“When I was young...” – the Sixties in the Reagan era: how the present impacts on representations of the past

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"When I was young..." – The Sirettes in the Region Era: how the present interacts on representations of the best.
I wish to confirm that this thesis is entirely my own work and that all sources have been acknowledged.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis questions how representations of the past, in particular those present in feature films, are influenced by the present in which those representations are created. There are a range of approaches to depicting the past in feature films, however, much of the scholarship in the area of film and history focuses on the manner in which single films or genres of film represent specific events or people of the past. I utilise a new approach to the examination of this form of representation of the past by examining a group of films across a range of genres. The films I am examining were all made within one historical period (the Reagan-Bush presidencies in the United States) about another period of the past, the Sixties.

Identification of the influence of the present in which a representation is created on that representation requires an examination of context. The thesis focuses on three main issues within the films—sex, Vietnam and race. These areas were chosen because they were sites of change and debate during both the Sixties and the 1980s and early 1990s. I explore the depictions of sex, Vietnam and race in the archive of films examined before placing the representations within their contexts. These representations are given context in two ways. Firstly, I compare the manner in which the films depict sex, Vietnam and race in the Sixties with the way in which the other films made during the Reagan-Bush years represent the same issues. This allows the identification of representations which are peculiar to the Sixties setting. Secondly, I examine the media and political debates about sex, Vietnam and race from the Reagan-Bush years. Comparing the political and media debates from the 1980s and early 1990s with the representations within the films set in the Sixties allows for consideration of the manner in which the representation of the Sixties has been affected by the politics of the present at the time of their creation. I find that while the representations of the past are affected in different ways by the present, there is a clear relationship between the manner in which the Sixties is depicted within the films and the political debates and media representations of the 1980s and early 1990s.
The thesis finally questions whether the representations of the Sixties within the films could be considered to be collective memory. To do so, I establish a theoretical framework for collective memory. I then consider what I have discovered about the representations within the films against this framework. The thesis concludes that while there is no single approach to representation which could be applied to all the films, the representations within the films could generally be considered to fit within the theoretical understanding of collective memory.
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6
Introduction

I was born in the Sixties, 1969 to be precise. I was a teenager and university student during the Reagan-Bush era. My parents are baby boomers. As a result of this conjunction of facts, I grew up listening to the music of the Sixties and being clearly informed about how it was superior to that which I preferred during the 1980s. I came to understand that youth in the Sixties were so much more politically active and radical than we conservative 1980s youth were, even though I am sure I went to more political rallies than either of my parents ever did. From my parents, and occasionally their friends, I heard about the golden years of the Sixties, how things were better then and the world was suffused with sunshine. John F Kennedy was viewed with reverence and I developed a keen interest in the Vietnam War.

As I got older and interested in the constructed nature of reality, I started to wonder about the mythology of the Sixties. It interested me that a period of time, not so far removed from the present, could be endowed with such a halo and could be talked about in such a particular way and retain such a strong mythic presence.

Given this fascination with the way that the idea of the Sixties was constructed during my adolescence and young adulthood, it was natural that I would choose these two periods to examine when I decided to look at the way film represents the past.

In this thesis, I have chosen to examine how deeply representations of the past, particularly those in feature films, are impacted by the present in which they are constructed. Based on the evidence I gather in this way I will consider whether films are in fact a form of collective memory or whether they utilise another approach to representing the past.

There has been a lot written about film and history. In general this work has focused on the way one film, or perhaps one genre of film or one director, has engaged in this
representation.¹ My interest went beyond this approach to film. While it is worthwhile to examine the way a specific film deals with the past, this is a very isolated and discrete manner of looking at what the representation is doing. My interest was broader than that. I was concerned to see whether trends existed in the manner in which one era looked at another, particularly through the medium of feature films.

The importance of looking at film as texts whose meaning is made clearer by an understanding of context has been identified by others. Kellner points to the methodology that I have chosen to adopt in examining these questions, writing:

One way to delineate the ideologies of media culture is to read the artifact relationally, situating films...within their genres or cycles, as well as within their historical, socio-political, and economic context. Reading films contextually involves seeing how they relate to other films within the set...²

Here Kellner is noting that to understand the ideological content of films one has to situate them clearly within their own context. As he notes, this context is two-fold. Firstly, it encompasses the genre or type of film and requires an understanding of the how this effects the depictions within the film being considered. Secondly, the influence of the

¹ What follows is, in no way, a comprehensive bibliography of writing on film and history, however for example see Natalie Zemon Davis, Slaves on Screen: Film and Historical Vision (USA: Harvard University Press, 2000) which focuses on depictions of slavery; Robert Brent Toplin, Reel History: In Defense of Hollywood (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2002) which looks at a number of films individually; The Persistence of History: Cinema, Television, and the Modern Event, ed. Vivian Sobchack, (New York and London: Routledge, 1996) which contains many chapters by various authors each of which is written about an individual film (such as JFK (1991)), or a cluster of films about a specific event such as the Holocaust; American History/American Film: Interpreting the Hollywood Image. ed. John E. O’Connor and Martin A. Jackson, (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1980) which contains 14 chapters each on an individual film; Timothy Corrigan A Cinema Without Walls: Movies and Culture After Vietnam (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1991) which contains a chapter on three historical films; Marc Ferro, Cinema and History trans. Naomi Greene, (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1988), which examines a range of individuals films plus some sets of films—one chapter, however, on “Film and the Legitimization of Power in the Soviet Regime” does use a broader approach to looking a films from a similar period; Jeanine Basinger, The World War II Combat Film: Anatomy of a Genre (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2003)

period in which the film is being made on the content of the film cannot be ignored. It is this second relationship in which I am particularly interested. How does the present in which a film is created relate to the presentation of the past which the film contains?

In a similar vein, Ditmar and Michaud note that,

Another way to understand these films’ relation to contemporary arenas of ideological contradiction and conflict is to consider them in terms of their own historic specificity as artifacts produced at given points in time.\(^3\)

While in this thesis I am not interested specifically in ideology, I think that the approach outlined in both these quotes is valid when trying to understand the representations of the past that are seen within films. I have based my methodological approach on this concept of placing films within the context of the types of issues they are representing as well as their historical context. In order to understand how and why the films are doing what they are doing, one needs to understand the context of the representation and examine the similarities and differences between how the past and the present are being represented. Popular culture is not contextless; in fact it is all about the context. I want to bring this kind of understanding of popular culture into the arena of historical representation in film.

My thesis seeks to examine a number of questions. These are focused on developing an understanding of the way in which the present in which a representation occurs impacts on that representation. The questions examined within the thesis aim to illuminate this key issue. When feature films represent the near-past, what are the building blocks of these representations? How was the present represented contemporaneously? Given this, how is the representation of the past in film influenced by the present in which it is being made? Finally, I wish to consider whether this approach to representing the past meshes with the representation of collective memory.

In order to find some answers to these questions, I have chosen to look at the representation of the Sixties in Hollywood films made during the Reagan-Bush era. I discuss in greater detail the relationship of the two periods in Chapter One and why they make an interesting case study, however I wanted to acknowledge here that the choice also stemmed from a personal interest in the inter-relationship between these times, which was something I experienced myself.

The approach that I have decided to adopt to answer these questions involves a focus on films which were produced in the United States. Within this thesis, I determine an archive of films,\(^4\) and then place them within their contexts. Naturally of course, these contexts are multiple. My approach involves an examination of two major aspects of their context: the concurrent representations within the news media of issues similar to those raised within the films, and the way these issues are represented in other Hollywood feature films which are not set during the Sixties. I will not try to argue that these are the only aspects of the context for the films, however I believe that these are the ones which will allow me to undertake the investigation I attempt in this thesis.

Returning to Kellner’s ideas, the methodology I developed to undertake this investigation needed to allow me to identify elements of representations within my film archive which are common approaches within other feature films made contemporaneously. I also needed to find a way to establish what the debates and discussions of the past were that might have influenced the representations within the feature films.

There were a large number of films which were produced during the Reagan-Bush era which were set in, or related strongly to, the Sixties. The Sixties was a popular setting for film, television and other forms of popular culture during the 1980s and early 1990s.\(^5\) Not all of the films I am considering are what would be traditionally considered “historical” films. I have chosen to look at a wide range of films which represent the

\(^4\) Details of these films can be found at Appendix A.  
Sixties. In Chapter One I outline my definition of the Sixties and provide an outline of the films I have chosen and discuss the process of selecting the films.

In order to be able to thoroughly examine the question of how the representation of the past is impacted by the present in which it is produced, I decided that it would be most effective to limit the scope of the thesis to examine three main issues within the representations of the Sixties, specifically sex, Vietnam and race. All three are issues with which there is an immediate association with the Sixties and, as I will discuss in the following chapters, each of these areas has specific relevance to both the Sixties and the Reagan-Bush era. Other issues considered but not included specifically within the thesis are the depictions of women and feminism, the counter-culture and drug use, idealism and politics and the changing nature of the family. These issues all maintain a similar level of relevance in both the Sixties and the Reagan-Bush era, however for the purposes of the thesis I decided that sex, Vietnam and race represented the richest archive of film depictions, as well as being the three key issues of the Sixties and still important in the 1980s and early 1990s. While the other areas are considered to some extent within this thesis, they themselves could be examined using a similar approach.

In contextualising the representations within the films I have selected, I examined the news media on issues from the Reagan-Bush era. Establishing a valid archive of news media representations also required selection. For the purposes of this thesis I use a range of materials which, while not comprehensive, represent a clear cross-section of US news media from the 1980s and early 1990s. My selection involves newspaper articles from major databases such as Factiva, which span large “quality” papers such as The New York Times through to small, regional papers such as the Orange County Register. I have also utilised major news magazines such as Time and The New Republic whose archives are accessible online. I have investigated other news media where references to them exist. With respect to television coverage, I have utilised the news, current affairs and documentaries from the Reagan-Bush era which can be accessed through the Paley Center for Media’s New York library. A notable absence from my analysis is radio coverage from the period. While the use of the news media is important to allow the
contextualisation of the analysis of the films, this is not the main thrust of my work. Rather, I chose to use this approach to gain a representational, rather than comprehensive, selection of what was happening within the media at the time. As it was, each search of newspapers turned up literally thousands of articles on each subject I am considering. Broadening my selection of news media representations would have risked changing the entire focus of my thesis from the question of how feature films represented the Sixties to being about how the issues of sex, Vietnam and race were represented in the media during the Reagan Bush era.

In examining the films within the context of genre, I have taken a slightly different approach between the three subjects, because each engages a dissimilar approach to representation within the broader area of Hollywood feature films. There is not a “sex” genre within mainstream films in the way that there is a war genre. I have therefore chosen, in Chapter Two, to examine how sex was presented more broadly in contemporary films of the Reagan-Bush era to contextualise the representations within the films I am considering.

In Chapter Three, which examines Vietnam, I have conversely chosen to look at combat and war genre films. This is because there were not many (if any) films made about conflicts other than Vietnam during the 1980s and early 1990s. I have therefore chosen to use war films made both before and after the 1980s as a point of comparison and contextualisation for films which featured Vietnam.

Finally, in considering race in Chapter Four, I have examined both the use of non-white actors in films from the 1980s and early 1990s and the depiction of race-based issues. I have also placed these representations within the history of depictions of race in Hollywood cinema to provide further historical contextualisation.

While pornographic films could be considered a “sex” genre, they are outside the scope of the representations I am examining.
Once I have contextualised the representations of the Sixties in this way, I am able to consider how the present has impacted on the manner in which the past has been represented. I take this analysis further in Chapter Five, where I consider whether the representations within the film are consistent with the representation of collective memory. In order to examine this question I provide an overview of the theoretical concept of collective memory. In considering this question, I will attempt to place the representations of the past within a theoretical framework.

For myself, the process of considering these questions has provided me with the critical questions and counterpoints to utilise when my parents again tell me of the greatness of the Sixties. But while these are the parents who taught me to think and question, let’s face it, they are still my parents. When something is as integral to your construction of identity and your understanding of the past as these representations of the Sixties are to my parents, it is unlikely I’ll ever bother to voice my questions. This is one argument I will never win.
Chapter 1 - The Sixties, Reagan, Baby Boomers and the Representation of History

*We need to study film and see it in relation to the world that produces it.*

Marc Ferro¹

**Trope of the Sixties**

In her excellent essay on the trope of the Sixties, Eleanor Townsley argues that,

> we need to discover and expose the historical processes of the construction of ‘the Sixties’ trope, and, rather than using ‘the Sixties’ to explain other phenomena, we need to explain the phenomenon of the trope of ‘the Sixties’.²

In my thesis I wish to attempt this, by drawing out the tropological depictions of the Sixties that were present in films of the 1980s and early 1990s. In looking at these depictions in the context of the cultural debates which were occurring in the US at the time, I wish to consider how film representations of the past are being impacted by the present. This will provide an insight into how the tropes of the Sixties were being constructed, and whether the “phenomenon of the trope of ‘the Sixties’” rose from a cultural need in the present of the representation.

Hayden White writes that,

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¹ Marc Ferro, *Cinema and History*, p29.
Tropic is the shadow from which all realistic discourse tries to flee. This flight, however, is futile; for tropics is the process by which all discourse constitutes the objects which it pretends only to describe realistically and to analyze objectively.¹

Applying this idea to my thesis, I argue that the general discourse around the Sixties, is informed by a series of tropes which have come to represent our understanding of that period. These tropes have often replaced deeper understandings of the period and, for many, the sum of the tropes of the Sixties now constitutes the period as a whole. Paul Lyons illustrates this idea neatly in the first chapter of his book on the legacy of the Sixties. He describes the reaction of students who are sent to interview baby boomers about their experiences during the decade. Inevitably these students complain that they are “not finding the right people” and that those they interviewed “weren’t really part of the Sixties.” This is because their subjects do not confirm to the tropic understanding of the Sixties held by these students: that the Sixties involved Woodstock, hippies, civil rights and the Vietnam War.² For many, the sum of these tropes is the Sixties. As Mark Feeney has observed “[m]ore than any other decade, the ‘60s is an assertion as well as a chronology.”³

I wish to look closely at this “assertion” of the Sixties that was presented in films made during a specific moment in time, the Reagan-Bush Republican presidencies in the United States. Examining the depiction of the Sixties during a specific moment in time allows me to consider the impact of the politics and culture of that time on those depictions. I am interested in the 1980s and early 1990s in particular because during this time the Sixties, understood tropically, was under attack by the dominant conservative political forces, as I will discuss throughout the thesis. The inter-relationship between the two periods interests me and, I believe, impacts on the manner in which the Sixties was represented at the time. In order to consider the depiction of the period on film, I will first

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examine this notion of the trope of the Sixties and tease it out within the representations of the past under consideration.

Before moving to the trope, in order to discuss the Sixties it is useful to have a definition of what is meant by the term. Fredric Jameson notes that a historical period can be understood as,

the sharing of a common objective situation, to which a whole range of varied responses and creative innovation is then possible, but always within that situation’s structural limits. \(^6\)

He also notes that cultural periodisation does not “imply some massive kinship and homogeneity or identity within a given period.” \(^7\) The differences between the beginning of the Sixties and the end make the idea of it as a period sharing a common objective situation no less valid. In fact, it is, in many ways, the changes that occur during the period which are generally used to define the decade. Returning to the idea of the trope of the Sixties, the Sixties are change and therefore it is important that the beginning of the period is distinctly different from its end.

A number of historians have chosen events as ways of defining the beginning and ending of the Sixties. Terry Anderson writes that the decade “began in 1960 at Greensboro and...ended in the early 1970s when Congress passed the Equal Rights Amendment and the U.S. Army came home from the Vietnam War.” \(^8\) David Farber, on the other hand, frames the Sixties with regard to their relationship with Nixon: “Nixon’s failed bid for the presidency begins the sixties, Nixon’s failed presidency ends the sixties era.” \(^9\) Barbara Tischler demonstrates that, depending on the story of the Sixties that you want to tell, there can be a number of definitions of the Sixties, listing seven examples including

\(^7\) Ibid.
Vietnam (1954-1973), the Civil Rights Movement (1954-1966) and "Camelot and the Great Society" (1960-1968). Arthur Marwick, taking a broader perspective, argues for a 'long sixties,' from 1958 to 1974. Marwick reasons that "minor and rather insignificant movements in the fifties became major and highly significant ones in the sixties" and that "the critical point of change came, as precisely as one could ever express it, in 1958-9."

He further sees the end of the Sixties as corresponding with the end of what Hobsbawm termed the 'Golden Age' in 1973, although he chooses 1974 as the final end point as it was only in that year that the mass of ordinary people began to feel the effects of the oil crisis, because some of the crucial developments initiated in the sixties only culminated then...and because only in August, with Congress drastically cutting aid to Saigon and Nixon resigning, did the anti-war movement feel it was achieving victory.

Similarly Jameson argues that the beginning of the Sixties came in the third world with the "great movement of decolonization in British and French Africa." In particular he notes that the independence of Ghana (1957), the assassination of Lumumba of the Congo in 1961, the granting of independence to the French sub-Saharan colonies and the Algerian Revolution all "signal the convulsive birth of what will come in time to be known as the 60s." Jameson views the end of the Sixties as falling in 1972-1974, signaled by the end of "third-worldism" in Europe and the US, the loss of momentum of many progressive groups with the end of the draft in the US, the crisis within the black movement and the fracturing of the women’s movement.

For the purposes of my thesis, drawing on the above reasoning, I intend to define the Sixties, in chronological terms, as the period from the late 1950s to 1974. Given that the

12 Ibid.
13 Jameson, "Periodizing the 60s," p180.
14 Ibid., p183.
Vietnam War features strongly in representations of the period,\textsuperscript{15} it is difficult to define an end to the period much before the end of US involvement in the war. Between this beginning and end significant changes occurred within the social and political outlooks in a number of areas of the US mindset and these are some of the issues I intend to consider in this thesis.

More importantly though, the use and examination of tropes reinforces and, in reality, constitutes my choice of the beginning and end of the Sixties. Advancing from Jameson's discussion of periodisation,\textsuperscript{16} it would seem to follow that while the tropes of the Sixties remained applicable, the period remained the Sixties. When these tropes were no longer relevant, then the US moved out of that period and into a new one. It is clear that many of the tropes of the Sixties, such as change, civil rights, Vietnam and the popularisation of culture began in the late 1950s and that many of these tropes and others did not stop being relevant until well into the 1970s.

Following from this idea of tropes as constituting the period, I am not so interested in what happened in the Sixties, including with respect to the definition of the period, as how the period is represented. Stuart Hall notes that “we give things meaning by how we represent them”\textsuperscript{17} and I am choosing to examine the meanings given to the Sixties through their representation in films from a specific period, a period in which the Sixties was clearly constituted in public political debate and the meaning of the still coalescing tropes of the era was challenged.

I contend that the representations of the Sixties within the films which I consider utilise a series of tropes to constitute that representation. Townsley suggests that there is something about the period upon which we all agree, arguing that ‘the Sixties’ is an important political trope, that is, a “figurative use of words, which organizes our


\textsuperscript{16} Jameson, "Periodizing the 60s."

understanding of contemporary US politics and society.” She goes on to argue that the function of a trope is to “compress and inscribe historically developed collective understandings in a very short space...reduc[ing] complexity and repress[ing] contentious detail in favor of ‘what everyone knows.’” She does however acknowledge that the “profound cultural tension” evoked by the Sixties prevents the tropological effect from being complete.\textsuperscript{18}

This idea follows what White has argued, that tropes act to construct our understanding of an object, in this case the Sixties, pushing discourse in a direction which is not necessarily the same as the truth. That is not to say that tropes are without truth, rather they push us towards a “common sense” understanding of an object, which, in Gramsci’s terms, is “the traditional popular conception of the world”\textsuperscript{19} or more specifically that understanding which is “mechanically imposed by the external environment, ie by one of the many social groups in which everyone is automatically involved from the moment of his entry in the conscious world.”\textsuperscript{20} The common sense understanding embedded within a trope makes critical discourse and analysis of the actuality of an object more difficult. As Marcia Landy points out, “[m]elodrama and history feed on familiarity, ritualization, repetition, and overvaluation of the past to produce a déjà vu sense of ‘Yes, that is the way it was and is.’”\textsuperscript{21}

By illuminating the tropes of the Sixties found in the films I am examining I hope to be able to understand the manner in which the cultural and political discourses of the 1980s and early 1990s effected representations of the earlier period. Knowledge of these tropes is a way of identifying the commonly held views of the Sixties and separating them from other ways in which the period is represented.

Returning to Townsley’s discussion of the cultural tension the Sixties can evoke in the US, it is important to note that this does not mean that there is significant disagreement

\textsuperscript{18} Townsley, "The Sixties' Tropes."


\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., p323.

about the events of the Sixties, or about the tropes which are used to represent the period. Both those on the political right and left will often use similar ideas about the period. Where the general disagreement about the Sixties lies is in its meaning and impact, and it is at this site that representations of the Sixties become particularly important. As Camille Paglia writes in her introduction to an essay on North American thinkers:

> A war still rages over the legacy of the 1960s. For many conservatives that decade spawned the worst aspects of contemporary culture, from sexual promiscuity and epidemic divorce to drug abuse and educational decline.\(^{22}\)

Conservatives such as Gertrude Himmelfarb argue that almost everything bad in American society today, from crime and violence to welfare dependency and “the obscenity and sadism of videos and rap music” are all the result of the legacy of the 1960s.\(^{23}\) David Horowitz and Peter Collier go as far as assigning blame for the origins of AIDS to the Sixties.\(^{24}\) Given the level of destructiveness which is assigned to the Sixties by the right in the US, Charles Taylor asks “What did conservatives do before they had the ‘60s to blame? It’s been such a boon to them that, secretly at least, they must be grateful for it.”\(^{25}\)

On the other hand, liberals tend to represent the legacy of the Sixties in positive terms. Morris Dickstein, for example, attributes to the Sixties “many of the fundamental rights we now accord to women, gay people, and blacks”\(^{26}\) as well as the birth of the peace movement, the environmental movement and the expansion of higher education. Interestingly, Dickstein, like Himmelfarb acknowledges that the “rise in the divorce rate [and] the changing relationship between parents and children”\(^{27}\) were also amongst the

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24 Taylor, Himmelfarb Vs. The ’60.
26 Ibid.
changes wrought by the period, although he interprets these events differently from her, seeing them as allowing greater freedoms for individuals.

I will discuss further the ideas on the right and left about the impact of the Sixties when I look at the specific films and issues later in my thesis, however, even in the brief discussion above it is possible to see tropes of the Sixties emerging. An important one is used by Townsley when she writes ""the Sixties' denotes a break or major change in American history, after which nothing is the same again." 28 This is an idea which emerges repeatedly in representations of the period. At the end of Dirty Dancing (1987) which is set in the summer of 1963, for example, Max Kellerman, the owner of the holiday resort where the story takes place, talks whimsically about "how it all seems to be ending...how it is all slipping away." He is reflecting on the fact that, to him, the world emerging in the Sixties is one which is fundamentally different to the era which preceded it.

This is not dissimilar to the trope cited by Jameson as the defining characterisation of the period:

The simplest yet most universal formulation surely remains the widely shared feeling that in the 60s, for a time, everything was possible: that this period, in other words, was a moment of a universal liberation, a global unbundling of energies. 29

This trope again indicates a universalising of an experience of the Sixties that was, perhaps, not shared by everyone.

Other tropes of the period tend to be focused on aspects of culture. In the Australian summer of 2002-03, Streets Icecream brought out a limited-period novelty range of

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29 Jameson, "Periodizing the 60s," p207.
30 While my thesis is focused on the representation of the Sixties in the US, I note that there are many similarities in the tropes of the Sixties across the Western English speaking world. This is particularly true of Australia where conscription for military service in Vietnam led to the mirroring of many of the social and political movements of the US during the period, if slightly delayed.
icecreams which was collectively entitled “The Sixties Nine”. These icecreams utilised the iconography of the (usually US) Sixties with both their names and their associated advertising and are a good example of some of the tropes of the period. The range included the “Jami Hendrix”, the “Cherry Guevera”, the “Guava Lamp”, the “John Lemon”, the “Cinnamon on The Moon”, the “Candy Warhol”, the “Wood Choc”, the “Peace ManGo” and, pitching for the long Sixties, the “ChocWork Orange” (the film Clockwork Orange was released in 1971).

Encapsulated within these icecream names are many of the distinct tropes of the Sixties—rock music, revolution, peace protests, pop art, kitsch and the space program. The television commercials for the range expanded these ideas further with the image of a threesome in a bed in a furniture store, symbolising the sexual revolution, a man rolling an enormous spliff, reflecting drug use, and a young women altering her traditional wedding dress by ripping off the bottom to turn it into a mini-dress, symbolising non-conformity, Sixties fashion and women’s liberation.

The images used by Streets are reflected over and over again in symbolic representations of the period. For example, a website containing information about the Sixties, Nostalgia Central,\footnote{Nostalgia Central [internet] available from http://www.nostalgiacentral.com/sixties.htm [accessed 29/04/03].} uses the following images on its front webpage—a Vespa scooter with a British flag attached, Jimmy Hendrix standing in front of the US flag, an astronaut in full spacesuit, a peace symbol and a toy Batman car. Again, the representations of rock and roll (and Jimmy Hendrix specifically), space exploration, peace protests and kitsch are included. These tropes quite clearly exist for both the political right and left; it is how they are used and their meaning which differ. The idea of the sexual revolution, for example, is a trope accepted by both sides of politics, it is the meaning that is attached to it that differentiates the representation. For the left, the sexual revolution was positive, opening up opportunities, allowing better education and greater choice to people, while for the right, it was a pre cursor for the proliferation of pornography, the breakdown of the family and the harbinger of the AIDS epidemic.
In my thesis I focus on three primary tropic areas: sex, race and Vietnam. All three are used repeatedly in films of the Reagan-Bush era and the representations in the films are caught up in the cultural debates of the time. These three tropic areas feature so strongly in the representations of the Sixties that there are few representations or discussions of the period, from academic work to television series, that do not include some mention of one, and usually at least two if not all three, of these issues.

This prevalence of and focus on these subjects makes it even more important to be able to deconstruct their representation and question what is being signified in them, particularly with respect to other public debates of the time. These are importantly the issues around which there is the most dispute over the meaning and legacy of the Sixties during the 1980s and early 1990s ensuring their relevance in political and cultural debates during the period.

**Why the Sixties? Why the 1980s?**

So why the Sixties in the 1980s? There are a number of reasons for this, including the political, social and cultural arguments that occurred around the impact of the Sixties in the Reagan-Bush era, the fact that this was the first era which looked “historically” at the Sixties, and the importance of the baby boom generation.

In the 1980s, the Sixties begin to be viewed in historical terms. With the election of Reagan, as far as US society was concerned, the Sixties were well and truly part of the past. White notes that thinkers in the past “recognized that the function of history…was to provide a specific temporal dimension to man’s awareness of himself.”

With a distinct change in direction in US politics by 1980, seeing the Sixties historically created a clearer way of defining oneself temporally.

By the 1980s, the Sixties could also be viewed in the manner termed by Stephen Feuchtwang as a “caesura”. Feuchtwang uses the term to “refer to points of before and

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after that inaugurate a present and demarcate a past.” He notes that such “caesurae are mythic: they mark a moment of creation of a relative past” and that they create “heroes of the good after and the bad before, or vice versa; or it may just be the time itself that is villainous compared to the present, or vice versa.” In many areas of popular discourse, both the Sixties and the election of Ronald Reagan represented caesurae, with the past or present represented as bad or good depending on the point of view being represented. For left-wing activists, for example, the Sixties represented the beginning of the good past which was overthrown by the bad after with the election of Reagan.

Supporting this idea that the history of the Sixties helped to define people in the 1980s, there is a strong argument put by some historians that 1980s conservatism developed from a reaction to the protest and radicalism in the Sixties. In an article on Nixon, Farber argues that many Americans, including working class people,

did not accept the demonstrators or the demonstrators’ supporters or sympathizers—the national Democratic party—as spokespeople for them...They saw in the protesters just another sector of the elite, less reasonable and less concerned about economic viability, bidding for power and walking a path to power that offered those who could not give orders in the new code of consumption nothing more than they already had. Indeed, in the new activists’ loud demands for affirmative action programs and a non-sexist, non-racist society, a good many white men, at least, found only new threats and new diminutions to their already circumscribed world.

Even some of those who participated in protest movements during the Sixties transformed into “neoconservatives” in the years following that period. Barbara Ehrenreich sees this trend as a backlash against the level of radicalism espoused by Sixties radicals. She also argues that the “direct attack on the power and privileges of the

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34 Ibid.
professoriate" undertaken by student activists radicalised some old-style left wingers, particularly within academia, toward the right.\textsuperscript{36}

Horowitz and Collier are examples of the neoconservatives in the 1980s. As they write about themselves in their book about the impact of the changes following from the period:

> By the early Eighties, we felt it was time to try for an honest inventory of our generation’s impact. Some of the accomplishments were undeniably positive. There was an expansion of consciousness, of social space, of tolerance, of prospects for individual fulfilment. But there was a dark side too. In the inchoate attack against authority, we had weakened our culture’s immune system, making it vulnerable to opportunistic diseases.\textsuperscript{37}

The remainder of their book\textsuperscript{38} outlines a number of areas in which they perceive the failures or excesses of the Sixties have led to undesirable outcomes, such as their extended discussion of the life and fate of Faye Stender, a lawyer for Black Panther members who eventually committed suicide, unable to cope with the pain she was enduring as a result of being shot. In telling these stories, Horowitz and Collier draw extensively on Sixties tropes such as those of sexual liberation, and interpret them in a negative way.

The rise of the religious right, which was to become powerful during the 1980s, has also been seen in terms of the trope of Sixties. Sean Wilentz, for example, argues that the televangelist Jerry Falwell “tapped into the deeply sexualized anxieties that followed from the social upheavals of the last twenty years.”\textsuperscript{39} Dionne goes further arguing that the rise of the religious right is inextricably, and paradoxically, linked to the Sixties,

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{37} Horowitz and Collier, \textit{Destructive Generation: Second Thoughts About the Sixties}, p16.
  \item \textsuperscript{38} Ibid., pp21-66.
\end{itemize}
Again we see the featured use of tropes of the Sixties used in discussions of the 1980s and the growth in conservatism. E J Dionne himself indicates the tropic nature of his reference to "sixties permissiveness" by his use of quotation marks and the use of the word sixties rather than numerical symbols which he generally uses in his text.

Moving away from the conservative perspective on the Sixties there are a range of discussions of the 1980s as representing a number of caesural moments. A strong discourse exists around the notion of the election of Reagan representing the end of many of the changes or "revolutions" begun in the Sixties. Nicolaus Mills notes, for example, that the "liberal tradition" collapsed in the 1980s. With the advent of AIDS, it was often argued in the media that the "sexual revolution" had ceased, resulting in a new sexual conservatism.

From the point of view of the right, on the other hand, there is a sense that in the 1980s, Americans were allowed to take pride in their country and its course again, in a way which had become difficult following the Sixties. Peggy Noonan expresses it thus, back in the sixties and seventies some of us began to fear for our country, and its skepticism, cynicism and drift. And the thing Ronald Reagan did was to represent

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in his person the views, the commonly held views of the American people and remind us they still had legitimacy.\textsuperscript{43}

This is a highly politicised and a highly tropic view of both the Sixties and the Reagan presidency, which is hardly a surprise from a Presidential speechwriter whose daily job during a large part of the Reagan presidency was to use literary allusions and forms in writing for the president. Nonetheless it does outline another sense of closure which dominated discourse in the 1980s. Noonan thus provides one perspective on the caesural moment of Reagan’s election. The opposite of this in the bad/good dichotomy is that Americans lost the sense of perspective and unease gained during the Sixties at this time as Reagan’s positivity and pro-America stance allowed Americans to sink back into their comfortable complacency and enjoy the fruits of the perceived economic success of the era without fear. Here the villain of the new caesural moment is Reagan. These concepts draw on tropes of both the Sixties and the 1980s in their depiction of the caesural shift.

Lyons writes, “the reactions to the Sixties rebellions generated the Reagan revolution of the 1980s.”\textsuperscript{44} It is interesting this terminology is often used with regard to Reagan’s presidency. The references to the ‘Reagan revolution’ implicitly compare the period with the oft-discussed sex, gender, civil rights and youth ‘revolutions’ of the Sixties. In essence, calling it the Reagan Revolution carries the implication that it is overthrowing the changes implemented by the previous revolutions, returning to the notion that both the Sixties and the 1980s represent caesural moments.

The discourse which surrounded the inauguration of Reagan similarly seemed to reinforce this idea of a caesural moment. Ronald Reagan was elected to office on 4 November 1980, with a significant majority of votes. The inauguration which was held on 21 January 1981, saw an “outpouring of wealth and privilege” in what Haynes Johnson noted was a spectacle not seen in Washington since Andrew Jackson’s


\textsuperscript{44} Lyons, \textit{New Left, New Right, and the Legacy of the Sixties}, p158.
inauguration. At 12.35pm that day, the American hostages in Iran, held since 4 November 1979, were released. Despite the fact that President Carter had negotiated the release, their return became part of the triumph of Ronald Reagan’s first day in office. It was “Morning in America”, a phrase which Reagan had used as a slogan during his election campaign.

The dawn which Reagan’s inauguration symbolised for conservatives and neo-conservatives followed a night which, in their conceptualisation, had commenced in the Sixties. Noonan (retrospectively) credits herself with saying on the night of the Presidential election in 1980 that Americans “awoke from our slumber.” This kind of rhetoric reinforces the manner in which the historicity of the Sixties was established during the 1980s, with Reagan becoming the hero of the new “good time” for members of the political right. The political right was to dominate the political debate for over a decade from this time.

Thus the representation of the Sixties during the Reagan-Bush era is significant both because the Sixties first became an ‘historic’ time during this period, but also because of the inter-relatedness of the two decades. In many representations, as discussed above, the Sixties represented a beginning and the 1980s an end, while within others the Sixties represented a beginning from which the 1980s inevitably grew. These two concepts are less contradictory than one might imagine: for example, if the Sixties is represented as the beginning of the sexual revolution and the 1980s an end, then the sexual freedoms or permissiveness (depending on your point of view) of the Sixties can be seen as inevitably leading to a conservative reaction, which results in this end.

**Baby Boom Generation**

There is another major reason why I believe that the representation of the Sixties in the Reagan-Bush era is particularly important. This is because the 1980s and early 1990s

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were the times when the baby boom generation began to take control of the cultural and political arenas, when they started to directly hold the levers of power in business, politics and culture.

A key *Time* cover story appeared on 19 May 1986—"The Baby Boomers Turn 40." The baby boom generation are key players in the Sixties and the 1980s, and, more importantly, in the representation of each era. The construction in discourse of baby boomers as a generation is dominated by both eras, particularly the Sixties. The identity of baby boomers as a generation was forged in the Sixties. In the 1980s baby boomers came into their own, dominating popular culture and ways of seeing the world.

Is it, in fact, fair to group together a collection of people based on their birth date alone and use this group as a tool to examine historical representations? Clearly, the debates within the Sixties and the 1980s and 1990s were not purely inter-generational and point to differences in ideas within the same generational cohort. Does this mean that the idea of a generation as a meaningful way of understanding groups of people is therefore void? To answer this question I will look at a definition of generations and some of the theoretical approaches to the notion of generations.

The notion of a generation is a complex one. Karl Mannheim acknowledges that generations are not monolithic entities and that "within any generation there can exist a number of differentiated, antagonistic generation-units." Nonetheless, Mannheim considers that a generation can be considered a constituted group "where a concrete bond is created between members of a generation by their being exposed to the social and intellectual symptoms of a process of dynamic de-stabilization." By this Mannheim is arguing that being born at the same time is not necessarily enough to constitute a "generation as an actuality", for example Mannheim would point out that there is little in common between Chinese peasants born into the baby boom generation and an

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48 Ibid., p303.
49 Ibid., p303.
American of the same birthdate. As he writes, “mere contemporaneity becomes sociologically significant only when it involves participation in the same historical and social circumstances.” However, it is safe to consider that Americans born within the baby boom period “participated in the common destiny of this historical and social unit.” This can be related to Jameson’s notion of a historical period as the sharing of a common objective situation as I discussed earlier. Obviously a period which is defined as clearly as the Sixties increases the chance of a group of people born at the same time participating in the same historical circumstances (or feeling as if they have). Both Jameson and Mannheim agree that participation in such a historical period does not, however, automatically result in the same response from the individuals who do so. Nonetheless, according to Mannheim, while within a generation there can be sub groupings, often with totally opposed views, exposure to a similar range of experiences and, in particular, forces of social change, lead to a concrete sense of commonality which allows a generation to be viewed as a social force.

William Strauss and Neil Howe, building on Mannheim’s theory of generations have identified four generational types which they argue have cycled through American history, noting that,

[y]ou and your peers share the same “age location” in history, and your generation’s collective mind-set cannot help but influence you—whether you agree with it or spend your lifetime battling against it.

They also note that baby boomers are “the twentieth century’s most generation-conscious peer group” and that this nomenclature for the generation has been used repeatedly in the media.

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50 Ibid., p297.
51 Ibid., p303. (emphasis from original removed)
There are a number of possible start and end dates for the baby boom generation. Clearly it incorporates the demographic spike that led to its name, however the exact start and finish dates are changeable. In writing about the lives of members of this generation, Michael Gross defines the era as starting with the bombing of Pearl Harbor (December 7, 1941) and ending on November 22, 1963 with John F Kennedy’s assassination.\textsuperscript{54} Strauss and Howe define the “Boom Generation” as spanning from 1943 to 1960\textsuperscript{55} while Landon Jones and Paul C Light both consider it begins in 1946 and ends in 1964.\textsuperscript{56} I consider baby boomers those born between 1943, which Strauss and Howe argue is the time when there was “the first real evidence that G.I. optimism would be rewarded with victory,” and 1963 with the assassination of Kennedy. The assassination of Kennedy is a clear turning point in representations of the Sixties as the point when optimism faded. In this respect I am defining the baby boom generation as those born during the period of optimism in the US between 1943 and 1963. this means that all of the baby boomers spent some part of their youth during the Sixties, with the early to mid baby boomers experiencing the Sixties as teenagers and young adults.

The “peer personality” which Strauss and Howe identify for the baby boom generation is “idealist.” They argue that this generation type is “dominant and inner-fixated” and grows up as increasingly indulged youths after a secular crisis; comes of age inspiring a spiritual awakening; fragments into narcissistic rising adults; cultivates principle as moralistic midlifers; and emerges as visionary elders guiding the next secular crisis.\textsuperscript{57}

The “secular crisis” which heavily influenced the youth of the baby boomers was World War II, a time when US citizens, in particular, were forced to reconsider many of the assumptions about their country and its place in the world they had while growing up.

\textsuperscript{55} Strauss and Howe, \textit{Generations: The History of America's Future, 1584 to 2069}, p299.
\textsuperscript{57} Strauss and Howe, \textit{Generations: The History of America's Future, 1584 to 2069}, p74.
Other examples of "idealist" generations include the "Puritan Generation" (1584-1614), the "Awakening Generation" (1701-1723), the "Transcendental Generation" (1792-1821) and the "Missionary Generation" (1860-1882). Strauss and Howe argue that each of these generations has a similar "peer personality" and that many of the dominant characteristics of the baby boom generation, such as their self-satisfaction, their inward focus and their obsession with the spiritual are due in part to their generation’s location with the generational cycle.

I would argue that there is a lot of hubris amongst the work written on baby boomers, but then again, as a member of the generation which Strauss and Howe claim is most antagonistic to the baby boom, of course I would. Nonetheless, I will admit that demographically the baby boom is a significant grouping because of its sheer size, and that this significance has been increased by the generation’s involvement in or proximity to the significant social, cultural and technological changes which have occurred since their births. Whether one agrees with Jones that the baby boom generation is "the most decisive generation in our history" and that "boom babies were born to be the best and the brightest" or with Gross that they were "[e]ducated, worldly, raised on breached barricades, broken rules and new paradigms" one must admit that Western baby boomers, as a generation, have had, and continue to have, an important impact on the world. There is also a lot of generalisation about baby boomers, including within the discussions of Strauss and Howe. Many people writing about the baby boomers (with the important exception of Light), tend to consider the popular images (tropes) of baby boomers, and miss the important point made by Lyons, that many baby boomers were not actively involved in protest, free love, drug use or many of the other tropes of the 1960s. Anne Riggs and Bryan Turner note in their survey of Australian elite baby boomers that while most:

58 Jones, Great Expectations: America and the Baby Boom Generation, p1.
reported feeling part of the sixties generation [m]any in the sample had not been involved in the protest and other social movements during the sixties and, in some cases, had supported Australia’s involvement in the Vietnam War. ⁶⁰

This idea that baby boomers felt they were “of” a period even without direct involvement in the events which have been used tropically to constitute that period follows Mannheim’s idea that a group who have partaken of the same historical and social circumstances are bound together as a generation. This may be despite differences in their actual engagement and actions during that period. This leaves the whole generation with something at stake in the representation of the period.

Here I want to return to Mannheim’s idea of “generational-units” which exist within the one generation. While the baby boom has had an impact on the world, that impact has often been contradictory and opposed. Mannheim noted that the “generation-unit tends to impose a much more concrete and binding tie on its members because of the parallelism of responses it involves.” ⁶¹ Within the baby boom generation there are a number of different, distinctive and quite recognisable generation-units in Mannheim’s terms. Lyons identifies at least four significant generation-units who were active during the Sixties: the left including protesters and political radicals; those who served in Vietnam, mostly American “proletariat and sub-proletariat”; the large “silent majority” who avoided political activism and Vietnam service; and the New Right, a “powerful conservative movement” that emerged in the Sixties. ⁶² By the 1980s, another grouping had emerged, what has been described as the “Second Thoughts” movement, or called by others, neo-conservatives. Gross describes the Second Thoughts movement as “a loose agglomeration of former members of the New Left who have rediscovered patriotism after deciding that American democracy not only tolerated but incorporated aspects of their radicalism.” ⁶³ Dionne describes the rise of neo-conservatives thus,

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The roots of neoconservatism lie in the internecine liberal conflicts. Most of those who would later create neoconservatism were among the most militant members of the coalition of “Cold War liberals” who saw halting Soviet expansion in the late 1940s as America’s first priority.64

Thus while neo-conservatives who first appeared in the Sixties were from the generation before baby boomers, their ranks were later swelled by those who, like Horowitz, Collier and David Stockman (economics adviser to Reagan) were baby boomers who moved away from their former leftist radicalism during the 1970s forming a discrete generational unit.

Understanding these generation differences is important to understanding the differences in the representations of the Sixties in the 1980s. Gross writes that the courses of baby boomers’ lives by the early 1980s were

informed by strong recollections—accepted or rejected—that affected everything we’ve done since. “If you remember, you weren’t there,” we say. But we were there, and loath as we are to admit it, we remember plenty.65

Baby boomers in the US thus had (and have) much at stake in the representation of the Sixties. Many of the tropes of the period were created, reinforced and represented during the 1980s. For many, their identity position within the baby boom generation, and also within the political positions available following the election of Reagan, were dependent upon which representations of the Sixties they embraced.

The importance of the baby boom generation and its impact on representation is particularly significant with regard to the films I am examining. In the 1980s, the debates about the Sixties were not always something which engaged every layer of US society, nor did the issues surrounding the particular tropes I am discussing necessarily make it

64 Dionne Jr, Why Americans Hate Politics, p57.
into the dinner conversation of all US households. There was, no doubt, a large proportion of Americans who had little interest in or engagement with arguments about political issues during the 1980s. As James Davison Hunter, writing about the 1980s, points out,

[w]hile ordinary people participate in the construction of their own private worlds, the development and articulation of the more elaborate systems of meaning, including the realm of public culture, falls almost always to the realm of elites. They are the ones who create the concepts, supply the language and explicate the logic of public discussion. They are the ones who define and redefine the meaning of public symbols. Public discourse, then, is largely a discourse of elites.\(^6\)

By the 1980s, many of the elites were being infiltrated by the baby boomers, ensuring that members of that generation had a say in this public discourse. Interestingly some of the key political players in 1980s, such as the Moral Majority, managed to find a way to make ordinary people more engaged by this kind of political debate. For many, however, it is likely that the politics of the period, while impacting on them through resulting political, economic and judicial changes, rarely entered consciously into their day to day thinking. In this thesis my examination of films will illuminate the way that the politics of the Sixties were depicted in a primarily popular culture sphere, probably the area where baby boomers had the most control and impact. The point of comparison and contextualisation, however, is likely to be focused on the sphere of public discourse, which, as Hunter points out, tends to be the realm of the elites. Therefore, the way in which the political and media elites discussed the Sixties and issues such as sex, race and Vietnam will present the comparison to what is depicted in my film archive.

**Baby Boomers, Film and Directors**

Film, for the most part, is representation created by the cultural and economic elites. In the next section of this chapter I will provide an overview and discussion of the films that

I have chosen to focus on in this thesis. An examination of the backgrounds of the 34 directors whose films I will be discussing indicates that the majority of them are college educated (17 confirmed, a number unknown), white (33) and male (32). The group includes graduates of Harvard Law School (Philip Kaufman *The Right Stuff* 1983), Columbia and Sarah Lawrence (Brian de Palma *Casualties of War* 1989), Cambridge (Iain Softley *Backbeat* 1993, Brian Gibson *What's Love Got To Do With It?* 1993) and New York University (Oliver Stone, Nancy Savoca and Jonathan Kaplan), amongst other institutions. A large proportion of them (26) come from families already involved in the film industry or began their careers as actors or in another part of the film industry. At least eleven of them donated to the Democrats between 2000-2006.

With respect to the role of baby boomers in representations of the Sixties, nineteen of the directors fall within my definition of the generation, while another six were born between 1938 and 1942 and thus would have been in their twenties for the majority of the Sixties. Gross argues in the 1980s that “[n]ow that [baby boomers] finally control the culture they once merely dominated, boomers are determined to stay on top of it.” Mark Davis notes, more critically that,

[from Mickey Mouse Club to Frequent Flier Club, baby-boomers have traditionally led a clubbish life organized around happenings and trends, from the twist to hula hoops to Frisbees to disco to aerobics to line dancing. They give the

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67 The full list of directors is at Appendix A. This table outlines the films in full, including directors.
69 Data sourced from searches on *PoliticalMoneyLine* (http://www.fecinfo.com/) accessed on 31 October 2005. I note that Clint Eastwood has donated to both Republicans and Democrats and was elected Mayor of Carmel-by-the-Sea in 1986 as a Republican. This may not represent all party political donations as some may have been made by spouses etc. While I note that these donations occurred 20 years after the period I am discussing in the thesis and it is possible that some political allegiances may have changed during this time, the information supports the general tendency of the directors towards more liberal political positions.
impression that baby-boomerdom itself is a club, and exclusive gang, with everyone else on the outer.⁷¹

A group that sees itself as a “club” or as the “rulers” of society is naturally going to be interested in maintaining this cultural dominance. By the early 1980s, as Jones points out, the Baby Boom had “produced surprisingly few leaders or even genuine individualists.”⁷² Jones argues, perhaps counter-intuitively, that this was due to the size of the Baby Boom cohort. Since the period that I am examining, this has changed significantly. The 1980s and early 1990s were dominated by political leaders in the US who were already old during the Sixties. However, in 1992 Bill Clinton became the US’s first Baby Boomer president and the 2000 election was the first Presidential contest between two Baby Boom candidates.

In the quotes above, both Gross and Davis refer explicitly or implicitly to the role that the baby boomers have played in culture. Mannheim notes that it is in the sphere of culture that generational trends tend to have a more noticeable impact, noting that the nature of both the sphere of natural sciences, and the “civilization” (politics) sphere where “the unilinear nature of developments falling within it, tends to conceal experiential and volitional transformations” are less likely to reflect generation change.⁷³ As I have discussed above, generations can contain competing groupings within them, and the baby boom generation certainly does. A possible motivation for directors of the baby boom generation for making films about the Sixties is to stake their claim in the representation of the period, marking ground in an intra-generational fight over their own generation’s legacy. Given the strong political debates around the Sixties that were present during the 1980s and early 1990s, it is very likely that this provided impetus to a number of directors.

⁷² Jones, Great Expectations: America and the Baby Boom Generation, p2.
One could alternatively argue that the choice to depict the Sixties reflects a desire to recreate their youth on screen, or that this period of their lives is particularly filled with rich subject matter. Finally, one could posit that films about the Sixties presented a strong economic propositions because of the growing wealth of baby boomers and a curiosity about the parents lives on the part of the next generation. There are examples of films from all these categories within those that I will be discussing. The relevant question is whether these motivations for creating representation changes the representation itself. Does it impact on the tropes used or the approach to representation? Is this part of the way the present impacts on the representation of the past?

As indicated by the discussion provided above, film directors are generally from amongst the elites of society even when their product is consumed by a far broader cross section of the public. It is likely that the majority of these directors were influenced by, or, at the very least, aware of, the kinds of cultural and political debates that engaged commentators during the Reagan-Bush period. I am providing background on the directors of the films under consideration in order to provide a perspective on why specific ideas about the Sixties may be placed in these films. Directors from different backgrounds and social groups are likely to reflect different angles of the political and cultural debates taking place. However, I do want to acknowledge that, for the purpose of the analysis of representations, the intention of the author of a work is not the key issue. Each individual will read and interpret a text differently depending on their own cultural and political perspectives and understanding of the ideas being presented. By examining the social and political perspectives of directors, I am not trying to argue for some essentialised or single interpretation of the films. Rather I am locating these texts within their historical context, which includes a view on their directors.

The director’s immersion in the film business coupled with their high level of education allows one to make some assumptions about the general political leanings of the group as a whole. Directors are generally seen as the artistic part of feature film making while

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producers deal with the financial aspects. However, a large number of the directors in the group have also acted as producers or own their own production companies, and this was true of some of them while they were involved in the production of the films under discussion. One could therefore assert that they would display a degree of fiscal conservatism. The generally middle-to-upper class backgrounds of the directors might also add to this slightly economically conservative position.

On social issues however, the group as a whole are more liberally inclined. "Hollywood" as a whole has often been viewed as a supporter of the moderate centre-left in US politics. As indicated above, a number of these directors have donated recently to Democrat politicians, while only one, Clint Eastwood, has any Republican affiliations. This is reflected in the overall donation statistics. Of the 114 donations by individuals who self-identified as a “film director” for the 2004 campaigns, only three donations were to immediately identifiably Republican causes. Similarly, for the group who identified themselves as a “film producer,” of the 312 donations, only 25 were to Republicans. Given the generally centrist economic position of the Democrat in the US, this support for the Democrats does not contradict my assumption that the directors are likely to be economically moderate to mildly conservative. It does however support an assertion that they are likely to have more liberal views on social issues and on areas such as foreign policy.

Whether there is detailed evidence to support this assertion, it was certainly one which permeated cultural and political debate. Hunter notes that during the 1980s anti-abortion activists, and the orthodox/conservative side of politics, believed strongly that the “media and arts establishment” was prejudiced against them and their values. Hunter himself argues that while these ideas might have been exaggerated they were, not totally born out of illusion. Studies of the attitudes of media and entertainment elites, as well as television news programming and newspaper coverage of various public figures, provide evidence of this.

social issues and political events, have shown a fairly strong and consistent bias toward a liberal and progressivist point of view.\textsuperscript{76}

The background of many of the directors of the films I am examining—baby boomers who were either college-educated or grew up within the entertainment industry—lends some credibility to this perception of a liberal bias. Nonetheless, it is difficult to sustain an argument that this is uniformly the case amongst Hollywood in general and directors in particular.

As a whole the directors of the films that I am discussing are white men who experienced the Sixties in a significant way, are generally well educated, with a tendency towards liberal political beliefs and who have a strong knowledge and/or experience of films and filmmaking, either through family, study or experience. This experience, as well as the fact that many of them have producing experience or own their own production companies, means that the group is generally conscious of the commercial appeal of the films that they are making and their ability to provide a financial return. As (primarily) baby boomers making films in the Reagan-Bush era, they were for the first time, part of the cultural and economic elite, and like other baby boomers, no doubt keen to maintain and strengthen this position.

\textit{The archive of films}

My arguments about the manner in which the present impacts on the representation of the past will be based on the examination of 36 films (Box in text overleaf). These will represent my primary source. I will, at times, discuss other films when relevant, but, across the whole of this thesis I will only examine my selection in detail. A detailed list of the films considered is at Appendix A.

I have utilised several main criteria to establish my base list of 36 films. These are:

• the film must have been released between 1983 and 1994;
• the film must have had wide, mainstream release in the US; and
• the majority of the action of the film must be set in the Sixties.

To establish my initial archive, I undertook searches of the Internet Movie Database searching film descriptions and plot outlines using key words such as “Sixties/1960s,” “Vietnam,” “civil rights” and “Kennedy.” This list was supplemented by broader internet searches using similar parameters, feedback from early presentations about my thesis and from my literature review of work on film and history. I do not claim that I have included every film which deals with the Sixties in this selection. As I discuss elsewhere, there are a significant number of Vietnam films which I have not included, although I have ensured I have included the most successful of this subset of films. It is also possible that there are other mainstream representations of the Sixties which have not been included. My approach to determining my archive means I have, however, included all the major releases which deal with the period, as well as a collection of smaller budget feature films on the period. This presents a strongly representative, if not absolutely comprehensive, selection of films.
While I am interested in the depiction of the Sixties in the Reagan-Bush era, I have chosen 1983 to 1994 to reflect the lead times involved in film making. Films released in 1980-1982 would generally have been developed, financed and, in some cases filmed, before the inauguration of President Ronald Reagan. Similarly films released in 1993 and 1994 would have been largely financed and filmed prior to the election of President Clinton. For an example of the time periods involved, *Mermaids* which was released in 1990, began principal photography in September 1989 and it is likely that pre production took some time given that an article on the production of the film cites the "extensive talent search" undertaken for the actor to play Kate (see "Mermaids," Starring Cher, Bob Hoskins and Winona Ryder. Begins Principal Photography," PR
and that films made in the late 1980s may well have been originally conceived in the 1970s or earlier. However, I contend that, while the essential concept of a film may have been around for a long time, the approach to the final execution of that idea is not really settled upon until the time that a film has been financed, as those who finance a film will often have a strong influence on content, particularly for early-career directors. Even then the approach of a film can be altered during filming, editing, or even after being viewed by test audience, though these changes are often (but not always) smaller.

I have chosen film alone rather than including television series or telemovies. While there were also a number of relevant television programs made during the same period, the need to limit the archive under consideration led me to exclude television from consideration. The episodic nature of television series also would mean that their inclusion would have distorted the perspective of the thesis. In addition, difficulties in accessing telemovies from 30 years ago added an additional dimension to their inclusion within the study. Most importantly, however, television programs have different cost structures, artistic drivers and audience expectations. While worthy of study, in this thesis I have chosen to focus on feature films.

I am interested in films which had mainstream US release as I am considering how these films engaged with mainstream representation of issues at the time of their release. Films which were destined for mainstream release in the 1980s and early 1990s (regardless of how successful they were) had to take into account the sale-ability of the content to attempt to ensure a wide audience and critical praise. While all the films had mainstream US release, some were searching for critical praise and awards while others were clearly


aimed at a mass audience. Both of these approaches required an understanding of the way
the specific target audience would view and understand the depictions of the Sixties.

Obviously, because of the nature of the study, it is important that the action of the films
takes place, at least largely, in the Sixties. There are two obvious exceptions to this. One is *The Big Chill* (1983). This film is set in the early 1980s, but it deals very specifically
with the juxtaposition of the characters’ lives between the Sixties and the present, and the
impact that the Sixties has had on their lives. I think it is an important addition to my
films as it sets out many of the cultural tropes of the Sixties, including Vietnam, drug use,
women’s liberation, political activism and music. The other major exception is *Lean On
Me* (1989) which is largely set in the late 1980s. Its opening scenes, however, are set in
the Sixties, and again it engages in the juxtaposition of the two periods, particularly in
relation to the position of black people. Other films like *Forrest Gump* (1994) and *What’s
Love Got to Do With It?* (1993) cover a range of periods from the 1950s through to the
1980s, but both involve significant representations of the Sixties in a particularly tropic
fashion.

The 36 films I am examining are a varied group. They appeal to different audiences, fit
different genres, have directors at different career stages and made varying amounts at the
box office. Some of these distinctions are important in considerations of either the
influences on the film or the influence of the film.

With respect to genre (and these genres overlap), 10 of the films would broadly fit into a
comic genre, fourteen could be viewed as drama, eight have a strong romance element,
twelve are war films, nine are biographical or based on a “true” story, six have coming of
age themes and three are crime stories. None of the films I am considering is specifically
an action film, outside of the war or crime genres. Only one is aimed specifically at
children (*The Sandlot* (1993)) though it could be argued that the central focus on children
in *Stand By Me* (1986) could also justify calling it a children’s film. Five films centre on
teenage protagonists and could be seen as targeted directly at teen audiences. A film like
*Peggy Sue Got Married* (1986), while holding an appeal for teens could also be seen as a
film for older audiences recollecting and evaluating their youth in the same manner as Peggy Sue. Similarly, the films *Backbeat* (1993) and *The Doors* (1991), while perhaps appealing to a younger audience due to their focus on the world of music and drugs, were probably also intended to find an audience amongst older people who were fans of the Beatles and the Doors respectively. One of the attractions of films about the Sixties made during the 1980s and 1990s for producers is that studios may have felt that their appeal would be broader than the traditional audience for their genre, because they were set in a period of living memory and one which was particularly important to the baby boomers in their (wealthy) thirties and forties.

The films did vary in their appeal at the box office, although most did reasonably well. According to the US box office figures recorded by Box Office Mojo, 21 of the films were amongst the top 50 performing films in their year of release and another five were within the top 100. Only two films were outside of the top 200: *Dogfight* which was number 203 in 1991 and only made $0.4 million at the box office; and *The Indian Runner* which was number 214 also in 1991 and only made $0.2 million. These were the only films to make less than $1 million, while only 10 films made less than $10 million. Three films were among the top 10 films of their year, with *Forrest Gump* the most popular film of 1994, *Platoon* number 3 in 1986 and *Good Morning Vietnam* number 4 in 1987. While box office popularity is not the only measure of the impact of a film, it certainly must be accepted that the more people who see a film, the more likely it is to affect individuals and public debate. Some films, like *Malcolm X* (1992), *Mississippi Burning* (1988) or *Casualties of War* (1989) generated significant attention and debate in the media without generating particularly high box office results. These films dealt with historically and socially significant events, and while such subject matter often captures the attention of the media, and opinion writers in particular, it does not necessarily excite a mainstream, cinema-attending public. Tessa Morris-Suzuki points out that historical films can both directly and indirectly prompt both academic and mainstream writings on

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79 All box office figures from *Box Office Mojo* [internet] available at [http://www.boxofficemojo.com](http://www.boxofficemojo.com) accessed on 22 December 2005 unless stated otherwise.

80 For example, *Malcolm X* earned $48.2m and was ranked 32nd, *Mississippi Burning* was 33rd with $34.6m and *Casualties of War* was 58th earning only $18.6m.
the historical subject of the film. Her example of the impact of *Amistad* (1997), which
was far from a major box office success\(^1\) is thus instructive. As she notes, films such as
the ones I am considering “generate a mass of other forms of historical representation:
books of the film, reviews, magazine interviews, media debates, TV documentaries on
the making of the movies, Internet websites, educational material and so on.”\(^2\) Many of
the films I am considering fall into this category.\(^3\)

This kind of media attention can make a film more influential than raw box office data
would indicate. In discussing the connections between film and history, I believe it is
important to acknowledge that all films are not necessarily equal and that, in approaching
this topic, I have chosen to focus on mainstream Hollywood films because they are more
likely to be viewed by mainstream audiences and thus impact on public debates.

*Film and the representation of the past*

There has been a lot written about the relationship between film and history. Much of this
discussion focuses on the way that film depicts the past in comparison to the manner the
past is depicted in academic history texts, and the relative worthiness of film as a medium
for the representation of the past. In this section I will provide an overview of some of the
debates about the way that film generally presents the past. In Chapter Five, I will go on
to examine the forms of representation within the films I am considering to question what
mode of representing the past they use, be it history, collective memory or nostalgia.

The detractors of film as a medium for presenting the past tend to point to its narrativity,
its paucity of supporting evidence and its inability to depict the complex social
interactions and forces which lead to events. On the other hand, there have been in recent
years a number of people who have argued that film can play an effective role in

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\(^1\) According to Box Office Mojo, *Amistad* was ranked 50\(^{th}\) in 1997 and grossed $44.2m. Considering that it
was directed by Steven Spielberg and starred Anthony Hopkins and Morgan Freeman, this could not be
considered a particularly successful box office result. (“Amistad” Box Office Mojo [internet] available at
http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=amistad.htm [accessed 19/1/06].


\(^3\) For example the debates and publications around JFK and Malcolm X, the TV spin-off series from Dirty
Dancing, and the (much later) Broadway musical version of Hairspray which was then remade as a feature
presenting the past which can be incorporated into an understanding of history. They highlight the rich array of detail that can be more effectively depicted on film than on paper and argue that much academic history tends to be narrative in form at any rate. Historians like Robert Rosenstone and Natalie Zemon Davis in particular have strongly defended the film as a form of history. While Rosenstone derides some historical film, he sees a role for specific types of film to explore the past in new and different ways, arguing that “the very nature of visual media forces us to reconceptualize and or broaden what we mean by the word, history.”84 He is particularly supportive of a number of experimental or alternative films which he thinks present a postmodern approach to history.85

Zemon Davis, on the other hand, sees historical worth in more mainstream films. She believes that the “microhistories” presented by films can, for example, “reveal social structures and social codes in a given time and place, sources and forms of alliance and conflict, and the tension between the traditional and the new.”86 In her book about the depiction of slavery in film, she strongly argues that while the films she is discussing may not be accurate in every sense, they can teach viewers a lot about the history of a period. For example, in relation to *Spartacus* (1960), she argues that, despite some inaccuracies in the film, it is, in some respects, “outstanding in depicting important social processes and critical experiences from the past.”87

It should, of course, be noted that both Zemon Davis and Rosenstone have been involved in the making of fictional films about the past—*Le retour de Martin Guerre* (1982) in Zemon Davis’ case and *Reds* (1981) in Rosenstone’s—and consequently have some professional stake in arguing that film can be an effective form of historical representation. Nonetheless they are not the only writers in this area. Robert Brent Toplin has considered a number of films and believes that they can be effective conveyers of

87 Ibid., p.36.
accurate history. Rather optimistically, he also argues that films which are too historically inaccurate are subject to critical examination and fail to win major awards and often suffer at the box office.\(^8^8\) I consider that he uses relatively arbitrary and subjective criteria to determine whether films are "good" or "bad" history, and that a case could be made that his choices (*Titanic* - good, *Amistad* and *The Hurricane* - bad) were made to support his argument.\(^8^9\)

What many of these debates about representations of the past and film tend to ignore, or to accept without much comment, is that, whether it is a good, bad or indifferent historian, film (and television) is an essential part of the way that people today gain an understanding of the past. Others deal with the issue more directly. Gary Edgerton argues that television is the principal means by which most people learn about history today.\(^9^0\) He believes that television's "nonfictional and fictional portrayals have similarly transformed the way tens of millions of viewers think about historical figures and events."\(^9^1\) John O'Connor agrees.

How many of those students are likely to subscribe to the *American Historical Review*, read a historical monograph, or even turn to more popular forms of historical writing, once they are finished with their required college history course? However unfortunate, it appears likely that even well-educated Americans are learning most of their history from film or television.\(^9^2\)

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89 In comparison, for example, Zemon Davis believes that Amistad's "quality as a historical film is in some ways so very good and in others disappointing" pointing out in particular three fabrications which she does not believe can be justified (Davis, *Slaves on Screen: Film and Historical Vision*). Titanic's main claim to historical accuracy has usually centred around the minute attention in sets, props and costuming, because its main story line is ludicrously unlikely.
90 In his discussion, Edgerton includes feature films as a component of what is accessed on television.
The same arguments can be made about feature films. Writing about Oliver Stone’s film *Nixon*, Daniel Walkowitz argues that the film should be taken seriously as a historical work “not least because its wide distribution gives it a central place in the public history of the era.” Similarly Robert Burgoyne notes that a vexed concern of many is now “the preeminent role that film has assumed in interpreting the past for contemporary society.” This consideration of the influence of the representation of the past on film and television would be equally true whether the mode of that representation is history, collective memory or nostalgia.

Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelan’s examination of the manner in which history is used and accessed in the US, notes that television, movies and books offered their respondents the most simple method of accessing the past. However, in their extensive telephone survey of the public about the way they accessed and understood the past, they found that television programs and films were ranked lowest for trustworthiness by respondents. This still left films and television ranked at five on a ten point scale. This rating meant that while film and television rated lower than other sources of information about the past, they were not considered wholly untrustworthy. Many of the respondents who felt negatively about the trustworthiness of films and television indicated that they believed history would be distorted by economic imperatives or that history was “jazzed up” to make films more entertaining. Interestingly, this suspicion was also extended to books about history. Nonetheless, many people did still find film and television a credible source of history, or respondents stated that “they’d found ways to screen distortions introduced by commerce, entertainment, ideology, and prejudice.”

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95 Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelan, *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life* (USA: Columbia University Press, 1998), p21. In contrast, museums were considered the most trustworthy at 8.4 followed by personal accounts from grandparents or other relatives at 8.0.

96 Ibid., pp97-99.

97 Ibid., p99.
also reluctant to dismiss all films, television and books, claiming that different kinds of film and television were more or less trustworthy than others.  

What is interesting in Thelan and Rosenzweig’s study is that their respondents’ interrogation of their own use of film as a source of history indicates that they are conscious of viewing it as an, at times, credible source of knowledge about the past. This conscious acceptance of the input of films to one’s understanding of the past is in addition to information about the past that is absorbed less consciously, particularly where films are not attempting to be “historical” in the more deliberate sense.

Leger Grindon takes another perspective on the role of representations of the past in feature film. He argues that historic films present ideological ideas about the present which “pass unquestioned into popular culture” because audiences consider that films are about the past. He argues that the “appeal to authority” of historical films is “reinforced by embellishing the historical film with scholarly references, period detail, or antiquated manners” because this presents “history as an avenue to the truth.” What he fails to note is that, as ideological assumptions about the present may pass unquestioned into popular culture due to their presence in historical film, so too may some present ideas about the past pass unquestioned into popular culture when they appear in films, and more so when the film is more fictional or, as discussed above, not attempting to be “historical” in a deliberate manner. This is because ideas about the past are less likely to be challenged when they appear in films which do not purport to tell a “true” story. There have been many, many articles (both academic and popular) written about films like JFK and Forrest Gump questioning and discussing their history, while the notions about the past presented by films like Austin Powers: International Man of Mystery (1999), Dirty Dancing or A Blast from the Past (1999) remain virtually unchallenged. Some writers acknowledge these tensions. Marne Hughes-Warrington points to some of the difficulties

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98 Ibid., pp99-100.
100 Ibid., p3.
in defining historical films, noting that what she regards as a historical film may not be considered such by others. Similarly Landy notes that when the historical film began to make a comeback in Italy during the 1950s in "comic, satiric, and even epic forms" as well as adventure and action films, "little effort was expended in seeking to understand...the films' return to historical subjects." She notes that "[s]ince the popular historical films made no pretence to realism...they did not seem to warrant critical attention." Audience knowledge that the narrative or story is fictional does not mean that they do not accept or absorb the details of the past, particularly when they play on notions already held about the period. We see examples of this in representation of the psychedelic movement in Austin Powers, the idea of the early Sixties as a time of change in Dirty Dancing and Cold War paranoia in A Blast From the Past. These are ideas about the past which are unchallenged, and thus become part of an audience's understanding of that past. In this vein, Burgoyne notes that "[c]oncepts of social reality constructed in Hollywood films clearly serve as legitimating discourses in the life of the nation." These completely fictional films set in the past cannot be discounted as imparters of knowledge about the past. They often provide a more easily accepted and less disputed background to a period which is less controversial and less debated than films which purport to depict actual historical events. Most debate, although not all, about the accuracy of films about the past tends to centre on arguments regarding the representation of actual events or characters rather than their general picture of the times they were set. As I have discussed above, films such as Dirty Dancing have raised little debate about historical accuracy while they nonetheless present a slice of social history of a period. Where that social history or the background to the film accords with the viewers'

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102 Ibid., p190.
103 Landy, Cinematic Uses of the Past, p12.
105 There are also debates about costume and other details about some films, particularly those set in the distant past. Some films also attempt to make claims about their authenticity and historical accuracy due to their attention to details, eg Titanic and its crockery etc, however these issues tend to be less central to disputes than issues of action and character.
general beliefs about the past, it is even more likely to be accepted. The lack of debate about this aspect of films about the past, indicates that this is likely.

Another important role, if a somewhat contradictory one, that films about the past play is the (re)introduction of ideas about the past to discourse. As O'Connor argues,

[s]eries such as *Roots* (1976) and *Holocaust* (1978) may be challenged for their historical accuracy, but no one denies that as media events they raised major historical issues for discussion in living rooms and over lunch tables as never before.\(^{106}\)

The same can be argued for a number of feature films. A striking example of this is Oliver Stone’s *JFK*. Stone consciously set out to provoke debate with the film and reinvigorate the issue of the story of Kennedy’s assassination. The film presented a view about the authors of Kennedy’s assassination and their motivations at a time when that issue, if not resolved, had largely moved out of the public realm. When the film was released, the issue was discussed extensively and official files were even made public. The re-introduction to discourse of the story of the assassination and its investigation by the film occurred in a powerful manner which was unlikely to be replicated by any other form of representation of the past.

This raising of questions or provoking re-examination of a period has occurred again and again as a result of films about the past. Fictional films about the past often provoke a more formal discussion about ideas of the past within them in newspapers and academic journals—all sorts of films from *Titanic* to *The Patriot* to *U-571* have generated this kind of debate. In fact, it is rare for a historical film based on real events to be completely unchallenged or, at least, to have its version of the past left undisussed. Introducing ideas about the past to the public consciousness remains a significant role of feature film.

\(^{106}\) O’Connor, "History in Images/Images in History: Reflections on the Importance of Film and Television Study for an Understanding of the Past," p1203.
While historical films may prompt discussion of the past they are, nonetheless, also representing the present. As Hughes-Warrington notes, “Historical films are...never just about one time, whether that is a represented past, the filmmaker’s present...or the viewer’s present.”¹⁰⁷ This is relevant to my argument that films about the Sixties engaged with cultural and political debates of the time of their production. Pierre Sorlin, in writing about *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), argues that films about the past allow us to comprehend “how men living at a certain time understood their own history.”¹⁰⁸ Sorlin sees that analysing some historical films will allow one to possibly find “a view of the present embedded within a picture of the past.”¹⁰⁹ In my thesis I wish to determine whether representations of the Sixties during the Reagan-Bush period do in fact contain that “view of the present.”

To utilise the example of *Spartacus* again, Maria Wyke supports Sorlin’s point of view by looking at the 1960 depiction of *Spartacus* and examining the way it reflects different issues from the time of its production. She argues, for example, that it “manifests a more immediate, liberal concern with the American Communist Party...and the recent hounding by HUAC [House Un-American Activities Committee] of Party members” and generally is influenced by the atmosphere of persecution prevalent in the US at that time. She cites the scene where the Romans promise the slaves they will spare their lives if they identify Spartacus, as being reflective of the attempts made by HUAC to force witnesses to inform on their friends and colleagues.¹¹⁰

Similarly Kara McKechnie argues that films about the British monarchy differ depending on the time in which they are produced. For example, when

the public lacked confidence in the stability of the monarchy, as was the case at the time of the 1938 Abdication Crisis, films like *Victoria the Great* and *Sixty Glorious Years* provided reassurance. By contrast, when stability prevailed, after

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¹⁰⁷ Hughes-Warrington, *History Goes to the Movies: Studying History on Film*, p76.
¹⁰⁹ Ibid., p19.
the coronation of Elizabeth II, weak and ridiculous monarchs could be shown on screen without danger, as in Beau Brummell.\textsuperscript{111}

Here the films may not directly represent the present, as they appear to tell a story which is opposite to that which is occurring at the time. Nonetheless they do fill a present need or interest, particularly in the case of films which provided reassurance about the monarchy. As McKechnie goes on to point out, there were fewer films about the monarchy in the decade after Beau Brummell as the relative stability of the monarchy meant there was less need for them.\textsuperscript{112} The extent to which this can be attributed to conscious decision-making by film-makers is difficult to ascertain, as it may indicate instead a unthinking reflection of the present. One can thus question why there was a proliferation of films about the Sixties produced during the Reagan-Bush era and what story they might be trying to tell.

Burgoyne sees film as a powerful means of remaking ideological fictions particularly by attempting to "rearticulate the cultural narratives that define the American nation."\textsuperscript{113} In his discussion he cites films like Malcolm X (1992), JFK (1991), Born on the Fourth of July (1989) and Forrest Gump (1994) all of which are films I will be discussing. He also argues that, the "contemporary historical film is...a privileged discursive site in which anxiety, ambivalence, and expectation about the nation, its history and its future are played out in narrative form."\textsuperscript{114} The ability of film to "hold up to scrutiny and drive home the emotional meaning of the imagined community of nation and its bruising inadequacies"\textsuperscript{115} and to debate these anxieties and ambivalences was particularly important during a period like the Reagan-Bush presidencies when cultural debates were at their heights. This need would have been intensified where filmmakers, such as Oliver Stone, held a different political outlook from the dominant political forces of the period.

\textsuperscript{112} Ibid., pp220-21.
\textsuperscript{113} Burgoyne, Film Nation: Hollywood Looks at U.S. History, p2.
\textsuperscript{114} Ibid., p11.
\textsuperscript{115} Ibid., p6.
As I have previously noted, I am less concerned about the “truth” of the past, than with why the past is represented in certain ways. As Landy points out an obsession with accuracy of facts within historical film “is a major obstacle inhibiting a proper assessment of the uses of the past in cinema.” In this thesis I wish to go past this obstacle and consequently I am also not interested in making judgments about the historical accuracy of film or whether it is good or bad that film acts as a significant technology of accessing the past for most people. Rather I wish to explore how film representations of a specific past interact with the cultural and political debates of the period in which they are made. In the following chapters I will take this general view that films about the past are influenced by the present and test it through a close examination of my archive of films. I will then explore the more closely the question of the mode of representing the past that these films use.

**Onwards**

In the following chapters I will examine the three key areas of representation: sex, Vietnam and race. By examining these within their context, I will attempt to determine how their representations of the Sixties have been impacted by the present in which they were constructed.

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The mini-skirt and the Pill started the sexual revolution in the 1960s. Fear of AIDS has ended it.\textsuperscript{1}

"If the original sexual revolution of the 1960s was defined by freedom, this one heralded by AIDS, is defined by the specter of death."\textsuperscript{2}

"I feel so lucky I came of age after the Pill and before AIDS," said 42-year-old Katherine, a Berkeley professor.\textsuperscript{3}

A clear trope of the Sixties is the idea of the "sexual revolution." As the quotes above discuss, the Sixties are often depicted as the era of sex or the time when an explosion of sex commenced. In contrast the 1980s, while they were occurring, were viewed as a period when sexual fear and repression was beginning, once again, to take hold. Accepted historical accounts of the Sixties support the idea that changes around sex, abortion and contraception did take place during the period, however, as discussed in Chapter One, what is questioned is the extent to which this was a good thing.

Beth Bailey argues that there were three major strands to the sexual revolution of the Sixties: the increased sexualisation of American culture through the increased representation of sex and sexual imagery in public life; the increased number of young people who began living together without being married, and the "active claiming" of sex by young people not only for pleasure but for power in the cultural politics of the US at the time.\textsuperscript{4} Clearly, other strands to the revolution in sex involved the introduction of the contraceptive pill in the early Sixties and the growth of the pro-choice movement which led to the Roe v Wade decision on abortion in 1973. Dickstein notes that during the Sixties "[w]omen sought and achieved better control over their bodies and more freedom

\textsuperscript{1}Voedisch, "Lifeless AIDS Tape Puts the 'Ex' on Sex."


\textsuperscript{4}Beth Bailey, "Sexual Revolution(s)," in \textit{The Sixties... From Memory to History}, ed. David Farber (USA: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), p238.
from demeaning roles and stereotypes.\textsuperscript{5} This new control was in part aided by, while at the same time facilitating, new approaches to contraception, abortion and sex. The “emergence of youth as a distinct political and cultural force”\textsuperscript{6} also had its impact on sexual behaviours.

Since the 1980s, the way the Sixties in the US is considered invariably involves sex. As Dickstein notes, “any sign of social activism, antiwar protest, or sexual hijinks quickly brings the sixties to mind.”\textsuperscript{7} Given this strong connection between the Sixties and sex, in this chapter I will look at the way sex and sex-related activity are depicted in the films I am considering. From this I will attempt to consider how the present of the 1980s and early 1990s affected this representation.

To do this, I will first examine the depictions of sex within these films. I will then examine the way that sex is depicted in films more generally, especially in films of the Reagan-Bush era, before turning to a consideration of the social and political context in which the films were produced. I will then seek to draw together some themes in this representation and reflect on the impact of the present on the way sex in the Sixties was represented during the Reagan-Bush era.

**Sex in the Sixties on Film**

When one considers the depiction of sex in the 36 films I am examining, the first thing that is striking is that many of the non-war, non-actuality films are set in the early, not late, Sixties, and most notably in 1963. These include *Shag, Dirty Dancing, Mermaids, Dogfight, Love Field, A Perfect World* (all set in 1963) and *Peggy Sue Got Married* (set in 1960), *Catholic Boys* (set in 1965), *Stand By Me* (set in 1959), *Little Shop of Horrors* (set during the Kennedy presidency) and *The Sandlot* (set in 1962).\textsuperscript{8} By focusing on the early Sixties (and particularly the period prior to Kennedy’s death), these films are at the

\textsuperscript{8} I will not be discussing *Stand By Me* or *The Sandlot* in this chapter because, as primarily children’s films, they do not feature sex to any significant extent.
beginning of the sexual revolution⁹ and could be seen to be constructing a representation of the time which preceded it. This presents a different perspective to that which one would expect had all the films been set in the late Sixties, when the sexual revolution had more clearly taken hold and was incorporated into the broader counter culture.

The highlighting of the way sex was viewed prior to the changes in the Sixties can be seen in a number of the films. In Peggy Sue Got Married, the contrast between the adult Peggy Sue’s sexuality and that of her friends in their 1960 youthful incarnation is the device used to highlight the lack of knowledge and unsophisticated approach of young people in the early Sixties around sex. One of her friends announces at a party that “You’d be surprised how many girls in school aren’t virgins” to the rapt attention of those around her. When Peggy Sue says to Charlie “let’s make love” when they are in his car, he is completely flustered, refusing and telling her it is “real late” and that she “sure knows how to spoil a mood.” He tries to remind her that she was the one who said they should wait and clearly finds the idea of a sexually forward woman confronting. The character of Michael Fitzsimmons represents the beginnings of the sexual revolution. Riding a motorbike, dressed in black and quoting Kerouac, he is happy to smoke drugs with Peggy Sue and make love under the stars. His response to this, however, represents his own innocent naivety. He tells Peggy-Sue that they have “fused” and “have fire” and must stay together. Even his proposal that she comes with him to Utah and live in a polygamous relationship with him and another girl he knows, is delivered as a naïve idealistic, albeit male-centred, ideal of life in which he would write his great novel while the women looked after the chickens to support them. He willingly accepts Peggy Sue’s gentle brush off and advice to see their night together as an “inspiration,” dedicating the book he writes in the 1980s to her.

The ideal for Peggy Sue appears to be the ability to control her sexuality. The film seems to argue that it would be good to be able to combine the choices provided by the sexual

⁹ Barbara Tischler places the beginning of the feminist revolution in 1964 ("Introduction: "It Was Twenty Years Ago Today" or Why We Need More 1960s Scholarship") while the pill was approved for contraceptive use in 1960. It should be noted that in 1961 it was still a crime to use birth control in Connecticut ("The Pill: Timeline" PBS [internet] available at http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/pill/timeline2.html [accessed 30/3/2008]).
revolution with greater maturity provided by age and experience into the control of one’s sexuality in youth. Peggy Sue is by no means promiscuous, but she has the desires for sex of an adult baby boomer from the 1980s, rather the early Sixties teenager her time dislocation has made her. Nonetheless, while she has a wish-fulfillment sexual encounter with Michael, her choices when reliving the past end up mirroring those of her youth, particularly in that she ultimately chooses to get pregnant again.

While the characters in Peggy-Sue never mention abortion, the narrative makes clear that by 1985, Peggy-Sue has spent almost her entire adult life in a relatively unhappy marriage to her high school boyfriend Charlie, who finally left her for another woman, due to the fact of her unintended pregnancy which led to their marriage. In the 1960 represented in the film when Peggy-Sue gets pregnant, the middle-class teenagers around her clearly have little information regarding birth control, let alone abortion, and a pregnancy means an early marriage, whether this is the best outcome for the couple or not.

What is interesting is that, while it is clear that Peggy-Sue’s early pregnancy and marriage have taken her into a life which was not necessarily ideal, given the hypothetical chance to change it all, she chooses the same life again, primarily because she does not want to risk losing her children. Here one could argue that the film has an anti-abortion/contraception position. Peggy-Sue is given the choice of a symbolic (extremely late term – as the resulting child is an adult in her actual life) abortion. If she chose to refrain from sex with Charlie on her eighteenth birthday, the time when, according to the narrative, she had become pregnant, she may have been able to avoid the pregnancy and the subsequent marriage which had left both her husband and her unhappy and unsatisfied. However, after deliberately looking at her locket, where her children’s photos would eventually be, she succumbs. This experience transports her back to the 1980s where she is in hospital. On her waking, the Charlie of the 1980s wants to reconcile. It is not clear, however, why or how the marriage would be much happier, except that Peggy-Sue now possesses a greater level of knowledge about herself and her husband. While the direct reference to children could be read as an anti-abortion
statement in which the life of the fetus is privileged above the happiness or convenience of the mother, there remains a certain ambivalence within the ending of the film. Peggy-Sue’s life is not automatically happier or the problems within it resolved. While Charlie is looking for a reconciliation, it seems to be in part because the woman for whom he had left Peggy-Sue does not understand his frame of reference due to age differences. It is not at all clear that the problems in the marriage will go away. Thus, rather than being read as anti-abortion, it could be viewed as being about the necessity of learning to live with the choices one makes.

Overall Peggy-Sue highlights the idea that adolescents and young adults of the early Sixties were innocent and uninformed, limited in their choices around sex and sexually related complications. It is difficult for Peggy-Sue to alter the past when she has a loving relationship with the consequences, her children, but it is clear that it is at least possible, if not probable, that she and Charlie may have had happier lives had they been in a position to make an informed choice.

A film targeted at teenagers, Shag (1989), set in 1963, is centrally obsessed with sex even though there is not a great deal of actual sex within it. As with Peggy-Sue, the implication within the film is that the four girls who are the film’s central characters are inexperienced in relation to sex. Carson, who is engaged, has made it clear that she is not interested in having sex before she marries Harley, her fiancé. The innocent attitude to sex is caught up in the positioning of the girls as “Southern belles” who are about to embark on their lives beyond high school. For example, while Melaina may flirt outrageously in a public place, and even agree to go for a ride in a car with a unknown man, she is horrified at the prospect of having sex with him. The daughter of a preacher, when fighting off the townie at a local parking spot, she says that it is “against my religion.” Similarly when Melaina sets out to seduce the visiting singing star, Jimmy Valentine, in order to have him help her get to Hollywood, she is not shown to engage in more than dancing and kissing with him. Her transference of pretence of affection to his manager similarly appears to remain at a level of potential, rather than actual, sexual engagement.
Carson, in her encounters with the alluring Chip, also appeals to her Southern modesty in attempting to resist his charms. She indicates that she finds it offensive when he removes his shirt while they are alone together, but yet agrees to rub sunscreen on his back. When Harley arrives in Myrtle Beach to find Carson, Carson realises she does not really want to marry him and goes into hiding with Chip and this leads to a sexual encounter. Chip, a Yale student (though Carson does not know this), represents something glamorous and a little bit dangerous to Carson and her friends, and it is this appeal which overcomes Carson’s previous lack of interest in sex. The reaction the next morning from her friends, particularly Luanne, a Senator’s daughter, reinforces the sense of innocence about the girls, as they display surprise and concern, but also some support.

While portrayed as largely innocent, the girls in *Shag* show an understanding of the impact of sex when they first arrive in Myrtle Beach. Staring at the pale green exterior of the Magnolia Court Motel, they note “This is where Florence Jarrod got pregnant last year.” The silent contemplation of the spot which follows and the questioning of whether they should leave indicates the problematic outcome for the girl concerned. This revelation about Myrtle Beach as a site for risk-taking serves to highlight the fact that the girls are stepping outside of their safe and comfortable lifestyles by going there, foreshadowing the kind of encounters that both Carson and Melaina will have. Although this moment obviously raises the issue of pregnancy, and by implication contraception, it does not appear anywhere else within the film. It is not, apparently, an issue for Chip and Carson when they engage in their unplanned encounter on a boat, nor does Melaina use pregnancy as a defence when fighting off the groping townie. Carson’s friends also do not seem concerned about the potential for pregnancy in the general (over) reaction to the news that of the sexual encounter.

The depiction of sex in *Mermaids* (1990) also set in 1963 contains similar elements to *Peggy-Sue* and *Shag*, relating to the innocence and lack of knowledge of Charlotte, the central character. It is, however, more ambiguous about sex generally. At the beginning of the film, Rachel Flax, Charlotte’s single mother, is engaged in an affair with her boss. Charlotte’s narrative makes it clear that this is not the first such affair her mother has had.
While Charlotte was born while Rachel was married, Kate, Charlotte’s younger sister, is the result of a one night encounter Rachel had while she was working as a maid at a hotel. At the beginning of the film Charlotte, who has ambitions to be a nun (despite being Jewish) treats her mother’s behaviour with a degree of contempt. Interestingly for the period however, Rachel Flax’s position as a single mother does not appear to make her socially marginal. While she moves towns at the beginning of the film when she becomes unhappy with her relationship with her boss (and they have moved 18 times), she is not portrayed as a social outsider. Although it is implied that her new boss’s fiancé looks at her with a degree of suspicion, within the new town her single status and her Jewishness do not appear to be major problems with respect to social integration. On encountering a nun from the nearby convent, the nun welcomes her to the town saying “You must be Mrs Flax, Joe [the caretaker at the convent] tells us a nice Jewish family had moved in.” More interestingly, Rachel is seen as a role model by Mary O’Brien, who Charlotte overhears boasting about performing oral sex on a boy. Mary’s friends are delightfully outraged by this confession saying “Mary, you’re going to get yourself in a heap of trouble” to which Mary responds “I know, I can’t wait.”

Overall the attitude towards sex from characters other than Charlotte is playful and ambiguous. Charlotte, on the other hand, is troubled by her attraction to Joe as it places her in conflict with her desire to be a nun. Understanding or discussing sex remains problematic for Charlotte, who is horrified even when her mother talks to the nuns about feet swelling in pregnancy. Charlotte scolds her telling her the nun is “a Holy vessel.” Despite her mother’s extensive sexual experience, Charlotte also remains innocent about contraception. The lack of sex education provided to young people at the time is emphasised in a humorous incident involving Charlotte who believes she might be pregnant after kissing Joe. She runs away from the encounter and refers to herself as a “fallen woman,” showering and scrubbing herself clean while praying. Her fear of punishment from God is then melded with the idea that she could be pregnant. It is not until she goes and sees a doctor who informs her otherwise that her fears are assuaged. While Charlotte’s fear being pregnant is caught up with her religious thinking,
nonetheless it is being used to emphasise the idea that teenagers in the early Sixties lacked knowledge about sex and its implications.

Imitating her mother by dressing and behaving sexually ends up as Charlotte’s ultimate rebellion against her mother. One night while Rachel is out, Charlotte puts on one of her mother’s dresses, singing “Fever,” her mother’s signature song, teases her hair and puts on her mother’s make up while drinking. Charlotte does this because she is upset because she had seen her mother kissing Joe. She and her younger sister Kate then head up to the convent where Charlotte encounters, and has sex with, Joe, while Kate falls in the icy river and nearly drowns. The endangering of Kate’s life through Charlotte’s irresponsible attitude to sex could be read as a condemnation of sexual activity and the parenting behaviour of her mother. It is when Charlotte acts like her mother and attempts to take on her attributes that Kate’s life is endangered. Interestingly, however, this reading is undercut by the end of the film. Kate survives and thrives, Charlotte and Rachel’s relationship improves and Charlotte herself becomes more balanced in her outlook on life. Charlotte’s sexual activity does not result in ostracism from her peers, instead it increases her popularity at school, particularly, but not exclusively amongst the boys, and she compares her own popularity with that of Mary O’Brien. In contrast following the accident, Rachel’s relationship with Lou who she has been dating on-and-off since their arrival in town takes on greater significance and stability and she is shown to be making a greater effort to ensure it works. The film therefore ends with the ideal of the traditional family structure replacing the greater sexual freedom coupled with instability previously enjoyed by Rachel. These contradictory ideas are not unlike the confusion around messages about sex that were apparent during the 1980s and early 1990s as I will discuss later in this chapter.

In *Dogfight* (1991), again set in 1963, the innocent relationship which develops between Eddie and Rose and results in sex, is contrasted with the more raucous behaviour of his fellow marines. Eddie initially asks Rose to the “dogfight” party because he considers her unattractive and badly dressed, as the point of a dogfight is that the marine who brings the ugliest girl to the party wins a cash prize. Eddie however is drawn to Rose’s
sweetness and spends the rest of the night with her. While they engage in an innocent courtship, Eddie’s friends drink beer, fight, get tattoos and watch a semi-pornographic film while being serviced by a prostitute.

At the end of the night Eddie and Rose return to her home where they have sex. The innocence of the encounter is emphasised when Rose dons a voluminous white night dress as a prelude to going to bed. While the strong indication within the film is that Eddie, a marine, is sexually experienced, Eddie’s approach to the encounter retains an air of innocence. For example, while waiting for Rose, he removes a condom from his wallet and hides it behind a teddy bear. The association of contraception with a childhood toy, acts to further reinforce the innocent nature of Eddie and Rose’s encounter. Interestingly, the condom packaging is khaki in colour, associating his use of contraception with his position as a member of the armed forces. As Planned Parenthood discusses in its history of contraception, condoms were distributed to the armed forces from at least World War II, though primarily for disease prevention (hardly likely to be a concern with Rose) rather than in relation to pregnancy and thus it is Eddie’s position as a marine which grants him access to contraception.

In another film set in 1963, Love Field (1992), the representation of sex is entwined with the representation of race relations in the US at the time. The sexual encounter between Lurene, who is white, and Paul, who is black, is a result of the intimacy that has developed between them and their sadness and desperation. The problematic nature of their potential relationship is indicated by Mrs Enright’s reaction when she realises they have been having sex. Nonetheless, at the end of the film, Lurene has left her husband and there potential for their relationship to develop further when Paul is released from gaol. Here the sexual encounter is made more challenging because Paul is black and, in this respect, the film reflects its Sixties context. The issues raised by sex in this context are more ones of race than of sex in terms of the tropes of representation.

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Sex and abortion are central plot drivers in Dirty Dancing. Made and released at a time when the abortion debate was a strong feature of political debate in the US it is, I believe, a strongly pro-choice film. Set in 1963 like many of the films discussed, it differs by directly addressing the very controversial issue of abortion. Dirty Dancing examines abortion as an issue of women’s health, and shows choice and access to safe abortion as an issue of class. In opposition to the stance of the anti-abortion movement at the time, which I will discuss later in the chapter, there is no agonising about the status of the fetus or the moral rights and wrongs of the situation.

In the film, set in the summer of 1963, Penny, who is pregnant, is a young woman from a working class background who earns her income from her role as a dancing instructor and demonstrator. The father, Robbie, is a young man from a rich family who is working while on holiday from his studies at Yale Medical School. He has no intention of marrying Penny and will barely even acknowledge that he is the father. Thus given Penny’s economic status and her method of earning a living, she feels she has few choices. Penny is not in any way characterised by the film as immoral or promiscuous. She is desperate to assure Baby, the film’s innocent but idealistic central protagonist, she doesn’t “sleep around” and that she thought Robbie, the father, in her words “loved me. That I was something special.” When the opportunity to have an illegal abortion from a doctor passing through town arises, it offers her hope and it seems to Penny and her circle of friends to offer the most logical solution to her dilemma.

The choice to have an abortion here is not played out as a moral dilemma, rather as a situation posing practical and financial difficulties. The decision to go ahead with the abortion is, in fact, the motivator for the central plot of the film. Baby acts to ensure that Penny can have the abortion, first by procuring the cash, which sees her first appeal to Robbie, who dismisses any responsibility by condemning Penny, and then by seeking the money from her father, urging him to trust her while not revealing why she needs the cash. The construction of this appeal for money in both cases does not morally problematise the abortion. In fact it is Robbie, who refuses to assist, dismisses Penny as promiscuous and divides the world into people who matter and those who don’t (he offers
to lend Baby his copy of The Fountainhead), who is shown as morally dubious throughout the remainder of the film. Baby’s willingness to endanger her close and trusting relationship with her father to gain the funds, which she explains are to help someone in trouble, again follows the general logic of the film that ensuring Penny can have the abortion is the right thing to do. Baby also needs to learn to dance (providing the motivation for the central plot of the film) to take Penny’s place in a demonstration dancing exhibition which takes place on the night the abortion is to occur.

The abortion is unsafe and nearly kills Penny—in the words of the character who has accompanied Penny to her appointment, the doctor was a “butcher” with “a dirty knife and a folding table” who “didn’t give her no ether”. Baby seeks the assistance of her father, a doctor, even though she realises that this will cause a breach between them. Mr Houseman, Baby’s father, however, never seems to blame or condemn Penny for her actions. This is probably because she becomes his patient, and, as such, he feels a duty of care to her which does not include condemnation. At the end of the film the two are shown embracing in an attitude of mutual fondness. It is also possible that Mr Houseman recognises the limited options available to a woman in Penny’s situation. In contrast, his attitude towards Baby’s complicity and what he assumes to be Johnny’s responsibility (and later Robbie’s actual responsibility) is strong and harsh. He views Baby’s actions as a breach of his trust, while, with respect to the men, he condemns their unwillingness to be a father to the baby or marry Penny, and thus their abrogation of responsibility. He does, however, seem to assume his own daughters are inherently more innocent than Penny, telling Johnny (when he presumes he is responsible for Penny’s pregnancy) who is by this time romantically involved with Baby, that he believes he is moving onto an “innocent girl”, implying a contrast between Baby and Penny. This attitude appears to have more to do with issues of social status and class than sex and morality.

Nonetheless, overall, the film highlights the problematic nature of illegal abortion when a woman has a genuine, although not medical, need to obtain one. The only villain within the situation is Robbie, who is constructed as hypocritical and irresponsible, a deceitful sexual predator. Again this construction of Robbie highlights the class issues in the film.
The working class Penny and Johnny are shown as victims of their higher status sexual partners/predators (more about Johnny to follow). At no time do the main characters engage in any discussion of the morality of Penny’s choice or the illegality of the procedure, except insomuch as it leads to the endangering of Penny’s life.

The writer and co-producer of *Dirty Dancing*, Eleanor Bergstein, hinted at a deliberate political dimension to her vision for the film when she said, “I meant ‘Dirty Dancing’ to be a celebration of the time of your life when you could believe that a kind of earnest, liberal action could remake the world in your own image.”*11* *Dirty Dancing* was hugely popular on its release, the eleventh most popular release in the US in 1987 with a total lifetime US gross of over $63 million which was particularly impressive for a film which was independently made for only $6 million and had no major stars in it (Patrick Swayze became popular only because of *Dirty Dancing*).*12* Despite this eventual popularity at the box office, it is notable that, according to newspaper reports, a number of major studios turned it down.*13* Without evidence of why the studios took this decision, one could argue that, despite the popularity of film and television about the Sixties at the time, major (and minor) studios were unwilling to back *Dirty Dancing* because of their awareness of the growing political controversy around abortion, fearing the commercial impact of boycotts from groups such as the National Right To Life Committee. Of course, it could also be argued that the rejection of the film by the studios could have been a decision based on the fact they did not believe a film about dancing with no major stars would be popular (although a studio could have chosen to recast the main leads).

It is also interesting that there were few mentions of the abortion in the press surrounding the film, particularly given that it was a central motivation for the action of the rest of the film. *The New York Times* film review mentions,

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a really quite awful subplot about Penny's abortion, financed by money that Baby has borrowed from her conventionally liberal doctor-father, and about the arrogant young Ivy League fellow who is responsible for Penny's condition. Generally however discussion of the film focuses on the main romantic plot. It is possible that, at the time, the anti-abortion movement was unaware of the abortion-related content of the film, or perhaps considered that the fact that the abortion endangers Penny's life made the film innately anti-abortion, however I have been unable to source any direct evidence about the attitudes of anti-abortion groups to the film. Later however, in 1991, a *Billboard* article mentions that *Dirty Dancing* had been included on "anti-pornography groups' lists" of films that should be boycotted because "one of the characters in the movie obtains an abortion." In addition to the abortion, there is a lot of other exploration of sex and, in particular, a contrasting of morally "good" and "bad" sex. When Johnny and Baby have sex it is because they truly love each other and their sexual activity is framed as passionate and important, although it also leaves them both vulnerable to the manipulations of others. This contrasts with much of the other sexual activity which occurs throughout the film. Baby's sister Lisa has a romance with Robbie while they are staying at the hotel. While Baby already has had sex with Johnny, she tells Lisa, her sister, that it would be wrong to "go all the way" with Robbie and it should be with some one she loves. Her sister, unaware of Penny's pregnancy and Robbie's duplicity, dismisses Baby's advice as jealous and views the gift of her virginity to Robbie as an enormous prize. Lisa's attitude towards sex is shown be a silly, if innocent, one. As mentioned above, Robbie, is

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14 Vincent Canby, "'Dirty Dancing,' a Catskills Romance in 1963," *The New York Times*, 21 August 1987. While Canby calls the abortion storyline a "subplot" it is in fact the central driver for the action within the film: Baby has to learn to dance in order to replace Penny at a special demonstration performance as the only day Penny can have the abortion is the day of a dance performance she and Johnny can't afford to miss because of the fee and the risk of losing future bookings.

15 Earl Paige, "Minn. Dealers 'Fight Back' against Anti-Porn Groups. (Home Video Stores)," *Billboard*, 23 March 1991. The article states that other listing by the anti-pornography groups included Roadrunner cartoons and *Nightmare on Elm Street* due to violent contents. In this respect, the anti-pornography groups were clearly pursuing a conservative morality-driven agenda.
depicted as unpleasant and duplicitous throughout the film, stemming in part from his sexual behaviour. Robbie is depicted as sexually predatory, not to mention a snob who derides Johnny, telling him to keep away from the daughters and talking about “slumming it” when referring to sex with Penny. Similarly, Mrs Vivian Pressman, who like Robbie is depicted as viewing sex as a matter of physical gratification rather than as a gift of love (Baby’s position), is shown to be manipulative and dishonest. Mrs Pressman, when spurned sexually by Johnny, implicates him in a theft out of spite, knowing that he cannot defend himself because he was with Baby at the time. Lisa catches Mrs Pressman and Robbie having sex when she comes to offer herself to Robbie. This discovery brings the two “bad” characters together, and, while ensuring Lisa is spared from Robbie’s sexual ensnarement, highlights the naivété of her early discussions with Baby.

Sex, as indicated above, is clearly a class issue within the film. Johnny, the poor dancing teacher, has himself had sex with a number of women including Mrs Pressman and other “Bungalow Bunnies”—women who spend weekdays at the resort while their husbands are in the city working. He is horrified, however, when Baby concludes that he was using the women. He argues that they were using him, that he was beguiled by their money, cleanliness and softness, a contrast from what he encountered “on the streets”. His essential innocence is maintained by this portrayal of himself as a victim, and because he turns down Mrs Pressman’s money and sexual allure at the next opportunity. The idea that this sex was something in which Johnny engaged because of desperation and the need to maintain his job and income is strongly emphasised. His further nobility is highlighted because he refuses to use Baby as an alibi when accused of theft by Mrs Pressman, and it is Baby herself who comes forward to reveal that they were together.

These four films set in 1963 display a range of similarities in the way they depict the time, particularly in relation to sex. The 1963 prior to the assassination of Kennedy is shown to be a time of hope and optimism, with much carefree fun. Following Kennedys’s death, there is change and darker representations of events and human emotions (though this is only implied in Dirty Dancing). In all, there is a lot of innocence and naivety
displayed around sex and sexual issues, especially by the young women depicted. Even those characters who have been sexually active, like Penny and Johnny, still idealise sex—Penny only had sex because she thought Robbie “really loved her” and Johnny feels cheapened and used by his sexual encounters. The young people of 1963 were innocent about sex, even Eddie, the marine, hides his condom behind a teddy.

In *Catholic Boys* (1985), set two years later, sexuality is definitely woven through the development of the teenage boys’ lives. While there is still an innocence to the approach of the film to sex, it is coupled with a great deal more experimentation that the films so far discussed. One of the boys, Williams, is shown to be constantly masturbating and most of the boys enjoy making sexual comments to girls. Rooney, the least academically gifted and the designated bad boy of the group is most interested in and most vigourously pursues sex, telling the target of his affections, Janine, what the penance for “getting felt up” is. Overall, however, there is a lot more talk about sex from the boys than there is action. When Rooney takes Janine out in his father’s car with its “electric leather seats,” Janine ends up drunk and vomiting and, following a series of incidents, the car is destroyed. The main love story in the film between Danni and Michael never progresses past kissing. Nonetheless, at the commencement of the Catholic combined school dance, the teenagers are given a fire-breathing sermon about the dangers of lust. This reflects the level of sexual education being provided to Catholic teenagers at the time and contrasts with the depicted reality in which they all have a much broader understanding than is credited by the Catholic brothers.

All the representations within films I have discussed so far have been from the early Sixties. They all clearly depict a period where there are strong rules around sex, and limited knowledge or information available to young people. In all of the films, the early Sixties, particularly prior to the Kennedy assassination, are shown to be a time of relative innocence.

While *1969*, set in the year of its title, engages more with the concepts of late Sixties counter-culture, telling the story of two teenagers, the issue of sex is again approached
with an aura of innocence. Scott and Ralph, 19 and at college, are contrasted with each other. Scott is a determined hippie-wannabe who spends his time waxing philosophically about how he and Ralph are “leaves” and painting his combi van. Ralph, on the other hand, is a more traditional teenager on the verge of flunking out of college and being drafted. In contrast to the association of free-love and sexual promiscuity with hippies, it is Ralph who is more sexually experienced and Scott who, for the most part of the film, remains a virgin. Even Scott and Ralph’s encounter with a colony of nudist hippies living on the beach does not lead to any sexual encounter, rather the satisfying of even more basic needs as they are served food and drink. Scott nonetheless boasts to his straight-laced, Marine brother, Alden, that he had been “doing that for a long time” when asked about his sexual experience. His brother is a little impressed and taken aback, stating that he was nearly twenty before he started. Here demonstrating sexual prowess is about asserting masculinity, particularly for the long-haired Scott faced with Alden’s adoption of his father’s military role.

When Scott does have sex with Beth, Ralph’s younger sister, this is framed as an innocent sexual awakening. It takes place when both Scott and Beth are sad and vulnerable. Scott has discovered Alden is missing in action and has been spurned by his father, while Beth is upset because Ralph has been jailed for attempting to steal his draft papers. It is clear that Beth has been fond of Scott for a long time and it is she who seeks him out, telling him that she thinks he is the most beautiful person she knows and seeking reciprocal reassurances. Following their sexual encounter, which is not shown, they run away to go “on the road” together. Ralph, in prison when they leave, is by contrast horrified that his friend has “balled” his sister. We also learn that Ralph’s early boast of his sexual experience, that he had had sex with fourteen women, was just a youthful boast and that he had “lied about ten of them”, two of whom were, in his words, “bad news.”

Within 1969 a potentially sexual encounter between Scott’s father and Ralph’s mother is shown within a context of innocence and sympathy. Scott’s father is emotionally isolated: his eldest son is missing in action, he has argued with Scott and his wife has withdrawn from him. Similarly Ev, a long time widow, is drunkenly euphoric as she watches the
moon landing, trying to forget that Ralph was arrested that day. The kiss between them is not portrayed as an act of marital infidelity so much as a moment of comfort. Later in the evening, Scott witnesses them dancing together in the front room of Ev’s house and there is an indication that any physical or sexual contact between them is more about finding comfort and solace than sexual lust.

The films discussed above, primarily aimed at a teen-young adult audience, tend to treat the Sixties as a period of sexual innocence or awakening, rather than an explosive orgy of sexual activity. This could be viewed as consistent with the coming-of-age/awakening of understanding nature of many of these films, rather than being a specific feature of representations of the period. A lot of films depicting teens and young adults are similarly themed. I will explore these depictions later in this chapter to attempt to determine whether there is a difference in the particular representations within these films which can be attributed to their period setting.

Notably, however, even *The Big Chill*, which as I discussed previously is set in the early 1980s but focuses on the Sixties and has an older audience in mind, seems to reflect a certain innocence around sex. Two of the strong storylines about sex are around Sarah’s infidelity with the now dead Alex, and Meg’s desire to get pregnant. Sarah and Alex have been forgiven by Harold, Sarah’s husband, and apparently it only happened “a few times.” At the end of the film, Sarah allows Meg and Harold to have sex for procreative reasons, and, perhaps too as a quid pro quo for her earlier infidelity. In this context these sexual arrangements are not depicted as sordid or problematic, but about mature adults negotiating an emotional area. There remains a purity to the relationships, even those which are essentially about infidelity.

The depiction of sex within *Little Shop of Horrors* (1986) also presents innocent sexual relationships as the ideal. While the film, as a comic-musical, presents all its characterisations as overdetermined the tension between the relationship which Seymour aspires to with Audrey and the one that she is having early in the film with the sadistic dentist, Orin, creates a clear dichotomy between the sexually active relationship and the
ideal, innocent one. Seymour’s innocent dreams focus on building a house for him and Audrey to share. Meanwhile, Audrey is abused physically by Orin. The level of overdetermination within the film could be interpreted as an implicit critique of Seymour’s early Sixties dream of domesticity, but it is also depicted as clearly superior to the squalor of Audrey and Orin’s relationship. It also again focuses on the pre-sexual revolution approach to sex, which appears superior to the possibility of the active sexual relationship.

Set also in the early Sixties and also aimed more at adults, the issue of sex emerges very briefly in The Right Stuff. In one scene, there is the implication that a number of the (married) trainee astronauts have been engaging in extramarital sexual activities. Two women are shown in the bar where the men are relaxing, and it is implied through their brief comments that they are attempting to work their way through all seven. They approach John Glenn, who, throughout the film, is depicted as the straightest of all the Mercury pilots. The film then moves immediately to the next scene, where John is upbraiding his fellow astronauts for having flings in case they endanger the integrity of the space program. He and Alan Shepard scuffle over this, until it is used by the other astronauts as a point at which they bind as a team. Here the issue of sex, and the morality around sex, is secondary to their bonding as a coherent group. While the role of the wives in the film is highly constrained in accordance with the expectations of woman at that time during the Sixties, this brief insight into sexual lives is timeless, as men from any era away from their wives have been depicted as choosing to be faithful or not.

Not all of the films that I am considering have the same approach to sex and the innocence of the Sixties. The films discussed above fall into the romantic comedy/drama generic category. It must be acknowledged that some of the manner of representation of sex within these films can be attributed to generic conventions as I will discuss further. In contrast, three different genres of films have different approaches to the depiction of sex. The mobster film, rock and roll biopics and the Vietnam War films all show sex in different manners. A final film to consider is Forrest Gump, a comedy-drama, which also demonstrates a different approach to the representation of sex.
In *Goodfellas* (1990), which is primarily a mobster film, sex is part of the fabric of the lives of those involved in the gangster lifestyle. While the courtship between Henry and Karen is fairly decorous, it is clear that shortly after their marriage he has a girlfriend in addition to his wife. The manner in which sex is portrayed within the film is shown to be part of the lifestyles of those involved in the crime families, rather than being a specific issue of the Sixties.

Sex is more complicated and more ambiguous in impact in both *What's Love Got to Do With It?* and *Backbeat*. *What's Love Got to Do With It?* is primarily the story of Ike and Tina Turner’s relationship from when they first meet through to Tina’s complete removal of Ike from her life. While Anna Mae/Tina is an innocent, it is clear that, in the early part of the film, her mother is not. Ike Turner is also experienced sexually, unfaithful and sexually manipulative. The focus on Ike moves from sexual irresponsibility to violence and drug use for the last two thirds of the film, but early in the film the fact that Ike treats women badly in terms of commitment and fidelity is made apparent. His partner, Lorraine, is distressed when she sees the attention Ike lavishes on Anna Mae and attempts to kill herself. We are later given indications that Anna Mae herself suspects that Ike’s attention may be wandering. So while the central character, Anna Mae/Tina, is innocent and naïve, the characters who surround her are not. Anna Mae’s innocence is consistent with the depiction of her throughout the film as an essentially good character. The issue of sexual fidelity, however, quickly disappears from the film once Ike and Tina become famous, to be replaced by other unpleasantness, in particular the verbal and physical abuse of Tina by Ike. Ike’s depiction, therefore, is as a thoroughly bad person, and his sexual behaviour could be read as part of that depiction, rather than engaging directly with ideas about sex in the period setting.

John and Stuart in *Backbeat*, the story of the earliest years of the Beatles, are shown as regular young men, with normal sexual appetites. They relish the opportunities presented by being in the band and, in John’s case, away from his regular girlfriend, to engage in commitment-free sex with German girls. Of the Beatles, only the younger George, at 17,
seems to be immune to the lure of easy sex, as he waits outside their living quarters chatting to another girl while his bandmates indulge. However sex takes on a more complex hue when Stuart becomes involved with Astrid. John attempts to deride the involvement initially, telling Stuart that she will never “shag” him. The sexual element of Astrid and Stuart’s relationship is made more complex by the presence of Klaus of whom Astrid says “I have known Klaus all my life, we have been lovers since we were born.” Astrid’s world is a bizarre and alternative one, which Stuart embraces enthusiastically as it seems to be more in line with his passion for painting over rock music. Thus the simple pleasures of “shagging” and rock and roll are contrasted with the more bohemian lifestyle of the artist. Astrid, unlike John’s Cynthia, does not have the simple desire to marry her man and have babies. Sex in her world is less about ownership, and although Klaus is devastated when he discovers Stuart and Astrid together, it does not lead to bitterness and he remains friends with Stuart and the band. Within the narrative there is more of a representation of the Sixties as a period of sexual exploration than in any of the other films I am considering. This is particularly through Stuart and his encounters with the German artistic world. In the case of John however, his sexual behaviour seems to be a more time-honoured part of being a young man away from home, and is not framed within any particularly Sixties context. It is important to note, however, that Backbeat, unlike most of the films I am examining, is set in Hamburg, not the US and features English and German characters, and not Americans. It is therefore perhaps less surprising that it takes a slightly different perspective from the US set films.

In The Doors, attitudes towards sex, and sexual behaviour itself are thoroughly explored. Jim Morrison’s approach to sex is placed in striking opposition to repressive ideas about sex and sexual behaviour which are depicted as characterising the approach of the establishment in the Sixties. Jim Morrison’s initial sexual openness is represented as part of mid Sixties youth culture as he hangs out at Venice Beach and pursues Pamela, a hippie. His need to continue to push the boundaries, however, eventually goes beyond what is acceptable even to his contemporaries.
The repressive attitudes of the establishment are on display when the Doors are invited onto the Ed Sullivan Show, although in this case they apply more to drug use than to sex. Prior to the show, the band is asked to change the words to *Light My Fire* to say “Girl we couldn’t get much better” rather than “higher”. While the other band members are willing to acquiesce, Jim deliberately keeps to the song’s lyrics making sure he emphasises the word to the camera, much to the disgust of the show’s producer.

Later in the film, Jim and Patricia are maced by a policeman when caught backstage about to have sex. Jim taunts the police who flank the stage at the concert and is dragged off stage after revealing what had happened backstage. At another concert, despite the naked woman in the crowd, Jim is arrested when he reveals his penis on stage in a drunken performance. As the film progresses, Jim’s flouting of authority moves from being an act of defiance to being about a loss of control, not merely of his sexual behaviour, but of his total approach to life. He is shown to be flawed and self destructive with his failure underlined by his inability to maintain a stable relationship with his much put-upon partner, Pamela, and is highlighted through his excesses—drugs, alcohol and sex. Within this context, however, Pamela is not entirely blameless; her willingness to allow Jim to live without boundaries and her own descent into drug use are depicted as enabling behaviours. Even more to blame is the other woman in Jim’s life, Patricia Kennealy. As part of their relationship, Patricia encourages Jim to use drugs and she starts him using cocaine. She also introduces him to witchcraft and blood drinking. Ray, who marries and has a child, sees Patricia as a destructive influence, telling her to stay away from Jim as “he doesn’t need any more shit in his life.” Jim’s sexual relationship with Patricia is depicted as a part of this loss of control, in spite of their pagan “wedding” ceremony, and it is not until he distances himself from her that he is shown as having any chance at regaining a semblance of stability within his life.

Jim’s excess in drink, sex and drugs is shown ultimately to have a castrating effect upon him. At two points in the film he is unable to perform sexually: once with Pamela and once with Patricia. In both cases this sexual failure in fact leads to further excess as he and Patricia engage in cocaine, blood drinking and frenzied paganistic dancing before
they finally have sex. With Pamela he drinks more and fights with her, breaking things and trying to throw himself out of the window before managing to “fuck death away.”

While Jim finds co-conspirators in excess in his dodgy roadies and Warholian actor Tom Baker, his bandmates come to disapprove of his behaviour and embrace a more traditional conventionality. This is a much darker representation of sexual experimentation amongst the European/painting crowd than is seen in *Backbeat*. In *Backbeat* unconventional sexual relationships and arrangements are not depicted as destructive in the way they are in *The Doors*. In *The Doors* this sexual licence is linked with drug use and degradation. None of the other Doors like the Warhol set when they meet them, with Ray referring to them as vampires, and they leave the party early, leaving Pamela and Jim to be drawn into a darker, less innocent world. Here Pamela meets the Count who will later introduce her to heroin and it is after this party that she, disoriented and upset, comes upon Nico performing fellatio on Jim in a lift.

Jim’s engagement with sex is shown as part of his personal decline and fall, rather than being an inherent component of a Sixties lifestyle. Jim is clearly connected with the counter-culture, however it is clear within the film that he chooses a more destructive path than fellow counter-cultural travellers. Initially, Jim approaches love and sex from a poetic, romantic point of view, climbing a tree to deliver an initial kiss to Pamela, climbing into her bedroom to entice her out for a walk and talking about poetry under the stars in a manner similar to Michael Fitzsimmons in *Peggy Sue Got Married*. Jim’s less innocent behaviour is fuelled by drugs and alcohol and the influence of some of the darker people around him, in particular, the Europeans associated with Warhol, as well as Patricia and her paganism. There is clearly a flawed side to Jim, which the circumstances of his life places into a dominant position. Nonetheless, the film also tries to depict a particular innocence to him as well. His cohort in the band, while dressing like hippies and clearly being part of the music scene, actually are depicted as balancing the pull of the Sixties counter-culture with more traditional relationships. The band members, for example, are all depicted at a child’s birthday party with their partners and children. It would appear that the film is not making the period itself responsible for all the excesses
depicted, but rather allowing it to provide the preconditions for this behaviour, particularly in the tensions between establishment conservatism and the counter culture. Excess is the way to smash tradition and oppression, however the trick is to be able to pull away from that excess.

*The Doors* also explicitly deals with abortion. When, during his 1970 trial, his alternate lover, Patricia, tells him she is pregnant, Jim questions his responsibility, although not as harshly as Robbie in *Dirty Dancing*. Jim’s first question to Patricia is, “are you going to get rid of it?” acknowledges that he is not prepared to shoulder the responsibility of fatherhood. Patricia at first says she will keep “the kid,” to which Jim replies that that would be her decision but if she had an abortion he would be there with her. She acknowledges her dilemma, stating that she does not even like children particularly, but that she does not “want the other fucking thing either.” In the scene where she confronts Jim, Patricia is wearing a smock and her pregnancy is showing, a cinematic device to indicate the pregnancy, however it does imply the it would not necessarily be a first trimester abortion. Access to abortion is not raised as an issue in the discussion, and it is likely that this reflects the fact that, even pre-*Roe* abortion was a less fraught issue for the rich and well-connected, who were able to travel easily to states where it was possible to gain legal abortions, than for those of the class and status of Penny in *Dirty Dancing*. The abortion and the pregnancy are not referred to again in the film and neither is Patricia featured, though she is mentioned amongst a list of women who have tried to call Jim. The film leaves it unclear as to what Patricia decides, though it seems likely she will chose an abortion. Abortion here is presented again as a logical, if somewhat distasteful, method of resolving a problem. One could read the depiction of abortion negatively, given its utility in solving a situation which Jim’s drug use, irresponsibility, narcissism and uncontrolled sexual urges has created. On the other hand, Jim’s refusal to take responsibility for the baby and his disavowal of their Wiccan marriage (“Patricia, I was stoned. It seemed like a fun thing to do at the time”) separate him from what has been constructed as a destructive influence on his life. It is from this bottom point of the

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16 Note that Kennealy confirms the story of the pregnancy and abortion in *Strange Days: My Life With and Without Jim Morrison* (Plume: USA 1993).
combined obscenity trial and Patricia’s pregnancy that Jim eventually begins to return to having some control of his life.

These three rock bio-pic films move some distance from the association of sex and innocence that appears strongly in the fictional films discussed earlier. An even more radical departure from a depiction of sex as innocent is found in the Vietnam combat films. In these films sex is almost entirely about commercial transactions or violence. *Hamburger Hill* (1987) sees the soldiers of all ranks visiting brothels and molesting bar girls. The soldiers fight over whose turn it is and who goes first. In *Full Metal Jacket* (1987), sexualised encounters become increasingly brutal through the course of the film. During boot camp the recruits are faced with the extreme verbal misogyny and homophobia of Gunnery Sergeant Hartman as he trains them. The very first scene in Vietnam shows Private Joker and Rafterman, his photographer, being approached by a prostitute who haggles with them over prices, demeaning herself with her comical sexual talk. Once agreed on a price of $10, Joker points out that “half these gook whores are serving officers in the Viet Cong,” linking sex and violence again. The encounter between a prostitute and the squad of marines which occurs during a respite in the battle in Hue is even more uncompromising, as the men negotiate for the woman to service all the soldiers, haggling over the price for different types of sex. The woman refuses to have intercourse at first with the black soldier, claiming that he is “too beaucoup,” until he demonstrates that he is not. When the price is established, the hierarchy of the squad is reinforced, as the aggressive and brutal “Animal Mother” asserts his right to go first.

This treatment of Vietnamese women as objects for sex and the ongoing link between sex and violence precedes an encounter with the Vietnamese sniper. From the beginning of the film guns and sex are paired, with the marines encouraged during basic training to give their gun a woman’s name, and with their training chants—“this is for killing, this is for fun”. When the injured female sniper is encountered in a semi-destroyed building, the film’s early use of the weapon as a metaphor, or substitute, for sex is played out when she is shot and killed by Joker. She begs him to kill her and her almost sexual writhing is ended by his (phallic) gun.
This metaphoric sexual assault on a Vietnamese woman in *Full Metal Jacket*, is played out in actuality in *Platoon*. During their attack on a village, soldiers are depicted raping a girl, and have to be pulled off by Chris, the central character, and Sergeant Elias. This concept of the merging of sex and violence is taken further in *Casualties of War* in which the entire premise of the film is based around the gang rape of a Vietnamese girl. The implications of this consistent link between sexual violence and the Vietnam war are that it is not the Sixties, but the nature of the war itself (and possibly war more generally) which results in the particular attitudes to sex which are seen within these films. I will discuss this further in the following chapter.

While *Heaven and Earth* (1993) depicts a view of the Vietnam war from the perspective of a Vietnamese woman, it retains the focus on the brutality and commercial nature of most sexual transactions associated with the war. Le Ly who is raped by the Viet Cong, later engages in a sexual relationship with her employer. While, on her part, the relationship is fuelled by genuine affection and love, when it results in pregnancy, commercial considerations and self harm come to the fore. Le Ly’s mother attempts to “sell” her daughter to the man and his wife as his “second wife” and attempts various dangerous remedies to rid her of the pregnancy. Eventually she is forced to leave and support her baby on her own. The interaction between Le Ly, and her sister who works as a bar girl, with American soldiers also highlights the commercial transactional nature of sex during the conflict. Le Ly does not engage in prostitution, but at one point succumbs to the pleading of an MP and his offers of larger and larger sums of money to have sex with a couple of GIs. Even her relationship with Steve is tinged with these kinds of considerations. The power differential in their relationship is significant, and made greater when they first return to the US. The nature of sex again appears to be related primarily to the war, rather than the period setting of the film.

In *Born on The Fourth of July*, Catholicism and anti-Communist ideology are linked explicitly with sexual potency. Ron is not shown experiencing sex prior to his Vietnam service and his mother’s Catholicism is emphasised. She scolds him for having a *Playboy*
magazine in his room, telling him that “God is going to punish him.” Similarly she tells him before he leaves that Communism must be stopped and that it is “God’s will” that he goes to Vietnam. On his return, his paralysis means that he cannot get an erection any more. In his drunken attack on his mother one night, he blames her mix of religion and right-wing ideology for sending him to a pointless war where he lost the ability to use his penis which he “didn’t have time to learn to how to use.” Here loss of sexual potency is clearly blamed on the repressive social and political conditions of the early Sixties which helped to create the conditions for the Vietnam War. Ron does experience sexual gratification in Mexico with a prostitute, but mistakes the commercial transaction for genuine love, leading again to a level of disillusionment. This sexual rehabilitation does, however, allow Ron to reclaim and take control of his life. His sexual encounters with the Mexican prostitute are placed outside the context of historical period. While we are given a date—1970—the emphasis of the experiences in Mexico are of exotic otherness, outside the reality of the US. The film is shot through a colour filter and the focus is on the exotic—the palm trees, the Mexican women, the beach. In this way, while his sexual repression in the US in located in his mother’s Catholicism and the prevailing social mores, his experiences in Mexico are outside the historical framework of the film.

It is unsurprising that sexual activity has lost its innocence in the Vietnamese combat films as one of the tropes of these films, as I will discuss more extensively in the next chapter, is how the Vietnam experience stripped the innocence of the young men who fought there. Sex here is located in the context of war. What is significant is that the manner in which sex is shown in the context of this particular war is far more brutal and commercially focused than the way war and sex had been presented previously. Again this is an issue I will explore further in Chapter Three.

The final exception I mentioned was Forrest Gump. Unlike the other films I am discussing, Forrest Gump clearly focuses on sexual promiscuity as a feature of the Sixties. While Forrest himself is an innocent throughout the film, the character of Jenny is used as a counterpoint to Forrest. Where Forrest’s innocence sees him glide effortlessly through the world, garnering success and fortune, Jenny’s less idealistic view of the
world leads her to abuse and disaster. Jenny is scarred sexually from the beginning, as the film alludes to sexual abuse suffered at the hands of her father. Forrest tries constantly through the film to rescue Jenny from the impact of her sexuality: interrupting her with a boyfriend at college, carrying her from the stage where she sings folk songs naked, discouraging her involvement with an abusive SDS\textsuperscript{17} boyfriend and finally marrying her when she has AIDS. Here the contrast between good innocent sex and the bad sex that Jenny has engaged in is made explicit: her one “good” sexual encounter, with Forrest, leads to the birth of little Forrest, while her “bad” sexual life kills her through AIDS. The stark difference in the results of sex removes any notion of innocence in Jenny’s sexual activity.

Other depictions of sex in \textit{Forrest Gump}, although not necessarily occurring during the Sixties, add to this idea of sex as a tool or a cynical exercise. Forrest’s mother has sex with the school headmaster to ensure that Forrest is allowed into mainstream school, while Forrest waits outside. Forrest and Lieutenant Dan’s encounter with prostitutes is represented as seamy and unrewarding, with the prostitutes depicted as cynical, unfeeling women. Again here the emphasis is on the way that women engage with sex, rather than how men and sex are linked. It is the women in each of these encounters who drive the negative sexual behaviour, men are the ones shown being manipulated or mistreated.

J H Wang argues that within the logic of the narrative of \textit{Forrest Gump}, Jenny is the embodiment of the Sixties. Wang writes,

\begin{quote}
[i]n her physical movement away from her past and away from the values of 1950s Alabama, Jenny moves on an ever-increasing path of self-destruction. In juxtaposing Jenny’s sexuality and the tumultuous moments of the 1960s, sexual chaos and historical chaos are intimately linked. Moving from strip shows, to the pages of \textit{Playboy}, to college, to antiwar activism, the account of Jenny’s sexual experimentation is intertwined with her involvement in 1960s political and
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{17} Students For a Democratic Society.
Here Wang is arguing that implicit in the depiction of Jenny and her sexual behaviour is a political argument against the sexual "revolution" of the Sixties. This is an interesting consideration, particularly when contrasted with the emphasis on innocence within the majority of the films. Within these films the manner in which sex is depicted would seem to be making a contrasting political statement. The depiction of Jenny contrasts with the view that comes from many of the other films: that at the beginning of the Sixties there was a certain lack of knowledge and high level of naivety and repression surrounding sexual behaviour. In this interpretation of the period, the repression and ignorance of the early Sixties are seen as needless and dangerous for young people, and the resulting changes are a good thing. Even a film like *The Doors* does not indicate that this change results necessarily in excess, but adds a note of caution to the tale.

**Sex on film**

In this section I want to look at the depiction of sex and the related issue of abortion in other films made during the 1980s and early 1990s. This will allow me to identify areas of commonality and difference in the representation of sex when it occurs in films set in the Sixties, as compared to those with a contemporary setting. Sex has always been an important component of films and the way it has been depicted has changed depending on the prevailing attitudes and censorship. By the 1980s its depiction had expanded quite significantly as I will discuss here.

I have noted that the sexual revolution is one of the reoccurring tropes of the Sixties. Despite this, the depiction of sexual activity in films was severely constrained until 1967 when the Hays Production Code was finally entirely abandoned. The code was developed in the 1920s, as an initiative of Will Hays, the president of the newly formed Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America. Its development was part of a strategy...
designed to create an image of Hollywood as a family-friendly place, moving away from previous scandals which had impacted on the perception of the industry.¹⁹ A number of films which defied the code had been released prior to 1967, however these were generally, though not exclusively, outside the mainstream of Hollywood cinema. In contrast, by the 1980s, sex was featured heavily and, at times, explicitly, in the most mainstream of films.

There were a number of classic teen romantic comedy/coming of age films produced and released during the Reagan-Bush era, notably those directed by John Hughes such as *Sixteen Candles* (1984), *The Breakfast Club* (1985) and *Pretty in Pink* (1986). Many of these depicted relatively innocent teenage relationships where engaging in sexual activity was seen as somewhat unsavoury. In these films it was often the “bad” characters who had sex, while the main stars maintained pure relationships. The discourse around sex discussed earlier in the chapter in a film like *Shag* is very similar to that within these kinds of teen films from the period, particularly ones focused on girls’ first serious relationships. The girls in *Shag*, while depicted as innocent and somewhat naïve, are not enormously more so than Andy in *Pretty in Pink*. The dilemmas of the girls in *Shag* are similar and the reactions to sexual situations and encounters share much in common with this particular group of teen genre films of the 1980s and early 1990s. *Shag* presents a slightly more advanced approach to sex than these John Hughes films with its inclusion of a positive sexual encounter. Carson’s sexual encounter is depicted as a positive advance in her character in the narrative of the film. Her behaviour does not result in ostracism by her friends. Similarly, Melaina’s behaviour is seen by her friends as risqué, and while Luanne tries to force her to be more “modest” in her appearance at the local beauty pageant, Melaina is not condemned for it.

In comparison to the relatively tame presentation of sex in *Shag*, other teen focused films from the Reagan-Bush era contained much more explicit depictions of sex. These often utilised the same actors who featured in the sex-free John Hughes films. *St Elmo’s Fire*

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(1985), whose stars included Andrew McCarthy (who later featured in *Pretty in Pink*), showed the main characters having sex with each other and heavily featured themes of infidelity and sex as gratification. *Class* (1983), also starring Andrew McCarthy, showed him, still a school student, engaging in an affair with the mother of his room mate from boarding school. Made also in 1983, *Risky Business*, starring Tom Cruise, one of the biggest teen idols of the period (and an on-going major star), features his character facilitating prostitution to make money to pay for damage to his father’s car.

This range of representations of sex and sexuality within films aimed at a teen audience is much more complex and morally ambiguous than that seen in the films set in the Sixties. In those films, targeted at a similar audience, there is a greater emphasis on the innocence of the characters in their relationship with sex, and a far clearer focus on their level of sexual knowledge, something which is taken for granted in films with a contemporary setting.

Reagan-Bush era films that were aimed at the young adult market as well as older teens contained further explicit images of sex. *Top Gun* (1986), for example, contains a number of relatively detailed sex scenes. Another film targeted at a similar age group, although skewing more to women, *About Last Night* (1986), was a film which was based on the premise that a relationship could be founded on a one night stand.

In 1990, the explicit function of prostitution was packaged into the ultimate fairytale with the release of *Pretty Woman*. In a film clearly targeted at young women, a prostitute is transformed and rescued by a multimillionaire who she in turn teaches humanity. A traditional tale of female transformation and rescue, it was the fourth most popular film of its year in the US\(^\text{20}\) and made Julia Roberts a major star.

The depiction of sex in films reached its zenith for the 1980s with *Nine ½ Weeks* (1986). This film centred around an intense affair between two adults which moves into sado-
masochism. It featured highly sexualised content and was focused almost entirely on the sexual relationship between the two. A similar film *Wild Orchid* (1990) also dealt almost entirely with the sexual relationship of the central characters. While primarily examining the impacts of ill-advised sexual infidelity, *Fatal Attraction* (1987) also placed sex at the centre of its film. By 1992, a mystery/police genre film, *Basic Instinct*, also made dangerous sex the pivotal component of its plot.

These films not only featured sexual behaviour as a strong motivator for action, they eroticised depictions of sexual activity. While including titillating sexual sequences, these films tended to take a moral perspective with respect to sex, demonstrating the consequences which can result from ill-chosen sexual partners or dangerous sexual behaviour. This notion of unbridled sexuality as dangerous clearly accorded with much of the discourse about sex which was occurring in US politics and media at the same time, as I will discuss later in this chapter. At the same time, there was a clearly hypocritical element to the moralising as the films would often use their depiction of sex as a selling point.

Douglas Kellner and Michael Ryan write that, during the 1980s,

> [a]s part of the conservative attempt to restore the dominance of the traditional patriarchal family, the sexual revolutions of the era—abortion, gay rights, birth control—were combatted on a number of fronts. The conservative drive to restore the family was in some respects merely a pretext for reimposing sexual discipline on youth and for curtailing independent feminine sexuality. 21

They also note that, “Hollywood took both sides of the issue [of sexuality]” as “some films explored the origins of male violence against women in media fantasies (*Lipstick*), while others brutalized women for being sexually independent (*Looking for Mr."

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While they acknowledge that “a breakdown in restraints on pornography” is reflected in films like *Risky Business*, they argue that the change in gender relations over the previous two decades allowed young women “to be represented as having greater agency and choice in the sexual arena” than films prior to the mid seventies. The dual nature of Hollywood depictions of sex is clearly evident in films from the Reagan-Bush era. While there is some agency afforded to women in the sexual arena, in general women who are sexually dominant tend to be shown to be dangerous or bad.

Clearly the breakdown in restraints on pornography that Kellner and Ryan mention is a feature of films like *Nine ½ Weeks, Wild Orchid* and *Basic Instinct*, however it is also apparent in the depictions of sexual activity in many of the other films, like *Top Gun* and *Pretty Woman*. Even a film like *Flashdance* (1983) which featured no actual sex scenes, draws heavily on pornographic images, utilising erotic dancers and strippers, and includes a scene where the central female character while at a restaurant uses her foot to massage her boyfriend’s groin before revealing she has almost no clothes on. Throughout the film there is extreme fetishisation of the female body with many shots, particularly during dance sequences, showing only the thighs and bottom of the character.

A number of Reagan-Bush era films demonstrate Kellner and Ryan’s point about Hollywood playing both sides of the issue highlighting the impact of contemporary politics. Women in general are granted greater sexual agency and, at times, men are depicted badly when they are shown making assumptions about a woman’s sexual availability. An interesting example of this is in *Pretty Woman*, when one of the friends of the main male character tries to approach Vivian (the prostitute) to suggest sex with him when she has finished working for Edward (the multimillionaire). His approach is depicted as boorish and inappropriate and creates tension within his relationship with Edward. While the scene endows Vivian with a degree of control over her sexuality there is also something inherently conservative about the scene, as now that Vivian has found

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22 Ibid.
23 Ibid.
24 Ibid., p166.
“love” with Edward she finds it morally outrageous to be approached for sex in the way she used to make a living only a week earlier.

Overall, however, in the films of the 1980s and early 1990s, women tend to be regularly punished for inappropriate sexual activity. Similarly, sexually aggressive women place men in danger. This could be seen as part of the conservative attempt to reimpose sexual limitations. Yet it remains indisputable that there was a paradox at the centre of these films which clearly exploited sexual imagery to make them more marketable. The films set in the Sixties do not engage as greatly with this approach to the punishment of women. While Jenny in *Forrest Gump* is punished for her sexual behaviour, the female characters in other films are not. Many face consequences, but these are not ultimately destructive. Women, overall, do seek and have a degree of control over their sexuality, and the importance of this is emphasised most strongly in *Peggy-Sue Got Married*.

**Abortion and contraception on film**

While there was a lot of sexual activity in films made in the 1980s and 1990s, not a lot of it involved contraception. Given the eroticised pornographic roots of the depiction of sex at this time as discussed above, it is unsurprising that characters rarely pull out a condom or discuss other contraceptive methods. There were some exceptions, such as in *St Elmo’s Fire*. Alec and Leslie, the committed couple at the beginning of the film, are engaging in some teasing foreplay, when Leslie excuses herself to go to the bathroom. Here contraception is used as a plot point to highlight their different approaches to the relationship: Alec suggests that they do not need “that thing” and should get married, while Leslie is not ready to make the commitment yet. While contraception is used as the catalyst to a discussion about their relationship at this point in the film, it does not appear to be used at any other point in the film as a part of actual sexual activity.

In general, however, while many Reagan-Bush era films showed consequences from inappropriate sexual activity, these were less often about mundane things like sexually transmitted disease or pregnancy and more often involved violence or being left by one’s spouse. This runs counter to the tendencies of television soap operas, where unwanted
pregnancies were, and continue to be, a regular occurrence. Laura Stempel Mumford comments on,

soap opera women's striking ignorance of their own reproductive systems, including their apparent lack of information about or access to contraception and their constant surprise at unplanned pregnancies.  

Women in feature films at the time were generally similarly unaware of the need for or availability of contraception, but rarely did this create a problem for them. Pregnancy within a feature film is, however, a plot point which transforms an entire film. For soap opera, its ongoing nature make the plot and story implications of unwanted pregnancy fodder for its never-ending narrative. Women in feature films are generally immune to the unwanted pregnancy which strikes often in soap, unless the focus of the film is unwanted pregnancy. Thus while unwanted pregnancy was not a taboo within televiusal depictions at the time, it was generally absent from feature films.

While the possibility of pregnancy is ignored in the majority of films with a contemporary setting, the films set in the Sixties alert the audience to the consequences of unprotected sex. We see this with Penny’s unwanted pregnancy in Dirty Dancing; the mention of the girl’s pregnancy in Shag; The focus on Peggy-Sue’s pregnancy in Peggy-Sue Got Married; the actual visibility of contraception (Dogfight) and the recognition of the ignorance about these issues (Mermaids). This does not mean that all these characters get pregnant when they participate in (presumably) unprotected sex, however there does seem to be a much greater acknowledgement of those issues in the Sixties-setting films.

Given the absence of unwanted pregnancies in contemporary Reagan-Bush era films, it is unsurprising to find that very few films of the period involved abortion. A search of the

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Internet Movie Database for the term “abortion” in plot summaries, revealed only three feature films in the period I am considering. These were Dirty Dancing, a mystery-thriller film called A Climate for Killing (1991) which features discussion of an abortion as a minor plot point, and For Keeps? (1988). While the plot summaries on the Internet Movie Database are provided by the public and are therefore not necessarily comprehensive and I would not argue that these are the only US feature films made during the period, it is revealing that so few films of the time featured abortion to any great extent.

For Keeps? while providing discourse on the idea of abortion, does not actually feature an abortion. Aimed at teenagers and starring Molly Ringwald (who appeared in most of the John Hughes films I mentioned above) as Darcy, the two central characters are still at high school and about to start college when they discover that Darcy is pregnant. Despite being urged by their parents either to have an abortion or give the child up for adoption, they get married and undertake the role of young parents.

In addition to these films, Parenthood (1989) features discussion of abortion where it is rejected as an option by both an older woman whose husband has just lost his job, and a young girl about to enter college. The Fly (1986) also features a near-abortion. In this horror film, Veronica, the lead female, seeks to have an abortion because she fears her baby may be a mutant. The abortion is prevented by the rapidly mutating father, who she is later forced to kill. Even in this situation the mooted abortion, if it happens at all, is left to occur following the end of the film.

Fast Times at Ridgemont High (1982), made just before the period I am considering, shows a much more straightforward approach to abortion. In it, one of the main female characters, a high school student, has an abortion. No one in the film condemns her for her choice, and most of the outrage around the situation is directed at the father and, in particular, his failure to accompany her to the abortion clinic and pay his share of the

27 Given that the sequel made in 1989, The Fly II, focuses primarily on the resulting child, one can safely assume that the abortion did not take place.
costs. Similarly *Trust* (1990), an independent American film directed by Hal Hartley features a young woman who must make a choice about abortion. Here again the morality of the situation is not a key issue. The film does acknowledge the political dimension to abortion of the time of its making, depicting anti-abortion protesters.

The focus on abortion in US telemovies of the period, however, was somewhat more direct than in feature films. At least five telemovies featured abortions within their plot between 1983 and 1994 including: *Absolute Strangers* (1991) which featured anti-abortion activists attempting to fight a man who wanted to allow doctors to terminate his wife’s pregnancy in order to sustain her life; *Choices* (1986) about a nineteen year old girl contemplating abortion which is opposed by her father until he finds his second wife is pregnant; *A Private Matter* (1992) the “true” story of Romper Room host, Miss Sherri, who, during the 1960s, fights to have an abortion when she discovers the effects of thalidomide; *Sweet Revenge* (1984) which features a girl dying after an illegal abortion; and *Roe vs Wade* (1991) about the legal case which allowed for legal abortion. Notably two of these telemovies were themselves set in the Sixties (as I have defined it). An HBO series in 1992, *Lifestories: Families in Crisis* also featured the storyline of a teenage girl who dies after an illegal abortion.

Overall birth control and abortion was mostly noticeable by its absence in feature films with a contemporary setting. There are, as cited, examples of films where the notion is considered but dismissed, usually not for overtly moral/religious issues and films where it occurs without moralising. While Susan Faludi argues that, during the 1980s in popular culture, “abortion becomes a moral litmus test to separate the good woman from the bad”\(^\text{28}\) I think her selection of films is limited. She does not address *Dirty Dancing, Trust* or *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*, which disprove her argument. She does point out that, abortion is denounced in *Listen to Me* [1989], which is supposedly an evenhanded debate on the issue, and demonized in *Criminal Law* [1988], where

\(^{28}\) Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War against Women*, p163.
the abortionist, Sybil, is a witchlike figure whose profession traumatizes her son and turns him into a psychopath.\textsuperscript{29}

Nonetheless, it is absence which is more noticeable in film than either positive or negative depictions.

US serial drama and soap opera of the period also tended to avoid actual abortions. Mumford notes that "the rare exceptions to soaps' stern no-abortion code...actually serve to reinforce the prohibition they seem to undermine" with the women assailed by regret, "often accompanied by the imagined crying of babies"\textsuperscript{30} and generally the abortion is seen as a betrayal of the would-be father by the woman. Given the more regular presence of pregnancy within soap opera plots, it is unsurprising that abortion was more often discussed and considered within soap opera, however also notable is the fact that contraception was rarely considered.

The depiction of sex in general, and abortion and contraception in particular, in feature films of the Reagan-Bush era, contained a number of underlying themes. The setting of the Sixties does, overall, lead to a different approach. The films set in the Sixties are less sexually explicit and do not engage in the highly eroticized depictions of sex seen in many films of the 1980s and early 1990s. The issues of knowledge about sex and the impact of unwanted pregnancies are also raised more explicitly in these films than in films with a contemporary setting.

**Sex in the Reagan-Bush Era**

I will now examine the manner in which sex was discussed in the political, media and social spheres during the 1980s and early 1990s. Consideration of these ideas will allow me to identify whether the films I am considering engage with these ideas and if so, how they do so.

\textsuperscript{29} Ibid., p164.

As discussed in the introduction, I utilise television and newspaper reports as well as a range of magazine articles from the Reagan-Bush era to form my picture of the manner in which sex was discussed in these spheres at the time. I have also drawn on a number of books which were published during the 1980s and early 1990s about sex and Americans. I have specifically chosen books which examined the way Americans viewed and discussed their sex lives to fill out this selection.

Over and over in discussions about sex during the Reagan-Bush era, and particularly from the mid 1980s, a very specific theme was present. This theme was that the Sixties saw the beginning of a sexual revolution which stalled or ended in the 1980s due to AIDS. The constant reprise was that in the Sixties, the “sexual revolution,” created a change in attitudes to sex and to sexual behaviour which continued throughout the 1970s. The rationale, in this discourse, for the beginning of the sexual revolution is vague and generally mentions the advent of the Pill and the increase in freedoms for younger people but is rarely explored in any detail. This lack of clarity about what the sexual revolution entailed points to its position as a trope of the Sixties, obscuring an actual examination of the history with a short-hand catch-all. What interested the news media during the 1980s and early 1990s was what had “stopped” or “ended” the sexual revolution, what, in the arguments of some, had brought about a new sexual conservatism and this is generally credited to AIDS.\(^{31}\)

As I discussed in Chapter One, Feuchtwang uses the term “caesura” to divide historical periods and argues that these caesurae create heroes and villains of the before and after.\(^{32}\) In the discourse on sex which was present during the Reagan-Bush era, two caesurae are evident: the Sixties with the before-time of sexual repression/moderation, depending on

\(^{31}\) For example Dimen, "AIDS Brave New World of Love and Death.", Voedisch, "Lifeless AIDS Tape Puts the 'Ex' on Sex"; ABC television special Single in America (1987) cited in Faludi, Backlash: The Undeclared War against Women, p126-27; “AIDS”, Nightline ABC, 7/3/1988; “Sex in the 1990s,” MTV News Special MTV, 12/09/1990 (this had a range of varying messages—some celebrities/college students interviewed agreeing the ‘sexual revolution was over’ while some disagreed), Tonight Show starring Johnny Carson. NBC, 15/12/1987 featured an interview with Robin Williams who made a number of jokes around the notion that AIDS had impacted on sexual practice, and Decade, MTV, 9/12/1989 which again featured a range of opinions about sex and the impact of AIDS.

\(^{32}\) Feuchtwang, "Mythical Moments in National and Other Family Histories," p180.
your point of view and the after-time of sexual freedom/decadence; followed by the 1980s and AIDS with the after-time of a return to repression and fear, or, in the eyes of some, more reasonable sexual behaviour. What is interesting about these caesurae is that, depending on the political position of the observer, the time before and after each caesura can be more or less villainous, yet the caesura themselves remain fixed. That is, in the debates at the time it was agreed that changes occurred in both the Sixties and the 1980s, but how the impact of these changes is perceived is dependent on the position of the observer.

The idea that the rise of AIDS resulted in a fundamental shift in sexual behaviour during the 1980s and early 1990s was not, however, without a counter-narrative. Many sexual researchers and academics argued that, while AIDS had affected the way people talked about sex, it had a far lesser impact on the actual sexual activity of heterosexuals than the dominant discourse would indicate. For example, Lillian Rubin details in her work on sexual behaviour that men and women were still engaging in a broad range of sexual behaviours throughout the 1980s, and that while AIDS had resulted in some changes in sexual behaviour, overall it was at most a catalyst to changes in the dynamics of sexual activity, rather than a root cause.33

The Janus Report on Sexual Behavior was even more dismissive of the idea of an end to the sexual revolution. Published in 1993, it added to the debate regarding what was happening to sexual activity amongst Americans during the Reagan-Bush era. It argues,

[m]any experts predicted the demise of American sex in the wake of the panic generated by AIDS. We found, instead, a continuous and increasing variety of marginal sex.34

The Januses also found that “the burgeoning sense of freedom, the choices of love or lust, the spirit of personal autonomy that marked the sexuality of those earlier years is still part

33 Rubin, Erotic Wars: What Happened to the Sexual Revolution, p139.
of the American spirit” although they noted that there had been some changes and a greater emphasis on safe sex.35

This counter-narrative was also present to some extent within the news media. For example, an article in the San Francisco Chronicle in February 1989 highlighted the two sides of the debate.

At a time when adults in America are moderating their sexual activity in response to the threat of AIDS and shifting standards of behavior, teenagers in the past decade have developed a widely held sense that they are entitled to have sex.36

The article indicated that teenagers were more sexually independent and viewed sexual activity as a matter of “personal choice, rather than a response to adult influence.”37 Interestingly, the article notes that “the rates of teenage pregnancy, abortion and childbearing are considerably higher in the United States than in other industrialized countries, even though the age of initiation and levels of teenage sexual activity are comparable.”38 This would seem to indicate that while teenagers in the US were sexually active there was both a lack of sexual education and a lower use of contraception than in similar countries.

This is a theme further explored by Ira Reiss who in 1990 argued that repression and lack of sexual openness and tolerance were the cause of the “sexual problems” in the US in his book—An End to Shame.39 Reiss identifies these problems or “crises” as: the high level of reported AIDS cases in the US—“the highest number of reported cases of AIDS in any country in the world”40; the fact that the “rate of teenage pregnancy for those under fifteen years of age is five times that of other developed countries in the world, even

37 Ibid.
38 Ibid.
40 Ibid., p18.
though sexual activity is no higher"; the high number of rapes which is "several times that in England, West Germany and France"; and evidence that the US has "one of the highest rates of child sexual abuse in the industrialized world." Reiss believes that the emphasis on abstinence in sexual education and that "fear and anxiety" around sexuality add to these problems, rather than being the solution that conservative voices indicated.

It is here that the changes of the 1980s and 1990s are more evident. While sexual behaviour itself may not have changed markedly due to AIDS, the election of a conservative President, the rise of the religious right and the increased fears around AIDS highlighted within social and political debates led to a change in the way in which individual sexual behaviour was policed. Reiss points to example after example of the newly sexually restrictive discourse and actions that occurred in US society in the 1980s. These included the repression of the 'obscene' in art and popular culture opposition to broad sex education. Similarly Dionne points out that, at the urging of the religious right, Reagan’s Attorney-General Edwin Meese "wage[d] a war on pornography" and that Congress passed legislation to "promote chastity as a form of birth control."

These approaches to issues around sex highlight the manner in which the rise of the political right and the increased power of religious fundamentalists influenced the debate on sex during the 1980s and 1990s, despite the perception of a number of researchers that people, particularly the young, were in fact increasingly sexually active. The examples cited show the way that political discourse about sex became significantly more conservative during the 1980s. This shift in the political debate reinforced the broader popular conception of a decline in sex, or, at least, a return to repression.

What motivated this overall shift in understanding? I would argue that one of the strong motivating factors for the shift is the fact that baby boomers who were beginning to

41 Ibid. emphasis in the original
42 Ibid., p19.
43 Ibid.
45 Dionne Jr, Why Americans Hate Politics, pp236.
46 Ibid., pp236-37.
dominate the cultural scene had themselves changed. As Strauss and Howe, (over)state it, “[f]rom VJ-Day forward whatever age bracket Boomers have occupied has been the cultural and spiritual focus for American society as a whole.”\(^{47}\) By the mid 1980s even the youngest of the Baby Boomers were entering their late twenties whilst the oldest were hitting forty. The segment of the generational group who reached their teens during the Sixties were now grown up. As Cheryl Merser wrote in 1987,

I’m at the age now that my women friends, and some of my men friends, are, to put it mildly, thinking about kids—whether to have them or not; how to find someone with whom to have them “in time”; what will happen to us (will we shrivel up and be not quite human?) if we don’t have them.\(^{48}\)

Strauss and Howe, in their work on generations, argue that the “idealist generation”, of which baby boomers are one, “fragments into narcissistic rising adults [and] cultivates principle as moralistic midlifers.”\(^{49}\) They argue that “Boomers look upon themselves as “growing up” to a new sense of responsibility and self-denial.”\(^{50}\) The process of ageing is thus coupled with a “New Puritanism” of the adult-to-mid-life baby boom generation as described by Howe and Strauss.\(^{51}\) With the change in focus of the lives of the most influential cohort of baby boomers from the early 1980s, the sexual revolution was no longer of such great importance. In one of the interviews undertaken by Mark Baker for his book on sexual behaviour, a woman, in talking about her reduced sex life, made a telling statement about the relationship between sex and AIDS and ageing,

I don’t know how much AIDS has to do with it. I think AIDS is coincidental to my sexual history. Even without AIDS this would have happened, I’m just older. I’m tired of the dance.\(^{52}\)

\(^{47}\) Strauss and Howe, *Generations: The History of America’s Future, 1584 to 2069*, p301.


\(^{49}\) Strauss and Howe, *Generations: The History of America’s Future, 1584 to 2069*, p74.

\(^{50}\) Ibid., p312.

\(^{51}\) Ibid., pp312-16.

This idea that baby boomers were reaching an age when they were looking beyond causal sexual relationships was reinforced by popular culture. The television series *thirtysomething* which screened from 1987-1991 was labeled by the media as the quintessential program about Baby Boomer yuppies of the period. The series focuses on a professional couple with their first baby and their various friends and colleagues. As with *The Big Chill*, this series works around the premise that, by the early 1980s, the generation of the Sixties had entered a new stage of their lives in which monogamy and children had become more important, in general, than free love.

It is also notable that, by the 1980s, some women viewed their experiences with “free love” and the sexual revolution somewhat skeptically. While there was an undoubted change in the way women dealt with sex (the rate of Baby Boomer women having premarital sex doubled from the previous generation33), the perspective that many women espoused by the 1980s was far from a total endorsement of the changes. For example, Rubin interviews one woman who argues,

> I think I let some of my power go by having sex as freely as I’ve done. Women had more leverage with men before sex got so free....I think if women in general were less available sexually, I might be in a relationship, and so would a lot of other women who are feeling deprived now.54

Other women interviewed by Rubin saw the problems as located in the past.

> The revolution, which had freed them to say yes, also disabled them from saying no. “It was weird; it was so hard to say no,” said 38-year-old Paula...“The guys just took it for granted that you’d go to bed with them, and you felt like you had to explain it if you didn’t want to. Then if you tried, you couldn’t think of a good reason why not to, so you did it.”55

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53 Ibid., pp93-94.
A number of other women interviewed by Rubin repeat this theme. Rubin herself notes that “it was the coercive force of a movement that, in fact, had wide appeal to women, while it also rested on a deeply entrenched structure of roles and relationships that was bound to corrupt the ideals on which it was founded.”

It is important to note that Rubin’s research did not do this recording of what women felt at the time of the 1960s and early 1970s. Her book represents the mediated view of women in the 1980s articulating their memories of the Sixties, memories which seem to correspond with a key trope of the Sixties around sex. This particular articulation may have been present in the 1980s for a number of reasons. At a time when the cohort discussed above were moving into relationships or away from casual sex, women may have found that raising concerns about the impact of the sexual revolution on them gave them a justification for moving into more traditional frameworks of thinking about sex and sexual relationships. It may also have been a way of justifying the lack of a significant sexual relationship. For baby boomers with children now in their teens, it would also represent a rationale for discouraging sexual activity.

These interviews and personal reflections on the role of sex in the 1980s and 1990s show that by the Reagan-Bush years the manner in which sex was being discussed was different to the Sixties. The sexual revolution of the Sixties had moved from being liberating to being, at best, something which had run out of steam and, at worst, the cause of disease and death. As I have pointed out in an earlier chapter, conservatives like Himmelfarb, Horowitz and Collier place extensive blame for issues like obscenity and even AIDS itself on the changes wrought during the Sixties. Dionne discusses how issues that the religious right picked up, particularly social issues, became the fuel for conservatism during the 1980s. He argues that George Bush “ran against the past” in 1988 and this looking backward was a key component of the conservative agenda. In this way, placing blame for problems of the present in an era like the Sixties was an enormously convenient political device. Similarly, making strong use of the mythic

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56 Ibid., p95.
57 Dionne Jr, Why Americans Hate Politics, p26.
caesural moment and trope of the Sixties' "sexual revolution" helped reinforce an idea of a bad period which the new caesural moment of the election of Reagan with his heroic conservatives would overcome.

**Pro-life, pro-choice or pro-contraception?**

With respect to the specifics of abortion and contraception, through the Sixties women gained a far greater degree of control over their own reproduction. As mentioned above, the introduction of the contraceptive pill in the early Sixties is often cited as one of the causes of, or necessary preconditions for, the sexual revolution. The outcome of *Roe v Wade* in 1973, which ruled that any restriction on abortion during the first trimester was unconstitutional and allowed only limited restrictions on later trimester abortions,\(^{58}\) was the culmination of a movement of illegal resistance and court action by the nascent women's movement throughout the Sixties and into the 1970s.

While the contraceptive pill was first approved for distribution in 1960\(^{59}\), there were still restrictions in some states regarding the use of contraception. In 1965 in *Griswold v Connecticut*, the Supreme Court struck down a Connecticut statue forbidding the use of contraceptive devices by married couples. The decision in this case was the first time the Court had recognised the right to privacy\(^{60}\) which was later the key component of the *Roe v Wade* decision. Later still, in 1972, in *Eisenstadt v Baird*, the Supreme Court recognised that the right to privacy should extend to all people with respect to contraception.\(^{61}\)

In addition to the introduction of the contraceptive pill and the increased legality of the use of contraceptive measures, the history of contraception provided by Planned Parenthood notes that the use of condoms, previously one of the most common forms of contraception and disease prevention, underwent a revolution of its own of sorts during the Sixties.

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\(^{59}\) Planned Parenthood, *A History of Contraceptive Methods*.

\(^{60}\) Fried, "Key United States Supreme Court Abortion and Privacy Cases," p45.

\(^{61}\) Ibid.
The sexual revolution of the '60s almost put an end to condom use. "Good girls" were willing sex partners, so fewer men turned to professional sex workers, the most prevalent sexually transmitted infections—gonorrhea and syphilis—were easily treated, and the pill and IUD provided the most effective reversible contraception the world had seen.\(^{62}\)

It was not until the 1980s that the use of condoms would again become important, this time to counter the spread of HIV infection.

Contraceptive use was much more common by the beginning of the 1980s than it had been twenty years earlier. Nonetheless, as with many issues around sexual activity discussed during the 1980s, the Sixties and the 1980s were often used as brackets around change in the arena of contraception. In 1987 Dr Richard Lincoln, senior Vice President of the Alan Guttmacher Institute, a research organisation focused on reproductive technologies, warned at a birth-control association meeting that,

[i]f the 1960s ushered in a contraceptive revolution, then during the 1980s we’re experiencing a contraceptive counterrevolution. The IUD has effectively disappeared from the American market. Spermicides – meaning foams, jellies, creams and sponges – may be next.\(^{63}\)

He also noted that clinical research on new methods of contraception had virtually ceased. Similarly Dr Elizabeth Connell, a professor of gynaecology and obstetrics at Emory University, noted that many women were having to leave the country to obtain contraception, particularly inter-uterine devices.\(^{64}\) In 1990 the situation was similar with discussions in the media of contraception still highlighting a lack of development in the field. One article argued that the reasons for this included the popularity of the

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\(^{64}\) Ibid.
contraceptive pill discouraging competitors, and the impact of litigation. It noted that in 1985,

Upjohn Co. closed its contraceptive research laboratories for several reasons: difficulty in attaining liability insurance, problems in getting approval for new products, and, possibly, troubles resulting from a boycott by the anti-abortion National Right to Life Committee. Anti-abortionists were angered by Upjohn's research into an abortion-inducing drug.\(^5\)

Ironically, despite the strong voices against the use of abortion as a contraceptive method coming from anti-abortion activists at the time, little research or development of contraception was occurring. Later in 1990 Planned Parenthood held a conference where it was argued that the debate on abortion had meant that the federal government had not placed enough emphasis on contraception. An article discussing the conference argues that the baby boom generation has seen “free love [give] way to sterilization” as a lack of advance in contraceptive technology resulted in tubal ligations and vasectomies becoming a preferred method of pregnancy prevention for couples.\(^6\) It is also important to note that the trend in funding for education relating to sex was moving to an emphasis on chastity and abstinence. Contraception seemingly had become caught up in the trend towards public repression of sexuality, following this general idea that the sexual revolution had ended. This public approach ignored what was happening privately, as outlined by researchers like the Januses.

The ascendancy of the political right manifested by the election of Ronald Reagan contributed to making abortion a central political issue during the 1980s. As writers like Tribe and Dionne discuss, this became a “clash of absolutes” or a debate of extremes. Alan Bock summarises the arguments,


people on either side of the issue find it difficult to grant the possibility of decent motives to their opponents: Anti-abortion activists talk of Nazi-like baby murderers, while pro-abortion activists talk of misogynistic puritans who want to control women right down to their wombs. Without such purposely polarizing rhetoric, compromise might be possible. With it, the issue is endlessly debated and never resolved.57

Bock and Dionne’s argument is that this extreme level of polarization in political debate contrasted with the polls that suggested that the general public saw the issue as an area where compromise could be achieved, and themselves thought in terms of compromise. Hunter echoes this view when outlining the kind of name-calling and misrepresentation engaged in by both sides of the debate.68

Nonetheless, it is the public debate on the issue in which I remain most interested. As I noted in Chapter One, Hunter points out that those who frame and engage in public debate are generally those who are empowered by wealth, education or political position. Debates such as the abortion debate can rage above the heads of many people, however their occurrence inevitably impacts on, and helps to shape, the thinking of the broad populace.

The polarised abortion debate continued throughout the Reagan-Bush period. It was a key focus of discussion over Reagan’s appointments to the Supreme Court. It reached a further peak in 1989 with the Webster v Reproductive Health Services case which upheld a Missouri law imposing restrictions on the use of state funds for activities relating to abortion. This decision encouraged a remobilisation of the pro-choice movement.69

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57 Alan W Bock, “Can Politics Be Redeemed?,” The Orange County Register, 8 September 1991, p1.
69 For example Kondracke (Morton M Kondracke, "The New Abortion Wars: A Report from Several Fronts," The New Republic, 28 August 1989, pp17-18.) discusses the impact of Webster on women who had become “complacent” about the legal right to abortion.
On the other side, the activities of Operation Rescue, the anti-abortion group, and, in particular, their extended protests in Wichita in the summer of 1991 around the offices of Dr George Tiller, “one of the nation’s few physicians who directs abortions in the last three months of pregnancy”\(^{70}\) were another major episode of conflict in this polarised debate.

The dominance of the conservative voice in the abortion debate throughout the 1980s meant that the debate had been reframed in a fundamental sense. Overall the emphasis of the abortion debate had changed. The debate moved from being one about women’s rights, to being about the rights of the fetus. As Ellen Willis notes, by 1985, she felt “isolated” when arguing that abortion is a feminist issue and that,

\[\text{[o]nce people took for granted that abortion was an issue of sexual politics and morality. Now, abortion is often discussed as a question of “life” in the abstract. Public concern over abortion centers almost exclusively on fetuses; women and their bodies are merely the stage on which the drama of fetal life and death takes place.}\]

\(^{71}\)

Pre *Roe v Wade*, the main political focus of the abortion debate came from progressive women’s groups. Organisations focusing on women’s right to abortion were founded in the Sixties\(^{72}\) and the focus of these groups was on over-turning existing abortion laws. In trying to create the impetus for change, these groups focused the discourse on abortion around women—women’s right to choose, women’s health and safety, women’s privacy. The movement was largely propelled by women and opponents were not focused and organised.

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\(^{72}\) For example, NARAL Pro-Choice Minnesota was founded in 1966 under the name Minnesota Council for the Legal Termination of Pregnancy (MCLTP)("About Us" NARAL Pro-Choice Minnesota [internet] available at [http://www.prochoiceminnesota.org/s07aboutus/](http://www.prochoiceminnesota.org/s07aboutus/) [accessed 17 August 2005]).
Following *Roe v Wade* the intensity and focus of the women’s groups in this area waned to an extent. As Andrew Merton notes, “the liberal reform movement tended to view the Supreme Court decisions as its final victory.”

Thus, after *Roe* the anti-abortion movement was able to begin to take control of the discourse around abortion, driving the issue away from one of women’s rights and towards the rights of the fetus. Even at its nascent stage, the anti-abortion movement recognised the value of this focus, with pioneers of the movement like Jack Willkes and Father Charles Fiore collecting images of aborted fetuses in the early 1970s. By 1989, *The New Republic* reported that the anti-abortion movement and its conservative Republican allies believed that “they can win [the abortion debate] if the debate focuses on unborn babies and ‘abortion.'” Hence the use by groups such as Operation Rescue of pictures of aborted fetuses and the promotion of “save the babies” sloganeering. By seizing and relentlessly pushing a discourse based on a discussion of “unborn babies” which equated abortion with murder, the anti-abortion movement was able to push the terrain of the debate away from the issue of women’s rights where the pro-abortion forces had previously been able to dominate the debate. This inversion of the issue of “rights,” from women to fetuses, is significant given the importance of rights-discourse generally in the US in the period of the 1960s-1980s.

The decision in *Roe v Wade* thus represents a caesura, in Feuchtwang’s terms, with a bad before/after, depending on one’s point of view. For pro-choice groups, the bad before of illegal abortions and restricted access is replaced by a good after, while for the anti-abortion movement the meaning of the periods are reversed. We see that, as a mythic marker in time, the caesural moment is not a value-free turning point, but one which is deeply embedded in the political points of view of those interpreting it, even when there is no dispute that the moment itself represents a caesura.

Feuchtwang also argues that a

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74 Ibid., pp78-79.
76 Garry Wills, "‘Save the Babies',' *Time* 1989.
caesural event is a feature of histories of large-scale social groups where, because of its destructive or transformative impact, it is a unifying point of reference for all those who, by narrative knowledge of any kind and material, trace themselves to the before that it demarcates.\textsuperscript{77}

This can be viewed as true for both the pro-choice and anti-abortion groups. At its most mythic level, for pro-choice groups, the memory is of a villainous past which was transformed by the heroic actions of those practitioners and women who were either willing to engage in legal processes or had no choice due to prosecution, to force the change to the understanding of the law which culminated in \textit{Roe v Wade}. For the anti-abortion side, their own complacency in the good past is seen as one of the causes of the mythic transformation to a current villainous time peopled with evil-doers, and some heroes like the members of Operation Rescue and Dr Bernard Nathanson, a reformed abortion doctor who narrates the classic anti-abortion documentary, \textit{The Silent Scream}.\textsuperscript{78}

The shift in focus brought about by the caesural moment which \textit{Roe v Wade} represents for both sides of the debate, also contributed to the change in the nature of discourse regarding abortion.

As with the issue of sex more generally, the reality of practice and understanding in the general public differed to some extent from the political and media approach on the issue. There is some evidence that the conservative approach to abortion which characterised the Reagan-Bush period was not adopted by the general public. In both 1985 and 1990 surveys showed an increase in support for legalised abortion. The National Opinion Research Center indicated in 1985 that a longitudinal survey found that support for abortion, along with other liberal positions on sexual and reproductive practices had increased since the Sixties and that “a large majority of the public backs the liberal positions.”\textsuperscript{79} Similarly in 1990, the 24\textsuperscript{th} annual survey of “entering college freshmen” found that support for legalised abortion, which had remained relatively stable between

\textsuperscript{77} Feuchtwang, "Mythical Moments in National and Other Family Histories," p180.


53 and 59 per cent for over 20 years had increased significantly between 1988 and 1989, from 57 to 64.7 per cent. The survey’s director indicated that it may have been concern about the direction of the Supreme Court which had caused this increase.\textsuperscript{80} Time Magazine also reported that a poll conducted for Time and CNN in April 1989 showed that, even though half those surveyed felt that abortion was wrong, “67% favor leaving the decision to a woman and her doctor.”\textsuperscript{81} The Janus Report on Sexual Behaviour also reported that the number of people who agreed that “abortion is murder” had decreased during their 1988-1992 survey (30 per cent for both men and women) from their earlier survey in 1983-1985 (39 per cent for men, 33 per cent for women).\textsuperscript{82} An Associated Press/Media General survey in July 1989 indicated that 63 per cent of voters “would want their state to make abortion legal if the Supreme Court reverses Roe.”\textsuperscript{83} However, other polls were less apparently in favour of abortion with a Boston Globe poll in March 1989 reporting that “only 25 percent of Americans favor unrestricted rights to abortion” with 53 per cent preferring some restrictions. In particular these restrictions would have banned the majority of abortions actually occurring in the US at the time: “those for which the reason is merely emotional strain or inconvenience for a mother of carrying her baby to term.”\textsuperscript{84} The Allan Guttmacher Institute, the research arm of Planned Parenthood had similar results.

Voters oppose legal abortion as a means of birth control by 89 percent to 6 percent, by 75 percent to 16 when the mother cannot afford to support her child, and by 93 percent to 3 when the fetus is the wrong sex.\textsuperscript{85}

While the result of polls can often depend on the type of question asked, these results show that there was, by the end of the 1980s, a greater ambivalence about abortion than in much of the public discussion. Unlike the polarised all-or-nothing discourse of the pro

\textsuperscript{80} Associated Press, "Changing Times: Freshmen Conservative About Drugs; Liberal on Abortion," St. Louis Post-Dispatch, 22 January 1990.
\textsuperscript{81} Richard Lacayo, "Whose Life Is It?,” Time, 01 May 1989, p1.
\textsuperscript{83} Kondracke, "The New Abortion Wars: A Report from Several Fronts.,” p18.
\textsuperscript{84} Ibid., p19.
\textsuperscript{85} Ibid.
and anti-abortion groups, most people did not view it as intrinsically wrong, however there was a concern about its over-use.

**The films, public discourse and representation**

Sex during the 1980s was highly contested terrain. While the political right was encouraging the idea of the "end" of the sexual revolution, supported by the appearance of AIDS and the ageing of the baby boomer population, research was indicating that little had actually changed in the sex lives of Americans in general. There was also strong and polarised political debate around issues like abortion, contraception and sex education, although it would seem that the views of the American public were much more flexible and equivocal than those of their political representatives. The Sixties loomed large in much public discourse about sex, with the trope of the sexual revolution being particularly strong, representing a mythic moment in the public story of sex in the US.

Many Hollywood films of the period reflected the increasingly conservative views of the political discourse, with extreme consequences for characters who were sexually transgressive, while at the same time utilising sexual imagery to increase the appeal of their films. In this environment, the films that I am examining generally take a milder approach, both to the outcomes of sex and also to the trope of the sexual revolution. It would seem that film makers did not believe that to make a film convincingly about the Sixties they needed to embrace this trope which was clearly present in other discourse. Instead another, alternate approach appears which demonstrates that there was sex before the sexual revolution, and that this Sixties sex was of an innocent type. What we see here is in interesting contrast to the representation of sex that dominated the Reagan-Bush eras.

The films I have discussed in this chapter, excluding most of the Vietnam films, are primarily light entertainment aimed at young adults or teens. They are not aimed at putting forward strong political positions, rather they were made with the aim of ensuring that they maximised their box office returns. Nonetheless, given the age of many of the directors of these films, and the subject matter, it is likely that their experiences of the
Sixties (and those of their scriptwriters) influenced their depictions of the period. Thus we see a clear trope emerging of the (early) Sixties as a period of innocence and sexual awakening, where a lack of knowledge about sex and its consequences could lead to less than happy outcomes, but mostly where sex (particularly where love is involved) is a relatively innocent part of coming of age. This approach to sex and sexuality contrasts with the idea of the Sixties as a period of debauched sexual revolution, and presents a softer and less punitive approach to sex than many of the contemporary films of the period. No one has their bunny boiled (as in *Fatal Attraction*) or is stabbed with an ice pick (as in *Basic Instinct*) because of their sexual activity, but questions of the impact of unwanted pregnancy are raised.

The trope of innocence also gently resists some of the ideas within the media and political discourse. During a period when sex education programs were being de-funded and replaced with chastity promotion, within these depictions is the idea that ignorance is not better. A number of the films highlight the fact that a lack of knowledge about sex can be problematic for characters, particularly because sex is inevitable. The films point out that, even before the supposed “sexual revolution” teenagers and young people did have sex; an implied critique perhaps of the renewed emphasis on the advocating of chastity as a legitimate approach to sex education. One could read the films as indicating that a return to a pre sexual revolution period would not stop teenagers or others having sex.

What is also interesting from the perspective of the political discourse of the time is what the films do not do and which tropes of the Sixties they eschew. Few of them are set in the late Sixties. Few of them have fully adult protagonists. Few of them engage extensively with the counter culture. As I have discussed, even *1969* avoids a heavy examination of the sexual revolution as its ostensible “hippy” character is still a relatively naive small town boy. The only films which strongly engage with the “free love” trope of the Sixties are *Forrest Gump* and *The Doors*. These two films do show an excess of sex

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and, while exploiting that particular trope of Sixties representation also, like other 1980s films, show negative consequences for those who indulge. Thus, interestingly, when the films engage most with the heavily utilised trope of Sixties sexual activity, they also correspond most closely with the moralising approach to sex which appeared to dominate depictions of sex in 1980s films which were set in the present.

The depiction of sex within the Vietnam films has more to do with the overall depiction of the Vietnam War, than it does with tropes around sex, particularly as most of the sex takes place in Vietnam and generally with Vietnamese women. I will discuss this further in the following chapter.

So during a period when a particular trope of the Sixties was very salient in the media and political debate, most films about the period avoided it, and created their own trope. One can ponder why this might be the case. It could be that film directors and producers, particularly those who were participants in the Sixties, actively did not want to engage with or encourage this particular view of the period. Or it could be that, given the strong conservative influence, it was considered commercially risky to make films about the Sixties which highlighted or showed positive depictions of the sexual revolution. Perhaps it is that this particular trope is difficult to depict within the conventions of Hollywood films. The final possibility is that because the trope of the sexual revolution is so strong, it is viewed as a given which does not need specific exploration, and instead serves as a backdrop for films such as *The Doors* and *1969*.

Following the early 1990s, there really have been few films which deal with the Sixties and the sexual revolution. One interesting exception is the three *Austin Powers* films, made between 1997 and 2002. In these Austin Powers, the spy from the Sixties, is constantly making sexual allusions and inappropriate comments. In his depiction though, he is British, and also curiously innocent when it comes to actual sex. Two other films which dwell in more detail on sex during the Sixties, *Auto Focus* and *Confession of a Dangerous Mind* (both made 2002), are both bio-pics which depict their heroes as ultimately flawed and self destructive. Much of the sex in these films has a certain
squalor about it. In these films the focus is more on the activity (and pathology) of the individual rather than being about a broader change in sexual activity.

The difference between the manner in which sex in the Sixties was depicted in my films and that within broader debate does not mean that the present has not impacted on this aspect of the representation of the past, just that the impact is not what one might have immediately expected. In the next chapter, I will identify whether the relationship between the representations of Vietnam are more closely aligned.
Chapter 3 - Vietnam

It is difficult to talk about, think about or represent the United States in the Sixties without reference to Vietnam. Many of the ideas and conceptions that are held about the period are tied up with the war. Thus it is significant that during the 1980s and early 1990s there was a wave of films dealing with the topic of Vietnam directly. Prior to the election of Reagan, few movies had been made about Vietnam, with notable exceptions including *The Green Berets* (1968), *The Boys from Company C* (1978), *The Deer Hunter* (1978), *Go Tell the Spartans* (1979), and *Apocalypse Now* (1979). In the period I am considering there were films made about Vietnam, about Vietnam veterans and about Vietnam veterans returning to Vietnam in a particularly violent manner. Many of the thirty six films I am examining contain some reference to Vietnam whether small (like the Vietnam footage shown in *The Doors*) or significant (brother killed there in 1969) even where Vietnam is not the focus of the film.

I am not looking at every film made about Vietnam during the Reagan-Bush era in this thesis. To do so would risk changing the focus from the Sixties in general to Vietnam in particular. For example, Jeremy Arnold’s filmography of combat films lists 25 films made between 1983 and 1994 which are about Vietnam to some significant extent.\(^1\) Included in this are several prisoner of war rescue fantasies, the primary ones being *Missing in Action* (1984) and *Rambo: First Blood Part II* (1985). In her book on World War II combat films, Jeanine Basinger notes that,

\[a\]s of 1985 [the time of writing the book], Vietnam seems to be on the brink of cinematic respectability for combat/action films. So far, our approach has been to go back in and rescue ourselves—a convenient way to make a new Vietnam War—one in which we [Americans] are victorious. Vietnam thus becomes our fight to free its victims instead of our losing debacle.\(^2\)

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Basinger is pointing to the fact that by the mid 1980s, Vietnam was no longer a setting for the absurdist approaches to the depiction of war it had been in the 1970s, with films like *Apocalypse Now* and *The Boys in Company C*. This idea of “rescuing ourselves” and winning the war fits strongly with the Reagan era approach to re-visioning (remasculinising in the terminology of Jeffords) America to overcome the impact on the national psyche of the defeat in Vietnam. However, the films that comprise this approach to Vietnam—*Rambo: First Blood II, Missing In Action* and *Uncommon Valor* (1983)—are not films that I am interested in discussing. These films are set in the present; they are explicitly about the attempt to rehabilitate American (male) identity.

The selection of Vietnam films I have chosen, on the other hand, includes the most popular and well-known of the films of this period and involves a range of different approaches to the war. They are, necessarily, however a selection and do not represent comprehensive coverage of films about Vietnam made during this period. The films I have chosen include the most popular of the combat films set during the war (*Platoon*) and films showing different aspects of the war: infantry combat films (*Hamburger Hill* and *Platoon*), the training-to-combat film (*Full Metal Jacket*), bio-pics (*Born on the Fourth of July* and *Heaven and Earth*), a navy-air film (*Flight of the Intruder*), a “morality play” (*Casualties of War*), the story of returned veterans (*The Indian Runner* and *Birdy*), two comedies (*Good Morning Vietnam* and *Air America*) and the inevitable *Forrest Gump*. Amongst the other films I am considering, while most feature Vietnam to some extent, it looms large in 1969, *The Big Chill* and *Dogfight. JFK* is in its own category in reference to Vietnam, as it presents its own theory about the reasons for the

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4 For a more in-depth discussion of these films, see Jeffords, *The Remasculinization of America: Gender and the Vietnam War*. While I accept that, as Arnold notes in the filmography referenced above (p327), one should not dismiss *Rambo* particularly as it was enormously successful, and while I note that it was representative of changing attitudes towards Vietnam veterans, I still believe that it falls outside my range of interests.


war. This selection provides a distinct examination of the way the conflict was being approached because, by setting the films during the conflict itself, the easy fantasy victory of the Rambo-style films is much more difficult to achieve within the narrative, and winning is often not what these films are about.

This chapter will begin with an examination of these films. I will then look at the way that war is usually approached in film and some of the generic constructions surrounding its depiction, including other approaches to Vietnam. The Vietnam War maintained a significant presence in the media during the 1980s and early 1990s and I consider the discussions of Vietnam which were a feature of the Reagan-Bush era. Finally I will examine the ways the films I am considering relate to the period in which they were produced.

**Vietnam Films**

In this section I examine a number of different aspects of the Vietnam films that are illustrative of the overall nature of the selection. I discuss the manner in which common aspects of the broader generic schema of combat films are used within these films, such as the depiction of uniforms and combat paraphernalia and the depiction of women and the enemy. This allows direct comparison with the approach taken in combat films not about Vietnam. I will then focus on some strong thematic elements in the films such as the loss of innocence and the pointlessness of the sacrifice, the role of the individual versus the group and the relationship between authority and incompetence. These elements will then be examined later in the chapter in the context of the political debates about Vietnam of the Reagan-Bush period. Finally I look at how the films represent two of the key issues within popular discourse on Vietnam: Vietnam veterans and the protest movement.

**Uniforms and guns**

The selection of films cuts across a number of genres and sub-genres. I will start by examining some of the straightforward, combat-generic elements within the films, such as the presence of military paraphernalia, uniforms and weapons. These are present within all the films, but the manner in which they are used is part of the specific
representation of the Sixties and Vietnam. In *Platoon*, for example, we see a gun being used as an elaborate pipe for smoking marijuana. In *Full Metal Jacket*, Joker wears his helmet emblazoned with the words “Born to Kill” and a peace symbol. At other times he wears the peace symbol button on his uniform. The audience’s attention is drawn to this when Joker is upbraided by a senior officer about it.

In *Air America*, the “good” if crazy civilian pilots are differentiated from the questionable intelligence operatives and the distinctly “bad” Laotian general by both their lack of uniform and military titles. Similarly, in *Good Morning Vietnam*, Cronauer’s less formal approach to the wearing of his uniform and engagement with military protocol separates him from the obsessive adherence to all things military of 2nd Lieutenant Hauk and Sergeant Major Dickerson.

*Born on the Fourth of July* shows the contrasting approach to uniform—the seductive glamour of the marines who make a recruiting visit to Ron’s high school, Ron’s pride in his uniform when he appears in his dress uniform in the Fourth of July parade, and then the growing disillusionment where we see veterans wearing various components of their uniforms both at Villa Dulce in Mexico and in the later protests. At these protests, in particular, we see veterans wearing their combat medals and khakis. Here the meaning of uniforms is associated with negative aspects of the military. In wearing parts of their uniform while protesting, the protesters disrupt the use of military symbols. This highlights the less heroic notions of war and the military which are on display within *Born on the Fourth of July*, as well as the broader range of films.

In *Forrest Gump*, however, the approach is different. Protesters, in particular Jenny’s SDS boyfriend, are shown wearing pseudo military gear and Black Panthers members are shown in their own military style garb. This is contrasted with Forrest in his own dress uniform. However, unlike the earlier films, it is Forrest in his dress uniform with whom we are asked to identify and the protesters who are shown in a negative light. Similarly while Lieutenant Dan is in the depths of his depression, he is depicted wearing parts of his uniform. Once he is happy, he wears only civilian attire. The meaning in *Forrest*
Gump does not provide quite the same negative associations with the proper use of military uniforms, but those who wrongly appropriate it are depicted negatively.

Given these are war films, it is unsurprising that combat is regularly featured. The depiction of combat involved in most of these films involves a high level of gore, but there is also a sense of excitement. It must be noted that part of the attraction of these films in box office terms is the excitement of combat on film. The scenes of combat are tense and exciting. In particular, the air combat scenes featured in Flight of the Intruder are filmed to emphasise their excitement and glamour. There is, however, a strong focus on the unpleasantness surrounding the end of combat: for example in Platoon we see the American soldiers killing wounded North Vietnamese soldiers as they mop up and throwing their bodies into mass graves, and in Hamburger Hill there is a gratuitous scene of a soldier shooting the head off an already unconscious Vietnamese soldier. There is also a focus on the unpleasant aspects of jungle warfare: foot damage and fungal diseases which would indicate that the films are trying to focus on the less glamorous side of the war, however inevitably the combat sequences suffuse the films with excitement.

**Women and war**

I have discussed in the previous chapter the depiction of sex in Vietnam films. The depiction of sex is caught up in the broader theme of the loss of innocence and the nihilism within the films which I will discuss later. Outside of this domain, there is a limited role for women in all of the films which are primarily focused on Vietnam, with the clear exception of Heaven and Earth, which tells the story of a Vietnamese woman. In the combat films, other than as objects for sex, women are generally absences rather than present. In Platoon, for example, Chris writes to his grandmother, while in Casualties of War Eriksson talks about his wife. In Hamburger Hill, Private Joe Beletsky listens to the tape from his girlfriend, which comments on the war and the domestic attitudes to it. In Air America, women are featured briefly, in the figures of Corinne the aid worker and Gene’s Laotian wife. While Gene’s wife appears only very briefly, Corinne has a slightly larger part, and her role is essentially as the collective conscience for the film. When Senator Davenport visits the refugee camp as part of his sanitised
guided tour around Laos, she tries to tell him about the corruption and drug running which is going on. At the end of the film she forces Gene to dump his arms cache to rescue a group of refugees when the camp becomes a battle ground between the troops of General Sung and the advancing communists.

Both *Flight of the Intruder* and *Good Morning Vietnam* have extended romantic subplots. In *Flight*, Callie is there, in part, to provide comment and conscience with respect to the war. Jake first meets Callie when he goes to visit the wife of his dead co-pilot. Callie is there "paid by the navy" to help the newly bereaved widow. Her husband had been a pilot who was killed in action, leaving her to look after her daughter. Beyond this, the romance between Callie and Jake is fairly uneventful and does not impact on the overall narrative. In *Good Morning Vietnam*, Cronauer pursues a relationship with a young Vietnamese woman named Trinh. While this relationship provides a level of comic fare, as she is chaperoned by various family members, it is actually Cronauer's relationship with Trinh's brother, Tuan, which is of greater dramatic purpose in the film, as it turns out that he is a member of the Viet Cong. Thus here the romantic subplot is overshadowed by the actual narrative of the film.

In *Born of the Fourth of July* women do play more of a role than in many of the Vietnam films, but this occurs outside the context of combat. Even then we have the very traditional roles of prostitute, childhood sweetheart and mother. Again we see the main female, the childhood sweetheart Donna, acting in a conscience/commentary role, particularly when Ron visits her at college in Syracuse. She has become an anti-war activist, dismayed by what has happened to her friends like Ron and the killings at Kent State University. Ron's mother is depicted in the opposite manner; she shrinks from his disability and cannot understand his anger and frustration. Ron blames her for pushing him into the marines and for his disability. Williams argues that the film "uses mother as a convenient scapegoat whom Ron can hysterically blame for both his physical and social
castration." I tend to disagree with Williams, as I believe the film is making the explicit link between the repressive forces of religion and nationalism which served to encourage young men to serve in Vietnam. The mother within the film is the embodiment of these forces and thus is more than a scapegoat—according to the film’s logic, she is responsible for Ron’s position. As I noted in the previous chapter, Ron’s engagement with his mother also highlights the connection between sex and violence we see in a number of the Vietnam films.

**Enemies and the loss of innocence**

In combat films there must be an enemy. Within the Vietnam films, the manner of depicting the enemy becomes intrinsically intertwined with the manner in which Americans considered the war during the Reagan-Bush era. These films tend to show the enemy primarily in the abstract, unseen and distant. Much of the combat within these films takes place in the jungle where the enemy is difficult to see, if seen at all. Part of the distancing of the enemy is the regular use of booby traps which disrupt the control of the American soldiers. That lurking, hidden danger posed by the enemy is shown at the beginning of *Casualties of War*, when Eriksson has the ground collapse underneath him and gets stuck half in a Viet Cong tunnel. We see him panic and call for help, but unlike the audience, he does not know exactly how much danger he is in, as the audience sees a Viet Cong combatant approach him from below with a knife. This is a strange sequence within the film—the audience sees the Viet Cong fighter quite clearly and distinctly, which is unusual within these films, while Eriksson himself is unaware of the danger. In one reading the sequence is played as a cheap suspense device which is meaningless within the overall narrative. An alternate reading interprets the Viet Cong fighter as savage and animalistic—he clutches his knife between his teeth and crawls towards Eriksson’s flailing legs, willing to take advantage of his enemy’s helpless state. In this sense, the sequence could be seen as lessening the impact of what will come later in the film, when the squad treats the Vietnamese girl they have kidnapped as little better than an animal. While an argument could be made that it is providing an explanation for the

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kind of pressure that the American soldiers are under and why they might come to view the Vietnamese in this manner, this is undermined by the fact that the Americans are oblivious to the Viet Cong fighter.

The depiction of the enemy in *Hamburger Hill* uses similar imagery of the savage fighter who is almost animalistic. During a training exercise, Sergeant Frantz introduces his soldiers to “Han,” a stand-in for a North Vietnamese Army regular. While Frantz talks, Han is shown to be covered in mud and camouflage, crawling and climbing sinuously through barbed wire and around fences. During this sequence, and at other times during the film, the strength and power of the North Vietnamese are emphasised, especially by Frantz the hardened soldier. Brian Woodman argues that, despite the fact that the enemy are often “featureless Asian Others” or “nothing more than a target for American guns”¹: the image of the deadly, powerful, and super-skilled enemy allows the film to underscore the utter nihilistic futility of the war. Although the American GIs eventually win their brutal battle, they come to realize that they have fought for nothing.²

I will discuss the nihilism of the films a little later in the chapter. What we should note here is that while the enemy is given respect in *Hamburger Hill* it is not really given a face—and in one scene, in fact, the enemy’s head is explicitly destroyed; shot off by one of the soldiers.

When the soldiers do face the Vietnamese close up, it is often those that they have killed wrongly or who they are victimising. In these cases the emphasis is often on women, children and the mentally deficient. Those killed mistakenly in *Born on the Fourth of July* are women, and it is the cries of the baby he is forced to leave behind which haunt Ron; in *Casualties of War* it is obviously the young girl, Tran, who is kidnapped, and the camera focuses on the grief and devastation of her mother and sister as the soldiers leave

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² Ibid., p52.
the village; while in *Platoon* the rape of a village girl is featured, as is the torture of the mentally deficient boy in the village who is made to “dance” while shots are fired at his feet. As I discussed in the previous chapter, in *Full Metal Jacket* they discover that the enemy sniper is a woman. This linking of the enemy with women acts, in one sense, to belittle them, but, more than that, it reinforces the sense of disbelief about America’s loss in the war. David Desser expresses it thus,

> [t]he image of the VC-as-woman, the ubiquity of women who are VC, is a near-hysterical reaction to the shock to the (masculine) American psyche that this physically smaller, technologically inferior race could defeat the hypermasculinized, hypertechnologised American soldier.¹⁰

I would argue that the constant presence and danger of children and adolescents is part of the same kind of response as that of women. By representing the enemy this way, the audience is led to ask two questions: why were we fighting women and children, and if this is who we were fighting, why didn’t we win? This is directly relevant to the ideas that I will discuss later which were present during the Reagan-Bush era regarding the notion of defeat and the attempts to depict America as a “tough guy” country.

The male enemy combatants who do feature strongly are the character of Tuan, from *Good Morning Vietnam*, who is an adolescent, and the knife wielding character featured in *Casualties of War*. In other films, Vietnamese male soldiers or Viet Cong fighters appear fleetingly before they die or kill or fire anti aircraft guns, and are not given a voice or face. The oft quoted line from Chris in *Platoon*, that “we did not fight the enemy, we fought ourselves and the enemy was us,” is reinforced by this distanced view of them. The Vietnamese are, it is implied in *Platoon* and hinted at in other films, merely a stand-in for the internal issues. Desser, writing in the early 1990s, supports this idea writing that,

The absence of the enemy, or the relative absence at least, is indicative of how we still see the war as a function of American culture, how the war was a product of a sickness within American society, or how the war led to a sickness within American society.11

This sense of the enemy being “us” is also part of the theme of innocence lost which pervades the films about Vietnam. This theme is consistent with many of the ideas about the Vietnam War, that it was a “dirty” or bad war, or, as Desser puts it above, that it was a product of “sickness” within society. In *Platoon* and *Casualties of War* we see the fresh-faced new recruit arrive and lose his innocence. The process for Chris, the central protagonist of *Platoon*, involves interactions with the two Sergeants Barnes and Elias, the encounter with the village and then witnessing Barnes kill Elias. When Chris then kills Barnes, his innocence is completely gone. As Gilbert Adair writes,

> Chris, like Adam in the Biblical Eden, has for ever forfeited his even relative moral and spiritual innocence, since, as one of the recruits earlier mumbles, ‘The only thing that can destroy Barnes is Barnes’, and the act of killing a killer ironically implies a posthumously symbiotic complicity...12

The things that Chris has seen, and has himself done, mean that he is no longer the innocent volunteer who arrived in Vietnam.

In *Casualties of War*, Eriksson has just arrived in-country. When visiting a village he gives the children chocolate and delights in the agricultural equipment in use. His squad mates warn him about taking food from villagers and trusting them, and their warnings are reinforced when they are suddenly ambushed in the village. Eriksson’s ideals and beliefs are then tested by the kidnapping of the Vietnamese girl and the planned and organised rape that takes place. By the end of the film, while maintaining his moral position, he is far from innocent and trusting.

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11 Ibid., p88.
Other films utilise this loss of innocence trope. In *Birdy*, both Birdy and his friend Al are shown as innocents, although Al is much more street-wise than Birdy. The scenes showing their lives before Vietnam are filmed with an orange filter, while the scenes following Vietnam are filmed in much colder hues. Both Birdy and Al return from Vietnam damaged, primarily physically in Al’s case, while Birdy, free from physical injury, has become almost catatonic. The mental damage suffered shows that neither Al nor Birdy will be the same again, although at the very end of the film we see that a spark of Birdy’s humour is retained, as he jumps from a building to Al’s horror—but it is only a metre down. It is a very odd note for the film to finish on, particularly given the deep seriousness of the second half of the film, as Al struggles to bring Birdy out of his catatonia. It is, perhaps, intended to add a touch of hope to the end of the film, to indicate that there is a possibility for redemption and recovery for Vietnam veterans.

In *Born on the Fourth of July* the innocence is cast more as a kind of naivety. Ron is shown to be impressed by the discipline and glamour of the Marines who come to give a recruiting talk at his school and the idea that the Marines take only the “best”. His naïve innocence and idealism about fighting for his country, it is implied, has been shaped by war films and playing soldiers with his friends in the woods near their town. The more cynical friend of the group who opts to go to college and get a business degree, warns the others not to go, but Ron and many of his friends volunteer. Between killing villagers accidentally and then killing another American and being told to forget about it, Ron’s idealistic innocence dissipates. His body is damaged later, and neither aspect of him fully recovers.

The film’s use of Tom Cruise in the role of Ron Kovic serves particularly to emphasize this idea of innocence lost. As Landy notes, the use of specific actors within films can bring extra-diegetic meaning to depictions of historical characters. She argues that “stardom” is a strongly contributing factor to national mythology and that the
star is crucial to the biopic, the costume drama, the historical film, and other instances of history in film, often offering a homology between the historical characters and the star figure.\(^{13}\)

Further she notes that stars serve as “a carrier of social and economic value in the contemporary culture, thus conferring meaning on the figures and events selected from the past.”\(^{14}\) Tom Cruise, at the time of the release of *Born on the Fourth of July*, carried significant social meaning into his depiction of Kovic. In particular, his previous roles add to the impact of the journey undertaken by Kovic. Prior to *Born on the Fourth of July*, Cruise’s major roles in successful films like *Risky Business* (1983), *All the Right Moves* (1983) and *Cocktail* (1988) had created for him a cheeky, but all-American persona. His most popular and famous role, prior to *Born*, as “Maverick”, the naval air lieutenant in *Top Gun* (1986), had made him into an American military hero. As Trevor McCrisken and Andrew Pepper note, at the time of this role he was “renowned for his chiselled good looks and most famous for being the 1980s equivalent of John Wayne in the Reaganesque, anti-Soviet action movie *Top Gun.*”\(^{15}\) By having Cruise portray Kovic this meaning is layered onto the characterisation at the beginning of the film. The subsequent crippling, disillusionment and loss of innocence of Kovic in the war is thus given greater impact: it is not as an individual that Kovic suffers, but as a representation of American manhood and military might. Burgoyne discusses how Kovic is constructed as “an avatar of masculinist mythology”\(^{16}\) through his depiction as a child playing war games and his participation in wrestling. He notes that in the first half of the film Kovic “enthusiastically presents himself as the representative of a nationalistic tradition defined by military force and moral rectitude.”\(^{17}\) In examining the filmic techniques used to create these ideas, Burgoyne misses what seems to be of central importance: that is the fact that Cruise himself has these values embedded in him and transfers them to the

\(^{13}\) Landy, *Cinematic Uses of the Past*, p22.
\(^{14}\) Ibid.
\(^{16}\) Burgoyne, *Film Nation*, p70.
\(^{17}\) Ibid., p63.
character of Kovic merely by being cast in that role. Rosenstone, however, picks up this idea noting that,

[actor Tom Cruise can be made up to resemble Ron Kovic, but at some level, viewers always know he is Tom Cruise, which means that the figure of Kovic on the screen carries a host of extra meanings. With Cruise playing Kovic, we have to know at some level that before us—at least for an audience in the United States—we have an all-American hero.]

In essence, *Born on the Fourth of July* spreads the idea of the loss of innocence in Vietnam beyond the individual, by using Cruise as a symbol of American boyhood as well as a representation of the military establishment.

There is an element of the same idea of playing with the relationship between actor and character in *Platoon*, where Charlie Sheen is cast in the central role of Private Chris Taylor. While Sheen himself was not a particularly well known actor at the time, his father, Martin Sheen, was the lead character in the seminal Vietnam film, *Apocalypse Now* (1979). The two films present differing views of the Vietnam conflict, however both characters show a deep disillusionment with their expectations of the war. The use of Charlie Sheen in *Platoon* already links him to the journey undertaken in *Apocalypse Now,* pre-figuring the darkness inherent in the war.

*Good Morning Vietnam* also sees this loss of innocence, although it is not as total as many of the other films. Cronauer is distraught when he discovers that Tuan, whom he has trusted and befriended, is really a member of the Viet Cong. For Cronauer, for most of the film, the war really is a joke, something he can make fun of in his radio show. He is not cynical in his jokes, and he also makes fun of the military, but the conflict itself does not really touch him. His innocence is reinforced by his role in teaching English to the Vietnamese people—he wants to help them, befriend them and teach them, rather

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than make them be American through force. He is thus stung and bewildered by his betrayal by Tuan. Nonetheless, he does cling to some of his innocent beliefs as his last action before being shipped out is to play baseball with his English class. The film can be read here as implying that more could have been achieved had the Americans employed different tactics in Vietnam: that really, deep down, the Vietnamese wanted to be just like Americans.

The film *Dogfight* focuses almost entirely on the night before Eddie leaves to go to Okinawa, from where he is hoping to go to Vietnam. While no combat is shown and we only see him briefly on his return, it is clear that he is a changed person from the experience. On his return to the US, he limps and seeks out Rose, it seems, to capture the innocent hope they both had before he left.

In *Heaven and Earth*, Le Ly is forced over and over to abandon her innocence. She is raped by the Viet Cong when it is suspected that she may have informed against them. She innocently falls in love with the master of the house where she goes to work. This results in a brutal encounter with reality when she gets pregnant. Her mother tries to sell her to him as a second wife, but Le Ly is kicked out by his wife. Despite her trials she tries to earn a living selling goods to soldiers, but is tempted into some prostitution by her poverty and need to feed herself and her son. She marries an American, who becomes an abusive alcoholic on their return to America. For Le Ly, her life is one disillusionment after another.

**Pointlessness and sacrifice**

This concept of innocence lost also links to the other strong notion within many of the films that relates to the pointlessness of the war. Like other war films, death and sacrifice are a strong feature of Vietnam films. Unlike many, although not all, combat films though, the sacrifice often seems to be a pointless one. As Neil Gabler points out, in Vietnam films “If there was any moral aim to the war, the troops either didn’t know it or didn’t believe in it.” As I will discuss in the next section of this chapter, these films

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differ from the majority of combat films because of this pointlessness. In the films, the soldiers do not see themselves fighting for a greater cause, nor do they really appear to be fighting for each other. Thomas Doherty argues that the war itself led to “tormenting personal isolation” and points out that in many Vietnam films “little of the casual warmth and unity of the Warner Brothers platoon survives the individual countdown.” The soldiers, within the Vietnam films, appear to be fighting merely for their survival.

The idea that the war is purposeless or that the purpose of the war is not clear to, or shared by, the soldiers is highlighted by the various conversations held in films. In *Hamburger Hill* soldiers discuss what the war is about, showing how little they understand or care. In Sgt Frantz’s speech to his recruits about to engage in combat training, he refers to the fact that they may have protested against the war. He notes that if they spend their time thinking about “peace, love and whether we should be in Vietnam,” they will get killed. Here again, the emphasis is on individual survival and questions of purpose should be subsumed against the overriding objective of survival.

In *Born on the Fourth of July* Ron clings to the idea that somehow he was fighting for the love of his country, although when he confronts his brother at dinner about not supporting the war, his words are just hollow rhetoric. He cannot articulate clearly why the war is important, although he makes some references to Communism—but even this rationale has been argued against elsewhere in the film. In part it seems that it is the very pointlessness of his sacrifice which upsets Ron and in his confrontation with his mother he repeats that “it was all for nothing.” It is not until he finds purpose through his work protesting against the war that he seems to make peace with himself.

Doherty argues that the structure of service in Vietnam—the one year tour—served to ensure that the war was an individual one. This approach shows itself in the films. When Sgt Frantz tells new troops that “I will save your life and you will save mine,” it is more an order than a call to arms of fellows. Newcomers are called “cherry” and more

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experienced soldiers are shown to be uninterested in getting to know them personally, as it is the new soldiers who are most likely to die. In *Hamburger Hill*, for example, Sgt Frantz and Doc do not bother to remember the name of a new member of the squad with what is considered to be a difficult ethnic name (Languilli), calling him "Alphabet" instead. When another new soldier is killed with his head blown off, Doc can't identify him and says he is "one of the new guys." Soldiers nearing the end of their tours are shown to be most interested in self preservation, in getting through their final weeks. In *Platoon*, Sergeant O'Neil begs off going on "ambush" because two of his squad are "short" and one is about to go on "RnR," indicating that they will not be focused on or interested in ambush. In *Hamburger Hill* Mac asks Sgt Frantz to find him a job back at base because he is "too short" to go out into heavy combat. The focus on the year-long tour thus means each soldier is aware of how long he, as an individual, needs to survive.

The focus on individual survival serves to undermine comradeship and lead to a greater focus on conflict between soldiers. In *Platoon* the tensions between Barnes and Elias which lead to the deaths of both are based around different values and approaches to the war and Barnes kills Elias to protect his own approach.

Similarly, in *Casualties of War*, the internal group conflict is based on different value-sets. Eriksson fundamentally disagrees with the Sergeant's decision to kidnap a Vietnamese girl and the actions of the squad in raping her. He refuses to follow the Sergeant's orders to kill her and is determined to see the other soldiers prosecuted for what they did. For Eriksson the fight is clearly one of individual survival. He opposes the group and faces possible death for this. Even after the war, he puts himself on the line to have the others prosecuted and must then live isolated from his previous identity to survive.

We also see internal conflict and lack of group solidarity in *Full Metal Jacket*. When Gunnery Sergeant Hartman takes to punishing the other recruits for the failures of Private Pyle, this does not force them to draw together as a group. Rather it emphasises their need to ensure their individual survival. For this they punish Pyle by holding him
down and beating him during the night. Even Joker, who had tried to help Pyle, resorts to the individual viewpoint, and joins in the beating. Once out in the field, the camaraderie of the soldiers does not bond them, and the need for self-preservation is again emphasised as the soldiers are picked off by a sniper if they try to help each other. Without a shared purpose and belief, the group finds no link and the sacrifice is not worth anything.

There are some exceptions to this lack of a reason to sacrifice. *Flight of the Intruder* differs from most of the Vietnam films in its approach to camaraderie and sacrifice. The central characters in the film chafe against and later defy the restrictions that are placed upon their bombing raids. Here there are some allusions to the view that political imperatives prevented victory in Vietnam which we do not see in other films. However the soldiers seem to ascribe more to the importance of fighting for each other. At the end of the film, when Commander Camparelli has been shot down and is in danger of being captured or shot by the Vietnamese, Jake Grafton (the hero) and Lt Commander Cole go out to rescue him, even though they have been grounded by Camparelli. Cole, the less predictable of the two, once injured, sacrifices himself not to achieve the goals of battle, but to save the lives of his comrades.\(^{21}\)

*Forrest Gump* takes a very different approach around individual sacrifice and comraderie to most of the other films. While Forrest’s description of the war underlines a certain absurdity about it, there is certainly comradeship and fellowship within the fighting. Forrest develops a close bond with Bubba, so much so that when he is killed during the war, Forrest follows Bubba’s dream for him. Forrest also rescues countless of his comrades, risking his life to do so, including Captain Dan. Both *Forrest Gump* and *Flight of the Intruder* thus present a much less nihilistic view of the war: both at least try to show that there is purpose in risking oneself for the sake of others.

Overall, however, the Vietnam films of this period seem to focus on the idea of the pointlessness of the sacrifice. The cause is not noble: much of the time it is not even

\(^{21}\) Cole’s sacrifice is similar to that seen in *Flying Tigers* (1942). It is therefore interesting to note that Cole’s call sign is “Tiger” which could be a coincidence or in fact a direct reference to the film. Both films are about aviators and in both, sacrifice redeems a key character.
apparent or able to be articulated. The soldiers are not as concerned about their companions as they are about their own survival. Adair points out that there is a “moral and spiritual void”\(^\text{22}\) at the centre of *Platoon*. I would argue that this lack of purpose, of meaning for sacrifice is the cause of this moral void in many of these films. As such, the oft repeated refrain in *Hamburger Hill* “it don’t mean nothin’” seems to summarise the overall attitude of the films.

**Attitudes to authority**

The nihilism within most of the films does show itself in the lack of defined authority and mistrust of it within the films. This problematising of authority occurs in a number of ways. As I have mentioned briefly above, in *Flight of the Intruder* (which is less nihilistic than other films), the pilots are unhappy about the restrictions placed on them by the authorities and government regarding the number and kind of bombing missions they can undertake. They emphasise how many dud targets they end up bombing as a way of further reinforcing this incompetence. In the end, Jake and Cole devise their own mission to destroy a legitimate target in Hanoi, against the orders of their superiors.

In *Air America*, there are a number of authority figures who are targeted. The CIA, which is running the mission in Laos, is shown to be willing to collude in drug smuggling and sides with a powerful but unpleasant local, General Sung, to achieve its aims. The CIA agents also willfully attempt to hide their operations from the visiting US Senator who is shown to be something of a fool, although smarter than the CIA believes. The pilots operating in Laos have little or no respect for the intelligence agents. Major Lemond and Rob, the chief intelligence operands, also try to frame one of the pilots to focus attention away from their own participation in drug smuggling. When Senator Davenport does not believe them and threatens to expose their activities in Washington, Major Lemond, exasperated, tells him that he has tried to make it easy for him and that should he try to report on what he “thinks” he has learnt in Laos, it will be the end of his political career because “the President loves my ass.” The point emphasised here is that it was not merely the CIA, but the Government who was responsible for what was happening in Laos.

Interestingly, the end titles of the film link what happened in Laos with the Reagan era government, as they tell us that both Lemond and Diehl were involved in the Iran-Contra affair.

*Good Morning Vietnam* also questions the competence of the military hierarchy. Lieutenant Hauk and Sergeant Major Dickerson are shown to be incompetent in their understanding of the troops and running of the military radio station. Hauk is shown as painfully unfunny, and unaware of it. Dickerson, on the other hand, is clearly deceptive and near-evil when he allows Cronauer to venture into territory which he knows is unsafe and has “VC” status. In contrast though, General Taylor, their superior, takes a pragmatic view and displays a sense of humour. He notes that the troops love Cronauer, and considering the problems the military are facing in Vietnam, his presence is a good thing, despite the junior officers’ reservations. This, to an extent, tempers the critique of the military within the film, by demonstrating that while the middle ranks may have been buffoons, senior officers were more sensible. Throughout the film, however, Cronauer also makes fun of the political and military establishment while defying the orders of those immediately above him.

In *Full Metal Jacket* and *Platoon* there are aspects of the incompetent or buffoon in military leaders. Joker encounters a Colonel at the site of a mass grave of Vietnamese. His immediate concern is the fact that Joker is wearing a peace button on his flak jacket. The language he uses, telling Joker to “get your head and your arse wired together or I will take a giant shit on you,” emphasises not so much buffoonery, but a complete lack of moral and intellectual engagement with his surrounds and the war, as well as a complete lack of humour. Lieutenant Wolfe in *Platoon* is shown to be barely competent and weak, lamely telling Sergeant Barnes that “in front of the men, I think I should be the one who gives the orders.” *Hamburger Hill* sees some questioning of the thoughts behind the orders for the mission, but in general senior military are not shown. When a television reporter, seeking comments from the soldiers, tells Sergeant Frantz that, “Word down at Division is you guys can’t take that hill” and that “Senator Kennedy says you don’t have a chance” he is met with instant hostility. Here the aggression is both against the news
reporter, but also against the idea they cannot achieve their objectives as Frantz tells him “we’re going take this fucking hill, newsman.”

In *Born on the Fourth of July*, Kovic’s commanding officer dismisses Kovic when he tries to tell him that he may have killed a fellow soldier, leaving Kovic without a sense of closure and confused by the unwillingness of the commander to address a real problem. The depiction of the Veteran’s Hospital is critical of the government, as it depicts veterans being left in squalor. *Born on the Fourth of July*’s strongest criticism of authority comes through the two scenes where protesters, including the wheelchair-bound Ron, are attacked by police. Both the Syracuse and the Republican National Convention scenes show the police as indiscriminate and the Republican National Convention scenes show the Republicans as hostile and aggressive to the veterans.

Overwhelmingly, the films lack a sense of trust in authority to make the right decision or to look after the soldiers either while in Vietnam, or on their return to the US.

**Veterans, protest and the return to America**

The position of veterans is also examined in these films. A number of films deal directly with Vietnam veterans, while other discuss the likely reception they will receive on their return to the US. *Born on the Fourth of July*, in particular, is focused heavily on the place of the veteran in US society. Despite the rhetoric that was present in the 1980s which I will discuss later in the chapter about veterans not being welcomed home and being shunned, we see Ron featured in a parade in his hometown, and giving a speech on the Fourth of July. During the parade, Ron is angrily shouted at by some protesters, but most observers at the parade and at his speech are supportive. This does contrast though with the treatment that Ron and his fellow injured veterans receive in the Veterans Hospital which is squalid and dirty and where they are attended by unsympathetic and generally uncaring staff. Ron’s mother and father demonstrate the two sides of the US attitudes to the returned soldier—Ron’s mother is uncomfortable and in the end angry at him because he blames her and because he represents her broken dreams. His father, in contrast, loves him and tries to help him, but ultimately does not know what to do, and suggests he goes
away. Ron is left to deal with his psychological wounds by himself. In all, the message is that America could not cope with what they had created with respect to veterans. They are certainly considered worthless by those at the Republican National Convention who are unwilling to listen to their opinions about the war. It is not until the Democratic National Convention in 1976 that Ron is actually accepted.

_The Indian Runner_ is focused on the life of a returned veteran and his brother. From the beginning of the film it is clear that Frank was a bad or difficult teenager before he went to Vietnam. His return from Vietnam is welcomed by his family (even though he fails to go and see his parents) and he does not face unruly crowds or unwelcoming protesters on his return. Frank’s trouble in settling down and maintaining a family and his outpouring of violence is not directly blamed on his service. Rather than Vietnam being the cause of his damage and “badness,” the implication of the film is that Frank’s service in Vietnam may have been a symptom or a part of his dysfunction, rather than the cause.

_Heaven and Earth_ takes a very different approach. Steve, who married Le Ly and takes her back to America after the war, seems to be a reasonable and balanced individual while they are in Vietnam. Once they have returned to the US however, Steve changes. He finds it hard to fit back in to suburban America and to deal with the financial pressures of that kind of living. He takes to drinking and violence against Le Ly and is haunted by nightmares and visions of the acts he performed during the war. The film implies that there are few avenues of support for either Steve or Le Ly and that his family really do not understand the impact that the war has had on them both. Eventually Steve shoots himself, unable to cope with his memories of Vietnam and the realities of his current life.

The character of Nick in _The Big Chill_ is a returned veteran who has been seriously damaged by his time in Vietnam. A wound sustained during his service has left him impotent and he is now a heavy drug user. Here the implication is that the Vietnam experience has left Nick disconnected with his life and keen to escape reality since his return.
As I have discussed above, in *Birdy* we see that both Birdy and Al are damaged by their experiences in Vietnam. The film focuses on Birdy’s time in a military psychiatric hospital which, while not quite as squalid as the depiction of the veteran’s hospital in *Born on the Fourth of July* is, nonetheless, a grey and gloomy place. The military officers in command have a minimal level of sympathy and offer little support and it is Al who is desperate to try and reach Birdy. While the civilian treatment of veterans is not highlighted, the military, and by extension the government, is shown to be lacking in its support for those the war has hurt.

This idea that the government will not necessarily look after those it uses is also made clear in *Air America*. Gene’s gun running activities are his “retirement plan” recognising that once the government no longer needs him in Laos, he will not be receiving any further support from them. While civilian, the film shows that the pilots are expected to undertake dangerous missions largely for the thrill of it, with only immediate remuneration and the idea that they are helping their country.

The depiction of the trauma caused to Vietnam veterans by their time in-country is not limited to the way in which actual veterans are represented. Adair argues that,

> the neurotic, antisocial autism with which the American cinema had previously stigmatised the *returning* vet...seems somehow to have infected the grunts of *Platoon* merely hours after their arrival in Vietnam.\(^{23}\)

This “autism,” as I discussed above, is the lack of internal group cohesion and belonging. However in other ways as well, soldiers while in Vietnam take on many of the characteristics of depictions of veterans that I will later demonstrate are evident in media representation during the Reagan-Bush era: they are damaged, they take drugs, they are violent and anti-social. Clearly the soldiers become the veterans of discourse before they leave the cinematic field of Vietnam.

\(^{23}\) Ibid.
In *Platoon* there is some talk amongst the in-country soldiers about how they will be welcomed once they return home. *Hamburger Hill* is full of discussions about how badly veterans are treated on their return. Mac is warned by one of the newly arrived soldiers that he should not wear his uniform when he walks down the street wearing his medals. In an extended soliloquy, Worcester explains why he returned to Vietnam: “pretty young things” had thrown “bags of dogshit” at them when they were evacuated back to “the world”; he’d found his wife with a long-haired hippie and heard of calls being made by college students telling relatives that they were glad his son had been killed by the Vietnamese. Another soldier receives a letter from his girlfriend which says she is not going to write to him any more, as her friends at college told her writing to him was “immoral.” As Williams notes “*Hamburger Hill’s* peace movement...[is] worse than the enemy.”

Forrest Gump, in general, takes the opposite view to most other films. On his return to the US, Forrest is lauded as a hero, presented his Medal of Honor at the White House and is even welcomed at a peace rally held in Washington which he mistakenly attends. For Forrest there is no adjustment to life and he is in no way vilified. This is, to some extent, contrasted by Lieutenant Dan who has lost both his legs. Lieutenant Dan is shown to be damaged and angry and parallels are drawn with the depiction of Ron Kovic as he grows his hair long. However, with Forrest’s help, it does not take Lieutenant Dan too long to recover and readjust and by the end of the film he has been completely renewed—he even has new legs to walk on.

This idea of protest and the peace movement is closely intertwined with the idea about the return of the veteran, with the Vietnam combat films presenting a predominantly negative view of the peace movement. Nonetheless, as Williams notes “a major film about the antiwar movement is conspicuous by its absence (or like *1969* [1989], conspicuously unsuccessful.” I would also note that while *1969* is antiwar, it is not

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24 Williams, "Narrative Patterns and Mythic Trajectories in Mid-1980s Vietnam Movies," p123.
25 Ibid., p122.
about the antiwar movement as such, although it does involve protest and opposition. It is interesting that this remains a gap. Few films actually do show protests with the exceptions of 1969, *Forrest Gump* and *Born on the Fourth of July*. Other films show footage of protests, such as *The Doors* and *The Indian Runner*, although these protests do not feature in the narrative.

Williams argues that “both seventies and eighties films agree on [the peace movement’s] irrelevant and dangerous nature” I believe that it is not quite that simple. *1969* and *Born on the Fourth of July* both present a relatively positive view of the peace movement, while a number of other films remain neutral on the issue. Clearly, however, others like *Hamburger Hill* regard the peace movement with disdain. The absence of films made during the 1980s and early 1990s which focus primarily on the protesters or the protest movement during Vietnam should not necessarily be read as a comment on the movement itself. It is more likely indicative of the saleability of the idea of the peace movement at a time when Rambo’s shooting of Vietnamese was being cheered in cinemas.26

The films which do feature protest take slightly different approaches, and in none of them is it seen as a wholly bad thing. Both *1969* and *Born on the Fourth of July* take a primarily positive approach to protesters although we do see angry protesters shouting at Ron during his parade, while some just make a peace symbol. In both films, opposition to the war is shown to have grown, in part, from personal experience. The films do not elevate ideology, but rather focus on the idea that individuals opposed the war because of the impact on them. As I have discussed above, Donna in *Born on the Fourth of July* has taken to protesting the war because of the way it had impacted on her personally. Similarly, the presence of veterans at the protest at the Republican Convention is about their understanding of the impact of the war because they had fought in it. While Scott in *1969* is anti-war from the start, people like Beth and his mother become more so because of the way that the war has affected them. The protest march at the end of the film is a

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26 See Kellner *Media Culture: cultural studies, identity and politics between the modern and the postmodern*, pp69-75, for a discussion of the reception of *Rambo: First Blood Part II*. 

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spontaneous one which starts at Scott’s brother Aldin’s funeral and ends at the gaol where Ralph is being held for trying to destroy his draft records. Here the opposition is personal, and Scott’s father joining with the protest clearly comes from his grief over his son’s death and his unwillingness to see others he knows die.

In Forrest Gump Jenny, it is implied, is anti-war from the time she is in college. She wants to be a folk singer and sings protest songs naked at the strip club where she works. It is, therefore, not surprising to find her as a fully-fledged hippie at the protest in Washington. While Jenny’s opposition to the war is seen as sincere, it is also shown as part of her dysfunction, with the links to her work in the strip club and the appearance of the abusive SDS boyfriend in Washington. The irony of the violent peace protester contrasted by Forrest, the gentle soldier, is shown to undercut the respectability of the peace movement. However, it is clear that, while we do not hear him, Forrest does say something that could be interpreted as anti-war at the rally in Washington, and he is afforded respect by the protesters he encounters there.

Overall then while the films are not homogenous in approach, we see a couple of tropes appearing in many of the Vietnam films of the Reagan-Bush era. The first is that the innocent boys who went to Vietnam were stripped of that innocence by their service. Not only did they lose their innocence, but many of them returned damaged by the experience. The second is that there was nothing worth fighting for in the conflict—not the war itself, nor the men you were fighting alongside. While films like Hamburger Hill and Forrest Gump were fairly negative about protest, 1969 and Born on the Fourth of July showed that where protest was linked to personal experiences it could be a positive thing. The military hierarchies and the government are not depicted in a favourable light and their combined incompetence unnecessarily endangered the lives of those fighting.

In the next section I want to consider to what extent these ideas about war differ in other combat films, before looking at the representation of issues around Vietnam in the media and in political debates during the 1980s and early 1990s.
Combat Films

Unsurprisingly, films about war and combat have been around since nearly the beginnings of motion pictures. Fighting is exciting and dramatic and it is something about which people feel passion—passionate commitment to a cause, the passion of patriotism, passionate opposition to war and passionate concern for those who die during war. Given this range of views about war, it is not a sustainable argument that war films are always either pro- or anti-war. Various periods have seen a predominance of one or the other sentiment (for example, immediately post World War I many films were anti-war while post World War II many were pro). However, it may in fact be over-simplifying things to suggest that most individual films stand alone as starkly either anti or pro war. Most films about combat can be read in a number of different ways which does not allow them to be simply reduced to a category.

The question then is, what do war films have in common? As entire books have been written on this subject, I do not wish to replicate that discussion, and it is beyond the scope of this thesis to do so. What I am particularly interested in is the way these films differ from or resemble Vietnam films of the Reagan-Bush era. In so doing, I wish to identify generic characteristics in order to establish what is specific to the films within my selection.

One of the key features of war films made prior to the 1970s, particularly those about World War II, was that these films tended to depict war, and the suffering it entailed, as necessary. As Basinger notes, “[a]t the bottom, both WWI and WWII films are about death”\textsuperscript{28} Suid notes that “[f]ilmmakers might not always portray combat as a pleasant experience, but they made it clear that ultimate victory did require some pain and suffering.”\textsuperscript{29} What was always implicit, and often explicitly articulated in films about


\textsuperscript{28} Basinger, \textit{The World War II Combat Film: Anatomy of a Genre}, p80.

\textsuperscript{29} Suid, \textit{Guts and Glory: The Making of the American Military Image in Film}, p2.
combat and war, was that the soldiers were fighting for something meaningful: a cause, “freedom,” to ensure the safety of their families, or even for “glory” itself. In war films since the Reagan-Bush era, this depiction has changed somewhat. Young argues that more recent war films focus on the individual rather than the cause, noting that Saving Private Ryan (1998) “proves the obverse of movies made during World War II” in that rather than the individual being sacrificed for the mission, “the lives of a group of men are risked for the sake of a single individual.” In these films, according to Young, “these Americans sacrifice their lives only for one another.” This is explicitly articulated in Black Hawk Down (2001), when Hoot says to another soldier that it is “about the man beside you.” The cause has moved from being one about country and ideology, to being about ensuring the survival of your unit and fellows, but the fight nonetheless remains purposeful.

The metanarrative developed within war movies made either side of the Reagan-Bush era therefore is around the necessity of sacrifice and death, whether for a comrade or for the greater good. Films like Rambo: First Blood Part II and Missing in Action, made during the 1980s, which show Vietnam veterans returning to Vietnam, also maintain this approach to combat. These men are fighting to rescue their former comrades still being held prisoner in Vietnam and thus have a cause. Films which contain this metanarrative are therefore distinctly different from the majority of the Vietnam films I am considering which have at their centre the purposelessness of their fight and sacrifice.

Basinger notes that World War I films are about “glory and the waste of youth and the need for pacifism” (Basinger, The World War II Combat Film: Anatomy of a Genre, p82) thus even though the films did dwell on the negatives of war, there was still glory to be had. Doherty, on the other hand notes that “the retrospective films of the interwar years from 1919 to 1939 projected the futility of combat and the nobility of pacifism” (Thomas Doherty, Projections of War: Hollywood, American Culture, and World War II (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), p87).


Ibid.

Ibid.
Victory is not necessarily a generic requirement for war films. Basinger notes that many American war films are “based on defeat, not victory.”35 She points to the mythologising of events like Valley Forge, Custer’s Last Stand and the Alamo and notes that “it is significant that Americans seek to glorify these last stands, or failures.”36 In this kind of mythology which is drawn on by many combat films, sacrifice is seen as part of the American way, if one is fighting for a cause. We Were Soldiers demonstrates this link, when Lt Cl Moore reads the history of his unit, linking the need for sacrifice and the acceptance of duty.

This idea of combat films demonstrating a link to American ideas of nation is strongly developed by Susan Owen who argues that Saving Private Ryan acts as a “secular American jeremiad”37 which responds to “the post-Vietnam crisis of national identity.”38 She believes the combat film articulates national identity in a powerful manner and argues that Saving Private Ryan works hard to “call the nation home to heroic national identity.”39

In addition to the idea of nation, the nature of American identity is explored in many combat films. I will not discuss the notion of American identity here, but note that Basinger argues that,

America, a maverick country that was started, settled, and built by a rebellious group of religious dissidents (and also by a ragtail group of misfits and outlaws), always contains the elements of rebellion and outlawry in the national persona.40

Similarly, Gabler argues that war films “have served as metaphors for America’s attitudes to authority, both personal and moral.”41 These ideas can appear within the way

36 Ibid.
38 Ibid.
39 Ibid.: p262.
in which characters are developed and presented in war films. Basinger uses the example of *Flying Tigers* (1942) where there are two main characters, one "sober and responsible" and one a jaunty, irresponsible daredevil. In the film, the irresponsible hero sacrifices himself for the cause. Here we see the dual nature of the American character represented with the “outlaw” character ready, nonetheless, to sacrifice himself in the service of nation. This contrasts with the similar sacrifice I discussed in *Flight of the Intruder*. The difference in *Flight*, however, is that the sacrifice is for the sake of comrades, and not for nation as a whole. This is consistent with the position taken in later war films, as opposed to the pre Reagan-Bush era approaches to war.

The maverick and melting-pot nature of American identity is also explored through the use of the combat patrol made up of men of different ages, ethnicity and geographical homes which is a consistent element of the war genre. We see this in films from *Bataan* (1943) through to *Saving Private Ryan*. Doherty argues that this stemmed from a recognition during World War II that the US itself risked appearing as racist as Nazi Germany, thus encouraging Hollywood to open itself up to a new range of Americans. However, it must be recognised that the inclusion of different racial groups within combat films did not free them from potentially racist representations. As Basinger notes “[t]he order in which they die, as well as the methods by which they die” are significant and a generic requirement is usually that the minorities die first, followed by “the weak and the mentally sensitive.” She also notes that “the most brutish deaths” are usually reserved for minorities. While this approach to the death of minorities within a group may have originated within the combat film, it has moved to be a feature of modern horror and disaster genre films.

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41 Gabler, "Seeking Perspective on the Movie Front Line."
43 Ibid., pp32-33.
46 Ibid., p54.
47 For a recent example see *Sunshine* (2007). Despite its apparent progressiveness in depicting a racially mixed crew and a non-white Captain, it is the Japanese Captain who dies first and the two white characters who are the last to die.
As with the Vietnam films I am considering, internal group conflict is another generic element of combat films. Sometimes this conflict would require the men involved to learn to accept the ways of a hard leader to survive in combat. Sometimes the conflict would be what Basinger terms a “Quirt/Flagg” relationship—an adversary relationship between two characters. This relationship can be over women, or over ideological issues and can be either central or part of the background or even comic relief of the film. Unlike the Vietnam films, though, this internal conflict was generally not destructive in the way it is depicted in Platoon or Casualties of War.

The manner in which the enemy appears and/or is depicted in war films does not appear to be a consistent thing—and sometimes it is not even internally consistent. Basinger points out that in Bataan,

[t]he Japanese...are an almost invincible force. Not only are there seemingly zillions of them (they keep coming and coming in endless waves of undervalued humanity), but they also have planes, tanks, trucks, ammunition aplenty, searchlights, and everything it takes to make modern war. They are both totally sophisticated with their mechanical skill and up-to-date equipment, and totally primitive, with their barbaric methods of killing...The Japanese are seen as an impersonal, faceless enemy. They are a mindless group, as opposed to our collection of strongly delineated individuals.

The enemy, here, was required to be seen as well equipped and sophisticated in order to explain why they were able to overcome these Americans (all die in Bataan), but also to make any defeats of them, and even the willingness to fight them, seem more heroic. In

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49 Ibid.
50 Ibid., p26 and 84. A Quirt/Flagg relationship is based on the depiction of two characters in *What Price Glory?* (1926) which features a relationship between two soldiers which is, according to Basinger “a male friendship that is fundamentally a competition, an adversary relationship.” Basinger notes that this kind of conflict/relationship appears in any number of combat films.
51 Ibid.
52 Ibid., p84.
53 Ibid., p55.
contrast, reducing them to faceless savages makes it understandable, and even necessary, to kill them. The idea of dehumanising the enemy, particularly during war time, is a fairly regular feature of war films, even though it does not necessarily accord with the experience of the troops facing them. Doherty quotes one soldier who wrote “When I see Japs once again portrayed as comic opera characters, thick skulled and insanely egotistical, I am inclined to walk out…”

Delia Konzett points out that in *The Lost Patrol* (1934), the Arab enemies within the film are rarely seen and when they are seen, they are depicted in long shot. She notes “Having no individual features, they are represented not as distinct, complex subjects but simply as a nameless, primitive drive compelled to destroy civilization.”

The idea of overwhelming hordes appears again in *Black Hawk Down* (2001). As Young puts it “[t]housands and thousands of armed and apparently crazed Somalis…besiege the small band of American troops.” These combatants are an undifferentiated horde granted minimal dialogue and absolutely no voice or explanation for their motivation.

Jeffries compares the film to *Zulu* (1964), another combat film noting how it showed “wave after wave of black men rac[ing] towards the heavily outnumbered British troops.” Similarly, in *Pearl Harbor* (2001), the force of the Japanese military attacking Hawaii seems to be an overwhelming one which keeps coming and coming.

Not all war films reduced the enemy to comic-opera villains or a faceless horde. *Tora! Tora! Tora!* (1970), which was a Japanese co-production and was presented as an actual recreation of historical events, shows both the Japanese and American stories of Pearl Harbor. In contrast to previous depictions of the Japanese it “explained the Japanese intentions and showed the attack for what it remains, a skillful military mission, which

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56 Young, "In the Combat Zone," p258.
57 There is one brief exception to this. When one of the Americans is taken prisoner, he is subjected to limited exposition from one of the warlords, providing a glimpse into the Somali motivations. However, this is quite separated from the actions of the hordes in the city itself.
skilful tacticians carefully planned.” Desser points out that there are a number of other World War II films which personify the Japanese such as Hell in the Pacific (1968), Midway (1976) and Farewell to the King (1986). More recent films have also, at times, opted for a degree of personification of the enemy. In Pearl Harbor the Japanese are given minor roles, where we see them planning the operation. These depictions are again limited and play little narrative purpose. We Were Soldiers (2002) gives a greater role and voice to a Vietnamese character depicted. The audience sees the Vietnamese briefing and planning, pictures of their loved ones and also their prayers. Saving Private Ryan, while showing the enemy in a personified form, nonetheless does not really humanise him. In the film, following a fire fight, the American soldiers capture and directly engage with a German, who, after much debate, they do not kill in revenge, but send him, on his honour, to give himself up at the nearest Allied post. The soldier later reappears in the final fight of the film, and appears to be the one who shoots the bullet which kills Captain Miller. Here, the enemy seen up close is not honourable, and the unwillingness to kill him in cold blood seems to lead directly to the death of the man who decided to spare him.

There are a range of similarities between other war films and those made during the Reagan-Bush era and set in the Vietnam war. One of the principle differences between combat films in general and those I am considering in depth is that of the worth of the war. Combat also tends to be less glamourous and more confused, and camaraderie less evident amongst the Vietnam troops. As discussed, not all Vietnam films I examined are the same, and Flight of the Intruder and the Vietnam section of Forrest Gump are probably closer to the generic norms than they are to the other films within my selection. Other war films also do not have the emphasis on command/government incompetence that is seen in the films I am considering.

**Vietnam in the Reagan-Bush era**

In 1985, the US commemorated the tenth anniversary of the end of the Vietnam War. This was a significant commemoration for the US, if not a celebration as such. The

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60 Suid, Guts and Glory: The Making of the American Military Image in Film, pp290-91.
Vietnam War loomed large in the media and in political debates during the entire Reagan-Bush period. The first "war" which the Americans had "lost" remained a compelling marker on the cultural landscape.

Lyons points out that by the time Reagan was elected, the American people were significantly disillusioned and the Vietnam War played a strong role in that. He argues that anti-war protests, following on from the legacy of McCarthyism, led to a polarity in the position of people as either for or against America. As he points out, protesters "opposed or felt ambivalent" about the use of the American flag and tended to project the position that America was itself bad, rather than the fault lying with those who were making decisions about issues such as troop involvement in Vietnam.\(^{62}\) Thus conservative political forces believed that part of the task of making Americans begin to feel good about themselves again was the need for a change in the way the Vietnam War, and the loss thereof, was conceived. As Johnson notes, this pessimism and self-doubt resulting from Vietnam and what could be seen as four "failed presidencies" led to a desire within parts of the American public for the Reagan presidency to succeed.\(^{63}\) A component of the success of the Reagan years would be the partial reconfiguring of attitudes towards Vietnam and the resulting attitudes towards the country itself.

In this section I will focus on a number of themes within the discussion of the war in the broader media including the notion of victory, the approach to memorialising Vietnam, Vietnam veterans and the link between Vietnam and foreign policy.

**Who lost the war?**

A new argument about Vietnam emerged in the 1980s: that the US had not so much lost the war, as not managed to win it. For example, in 1985, a couple of weeks before the anniversary of the collapse of the Saigon government, President Reagan is reported as having said "Well, the truth of the matter is that we did have victory...We didn’t lose that


\(^{63}\) Johnson, *Sleepwalking through History: America in the Reagan Years*, p28.
war. We won virtually every engagement." It is reported that the President also said that where the US lost the war was by failing "to support South Vietnam against North Vietnamese violations of agreement." Reagan placed the blame for this lack of support and subsequent loss on Congress.

Elsewhere this idea that the war was not lost on the battlefield was gaining strength. The opening paragraph of an article in *The New York Times* about a book containing a new assessment of the Vietnam defeat demonstrates the way ideas were circulating.

A recent book by a retired Army general rejects the thesis that the Vietnam War was lost because civilian policy makers “tied the hands” of the military and refused to “go all out.” He says that senior officers must share the “onus of failure.”

Here we see that the book is arguing *against* what it purports to be a widely accepted idea, that Vietnam was lost because of decisions made by the civilian government.

The rest of the article seems to indicate that the book does indeed lay much of the blame for the loss on the government, as the book’s author, General Palmer, is critical of Presidents Johnson and Nixon. The article says that General Palmer argues that “the military failed to use effectively the limbs that were not tied by civilian policy.” (my emphasis). Again here we see this idea of “civilian policy” and previous administrations as being the main hurdle to success in Vietnam.

The article also raises the idea that the “South Vietnamese Army was inept, poorly led and corrupt.” This provides another theme within the search for blame for the outcome of the Vietnam War. The idea that the South Vietnamese were corrupt and incompetent,
rather than casting more doubt on the wisdom of involving the US in the conflict in the first place, was a useful way of both sharing the blame and also alleviating any extant guilt about abandoning Vietnam. The conservative side of politics did view the end of the war in fairly catastrophic terms, with Peggy Noonan noting,

that our protests and the politicians’ withdrawal from the war and the manner in which they withdrew helped produce the boat people, the Cambodian holocaust, a gulag called Vietnam, and an untold increase in horror for the people of that part of the planet.\(^\text{69}\)

Noonan was writing in 1990 following her period of working on Reagan’s staff. She uses the idea of the “politicians’ withdrawal” in a negative sense. “Politician” is being used here in a derogatory manner. Noonan is echoing the idea from Reagan and contained within *The New York Times* article that “politicians,” “policy-makers” and Congress were the ones responsible for the defeat in Vietnam.

This kind of blame was played out in *Rambo: First Blood Part II*, when Rambo’s task in Vietnam is hindered, rather than helped, by the US government. Of course, as was noted at the time of its release and subsequently, Rambo does go back to Vietnam and “win” the war—after disposing of the government representative who stands in the way. The theme of government interference is also evident in *Flight of the Intruder* where the pilots chafe against restrictions placed on them by the government. The South Vietnamese do not feature strongly in the films, although their moral ambiguity is implied in some scenes. In *Full Metal Jacket*, for example, it is a South Vietnamese soldier who brings a prostitute to the Americans (and profits from it).

**Memorialising Vietnam**

No matter who lost the war or how it was lost, up until the 1980s, the US public had tried not to think about the war more than necessary. This led to an absence of the usual

immediate post-war welcomes home and memorialisation that has tended to follow other conflicts.

In the story of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, it is veterans themselves who play the role of memorialisers. On the website for the memorial a mythic story about its creation is outlined. This story is presented in the structure of a standard US myth—determined individual faces obstacles, continues undaunted, gains public support and achieves dream in face of Government and media. Jan Scruggs, a veteran, is cited as providing the impetus for the creation of the memorial. Attributing viewing *The Deer Hunter* (1979) as the inspiration to fund the construction of a memorial, Scruggs faces doubts and opposition but ultimately wins through.\(^\text{70}\)

This standard mythical structure is overlaid with the tropes surrounding veterans—that they were forgotten, mistrusted and seen as ‘other’ by much of the US population. As another part of the website states,

> [t]he 1982 memorial dedication heralded a homecoming for many veterans. Although they had returned years before, often the homecoming was bittersweet. With the memorial in place, it was an obvious sign of recognition and honor.\(^\text{71}\)

The memorial has thus been incorporated into collective memory as an important component of healing and a change in attitude towards veterans: “[h]aving a memorial built, in many cases, allowed veterans to reflect, remember lost friends, and heal wounds.”\(^\text{72}\)

The story also incorporates the important symbolism of the designer being a young Chinese American woman, Maya Lin. What this story misses is the fact that the choice of


\(^{72}\) Ibid.
design was not without controversy, which again reflected the tenor of cultural and political debate about Vietnam. The controversy and debate around the memorial focused in particular on the design was significant and had wide media coverage, including being the focus of an episode of *Nightline*, where Jan Scruggs and Maya Lin spoke in favour of the design while it was opposed by Ross Perot, an influential businessman and later Presidential aspirant.\textsuperscript{73}

Another part of the National Parks website about the Vietnam Veterans Memorial discusses the controversy.

The proposed design for the Vietnam Veterans Memorial angered some Vietnam veterans and other who felt that it did not convey the heroism, patriotism, and honor inherent in most war memorials...A veteran assailed the design as the “black gash of shame.” Other detractors criticized it as a “black, flagless pit,” while others attacked it as being “unheroic,” “death-oriented,” and “intentionally not meaningful.”\textsuperscript{74}

This argument exposed the clash of ideas about Vietnam as well as the meaning of memorialising and representation. At the time that the memorial was under consideration, much of the representation of veterans, particularly in popular culture, had shown them as damaged individuals. Adair writes that veteran status “served essentially as a source of easy, catch-all motivation – the motivation of a (minor) character’s neurosis, schizophrenia and, in general, antisocial behaviour.”\textsuperscript{75} Given these negative associations, some veterans felt concern that their memorial would be markedly different from the kinds of memorials which had been utilised for veterans of conflicts such as World War I and II. There was, quite probably, a feeling amongst some that this difference would further reinforce the kind of representations and remembering of veterans which cast them in a negative light.

\textsuperscript{73} “Vietnam Veterans Memorial,” *Nightline*, ABC, 14/10/1982.
\textsuperscript{75} Adair, *Hollywood's Vietnam: From the Green Berets to Full Metal Jacket*, p121.
The webpage goes on to note that "James Watt, Secretary for the Interior in the Reagan Administration, refused to issue a building permit for the memorial." It is reported that Watt wanted a statue and flagpole at the centre of the memorial. This intervention by the political elite shows again the importance of representations of the Vietnam War to the project of re-visioning the United States during the Reagan era. Eventually a compromise involving the addition of a statue representing "three weary soldiers carrying rifles"—the Three Servicemen Statue. A flagpole was added, but at the side of the memorial, to "symbolize in a more traditional manner the patriotism and heroism that some of the veterans and opponents thought was lacking in Lin's design" (my emphasis). This notion of a "traditional manner" of memorialising participants in wars is significant within the representations of Vietnam. Of course, wanting to memorialise in the "traditional manner" is about the discord between the post-conflict treatment of veterans with those from the two World Wars. These wars, particularly World War II, are generally represented as unambiguously "just" wars against oppressive regimes, which was in stark opposition to the representation of Vietnam. In the 1980s there was an ongoing attempt by the political elites to move to an acceptance of veterans which had more in common with the return of soldiers from the two earlier conflicts. In shifting the way the soldiers should be remembered, there was a nudge to the way the conflict in general could and should be discussed.

As part of this project of acceptance, there were a number of memorial-building projects which occurred during the Reagan-Bush era across the country. Many of these were

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78 Ibid.
80 It is likely that the "traditional manner" of memorialising war also refers directly to the US Marine Corps Memorial which depicts six 32 foot high servicemen raising the US flag at Iwo Jima. This statue incorporates the aspects that were considered missing by some of the critics—the figurative (and heroic) representation of soldiers and a US flag.
81 For example construction of a memorial commenced in Holmdel, New Jersey in 1987 ("Site of New Memorial," *The Orange County Register,* 31 May 1987); memorials were constructed or planned throughout Connecticut by 1987 (Robert A Hamilton, "Memorials Salute Vietnam Veterans," *The New York Times,* 26 July 1987); a memorial was planned to be dedicated in 1988 in Maryland ("Md. Veterans
partly or wholly funded by public donations, generally with significant involvement of veterans themselves. The manner in which veterans are represented as part of this process was a component of the rehabilitation project, with events such as the “Last Patrol”—a group of eight veterans “who walked 200 miles to raise funds for Maryland’s Vietnam War memorial.”

Many of the statues designed for the memorials show representations of the conflict: in Danbury the memorial “is a statue of an infantryman carrying a Vietnamese child in one arm and his rifle in another;” in Westchester the sculpture depicts “a soldier carrying a wounded comrade with a military nurse running toward them;” and the original plans for the Vietnam Memorial in Sacramento included “a bronze statue of a young soldier, sitting on his helmet reading a letter.” These monuments are interesting because they move away from the often abstract representations of battlefield glory, victory or honour typical of war memorials relating to previous conflicts, to a much more individual level of engagement in the conflict. The representations of soldiers carrying wounded comrades or children present an individual good, regardless of the murky moral prerogatives of the war, while the individual soldier reading a letter personalises the conflict without making any comment on the war itself. These images, like the names on the wall at the national memorial, seek to make the memorials about the soldiers themselves, rather than making grandiose statements about the individual participant as part of a greater cause, as occurs at the US National World War I and II memorials.
Even the name of the World War I memorial—the Liberty Memorial—demonstrates how the memorial represents more than merely the soldiers who have died; it is a representation of what the dominant discourses of the conflict represent the war as being about. Similarly, the World War II memorial does not feature the names of those who died, but has “Freedom Stars” in their place. Sturken notes that “a memorial refers to the life or lives sacrificed for a particular set of values.”

The National World War I and II memorials directly engage with the values being fought for, whereas the Vietnam memorials tend to focus almost exclusively on the lives sacrificed. This is in part a function of the loss of the war and due to the difficulty in articulating exactly what the abstract values involved in the war were.

It should be noted that the World War II memorial was only approved in 1993 and construction did not begin until September 2001. The Liberty Memorial is in Kansas City and was only officially designated a national historic landmark in September 2006. Thus, the Vietnam War was actually ahead of the two major wars in the Twentieth Century in receiving an official national memorial. This tends to go against the dominant trope that Vietnam was completely shunned. It could be argued, however, that because of the contested nature of Vietnam, it was more in need of a national memorial to focus and validate its memorialising. The early wars also were much more widely memorialised on a local community level than Vietnam prior to the creation of its national memorial.

Other forms of memorialising worked to change the discourse surrounding Vietnam. In 1987, the Navy Secretary, “a decorated Marine combat veteran of the Vietnam War”


Marita Sturken, Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), p47.

The US Marine Corps War Memorial, which could be mistaken for a World War II Memorial due to its subject matter, was dedicated in November 1954. According to its web page, “While the statue depicts one of the most famous incidents of World War II, the memorial is dedicated to all Marines who have given their lives in the defense of the United States since 1775.” National Park Service, The Marine Corps War Memorial [internet] available from http://www.nps.gov/archive/gwmp/usmc.htm [accessed 24/01/2007].


announced that a new guided-missile carrier would be named the Hue City. In announcing this, Webb sought to reinforce the ideas discussed above about why the war was lost. An Associated Press report on his announcement states,

[a]n outspoken veteran who has never made any secret of his belief that politicians prevented U.S. forces from prevailing in Vietnam, Webb said he hopes selection of the name will “cause all of us to remember the rewards of courage and the sad legacy of commitments abandoned through the confusion of domestic politics.”91

His comments, and the reporting of the announcement follow the general trend of conservative re-casting of the war during this period—the war was lost because of domestic politics or protesters or politicians “abandoning” Vietnam; those who fought it were good and courageous men and that, militarily, the US did not really lose. The article reports after Hue was “overrun by North Vietnamese during the Tet offensive of 1968 [a] force consisting primarily of U.S. Marines and South Vietnamese soldiers managed to retake the city after a month of fighting.”92 The article presents a Vietnam veteran in a successful and responsible position, the war as worth commemorating and Vietnam having been lost due to the decisions of politicians. All of these ideas were strong themes in attempts to rehabilitate the war in the eyes of the American public.

The 1980s also saw a number of “Welcome Home” type parades for Vietnam veterans. These were meant to replace the welcome home that the returning soldiers did not receive when they first came back from the war. One of the most significant was in New York where two days of events were held in 1985. As The New York Times reported,

[t]he events, scheduled to coincide with the 10th anniversary of the fall of Saigon, the official end of the war, include the dedication of the New York Vietnam Veterans Memorial in lower Manhattan and a ticker-tape parade from Brooklyn to

91 Ibid.
92 Ibid. Note, this is the battle represented at the end of Full Metal Jacket.

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the Battery, including that stretch of Broadway that is the traditional route of heroes.  

Another report following the events refers to the way veterans returned with "no hero’s welcome" and reports Mayor Koch as saying "What we do here tonight begins to undo that terrible injustice." Also within the report a veteran is quoted as saying "we answered the call of our country, and when we came back home we were kicked back into society almost like criminals...A phenomenal change has happened over the last few years." This celebration and the reporting of it again highlights the tropes around the war, in particular this idea that veterans were shunned by society unjustly and the way that this was being reconfigured during the Reagan-Bush era.

During this period there were also a number of television specials memorialising Vietnam and veterans. These included a major documentary series about Vietnam made in 1983, but also involved programs like Stanley Tonight: Women Veterans in Vietnam, CBS Reports: Bittersweet Memories – A Vietnam Reunion, Dear America: Letters Home from Vietnam and Real People: Veteran’s Show. These programs attempted to redress the neglect of veterans in the past by presenting their experiences and adding to the memorialising of the war.

The veteran and the media

The manner in which Vietnam veterans were portrayed during the 1980s and early 1990s follows from this approach to memorialisation. This process of memorialising Vietnam played a role in the project of rehabilitation of the image of veterans. The rehabilitation was part of the process, instigated by conservative forces, of removing the stigma of Vietnam and the Reagan administration’s attempt to re-vision the conflict.

95 Ibid.
100 "Veterans' Show," Real People, NBC, 10/11/1982.
Nonetheless, the trope of veterans as troubled was a strong one to overcome. My review of newspaper and television representations of veterans during the Reagan and Bush presidencies revealed many articles which discussed veterans and criminality. It is interesting that in these articles the status of the alleged criminal as a Vietnam veteran is often specifically mentioned. These include the report of Larry Webster “Vietnam war hero who turned to alcohol and drugs” sentenced to death for murder\(^{101}\) and “ex-marine Dennis Malvasi” who admitted planting bombs in abortion clinics.\(^{102}\) An ABC news special looked at five Vietnam veterans who were all in prison, but had not committed crimes prior to the war, and had been decorated for heroism during the war. The narration called them “victims of war.”\(^{103}\) A particularly interesting example of this kind of representation is the case where a man who was killed in a shoot-out had been misreported as being a Vietnam veteran.\(^{104}\) While this man had served in the armed forces as a conscript, he was never posted to Vietnam. Nonetheless, the strength of the trope of veterans as disturbed clearly led those writing earlier reports to assume that this man must have served in Vietnam. Another article\(^{105}\) tells the story of a damaged, homeless veteran, Mike, who died in the streets in Washington. A volunteer who had risen to the position of sergeant, he needed psychological care after the war and “was no longer fit for civilian life.”\(^{106}\)

There are some counters to this. For example, a report about President Reagan’s nomination of Everett Alvarez Jr to the board of the Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences emphasised his position as a former prisoner of war in Vietnam.\(^{107}\) The status of Navy Secretary James Webb as a “decorated Marine combat veteran of the


\(^{105}\) Connie Cass, "Passers-by Find That They Miss Homeless Man," St Louis Post-Dispatch, 28 November 1993.

\(^{106}\) Ibid.

Vietnam War was similarly emphasised when the USS Hue was named. Much of the press around the election of Senator John McCain in 1986 focused on his time as a prisoner of war during the Vietnam conflict. On a more local level, veterans such as Richard Cacace are given by the media as positive veteran examples—Cacace “returned to Connecticut after his stint in Southeast Asia and went to work for an engineering company in New York. Five years later, he started a business in Connecticut.”

A number of the television specials about returned veterans also showed well adjusted men and women with happy and successful lives. In a show focussing on the reunion of a group of veterans, it is shown how most of them “returned from Vietnam and slipped quietly into the mainstream.” While the veterans interviewed during the program expressed their feelings about some of the difficulties in returning, such as the difficulties in talking to people about what had happened there, almost all of them were represented as very normal people.

An article in the *St Louis Post-Dispatch* in 1985 emphasised the differences in life for Vietnam veterans in the ten years following the war, pairing a prominent Los Angeles attorney with an unemployed ex-Marine, and John Kerry, newly elected senator, with “Gregory Jackson, 38, of Los Angeles…a crippled vet haunted by war memories.” While the article acknowledges that some veterans had made a successful return to civilian life, its emphasis, starting with the title “A Difficult Adjustment to Civilian Life,” is on the difficulties veterans had. For example it quotes unnamed “studies” as showing that “those who were in combat suffer higher arrest, divorce and jobless rates—and more psychological problems—than their contemporaries.” This kind of statement ignores the fact that some of these issues relate to not only the combat experience in Vietnam, but also the socio-economic class from which many of the draftees, in particular, were drawn, and to which most then returned. While one of these studies itself appears to acknowledge these subtleties as the article quotes it referring to race and ethnicity, in

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108 Associated Press, "USS Hue City/Navy to Name Ship for Vietnam Battle."
110 "Bittersweet Memories – A Vietnam Reunion."
112 Ibid.
addition to combat levels, as correlating to employment and financial difficulties, this is unremarked upon in the rest of the article.

In the discourse of the troubled Vietnam veteran, the issues of race, education and socio-economic class are not often raised. In the television special discussed above, one veteran went as far as claiming that "There was no such thing as colour in Vietnam."113 Similarly, the problems that combat veterans had on readjusting to civilian life following previous wars is not discussed. A proportion of veterans suffered psychological trauma following every war and had difficulty taking up "normal" life. These articles generally do not refer to the many victims of "shell-shock" post World War I or the similarly psychologically damaged veterans of other conflicts, nor do they question how the education levels and socio-economic class of the majority of Vietnam veterans impacted on their re-adjustment. Similarly, they do not tend to focus on the many Vietnam veterans who returned to civilian life without difficulty. The reason that this trope of the damaged Vietnam veteran was so strong within the news media and reoccurred in a number of films and television programs114 was because it was a politically useful concept for both sides of politics. For left-wing arguments it was important to see the cause of Vietnam veteran dysfunction as being the war itself, furthering the argument about the bad-ness of the war and its impact on individuals. For conservatives, in contrast, the dysfunction was caused by the lack of recognition and devaluing of veterans following the war. This helped to further the argument for the rehabilitation of conceptions of the conflict. Thus for both sides of discourse about the war, the trope of the damaged veteran is present and useful, but, like many issues with respect to the Sixties, the meaning of the trope is different.

An article in *The New Republic* in 1986 highlights the way that this trope of the Vietnam veteran was being used politically by conservatives during the 1980s. It argues that,

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113 "Bittersweet Memories – A Vietnam Reunion." Interestingly, this view contrasts with the depictions within a number of the Vietnam films I am considering.

114 See for example *First Blood* (1982).
[i]f ever there was a group persuaded by ideologues that it could blame its problems on society, it is Vietnam veterans. Only this time it is conservative ideologues who have joined with the usual legions of media hypesters and “caring professionals” to encourage brooding self-pity.115

The article goes on to say,

[y]et you don’t hear conservatives suggesting that “liberal guilt” has created a “vet culture” of dependency and irresponsibility, because this culture serves their ideological purpose. The vets grievance (nobody appreciates them) bolsters the conservative grievance (nobody appreciates the war).116

The article points out the link between the perceptions of the war and the perceptions of veterans that I point to above. It notes that “[t]hose who insist on nothing less than full retroactive support for the war is a dishonour to veterans are the ones denying them their full due.”117 According to the author of the article, it is useful to depict veterans as unjustly denied, in order to attempt to influence the way that the public thinks about them, and by extension, about the war. This demonstrates the use of the trope by the conservatives to further their political agenda. The conservative rehabilitation project can show veterans as disadvantaged, but wants them depicted as undeservedly so. These representations show protesters demonising soldiers on their return, and criticise their actions. If these protesters were wrong about soldiers, were they, by extension, wrong about the war itself? Jerry Lembcke explores how the demonisation of returning soldiers by protesters is itself a mythic construction, in particular the idea that veterans were spat on. He notes the importance of this image in the lead up to the Gulf War as a way of bolstering support for the troops.118 He also notes that German fascists used the very same rumour between World Wars I and II to “arouse anger towards groups and

116 Ibid.
117 Ibid.
individuals who had opposed the war." This vilification of protesters and their motives was a way of subverting the arguments from the left about Vietnam.

The story of Agent Orange was another key presence in discussions about Vietnam. The ideological constructions of the position of veterans had an affect on the fight for recognition of and compensation for the health problems of veterans relating to its use during the war. In particular, the left wing notions of veterans as symbolic of the dysfunction or even the sickness of the war influenced the construction of the story of Agent Orange as damage caused to soldiers by their own side. By 1983, “top Reagan Administration public health officials” were testifying to House subcommittees that increasing evidence linked dioxins to cancers in humans, although they said that the evidence was still not conclusive and that more research was needed. In May 1984 a major class action law suit on behalf of Vietnam veterans affected by Agent Orange against Dow Chemicals and the Government, amongst others, went to trial. A settlement was “tentatively” approved in September 1984 and by May the following year the Government had won a ruling that it did not have to contribute to the $180 million settlement fund. The issue was reopened in 1993 when the Government extended disability benefits to veterans with a increased range of cancers and veterans sought to challenge the 1984 settlement. The damaging impact of the war on the veterans was emphasised in the story of Agent Orange which also highlighted the culpability of the Government in damaging these soldiers.

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119 Ibid., p2.
121 Ibid.
127 Note that it was the Clinton Presidency which extended disability benefits to those suffering the impact of Agent Orange, in line with the left/right discourse of the impact of the war.
128 An episode of Twenty/Twenty in 1986 featured the story of the Zumwalts. Admiral Zumwalt was in charge of the navy in Vietnam and ordered the spraying of Agent Orange in areas where navy swift boats were operating. His son Elmo, served on swift boats and as a result of exposure to Agent Orange his son Russell has mental dysfunction and found himself diagnosed with cancer in 1983. The Admiral
Agent Orange was then seen as the touchstone for Gulf War Syndrome when it first began to be discussed by the media. Like many other aspects of the Gulf War of 1991, as I will discuss shortly, the impact of chemicals on soldiers went directly to Vietnam for its reference point.

Sturken notes that (by 1997),

[i]ronically, both the Vietnam veteran and the person with AIDS have become appealing figures. In the memorializing of the war, many people (such as the actors and directors of Hollywood films about the Vietnam War) have proclaimed themselves to have veteran status, and the once-maligned Vietnam veterans have been rewritten as repositories of special wisdom.

This indicates the success of the project of rehabilitation of the veteran during the Reagan-Bush era. While the figure of the troubled vet is still recognisable in media representation in 2009, there is no longer any automatic negative in Vietnam service. This can particularly be seen when the position as a Vietnam veteran/hero was a central component of the Presidential campaigns of John Kerry (2004) and John McCain (2008).

The final issue around the depiction of veterans was not so much about those who had returned from Vietnam, but rather those who had not. Article after article about soldiers who were listed as “missing-in-action” (MIAs) was published during the 1980s, many reporting on talks between the US and Vietnam regarding MIAs, some reporting on nonetheless thinks that the use of Agent Orange, on balance, saved the lives of US servicemen, despite the personal anguish. “By His Father’s Hands – The Zumwalts,” 20/20, ABC, 2/10/1986.


130 Sturken, Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering, p16.

the return of bodies and some just reflecting on the number still missing. There was also some discussion of the possibility that MIAs were actually being kept alive as prisoners-of-war by the Vietnamese government or in hiding in the countryside, as well as coverage of demonstrations seeking further Government action to gain the release of any MIAs being held as prisoners. The issue of normalising diplomatic relations with Vietnam was closely tied in political discourse to the issue of MIAs and it was not until 1993 that the US Government stated "as conclusively as anyone can" that there were no US prisoners of war being held in Vietnam. While the issue of MIAs was current prior to 1984, the appearance of films like Missing In Action (1984) and Rambo: First Blood Part II added to the debate, particularly around the idea that the Vietnamese may still be holding prisoners. In one article in The New York Times in 1987, a "key Senate aide" is quoted as saying that the "issue has taken on a sort of mythic character."

The aide goes on to note,

[w]hen Reagan was elected he took a strong profile in '81 that the P.O.W.-M.I.A. issue was not resolved – a view that he expressed even as Governor of California. And you had the spate of Rambo movies which perpetuated the idea that there are living Americans being held against their will there.


134 For example "Hanoi to Check MIA Sightings," Newsday, 16 February 1986; "U.S. POWs in Indochina a 'Strong Possibility'" Newsday, 1 October 1986; "Demanding Answers to the MIA Question," Newsday, 15 January 1986; and Jack Broom and Bill Dietrich, "Negotiate to Free Any POWs, Say Most in Poll," Seattle Times, 23 February 1986. Also discussed as a likely possibility on “Veterans’ Show.”


The myth of the MIAs was thus re-introduced strongly into discourse by Reagan and taken up in films that, particularly in the case of Rambo, had a significant box office impact. In so doing they reinforced this notion and made it more important politically. This idea that MIAs might remain alive in Vietnam was also grasped by families of the missing who clung to some hope of seeing their relative alive, further reinforcing its strength as an idea. The Senate aide, for example, is also quoted as saying that “no member of congress would ever deny the possibility that...Americans are being held in Vietnam [b]ut few actually believe it.” Thus the myth continued until put to rest in 1993 by President Clinton’s declaration that there were no Americans left alive in Vietnam and the subsequent normalisation of diplomatic and economic relations between the two countries.

**Foreign policy and Vietnam**

The relationship with Vietnam and its neighbours was not the only US foreign policy which was driven by and related to the war. During the 1980s and early 1990s a number of international conflicts in which armed forces of the United States participated in some form or another occurred. And when US troops went overseas, comparisons with or references to Vietnam quickly followed. I am not so much interested in the extent to which the Vietnam War actually impacted on the decision-making process about international deployment, though it is sure to have done so to some extent. What I am interested in is the frequency with which Vietnam appeared in reports on and discussions of US involvement in other conflicts. In examining references to Vietnam in discussions of other conflicts I can demonstrate how the war influenced those discussions.

Throughout the period I am examining, the US involved itself in a range of external conflicts, particularly in the Middle East and Central America. None could be considered

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139 Ibid.
140 For example, see David Halberstam’s discussion re General McPeak, airforce chief of staff in the Bush-Clinton era pp40-41 (David Halberstam, *War In A Time of Peace: Bush, Clinton and the Generals*, (London: Bloomsbury, 2001) ). Halberstam notes that “[m]any of the army people, [McPeak] felt, had returned from the [Vietnam] war deeply hurt, almost emotionally wounded....If the president wanted to do something in a place like Bosnia where war crimes were taking place, McPeak had come to believe, then he had a right to try. But among the army people, particularly those involved in Vietnam, he sensed a need to talk him out of it.” Here Halberstam associates the impact of Vietnam on the army with the decision making process regarding foreign troop deployment.
on the same level as the Vietnam conflict—even the Gulf War of 1990-1991 was limited in its aims and duration. Nonetheless, at some point in the coverage of most of these extra-territorial military engagements, Vietnam was referred to and comparisons made.

One of the areas in which comparison with Vietnam most frequently occurred was with respect to US activities in Central America during the 1980s. The US support for the government in El Salvador and the provision of arms to the anti-government contra fighters in Nicaragua both led to a number of comparisons with Vietnam. A PBS documentary from 1981 was entitled El Salvador: Another Vietnam? In 1983 Anthony Lewis, writing in The New York Times, called decisions about Central America policy “[I]t the most fateful foreign policy choice since Vietnam.” Writing about Nicaragua he noted the “clumsy covert war being waged against the Sandinist Government of Nicaragua” and asked whether “our political system [will] work this time to avoid disaster?” In his argument Vietnam was a “disaster” and the question was whether a greater level of public knowledge about the activities in Central America, and Nicaragua in particular, would ensure that the government was more responsible.

Later that year The New York Times reported that “senior generals of the United States Army say they oppose any American military intervention in Central America without the clear, unequivocal support of Congress and the people.” While this would seem a sensible principle on its own, the article associates the concept with Vietnam, reporting,

> [a]ll these generals, and many more who gave their views but did not want to be identified, served in Vietnam and their attitude reflects the scars the Vietnam experience left on the Army.\(^{143}\)

The article reflects on the idea that Central American involvement would be messy and may not have the support of the local people. This meant a military approach might not be ideal, despite the concern about the number of “Soviet-supported Communist

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141 Anthony Lewis, "Road to Disaster," The New York Times, 10 April 1983.
142 Ibid.
Governments in this hemisphere. The article thus links the tropes of Vietnam—lack of support of the local people, lack of clear military goals and lack of support of the US people—with any potential intervention in Central America. Other articles also clearly linked the conflicts by discussing the rhetoric around communism present in both situations and the role of military commanders.

The Vietnamese government itself made the comparison with the situation in Nicaragua, with one report from 1983 noting that, while visiting Managua, Vietnam’s Foreign Minister said “North American intervention in Nicaragua could lead to many Vietnams.” This statement is construed within the article as meaning that intervention “could lead to a conflict similar to the Vietnam War.” This comparison makes it clear that there are underlying tropes about Vietnam, which the report does not need to mention. The reading audience already understands and accepts that a comparison with Vietnam means a number of things, including that the conflict would be highly political, dangerous, unpopular, potentially unjust, damaging to soldiers and unlikely to lead to victory. How precisely each reader understands the trope being used depends on their individual experience, beliefs and knowledge, but these concepts are some of the central ideas in the Vietnam trope.

When the House voted against aid to the contra rebels in Nicaragua, the issue was “described as one of the most important foreign-aid votes since the Tonkin Gulf (sic) resolution that escalated U.S. participation in the Vietnam War.” This close association implies a comparison with the Vietnam War and the idea that such a move could have the same kind of results as the Tonkin Bay resolution of 1964. This was made explicit by the House Speaker Thomas O’Neill who is reported as saying that “the aid package

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144 Ibid.
148 Ibid.
eventually would involve U.S. troops in a prolonged war in Central America." \(^{150}\) By then referring to "a quagmire down there, those hills and mountains" \(^{151}\) O'Neill further reinforces the Vietnam comparisons, indicating the difficulties of fighting a war in such conditions, linking with another trope of Vietnam. It was also noted that the Reagan administration, in seeking support for its aid package, "raised arguments rarely heard since the divisive days when opposition to the Vietnam War was equated with lack of patriotism," \(^{152}\) in particular that not supporting it was akin to supporting communism. \(^{153}\) This again refers directly to tropes of Vietnam and, in so doing, puts the debate into a particular context.

The Gulf War of 1990-1991, as the first major engagement of US troops since Vietnam, inevitably attracted endless comparisons with that conflict. As Owen Gilman, writing in 1991, noted,

[the specter of Vietnam was evident throughout the Persian Gulf crisis of 1990-91, even at the conclusion of the 100-hour ground war, even at the moment when the United States and its allies claimed victory over Iraq. Even in victory, President Bush was compelled to deliver a funeral oration for the doubts sown by the earlier war. \(^{154}\)

In examining articles about the Gulf War, it is impressive how many different ways comparisons with the Vietnam conflict are drawn, even though the premise of the wars were so very different. These included comparisons to the size of the troop build up \(^{155}\)

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\(^{150}\) Ibid.
\(^{151}\) Ibid.
\(^{153}\) Ibid, and "House Turns Down Aid to Contras - 222-210 Vote Rejects Reagan Plan."
and the making of direct references to Vietnam, including through the interviewing of Vietnam veterans about their thoughts on the war. Following on from this, opposition to the war, and, in particular, protests against it were again linked repeatedly to Vietnam. Many of these articles made it appear that there had been few, if any, peace protests in the intervening years with one article stating that “speakers harangued the protesters with themes familiar from the Vietnam days” and quotes one protester, “a veteran of the last [Vietnam] big protests” as saying “It’s like it’s the Sixties all over again.” Much of the protest was linked directly to Vietnam and the participation of Vietnam veterans was emphasised. These references to the Vietnam War, and, in particular, the participation of baby boomers and/or Vietnam era participants, served to reinforce the idea that the most important and significant of anti-war protests occurred during the Sixties and that nothing since then was in any way equivalent. This, in turn, reinforces the idea that the generation after the baby boomers was apathetic in comparison. Articles like “90’s Teen-Agers Echo 60’s Spirit” express

the World to the Gulf,” St Petersburg Times, 8 August 1990 it is noted that B-52 bombers might be used “something that hasn’t been done since the Vietnam War”. “New Carrier Force Sets Sail to Join Buildup in Gulf/Navy Says Departing Flotilla Is Biggest since Early Stages of Vietnam War,” San Francisco Chronicle, 29 December 1990 obviously reports on the size of the naval presence and makes the comparison with Vietnam.

156 Reuters, "At Viet Memorial, Visitors Express Fear of Another Conflict."
159 Ibid.
surprise that the young people of the 1980s and 1990s may be willing to take a stand about anything. The article begins, rather patronisingly, "They may not be a second Woodstock generation, but high school students nationwide are proving they're not the quiescent group that many assume." Naturally, according to the article "while today's students are more politically active than their recent predecessors, Professor Astin does not liken them to the famously anti-establishment generation of the 60's." This reinforces a significant trope of the Sixties, the idea that young people during that period were more radical as a generation. It is this over-simplification of the Sixties, a part of the creation of tropes, that Lyons argues against. As he points out, in additional to protestors and GIs during the Vietnam period there was

also a probably larger group of mostly white, middle-class, suburban youth who cultivated their own gardens, dated, played sports, married, pursued careers, worried about insurance, thrilled to the Apollo moon landing and were the generational component of what Richard Nixon proclaimed "the great silent majority." In pointing this out, I do not wish to argue that the trope is completely wrong, rather I note that what is occurring in the comparisons of the Gulf War protests (or any protests, in fact) and protests against Vietnam in the Sixties is that tropes of the period are being utilised rather than it being a straightforward historical discussion.

Another area of comparisons was discussions about the likely media coverage of the conflict. Here similarities to the power and role of the media during the Vietnam War are raised. In one article a direct comparison between President Johnson's justification for the escalation of the Vietnam War, the attack in the Gulf of Tonkin, is compared to President Bush's justification for sending the army to Saudi Arabia—that the Iraqi army

162 Ibid.
was “massed along Kuwait’s border with Saudi Arabia, poised to invade it.”

It notes that in both cases there were “no reporters to verify or challenge” the claims, and, that in the case of the current conflict, “the U.S. networks seemed to accept it as fact.” Given the doubt that had been thrown on the Tonkin incident since the Vietnam War, by linking the two events so closely, the article was attempting to throw doubt on the legitimacy of the US actions. The article goes on to point out the importance of media support to ensure the support for the war, noting that following Walter Cronkite’s announcement on the news that the US could not win the war in Vietnam, “public support for the war dropped to its lowest ebb.” This reflects another important trope of the Vietnam War; the importance of the media and television in particular to how the war was perceived at home.

The trope is take up in an article in *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* about the likely impact of the media and given a bit of a shake. While it notes that “images of battlefield carnage televised live via satellite will make Vietnam war coverage seem subdued,” it goes on to state,

> [b]ut that particular history lesson has gotten muddled. It is widely believed that the sheer horror of nightly scenes of death and suffering turned Americans against the Vietnam War. But there is no evidence for this. Opposition rose along with the body count, but at a slower rate than occurred during the Korean War in the absence of television coverage.

The crucial media impact occurred only after the Tet offensive in 1968, when journalists began excoriating the Johnson administration’s war effort and calling for an American withdrawal. In the next few weeks, polls showed, one American in six shifted from the “hawk” to the “dove” column.

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165 Ibid.

Thus, while the article notes that the impact of the media on public opinion about a war can be significant, it argues that some of the popularly held ideas about the impact of the television on the Vietnam War cannot be sustained. Television coverage ended up playing a very significant role in the Gulf War. It was tightly orchestrated and managed by the US military creating what Kellner has called, “another great movie…to boost Bush I’s popularity and save his presidency – the Persian Gulf TV War – a cinematic spectacle of the highest order.” This led to further cooperation between the media and the military resulting in such approaches as the “embedding” of journalists within military units during the first phase of the Iraq War in 2003. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to discuss the issue of the media and the Gulf War in greater depth, however, what is relevant is the fact that despite the difficulties in maintaining a real connection between the Vietnam War and the Gulf War, the comparison continued to be made.

While attempting to gather political and public support for the Gulf War, the Bush administration was careful to stress that it would not be like Vietnam. Concerns were raised that the Congressional approval sought by Bush would “give the administration a “blank check” similar to the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, which permitted President Lyndon Johnson to carry on the Vietnam War without further approval from Congress.” Again here we see the importance of Vietnam to consideration of any other conflict—for those who support the war it will be the opposite of Vietnam, while those against it clearly attempted to link the war with what happened in Vietnam. It is interesting to note that in his rhetoric, Bush returned to World War II, which in public discourse is seen as an indisputably just war, for his rhetorical comparisons, comparing

Saddam Hussein to Hitler. This shows the need to separate the conflict from that of Vietnam to maintain its saleability with the general public.

Following the Gulf conflict, which did turn out to be quick and decisive, the Vietnam War comparisons were even more repeatedly made, however, in this case pointing out the differences. Article titles like “The End of the ‘Vietnam Syndrome,’” “The Gulf War’s Aftermath: Is the Vietnam Syndrome Dead? Happily It’s Buried In the Gulf” and “Victory erases America’s post-Vietnam blues” linked the two wars. The Gulf War was thus seen as a way of moving past what had happened in Vietnam. President Bush is quoted as saying “By God, we’ve kicked this Vietnam syndrome” while another Republican is reported as saying, “We’ve been living with the Vietnam syndrome for so long, and this war brings back the imagery of World War II.” Note here that this idea of the importance of the “imagery.” For conservatives in the US, moving past the imagery of Vietnam was an important project of the 1980s and early 1990s.

The other significant post-Gulf War comparisons which were made related to the welcome home given to the troops, utilising the trope around the lack of welcome for Vietnam veterans. Again this provided an opportunity to depict those who failed to welcome home servicemen and women after Vietnam as wrong and continued the rehabilitation of the Vietnam veteran. Articles highlighted the difference between the two returns with one quoting a Vietnam veteran who had come to welcome the troops:

175 Chen and Richter, "The End of the "Vietnam Syndrome"/ Gulf War Veterans Say It Feels Good to Be a Soldier."
176 Ibid.

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"When we landed here at Travis, protestors threw eggs and bricks at the bus as we went by," Montgomery said. "It took me until 1985 to come out and say, "I am a Vietnam vet." You just got tired of people labeling you as a baby killer." Other articles reflected the same idea with another Vietnam veteran saying "What did we get? Spit in the face, and called ‘baby killer’ and everything else you can possibly think of."

In Atlanta, an article reported that "those who attended also turned their attention to the veterans of the Vietnam War." This kind of clear linkage between the welcome received by the returning Gulf troops and that which was received by Vietnam veterans, serves to both reinforce the original trope and create the idea that this "successful" war meant that the legacy of Vietnam could now be put in the past.

**Representation**

The strongest aspect of the representations of Vietnam during the Reagan-Bush era is that Vietnam was a problem, a difficulty which needed to be overcome. It is clear then that during the 1980s and early 1990s much of the way that conservative representations were constructed was to try and overcome this blockage in the American psyche and move forward. It is interesting to note that a number of articles showed that this was being achieved to some extent, at least within the terms of discourse, with small things like the renewed popularity of GI Joes and military toys, and renewed interest in military schools and the ROTC program at college. A view that Vietnam veterans had been hard done by prevailed and the idea that they were disturbed was one which remained, but did recede somewhat over the decade. The memorialising of Vietnam, followed by the short duration of the Gulf War in 1990-1991, was viewed by many as ways of moving

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178 Kim Christensen and Jeffrey Brody, "Welcome They Didn’t Get Still Haunts Vietnam Vets," The Orange County Register, 1 March 1991.
past Vietnam, even though it should be noted that the original views of Vietnam remain strong. I would argue that given the central importance of the Vietnam War to the baby boom generation, while people who experienced the Sixties remain in control of political and cultural debates, it is unlikely that the conflict will be put to rest. Beyond that it is possible that Vietnam will survive in comparisons given the strength of the tropes which surround it, particularly in relation to military misadventure, political protest and the treatment of returned soldiers.

**Representation and Vietnam films**

In the early 1990s, Michael Anderegg wrote,

> [a]s the Vietnam War continued to be a living part of the political, social, and cultural life of the decades following its official end, the films about the war could contribute multiple voices to the ongoing conversation. From this vantage point, it becomes clear that Vietnam films were not merely retrospective; rather they became and continue to be barometers of current attitudes.\(^{182}\)

This thesis is examining the idea that films about the Sixties made in the 1980s and 1990s were affected in their representations of the past by the needs of the time at which they were made. In some ways I agree with Anderegg, that the Vietnam films of the Reagan-Bush era do provide a barometer of attitudes during the period. But, I would also argue, that is not a simple juxtaposition. As I hope I have illuminated above, there were many competing perspectives about the Vietnam War during the 1980s and early 1990s. Similarly as my discussion of the films shows, while there are similarities between the films I am examining, they do not provide a simple coherent perspective on the Vietnam War. As Desser notes,

> [i]f we take these films [Vietnam films between 1978 and 1991] as a group, we find contradictions and ambiguities throughout, while many individual works are

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similarly conflicted in what they are trying to say about the Vietnam War and America's involvement in it.\footnote{Desser, ""Charlie Don't Surf": Race and Culture in the Vietnam War Films," p81.}

Nonetheless, in this final section of the chapter I will examine the relationship between the ideas and themes within the films and the manner in which Vietnam was discussed in the broader media. This will help to determine to what extent Anderegg's statement above can be conceded.

By the beginning of the Reagan years, the US had commenced the project of memorialising Vietnam as I have discussed at length. It is perhaps notable then that the first wave of Vietnam films came in 1978-79 (and are credited with inspiring the project of the national Vietnam Veterans Memorial) and that the next significant cluster came in the mid-late 1980s. By the late 1980s, the idea of memorialising Vietnam had become respectable: the Vietnam Veterans War Memorial had been completed and the controversy surrounding it had receded; there were projects across the country building memorials large and small; "welcome home" parades had been held. Sturken notes that the "1980s and 1990s have witnessed a repackaging of the 1960s and the Vietnam War" and that the process of memorialising, and, in particular, the construction of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, has "played a significant role in the rehistoricization of the Vietnam War."\footnote{Sturken, Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering, p45.} Some of the Vietnam War films from the period of the late 1980s can be viewed as part of this project of memorialising and rehistoricization: \textit{Hamburger Hill}, in particular, makes direct reference to this project by featuring the Vietnam Veterans Memorial during its opening credits sequence. The films make visible what has been left unseen in the interim by featuring the war and providing a basis for further debate and discussion.

Coupled with the process of memorialising were the twin rehabilitation projects: rehabilitation of the veteran and rehabilitation of the war itself. With respect to the veterans, it must be said that the films seem to present very mixed ideas. In most of them
we see the veteran, or the in-country soldiers, as damaged people, physically and psychologically broken by what they have encountered. However, unlike the crazed veteran depictions of television during the 1970s, we are provided a context and a rationale for this damage. The combat films show the soldiers faced with moral questions (in particular *Full Metal Jacket*, *Platoon*, *Casualties of War* and *Born on the Fourth of July*) where the answers are not easy, simple or clean; they show severe fighting with constant pain and death (*Hamburger Hill*, *Full Metal Jacket*, *Platoon*, *Birdy*). At the same time as doing this, some show, generally in a manner sympathetic to the veteran, the treatment that veterans received on their return—from the military, from the government and from other people. It is interesting that the contradictions are not dwelt upon (Ron Kovic is literally a baby killer and many of the soldiers are rapists, the thing veterans complain about being accused of on their return) and the soldiers (and civilian pilots in the case of *Air America*) are often shown to be slightly insane, drug smoking and anti-social. What is generally achieved through the films, however, is the presentation of an argument in favour of understanding for veterans—these men (for they are all men in the films) served in terrible circumstances, often without understanding what they were really fighting for, and then were treated badly on their return. This approach to representation makes those who have served in Vietnam inherently more sympathetic by allowing the audience to empathise with their position. This is clearly in line with the dominant media and political representations and during the 1980s and early 1990s and the attempt to change perceptions of Vietnam veterans.

The rehabilitation of the war, and through it America’s approach to foreign policy and the military, is less evident. A film like *Air America* condemns US military action in foreign countries and, like much of the newspaper discourse of the Reagan-Bush era, explicitly ties the military adventurism in Vietnam with activities in the 1980s in Central America. Distrust of military command and the government is a theme throughout many of the films. Even the way that military uniforms and paraphernalia are utilised in the films signals an undercurrent of questioning of the institution. This reflects the constant unease in wider discourse with respect to foreign interventions that was evident throughout the 1980s. It is perhaps significant that the film which demonstrates the least discomfort with
the war, *Forrest Gump*, was made after the 1990-1991 Gulf War which, the reportage around it declared, broke the Vietnam hoodoo.

This mistrust of Vietnam and the concerns about military adventurism can also be seen in the motif of lost innocence which appears in a number of the films. As Sturken argues,

> [t]he United States is scripted through these characters [the noble grunt soldiers] as losing its innocence—an innocence apparently regained after having been lost in the Kennedy assassination, an innocence to be mourned again with Watergate, Iran-Contra, and the Oklahoma City bombing. If the grunt soldier is innocent at the war’s outset, then the American public can identify through him with a sense of betrayal—we didn’t know, we believed. Yet the Vietnam War films provide a context in which battles fought over the war are reenacted within the war itself.\(^{185}\)

As Sturken points out here, the American public maintains its identification with innocence and innocence lost. This goes to the unease and lack of trust demonstrated in the news media around the idea of any US military activities overseas that was evident during the 1980s and even in the early 1990s, although mitigated to some respect by the success of the Gulf War.

It is notable that with the exception of *Flight of the Intruder*, the films do not seem to accord with the notion that the war was lost because of decisions by the civilian government. Rather, the nihilism within most of the films indicates that the war was never likely to be won, that its pointlessness made military victory unlikely. The media and political discussion of the 1980s and early 1990s picks this up to some extent where calls are made for clearly defined aims in any war the US intends to engage in. The nihilism within the films is quite distinct from the manner in which most war films approach the issue of the war. The Vietnam films made during the Reagan-Bush era focused on the pointless of the war in a manner which was unusual, particularly when compared to films set in World War II. More recently, two films about the Gulf War of

\(^{185}\) *ibid.*, p104.
1990-1991 have also utilised a more nihilistic view of the purpose of war. These films, *Jarhead* (2005) and *Three Kings* (1995), however, have not translated this view into the tragic mode that is evident within the majority of the Vietnam films, but have rather taken an absurdist-comic approach. This reflects the difference in media and popular attitudes to the conflict—the brief Gulf conflict does not resonate with the same level of national angst since it was a short war in which the US was quickly victorious.

Just as the films barely focus on the Vietnamese, so too was there minimal focus on the Vietnamese or the impact of the war on them in broader representations during the Reagan-Bush era. While there are some departures from this, overall, discussion of the pain and suffering caused by the Vietnam War in the 1980s and early 1990s squarely focused on the US itself. Like in the Vietnam films, the war appears to be an internal one, with only a shadowy enemy. Nonetheless, the media and political debates during the Reagan-Bush era showed an ongoing mistrust of the Vietnamese, particularly over the issue of MIAs, and an unwillingness to restore diplomatic relations. This was not an issue for the films in general, with the Vietnamese virtually non-existent. There are cases where they are depicted as untrustworthy or immoral, but this was rarely a significant focus.

Despite the preponderance of linkages in media representation of protests in the 1980s and 1990s with the Vietnam period, very few films actually feature protests in any significant manner. There are discussions, however, about the actions and activities of protesters, particularly in *Hamburger Hill*. As Lembcke points out, these can be seen as part of the project of rehabilitating the war. He notes that,

> [t]he myth of the spat-upon veteran functions...by providing an alibi for why the most powerful and righteous nation on earth (as America perceives itself to be) lost the war to an underdeveloped Asian nation. The myth says, in effect, that we were not beaten by the Vietnamese but were defeated on the home front by fifth columnists.\(^\text{186}\)

While this accords with the arguments from Noonan and Reagan himself, the fact that this theme does not recur more strongly within the films reflects the nihilism within their depictions, and the distance between the positions of most of the filmmakers and the ruling elites in this area.

Similarly, the films I am examining do not deal with the idea of MIAs at all. This however should not be seen as a hole in the cinematic depictions of the Vietnam experience—the films I am explicitly not dealing with like Rambo, deal with the issue in a strongly gung-ho manner. Missing, however, from the broad scope of Vietnam films is the depiction of what would appear to have been the growing reality of MIAs during the Reagan-Bush period, that they really were not coming back.

In general, the films try to rehabilitate the veteran and create a trope around the loss of innocence in Vietnam. If we go back to the discussion of the depiction of sex, that trope of the innocence of the pre-Vietnam days is already evident. Many of the ideas in the films matched the popular representations of Vietnam during the 1980s and early 1990s, but it would be a mistake to argue that it was a one-to-one match. There was not a close and simplistic relationship between the discourse of the Reagan-Bush period and the films made at the time which represent the war. As I have argued consistently, the films do not create a coherent and consistent picture, and neither did other representations present a totally coherent approach. However, I think it is possible to say in a qualified way, that, during the Reagan-Bush era, Vietnam films did present a barometer of the attitudes towards not only that conflict but also its wider ramifications. In general all representations did try to rehabilitate the depictions of veterans and did try to contextualise their war experience. The big difference is that conservative political representations did not accept the nihilism and pointlessness of the war which grounded many of the films.

Here we see a clear example of the manner in which the present impacts on representations of the part. In particular, the relationship between the themes of the films
and the broader media and political representations show that the present did have an affect generally on the thematic directions of the films and their representation of the past, without wanting to oversimplify that relationship.

In the next chapter I will examine the way in which issues of civil rights were represented to determine whether the films I am examining contain a clear link to the 1980s and early 1990s.
Chapter 4 - Civil rights and race

One of the key changes of the Sixties was the advance in the legal civil rights of African-Americans. In 1964, the Civil Rights Act was passed which outlawed segregation in schools, public places and employment and created the Equal Opportunity Commission. In 1965, the Voting Rights Act was passed making it easier for Southern blacks to enroll to vote. The Civil Rights Act of 1968 prohibited discrimination in the sale, rental and financing of housing. While many of the changes wrought by the Sixties are contested, it is hard for anyone to argue that the granting of legal equality to black people was anything but positive, although many still argue about the positive and negatives of some of the changes that have flowed from this progress. Many of these debates continued in the Reagan-Bush era as affirmative action, which was first granted by President Johnson in 1965, and desegregation were regularly discussed in the media and were subjects of extensive political debate.

Given the central importance of race and civil rights in both periods, I want to examine how these issues are addressed within the films that I have identified. I will also discuss how this compares to the way that these issues were represented in the media more generally during the period. I will also consider the manner in which race and racial difference has been depicted in other films, both within and outside the period, to determine whether there are any distinct themes within the representations of the Sixties. This will provide me with the basis to consider the impact of the present on the representations of the past.

Sixties, race and civil rights

I this section of the chapter I will look at the manner in which black issues such as civil rights are depicted in the films, as well as the presence and roles played by black actors. After looking briefly at the absences within the films, I will discuss the manner in which a number of the films grapple with the civil rights movement. I also examine the way some of the films de emphasise race as opposed to other issues such as economics and
finally I will look at the range of depictions of black soldiers within the films set in Vietnam.

The first thing to note about the films that I am examining is the absences. There are no films about Martin Luther King or his movement. There are no films depicting the Freedom Rides. There are no films which focus on the Greensborough sit-ins. There are no films which focus on the riots in 1968. Despite the importance of these events in the civil rights movement and in African-American history, Hollywood during the Reagan-Bush era did not address them at all.

Not only do the films fail to address these major events of the Sixties, but most of them fail to address the issue of race at all. Of the 36 films, only eight feature a black actor in a major role\(^1\) and fourteen do not feature black characters at all. Not all these films are entirely Anglo-Celtic: the major characters in *Mermaids* and *Dirty Dancing* are Jewish and *Goodfellas* features primarily Italian-Americans.\(^2\) The depictions in *Goodfellas* fall into a very predictable route for the depiction of Italian-Americans with their focus on crime and the mafia, remaining within a safe zone of representation. Only one of the films features a major character who is Hispanic: *The Sandlot* where the character is Benjamin Franklin Rodriguez, a baseball playing kid admired by his friends and leader of their gang. The other depictions of Hispanics are through the very minor appearance of a Hispanic orderly in a medical facility in *The Right Stuff* and through the characters of the prostitutes in *Born on the Fourth of July* who have little or almost no individual characterisation and appear primarily to serve the needs of the white veterans. *Heaven and Earth* features a Vietnamese protagonist who fled to the US following the war, and deals to an extent with her adjustment to a life in the suburbs, but no other films show Asians in an American context. Overall the films focus on small-town white America and

\(^1\) The films with major black roles are: *What's Love Got to Do With It?*, *Malcolm X*, *Lean On Me*, *Flight of The Intruder*, *Good Morning Vietnam*, *Hamburger Hill*, *Hairspray* and *Love Field*. One film focused on the civil rights movement, *Mississippi Burning*, does not feature a major black character, which is one of the causes of criticism of it.

\(^2\) While *A Bronx Tale* similarly features mafia-based depictions of Italian-Americans, it also focuses on the relations between this community and the growing black community in the Bronx as I will discuss later in the chapter.
avoid issues of race and difference altogether. This is clear in films such as *Stand By Me* and *1969*, where race is ignored as these communities lack black neighbours.

### Civil Rights, prejudice and violence

Moving from the absences within the films to their representations, I will first examine the manner in which the issue of the fight for civil rights is represented. As I mention above, many of the major landmarks within the civil rights battle are not depicted directly\(^3\). There are a few mentions scattered within films. For example, in *Dirty Dancing*, Neil Kellerman, the (Jewish) grandson of the resort owner, tries to impress Baby by telling her that he is going to Mississippi for the Freedom Rides. In *JFK*, the footage shown on television immediately after the assassination shows a black woman crying and saying “he did so much in this country for coloured people.” Back at the Garrison house, the black housekeeper appears to be the member of the household most emotionally affected saying “he was a fine man.” These indications in *JFK* of Kennedy’s positive impact on the life of blacks is contrasted in *Love Field*. At two points in *Love Field*, the white Texan Lurene assumes that black people would be mourning Kennedy’s death in the same way she is, saying on both occasions that he “did so much for the Negro.” On the first instance, the black Paul Cater looks slightly sceptical, but politely says nothing, however on the second occasion, the black mechanic examining the car points to the shanty town where he lives and says “Does it look like he has done much here?” Cater and the mechanic do acknowledge that “some” blacks like Kennedy, but are overall sceptical about his impact on the conditions of black people. Thus these films show contrasting views of Kennedy. Within the logic of *JFK* it is consistent for Kennedy to be depicted as a heroic figure as this increases the impact of his assassination and emphasises the need to uncover the truth about his death. However, a film like *Love Field*, which focuses more directly on the treatment of black people, has a different motivation. It therefore provides a different perspective on the impact of Kennedy’s administration on black people, noting that, at the time of his death, particularly in the South, black people were still being treated with extremes of prejudice.

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\(^3\) There are also no depictions of Martin Luther King, except where archival footage is used to establish period etc.
Aside from these brief and passing references, there are three films which address the civil rights movements directly: *Mississippi Burning*, *Malcolm X* and *Hairspray*. These films are very different and approach the struggles around civil rights from very different perspectives. While *Mississippi Burning* and *Malcolm X* are serious films based on facts, *Hairspray* is a comedy-musical with a particular focus on segregation. As factually-based films, *Mississippi Burning* and *Malcolm X* have been targeted by a range of critical commentary, particularly around their factual accuracy. *Mississippi Burning*, in particular, has been widely criticised for a number of reasons.

*Mississippi Burning*, while set around very significant events in the history of the civil rights movement of the Sixties, is not really about the civil rights struggle itself. Rather, it is more of a generic, lone-crusader-against-evil, criminal investigation kind of film, which uses the events around the killings of civil rights activists in Mississippi in 1964 as its backdrop. The film is essentially the tale of two white men investigating the bad guys, other white men. It is telling, for example, that the advertising posters for the film showed the two white stars, Gene Hackman and Willem Defoe, and that the film is without a major black character. The other heroic figure within the film is Mrs Pell, the white wife of one of the deputies involved in the murders. The only black character who makes a significant appearance in the film is another FBI agent who is used to frighten the Mayor into revealing what he knows about the murder. A black preacher does give an impassioned, political speech at the funeral of the murdered black activist, but even during this speech we are shown Agent Alan Ward (Defoe) marching amongst the black mourners, with a cut away to the white murderers. This kind of overlay demonstrates how the focus of the film is the white characters, and the black community and struggle is there as background. This is one of the key criticisms of the film, that it shows the black characters as passive and makes it the story of white men.4

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Regardless of this criticism, the film does show some of the atrocities of the pre-civil rights period, depicting the harassment and murder of black people, the burning of homes and churches, the difficulty of prosecuting these crimes under state law in places like Mississippi and the distance between the ways in which white people and black people could live. The white people of Mississippi are generally portrayed as venal, crass and stupid, contrasting with the depiction of the noble black folk and the determined, intelligent and compassionate FBI investigators. As George Will writes “[m]ovies almost never miss an opportunity for missing an opportunity for fidelity and subtlety.”

With respect to fidelity, Mississippi Burning has been criticized repeatedly. The director of Mississippi Burning, Alan Parker, defended his approach to the film by saying,

I’m trying to reach an entire generation who knows nothing of that historical event, to cause them to react to it viscerally, emotionally, because of the racism that’s around them now. And that’s enough of a reason, a justification, for the fictionalizing.

Clearly Parker has attempted to turn the story into one which he believes will capture audiences and the hook he found was the FBI investigation. The representation of the FBI investigation, however, is a particular focal point of criticism, with many arguing that the FBI and Hoover, its head at the time, were against the civil rights movement. Passions were so strong about this film that there were even a series of letters to the editor of The

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7 Alan Parker, quoted in Will, "Mississippi Burning' Has Kernel of Truth."
8 For example see Sitkoff, "Mississippi Burning" and Toplin, Reel History: In Defense of Hollywood.
New York Times either denouncing or supporting the film, and particularly the depiction of the FBI.9

What is interesting here, for the purposes of this thesis, is not whether the film was accurate or not, but why did it matter so much? Why was there an impassioned debate about its perceived accuracy and inaccuracies? The film depicts the FBI as committed to finding the perpetrators of the murder and, in this way, being committed to civil rights. The film creates a reason for the civil rights movement: it shows violence and terror being perpetrated against black people and their supporters by ignorant and vicious white people. It also depicts a culture of complicity with respect to this kind of violence against black people and its institutionalised nature, given the involvement of law enforcement officers, the Mayor and even the local judiciary. Later in this chapter I will examine this question of why did it matter to those involved in the media and academia that this film said what it said and whether it should have or not. I will also try to put that question in the context of the way other issues of race were being discussed and represented in the media at the time.

Malcolm X also had its fair share of controversy. Some have argued that Spike Lee deliberately provoked some of that controversy in order to better sell his film, with stunts such as telling black teenagers they should miss school in order to see it and insisting that he would only be interviewed by black reporters.
Malcolm X is a very complex film if one tries to see it as a story of the civil rights movement. The film clearly depicts Southern racism, with the murder of Malcolm’s father by Klansmen and the institutionalising of his mother. His mother’s institutionalisation is shown to be a result of her defiant attitude to a the white social worker. When the social worker tells her that her children are delinquent and that Malcolm is a thief, Ms Little tells her to get out and threatens her if she does not leave. The social worker then tells her ominously that she will “regret this.”

Once in foster care, Malcolm is President of his class and an excellent student, but we see his teacher telling him that he is a “nigger” and that “a lawyer is not a realistic goal for a nigger.” Malcolm tells his black girlfriend that as a child he was “called nigger so often” that he thought it was normal. We also see Malcolm being told to call his supervisor on the train “Mr Cooper” rather than using his first name, and being called “boy” by a customer.

When Malcolm and his friend Shorty are convicted for burglary, his narration says that their crime was “sleeping with white girls” and for this reason they received a much heavier sentence than the two (white) women involved in the crime. He is treated badly on his arrival in prison but while he is called “boy” by the prison guards, it could be argued that it is his defiance that brings the treatment upon him, not his colour.

Despite these depictions of racism and the treatment of black people, overall, there is not a particularly strong emphasis on this as the cause for Malcolm’s problems, or his decision to become an activist. Within the film, while his blackness may effect on these decisions, they are framed as individual choices rather than structural imperatives. Many of Malcolm’s problems are shown to be caused by himself. He chooses a (morally questionable) white girlfriend over his more innocent black girlfriend, he has a job but instead chooses to get involved in crime and to start using drugs. These choices, not his blackness itself, are what lead him to prison. His colour may have an influence on the
sentence he receives, but it is his own choices that dictated his actions that lead him to get sentenced.

The message he receives in prison from Baines reinforces this concept that the black position in society is partly a matter of individual choice and that the choice of becoming a Muslim will help him break free from white oppression. The emphasis, particularly at this point in the film, is on the individual responsibility of black men, rather than the structural racism of the system. The idea is again raised with respect to Malcolm’s old associates, including Shorty and West Indian Archie. Their lives have disintegrated due to drugs and sex with white women. When Malcolm visits Archie, he is paralysed from a stroke and living in squalor and poverty. The contrast with the clean, neatly dressed Malcolm who comes to his assistance reinforces the idea that it is the individual choices of black people that lead to the situations they find themselves in. While Malcolm argues that white men control alcohol, drugs, gambling and oppression, it is up to blacks to avoid these temptations.

The film also depicts Malcolm as intelligent but naïve and persuadable. This is particularly evident when he is works as a hustler in Harlem and when he is influenced by Sophia, his white girlfriend. It is further emphasised when he is influenced by Baines and Elijah Muhammad. This persuadability is underlined by the reactions of his old friends when he writes to them to tell of Elijah Muhammad’s teachings—they laugh or think he is crazy. Malcolm preaches and teaches what he has learned strictly as it has been taught to him; he does not change or embellish, despite the fact that his intelligence allows him to challenge a white priest. The strong emphasis on white people as devils and the need for a separate nation in the speeches that Malcolm is depicted giving reinforces the impression of credulity. What is emphasised is not realistic solutions, but negative ideas and impossible dreams. We also see this naivety in his discussions with Betty, who shows a little more skepticism about some of the ideas he expresses, while Malcolm virtually parrots Elijah Muhammad word for word. This parroting is demonstrated cinematically through the cutting between Malcolm and Elijah Muhammad speaking the same words. His unquestioning devotion to the teachings of Elijah Muhammad eventually lead him
into problems and contradictions, and a sense of enormous betrayal when he discovers that Muhammad may be fallible, having engaged in sex with his young assistants and left them with babies. This disillusionment is reinforced when Malcolm is expelled from the Nation of Islam and his life is threatened.

While the film shows Malcolm becoming his own man at the end of the film with his own ideas, the majority of the film shows him as led by others, gullible and naïve. Interestingly, even when Malcolm acts to help Brother Johnson who has been imprisoned unjustly, the film gives the impression that it is only because he has been goaded into it by the taunting of others. The overall message of the film is a very mixed one and the end segment contradicts many of the ideas that have been introduced earlier in the film. If the Nation of Islam is corrupt, then are all its teachings about self sacrifice and self discipline wrong? After all, it is shown clearly that Elijah Muhammad himself has not lived according to these ideas. The film’s logic at other points does reinforce the idea of the individual taking responsibility for him or herself. Nation of Islam members, the film implies, are destructive and willing to use violence against their own members when they disagree with each other. Here is the inference that these movements sabotage themselves through in-fighting. The film leaves a confused impression as to the benefits of organisations like the Nation of Islam and their teachings. While Malcolm’s message at the end of the film is depicted with less equivocation, the component of the film devoted to this is very small. In a similar vein Davis and Davenport note that,

> [b]ecause the complex nature of Malcolm X ranges from a frightening advocate of hatred and violence to a heroic teacher of morality, self-respect, and courage, the ultimate impact of the film among African American viewers depends on which of the many themes will be internalized.12

The film is complex and it is not easy to determine any clear messages. Karen Ross also notes this, writing that “[o]nce again, Lee has made a film lacking in its development as a

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The clearest message is that racism and brutality are still present in American society and this comes through from the title sequence where we see the American flag burned away as it is counterpointed with the footage of Rodney King being beaten. The footage is presented while we hear a speech from Malcolm X in which he denounces white people and claims that black people are not Americans. He notes that black people have not experienced the American dream, only the "American nightmare." This title sequence links the notion of the American nightmare to the continued condition of black people in America (and I will discuss this further below), but also further confuses the political message of the film. The opening speech is from Malcolm X's Nation of Islam period, a period which by the end of the film Malcolm himself is questioning. By the end of the film he has changed his opinion and no longer sees all white people as bad. The use of the speech increases the impact of the opening sequence, particularly the juxtaposition of the accusation that the white man is the "greatest kidnapper on earth" with the scenes of the beating, and clearly ties the past with the present in which the representation was created. With this scene it appears that Lee is more interested in presenting an opening to the film which has maximum impact and shock value. Making this impact appears to be more important than ensuring that the opening is consistent with Malcolm X's ultimate position.

Overall, while Malcolm X does present the civil rights movement, it presents it from a very specific perspective which does not include the wider popular movement. It also provides a somewhat confused view of the rights and wrongs of the approach Malcolm X took to that movement.

In contrast to these two serious and controversial films about significant people and events in the history of the civil rights struggle is the film Hairspray. Hairspray is considered to be the first mainstream crossover film directed by John Waters who had a reputation for the grotesque and shocking. It remains something of a comic book movie, with caricatures rather than characters, and thus presents a significant contrast to

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13 Ross, Black and White Media: Black Images in Popular Film and Television, p69.
both *Malcolm X* and *Mississippi Burning*. However, it clearly presents and addresses issues of civil rights, in particular segregation. It also includes protests and by the end of the film there have been achievements made in the position of black people, however small.

Set in 1962-63, the story of *Hairspray* is of the character Tracy Turnblad whose dancing skills means she gets to join the “Council” of the Corny Collins music show, displacing the previously most popular, but evil, Amber von Tussle and also getting to “go steady” with Amber’s (former) boyfriend Link Larkin. Around this story, the issues of segregation and racism are highlighted from the beginning. In one of the opening scenes, Mrs Malinski, one of Tracy’s mother’s customers, calls Tracy and her friend Penny “delinquents” because “it ain’t right to be dancing on TV to that coloured music”. Amber’s parents who own the local amusement park complain that if they are forced to integrate it, they will go broke.

These initial pointers to the prevalent racism are then made more explicit when a black couple is refused entry to a “hop” which Corny Collins is holding because this is “a white venue.” Similarly, when a black girl, Nadine, who is clearly a good dancer, tries out for the Council at the same time as Tracy, she is asked if she is aware when the show’s “Negro Day” is, and she protests that she thinks the show should be integrated every day. She is asked whether she can relate to Leslie Gore’s music, and replies that she would be willing to dance to Lawrence Welk if she had to. Here music is being used as a definer of race—it is fine for white people to colonise the music of blacks, but it is seen, by some white people, as impossible that black people would enjoy the music of white people. Tellingly, the music of Leslie Gore is not so distant from that of black girl groups of the era, particularly as her music was produced by Quincy Jones, a black music producer. Lawrence Welk was a man who was nearly sixty in 1962 and whose music was conservative and focused mainly on polkas and novelty songs. By choosing him as a point of comparison, Nadine is trying to point out that her blackness should not automatically exclude her from a white musical world. At the same interview, Tracy is
asked whether she would swim in an integrated swimming pool, and she proudly says she
would and that she supports integration.

At school when Tracy is put into the special education class for having hair which is too
big, she complains to the principal that special education is for “retards and the black kids
you try to hold back.” Indeed, while the other classes appear to be populated by only
white students, the special education class does have a number of black students. The
implication here is that the school is integrating but only by marginalising the black
students. The principal is also shown as an unreasonable authority figure, reflecting the
general tone of the film toward those who resist or oppose segregation.

Arvin Hodgepile, the station manager who refuses to allow the Corny Collins show to
feature any black faces, is also shown as grotesque and unreasonable, along with the
von Tussles. Tracy befriends Seaweed, the son of Motormouth Mabel, a local (black)
radio personality, and a romance develops between him and Penny, Tracy’s best friend.
This leads Tracy, Penny and Link to venture into the black part of town, which is shown
as rundown and poor, to dance with the black kids. Penny’s overprotective mother
pursues them and is completely flustered by the black people she encounters, showing
extreme fear and confusion while the black people watching laugh at her foolishness. She
runs off screaming when a black policeman attempts to help her. Later she grabs Penny
off the street and has a “psychologist”, Dr Frederickson, use extreme measures to try and
convince her that negroes are bad. The extreme depictions of Penny’s mother, Arvin
Hodgepile and the von Tussle’s are used to underscore the ridiculous nature of this kind
of racism.

Later when Tracy brings Seaweed’s sister, L’il Inez to the show, L’il Inez, Penny and
Seaweed are stopped from going in. Penny asks the security guard if he is aware of the
supreme court ruling on segregation and they commence a noisy sit-in protest which is
joined by Tracy and Link. Corny tries to argue with Hodgepile that this would be an easy
way to begin integrating the show, but is told that “Baltimore is not ready for integrated
dancing” and the protest is broken up by police. Similarly at Corny’s big show at the
Hairspray does clearly highlight the racism around integration, and also the lengths to which some would resort in order to maintain the status quo. Unlike Mississippi Burning we see black people playing an active role in achieving advances for themselves, and unlike the majority of Malcolm X it is shown that white people can play a positive role in this process. While all the characters are caricatures, the extreme grotesqueness of those opposing integration reinforces the political position of the film.

Love Field, like Hairspray, is primarily fictional, and as such has not received the critical scrutiny encountered by Mississippi Burning and Malcolm X. This film, while not about the civil rights movement, presents a clear representation of the position of black people in the US during the early Sixties. In the film we see the white Lurene who works in a beauty parlour and is somewhat out of touch with the world, traveling from Dallas to Washington to see Kennedy’s funeral. She encounters the black Paul Cater and his daughter, Jonelle. Paul has taken his daughter from an institution where she had been placed after the death of her mother after he found evidence that Jonelle had been beaten.

The film represents the structural racism faced by blacks in the US in the early Sixties, particularly in the South, without overplaying the situation or turning to melodrama. Paul Cater is an educated, intelligent black man who understands he needs to negotiate his way through the system. As he has taken his daughter illegally, believing that he
would find it easier to fight for her custody once back in Philadelphia, he recognises the need to maintain a low profile and not antagonise white police officers. Lurene is shown as an innocent, without any conscious prejudice, but nonetheless displaying the internalised racism that the structure of society has created within her. She is as happy to talk to Paul and his daughter as she is to talk to anyone else on the bus, but when she introduces herself it is as “Mrs Hallett,” adding an instinctive level of formality. While she unselfconsciously talks to Paul, we are shown both white and black people looking at them disapprovingly.

In the film we see Paul sitting at the back of the bus and accepting being addressed as “boy” by a Deputy. When providing an account of an accident he has witnessed, it is clear that the Sherriff treats his witness statement with scepticism and treats him more like a suspect than a witness. Later when Paul and Lurene are traveling together by car he is told by a black mechanic they consult that she should ride in the back traveling around this area. When the car breaks down on a quiet country back road, Lurene flags down a passing motorist. The driver and his son show their disapproval of their travelling together and later return with a friend to beat Paul.

In discussing his life with Lurene, Paul indicates that one of the reasons he did not end up marrying his daughter’s mother is because his mind was elsewhere, on training as a pharmacist in the armed services. Here the army is presented a valid way for a black man to gain an education and a profession. In contrast to this, we are shown the poverty of many black people in the country who have not found a way to escape prejudice. The black mechanic, for example, lives in a shanty town.

While the police are not represented as evil as they are in *Mississippi Burning*, they are shown as bigoted in a very ordinary way. This mundane bigotry disenfranchises and belittles black people. The sheriffs and deputies encountered in the South refer to blacks as “niggers” and “boy” and fail to treat them with fairness. An interesting contrast in the film is presented when Paul and Lurene are in Washington and are stopped by a black policeman. He does not automatically view them with suspicion or treat Paul
Pointless racism and resulting violence are also a key component of *A Bronx Tale*. Set in an Italian neighbourhood of the Bronx, it depicts the reactions of some young gangster-wannabes to what they see as the encroachment of blacks on their territory. While Calogero, the central character, tries to ignore the racist attitudes of his friends and starts a romantic relationship with a black girl, his friends engage in escalating violence towards the nearby black neighbourhood. This violence ultimately ends badly for Calogero’s friends who are killed when a home-made gas bottle bomb blows up in the back seat of their car. Calogero’s relationship, conversely, is depicted positively as a step towards understanding.

**Is race an issue? Economic independence, music and other encounters**

*Lean on Me* opens in 1967 and then shifts to the 1980s. It picks up on the themes of school segregation that are featured in passing in *Hairspray*, as well as the idea of drugs and criminality as the causes of black oppression in *Malcolm X*. In 1967 Eastside High is an orderly school with well-behaved students interested in learning. The majority of these students are white. “Twenty years later” the school is mostly black and full of violence and drugs. Joe Clark in 1967 is a black teacher who inspires his students and teaches them that racism is a stain on America. He is also an agitator who starts union involvement in the school and finds that the other staff agree to his transfer in order to ensure their own pay rise. He is asked to return to the school to fix the situation that only thirty per cent of the students are passing the basic skills test. The film, like *Malcolm X*, focuses on individual solutions to the issues of racism and poverty. In Joe Clarke’s opening speech to the school as principal he says that, if they do not succeed in life:

I don’t want you to blame your parents, I don’t want you to blame the white man, I want you to blame yourselves. The responsibility is yours.
He links achievement of the “American Dream” to getting a good education. Similarly he tells the parents of the children who protest the mass expulsion of students deemed trouble-makers that they need to help their kids to study, get off welfare and give them some pride. Clarke is shown as a man who, in the Sixties, was willing to organise to achieve advancement at the level of the collective, and now, in the 1980s, believes it is up to the individual to change their situation.

Forrest Gump presents a range of depictions of race and race-related issues. While not directly addressing issues of civil rights, Forrest Gump does show one of the key moments in the process of desegregation, with the forced desegregation of the University of Alabama. As with most of the film, Forrest is shown as a spectator, who lacks any understanding of the politics involved. However, when a black female student drops her book, Forrest picks it up for her. What we see is a person who is not caught up in the politics of race, who sees the woman as simply a person who requires help. To Forrest, who just sees people as people, there is no reason why a black person is not entitled to be at the university.

While Forrest Gump does not emphasise self reliance in the same way as Lean on Me or Malcolm X, it does seem to suggest that economic independence is a sure route to overcoming black oppression. In the film we see a montage of the ancestors of Forrest’s friend Bubba serving at the tables of white people. Later in the film, when Forrest has made a fortune on his shrimp boat and given a share to Bubba’s mother, we see her, in the same framing, being served by a white woman. This juxtaposition seems to indicate that the reason for the power relationship between black and white is based, at least partly, on wealth rather than politics, and that once that position is changed, so too is the power relationship.

Forrest Gump also has a brief representation of a Black Panther member, in a scene which carries quite a different message to that of the Alabama State University integration. When Jenny takes Forrest to meet her boyfriend who is a member of SDS, a black man in Black Panther paraphernalia is also present. This man is shown shouting at
Forrest and is oblivious to the violence displayed by Jenny’s boyfriend toward her. The general attitude is one of aggressive violence and slogan-filled rhetoric. Forrest recoils from the hatred on display.

This is the most significant representation of the Black Power movement within any of the films. Another Black Panther is shown briefly present with the organisers and speakers at the anti-war protest at Syracuse University which is depicted in *Born on the Fourth of July*. It is not until 1995 that the Black Panthers appear on screen in any significant manner when Mario Van Peebles, a black director, made the film *Panther*.

The link between blackness and music which we see in *Hairspray* is picked up in a number of other films. In *Little Shop of Horrors* three black women act as a chorus. They are represented as black girl band from the early Sixties. Black characters make no other appearance in speaking parts in the film. Similarly in *Shag*, the only black characters, other than a maid who appears briefly at the end of the film, are in the band that plays in the dance hall.

Given this connection between blackness and music, it is unsurprising that the other major biopic within my group of pictures is about a black musician. *What’s love got to do with it?*, centering on the life of Anna Mae/Tina Turner, is the only film in the group which heavily features black characters and is not directly political. The film is set in an almost completely black milieu and yet does not directly touch on the social and political struggles of the period. What we do see in the film is a focus again on the damage that drugs, violence and philandering do to individuals and the need for the individual to create their own destiny. Ike Turner, at the end of the film, is shown to be a broken man, destroyed by drugs and having lost the important things in his life, particularly his wife, because of his drug use and his violence. Tina, on the other hand, through her hard work and talent, has created her own new life and is strong and independent.

Another film in which black characters are more than background is *A Perfect World* (1993). While sleeping in the car in a corn field, Butch and Philip are woken by a black
man who is working in the fields. He offers them a place to stay, and in the morning his wife and grandson provide breakfast and they dance and play together. Throughout the scenes involving the black family, there is little to separate the interactions from those Butch would have had if they had been a poor white rural family, despite the film being set in Texas. In fact, the home does not indicate extreme poverty, though both Mack and Lottie, the black couple, refer to “Mr Andrews” who is clearly the owner of the farm. When conflict arises between Butch and Mack, it is because Butch witnesses Mack hitting his grandson, Cleve. Again in these scenes, there is little reason for race to matter and it would appear that the family could have easily have been white.

**Black soldiers**

The other films which feature black characters and deal with issues around race are the films set in Vietnam. Black soldiers are featured in all of these and their relationships often illuminate political issues. Of the eight films featuring a major black character, three of them are Vietnam films and one of them is the most unlikely settings for a major black character, the aircraft carrier of *Flight of the Intruder*.

The role of Commander Camperelli in *Flight of the Intruder* is one where the race of the actor does not impact on the character or narrative in any significant way. As I discussed in Chapter Two, the position of Commander Camperelli as a black commander/pilot in the navy is an unusual one during the Vietnam War. Nonetheless, for the majority of the movie, the emphasis is more on Camperelli’s Italian heritage, with predictable mafia references, rather than on his colour. At the very end of the film his colour is addressed, when Grafton tells him he has heard that Camperelli is going to be promoted to Captain of an aircraft carrier and suggests that he will probably make admiral. Camperelli says “you ever seen a black man who’s an admiral?” Grafton then refers to Camperelli as “fifth generation mafia,” as if this cancels the colour impediment to promotion. The film leaves one with an optimistic sense, that Grafton could become an admiral, black or not.

Similarly, in *Good Morning Vietnam*, Cronauer’s offsider is the black Pfc Garlick. Again, while the part is played by a black actor, the role is race-neutral and little reference is
made to his race throughout the film or any differing treatment he may receive. While Garlick is supportive of Cronauer, though more cautious, he is not shown to be particularly associated with black music or any of the other usual cultural signifiers. This use of a black soldier behind the lines goes against the general reality of the Vietnam conflict, where blacks found it hard to get non-combat positions. The depiction of both Camperelli and Garlick as black characters in this way has more to do with the representation of blacks generally in the 1980s as I will discuss later in the chapter, rather than being representative of the politics and reality of the Sixties.

In contrast to these films, *Hamburger Hill* deals significantly with black soldiers, both as characters and in their political context. Just as the soldiers in *Hamburger Hill* seem to talk endlessly about the political protests against Vietnam veterans back home, the position of black soldiers in relation to white soldiers is a constant topic for discussion. The black characters discuss the difficulties of a black soldier getting a job behind the lines and their poor treatment by officers. There is also a degree of tension between black and white soldiers at times. Overall, however, there is little actual demonstration of this racism in action, although it is clear that there are no black officers.

The roles played by black characters in the other combat films, *Full Metal Jacket* and *Platoon* are similar to those in *Hamburger Hill*, although less overtly political. In *Full Metal Jacket*, Sergeant Hartman explicitly states when the recruits arrive for basic training that there is “no racial bigotry here....you are all equally worthless.” When Joker later encounters Cowboy’s squad in Hue, there are a couple of black soldiers within it. Questions of race come to the fore when the squad encounters a prostitute and her South Vietnamese Army pimp. As discussed in Chapter Two, despite the black soldier negotiating the price for the prostitute, just before he can go inside the building with the woman, Animal Mother, the toughest white soldier within the squad, steps in and asserts his right to go first. Here the privilege is based partly on brutality, but it is nonetheless significant that it is a black soldier he bullies, not another white.
While not dealing as explicitly with racial tensions within the army as *Hamburger Hill*, *Platoon* does show the divide between many of the white and black soldiers who were serving together. Here again the black characters are associated with drugs, although the association is a less negative one than in the other films I have discussed. The black characters, along with those who look less than fully “white” and the white Sergeant Elias smoke marijuana together listening to Sixties music in a bunker. Back in the barracks Junior, another black soldier, says that he does not smoke marijuana because the white man has been using it to keep black men down, echoing the message within *Malcolm X*. The dope-smoking bunker is contrasted with the beer-drinking, poker-playing white boys who have a confederate flag in the barracks, and Rodriguez who has a shrine to Jesus over his bed. At other times within the film we see the casual racism of some of the soldiers, such as when O’Neill calls King “boy” and assigns him and Chris to latrine duty, although, it must be noted he also calls Chris “boy” at other times. However, interestingly, Chris tends to view all the soldiers together. In the narration which is constituted by the letters to his grandmother, Chris talks about how all the other soldiers are “from the end of the line” and have “two years high school”, that they are “the poor and the unwanted,” “the bottom of the barrel.” In this, Chris makes no differentiation between the white, black or Hispanic soldiers; their class position overrides any other difference between them. We also see class commentary by King, who is black, when he comments that “the poor are always being fucked over by the rich.” Here the position as a poor man is privileged over his position as a black.

Ron Kovic in *Born on the Fourth of July* comes from a predominantly white community. We are not shown significant interaction with black characters during his time in Vietnam, however he returns to a Veterans Hospital staffed almost entirely by uninterested and unsympathetic black staff. The staff are shown treating the patients with contempt and playing cards rather than tending to their needs. There are some moments of human empathy, but overall one is left with a very negative impression of these staff who are, uniformly, black.
Overall, the films which feature black characters mostly do address the politics of the Sixties, although with different levels of engagement. Only a handful of the films feature major black characters, including two which least address the politics of race: *Flight of the Intruder* and *Good Morning Vietnam*. In the case of *Flight of the Intruder*, this may have been attributed to the "star" status of Danny Glover playing the major black role.\(^\text{15}\)

Civil rights and the conditions of black people are addressed in a number of different ways in other films. There is strong emphasis placed on the need for self reliance in many of the films and the damaging impact on blacks of drugs and violence.

**Race on Film**

During the 1980s and early 1990s a number of major black stars, some of whom are still significant figures in the film industry twenty years on, emerged in Hollywood. Actors like Eddie Murphy, Denzel Washington, Laurence Fishburne and Samuel L Jackson all appeared in their first major films, while Richard Pryor became a star in mainstream cinema during the period. In this section of the chapter I wish to examine the way that race was depicted during the Reagan-Bush years on film, and the ways in which these actors and others were shown on screen.

In order to understand the depictions of blacks on film during the Reagan-Bush era, it is useful to have a brief overview of the history of their representation. Film and blackness got off to a very rocky start in the United States with *The Birth of a Nation* which is broadly considered to have contained extremely racist depictions of black people.\(^\text{16}\) The films which followed it tended to focus on subservient plantation and domestic slaves or servants who acted as comic relief or a counterpoint for their white masters.\(^\text{17}\) Many of these figures became standard black roles: for example, the devoted and loyal but strong,

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\(^\text{15}\) It is also interesting to note that Glover featured in another Vietnam film of the period *Bat 21*. According to Roquemore (Joseph Roquemore, *History Goes to the Movies: A Viewer's Guide to the Best (and some of the worst) Historical Films Ever Made*, (New York: Broadway, 1999), p 269), Glover's character in this is a fictional amalgam of the many pilots who served in the operation.


\(^\text{17}\) See the extended discussions in Guerrero, *Framing Blackness: The African-American Image in Film*, pp9-35 and Ross, *Black and White Media: Black Images in Popular Film and Television*. 

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domineering and a bit sassy, middle-aged black woman or "mammy" and the "coon" figures who were lazy and poorly-spoken, often rural, blacks.

This changed in the 1970s when the Hollywood machine recognised the spending power of black urban youth and attempted to harness it through the production of what became known as "blaxploitation" films. These films, many directed by black directors like Gordon Parks and Gordon Parks Jr, were full of violence and sex. Unlike the depictions that had predated them, they did not represent blacks as docile victims. Instead, in these films, the black characters were aggressive, violent and assertive. Ross notes that the formula that inspired blaxploitation was the story of an "aggressive black hero who beats the system and ends up with the money and the woman." Discussion abounds about which films constitute blaxploitation and whether these films were positive in the history of depictions of blacks. As a number of writers have pointed out, they did tend to reinforce stereotypes around black men and sexuality, and generally positioned black people within a criminal milieu. They were not positive depictions of black family life. However, these films do mark a recognition by film producers that black people in the US represented a viable and largely untapped market for films. They also showed black people engaged in sexual relationships, most of which were consensual and many of which were affectionate or even loving, which contrasted with what was to follow in the 1980s, as I will discuss. As Ed Guerrero notes “perhaps the most redeeming moment in all of Superfly is the tender, erotic lovemaking between Priest and his girl friend in a luxurious sunken bubble bath.” The importance of these films in a changing conception of black people should not be underestimated. In these films when black people wielded violence or power it was often contained within a black-on-black context, minimising its threat to the white cinema-viewing population. Nonetheless I do not believe that the

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19 See discussion in Mark A Reid, Redefining Black Film (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), p24. An interesting example of the persistence of this "coon" stereotype could be seen in the first season of Survivor in which the only black male competitor, Gervase Peterson was clearly constructed as the laziest person on the island.
21 Ross, Black and White Media: Black Images in Popular Film and Television, p18.
22 Guerrero, Framing Blackness: The African-American Image in Film, p144.
importance of the depiction of this kind of power and these kind of sexual relationships in any form should be underestimated. Compared to previous depictions of blacks as exploited or passive or even merely comical, or the neutered white-man-in-black-face roles played by Sidney Poitier, as discussed by both Ross and Guerrero, these films showed black people as potent and powerful. These were not ideal depictions of black people, but they did play a role in breaking down some of the taboos in films and, more importantly, provided black directors and actors with the opportunity to expand their skills and experience.

I will now turn to examining the depictions of blacks in films released during the Reagan-Bush period in order to establish comparisons with the films within my selection. This will allow an examination of the manner in which films set in the past differ from other films produced contemporaneously. By the late 1970s the blaxploitation trend had waned, replaced by two emerging trends: that of the black star, often within a white milieu, and the smaller field of the black-focused and black-made features. The incidental appearance of black characters also grew, with the figure of the black police (mid-level) superior who would bawl out his badly behaving white main characters was a regular feature of both film and television. Sharon Willis points out that the “ubiquitous African American judge or police chief” would often “organize and adjudicate the activities of the primary cast” but was without a significant role him-(usually) self.23 Here we can note the comparison with the depiction of Camperelli in Flight of the Intruder. As with the police-chief archetype, he bawls out the pilots and organises their activities. Willis argues that these characters were used to “perform a lot of ideological work” by both representing yet sideling racial difference and also counterbalancing the depiction of African Americans as criminals.24 While I do not disagree with her contention that these roles did these things, I think they were also indicative of the slowly evolving space allowed for the representation of blacks (and other races) in feature films. The backwash of the blaxploitation genre created a space for roles which were different from those which had preceded that time.

24 Ibid.
The role of the single black star in the white space has been discussed extensively by Guerrero and Ross. The black character, generally isolated from his or her cultural milieu, surrounded by white characters and generally devoid of romantic or sexual involvement is probably best exemplified by the Beverly Hills Cop and Sister Act films which were deliberately cast as “fish-out-of-water” comedies. Much of the work of Eddie Murphy, Whoopi Goldberg, Richard Pryor, Wesley Snipes and Gregory Hines during this period falls firmly within this category. In Beverly Hills Cop, Murphy’s blackness is associated with “street smarts” and imagination, and doing things a little bit outside normal procedure—in short, with difference and deviance. Sister Act follows this idea with Goldberg as a nightclub singer on the run from criminals. While not a criminal herself, she is nonetheless closely associated with them and is clearly deviant in the world of the white nuns. In addition to the kinds of themes one sees within Beverly Hills Cop, in Sister Act blackness is also equated with “rhythm.”

Many of these single black roles were in “buddy” comedies where the black character was partnered with a white star. These were exemplified by films such as 48 Hrs (1982) (Murphy and Nick Nolte), the Lethal Weapon series (Danny Glover and Mel Gibson), and Silver Streak (1976) and Stir Crazy (1980) (Pryor and Gene Wilder). Buddy films contain the race of the black character, as Guerrero argues,

[i]t seems that with the biracial buddy formula Hollywood put the black filmic presence in the protective custody, so to speak, of a white lead or co-star and therefore in conformity with white sensibilities and expectations of what blacks, essentially, should be.

Ensuring white men accompanied and constrained black men, according to Guerrero’s argument, normalised the position of blacks as constrained and subjected by whites. This contrasts with the police-chief type role where black men could upbraid whites. Those

26 Guerrero, Framing Blackness: The African-American Image in Film, p128.
roles, however, were very minor; when the black character moved to the centre of the plot he required the constraint of a white buddy. The use of the biracial buddy film has continued past the Reagan-Bush era with films such as the _Men in Black_ films (Will Smith and Tommy Lee Jones), _Shanghai Noon_ (2000) and _Shanghai Knights_ (2003) (Owen Wilson and Jackie Chan). A repositioning of the roles came with _Bulletproof_ (1996) where the white Adam Sandler is buddied with the black Damon Wayans. Here it is Wayans who is the cop, representing order, while Sandler is the car thief and drug dealer. Overall, however, the buddy films during the 1980s and early 1990s saw white men leading and constraining black men. The depiction of Garlick in _Good Morning Vietnam_ falls loosely within this category, although Garlick is more clearly a subordinate offside than a fully-fledged buddy.

While buddy films during the Reagan-Bush era did show black characters, they did not tend to focus on issues of concern to blacks. Instead they usually showed blacks as strangers in a world of whites. In this sense they were a step backward from the blaxploitation films which did show black people interacting largely with other black people, even if the environments for this interaction were themselves limited, questionable or stereotyped.

It should be noted that following the Reagan-Bush era, the 1980s black, star-driven vehicles have become increasingly popular. Some of these have been fuelled by the star power of Eddie Murphy with films like the _Doctor Doolittle_ (1998 and 2001) and _Nutty Professor_ (1996 and 2000) films and _Norbit_ (2007). While as Doctor Doolittle Murphy starred alongside animals in what was a mostly straight comedic role, the _Nutty Professor_ films see Murphy playing not only the eponymous role, but a range of grotesque

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27 Another interesting recent twist on biracial formula is the _Rush Hour_ films which feature a black star (Chris Tucker) buddied with an Asian character (Jackie Chan). While the first movie (1988) sees Chan out of place while Rock is a street wise LA police officer, in the second movie (2001) it is Tucker who is displaced in a Hong Kong environment. Tucker is also an extreme performer with mannerisms (and screaming) which border on the effeminate, again serving to place him in something of a liminal position. For an examination of the racial stereotypes used in _Rush Hour 2_ see Ji Hoon Park, Nadine G. Gabbadon, and Ariel R. Chemin, "Naturalizing Racial Differences through Comedy: Asian, Black, and White Views on Racial Stereotypes in _Rush Hour 2_," _Journal of Communication_ 56 (2006). Similarly, in 1995 _Bad Boys_ was a buddy film which used two black cops. This had been seen in the 1970s when Bill Cosby and Sidney Poitier appeared in a series of films together. However, this approach had largely disappeared in the 1980s.
stereotypes including Cletus “Papa” Klump and Ida Mae “Granny” Jensen. A similar approach is seen in the Big Momma’s House (2000 and 2006) films in which Martin Lawrence is disguised as a fat old woman in order to guard a federal witness. While these films do create a black milieu for the star to operate within, this milieu is one which is peopled by stereotypes and grotesqueries. Interestingly, these films return to the stereotypes of early depictions of black people, populated as they are by “mammies” and “coons.” As Park et al note, the use of race-based stereotypes is common in comedy as they serve as a source of humour.28

Ryan and Kellner note that during the 1980s and early 1990s there were some films made with a predominantly black cast which dealt with race were set in the past such as A Soldier’s Story (1984), The Killing Floor (1984) and The Color Purple (1985). They argue that setting these films in the past “made racism seem a historical problem in the process of being overcome.”29 This is an interesting point worth consideration with respect to the depictions of race in the films I am examining and I will return to it later in the chapter. The Color Purple has been significantly criticised by writers like Guerrero, Ross and Ryan and Kellner as making “rural black life seem positively suburban,”30 “entertainment rather than accurate social commentary”31 and that the film “locate[s] the black community in naïve or idyllic rural settings removed from the unrelenting containment and oppression of the surrounding, hostile white community.”32 Criticism of the film also focuses on the depiction of Mister and the displacement of white crimes onto him.33 While I would agree with most of these criticisms, I would however note that it was at least a film focused entirely on black people, from a novel by a black woman in the midst of a film market dominated by white films about white people. In this way it is very different to the usual market, although we can see a clear comparison in What’s Love Got To Do With It? Both films tell the story of black women overcoming adversity, albeit adversity inflicted by black men, to achieve the lives they desire.

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28 Ibid., p158.
30 Ibid.
31 Ross, Black and White Media: Black Images in Popular Film and Television, p21.
33 Ibid., p54 and Ross, Black and White Media: Black Images in Popular Film and Television, p21-22.
In contrast to the predominantly white world of Hollywood, occasionally trespassed upon by a small number of black stars, a small area of emerging filmmaking was films directed by black people about the world in which they lived. The principal proponent of this emerging area was Spike Lee. There are a variety of critical positions on his work, including the notion he "knows nothing of women"\(^{34}\) and, as I have noted with respect to Malcolm X, the political position in many of his films is not always coherent or consistent. For the purposes of my consideration, what is interesting is how his films differ from the mainstream of representation of race during the period. Lee’s films of the 1980s and 1990s are set within a black milieu, peopled by black characters. Issues which were highly pertinent to the period, such as racial tensions between blacks and Koreans are highlighted in *Do The Right Thing* (1989) and concerns around drugs appear in the more mainstream *Jungle Fever* (1991). Other filmmakers during the period who made films set within a black milieu included Harry Belfonte with *Beat Street* (1984), which is set in a black New York city ghetto and deals with hip hop music, and *Hollywood Shuffle* (1987), directed by Robert Townsend, about the trials of an aspiring black actor in Hollywood.

Other black film makers emerged at the beginning of the 1990s with films like *New Jack City* (1991) directed by Mario Van Peebles, which dealt with cocaine in New York, and *Boyz n the Hood* (1991), directed by John Singleton, which was set in the Los Angeles ghettos. These films dealt with the issues of drugs and violence and their effects on black people in a less romanticised way than the blaxploitation films which had preceded them. Again these films have been criticised for their emphasis on violence and crime and there were incidents of violence associated with their screenings.\(^3^{5}\) Reid also notes that *Boyz N the Hood* focuses on a tale of escape from the ghetto, rather than attempts to "ameliorate the conditions that spur such escapes into the mainstream."\(^{36}\)

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\(^{34}\) Terry McMillan quoted in Ross, *Black and White Media: Black Images in Popular Film and Television* p22.

\(^{35}\) Reid, *Redefining Black Film*, p133-34.

\(^{36}\) Ibid.
It should also be noted that some of the major black stars of the period had begun to get their hands onto the levers of film production. Eddie Murphy wrote the story for *Coming to America* (1988), which was the first feature film he had made which was set in an almost entirely black milieu. The film showed aspects of the lives of poor urban blacks, but also featured a black middle class. *Harlem Nights* (1989), which Murphy wrote, directed and was the executive producer, while also predominantly about black people, was set in the period of the 1920s, rather than dealing with the contemporary black world.

While clearly none of these films was perfect and most have attracted criticisms from black film theorists, they did represent an alternative to white mainstream films and their representations of race. These films did show black people with agency, often in a black milieu, engaging with other black people and engaging in sexual and loving relationships with other black (and occasionally white) people. It is difficult for any individual film that seeks mainstream (or even independent) success to fully meet critical requirements. Some of these requirements are contradictory—for example some see a focus on drugs as denigrating black people and reducing the spectrum of black experience to the stereotypes of ghetto existence, while others see an avoidance of these kinds of topics as a failure to represent the reality of existence for many black people. What is therefore interesting is how films as a group and across the spectrum depicted race. Another point of interest with respect to my thesis is that all but *Harlem Nights* have a contemporary setting. This makes *Malcolm X* quite unusual in that it chose to focus on the past of racial relations, rather than the present. It could also be seen as one of the reasons Lee felt it was so important to link its depictions with the present through the opening sequence.

Overall then, the representation of black people in films during the Reagan-Bush era tended to divide into three broad categories. First was the black offside or buddy, second was the black star in a predominantly white world and thirdly were the films made by black people set within a predominantly black milieu. Black people in these films were usually left isolated from other black people while the popularity of a number of black,

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37 Mark Reid discusses some of these tensions with reference to *The Cosby Show* and its depiction of a professional middle class black family. Ibid, pp33-34.
mostly male stars did increase, allowing a broadening of roles for black people which increased through the 1990s. In most other Hollywood films—a fourth category as it were—black people were marginalised or sidelined if they appeared at all.

With respect to the depictions of other races, these were probably even more liminal and unhelpful. Most Asian characters in films were foreigners and not Americans themselves, and there was extensive criticism of *Year of the Dragon* (1985) for its depictions of Chinese-Americans. A more comical approach to the depiction of Chinese-Americans and mystical and mysterious orientalism was *Big Trouble in Little China* (1986), which featured an evil Chinese sorcerer. In this film there was an element of the interracial buddy approach with truck driver, Jack Burton (Kurt Russell) friends with the Chinese-American Wang Chi. Throughout the film they must work together to rescue Wang’s kidnapped fiancée.

Few mainstream films dealt with the contemporary experience of native Americans other than *Thunderheart* (1992) which featured Val Kilmer as a FBI agent with a Sioux background investigating a murder on an Indian reservation. Similarly the Hispanic experience had not begun to make a significant impact, although there were a few films made such as *Stand and Deliver* (1988) which acknowledge the contemporary realities of Hispanics. The rise and popularity of the Hispanic actor Lou Diamond Phillips meant that space was made for Hispanic characters in a number of films, particularly those aimed at the teenager-young adult market.

Overall however, during the 1980s and early 1990s, like the films I am specifically examining, mainstream Hollywood films overwhelmingly focused on white people. As

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discussed above, there were incursions by black people into this white space, and some attempts to make the space a black one. These remained exceptions to the rule of a Hollywood which was dominated by the notion that both the players and the spectators of film were white. The films then that I am examining which fail to feature non-white characters were not atypical. What is significant is that some do examine the position of blacks during the Sixties at a time when the history of black-white relations in other eras was not being examined.

**Advances, backsliding, violence and economic progress—representations in the Reagan-Bush era**

While there are a broad range of representations of African-Americans that appeared in the news media during the 1980s and early 1990s, there are some clear themes within those representations. In this section I want to examine some of those themes which relate, in particular, to the representation within my selection of films. I have utilised the same approach to selection of examples of the media which I have used in the previous two chapters, with a focus on newspapers and television. This examination will then allow me, in the final section of this chapter, to determine what the links are between the way the issue of civil rights and the broader issue of race, or more precisely, blackness, were addressed in the films I have discussed above.

**Civil rights, segregation and the Supreme Court**

Within the broad area of civil rights there are a number of sub-themes within the general media discussions of the period. These include the appointment of Supreme Court judges, segregation and affirmative action, the question of economic rights versus political rights, the declaration of Martin Luther King Day and the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa.

The first of these I will discuss is affirmative action. Affirmative action was highly contested during the 1980s, and this contestation went as far as the Supreme Court. In Chapter Two I mentioned briefly the importance of abortion in discussions about the appointment of Supreme Court justices. The highly contested nature of civil rights
legislation and previous Supreme Court decisions meant that civil rights was a major
touchstone for Supreme Court appointments during the period, second only to abortion.
The retirement in 1991 from the Supreme Court of Thurgood Marshall, the first African-
American Supreme Court Justice, ensured that civil rights played a strong role in these
appointments. Decisions of the Supreme Court on affirmative action cases also led to
Congressional action, which was again the site of much disputation.

Opinions on affirmative action, according to the manner in which the issue was
represented in the media, was divided, and not as simplistically as one might imagine.
Affirmative action regulations were enacted to redress discriminatory hiring policies
especially with respect to race and gender. It is not relevant to this thesis to address the
various definitional debates and the contested nature of these policies further. While the
media showed that most conservatives opposed affirmative action and most liberals
supported it, the representations did not highlight a simple black/white divide on the
issue. For example, in 1985, the San Francisco Chronicle reported that the black head of
the US Commission on Civil Rights, Clarence Pendleton Jr “assailed federal minority
employment quotas and affirmative action, which he called ‘these God-awful special
protections.’” The same article indicates that Pendleton wanted the partial repeal of
“fair-hiring laws, including equal pay for women.”

Blacks on the other side of the political debate criticised Reagan’s appointments to
positions relating to discrimination and argued that affirmative action and the position
of blacks was moving backwards during his presidency. A government report in 1988
called “One-Third of a Nation” concluded that in the preceding decade there were “actual

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40 Thurgood Marshall was also an attorney in the landmark Brown v Board of Education case which paved the way for desegregation.
41 Rick DelVecchio, "Rights Chief Assails 'Special Protections'," The San Francisco Chronicle, 2 March 1985.
42 Ibid.
reversals” in the move toward equality for minorities. Other articles reiterated this idea that the situation for black people had actually declined during the 1980s, after the advances gained through the granting of political civil rights and the outlawing of workplace discrimination in the Sixties and 1970s. Some articles went so far as explicitly blaming Reagan for this backsliding, arguing that he was “a disaster for blacks” and headed an “eight-year counter-revolution against traditional civil rights policies.”

Within these representations, the election of Reagan can be seen as a caesural moment, with the President as the arch-villain of the bad after-time.

Other articles argued that segregation was still alive, or emphasised the very slow progress being made in overcoming it. Some articles highlighted the remaining segregation within housing, while court battles and practical struggles were still occurring over the desegregation of schools and colleges. There was however some coverage

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46 McGrory, "Blacks Will Shed No Tears for Reagan." See also Susan Wortman, "Activist Says Reagan Did Little for Blacks," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 28 February 1988 which reports that John E Jacob of the National Urban League placed the blame for the lack of advancement of parity for blacks on Reagan; and Bob Drury, "Jackson Puts Blame on Reagan White House Permits Racism, He Says," *Newsday*, 19 January 1987 which reports that Jesse Jackson said that "socioeconomic malaise which pits poor blacks against poor whites has its origins in the White House of President Ronald Reagan". Jesse Jackson appears in, *Decade*, MTV, where he says of Ronald Reagan “He never saw a civil right he would fight for.” In the same program Spike Lee notes that during the Reagan years it became “fashionable” to be a racist which is reinforced by Tracy Chapman who notes that people became more racist during the 1980s. In "NAACP Leader Calls Reagan a 'Racist'," *The San Francisco Chronicle*, 18 May 1985, William Gibson of the NAACP is quoted as saying “we’ll be calling Mr. Reagan what he is. And I said some time ago he’s basically a reactionary and he’s a racist.” On, “Stop the Madness: Los Angeles Riots,” *Nightline* ABC 01/05/1992 black gang members argued that Reagan had “snatched social programs out from under us” and that all the social programs instituted since the Watts riots had been wound back.
47 Freivogel, "Reagan Reversal: Ideology Altered Policies."
given to the idea that affirmative action had created unfairness for non-blacks. One book, *Illiberal Education: Politics of Race and Sex on Campus*, published in 1991, argued that affirmative action was, in fact, damaging universities and achieving poor outcomes for blacks. Its author, Dinesh D’Souza, a former Republican White House staffer, was given some coverage in the media.49

Action within the Supreme Court in 1989 changed the interpretation of affirmative action law and led to a prolonged discussion within the media about President Bush’s racial credentials. While the media generally portrayed a slowing or reversal in minority rights during the Reagan period, President Bush was generally seen as more sympathetic to blacks, despite the use of racial scare tactics around the figure of Willie Horton during the Presidential election, which I will discuss later. This impression of Bush was tested when he opposed legislation to overturn the Court’s decision on affirmative action.

The Supreme Court was an important arena for debate on minority issues. During the nomination of Robert Bork, a conservative Court of Appeals circuit judge, the media portrayed the issue of civil rights as the key factor in his defeat, citing, in particular, the influence of Southern black voters on their Senate representatives.50 Another article even cast the rejection of Bork as proof that “civil rights...have become as American as apple pie.”51 While this runs counter to the overall sense that Reagan promoted a reversal of civil rights, it highlights the complexity in the interactions between the political messaging and the actual attitudes of Americans. *The New York Times* noted that,
Bork frightened many blacks not because they thought he harbored racial hatred, but because of his rigid view of the Constitution and of Congress' power to safeguard civil rights.\(^\text{52}\)

Bork was thus not necessarily depicted within the media as a racist, but as someone who threatened the gains made by blacks and women and who thus was opposed by groups such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

The theme of race was even stronger in the hearings around the appointment of Clarence Thomas. A black man, he stood in the ironic position of being opposed by many of the same people who had opposed the appointment of Bork. As a number of articles pointed out, while black and the "grandson of sharecroppers," Thomas was opposed to affirmative action approaches.\(^\text{54}\) One article in particular characterised Thomas as believing that,

> taking account of race in government policy is itself the essence of racism, a harmful and constitutionally impermissible approach that demeans and discourages black achievement.\(^\text{55}\)

Thus the media pondered the spectacle of a black nominee for the Supreme Court being opposed by most black activist groups. Some articles did point out that while most of the national peak bodies for black rights opposed Thomas, the black public and some of the

\[^{55}\] Greenhouse, "Court Choice Puts Nation's Racial Legacy on Table."
local groups were much more divided on their response to him, with many seeing Thomas as an admirable black role model.  

While Thomas’ position on civil rights and abortion and his race were the initial areas of debate around his appointment, by the end of the process the focus had changed sharply within the media to become about sexual harassment charges against Thomas from Anita Hill. Possibly because Hill was black herself, the media coverage did not dwell on traditional racially-charged notions of black men and sexuality, although Thomas did use this imagery himself. The allegations by Hill and the treatment of both Thomas and Hill by the media have been dealt with extensively in academic literature and it is not the role of this thesis to examine these representations in depth. However, I will note that, according to the literature, there were two strongly competing approaches to the construction of both Hill and Thomas and their actions in the media coverage of the trials. While both Hill and Thomas were black, as Robinson and Powell point out, Thomas regularly used racially-driven images and concepts to depict Hill’s accusations as fictitious. The phrase he used which was most often repeated in the media was that the Senate hearings were a “high-tech lynching.” At the end of the trial, there was a strong theme within the media that the accusations against Thomas brought the public more firmly onto his side, with opinion polls and other reactions demonstrating empathy

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58 For example in Robinson and Powell, “The Postmodern Politics of Context Definition: Competing Reality Frames in the Hill-Thomas Spectacle”, Robinson and Powell outline the competing frames where Hill is depicted as either a “sexual persecutor” or an “innocent victim of racism” while Thomas is either a “innocent victim of racism” or a “political/racial persecutor” (p283).


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with Thomas, rather than opposition to him. One can question here whether it was a reflection of public and media concern about racism that led to this result, or whether it was actually more reflective of an inherent sexism within public conceptions and media representations. Either way, it was an episode which led to the appearance within the media of some very specific kinds of representations around race (and sex).

Not all media coverage of issues of civil rights focused on judicial or political issues. Other discussions of the progress of black people focused on the need for economic advancement. Within this range of representations there were a number of ‘good news’ stories reflecting the idea that black people were no longer subject to the discrimination that once existed. For example, one article in The Washington Post focused on the story of Juliette McNeil who grew up in Alabama wearing “Goodwill clothes” and “fearful that the occupants of a passing car meant her harm.” She attended a school which did not integrate until after she had graduated, but went to university nonetheless. The story notes that, “Today McNeil, 34, makes more than $45,000 a year as a supervisory operating accountant.” The article then takes the example of McNeil and generalises to talk of a “new black middle class” which “is emerging and succeeding by the standards of majority white culture.”

Other articles across the period focused on the importance of economic advancement or ‘rights,’ rather than civil rights. This was noted in reports on the 1992 election, with one article arguing that Clinton had adapted his pitch and was addressing issues around the

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63 Ibid.
economic rights were now more important than civil rights.®

The history of civil rights was raised in the media in relation to the declaration of Martin Luther King Day which, despite President Reagan's initial opposition to it, was approved by Congress in 1983 and observed for the first time in 1986. In a report about Reagan speaking on Martin Luther King Jr's birthday, one report pointed out his original objection to the holiday, and his later apology to Coretta Scott King on signing the legislation into law.® Discussion of the holiday in the news generally referred to the past of the civil rights movement,® but some articles used it to consider the advancement of blacks and, in some cases, to blame the Reagan administration for reversals in the conditions of black people.® Acceptance of the holiday took some time however and in 1987, for example, there were protests in Arizona where Governor Mecham refused to grant the holiday, warning "that there may be reprisals against blacks and others who push too insistently for the holiday."® In 1991, Public Enemy released a song called By the time I get to Arizona in which it demanded that the Governor "honor [King] or he's a goner."® Articles noted that the video that accompanied the song had "Arizona in an uproar" as it urged "violent retaliation against the state for rejecting a paid holiday in honor of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr."® Public Enemy and other black rap groups emerged into the (near) mainstream in the late 1980s, providing strong and sometimes

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70 Carlton Ridenhour, Gary Rinaldo, Hank Shocklee "By The Time I Get To Arizona" Apocalypse '91... The Enemy Strikes Back, 1991.

violent media representations of black positions on a number of civil, economic and political issues.

Another way in which civil rights was regularly raised in the media was in the making of comparisons between the American past and the South African present. The response of one black Reverend in Arizona to Governor Mecham was to say “I felt like I was in South Africa.”\(^{72}\) Bishop Tutu was involved in a day-long anti-apartheid conference which was on the eve of the first Martin Luther King Day holiday.\(^{73}\) Other media reports on the issue compared and contrasted the differences and similarities between King and Nelson Mandela and the struggles against racial prejudice in the US and South Africa.\(^{74}\)

Comparisons with the past also occurred in the context of the Gulf War in 1991. In the lead-up to the fighting, the notion, reflected in media reports, that “poor blacks and other minorities make up a disproportionate number of U.S. troops”\(^{75}\) resulted in President Bush stating at a press conference that “the army cannot be discriminatory because it is all-volunteer.”\(^{76}\) Other articles took up the issue following this pronouncement, with USA Today highlighting that black Americans were less supportive of military action in the Gulf because “they assume they’ll suffer disproportionate casualties.”\(^{77}\) A pollster quoted in the article argues that this perception stemmed from the time of the Vietnam War and is “rooted in a belief there’s a class phenomenon and a race phenomenon about who fights wars.”\(^{78}\) An article nearly a month later in The San Francisco Chronicle highlighted these and other concerns held by blacks about the war.\(^{79}\) It did, however, note

\(^{72}\) Lempinen, "Arizonans Protest King Holiday Ban."
\(^{73}\) "Tutu Honors King, Threatens South Africa over Apartheid," The San Francisco Chronicle, 20 January 1986.
\(^{76}\) Ibid.
\(^{78}\) Ibid.
that many blacks expressed pride in the role of General Colin Powell, the first black chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.\textsuperscript{80}

**Racism, Riots and Rodney King**

The story, which persisted from 1991 to 1993, of the beating of Rodney King became a significant episode in the representation of African-Americans. In addition, one can see that many of the ways that African-Americans were being represented at the time had a significant impact on the way the story was told. Rodney King, a black motorist, was beaten after being stopped by police in Los Angeles in 1991. The beating was captured on video by a bystander. The police involved were tried in the State court and acquitted. Riots followed in Los Angeles. The officers were later tried by the Federal Courts and two of them were convicted.

Much has been written about the trials and the video footage both from an academic\textsuperscript{81} and media standpoint,\textsuperscript{82} and, again, it is not the purpose of this thesis to explore the incident and it representations in detail. What I will try to draw out is what is relevant to this thesis, that is what it shows us about the themes in the representation of race at the time. The inclusion of the video footage of the beating in the opening sequence of *Malcolm X* makes it important to the thesis to understand what it was about this story which led it to be a referent in that film.

One thing that Ronald Jacobs, Marita Sturken and Frank Tomasulo all note in their writing on the Rodney King story is that the representations within that story change. Jacobs explores the way the narrative mode of the representation moved between a

\textsuperscript{80} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{82} Jacobs notes, for example, that in 1992, "between 30 April and 13 May, the Los Angeles Times wrote 290 articles about the Rodney King crisis, the New York Times wrote 105 articles and the Chicago Tribune wrote 103 articles" as well as there being significant coverage on television news. Jacobs, "Narrative, Civil Society and Public Culture," pp23.
romantic and tragic emplotment, while Sturken looks at the way the dominant representation moved from the grainy footage of the beatings to the “slick, omniscient view from the helicopter” of black men beating a white truck driver during the riots in Los Angeles. Tomasulo examines the way that the meaning of the video itself changed according to the manner in which it was represented, particularly during the initial trial. What is important about the dynamic and changing nature of the Rodney King story is what that says about the unsettled nature of the story underneath the saga of Rodney King—that of racism and the relationship between black and white Americans.

The tensions around this underlying racism meant that the villains of the story kept changing and there were problems and inconsistencies in the manner in which the media and public figures expressed themselves during the crisis. For example, The Economist noted that,

[t]o many Americans, who had seen the famous video of Mr King being beaten by the police as he lay on the ground, the white suburban jury who delivered the not-guilty verdict in Ventura county seemed racist and insular.

While as the article points out “a horrified George Bush immediately announced the reopening of the federal investigation,” President Bush was also very quick to condemn those rioting in Los Angeles following the outcomes of the trial. As the St. Louis Post-Dispatch pointed out “he saved his strongest words to condemn the ‘murder and destruction in the streets of Los Angeles.’” Bush’s messages attempted to make sense of the several villains that emerged post-trial—the jury, the police officers and the rioters in Los Angeles, with another St. Louis Post-Dispatch report noting.

83 Ibid., pp29-31.
84 Sturken, Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering, pp40.
86 Ibid.
Although he demanded a return to law and order, Bush said he understood the sense of betrayal felt by Americans at the acquittal of four white Los Angeles police officers in the beating of black motorist Rodney King. 88

The article also points out that Bush said it was hard to understand the verdict but that the "process of law" must be respected. 89 Here the contradictions within the Rodney King story are apparent: if the results of the process of law seem so wrong, why should that process be respected. And is it the jury or rioters who should be condemned? Or both? Or neither? Representations around the case have been indecisive on this, although in general the riots and the resulting black violence, particularly the beating of the white truck driver that Sturken discusses were condemned. But even these condemnations were in fact tempered by attempts to understand the causes for the alienation and disaffection that led to them in the first place. 90

The Rodney King story brought comparisons with the Sixties primarily in two areas: the Los Angeles riots were compared with the Watts riots of 1965 and other urban riots of 1967, 91 and the decision that a federal case would be mounted following the failure to gain a conviction in the initial trial was discussed in the context of similar use of federal powers in the past. 92 It should be noted that Mississippi Burning highlights the

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89 Ibid.
difficulties of having white policemen convicted in state courts and the need to move the cases into a federal jurisdiction. One article questioned the comparison between the lack of state-based court convictions in the Sixties, noting,

[i]n the South in the 1960s, federal civil-rights laws were used to reopen cases where there appeared to be a racist miscarriage of justice. Comforting as this analogy is, it is not completely accurate. In the old South many of the state cases were pursued half-heartedly by white lawyers; in Ventura County, the prosecution may have been unsuccessful but it was not for lack of effort.  

The article thus expresses the idea that while racism may persist, it is not as structurally endemic in Los Angeles in the 1990s as it was in the South during the Sixties.

The theme of rioting and its association with black people arose at other points during the 1980s and 1990s. In 1987 predominantly black college students partying at Virginia Beach engaged in rioting and looting. One article about the incident tried to construct a racially-based explanation for the riots noting that “State and local civil rights leaders said that there had been excessive police force and that race had been a major factor in the turmoil because of indifference to blacks’ needs by Virginia Beach whites.”

The most interesting thing about the reporting on Virginia Beach is the way that a number of clear themes emerged which were also evident in the reporting on the Rodney King case, and, in particular, the violence which followed. The fact that the students were predominantly black seemed to mean, for the media, that there must have been more to what went on than merely drunken misbehaviour by students. Again, because most of the rioters were black, the role of the police was closely questioned. Finally there is the “them and us” theme which emerges: the idea that the black students may have been reacting to unfriendliness from the white locals. These themes emphasise the strong

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93 "Another Rodney King Trial."
95 Ayres Jr, "Virginia Beach Is Quiet after Violence".
Racially motivated violence, like that in the Rodney King case, was a strong theme within the media during the Reagan-Bush era. One incident in particular stirred a broad discussion about racism and racist violence within the opinion pages of major newspapers. On 20 December 1986, three black men were assaulted by a group of white youths in the predominantly white area of Howard Beach in Queens, New York. One of these men ran and was hit by a car and killed. The Howard Beach incident, as it was known in the media, became a focus of editorials and opinion pieces, including those written by the Mayor of New York, Edward Koch and prominent black politician, Jesse Jackson. Most of these articles deplored the attack, but were concerned that the racism apparent in it was not isolated and was part of a wider malaise within American society, with some citing other examples of recent racist violence: cadets at a military academy in Charleston dressing like Ku Klux Klansman and terrorizing a black cadet; a black man being beaten to death in Coney Island after his bicycle collided with a car; and the brutal beating of Robert Wright, a black man, in Toledo, Ohio. Some articles tried to look for positive signs of improvements in race relations, but most engaged in hand-wringing regarding the prevalence of racism, particularly when the Howard Beach...
incident was followed by a violent racist attack on black marchers in Forsyth County, Georgia. The combination of events led to an examination of the nature of racism in the 1980s and a desire for change.

Not much changed in the eyes of the American media, however, over the next five years, as articles of this nature continued to appear regularly. An article in 1988 described the attack on a 50 year old black woman by two white men who

threatened her, then scrawled an “X” across her face with a red marker, smeared the feces on her face and cut her hair…”You’re too pretty to be a nigger.” The epithet was repeated several times.

The article went on to discuss how this had forced the New Jersey town where the attack took place “into a painful period of introspection, a coming to grips with the spectre of racial violence that has tarnished its bucolic image.” In 1989 a black fraternity house was set on fire while students were sleeping, forcing further questioning of the level of racism remaining in the US. The Rev Vivian of the Centre for Democratic Renewal is quoted as saying “A few years ago, blacks thought racial violence was all over...But we found we were dealing with a short-term victory.”

Other cases showed how interested in white-on-black racial violence the media remained. The case of (black) Tawana Brawley created a media storm between the time of her alleged abduction and rape by white assailants including police officers in 1987. The eventual findings of the Grand Jury in 1988 that cleared the local assistant district attorney Stephen Pagones of any wrong-doing or cover up in the case and highlighted problems with Brawley’s story attracted similar levels of media attention. The case generated hundreds of articles and on-going debate about the truth or otherwise of

106 Ibid.
108 Ibid.
Brawley's story. Even major films made reference to the case, with prominent graffiti in *Do The Right Thing* (1989) claiming "Tawana told the truth." The fascination with the case, with Brawley and with the cast of other characters involved, appeared to reflect the deep, on-going uncertainly and pent-up anxiety present in the US media around white-black violence, and, in particular, sexual violence. This was reflected in some of the editorials that followed the Grand Jury verdict in the case. *The New York Times* wrote that,

[the case] touched two deep sensitivities among blacks – ...a criminal justice system that often treats them arbitrarily, and...the ugly history, reverberating back to slavery, of white men violating black women, with black men powerless to prevent it.  

In the same vein, the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* noted that "What Ms Brawley said happened to her was entirely consistent with what many Americans, black and white, believe can happen to blacks in this country."

Other incidents of violence returned the entire discussion within the media back to the Sixties reflecting a fear that black-white relations had not significantly progressed since that time. In 1989 there were a series of mail-bombs, sent to people and organisations who had figured in civil rights litigation in three Southern states including Atlanta, which killed two people. While it was eventually discovered that the perpetrator did not necessarily have a racial motivation, early coverage of the crimes pondered the

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109 It should be noted that Brawley continues to claim that she told the truth in the matter.


113 Montgomery, "Moody Mail Bomb Trial Set to Open in Minnesota Judge, Alderman Were Killed in 1989."
involvement of white supremacists, including considering JB Stoner who had been convicted of attempting to bomb a church in Birmingham in 1958. Other articles referred to the bombings in the late 1950s and early Sixties as a point of comparison. In representations of the media, the violence against blacks during the civil rights period was neither forgotten, nor ended.

**Drugs and Mayor Barry**

The theme of drug use by African-American people was present during the Reagan-Bush years within media representation. The articles reflected on the impact of drugs through addiction, drug-related violence and imprisonment. One such article quotes a black minister and councilor who says that crack “is a new form of genocide, but it’s a genocide we’re inflicting upon ourselves. Crack is the worst enemy to black people since slavery.” Jesse Jackson is also reported as noting, at a speech about “striving in the face of racism” that “the Ku Klux Klan doesn’t exist in New York, but cocaine does” stating “[t]hat means...that we’re more threatened by dope than the rope.” This sentiment was echoed in the Public Enemy song released in 1991 which included a Ku Klux Klan coda noting that drugs were killing black men more efficiently than they

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115 "Longtime White Supremacist Leads List of Suspects in Bombing Series."

116 See for example Page, "Deadly Hate Bombs Indicate Desperation" and Booker and Cummings, "Bombings Remind Civil-Rights Activists of 1950s, '60s."


These statements are similar to the messages contained in *Malcolm X* and *Lean On Me* regarding drugs and their impact on the black community.

While some blamed the impact of drugs on black people themselves, others, including Rev Louis Farrakhan from the Nation of Islam, were reported to be blaming white people. As one article reported Farrakhan saying “[t]he epidemic of drugs and violence in the black community stems from a calculated attempt by whites to foster black self-destruction.”

The association of blacks and drugs, particularly crack, was crystallised in the media when Washington’s Mayor Marion Barry, one of the country’s highest profile black politicians, was arrested in 1990 for purchasing crack. He had previously been linked in the media to cocaine use following the conviction of his friend Charles Lewis on drug charges. Some articles about Barry’s arrest made an explicit link between Barry’s colour and the use of drugs. Others linked to other themes in the representation of African-Americans. For example, in one article about an annual meeting of mayors which occurred shortly after Barry’s arrest, one of the mayors interviewed linked Barry’s arrest closely with his race,

> “Black elected officials in highly visible position are put under a different standard,” said Mayor Sharpe James of Newark, who, like Mr. Barry is black. “As long as there is racism in our society, there will be racism in every agency, no matter how lofty their objectives.”

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121 “Some Black Call Drugs a Plot by White Establishment,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 31 December 1989.
Here we have the implied idea that it is Barry’s race which has led to his arrest, rather than his illegal activities. A Washington Post article reflected on the racial issues inherent in the arrest of Barry noting,

[blacks speak of selective prosecution, of the white community gloating. Whites react, but with a combination of unease and their own anger….many whites and some blacks are unwilling to discuss the subject publicly.⁠¹²⁵

This article articulates perceptions of persecution of black public figures and white unease around dealing with the issue. These ideas were present in a number of other articles.⁠¹²⁶

Some articles also linked Barry’s drug abuse with wider drug use, particularly that amongst black people. One article, for example, argued that imprisonment is not a sustainable way to fight the drug problems inherent in society.⁠¹²⁷ Another argued that “far too many blacks have allowed drugs to transform them into slaveships in shoes.”⁠¹²⁸ This is a return to the themes in some of the non-Barry related articles I discussed earlier, the equating drug use with slavery or genocide.

“Race-baiting is the way to get elected”⁠¹²⁹

During the 1988 Presidential election, race became a major issue through the figure of Willie Horton. During the campaign, Michael Dukakis, the Democratic party’s presidential candidate, was attacked for being liberal, and specifically for being soft on

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¹²⁹ Disposable Heroes of Hiphophrisy “Television, Drug of a Nation” Hypocrisy is the Greatest Luxury 1992.
crime. The attacks drew on his record as Governor of Massachusetts. While Governor, a prison furlough program was in place, and during his term in office a convicted black murderer, Willie Horton, was allowed out of prison for a period. While on release, he raped a white woman and terrorised her and her husband. The Bush campaign and Bush support groups used the prison furlough program in a number of ways. Horton’s image was used in a direct mail campaign, as well as in a television commercial sponsored by a group not directly affiliated with the Bush campaign. The Bush campaign itself used the image of a revolving door to refer to the furlough program but did not refer directly to Horton in their television commercials.

The appearance of Horton in paid advertising inevitably led to the repeated airing of his photo and discussion of the case in the media for free—a major bonus for a campaign where the costs of television advertising are high. Articles routinely referred to Horton and often, but not always, his race. In some cases they also referred to the race of his

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victim. While the overt purpose of the commercials was to attack Dukakis on the issue of crime, it was extensively debated by politicians and within the media whether this was in fact a campaign around race. Some editorial comment and Democrats, black politician Jesse Jackson and Vice Presidential nominee, Lloyd Bentsen, in particular, charged that the Bush campaign was racist. Jackson was quoted as referring to the issue of a black man raping a white woman as ‘raising America’s ‘most horrible psychosexual fears.’

In contrast, the idea that the issue of prison furlough was about race was opposed in a number of editorials, and by the victims of Horton’s attack and Republican figures.

Both during and after the election there was a range of opinions within the media about the impact of the Willie Horton case. Some journalists, like Art Buchwald and Jimmy Breslin, wondered how Bush would thank Horton and called it “Willie Horton’s Inauguration Day.” Breslin, when interviewing Horton, asking him, leadingly, “How does it feel to elect a president?” and claimed that “Willie Horton had more to do with George Bush winning than anyone.” Others, while presenting the idea that the Bush campaign certainly benefited from the use of Horton, did not necessarily ascribe so much responsibility to this factor or, like Wicker, ascribed the Democratic loss as being

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134 Quoted in Krauthammer, "Democratic Scoundrels Shouldn't Cry Racism."


138 Ibid.

139 For example see Clarence Page, "Concern About Crime Needn't Divide Races," St. Louis Post-Dispatch 1989.
about broader issues of race, noting that Bush won no more than 13 per cent of black voters in any part of the country while scoring a huge percentage of the white vote.  

What these debates and discussions within the media demonstrate is the potency of the issue of race within the media in the 1980s, and the contested nature of its representation. Amongst these representations of the Willie Horton saga there was a constant debate about race: whether the use of Willie Horton was to provoke racist reaction, how white versus black voters were different and how closely fears around crime and sex were linked with race.

Following his election, despite the protestations that the Horton issue was not about race, representations in the media showed President-elect Bush attempting to mend his relations with the black community, by meeting with Jesse Jackson, praising Martin Luther King Jr and being “the first president to include a tribute to black music in his inaugural festivities.”

The 1988 Presidential election was not the only one in which race played a role during the Reagan-Bush era, though it was perhaps the most significant. In media representations, race was again a point of discussion in the 1992 Presidential election. In 1992, the St. Louis Post-Dispatch noted that,

[t]he Los Angeles riots have taken America’s attention off less important matters… and shifted the focus to a wider arena where Clinton’s morality appears to outshine a president whose 1988 Willie Horton ad has come to symbolize racial politicking and whose flip-flops on 1991 civil-rights legislation offended many.

142 Chronicle Wire Services, "Bush Calls Dr. King a Hero, Pledges to Fight Bigotry / He Vows to Fulfill 'the Dream'," The San Francisco Chronicle, 17 January 1989.
In contrast, later in the campaign, *The Wall Street Journal* noted that some black political leaders like Jesse Jackson and Charles Rangel were not impressed by Clinton and that there was "a great deal of media attention [on] the apparent split between blacks and Mr. Clinton," but that in reality Clinton was in tune with the new aspirations and ideas of (voting) black Americans which went beyond civil rights.\(^\text{145}\) This idea was reinforced in other articles where it was argued that the concerns of black voters were broader than civil rights alone, and that aspirations and representations had diversified.\(^\text{146}\) The importance of race within electoral politics was also demonstrated through the publication of an article in *Time* in May 1992 which discussed the impact of the 1992 Los Angeles riots, in particular, on the Presidential campaign and the way that images from it may have potentially been used in television advertising.\(^\text{147}\)

Another flare in race and politics was with the failure of David Duke, a former Ku Klux Klan leader, to be elected to the position of Governor of Louisiana. Given his position as a Klan leader, it was inevitable that the election would be highly racially charged, so much so that even President Bush advised people to vote against Duke, a "self-described Republican."\(^\text{148}\) One article depicted black groups as specifically organising against Duke to ensure the defeat.\(^\text{149}\) The construction of the media representation of Duke's electoral failure argues for the positive power of black mobilisation in dealing with the politics of race.

**The Minority Minorities**

While most of the representations around race during the Reagan-Bush presidencies focused on blacks, the depiction of other minorities did have some impact during the period.

\(^\text{145}\) Gaiter, "New Diversity: Many Black Voters Broaden Their Agenda Beyond Civil Rights - Leaders' Strains with Clinton Obscure Significant Shift to Middle Class Concerns - Economic, Not Racial, Issues."

\(^\text{146}\) See for example Gregory Freeman, "Voices of Blacks Have Diversified," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 15 May 1992.


\(^\text{148}\) Larry Peterson, "Parties Try to Score Points on Duke's Loss // Right, Left Say It's Trouble for the Other," *The Orange County Register*, 18 November 1991.

The concerns of Hispanic Americans began to penetrate media representations by the early 1990s with articles on issues such as complaints of discrimination against Spanish speaking employees and those with accents\(^\text{150}\) and about the growth and diversity of the Hispanic population.\(^\text{151}\) One article examined the relations between blacks and the Hispanic community in Washington following a series of riots in Hispanic areas in 1991. Contemplating the tensions between the growing Hispanic community and the black community, the article notes,

\[\text{[i]}\text{n just over 20 years, blacks, long the disadvantaged minority fighting for social and political rights, have become the people in power coping with the anger of a different minority. There could well be more such confrontations ahead in American cities as the Hispanic population grows. By the end of this decade, there will be more young Hispanics in the country than young blacks.}\(^\text{152}\)

This theme was also explored with respect to the relations between Jews and blacks, and, in particular, the teachings of Louis Farrakhan.\(^\text{153}\) These articles referred to the good relationships between blacks and Jews during the civil rights campaigns during the Sixties, and implied that it was a bad thing for both groups that this had broken down.

There were also some articles and television reports which recognised the growing Asian-American population. The Asian population was viewed quite differently to blacks, with articles pointing to the academic and economic achievements of Asian-Americans and


\(^{153}\) See for example "Farrakhan's Fanaticism," St. Louis Post-Dispatch, 11 June 1988 and Philip Dine, "Black, Jewish Ties at Centre of Talks," St. Louis Post-Dispatch, 1 April 1990.
the notion of them as a "model minority." Interracial conflict emerged as a strong theme in the early 1990s, particularly in conflicts between shop-owning Koreans and the black communities they served. The boycotting of a Korean shop in Brooklyn and interrelated racial violence was discussed on a television special dealing with murder of the black Yusef Hawkins in Bensonhurst and also in interviews with black gang members following the Los Angeles riots. On both of these programs the idea that Korean shop owners exploited black communities or stymied black attempts at economic independence were strongly articulated. Gang members “Bone” and “Little Monster” commented that Korean liquor store owners “send their children to college on our beer.” In the special on Bensonhurst, the black Rev Daughty argued strongly that these economic concerns and the sense that the Koreans were disrespectful towards black people, that they had taken on white attitudes towards black people, led to the actions against them.

Amongst the articles I examined, few focused on tensions between whites and other minorities, rather there was a strong focus on the tensions between blacks and other minority groups. This approach of pitting minorities against each other in representations tended to deflect and conceal the real problems for minorities in the most important arena of competition, against white people. This approach also shifted blame away from a structure which disenfranchises minorities and rather implies it was their fault, because they cannot even get along with each other.

**The overall media picture**

Overall the way issues of race were viewed during the 1980s and early 1990s was with tense concern. The American media liked to deplore racism while still focusing on the problems of drugs and violence within (particularly) black communities with a degree of

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155 “Bensonhurst (Special Call-in Edition),” *The Eleventh Hour*, WNET-TV, 15/05/1990.

156 “Stop the Madness: Los Angeles Riots.”

157 Ibid.

158 “Bensonhurst (Special Call-in Edition).”

159 The discussions of the murder of Yusef Hawkins, mentioned above, also tended to focus heavily on the Italian-American nature of the men involved in the killing.
While this condemnation of what was going on was often voiced through the quotes of the black communities themselves, media representations did tend to perpetuate the differences between the white and black communities and ensure that issues like crime and violence were seen to be issues of the entire black community, while white crime tended to be shown in isolation.

The Eighties, the Sixties and Racial Representation

Looking across the films that I am considering and comparing with other feature film representations of race during the period, there are a number of areas in which there are coherent relationships, as well as some distinct differences. Similarly, the representations do relate to the way the media more broadly was representing issues around race, though again there are some absences and some interesting emphases. In this section of the chapter I want to draw all this together, looking back at the representations in the films about the Sixties and considering them in the context of other representations of blacks from the Reagan-Bush era.

One of the most notable approaches to race in my selection of films, as I have noted above, is the absence of representation of blacks and other racial minorities in so many of the films. This clearly corresponds with representation in film more broadly during the 1980s and early 1990s. While, as discussed above, there were a number of incursions into representations of non-Anglo types during this period, most popular entertainment remained devoid of blacks, Latinos and Asians. This changed gradually during the 1990s, and the appearance of black characters in both television and film became more regular by the 2000s, including in unusual roles such as superheroes. Representation of Hispanic Americans was extremely sketchy during the 1980s and it is not surprising there is so little of it in the films I am examining.

Unlike the way that black stars emerged in mainstream Hollywood films of the 1980s, few of the films in my selection rely on a black star in a white world approach. The one exception is the use of Danny Glover in *Flight of The Intruder*. Already a star from his role in films like *Lethal Weapon* (1987) and *The Color Purple*, his position as a black
commanding officer amongst white airmen is explained by his star status. In contrast, Dennis Haysbert who stars with Michelle Pfeiffer in *Love Field*, was not a major star at the time, having worked previously primarily in small television roles. His position in *Love Field* is clearly a black role but one which bears little relation to the kind of roles played by actors like Eddie Murphy and Whoopi Goldberg where they were isolated representations of blackness making life better (or at least more amusing) for the whites around them. Denzel Washington was certainly a star by the time he appeared in *Malcolm X*, but like Angela Basset and Laurence Fishburne in *What's love got to do with it?* was playing a black role and a historical black figure in a black milieu.

I have discussed the fact that civil rights and affirmative action were largely considered to have gone backwards during the Reagan-Bush era. This lack of positive focus at a political level is reflected in the low level of attention given to these issues in feature films. There are very few films both from my selection and from the 1980s and early 1990s which deal with these issues, and in these few the question of civil rights is dealt with from very particular angles. *Mississippi Burning* is a film primarily about racial violence, rather than civil rights. This accords with the significant focus on racially motivated violence which was seen in the media during the Reagan-Bush period. While *Malcolm X* has a somewhat confused message about civil rights, it begins with the strong emphasis on racially motivated violence through the depiction of the Rodney King issue. Again here it is significant that the issue of Rodney King is so strongly tied to the issue of civil rights because of the resonance and impact of that incident and its resulting trials in the US. This link is made in the print media coverage of the incident, but not as strongly as it is in the beginning of this film. Generally the media coverage skirts the issue of civil rights per se, although much of it does imply the racially motivated nature of the incident. In both *Mississippi Burning* and *Malcolm X*, a great deal of the emphasis appears to be on racially motivated violence which was well covered in the media during the Reagan-Bush era, rather than on the less politically popular (during the 1980s and early 1990s) aims of the civil rights movement.
Malcolm X also picks up another theme in the media coverage of issues around civil rights, in that it links the battle in the US from the Sixties with the one which was still occurring in the 1980s and early 1990s in South Africa. Protesters in Soweto are depicted with pictures of Malcolm X, in a scene which appears to have been staged for the film, and Nelson Mandela appears in the film at the end, quoting Malcolm X to a classroom of black children. The film cuts from Mandela to Malcolm X himself to say “by any means necessary.” By 1992, Mandela had renounced the violent approach to winning political rights and was focused on peaceful means to achieve the outcomes that he quotes Malcolm X as seeking “to be given the rights of a human being.” Here again, with the use of Mandela we seen some of the confusion in the message regarding civil rights and black struggle which is apparent throughout Malcolm X.

There was one major mainstream film about civil rights which was made in 1990 which I have not looked as part of my film selection because it fell outside my definition of the Sixties. Set during the Montgomery bus boycott of 1955-56, The Long Walk Home (1990) shows the manner in which one white woman and her black maid reacted to the boycotts. While the maid, Odessa, is played by Whoopi Goldberg and is given some agency within the film, primarily it is the story of her white employer, Miriam Thompson and what she does to help promote civil rights. In this, it is similar to Mississippi Burning where we see the story of civil rights changing from one of black empowerment and action, to being one where benevolent white people have helped blacks. Hairspray also engages in this to an extent, with the white Tracy Turnblad acting as the main spokesperson for black rights, although here there is a greater element of participation by the black characters themselves as we see the actions taken by L’il Inez and Motormouth Maybelle. Agency is given to these black characters in a way that does not occur in Mississippi Burning. Other films do briefly and vaguely acknowledge the activism of black people in the late Sixties with short, mostly visual references to Black Panthers and Black Power in 1969, Born on the 4th of July and Forrest Gump.

This lack of focus on civil rights has been evident more generally in mainstream film, since the Sixties. Very few films have been made which feature the civil rights movement.
in any meaningful way and, as discussed above, many focus on white actions rather than black ones. For example, another civil rights film, *Ghosts of Mississippi* (1997), while featuring Whoopi Goldberg as the widow of murdered black activist Medgar Evers, is primarily a story of the transformation of the white attorney, played by Alec Baldwin, who brings Evers’ murderer to trial twenty years later. While television has ventured a little more often into representation of issues around civil rights, it remains a relatively no-go area for Hollywood film. The rise of a number of viable black stars who could play the role of black civil rights figures does not seem to have impacted on this reluctance, and *Malcolm X* remains the only major Hollywood film to deal with the black role in the civil rights movement. One could theorise that the reason for this absence is the fact that the civil rights issues are not yet closed, that the racial conflict still apparent within the United States is too raw to ensure that there would be an audience for this kind of film, putting in doubt the box office returns of such a production. Certainly during the Reagan-Bush era, racial conflict was still occurring at political, judicial and street levels, impacting on the likely commercial viability of films dealing with this issue. It may also be that mainstream American filmmakers are uncomfortable still with placing black males at the centre of political power—after all, *Malcolm X* was made by a black filmmaker.

As noted above, racial violence was a strong feature of media representations of blacks during the Reagan-Bush era. The depiction of racial violence occurs strongly at the beginning of *Malcolm X* and then recurs periodically within the film, particularly in Malcolm’s narration of what had happened to his father. The second half of the film focuses more on black-on-black violence and the tensions between Malcolm and his

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160 *Panther* (1995), directed by Mario Van Peebles, focused on the Black Panther movement and the actions on people like Bobby Seale, Huey Newton and Eldridge Cleaver. It was an independently made film backed by a British production company and grossed $6.8m and was ranked 137th for the year ([http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=panther.htm accessed 29/09/2007](http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=panther.htm)). Hence, while not completely obscure, it was not a major mainstream film. Notably it was directed and written by black men.

161 Recently television has been willing to place the ultimate political power in the hands of black men, with the television series *24* using two different black presidents. In contrast to the white president featured in the intervening year, the Presidents Palmer (brothers) are shown to be strong and decisive and morally good. There have been few examples of this in film, although we occasionally are given minor black political figures like Mayor Marvin Berry in the *Back To The Future* films who is used as a demonstration of the progression of the position of black people from the 1950s to the 1980s and then into the future.
former Nation of Islam brothers. The idea of black-on-black violence was forcefully explored in the blaxploitation films. During the 1980s it was minimised because of the tendency of mainstream Hollywood films to isolate black characters. Even black criminals were often shown to be acting against white characters. The “Ghetto” films of the early 1990s like New Jack City and some Spike Lee films did pick up on this notion of black-on-black violence, as did Colors (1988) which was about two police men dealing with gang violence in Los Angeles. What’s love got to do with it? also features black-on-black violence, but within the context of domestic violence. In general, however, violence in the films that I am considering, like in the reportage in the media at the time, was more about interracial violence, and usually the violence committed by whites against black. This is shown strongly in Love Field where Paul Cater is attacked by passing whites merely for being black and traveling with a white woman. We are also shown the threats and attacks of the racist white protesters, in Hairspray, when they confront the black and white integration supporters outside the fun park where the Corny Collins show is being filmed. Mississippi Burning and A Bronx Tale have white violence against blacks at their core. Mississippi Burning, however, actually does focus as much on the violence these whites will commit against other whites who support civil rights as on violence against blacks. A Bronx Tale depicts a whole range of violence, but it is the violence against blacks by whites which is shown to be particularly senseless and motivated purely by hate.

This focus on violence against blacks by whites was very much in line with media reporting about these issues during the period, where there was a strong focus on this kind of activity. The depiction of young men from an Italian neighbourhood engaging in violence against black within A Bronx Tale, for example, has strong similarities with cases of racial violence during the 1980s, particularly the murder of Yusef Hawkins. It does, however, sharply contrast with mainstream films, where racist white-on-black violence did not tend to be depicted. One exception was The Color Purple which was set in the past. The film depicts a racist attack by the Sheriff on Sofia for being black and disrespectful. In general, however, mainstream films set in the present during the period did not deal with racial violence against blacks, despite the focus on it within the media.
The selected films also reflect the theme of black people and drug use. As I noted above, this is a strong theme in films such as *Malcolm X*, *Lean on Me*, *What's love got to do with it?* and *Platoon* where black people and drug use are strongly linked. Other than *Platoon*, these films reflect the idea that was apparent in some of the reportage on this area, emphasising the idea that drug use by black people was even more oppressive than the racism of whites. In *Malcolm X* the focus was particularly on cocaine. This links directly with the 1980s and early 1990s when cocaine, particularly in the form of crack, was being reported as the drug most impacting on blacks. This was also seen in films like *Boyz n the Hood* and *New Jack City* as well as *Deep Cover* (1992).

Another concept that translates from media coverage into some of these films is the idea that wealth can overcome racial discrimination. We see this in *Forrest Gump* and *Lean on Me* in particular where the notion that wealth and self reliance will overcome other barriers is strong. In *Lean on Me* this idea is both in the past and the present, with the depiction of Clark’s union role. In these films the focus on individual success and money as the key to overcoming racism appears to be more a reflection of the time of the films’ production than of their setting. The Sixties, in contrast, saw a much greater focus on the need for collective civil and political rights to overcome black oppression.

The films about the Sixties had a much stronger focus on issues of interracial romance and sex than either mainstream films of the same period or the media more generally. The first half of *Malcolm X* featured interracial romance heavily, showing it as part of Malcolm’s downfall, with the chaste and sensible black girlfriend contrasted with the wanton white woman who is shown as an enabler for crime and drugs. In contrast, *A Bronx Tale*, *Love Field* and *Hairspray* provide positive depictions of interracial romance, even though it requires the characters to defy conventions and the considerations of others. *Born of the Fourth of July* and *Hamburger Hill* both show interactions between white men and non-white prostitutes (Mexican and Vietnamese respectively). The

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162 *Deep Cover* features Laurence Fishburne playing an undercover cop who has to infiltrate a drug operation. During the course of his investigation he becomes deeply involved in the drug scene and the codes of good and bad become blurry.
depiction in *Born of the Fourth of July* of the Mexican prostitutes and their relationships with the veterans is complex: they are shown as both caring and venal and treated as inferior even by these incomplete men. In *Hamburger Hill* sex with the Vietnamese prostitutes is shown through a more traditional lens of orientalism: these women are exotic and different, not given voice and there only to serve the soldiers. In *Forrest Gump* it is the white prostitutes who are shown to be uncaring while Captain Dan finally finds happiness in an interracial relationship with his Vietnamese wife. *Full Metal Jacket* problematises the interactions with Vietnamese prostitutes with its depictions of prostitutes as business-like and demanding, gum chewing and not at all romantic. The prostitutes are in fact far less eroticised within the frame of the film than the wounded sniper, who is depicted lying prone and begging to be killed. In contrast, most mainstream films of the Reagan-Bush era tended to avoid any romance for black characters, let alone interracial romance. While there were a few exceptions, generally the issue was not addressed in films in any significant extent. This appears to be one area in which the film set in the Sixties did differ from mainstream film.

Overall while the films I consider neither consistently correspond to, or differ from, the depictions in the mainstream media, there was certainly some impact from the present on the representations of the past. Clearly, some of the themes that were central in media coverage of issues around race during the Reagan-Bush era are depicted in these films. Civil rights and segregation are addressed, but not in any comprehensive sense. While these issues were constantly discussed in the media during the 1980s and 1990s, the prevailing political players were not supportive of on-going political advances in these areas. Violence against blacks is featured strongly in the films, and maintains its political significance as it does within the media of the period. Drugs are also associated with black people, and generally in a negative way. There are some visual references to race riots, although these are generally restricted to background television footage in films like *The Indian Runner* and *The Doors*. As in the media, the concept of economic independence and self help was shown to play an important role in overcoming disadvantage and discrimination.
The depiction of race did differ in a number of ways from the manner in which race was represented in Hollywood films of the period more generally. While the films reflected the broader Hollywood offerings by generally excluding or minimising representations of difference, where black people were featured they were not usually as someone’s buddy, or as a stand alone black character in a white world. In almost all films where there was any significant representation of black characters they were given political and social context, whether it was as black soldiers complaining about not being able to get desk jobs in Vietnam, or a black dancer protesting against segregation on the Corny Collins show. While the films did tend to privilege white actions over blacks, even in the arena of civil rights, a number of them did present blacks with agency. In general black characters are presented as fully rounded characters and there are few stereotypes used, separating these films distinctly from most of the films made at the time. The representation of the past is thus distinct from the way the present was being depicted at the time.

In my concluding chapter I will examine this question of how the films about the Sixties were influenced or impacted by the present in which they were produced and draw some conclusions about the way the present and the past interact in representations of feature films.
Chapter 5 - What does it all mean?

The research I have outlined in the preceding chapters identifies the manner in which mainstream Hollywood representations of the Sixties produced during the Reagan-Bush presidencies were influenced by the present in which they were created. I have outlined the present of the 1980s and 1990s through an examination of the broader media representation in the particular areas of sex, Vietnam and race which co-existed with the Hollywood representations.

In this concluding chapter I will focus on a broad consideration of the representations within the 36 films. I wish then to consider whether these films are a form of collective memory. To effectively make this judgment, I will provide a discussion of what collective memory is, with some consideration of how it contrasts with two other primary modes of representation of the past—history and nostalgia. I can then use this definition of collective memory to return to the representations within the films and their relationship with the present, to provide evidence of the extent to which the representations are collective memory.

The films

The films do not entirely do what one might expect of films about the Sixties. In Chapter One I discussed tropes of the Sixties, which included the sexual revolution, civil rights, the Kennedys, space travel, Woodstock, protests, hippies and Vietnam. When I started my research, I imagined that films about the Sixties would centre firmly on these images and ideas. What I found most fascinating is the extent to which they do not. There are a number of films about Vietnam, and Vietnam is a pervasive part of the background of many others of the films. Kennedy’s assassination also is a commonly reoccurring trope: it has its own film, JFK; is the motivator for action in Love Field; and has a presence in films like Mermaids. It is also a silent indicator in other films—while it is never mentioned in Dirty Dancing, the fact that the film is set in the summer of 1963 allows it to sit as a heavy presence over the action. Similarly, there are implied references within
A Perfect World which is set a week or two prior to the assassination. Noteworthy though is that while the event of the assassination features regularly, the Kennedys themselves are not featured in any of the films made during the Reagan-Bush period, with the exception of Forrest Gump when Forrest visits the White House. There is one film about the space program, The Right Stuff, but beyond that the greatest reference to the moon landing is some archival footage in 1969. Similarly hippies, protests and the sexual revolution get scant coverage, and the only mention of Woodstock is in The Doors when the band complains they did not get invited. While the civil rights movement is addressed in Malcolm X and Mississippi Burning, major components of it are given little or no attention across the spectrum of the films.

This presents an initial revelation. While the general understanding of the past is influenced by what is seen on film as I discuss in Chapter One, these tropic ideas about the Sixties are not consistently obvious in films from the Reagan-Bush era. They are, however, also not contradicted. Rather than these tropes being highlighted within the films, they are part of the cultural competence that the audience needs to bring to the films to make sense of it. By this I mean that, for example, if the audience did not understand the significance of the Kennedys and their tropic meaning, aspects of films like Mermaids, Dirty Dancing and Love Field would not be as comprehensible. Love Field would make no sense if one did not understand the way black people were treated in the Southern states of the US during the Sixties. What we see within films about the Sixties are layers of implied understanding, of knowledge the audience can decode without it being spelt out to them. This is quite different from films about the distant or more unfamiliar past where there is often a much greater level of exposition and explanation. The films about the Sixties do not need to explain what a beehive hair-do is or why someone has one. Instead the beehive is a symbol in itself which serves to give the audience a contextual understanding, drawing on implied knowledge and cultural

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1 This difference is even notable amongst the films I am considering. Two films which deal with aspects of the Vietnam War with which the audience would be expected to have a lower level of knowledge have greater exposition at the beginning of the film. The unfamiliarity of the life of Vietnamese villagers and their cultural concepts see much more detailed opening front titles and greater exposition throughout Heaven and Earth. Similarly, the anticipated lack of understanding of the naval air role in North Vietnam sees a greater level of exposition in Flight of the Intruder.
codes. As Roland Barthes points to men’s hair fringes in Mankiewicz’s Julius Caesar (1953) as being “the label of Roman-ness” so too is the beehive a symbol of “Sixties-ness.” Within the films I am considering this applies not only to simple visual identifiers like costuming, but also to broader ideas (like segregation) and historical events (like the Kennedy assassination). The tropes I mention above form a background to the action of the films, a background which assumes an understanding of these ideas about the Sixties which should already be familiar to the audience. Here we see a clear impact of the relationship between the Sixties and the Reagan-Bush era impacting on the manner of representation. These tropes of the Sixties do not need to be represented in the films of the 1980s and early 1990s, because a director will understand that the audience has an implicit understanding of them. By not depicting many of the key tropes of the Sixties, the films do not rebut or deny their existence, they are instead using them and building the assumptions of the tropes into their background. It is therefore possible that in the future, if these tropes of the Sixties are not as well known or promulgated, aspects of these films may be much less accessible to audiences.

The manners in which the films represent the Sixties do not all carry equal weight however. It is clear that some of the films do engage more with the tropes of the Sixties, and, because of their timing, popularity or subject matter have become influencers of other representations, to the extent that one could argue they represent the frame to which all other films about the period refer. For example, the (chronologically) first film which I consider is The Big Chill. This film, set in the 1980s, contains many of the tropic notions of the Sixties—drugs, broad and open attitudes to sex, Vietnam, protest and idealism and rock and roll—and, it could be argued, sets the background framing of the social and political attitudes of the Sixties which suffuses the ideas within all other films about the Sixties. Similarly, Platoon sets the framework for Vietnam and has proved to have a greater level of resonance culturally than all of the other Vietnam films. It is difficult to establish exactly why these films hold a greater level of overall influence than others. Significantly, perhaps because of the politics of the 1980s and 1990s, there is not a film which has the same iconic impact with respect to depictions of civil rights

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and race—both *Mississippi Burning* and *Malcolm X* were considered too flawed by critics and analysts and did not seem to have the same cultural resonance that occurred with *The Big Chill* and *Platoon*.

In addition to *Platoon*, the films about Vietnam are the ones which engage most fully with the tropes of the Sixties. The ideas of the mysterious, faceless enemy, the lurking dangers of the jungle, the pointlessness of the fighting and the treatment of returning veterans are all present and all equate with the broader tropes of Vietnam. As I discussed in Chapter Three, some of these are features, not just of Vietnam films, but of war films more generally; in particular, the idea of a distanced, othered enemy. The main difference between the Vietnam films, particularly those made during the Reagan-Bush era, and other war films is in their total nihilism about the war and its purpose. The idea of Vietnam as an unwinnable, pointless quagmire which pervades the films did in fact accord closely with on-going media discourse around the fears of US intervention in other countries such as those of Central America, where the objectives and outcomes were not clear and the support from the local people was shaky at best. There are exceptions to this. *Flight of the Intruder* does feature the themes of fighting and sacrifice for one’s buddies, while it also reflects on the pointlessness of a contained war where it is not possible to go after the real targets. Even *Good Morning Vietnam* presents an implicit question about a war when the people who the American soldiers are supposed to be helping are so quick to turn against them.

On the other hand, the focus on the pointlessness of the war is somewhat at odds with the broader political attempts to rehabilitate the war that were occurring contemporaneously. Notably, the focus on the treatment of veterans within the films accords with broader media representation and the general political attempts to memorialise and celebrate Vietnam veterans during the 1980s and early 1990s. All emphasise the mistreated and overlooked nature of Vietnam veterans which were present during the Reagan-Bush era. Thus it would appear that during the Reagan-Bush era it was the political approach to rehabilitation of the war which ran counter to the prevailing cultural understanding of the war as I illustrated in Chapter Three. While
news articles baulked at the notion of creating Vietnam-like “quagmires” fighting in other countries where either the goals of the conflict or the support of the people of that country were not certain, Presidents Reagan and Bush attempted to change the understanding of Vietnam as a conflict, with only limited success. So here the films about Vietnam were reflecting cultural understandings, rather than the line being pushed by the political elites at the time.

The representations of the Sixties within the films also demonstrate a break from the dominant political rhetoric of the 1980s and 1990s about sex. As I explore in Chapter Two, conservative political discourse during the 1980s in particular, was aimed at re-imposing a more conservative approach to sex. The US government and the governments of individual states enforced bans on artists, sex education and attempted to limit abortion to the extent possible. In comparison, of all the depictions of sexual activity within the films, only Forrest Gump and The Doors come close to representing the ideas of sexual liberation gone too far that appeared regularly in the discussions of the dominant right-wing politicians during the Reagan-Bush era. While Forrest Gump tried to argue for a link between AIDS and the sexual revolution in the same way commentators like Horowitz and Collier did, The Doors framed the sexual activity of Jim Morrison as personally destructive to him. In contrast, other members of the band appeared to have stable, normal family existences. As I discuss in Chapter Two, most of the sexual activity within the films is focused on innocent sexual awakenings, first experiences and is usually without significant consequences for the participants. This contrasts both with my expectations prior to the commencement of my research and the ideas around sex which I have argued dominated the political debate during the Reagan-Bush period. In contrast, given the general ages of directors, the manner in which sex is depicted could more closely reflect the recollections (mediated as they are) of those involved in the filmmaking process of sex in the Sixties.

The 1980s and early 1990s also saw media and political representations closely linking sex and danger, particularly with the emergence of AIDS as an issue beyond the male homosexual community. As highlighted in Chapter Two, people from pop stars and
comedians to politicians were characterising sex as an area of danger and fear. This prevailing idea of sex and danger appeared in many contemporary films, not through depictions of AIDS, but in the repeated themes of revenge, murder and sado-masochism in the context of sexual encounters. Films set in the Sixties, in contrast, generally viewed sex in a more romantic and innocent light, even when they were set in the sexual revolution period of the late Sixties. This approach can be viewed in a number of ways. It could be seen that by dealing with sex in this period in this way, the films are reflecting on the idea that sex was simpler, less complicated and less dangerous in the past. The early Sixties setting of many of these films could be seen as creating an argument that the sexual revolution was not necessary, or has made things more complicated. This idea is problematised, however, in films like *Peggy Sue Got Married*, *Dirty Dancing* and *Mermaids*, where lack of knowledge about and access to safe contraception and abortion can be seen as putting woman in difficult and sometimes dangerous positions. Thus there would appear to be an ambivalence within the films about sex and the changes in sexual activities since the Sixties: there is positiveness about the pleasures of the innocence of sex at the time, but a concern that there still was a need for a greater openness around sexual education.

The representations of race and racial issues again reflect some of the prevailing ideas and associations that were evident in the media representations, and yet the films resist the dominant political direction. As discussed in Chapter Four, links between blacks and drugs and interracial violence appear within the films, mirroring many of the discussions which appeared in the media during the Reagan-Bush years. While the Reagan-Bush Presidencies tended not to advance issues such as affirmative action and political civil rights, the films which showed civil rights did emphasise the need to change attitudes about race. What is interesting though is that there were so few films about the civil rights movement. In Chapter Four I demonstrate the limited range of roles and, even the limited number of appearances of blacks, Hispanics and Asians in films made during the 1980s and 1990s, particularly if one does not count the films of a few big stars such as Eddie Murphy. Similarly, the films set in the Sixties generally did not feature non-white characters. Overall, the lack of focus on civil rights and black people more generally
reflected the lack of political focus: during the Reagan presidency black rights were not a priority for the administration. They more awkwardly appeared during Bush’s term with Supreme Court rulings pushing affirmative action back into the hands of legislators. Here, however, Bush continued to try and avoid the issue. The one film amongst my group which is focused directly on the civil rights struggle from a black perspective, *Malcolm X*, was released in 1992, following this legislative action and also following the Rodney King saga. It is also noteworthy that this is the only mainstream film made by a black director about the Sixties during the 1980s and 1990s.

So overall, the films seem to pick up on predominant cultural ideas of the 1980s and early 1990s but without specifically reflecting the contemporaneous political discourses. As such they are not vehicles for polemics, but are engaging with the ideas about the Sixties which permeated US society at the time, like the notion that Vietnam veterans had been poorly treated. Some of the issues and events they highlight are those which appear in the media during the Reagan-Bush era, rather than necessarily being those which dominated the Sixties themselves. While the representations within the films do have some similarities to the way other films made at the same time depict these issues, they have also forged clear differences. There are no black buddy films set in the Sixties, or isolated blacks in a white milieu. Similarly there are no crazed women seeking revenge for sexual abandonment. The Vietnam films, while adopting a number of the generic conventions of combat films, are clearly differentiated in the driving motivation of the soldiers involved and the comment on the war itself. The films are clearly influenced by the period in which they are made, but not always in a consistent way, and do not necessarily wholly subsume and then reflect dominant ideas. As I have discussed throughout the thesis, this may be for a number of reasons. A film which does not adopt the prevailing political notions may be attempting to actively resist or refute them. One could make a case that a film like *Hairspray* attempts to do this by depicting an agenda for black rights which goes against the eroding of these rights which seemed to be occurring during the 1980s and 1990s. Alternately, one could argue that the attitudes in *Shag* were reflecting the contents and approach of other teen films at the time and were merely oblivious to the political agendas around sex at the time, rather than actively
resisting. Further closer investigation of individual films would be needed to establish the exact nature of the resistance to or adoption of dominant political discourses within each representation. This thesis has established a broad framework, which further could facilitate further research of this nature.

Having identified how the films relate, in general terms, to other representations of the time in which they created and establishing that they are indeed impacted to differing extents, I will now look briefly at the notion of collective memory. My contention is that the manner in which these films engage with the past and yet remain engaged with the present makes these films a representation of collective memory. In order to be able to examine this question I need to return briefly to a discussion of the ideas of others to provide a theoretical framework.

**Collective memory and representations of the past**

Collective memory, as I intend to term it, goes by many names—such as cultural memory or social memory—and is studied across a number of disciplines but I believe it is nonetheless possible to construct a consistent definitional framework which draws on all of these. Collective memory has been one way society has always engaged with the past and, as John Docker and Ann Curthoys point out, the first historians, Herodotus and Thucydides used a mixture of myth, oral history and personal experience amongst the sources for their historical accounts, making their accounts of the past arguably more like what we would understand to be collective memory than modern definitions of history. As Paula Hamilton writes, history and memory until recently were often considered to be the same or "that history is merely official memory, an authorised discourse, and only one of the possible ways that society ‘remembers’ the past." This is not a completely accepted position however, as, on the other hand, in some post-modernist approaches to history, memory is seen as totally separate from history: Pierre Nora, for example, argues that the two are opposite ends of the spectrum, as he puts it

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“[h]istory is perpetually suspicious of memory, and its true mission is to suppress and destroy it.”

In this section, I will discuss collective memory and the characteristics which can be used to define it. I consider that there are five main aspects to collective memory: that collective memory is usually as much about the present as it is about the past; that it is held by more than one person; that it is socially constructed; that it provides identity for a group; and that it is a site of significant discursive struggle. I will also examine how this contrasts with other approaches to considering the past such as history and nostalgia. I note that individual memory and collective memory are not the same, however, as the discussion below will demonstrate, there are many similarities between the two.

Gary Edgerton writes that “proponents of memory studies...are most concerned with how and why a remembered version is being constructed at a particular time...[rather] than whether a specific rendition of the past is historically correct and reliable above all else.” James Fentress and Chris Wickham point out that while collective memory makes “factual claims” about the past “the question of whether we regard these memories as historically true will often turn out to be less important than whether they [the holders of such memories] regard their memories as true.” Similarly Sturken argues that,

it is important not to allow discussions of memory to bog down in questions of reliability. Memory is crucial to the understanding of a culture precisely because it indicates collective desires, needs, and self-definitions. We need to ask not whether a memory is true but rather what its telling reveals about how the past affects the present.

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8 Sturken, Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering, p2.
In collective memory the emphasis on truth is about whether the collective for whom the memory exists believes in its truth, not about its truthfulness in and of itself.

This contrasts with one of our key ideas about history. History does involve narrativity as there is a need for historians to fill in the gaps between the pieces of evidence they have found to bring them together to tell a story. As E H Carr points out, the historian must make choices about which facts to use, which story to tell. The choice of facts is not self evident, but requires a decision by the writer, the necessity to establish these basic facts rests not on any quality in the facts themselves, but on an *a priori* decision of the historian....It used to be said that the facts speak for themselves. This is, of course, untrue. The facts speak only when the historian calls on them: it is he who decides to which facts to give the floor, and in what order and context.9

It is, however, the emphasis on an evidentiary basis, on having facts to weave a story from, which is the primary differentiation between history and collective memory. Unlike history, collective memory does not concern itself with the origin of the evidence, instead it is about who believes in its truth. This idea is important when we examine films, whose evidentiary basis is seldom transparent. Nonetheless, a film about the past loses credibility with its audience unless the audience is willing to believe in the truth of its representation of the past.

A key concept of both collective and individual memory relates closely to the central investigation of my thesis. A very basic concept of memory is that it is not necessarily as much about the past as it is about the present. As Maurice Halbwachs states, with collective memory “everything seems to indicate that the past is not preserved but is reconstructed on the basis of the present."10 In his paper on memory, David Thelan discusses the memory of individuals, writing that “the starting place for the construction

of an individual recollection is a present need or circumstance." The human mind does not store memories in the same way as a computer does, allowing them to be retrieved, unchanged, at any time. As Thelan highlights, once psychologists concluded that "memory is a process of creative construction, biologists discovered that the brain had no central storage facility to hold bits of information." Rather, memory comes from a system of circuits or loops that facilitate associations between things. The key to memory is thus in these associations between things, rather than in exact recall, and it is the role of these associations which is emphasised further in collective memory.

Other theorists on memory have similar approaches to the idea that memory is creatively constructed. Ernest Schachtel states that,

> [m]emory as a function of the living personality can be understood only as a capacity for the organization and reconstruction of past experiences and impressions in the service of present needs, fears, and interests.

Similarly, Michael Schudson argues that memory "selects and distorts in the service of present interests." Here Schudson is talking about not merely personal or individual memory, but collective memory. This appears to be one clear point of similarity between individual memory and collective memory, leading to the argument that collective memory functions in much the same manner as individual memory. Barry Schwartz illuminates these ideas about collective remembrance writing that,

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12 Ibid., p1120.
Recollection of the past is an active, constructive process, not a simple matter of retrieving information. To remember is to place a part of the past in the service of conceptions and needs of the present.\(^{15}\)

Schwartz’s work on commemoration shows the impact of the present on the way the past is remembered collectively. He argues that,

[the magnetism of social origins resides not simply in their priority and ordering power but in the meaning of this priority and ordering power, as defined by later generations and in light of their own experiences, problems, and needs. While the object of commemoration is usually to be found in the past, the issue which motivates its selection and shaping is always to be found among the concerns of the present.\(^{16}\)]

Hamilton takes this point further arguing that “all memory is subject to structures of power in any society.”\(^{17}\) A shift, therefore, in present interests or in the power structure of a society can significantly impact on the manner in which the past is remembered.

Wulf Kansteiner argues that collective memory is much more susceptible to these kinds of changes than history, and that, in fact, this privileging of the contemporary is one of the differences between history and memory. One can value his point of view by considering the limitations that evidence places on the revising of history, which collective memory, which de-emphasises proof in favour of belief, can avoid. Further, the importance of associations in building collective memory means that the relationship with the contemporary, and the associations this can generate, come to the fore in collective memory. He writes,

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\(^{16}\) Ibid., p395.

Collective memory is not history, though it is sometimes made from similar material. It is a collective phenomenon but it only manifests itself in the actions and statements of individuals. It can take hold of historically and socially remote events but often privileges the interests of the contemporary. It is as much a result of conscious manipulation as unconscious absorption and it is always mediated.\textsuperscript{18}

He believes that collective memory develops from shared communications about the past and that its meanings are firmly based within the social world. National memory can be influenced by the experiences of small groups, but only “if they command the means to express their visions, and if their vision meets with compatible social or political objectives and inclinations among other important social groups.”\textsuperscript{19} This represents another difference between representations which are history and ones which are collective memory. History can be written by an individual, but collective memory must be based on the widely held views of a group or society. These views may have had their origins, in part, in a history written by an individual, but must have then been reinforced and repeated before they could be considered to be collective memory.

Similarly, a record of collective memory can be made by an individual, however it is only a representation of the individual’s interpretation of the collective’s memory. Each individual will experience collective memory slightly differently, although obviously the themes and overall direction remain the same.

Leading from this idea that collective memory must be a position held by more than one person is the next defining characteristic of memory generally, and collective memory in particular, that it is socially constructed. As we can see in Schwartz’s work discussed above, the present interests that collective memories are influenced by are the interests of social groups, and collective memories are produced in and by social activity, rather than merely originating in the mind of an individual. Fentress and Wickham see what


\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., p187-188.
they term "social memory" as being completely grounded in and critical to social experience,

we can usually regard social memory as an expression of collective experience: social memory identifies a group, giving it a sense of its past and defining its aspirations for the future.\textsuperscript{20}

This idea that collective memory is held by, and often is a defining feature of, a group is thus another critical component of the definition of collective memory which I will discuss a little further on.

Fentress and Wickham see little distinction between personal and social memory, viewing the two as mixed and memory as an essentially "social fact."\textsuperscript{21} This does not, however, completely exclude the personal from social or collective memory, nor imply that everyone's memory is essentially the same. Lewis Coser points out that while Halbwachs argues that memory is a socially constructed notion rather than a given, he also demonstrates that it is not "some mystical group mind."\textsuperscript{22} It is individuals who remember, and therefore while collective memory is socially constructed it is necessarily slightly different for every individual. Kansteiner explores this idea, writing,

\textquote{collective memories originate from shared communications about the meaning of the past that are anchored in the life-worlds of individuals who partake in the communal life of the respective collective.}\textsuperscript{23}

He does however believe that some events, like the Holocaust, become, "unencumbered' by actual individual memory," and that these memories which

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{20} Fentress and Wickham, \textit{Social Memory}.pp25-26
  \item \textsuperscript{21} Ibid., p7.
  \item \textsuperscript{23} Kansteiner, "Finding Meaning in Memory: A Methodological Critique of Collective Memory Studies," p188.
\end{itemize}
"transcend the time and space of the events' original occurrence"\textsuperscript{24} are the most collective of memories and the most powerful of collective memories. Importantly it can also supplant individual memory. Sturken quotes Vietnam veteran William Adams talking about his recollection of Vietnam: "what really happened is now so thoroughly mixed up in my mind with what has been said about what happened that the pure experience is no longer there."\textsuperscript{25} I would, however, be reluctant to argue that this kind of broader collectivity removes any difference between individuals. The way that society generally "remembers" the Holocaust, including people who were not alive to experience it or who have no direct individual experience of it, may contain many similarities, but is still always different between each individual.

Schudson takes a different, extreme point of view, arguing against individual memory. He writes "I take the view that, in an important sense, there is no such thing as individual memory... Memory is social."\textsuperscript{26} Schudson views even memories which are "idiosyncratically" located in individual minds as social and cultural due to a number of factors,

(a) they operate through the supra-individual cultural construction of language;
(b) they generally come into play in response to social stimulation, rehearsal or social cues – the act of remembering is itself interactive, prompted by cultural artifacts and social cues, employed for social purposes, and even enacted by cooperative activity; and (c) there are socially structured patterns of recall.\textsuperscript{27}

Schachtel’s writing supports this position to an extent, particularly with respect to the last point. He argues strongly that all memory is socially constructed and that memory of one’s personal past is less reliable than more collective memories. He believes that personal memory in adults is highly conventionalised and "reflects life as a road with occasional signposts and milestones rather than as the landscape through which this road

\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., p189
\textsuperscript{25} Sturken, \textit{Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering}, p121.
\textsuperscript{26} Schudson, "Dynamics of Distortion in Collective Memory," p346-47.
\textsuperscript{27} Ibid., p347
has led. This conventional construction of memory leads to the situation in which "[e]xperience increasingly assumes the form of the cliche under which it will be recalled because this cliche is what conventionally is remembered by others." Schachtel would argue that when someone, for example, remembers their wedding day as the happiest of their life, it is not because it was necessarily thus, but because that was the clichéd expectation on the day which has structured a memory which has been further conventionalised. These kinds of memories, such as the idea of a happy childhood, are, according to Schachtel, myths which "[l]ike most myths... [contain] elements of both truth and illusion."

Collective memory shares with individual memory this mythic structure which contains both elements of truth and illusion, or in Schudson’s words the “socially structured patterns of recall." Thus collective memory is socially constructed around conventions about the past which hold firm. Representations of the past which are collective memory are not, therefore, radical or different interpretations of that past; they are not the work of rogue individuals trying to present an alternative dialogue about the past. Collective memory is the view of the past generally agreed upon by its collective.

As individual memory helps to provide identity for an individual, so collective memory helps to define the identity of a society or group. Here again it is important to note the mutability of both memory and identity. As the identity of a society mutates and develops, so does its memory. This reflects my earlier discussions of the socially constructed nature of memory and the influence of the present on the way the past is constructed. Sturken explains this idea in relation to American culture and identity (she uses the term “cultural” rather than “collective” memory).

American culture is not amnesiac but rather replete with memory... cultural memory is a central aspect of how American culture functions and how the

29 Ibid., p194.
30 Ibid., p199.
31 Schudson, "Dynamics of Distortion in Collective Memory," p347.
nation is defined. The “culture of amnesia” actually involves the generation of memory in new forms, a process often misinterpreted as forgetting. Indeed, memory and forgetting are co-constitutive processes; each is essential to the other’s existence.32

It would, however, be difficult to argue that there is a single American identity which shares the same collective memory. Just as I argued in Chapter 1 with respect to generations, national identity would have subsets within it whose collective memory is different in some respects to that of other subsets—African-American collective memory of the civil rights movement in the Sixties would, for example, differ markedly from that of a right-wing Southern white American, even though they may share common collective memories of other aspects of their national past.

The differing power relations between groups can ensure that one version of collective memory may gain a wider foothold than an other. Returning to the idea that I discussed in Chapter 1 that public discourse is the discourse of elites, it is likely that society will more broadly influenced by the collective memory of those who have greater control of public discourse. This may, however, reinforce the identity of oppressed groups who maintain their own collective memory against official discourses. As Walthall notes, Japanese peasants reinforced collective memory about peasant martyrs by “telling stories about their opposition to ruling officials.”33 Nonetheless, it is important to acknowledge the differences in power and influence of the collective memories of different groups.

Thelan argues that the study of memory is important to the understanding of identities and sees the way memory is constructed as central to this.

32 Sturken, Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering, p.2.
The same questions about the construction of memory can illuminate how individuals, ethnic groups, political parties and cultures shape and reshape their identities—as known to themselves and to others. Those questions can explore how they establish their core identities, how much and what kind of variation they permit around that core, and what they rule out as unacceptable.  

Hamilton notes that the “[d]efining of groups or nations [by themselves] always necessitates a dual process of inclusion and exclusion and remembering the past is a central mechanism of that process.” This again reinforces the position that collective memory has a central role in the provision of identity, particularly at a group level. Examining the way my films have been impacted by the present, one could consider the group identity of many of the directors of these films as baby boomers as influencing their engagement with the collective memory of the Sixties.

While Schwartz does not deny that collective memory can change or that it is influenced by the present, he sees its continuity as one of the keys to its role in providing identity.

Does not every society, however fragmented, require a sense of sameness and continuity with what went before? If beliefs about the past fail to outlive changes in society—especially severe changes such as the postmodern turn—will not society’s very sense of itself be undermined? Society changes incessantly, Durkheim observed, but the collective consciousness endures across generations because old phases remain intact as new ones are superimposed upon them....As individuals acquire knowledge of the past through forebears, common memories endow successive generations with a common heritage, strengthen society’s temporal integration, create links between the living and the dead, and promote consensus over time. There can be no community then which is not a “community of memory,” and there can be no community of memory without the retelling of “constitutive narratives” and the recalling of people who have

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34 Thelan, "Memory and American History," p1118.
exemplified its moral values. Members of true communities live in the past, identify with it, feel it in themselves.36

In arguing this, Schwartz is rebutting post-modern arguments (and those of Nora in particular) that memory has been replaced by nostalgia; that is that “the present is colonized by images valued solely for their capacity to distract and entertain”37 and that metanarratives have disappeared. In contrast he argues that collective memory provides an essential component of identity to societies. This process can be observed in the way that, as a society, Australia collectively remembers the defeat at Gallipoli. This event is part of the collective memory of Australians, providing an on-going generational link. That does not mean that the collective memory has not changed; the way Gallipoli has been remembered has changed significantly depending on present circumstances. Nonetheless, the memory of the event itself is an important aspect of the Australian community of memory, a component of Australian identity.

Jan Assman explains that “cultural” memory, as he terms it, “preserves the store of knowledge from which a group derives an awareness of its unity and peculiarity.”38 From this it follows that for memory to be collective it must be held by more than one person. Collective memories can be held at the level of society or the nation, or at less broad levels, such as by families, ethnic groups, social classes,39 or by groups such as generations or occupational groups.40 Halbwachs writes about collective memory at the level of family and social class as well as religious collective memory. In essence, any group with a constituted identity can share collective memories.

As discussed above, those who have a similar construction of a particular event or past time become a more cohesive group. This corresponds with Feuchtwang’s concept of the caesura I discussed in Chapter One. A group of women whose collective memory of the

37 Ibid., p2.
40 Schudson, "Dynamics of Distortion in Collective Memory," p347.
time before *Roe v Wade* is as a bad time for women, is drawn together as a collective who wish to fight against any attempts to return to that time. Thus the collective memory of a bad time, and the way this was changed provides the group a identifiable sense of its past as the group, and establishes its motivation for the future. It also contributes to the identity of the group by defining what is important to them.

The role of collective memory in the formation of identity is one of the reasons why there is often much at stake in the way the past is remembered collectively. Memory that is mutable, about the present and which impacts on the way a society sees its own identity is bound to be contested regularly. Thus, despite being collectively held, or perhaps because it is, collective memory is a site of significant discursive struggle. This struggle over the past is important because of the implications of our memory of the past for the present. Schudson sees that a key feature of collective memory is that it “at least in liberal pluralistic societies, is provisional, always open to contestation and often actually contested.”

Sturken points out that, because memory has political implications it “both defines a culture and is the means by which its divisions and conflicting agendas are revealed.”

Landsberg notes that not only does collective memory “reinforce a particular group’s identity” but that the “publicizing” of the collective memory of a group through mass culture can “open up those memories and identities to persons from radically different backgrounds.” While I do not necessarily agree with Lansberg’s contention that what she terms “prosthetic” memory which is created in this way is essentially different from collective memory, I do agree that it is clear that mass culture has aided in the spread and reinforcement of collective memories that might have previously been limited to a small group.

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41 Ibid., p361.
In essence then, manifestations of collective memory are representations of the past which are broadly held and believed by groups of individuals. They are constructed and/or imparted to meet some present need of that group and they also help to form the identity of that group. It is likely that these representations are contested by other groups. Collective memory may or may not be entirely faithful to the “facts” of the past, however it represents the truth to the group for whom it is memory.

This understanding of collective memory is important because it provides insight into two of the central questions of my thesis. If the films I am considering can be considered to be collective memory—and I will explore this question in the next section of the chapter—is the manner in which they are impacted by the present related to their position as collective memory? Is it that the films reflect commonly held ideas in order to ensure that the representations of the past they depict are broadly believed? Are some ideas from the present included (or left out) because this accords with the ideas of a particular collective whose memory is being represented?

Before I turn to this consideration, I want to briefly explore the notion of nostalgia, as I think it is important to understand some of the differences between nostalgia and collective memory. While the two are closely linked, there are some differences in emphasis in the representation. Their close relationship has led some to argue that nostalgia has replaced memory or that memory and nostalgia are indistinguishable. I do not believe that this is the case and contend that nostalgia involves a clearly different approach to representing the past from memory.

The original meaning of the term “nostalgia” is as a yearning for, or wish to return to, the past. It had its origins in the idea of homesickness, but has been modified in its use now to most often refer to longing for the near past. The internet is replete with “nostalgia” sites, such as Nostalgia Central which bills itself as “The Premier Internet Guide to the 1950s, 1960s, 1970s and 1980s.” It claims to be “your one stop reference guide through four decades of music, movies, television, pop culture and social..."
history." This and other sites show that the clear focus of nostalgia in common understanding is the relics of popular culture of the past. The common usage of nostalgia has developed to mean a fondness and affection for the recent past and the relics of that past. It is in this idea of affection or fondness that nostalgia first departs from collective memory, which does not necessarily involve a positive or negative view of the past remembered.

Fred Davis points to another key difference between collective memory and nostalgia. He notes that “nostalgic material derives from a personally experienced past,” unlike what he terms “antiquarian feeling.” This stems also from the emotionality of nostalgia; to Davies nostalgia is an emotion, which is quite distinct from the approach to the past of collective memory. While collective memory can provoke emotion, it is not, of itself, an emotional state.

David Lowenthal has noted that a key feature of nostalgia is “the search for a simple and stable past as a refuge from the chaotic present.” While the common understanding of nostalgia as discussed above looks back at the past fondly, a more theoretical view of nostalgia sees it as more reactionary, reflecting a view of the past as superior. This also incorporates this idea of homesickness and a desire to return. This relationship between the past and the present, where the past is seen as simpler and better ensures that there is a caesural contrast with the present. Writing about American Graffiti (1973) in the early 1980s, Jameson noted that,

one tends to feel that for Americans at least, the 1950s remain the privileged lost object of desire—not merely the stability and prosperity of a pax Americana, but

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also the first naïve innocence of the countercultural impulses of early rock-and-roll and youth gangs.\textsuperscript{47}

While this is true, and the 1950s have been a strong source of nostalgic representations of the past, one absence from Jameson’s discussion is the fact that, for those shaping popular culture during the 1970s and 1980s, the 1950s represented the time of their childhood or young adulthood. Similarly, in the 2000s we see an increasing nostalgia for the 1970s and 1980s, the time in which many of those most engaged with popular culture production grew up. This current nostalgia however is different from a representation of the concerns or turmoils of those periods; it is instead focussed on revivals of popular bands, the remaking of popular television programs into major feature films and the recycling of the fashions of the time. This kind of approach to the past risks a simplification of that past, a troping of the past, where everything about the 1970s and 1980s is encapsulated and represented by these nostalgic artefacts. As Jameson writes, periodisation leads to a tendency to “obliterate difference, and to project an idea of the historical period as massive homogeneity”\textsuperscript{48} although this need not be its inevitable impact. Periodising is an extreme form of troping, where an entire period is defined as a series of tropes and difference is pushed aside. As I noted in Chapter One, this tropic effect, where the past is represented in a series of catch-all ideas or images, can replace deeper understandings of a period.

This idea of tropes is implicit in Jameson’s conception of the nostalgic film.

The nostalgic film was never a matter of some old-fashioned ‘representation’ of historical content, but approached the ‘past’ through stylistic connotation, conveying ‘pastness’ by the glossy qualities of the image, and ‘1930s-ness’ or ‘1950s-ness’ by the attributes of fashion…\textsuperscript{49}

\textsuperscript{47} Frederic Jameson, “Postmodernism, Or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism” New Left Review Vol I, No. 146, July-August 1984, p67.
\textsuperscript{48} Jameson, “Postmodernism, Or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism” p56.
\textsuperscript{49} Jameson, “Postmodernism, Or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism” p67.
Nostalgia, according to Jameson, is an approach to the past where style triumphs over content, where the mode of representation of the past has become the past being represented. Thus filmic devices and costuming replace representation of specific ideas or actions from that past. While these stylistic aspects of nostalgia may represent an aspect or element of collective memory, they are not the same thing.

James Berger has noted that the "political uses of nostalgia are said to be inevitably reactionary, serving to link the images of an ideal past to new or recycled authoritarian structures." By this he means that the idea of the past as better can be used to deny the importance of political or social advances. For example, nostalgia for the 1950s' family and family values, disguises and dismisses the social repression of the traditional 1950s family and the social good in the advances of feminism, equal rights for homosexual people and the move away from social conformity. Berger also cites the uses that Nazism made of nostalgia to promote its political and social agendas. However, he is unsatisfied that this is true and argues that nostalgia is,

a form of cultural transmission that can shift in its political and historical purposes, and thus bears a more complex and, potentially, more productive relation to the past that has generally been allowed.

Berger argues that in order for nostalgia to be more complex in this way, it must fuse the traumatic and the redemptive, something which most nostalgic representations of the past fail to do. These political representations of the past which are nostalgic provide a path for the redemption of the present, but one which usually involves a kind of regression to the past or its perceived values. As usually formulated, politically motivated nostalgic representations show a past when things were better and thus imply that a return to that time or its ideals will improve the world as it is. Cultural nostalgia such as trends around the objects of the past, on the other hand, acts to disguise the

51 Berger, “Cultural Trauma and the "Timeless Burst": Pynchon’s Revision of Nostalgia in Vineland” para 2.
conditions of the past. As Rollins notes of the “nostalgic” films featuring Will Rogers made during the 1930s, “the viewer’s psychological “pay-off” from these rural dramas was the opportunity to escape temporarily from the world of ethical confusion, Depression, and impeding war.”\(^{52}\) This escape to the better and simpler is the pay-off from the disguising of the conditions of the present.

There are therefore two ways to consider nostalgia, which are interlinked. It can be seen as a fondness for the past but can also be seen as a desire to return to the past, or at least to the values of the past. Both approaches require the past to be viewed as superior to the present in some way. Nostalgia is thus a particular and more limited form of representation of the past than collective memory and it can be considered separately in order to better identify whether the films I am considering are a form of collective memory and what this means for their approach to representation.

**Films and collective memory**

As I pointed out in Chapter One and have reiterated throughout the thesis, the films do not constitute a homogenous whole. They spread across genres and present differences in perspectives on the past. I will therefore not attempt to argue that all representations of the Sixties on film during the 1980s were a representation of collective memory, but I will try to identify the way in which the representations within the films accord generally with collective memory. In this way I intend to provide a greater insight into the way which the representations of the past in the films are affected by the time they were made.

Returning to my definitional framework for collective memory: I have argued that to be a representation of collective memory, the films do not need to be evidence-based or even true themselves, but they need to reflect the understanding of truth that is held by the collective for which they represent an object of memory. To be representations of collective memory, the films must serve some present purpose and they must be actively

shaped by the needs of the present. It is clear that some of the films I have been examining fall squarely into this category.

I start with the easiest of the films to draw a link between collective memory and their representations—the Vietnam films. Suid, a military historian, notes that there have been a range of opinions about the accuracy of films such as *Platoon* and *Full Metal Jacket*, writing that “[a]ny images about the nature of the American experience in Vietnam [in *Full Metal Jacket*] resulted almost coincidentally” but that, at the same time “some veterans of the fighting in Hue during Tet found Kubrick’s recreation authentic.” Similarly with respect to *Good Morning Vietnam*, he argues that while the film had “virtually no basis in the reality or even the surrealism of Vietnam,” some people argued that it reflects an emotional reality and has captured some of the sense of confusion of Vietnam. What Suid is doing here is demonstrating the argument that collective memory does not need to be factually accurate, if the collective for which it represents memory regards it as true or authentic. He provides the evidence that veterans themselves saw the representations within these films as authentic, meeting that particular aspect of the definition of collective memory.

Thus while many of the films failed the test of facticity, there are numerous examples of combat veterans speaking of how they felt like the truth to them. The Vietnam films of Oliver Stone, along with *Hamburger Hill*, were driven by this belief in the truthfulness of their representation—their production was closely directed by those who had participated in the war, and the attempt to be “authentic” was not necessarily tied to external evidence, but driven by a personal link with the past and its emotional, visceral realism which was tied to memory rather than history. The films represent the truth as it was felt to be by those making these films, reflecting back to the audience what they already understood in part to be the truth. Here we can see an impact of the present on the films. These films engage with the collective identity of those involved in their

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54 Ibid., p523.
55 Ibid., p525.
56 Ibid., p537.
production as Vietnam veterans or provide a point of collective identification for veterans. This was particularly important in an era where previously, as I discussed in Chapter Three, the collective identity of veterans had been less than positive.

Research undertaken in the United States in 1989 showed that "veterans being ill-treated," disillusionment with the government, the fact that America did not win and/or that it did not try to win, and a strong memory of lives lost were key themes amongst the public's memory of the war. These themes are all present in the films; if not all in each film which deals with Vietnam, at least some in each and all in at least some of the films. This demonstrates the manner in which the present in which the representation was being constructed impacted on that representation. It also demonstrates how closely aligned with the wider collective memory of the war the films about Vietnam were.

There is a clear and strong correlation between the collective memory of Vietnam and its representation within the films. The timing of the production of the films also shows how they were clearly linked to a present need. All of the Vietnam era films I am discussing bar Birdy were made post 1985. By then the Vietnam Memorial had been completed and opened, it was ten years since the end of the war and rehabilitating "welcome home" parades for Vietnam veterans had been held. The Reagan government was attempting to rehabilitate the war and justify foreign intervention more generally, and the United States was attempting to embrace the Vietnam War experience in a way that had not been done before. As Sturken writes of these films,

"produced after the construction of the Vietnam Veteran's Memorial, they constitute part of the rewriting of the war's process of healing and memory. These films are also more self-conscious about their role as historical works."^58


^58 Sturken, Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering, p89.
While self-conscious of their role as historical works, the Vietnam films do not represent history in their entirety. They do not (and cannot) tell the full story of the war. What they do represent is a clear casting of collective memory of the war. The representations of the Vietnam films I have examined include the idea of the jungle and its unknown enemies, the brutality of the war, the poor treatment of veterans and the pointless loss of life and innocence which continue to imbue this collective memory of the Vietnam War. These depictions served a range of purposes at the time they were produced, and some of those purposes continue to be important today.\(^{59}\)

One exception to this approach is *Flight of the Intruder*. As I explored in the chapter on Vietnam, this film features a number of the generic characteristics of war films in the World War II mode: noble sacrifice by a flawed character; redemption of the hero; the bonds of friendship; off-duty hijinks and a straightforward romance. While the film does refer to some of the concerns which feature more heavily in other films around the difficulty of the war and the lack of command direction, overall the film is nostalgic, not for the Sixties or Vietnam as much as for a simpler representation of war, for a time when war was straightforward and heroic. These were the same kinds of ideas about the military which had pervaded *Top Gun* (1986), a film which *Flight of the Intruder* also followed with its representation of naval aviation and the excitement of flight. Thus the nostalgia within *Flight* is for a past before Vietnam but more importantly before the representation of Vietnam as an unhappy and confused war. In using this nostalgic approach to the war it engaged with the modern pro-military representation seen in *Top Gun* and thus melded both the distant past of World War II films and the present of Reagan-era militarism to skip over the general representational approach to the Vietnam War.

\(^{59}\) Note the treatment of US servicemen and women returning from Iraq in the 2000s by the general public. Anti-war protesters are extremely careful to avoid condemning individual soldiers, and where evidence of atrocities has been uncovered, there is a clear targeting of those involved, and to some extent their commanders, rather than a generalised condemnation of soldiers. Even the response to the Abu Ghraib torture scandal has tended to focus on the lack of support and training of those involved, the failures of command and the individual malfeasance of the soldiers put through trial, rather than to raise general criticisms of soldiers. Interestingly, the most powerful critics of the Iraq War appear to be the families of serving soldiers or those killed or wounded in action. They have gained a legitimacy in the post-Vietnam environment as they cannot be accused or dismissed as unfairly criticizing soldiers, leaving them a clear field to focus on their critique of the war itself.
Nonetheless, I believe that the case for the Vietnam films overall as collective memory is clear. This leads to the question of whether the other films I am examining fall as easily within the same category? As I have discussed earlier, the films which deal with sex during the era primarily focus on the innocence of the era. This is an interesting contrast with the way in which the Sixties tended to be represented in much of the political discourse of the 1980s, when the period was seen as one of moral turpitude, especially with respect to the much vaunted “sexual revolution.” This would tend to lead one to believe that what the films are showing is not consistent with the collective memory of the period.

This is not necessarily true. As mentioned in the discussion of collective memory above, one of its key features is that it helps to contribute to the identity of groups of individuals. For those on the political and religious right, remembering the Sixties as a period of moral degradation both helped to give them a collective identity and served their present purposes as they attempted to change the debates around and approaches to sex in the US during the 1980s. There were, however, different perspectives on this debate, and different group identities which were fuelled by a different kind of collective identity. As I argued in Chapter One, the directors of the films I am considering were primarily young people during the Sixties, people whose identities were probably formed during and remained linked with the period. I also suggested that they were likely to be more liberal than the Reagan administration. These kinds of factors lead to an argument that, at least to some extent, their depiction of the innocence of the Sixties in sexual terms was the representation of another collective memory; one which saw the sexual revolution as necessary, as positive, as removing some of the restrictions and lack of knowledge that had damaged young people, particularly women, prior to this time.

The strong emphasis on the naivety of the young female characters, and the potential resultant impacts of them, is a strong theme within the films. In an era—the 1980s—when the political right was demanding that sexual education in schools be focused on “abstinence only,” the representation of a girl who thinks she is pregnant because she kissed someone, or a woman who has been unhappy much of her adult life because of a
pregnancy she did not know how to prevent, serves a strong present purpose. Similarly, at a time when the abortion debate had reached a pinnacle not seen since the *Rowe v Wade* decision in 1973, a film like *Dirty Dancing* which represents the impact of illegal abortion on women can be clearly seen to be serving a present purpose. For these reasons, I would argue that these representations are also a form of collective memory, again, if not the whole of each film, then at least in this respect.

An argument could be made that a number of films which feature sex or romantic plots significantly are simply costume dramas: films which could just as easily have been set in the 1980s or 1990s and merely use the Sixties as a form of colour and movement. This would bring them closer to the nostalgic approach to representation that collective memory. The two are not entirely mutually exclusive—the collective memory of a group can be that one period was better than the present. However, nostalgia is more likely to focus on these aspects to the exclusion of a broader engagement with the past being represented. While this is almost certainly true of *Shag*, films like *Mermaids* and *Dirty Dancing* do engage directly with the politics and realities of life in the Sixties, particularly in their depiction of attitudes to abortion and sexual education. In contrast, in *Shag* there is (significant) consequence-free sex which is simpler and innocent and everyone ends up happily. The situation in which Melaina finds herself when she goes off in the car of a local boy has the clear potential for rape. Instead she is only attacked with shaving cream by the man’s girlfriend. Here Melaina does not escape consequence-free from the unwise situation into which she has put herself, but she is not really hurt. The massive party which is thrown at Luanne’s parents’ house is tidied up miraculously quickly, in part due to the help of the appalled, but loyal black maid. This kind of happy resolution to all problems is partly a function of the romantic-comedy genre, but also does engage with the nostalgia for the simplicity of the past. The nostalgia is for a time when teenagers did not have to worry about disease (particularly AIDS), rape or violence, although this nostalgic longing hides the fact that, of course, these things and

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60 *Goodfellas* is the most extreme case of a costume drama. While much of the action is set in the Sixties, it does not engage at all with the politics of the time, and it appears that attitudes to women do not change significantly during the different time periods of the films. To a large extent, the Sixties provides a backdrop to a film which primarily focuses on more generic elements of the “mob” drama.
others (social exclusion, unwanted pregnancy) were actually threats at the time. The
nostalgic mode here acts ideologically to conceal the realities of the past.

The other two films which contain the most nostalgic representations are those which I
have featured least in my thesis: Stand By Me and The Sandlot. These films do not
engage with the politics of the time they are representing and, in this disengagement, do
not feature the main thematic elements of the Sixties I was examining. The Hispanic
character in The Sandlot is seen as the leader of the group and there seem to be no
barriers to his integration in the local group of kids. There is no need to fight for civil
rights in these films as black people are either absent, happy or have already won
through the racial barrier.

In films which fit in the nostalgic mode, sex is absent (from The Sandlot and Stand By
Me), straightforward (Flight of the Intruder) or innocent (Shag). Vietnam is not
mentioned in The Sandlot or Stand By Me and in Shag it is only alluded to as Chip is
joining the Marines. So within these films, Vietnam is non-existent or politics free. Even
the concerns raised in Flight of the Intruder are about the conduct of the war and the
directions from high command, not the morality of it. By disengaging from the difficult
politics of the period, the nostalgic representation maintains and reinforces this idea of a
simpler, more straightforward past.

Thus they present a depiction of a childhood idyll. Shaw and Chase point to the link
between nostalgia and childhood. They write, “[p]erhaps as a species we are given to
nostalgia, for each adult carries the memory of an age when the experience of time was
different.”\(^6\) They further note that, “there is an optimistic confidence that the childlike
but not infantile can be restored to our public life and to our private experience.”\(^6\) As
discussed above, nostalgia and youth are often clearly linked. In general, we perceive
our youth as a simpler, happier time when problems were solved easily and even the

\(^6\) Christopher Shaw and Malcolm Chase, "The Dimensions of Nostalgia," in The Imagined Past: History
and Nostalgia, ed. Christopher Shaw and Malcolm Chase (Manchester: Manchester University Press,
\(^6\) Ibid., p6.
consequences which seemed extreme were really quite mild. As Schachtel points out in his discussion of childhood amnesia, "[m]ankind's belief in a lost paradise is repeated in the belief, held by most people, in the individual myth of their happy childhood." Thus nostalgia longs for the paradise of the lost childhood and therefore the depictions of the past which we see focused on young people often reflect that longing for its return.

The entire structure of *Stand By Me* with its narration by "the writer" and its recollection of a boyhood summer evokes this notion of a longed-for past. In that past, Chris had not been stabbed to death without reason and, while it had its own threats and horrors, these were ones which could be overcome by boyish bravery or ingenuity. Even the sadness of Gordie's brother's death which provides the backdrop for the story does not prevent it from being a meditation on the desire for the past. There is a difference in the deaths of the past and those of the present: whereas the deaths set in the past make the boys think about their own futures and directions, the death of the present results only in looking backward.

Like *Stand By Me*, *The Sandlot* again contains this nostalgic form of representation. Boys play baseball in an idyllic summer and their biggest challenge is how to get a ball back without facing the wrath of "The Beast," the dog which lives over the fence in the yard. The young boys find friendship and acceptance and work together to overcome their problems. This is a longing for a simpler past, without the complications of childhoods of the present. The focus of these films is nostalgic, even if it may reflect the memory of some of those times.

To discuss the representations of race within the films, I return to the concept of collective memory. I believe that some of the contradictions inherent in *Malcolm X* can be explained by a consideration of the film as a representation of collective memory, rather than as history. Based on Malcolm X's autobiography (as told to Alex Haley), the

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63 Schachtel, "On Memory and Childhood Amnesia," p199.
film's basis is in memory, rather than in historical research or fact. As discussed earlier, Lee's use of the image of the burning American flag and the beating of Rodney King at the beginning of the film highlights the fact that Lee is unashamedly attempting to use the story for political purposes, relating it to the present and present circumstances. I think part of the confusion, ambivalence and inconsistency of the film is because it is memory; memory which began as Malcolm's own memories and has been translated to a collective level through its representation both in the original autobiography and now in the film—and in every representation and interpretation in between. The film is memory rather than consistent argument; memory which can be inconsistent and incoherent. The film highlights the contradictions in the collective memory of Malcolm—he was naïve, he was dangerous, he was a victim, he was a charismatic and idealistic leader—and ends up trying to say that he was all of those things. The film is trying to do a number of things in the way it represents the past. For example, it wants to show that black people are victimised by and suffer at the hands of white people. To this end there is a great emphasis on Malcolm's period with the Nation of Islam. However, when the film decides to show that Malcolm was able to rise above the race hatred of that group, it is not sure whether to refute the earlier aspects of his rhetoric and from this arises the ambivalence and confusion. The confusion of present purposes—the need to emphasise the oppression of blacks and the need to show Malcolm as a visionary—lead the confusion of memory to triumph over the order of narrative. The way a collective remembers is not necessarily logical, or progressive. What happens in Malcolm X is that the film attempts to provide a coherent narrative from a jumble of memories which have competing agendas. Thus the usual smoothing of narrative that filmmaking involves is not as straightforward. Nonetheless, for those who hold these collective memories, the contradictions do not matter, for memory is not subject to critical evaluation in the way that history is.

For example, the book (The Autobiography of Malcolm X, trans. as told to Alex Haley (New York: Ballantine Books, 1965), like many autobiographies, does not have any footnotes or references and is written as a narrative. An autobiography is by its very nature more inherently reliant on memory that scholarly research.
Other films featuring race and racial tensions contain elements of collective memory. *Mississippi Burning, A Bronx Tale, Hairspray* and *Love Field* all provide a representation of the past which serves to remind its audience of the devastating impact of racism in a present in which racial tensions were strong and the progress of civil rights was being slowed. These films all show some white people acting in a positive way to break down these barriers. While the historical evidence shows that most of the civil rights movement was driven by blacks themselves, what we see from these films which are clearly primarily targeted at white audiences, is the desire to remember the past as a time in which white people, as individuals, would have done the "right" thing had the opportunity arisen. This helps to build a mythology of the past which, while condemning the bad things that happened, allows the individual to identify with the "good" white person, assuaging guilt about complicity in the oppression of either the past or present. The story within *A Bronx Tale*, for example, reflected and engaged with racism in areas of Brooklyn during the 1980s and, in particular, the murders of black youths in Howard Beach and Bensonhurst, very similar neighbourhoods to that depicted in *A Bronx Tale*. As collective memory, the film shows that while extremes of racism exist, not all Italian-Americans were racist, and, by imputation, implies that neither are they in the present.

More broadly, the films often use moments of representations of the past to add emotion or poignancy to their representation. These are usually moments which have been incorporated into the collective memory of US society. Memory is replete with emotion; an essential part of the substance of memory is the emotional connections. The depiction of the announcement of Kennedy's assassination in *Mermaids* or the moon landing in 1969 not only provide a tangible and locatable connection with the past, but they engage with the emotion from that past. This is the past as it is remembered collectively; the (western) world stopped and mourned at the news of Kennedy's death, the (western) world looked on in awe and celebration at the moon landing.

Above I have noted that collective memory needs to accepted as the truth by the group for which it is memory, is shaped by present needs and must help to tell that group why
the world is as it is now. Given this, I believe that it is clear that many of the films I am considering use a mode of representation which makes them collective memory. They represent the past as people remembered it at the times the films were being screened. The films about Vietnam reflect what some veterans recall, and accord with the way that the public more generally collectively remembers the war—the confusion, the jungle, the poor treatment of veterans. Similarly the depictions of sex in many of the films, appeal to the baby-boomer collective memory of growing up, and accords with the understanding in the 1980s of how innocent and naive young people were then. The use of music and emotional moments helps to add to visceral memory of the past, the sense that this representation connects explicitly with the collectively remembered Sixties, even if that collective memory is not historically accurate.

The representations of collective memory within the films are also, in many cases, shaped by present needs. The Vietnam films came at a time when the memory of Vietnam was being both rehabilitated for veterans and invoked by divergent and occasionally overlapping groups as a rationale for the US not to invade other countries. The films manage to walk the line of both present needs by putting a case forward for the soldiers, while pointing out the nihilism and confusion of the war. Similarly both sexual liberty and civil rights were under attack in the US when these films were being made, and thus films which remember the “bad” aspects of life before the changes of the Sixties present a case to not move backwards.

Many of these films also, by implication or through actual links, showed their audiences why the characters, and even the audiences themselves, were how they were now. *The Big Chill*, set, as it is, in the present of the 1980s is the most clear example of this. The film searches for the reason for the position of its protagonists in the present through the memories of the past they shared. *Peggy-Sue Got Married* links the past and the present and shows that the divorce culture of the 1980s is partly the fault of rushed marriages and unwanted pregnancies. The nihilism of the Vietnam War and the treatment of veterans leads to the disengaged veteran. The attempts to overcome the manner in which...
black people were treated in the Sixties led inexorably to some of the political debates occurring in during the Reagan-Bush era.

It is also notable that the films which fall into the nostalgic mode of representation (including *Flight of the Intruder*) do not engage with the politics of the Sixties in the way which many of the other films I have considered do. These films avoid issues of race, and, in the case of *Flight* actively break with the likely historical scenario by featuring a high-ranked black character.

A side issue to be consider here for a moment is to what extent the films could be considered history. As demonstrated above, the films' approach to depicting the past is enmeshed in the popular understanding of what happened in the past and generally maintains a fidelity to that idea of the past. The films may have their basis in evidence-informed history, but in order to tell their stories within the format of a feature film and achieve the things films need to achieve, such as box-office success, they adapt and manipulate that history. What is important in the end for the film-makers is that the film corresponds with the audience's knowledge and understanding of the past, rather than maintaining a strictly evidence-informed approach to the past. Almost all films which are set in the past contain some kind of metaphorical or symbolic truth about both the past and the present. However, films are fictionalised and narrativised. Films tell about the past in a way which becomes primarily a story rather than attempting to present a strictly evidenced approach to the representation of the past.

This does not mean that these films (or films generally) are unhistorical. As noted in Chapter One, films do provide an adjunct to our historical understanding, a way to access the past which can help to enlighten audiences. They are not to be condemned for their lack of attention to detail or their willingness to bend the truth to fit their narrative, but there needs to be a recognition of the actual role they play comparatively—how they assist the historical imagination and improve our engagement with the past. In Chapter One I referred to the work by Thelan and Rosweig on the way that the public accesses and understands the past. As I discussed there, that work shows that the general public
has a similar view of the historical nature of films. This connection to the audience gives the film a sense of credibility or authenticity which is what is needed to be successful at the box office, as opposed to strict adherence to the facts. The people surveyed indicated that they felt that some films provided some useful insights into the past, but would tend to check the actual facticity of the past presented, as they feared they would be distorted for the purposes of entertainment or commerce. They did not accept that the past was exactly as presented in the films, but they understood that the films gave them an idea about the past. Aspects of the films, however, provide an important insight into the past which are not available in other forms of historical representation. Even films which are essentially fictional, such as Dirty Dancing, show historical realities such as the challenges facing unwedded, poor women with unwanted pregnancies during the Sixties. While the rest of the film may be largely an invention, there are, thus, aspects of history within (almost) every film. Thus the films can provide us an insight into the history of the Sixties as well as the collective memory of the period.

**Conclusion**

It is clear that the representations of the past within the films I have considered are profoundly affected by the present in which they are produced. What the films I have been examining (and probably most films about the past) do is use the past to reflect on the present, whether it is through representing a group’s collective memory of the past which is recreated based on present needs or whether it is to seek solace from the complexities of the now in a simpler past. This does not mean that they are simply depictions of the present, recast in a historical setting, however, it does mean that the approach to the past is influenced by the present in which it is created. All Hollywood films need to make money, and in order to do this they need to connect with as broad an audience as possible. Talking about the present through the past, presenting identifiable ideas and dilemmas, questioning why we do things in a particular way or providing an escape to a better time are all different modes of making this connection.

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In this thesis I have used a new methodology to examine the impact the present has on films representing the past. Analyses of films set in the past usually focus on only a couple of films at most, a single genre of film or a set of films about the same past event. What I have tried to do is look at the way films across a discrete period, no matter what genre or subject, represent a past period. In order to give the films’ representations context, I have looked at the manner in which those representations intersect with the way the contemporaneous media and other feature films depict similar issues. As I have emphasised within this chapter, the approach that is taken by these films is clearly influenced by present circumstances and needs. The methodology that I have used within this thesis has allowed me to identify and isolate the way that films are responding to the present circumstances in which they were made.

As I discuss in my introduction, I chose to look at the representation of the Sixties during the Reagan-Bush era for reasons that were both emotional and practical. The Sixties were strongly featured in film and television of the period and many of the changes wrought during the Sixties were being resisted and rolled back during the 1980s and early 1990s. It was also a time in which the history (and mythology) of the Sixties was being constructed. The story of Vietnam veterans was being actively reconstructed in US culture and the sexual revolution questioned and challenged by conservative politicians and as a reaction to the AIDS epidemic. A strong perception that things were moving backward for black people also pervaded political debates, but at the same time black people became increasingly apparent in mainstream cultural representation. Politicians of the Reagan-Bush era deliberately set themselves up in opposition to the Sixties, while aging baby boomers held onto their youth and conveyed their version of the past to their children. In this climate it is unsurprising that the Sixties would be so strongly represented at the movies. The range of popular movies made in the US during this period which featured the Sixties allowed a significant depth and breadth to my analysis.

To some extent there is a danger that my interpretation of the history of the Reagan-Bush era in tropic itself, utilising as it does strong tropes of the period. The evidentiary archive I have assembled lends weight to the sense that, if these are tropes, they are ones which were present during the period and not merely an imposed framework of understanding which has been imposed after the fact.
The analysis of the films shows that there is not a single approach to the representation of the past within the films, nor of the issues themselves. There are however some identifiable trends. Many tropes of the Sixties are building blocks for the representations within the films. Consistent trends within the films include the strong emphasis on the early Sixties and its relative innocence over depictions of the counter-cultural revolution of the latter part of the decade. Similarly the representations of Vietnam provide a very different representation of war from the combat films which had proceeded them; a depiction which emphasised the pointlessness of that war. An absence of non-white characters and black political issues was also largely evident in the films, and there was a lack of consistency in the representations of these issues where they did appear. In general however, the representations of Vietnam and civil rights and race issues did largely pick up on many of the themes in the mainstream media and in contemporary political debate at the time. The films featuring sex appeared, on the other hand, to be resisting or responding to the actions and rhetoric in the political sphere during the Reagan-Bush era.

I used the analysis of the films’ representations ultimately to consider whether the films could be viewed as a form of collective memory. My conclusion is that for the most part the films are representations of collective memory, although some of these films do use a representative approach which could be considered primarily nostalgic. The films engage with the past to try and explain to the audiences of the 1980s and 1990s why their world was as it was when they were viewing the films. They are shaped by present needs and ideas of the Reagan-Bush era. It is no surprise, for example, that JFK was made in 1991, following the machinations of the Iran-Contra affair. This climate made a belief that a government could and would manipulate events to facilitate war believable in a way that perhaps it was not a decade previously. The films engage with these present needs while they provide their audience with an interpretation of the past which resonates with them. They use familiar tropes in order to address these issues and both reinforce and challenge some of the popularly held ideas about the Sixties. This does not mean that they reflect the collective memory of all Americans of the period, rather they
are an aspect of the collective memory of a group of primarily white, educated, wealthy, baby boomer men.

Following from these findings, there are a number of outstanding research questions. I have found that, for the most part, the representations in the films I am considering are representations of cultural memory and reflect the ideas and needs of the period in which they were made. One question that arises from this is whether this approach to the representation is used in all films set in the past, or is it more acute in two periods which are so close in time? Is there a special link between the periods of the Sixties and the Reagan-Bush period, or could this kind of link be found in most films representing the past? It would be interesting to examine the approach of films made about a past which is outside living memory to consider whether they are less engaged with the present in which they were made. Another question is whether this role with respect to transmitting collective memory is particular to film, or whether other forms of cultural transmission as likely to be representations of collective memory. In particular it would be interesting to closely examine the kinds of representations of the past that are seen on television using a similar methodological approach. Further, it would be useful to consider whether it matters what period of history is being represented, given that the much of the focus of collective memory is the present rather than the past? Finally, a closer examination of the role of reception and audience interpretation in the way films are used to engage with the past could shed more light on the manner in which collective memory operates.

I would venture to argue that most films about the past are, to some extent, representations of collective memory, impacted by the present in which they are made. Some films which could be deemed collective memory use an almost entirely mythic approach to the past, while others are more closely tied to fact. Where films are representing collective memory, the factual basis of the films does not matter to those for whom the representation is part of their collective memory. For a film to be collective memory it relies on the viewer believing in the truth of the depiction. Whatever the "facts" of a film, collective memory relies on the belief of the audience. Representations of the Sixties which resonate with the collective memory, and thus the
mythology, of baby boomers like my parents do not need to be true to be credible. Personally, while I believe there is a particularly close connection between the two periods I am considering, I do not think this closeness is required for a film to depict collective memory. However, I think it would be interesting to see further research utilising the methodological approach I have established within this thesis to explore the links between the present of a depiction and the depiction itself.

Film engages with our imagination and shows us the past in a way which is not possible through other media. This does not mean that it is either inaccurate or that it should be believed without question. In order to embrace the role that film can play in telling us about our past, we need to understand and engage with the realities of its representations. As I have shown in this thesis, understanding how one era represents the past through film not only helps us understand the past being represented, but illuminates for us the story of the present in which that representation is taking place.
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# Appendix A: Films and details

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Director</th>
<th>Writer</th>
<th>Producer</th>
<th>Brief Synopsis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Big Chill</td>
<td>1983</td>
<td>Lawrence Kasdan</td>
<td>Barbara Benedek, Lawrence Kasdan</td>
<td>Lawrence Kasdan, Marcia Nasatir, Michael Shamberg</td>
<td>A group of friends from college meet up and spend the weekend together following the death of a friend. During the weekend they discuss their current lives and reflect on the changes to their lives since the Sixties.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Right Stuff</td>
<td>1983</td>
<td>Philip Kaufman</td>
<td>Philip Kaufman</td>
<td>Irwin Winkler, Robert Chartoff</td>
<td>This is the story of the Mercury space program and the recruitment of astronauts and their flights. Also runs the parallel story of test pilot Chuck Jaeger, the first man to break the sound barrier.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Birdy</td>
<td>1984</td>
<td>Alan Parker</td>
<td>Jack Behr, Sandy Kroopf, William Wharton</td>
<td>Alan Marshall</td>
<td>The film is split between two timelines: the story of Birdy and Al’s friendship leading up to their service in Vietnam and the story of Al and Birdy post Vietnam. Birdy is obsessed with birds as a youngster, then the trauma of Vietnam leaves him believing that he is one until Al finds a way to break through to him.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catholic Boys (released in US as Heaven Help Us)</td>
<td>1985</td>
<td>Michael Dinner</td>
<td>Charles Purpura</td>
<td>Michael Carliner, Dan Wigutow</td>
<td>Story of Michael Dunn’s time at a new Catholic school following the death of his parents and the relationship he forms with local girl Danni whose lives with her depressive father. Features the story of Michael’s friends at school and their various tangles with the authority of the Brothers at the school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Platoon</td>
<td>1986</td>
<td>Oliver Stone</td>
<td>Oliver Stone</td>
<td>Arnold Kopelson</td>
<td>The story of Chris, a young middle class volunteer in Vietnam and his encounters with two Sergeants, Elias and Barnes, who have very different approaches to fighting the war. After Chris witnesses Barnes orchestrating Elias’ death, he takes revenge by killing Barnes himself.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stand By Me</td>
<td>1986</td>
<td>Rob Reiner</td>
<td>Raynold Gideon, Bruce A Evans</td>
<td>Raynold Gideon, Bruce A Evans</td>
<td>The story of a group of boys who set out to find a body they have heard has been left by the railway...</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Movie Title</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Director</th>
<th>Screenplay</th>
<th>Soundtrack</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Peggy Sue Got Married</td>
<td>1986</td>
<td>Francis Ford Coppola</td>
<td>Jerry Leichtling, Arlene Sarner</td>
<td>Paul R Gurian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Little Shop of Horrors</td>
<td>1986</td>
<td>Frank Oz</td>
<td>Howard Ashman, Charles B Griffith</td>
<td>David Geffen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good Morning Vietnam</td>
<td>1987</td>
<td>Barry Levinson</td>
<td>Mitch Markowitz</td>
<td>Larry Brezner, Mark Johnson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dirty Dancing</td>
<td>1987</td>
<td>Emile Ardolino</td>
<td>Eleanor Bergstein</td>
<td>Linda Gottlieb</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full Metal Jacket</td>
<td>1987</td>
<td>Stanley Kubrick</td>
<td>Gustav Hasford, Stanley Kubrick, Michael Herr</td>
<td>Stanley Kubrick</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hamburger Hill</td>
<td>1987</td>
<td>John Irvin</td>
<td>James Carabatsos, Marcia Nasatir</td>
<td>James Carabatsos, Marcia Nasatir</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Andrew Scheinman tracks. Narrated by main character who is looking back at this time in his childhood, following the untimely death of Chris, his childhood friend and the strongest amongst his group of friends.

Peggy Sue suffers a black out at her 20 year school reunion and is transported back to 1960 where she relives the period leading up to when she accidentally became pregnant with her first child.

The story of Seymour who works in a flower shop and finds success with the help of a giant man-eating alien talking plant. Also tells the story of his love for and eventual romance with Audrey, who is in an abusive relationship with a sadistic dentist.

The story of armed forces radio announcer Adrian Cronauer and his time in Vietnam where he upsets the local station managers and befriends a Vietnamese boy who turns out to be a member of the Viet Cong.

The story of Baby who stays at an all-Jewish resort with her family. Making friends with the dancing staff, she helps the dancer Penny to find the money to get an abortion and learns to dance so she can fill in for her on the night of the abortion. Also tells the story of her romance with Johnny, the lead male dancer.

Split between two main stories. The first half tells the story of Joker and his experiences in training where fellow recruit Pvt Pyle suffers a breakdown and eventually kills himself. The second half of the film sees Joker in Vietnam working for Stars and Stripes where he becomes engaged in combat in the battle of Hue.

The story of a group of soldiers involved in the assault on Hill 937, known as Hamburger Hill because of the bloodiness of the battles there.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Director(s)</th>
<th>Screenplay(s)</th>
<th>Story Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mississippi Burning</td>
<td>1988</td>
<td>Alan Parker</td>
<td>Chris Gerolmo, Robert F Colesberry</td>
<td>The story of the investigation of the murder of civil rights workers in a small town in Mississippi by the FBI which results in the eventual prosecution of those involved.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hairspray</td>
<td>1988</td>
<td>John Waters</td>
<td>John Waters, Rachel Talalay</td>
<td>The story of Tracy Turnblad who becomes a dancer on the Corny Collins Show, then engages in protest to ensure that the show becomes integrated. Features the story of Tracy’s romance with lead dancer Link Larkin, and Tracy’s friend Penny’s romance with the black Seaweed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Born on the 4th of July</td>
<td>1989</td>
<td>Oliver Stone</td>
<td>Oliver Stone, Ron Kovic, A Kitman Ho, Oliver Stone</td>
<td>The story of Ron Kovic who goes to Vietnam where he accidentally kills another soldier before being paralysed. Once back in the US he has trouble adjusting to life and goes through a number of dramas before becoming actively involved in the anti-war movement.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lean on Me</td>
<td>1989</td>
<td>John G Avildsen</td>
<td>Michael Schiffer, Norman Twain</td>
<td>The story of (black) Joe Clark who was a teacher in a school in New Jersey in the Sixties. He returns 20 years later as the principal to straighten out the school which has huge problems with violence and drugs and is not meeting basic literacy standards. He uses unconventional methods to achieve his goals, but eventually wins over the students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Casualties of War</td>
<td>1989</td>
<td>Brian de Palma</td>
<td>David Rabe, Fred C Caruso, Art Linson</td>
<td>Private Eriksson is newly arrived in Vietnam. One of the members of his squad is killed. In revenge, his squadmates kidnap a Vietnamese girl and rape her. Eriksson refuses to participate and then tries to rescue the girl, but she is killed. He subsequently gives evidence against the other soldiers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shag</td>
<td>1989</td>
<td>Zelda Barron</td>
<td>Lanier Laney, Terry, Julia Chasman</td>
<td>Carson is about to be married so her three friends have a final weekend of partying and fun before they all have to go their separate ways.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Sweeney, Robin Swicord

Stephen Wolley

take her to Myrtle Beach for a last fun weekend. While there they meet a group of boys, including one who Carson ends up falling for and sleeping with. She then breaks off her engagement. Her fiancée finds consolation with one of her friends. Also features minor subplots about her two other friends and their romances. Everyone participates in a “shagging” dance competition.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Movie</th>
<th>Director(s)</th>
<th>Writers</th>
<th>Producers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Goodfellas</td>
<td>Martin Scorsese, Nicholas Pileggi, Martin Scorsese</td>
<td>Irwin Winkler</td>
<td>The story of the life of Henry Hill who is half Italian and who first gets involved with the mob as a young boy. He grows up and progresses through the ranks, gets married and eventually becomes addicted to cocaine. When he is arrested for major drugs charges he provides evidence against his former friends and goes into witness protection.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mermaids</td>
<td>Richard Benjamin, June Roberts</td>
<td>Lauren Lloyd, Patrick Palmer, Wallis Nicita</td>
<td>Charlotte, though Jewish, wants to be a nun. She and her sister live with their divorced mother and move to a new small. Tells the story of their relationships and Charlotte growing up.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Air America</td>
<td>Roger Spottiswoode, John Eskow, Richard Rush, David Shaber</td>
<td>Daniel Melnick, Michael J Kagan</td>
<td>Story of CIA contract pilot operating along the Cambodian border during the Vietnam war and their tangles with the CIA and local war lord over the drug trade.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JFK</td>
<td>Oliver Stone, Zachary Sklar</td>
<td>A Kitman Ho, Oliver Stone</td>
<td>The story of Jim Garrison’s investigation of the assassination of JFK and the resulting trial.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Doors</td>
<td>Oliver Stone, Randall Johnson, Oliver Stone, Bill Graham, A Kitman Ho, Sasha Harari</td>
<td>Randall Johnson, Oliver Stone</td>
<td>The story of Jim Morrison’s life including the formation and rise of The Doors through to his death in Paris.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flight of the Intruder</td>
<td>John Milius, Robert Dillon, David Shaber, Mace Neufeld, Robert Rehme</td>
<td>Robert Dillon, David Shaber</td>
<td>Jake Grafton is a navy pilot undertaking bombing runs over North Vietnam. His new bombardier and he decide to go off-mission and bomb facilities in Hanoi to have a real impact.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dogfight</td>
<td>Nancy Savoca, Bob Comfort</td>
<td>Richard Guay, Peter Newman</td>
<td>Eddie Birdlace and his marine friends have one night in town before they are shipped out. They organise a “dogfight” where the marine who brings the ugliest date wins. Eddie meets and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>The Indian Runner</strong></td>
<td>1991</td>
<td>Sean Penn</td>
<td>Sean Penn</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Malcolm X</strong></td>
<td>1992</td>
<td>Spike Lee</td>
<td>Arnold Perl, Spike Lee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Love Field</strong></td>
<td>1992</td>
<td>Jonathan Kaplan</td>
<td>Don Roos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>What's Love Got to Do with It</strong></td>
<td>1993</td>
<td>Brian Gibson</td>
<td>Kate Lanier</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>The Sandlot</strong></td>
<td>1993</td>
<td>David M Evans</td>
<td>David M Evans, Robert Gunter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>A Perfect World</strong></td>
<td>1993</td>
<td>Clint Eastwood</td>
<td>John Lee Hancock</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>A Bronx Tale</strong></td>
<td>1993</td>
<td>Robert de Niro</td>
<td>Chazz Palminteri</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

brings Rose, who is upset when she finds out. Eddie tries to make it up to her and they end up spending the entire night out together.

The story of Frank and Joe Roberts and their lives. Frank is a local policeman while Joe, who serves in Vietnam, finds it hard to settle down. Eventually it ends violently as Joe cannot handle the responsibilities he eventually gains.

The story of the life of Malcolm X from his childhood which we see in flashback through to his assassination. It particularly focuses on his time as a crook and his reform while in prison.

Lurene is upset by the death of JFK and travels to Washington by herself. En route she meets the black Paul Cater who is travelling with his daughter who he has taken from a children’s home without permission to take her back north. They end up travelling together and need to evade the police, until they arrive in Washington where Paul is apprehended.

Story of the life of Tina Turner from her childhood through to the revival of her career in the 1980s. In particular focuses on her relationship with Ike.

Story of a group of neighbourhood kids who play baseball together and who have to face the “Beast”, a giant dog who lives over the fence and steals their balls. Focuses also on the home life of Scotty who has a new stepfather.

Story of the escape from prison of Butch Haynes and the relationship he establishes with a boy he has kidnapped, who he saves from sexual assault by his fellow escapee. Told from the dual perspective of Butch and from the team attempting to recapture him.

The story of Calogero whose father disapproves when he become involved with the local crime.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Movie</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Director</th>
<th>Writers</th>
<th>Producers</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Heaven and Earth</td>
<td>1993</td>
<td>Oliver Stone</td>
<td>Oliver Stone, Le Ly Hayslip, Jay Wurts, James Hayslip</td>
<td>Oliver Stone, A Kitman Ho, Arnon Milchan, Robert Kline</td>
<td>The Story of Le Ly and her life from a teenager in Vietnam during the war through to her marriage to the American Steve and her move to the US. Focuses on the various indignities forced on Le Ly by a variety of different men.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Backbeat</td>
<td>1993</td>
<td>Iain Softley</td>
<td>Iain Softley, Michael Thomas, Stephen Ward</td>
<td>Finola Dwyer, Stephen Woolley</td>
<td>Story of Stuart Sutcliffe, an original member of the Beatles and the relationship with a German photographer and his passion for painting which led him to leave the band. Includes his death from a brain haemorrhage and focuses also on his relationship with John Lennon.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forrest Gump</td>
<td></td>
<td>Robert Zemekis</td>
<td>Eric Roth</td>
<td>Wendy Finerman, Steve Starkey, Steve Tisch</td>
<td>The story of Forrest Gump, an innocent who finds his way through many of the pivotal events of the 1960s and 1970s. Also follows the parallel story of his childhood friend Jenny who becomes involved in many of the social movements of the same periods and contracts AIDS. She and Forrest have a child together. At the end of the film, Jenny has died and Forrest is looking after young Forrest.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>