

Receptions of War: Vietnam in American Culture, by Andrew Martin. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993. xxiii + Pp. 192 \$24.95 (Hardcover).

Andrew Martin has written his study of the Vietnam War in hopes of examining "the work that culture does, how it selects, appropriates, and banishes in a process that aims to smooth over problems and straighten out contradictions" (xx). Thus, Martin positions himself as a cultural critic who will examine the various texts of the Vietnam War: books, films, television shows, public opinion, political ideology, the statements of prominent people. The study draws heavily upon contemporary theory, and Martin's definition of culture and his sense of critical purpose are avowedly political: "I propose a 'critical paradigm' that views culture . . . as an arena where the ongoing struggle to assert hegemonic imperatives and meanings takes place" (xxii).

All this said, it is Martin's practical criticism (or theory applied) that sticks. When discussing specific books and films, he often shows a supple and perceptive critical cast of mind. However, the reader must wade through a good many pages before arriving at these interesting discussions.

The first chapter is given over to a discussion of "The Vietnam Continuum," which amounts to a rather desultory and theoretically overburdened discussion of the way that the war has been perceived by the American public at various stages from its inception up to the present. It is also a discussion of how the war, or various presentations and perceptions of the war, wrought changes in the American public. Here, as later, Martin is most interesting when he talks cases, as in his discussion of the different receptions initially given to Graham Greene's *The Quiet American* and Lederer and Burdick's *The Ugly American*. His explanation of why the former was relatively unpopular (until later in the war), and the latter a popular and critical success is lucid and convincing.

The second chapter is a thirty-page sketch of the development of Cultural Studies, especially as it pertains to American Studies.

While much of this chapter is intellectually stimulating, it has no place in the present book and should have found its way into an academic journal. Martin's understanding of the issues under discussion here may indeed have been crucial to his writing this book. The material is, however, unnecessary to the reader, who would be able to follow Martin's subsequent discussions of Vietnam texts just as well without reading it. Martin himself may not have been able to see the superfluous nature of this chapter, but could not the editors?

The study recovers its true mission in the next two chapters, where a good number of important books and well-known films are criticized. In the chapter "Writing the War," Martin first posits a four-part ideological paradigm which he feels governs "the conventional understanding of the war" in the US: (1) the war was a "quagmire" for which no one can be held accountable, (2) the war is "beyond knowledge and investigation" and will never be comprehended, (3) no one won this war, all were equal victims, yet (4) neither did the US military lose on the battlefield (55-57). While each of these features is often heard in discussions of Vietnam (especially in mass media presentations), I would argue that there are so many instances of discussions and theses which run counter to these arguments (especially within academic circles), that I cannot credit this paradigm with the hegemonic status that Martin grants it.

Martin goes on to discuss the role of intellectuals within the Kennedy administration and to trace two typical intellectual trajectories of the Vietnam era. He uses the career of Daniel Ellsberg to illustrate the movement of an establishment insider who eventually came to fight against those he once supported. Movement in the other direction is exemplified by the intellectual about-face of Norman Podhoretz. In the most engaging part of this chapter, Martin discusses a number of prominent novels and memoirs about the war, paying particular attention to the ways that

such writings attempt to show how social identities
were constructed in the militarized culture of the Cold

War, and how those identities proved ultimately unstable under the dual ideological assault of the war in Vietnam and the war at home.(71)

Although no discussion of any one particular book stands out above the rest—all are insightful—the discussion of David Halberstam's *One Very Hot Day* dovetails nicely with the previous discussion of *The Quiet American*.

"Vietnam in Hollywood" is the most innovative and provocative chapter, the sort of critical writing that opens up entirely fresh critical perspectives. Martin first looks at a number of war-era films that, while not directly about Vietnam, can be seen clearly to be products of the social turmoil spawned by the war. In his discussions of the war films themselves, Martin describes how, typical of

Hollywood's established approach to controversial topics, the consequences and liabilities of a discredited system of foreign policy and a politically corrupting war are displaced onto personal narratives that explore individual subjectivity. And . . . the tendency is to aestheticize violence and displace political conflict onto romantic fictions of war. (111)

While what is meant by the aestheticization of violence (as opposed to presentation of violence) is never made precisely clear, the rest of the chapter lives up to this billing and includes as a bonus feature some interesting discussions of the depiction of male gender issues in various films.

Less convincingly, the final chapter continues the discussion of Vietnam movies and television shows, this time concentrating on the melodramatic qualities that inhere in so many of them. While the chapter begins promisingly and includes an interesting examination of *Coming Home*, it gives way to a tendency to paint up the obvious in elaborate language, and to a long summary of a single episode of *China Beach* which hardly seems worth the space and effort devoted to it.

In the end, Martin reminds the reader of the purposes he advanced at the outset. It is his professed hope that in practicing cultural criticism, the critic opens up to examination the prevailing ideological paradigms of a society, in this case the paradigms that pave the way toward war:

Long before the first shot is fired and the first body falls, a culture must have in place the discursive means for making such actions possible. The texts of popular culture are one of the sites where this kind of business gets transacted.(159)

Hence, the obvious political utility in examining those texts. Agreed. But where Martin and I part company is in the relative importance we would each attach to the discursive. Wisely, and contrary to the beliefs of some contemporary discourse theorists, Martin does warn at the beginning and end of his book that politics and power have a material as well as a discursive component. But these pronouncements seem a sort of lip service since they are no where given flesh and blood in this book. "The Vietnam War has been detached from history and absorbed into American culture as a 'discursive process'," (6) Martin argues, but he never exerts any effort at reattachment, nor indicates how that might be done, despite his concomitant avowal that "historical conditions, material effects, and political and economic conditions" (7) must be attended to. I do not want to give the impression that Martin ought not to have written textual criticism, for I reiterate that he is very good at it. His digging into the "discursive process" yields some valuable nuggets. Yet, the burden of the book, the cumulative force of its various exegeses, gives the impression that in politics discourse is all, or, at least, of paramount importance. At a time when many academic critics are content to confuse criticism with actual politics, that is an unfortunate impression.

—Matthew C. Stewart
Quito, Ecuador