

**FILM REVIEW – *Da 5 Bloods***

Alexis Maly, Webster University – Saint Louis

The Vietnam War is often remembered as a controversial conflict that almost tore apart American society. To protect the United States' image as a "righteous" and "good" benefactor, American memories and narratives of the Vietnam War have been reshaped and recast. Much of this reshaping has been achieved through America's film industry and its role in the production of memory. One such movie that showcases this is the 2020 Spike Lee film *Da Five Bloods*, which tells the story of four Black Vietnam War veterans – Paul, Otis, Eddie, and Melvin – who return to Vietnam to recover the remains of their unit leader, Norman, and recover missing gold.<sup>1</sup> (Paul's son, David, joins them later in the movie.) This group of men are known as the "Bloods". In this film, Lee attempts to highlight the largely forgotten experience of Black soldiers in Vietnam with underlying narratives of the American Civil Rights and Black Power movements. Despite these intentions, however, much of the plot illustrates how U.S. memories of the Vietnam War have largely been shaped to align with an American imperialist perspective that centers on U.S. dominance and moral superiority.

One way the film aids in the creation of American memories surrounding the Vietnam War is through framing the Vietnamese people as "other" and the "enemy". This creation of the Vietnamese "other" is evident in an early interaction between a Vietnamese merchant and Paul. The Vietnamese merchant tries to persuade Paul to buy a live chicken, and Paul repeatedly rejects the merchant's attempts. The encounter ends with the merchant yelling at the group, accusing them of killing his mother and father. In the scene, the viewer observes how the interaction causes Paul to become frustrated and very uncomfortable due to his PTSD; the viewer starts to sympathize with Paul because of

---

<sup>1</sup> During the war, the Bloods attempted to recover (and steal) gold that went down with a crashed U.S. transport plane. The gold was originally meant to be payment to American allies in Vietnam, the Viet Cong. In their initial hunt for the gold, the unit is attacked by Vietnamese soldiers and Norman is killed.

how the merchant is portrayed as rudely trying to force the chicken on him. This leads to a contrast between the Vietnamese people and Black American soldiers, with the Vietnamese being seen as hostile and inconsiderate while the American soldiers are framed as good people caught in a bad situation. This contrast continues throughout the film, including when the group finds the missing gold and is ambushed by armed Vietnamese men who claim that the gold belongs to them – not to American soldiers or the American government. The question of which country rightfully owns the gold is answered in the ensuing gunfight; the Vietnamese leader is the first to use his weapon, and by the end of the fight all but one of the Vietnamese men are killed. In this confrontation, the divide between Americans and Vietnamese is distinctly apparent. The Vietnamese make the first move that leads to the fight, and they are the ones who end up being killed or having to flee. It is a victory for the Americans, and this victory solidifies the idea of American ownership of the gold. Notably, nothing is mentioned about the fact that the gold was supposed to go to the Viet Cong in the first place.

By contrasting the Vietnamese against the Americans, the familiar narrative of American dominance and superiority as a “righteous” nation is retold and reinforced. Otis, Eddie, Melvin, Paul, and David are framed as only trying to do the honorable thing in recovering and repatriating their former leader’s remains. The narrative that the Bloods are seeking gold that is owed to them by the American government – for the racism and other hardships they experienced before, during, and after the war – then makes this an honorable quest, too. Though there are moments throughout the film that acknowledge the atrocities committed by American soldiers and the U.S. government in Vietnam, these instances suggest that the United States has fully acknowledged and atoned for its sins. For instance, a Vietnamese leader asks if they know about the Mỹ Lai Massacre and labels American soldiers “killers of innocent children and babies” (Lee, 2020, 1:43:46). In response, Paul claims that he knows “all about Mỹ Lai” and that “there were atrocities on both sides” (Lee, 2020, 1:43:50). Notably, Viet Thanh Nguyen (2016) notes that “when forced to look at these atrocities, a fairly typical American response is to say we did not do this or they did this too. This is the shock of misrecognition, seeing one’s reflection in a cracked mirror and confronting one’s disordered self” (p. 114). Paul’s response is then typically American, as it allows the nation to retain its authority so that it can continue to involve itself in the affairs of other nations. Not once during the film is it implicitly or explicitly acknowledged that America was the loser in the Vietnam war. America is always the victor, and the Vietnamese remain the necessary victims of America’s reframing of the war.

This narrative is especially apparent in the way the film creates a redemption arc for Paul, who is a very tortured character. Halfway through the film, it is revealed that Paul accidentally shot and killed

Norman while they were engaging with enemy fire, for which he has never forgiven himself. Later in the movie, Paul is bitten by a snake and hallucinates meeting Norman, who forgives him. Meanwhile, Vietnamese men find Paul and force him to dig his own grave. As Paul is digging, he is shot and killed while singing a hymn. During these scenes, the viewer begins to grow more sympathetic toward Paul and even begins to empathize with him. What Paul had done was an accident, and he was finally able to make peace with himself. Viewers want to see Paul live now that he has redeemed himself, only to see his story tragically end at the hands of the Vietnamese. Paul's narrative can then be seen as analogous to the creation of a redemptive arc for America with the Vietnam War. For America, the Vietnam War was a tragic mistake, but like Paul it has atoned for its atrocities and should no longer be judged for them. The Vietnamese are the bad guys, not America. Not only does this position the United States as having nothing to apologize for, but it also recreates a narrative where America is at the center of the story. All that needs to be known about the Vietnamese is that they are, and remain, "the enemy".

Spike Lee's film *Da Five Bloods* attempts to create a new narrative of America's involvement in the Vietnam War by highlighting the role Black soldiers played in the nation's armed forces. While Lee's attempt to recreate the narrative is admirable, he fails to view the Vietnam War from the viewpoint of anyone other than Americans. This allows audiences to continue to see America as a morally righteous imperial power and allows them to turn a "bad" war into a "good" one. This is largely accomplished by the film's portrayal of the Vietnamese as enemies and the "other," representing the United States as the moral victor of the war. Another way this reshaping is accomplished is through Paul's redemption arc in the film, which can be seen as an analogy for how America has reinvented its narrative of the war.

## References

Lee, S. (Director). (2020). *Da 5 Bloods* [Film]. Netflix

Nguyen, V. T. (2016). *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

© Copyright 2023 *Righting Wrongs: A Journal of Human Rights*. All rights reserved.

*Righting Wrongs: A Journal of Human Rights* is an academic journal that provides space for undergraduate students to explore human rights issues, challenge current actions and frameworks, and engage in problem-solving aimed at tackling some of the world's most pressing issues. This open-access journal is available online at [www.webster.edu/rightingwrongs](http://www.webster.edu/rightingwrongs).