

## Film Review

### A Veteran's Read of *The Deer Hunter* (1978)

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**T**he *Deer Hunter* has established itself as one of the premier movies of the Vietnam War. A block-buster entertainment released in 1978, it won five Academy Awards. I saw the movie at that time, twelve years after completing a tour of duty in South Vietnam with the 5th Special Forces Group. The film left a sour taste in my mouth. In 2007, the American Film Institute celebrated their Centennial Anniversary by ranking it fifty-third in a list of the 100 best American movies. In preparation for this review, I watched it again—fifty-eight years after I rotated home. I can now identify my aversion.

Fiction is commonly regarded as a genre where the deepest truths can be revealed. Throughout the entire movie, I could never “willfully suspend the disbelief” that legitimizes fiction. The movie made a heroic attempt to establish its *gravitas* by emotionally flogging two themes. Deer hunting carried the metaphorical weight of the movie. Russian roulette was used as an allegory of the Vietnam war. Both were ridiculously overripe. Finally, it portrayed Vietnam War veterans as lower class society dregs who were inept, insensitive, and not very bright. Now a proven urban myth, the label has stuck.

*The Deer Hunter* is set *circa* 1968 in a working class town in western Pennsylvania steel mill country. It's divided into three parts, with an added epilogue. The first third is background story on five obnoxious, Slavic-American wise-guys who work the steel mills. They are largely unlikable bums with no redeeming qualities except prankmanship, *bonhomie*, and boozing. Three of them (Michael—Robert De Niro; Nicki—Christopher Walken; and Steve—John Savage)

are to leave the next day to enter the US Army, and are assumed bound for Vietnam. They indicate they want to go Airborne and mutter “fuckin-A” a lot. The booze-fueled twenty-four hours before leaving includes gathering for a blow-out Greek Orthodox wedding in which the coming violence is foreshadowed by drips of red wine on a wedding gown, and they still have time to cram in a deer hunt.

Two deer hunts bookend the movie. Both take place on breath-taking, snow-covered, mountain peaks that could only be the Rocky Mountains. This terrain is somehow less than a day’s drive from western Pennsylvania. On the initial hunt, the booze-addled buddies speak in freighted language about fabled “one-shot-kills.” Michael shoots a magnificent stag and unceremoniously hauls him back to town draped over the fender of his old Cadillac. They arrive home in the evening, just in time for one last besotted, bonding, drinking binge before induction into the Army.

The middle third of the movie is set in a Vietnam. Michael lies inert in the jungle near a Vietnamese village wearing a dirty tiger suit and do-rag. Choppers roar in and discharge squads of American infantry. They are in jungle fatigues and helmets; regular Army. It’s unclear if they have anything to do with Michael, who rouses himself and produces a bulky, heavy flamethrower (just happened to have one handy) and torches a hut and a North Vietnamese soldier. In the next scene, somehow Michael and his pals, Nicki and Steve, are all prisoners of the VC. They are held in a foul, bamboo-cage, half immersed in a river. The prisoners are forced to engage in a game of Russian roulette as their vicious Vietnamese guards bet on who will get killed. This over-long, excruciating episode presumably reveals the astounding truth that “war is hell.” This pornographic tableau (*i.e.* presented so viewers in complete detachment can be titillated) is the ahistorical gambit that anchors the movie. There is no evidence any such bit of cruelty ever

happened in the entire war, but it is the trope here for Vietnam where you “pays your money and takes your chance.” It’s high-adventure cruelty and stupidity and played to the hilt for psychotic meanness. The three escape and make it to a Saigon military hospital. Steve has received gunshot wounds in the legs. Nicki suffers a mental breakdown and goes AWOL. He winds up in a vile club where a raucous crowd bets on who will survive as paired contestants play Russian roulette. Michael, somehow, is lurking on the fringes of this rabid crowd and views Nicki as he chooses to play the game. In the melee, Michael is unable to reach him.

Michael has returned home for the last act of the movie. He is portrayed in full, glorious technicolor as a Special Forces trooper, but he is a cartoon soldier. Despite his short hitch in the army, he is a senior Sergeant E-6. He wears a Green Beret, but the shoulder patch on his left arm is the Screaming Eagle of the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division. His right arm bears the Arrowhead patch of the Special Forces. Even if he served in both units during his short stretch in the Army, the beret and the 101<sup>st</sup> patch wouldn’t be worn at the same time. He also had a full beard, which wouldn’t have been allowed by either the Special Forces or the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne. Michael is troubled and isolates himself, having only unsettled interactions with old friends. Steve is found wasting away in a VA hospital, a double amputee. Michael learns Nicki has remained in Vietnam and returns to find him. How? Is he still in the Army? Can he run just any fool’s errand, willy-nilly, on his own recognizance? Nevertheless, he flies military and sets about to find Nicki and bring him home. Wearing civies, he finds him in the old Russian Roulette club, a drug addict who keeps winning as he plays the high-stakes game. Steve is stoned and unresponsive and Michael tries to reach him by challenging him to a game of Russian Roulette. Nicki blows his brains out to Michael’s tormented distress.

The Epilogue takes place at home in western Pennsylvania. Michael goes on the second

deer hunt. Again, he has a stag in his telescopic site, but he alters the line of fire to miss the deer. He calls after the stag as it moves on, “Okay? Okay!” Apparently, war cleansed Michael of his bloodthirsty persona. He attends the funeral for Nicki. Afterwards the friends, including Steve, who has left the VA, gather for an early morning breakfast where they sit pitifully around the table and mournfully sing, “God Bless America.” Fade to black.

*The Deer Hunter* is pretentious, sensationalized, deeply flawed, and riddled with cliches. This depressing crock-of-baloney just made me angry.

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