

they seem. Where the posted price keeps rising—much more rapidly than inflation in recent years—but where the proportion of people who actually pay it is already a minority and still dwindling. Where an odd blend of liberal doctrine and institutional self-interest (*always* described in terms of the former) dictates that if you pay full freight some portion of your payment will go for other people's educations—some of them because of financial need, some because the college wants

their bodies in its classrooms (and their partial tuition payments in its coffers), some because they are good ball players, some because they're bright.

Half concealed here are the remnants of an honorable tradition: consciously diversifying the student body on a campus, and making its educational resources available to those too poor to purchase them directly. But that is precisely the reasoning that

justifies billions in basic state subsidies and billions more in taxpayer-supported student financial aid via Washington and the state capital. There may be a case for the full tuition-payer also to be taxed again, this time by the college itself, to help finance other people's educations. But when a portion of that resource transfer goes to benefit students who do not qualify for it on grounds of poverty, you have to wonder. The next time you read that college tuitions are escalating another ten

or twelve percent, or contemplate paying the full "posted-price" for your daughter or son's Ivy League baccalaureate (which will cost you not less than \$64,000 if your youngster matriculated this past autumn), pause and ask yourself whom else you're subsidizing and through how many different mechanisms. And whether you really need to remain in the full-price minority. Remember: Robin Hood is not dead. He's in charge of higher education finance—and he isn't always sober. □

THE TALKIES



POLTROON

by Bruce Bawer

The parking lot outside the Wadsworth Theater was filled with Jaguars, Mercedes-Benzes, and BMWs. "Gee," I said, "Beverly Hills must be empty tonight." "A lot of rich folks come to these things," my sister replied. "A lot of people in The Industry."

We were in Westwood, city of Los Angeles. We had driven over the Santa Monica Mountains from the San Fernando Valley to this theater in the Veterans Administration complex, where my sister attends weekly screenings of about-to-be-released films as part of an extension course she takes at UCLA. (Actually, the screenings *are* the course.) The films are introduced by the course's "professor," film critic Stephen Farber; afterwards, Farber appears onstage in the company of someone connected with the film, and the "students" ask questions. This week there was a "bonus screening," which meant that the students could bring guests; since I was in town, my sister had invited me.

Tonight's treat was a Vietnam war movie called *Platoon*, and the evening's guest was its writer and director, Oliver Stone. Prior to *Platoon*, Stone had written or co-written *Scarface*, *The Year of the Dragon*, *Midnight Express*, and *Conan the Barbarian*, and had written and directed *Salvador*. Farber prepared us for Stone's newest effort by explain-

ing that Stone had himself been a soldier in Vietnam, that Stone was a "left-of-center" director whose intention in all of his films was to "*épater le bourgeoisie*," and that tonight's flick—which, as Stone would later affirm, was highly autobiographical—would be "abrasive," "disquieting," and "disturbing."

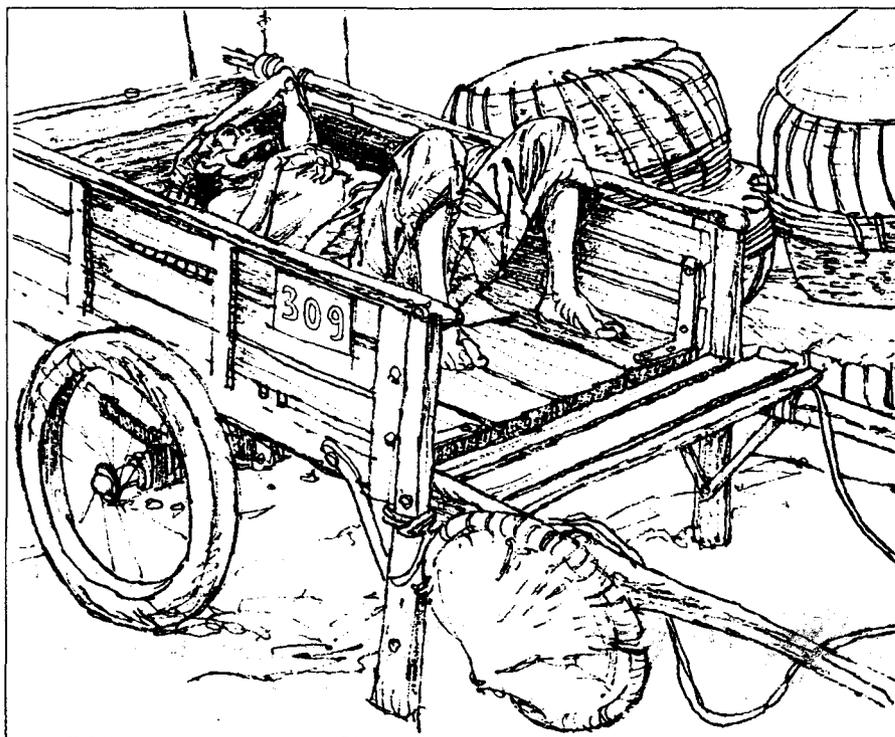
And so it was, right from the git-go. *Platoon* opens with an epigraph from Ecclesiastes which is obviously intended to carry bitter irony: "Rejoice O young man in thy youth." It's September of 1967 and we are on an airstrip in Vietnam; as body bags containing the remains of American soldiers lie waiting on the tarmac to be

loaded onto a plane, a number of young men who have come to take their place—including our hero, Chris Taylor (played by Charlie Sheen, son of Martin)—step down for the first time onto Asian soil. Chris, who narrates the movie in a series of voice-over excerpts from successive letters to his grandmother, is a rich white boy who has dropped out of college and, against his parents' wishes, has volunteered for the infantry. (The record shows that Stone himself, born in New York City, attended Yale for a year before going to Nam—first as a teacher, then as a soldier.)

Chris has volunteered for several reasons. He wants to serve his country,

wants to learn something about Life, and wants to be "anonymous." For Chris, in other words, going to war is in large part a rich boy's way of rebelling against Daddy and of escaping—only temporarily, of course—from the oppression of wealth. (Presumably the Peace Corps was full.) Besides, as Chris explains to a black member of his platoon named King (Keith David), the poor always do most of the fighting in wars; Chris thinks the rich should do their part, too. (King isn't impressed by this talk: "Shit, you gotta be rich in the first place to think like that.") Chris's early communications to Grandma are almost impossibly starry-eyed and idealistic: he's thrilled to be serving alongside the "poor" and "unwanted"; they're "the best I've ever seen, Grandma—the heart and soul." (Almost like real people!)

Yet even before Chris has seen any combat action, his illusions have begun to be shattered. "I think I made a big mistake coming here, Grandma," he writes, his tone that of a Yalie who has foolishly chosen to spend his junior year abroad in London rather than Paris. His expectations of Vietnam have been sharply contradicted by reality, but exactly what those expectations were and how he came by them is never explained. (Oliver Stone, in a revealing article that appears in the January/February issue of *American Film*, remembers himself as a "solitary, wide-eyed youth standing under those raggedy Asiatic clouds, looking out at the sea with . . . fantasies of Lord Jim and Julie Christie . . .") All that is clear is that Chris had no idea war was so *icky*.



Bruce Bawer is The American Spectator's movie reviewer. His latest book, *The Contemporary Stylist*, has just been published by Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.

(Apparently you don't have to read *All Quiet on the Western Front* or the poetry of Wilfred Owen to get into Yale.) What makes this callow boy's point of view so problematical is that it is also the film's point of view: King's sardonic remark notwithstanding, Stone does not regard either Chris's initial rich-boy illusions about war, or his subsequent facile moralizing about it, with the slightest hint of objectivity.

To say this is not to deny that the film, which follows the fortunes of Chris and his platoon over a period of several months, is extremely effective in many ways. Thanks largely to Robert Richardson's fine cinematography, Claire Simpson's editing, and Yves De Bono's special effects, *Platoon*—which

was shot on location in the Philippines—is a genuine triumph of atmosphere. Stone does a magnificent job of re-creating the experience of the typical foot soldier in the Vietnam bush: the jungles, swamps, mud, and rain, the leeches, insects, and snakes, the pounding music and mind-altering drugs, the friction between blacks and whites, the contrast between the wholesome, inexperienced, college-boy lieutenant and the tough, haunted-looking "grunts." Most powerfully of all, the film evokes the terrible suspensefulness of a progress through the jungle, the suddenness with which a few clumps of leaves can turn out to be a horde of armed and camouflaged Vietcong, the utter chaos of the ensuing combat, and the ap-

parent randomness with which bullets in the night find their marks, booby traps find their victims, the Angel of Death finds his prey.

But if the harrowing *mise en scène* of *Platoon* strikes one as astonishingly realistic, the plotting too often seems romantic, even melodramatic, and at least a couple of the characters are absurdly one-dimensional. Chris, we are led to understand, has turned his back on his real father—an Establishment type, apparently, who wanted him to stay in college—but in his platoon he finds two antithetical father figures, both of whom strain credibility. Sergeant Barnes (his face disfigured by a gruesome wound) is unspeakably evil, a human exterminator whose dedication to destroying the enemy knows no bounds. (Barnes, as enacted by an almost unrecognizable Tom Berenger, rather reminds one of the sick foul-mouth played by Dennis Hopper in *Blue Velvet*—the difference, of course, being that Hopper meant to be excessive to the point of self-parody.) Sergeant Elias (Willem Dafoe), whose years in Vietnam have left him disillusioned, is almost saintly; the film seeks to identify him with Christ. When Elias speaks, we are meant to take his word as gospel—and this is where one's problems with the movie really begin. "We're gonna lose this war," Elias tells Chris. "We been kickin' other people's asses for so long [whose? the Nazis?]? it's about time we got ours kicked." After Barnes and a protégé named Bunny (played by Matt Dillon's kid brother Kevin) bloodthirstily waste a couple of peasants during a search for VC in a remote village, and Elias forcibly prevents them from committing further atrocities, the platoon begins to break into pro-Barnes and pro-Elias camps. Chris—who, out of sheer exhaustion, tension, and fear, has come close himself to committing an atrocity or two—writes Grandma that he's losing his strength, his sanity, his sense of right and wrong.

And this is only the beginning. By the end of the film we've seen not only atrocities but more than one incident of "fragging" (the deliberate killing of one American soldier by another), the attempted rape of a little girl, and an unnerving nocturnal battle in which so many men are killed that, in the morning, a bulldozer must be used to scoop their bodies into a ditch. At movie's end, as Chris—twice wounded, like Oliver Stone, and therefore free to return home—ascends from the scene of carnage in a helicopter, he tells us in a heavily didactic voice-over that "We did not fight the enemy. We fought ourselves. The enemy was in us." Apropos of Barnes and Elias, he

says that since the war, there have been times when "I felt like a child of those two fathers." And he concludes by saying that it has been his aim, since the war, to try "to find a goodness and meaning to this life."

Though Stone's political position is not as explicit here as in his previous film, *Salvador*—a "fictionalized" story about an American photojournalist in 1980 El Salvador—*Platoon* and its predecessor have much in common. Both films are symphonies of death, full of graphically depicted corpses, many of them mutilated, many of them children's. Both are relatively plotless and are filmed in a brilliantly effective *faux*-documentary style. Both show American (or American-supported) soldiers killing peasants for being "Communists"—in parts of the world where, according to Stone's way of thinking, words like *democracy* and *Communism* don't really mean anything. Though Stone does take pains to portray intelligent, well-meaning Americans who feel otherwise, the ultimate message in both films is that America's military presence in places like Vietnam and Central America serves only to make the lives of the local peasantry more miserable and tragic—it's the powerful rich destroying the lives of the helpless poor. (Plainly, Stone is going to spend his life trying to atone for being born rich.) Just as Stone romanticizes Sergeant Elias in *Platoon*, so in *Salvador* he romanticizes a leader of the rebel army who, standing in his tent before a portrait of Marx and Lenin, tells a group of journalists that "the will of the people and the march of history cannot be changed—not even by the *norteamericanos!*" Outside, members of his Happy and noble peasant army sing "*el futuro será nuestro*" ("the future will be ours").

When *Platoon* ended, the Westwood crowd applauded enthusiastically, and it applauded again when Stephen Farber brought Oliver Stone onstage. Stone—whose attitude throughout the ensuing half hour or so would best be described as smug—offered some inside dope: he said that he had written the film in 1976, had been unable to interest an American studio in making it, and had finally secured financing from an English company. He informed us that all the members of Chris's platoon were based on people with whom he had served in Vietnam, and explained that he had helped his actors to capture the sound, the bearing, even the look of real jungle-weary soldiers—which they had captured, remarkably so, down to that chilling, half-mad look in the eyes—by making them dig their own foxholes, making them sleep in those foxholes,

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and allowing them only two or three hours of sleep each night during the weeks of filming. Disconcertingly, Stone spoke of the hardships he imposed upon his actors with an almost sadistic glee, so that one had the feeling that, his anti-war rhetoric notwithstanding, there was a part of him that positively reveled in the role of drill sergeant, in the idea of putting a cast of pampered young actors through some tough paces—a part that reveled, indeed, in war itself.

Then the audience began putting in its two cents. There were one or two folks who had complaints. A man with a cane, who politely identified himself (to the immediate derision of the crowd) as a conservative, asked whether it bothered Stone that *Platoon* might persuade young American men that their country wasn't worth serving, and whether he thought such a film could be made in the Soviet Union about, say, the Soviet war in Afghanistan. Stone replied that he considered himself a patriotic American, and quoted Gore Vidal on the real meaning of patriotism. (Hearty applause from the audience.) Then he added that he was confident that the "liberal thaw" presently underway in the USSR would result in a spate of films by Soviet filmmakers critical of the Soviet role in Afghanistan. (More applause.) A young lady then offered the opinion that the end of the picture was too didactic; Stone replied, "I like it that way." (More applause and warm laughter.) In reply to another audience member's question, Stone compared *Platoon* to two other Vietnam war films, Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* and Michael Cimino's *The Deer Hunter*. The Coppola and Cimino films, he said, were symbolic in their approach; his film was "realistic."

Stone suggested that many viewers, especially in places like Georgia, would consider *Platoon* anti-American. "I didn't think it was anti-American," declared a middle-aged man who sounded as if he was ready to take on the entire state of Georgia, and Alabama too. Stone grinned. "Well, you're obviously a liberal," he said, and the man beamed proudly. Most of the other "students" laughed affectionately and applauded, congratulating themselves on being liberals (and on not being from Georgia). Somebody asked Stone what his next project was. "I'm probably gonna do something about Wall Street," he replied, to the crowd's delighted whoop of laughter and applause. Clearly, the great majority of the audience was in love with both Stone and his movie. One after another, the Beverly Hills types stepped up to the microphones at the front of the auditorium to tell Stone how *powerful* his film was ("I feel as if I was there,"

said a slim, bearded gent who looked disturbingly like *New York* magazine's John Leonard; "I feel as if I should get a Purple Heart"), how *drained* they felt, how *eye-opening* it was, how much it had *taught* them, how much better they *understood* things, now.

To be sure, the film did have a stunning immediacy, perhaps unparalleled in any other war movie. But what, I reflected, could *Platoon* really have "taught" anybody about war in general or Vietnam in particular? Only that war is hell—which these presumably well-educated adults should already have known. *Platoon's* logic was much the same as that used by anti-nuke propagandists in connection with the television film "The Day After": just as "The Day After" presented an uncompromisingly realistic picture of the possible consequences of nuclear war, so *Platoon* assaults its audience with a ground soldier's view of Vietnam. Just as "The Day After" was used to support arguments in favor of unilateral nuclear disarmament, so *Platoon* is meant in part as an argument against American involvement in Vietnam—and, by extension, an argument against our involvement in Central America. But what does either of these films really prove? Not a thing. Both of them pretend to be contributing to intellectual discourse upon a significant issue, when all that they actually have to offer is a searing visceral experience that sheds no light on anything. For all its sheer cinematic effectiveness, then, *Platoon*, considered as a serious statement on Vietnam, amounts to nothing more than a high-priced piece of faulty logic.

Yet why were these affluent folks in the Westwood auditorium so struck by the film? Largely, I think, because the protagonist was one of them. Chris Taylor might well have been their own spoiled Ivy League brat, off on an ill-advised idealistic tear. Patently, it made these affluent people feel virtuous to applaud Stone's indictment of America, and of the American rich, in particular, for sending poor boys to do their fighting for them—and yet they felt comfortable applauding these sentiments because they were voiced by a rich boy who himself (if we take the liberty of identifying Chris with Oliver Stone) returned home, after the war, to be the big success that his parents wanted him to be. Indeed, that rich boy was not only the film's protagonist but its moral conscience; one even had the feeling, at times, that though it assailed capitalism and wealth, *Platoon* was informed by the perhaps unconscious assumption that a rich white boy's moral sense is likely to be superior to that of the average poor black boy.

In short, the hypocrisy of *Platoon* was breathtaking; and the Westwood audience—possessed of an irresponsible, self-congratulatory variety of pacifism that was barely distinguishable from est or TM or any of a dozen other self-indulgent, quasi-religious, feel-good-about-yourself California movements—loved every minute of it. This was one movie that had found its audience in record time. □

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SPECTATOR'S JOURNAL

AGENTS OF DECEPTION

by Rael Jean Isaac

The story has a happy ending. Soon South Carolina Educational Television (SCETV), the fourth largest producer of programs in the public television system, will be showing and making available to other PBS stations a brilliant film on Soviet disinformation, *Agents of Deception*. But the frustrations in finding a U.S. outlet encountered by Stornoway Productions, the small Canadian company that made the film, since it was completed in July 1985, constitute an indictment of American television and public television most especially.

Agents of Deception portrays "active measures" used by the Soviet International Department to influence public opinion in the West, including the creation of journals (the Greek tabloid *Ethnos*, reportedly created by the KGB in 1981, rapidly became the most widely read paper in the country); the buying of journalists (among them the man who became managing editor of Tokyo's largest conservative paper); the use of "agents of influence" (like Norway's Arne Trehold who insured that the Soviets were sitting on both sides of the table when his country negotiated a treaty on the disputed "gray zone" in the Barents Sea); and the manufacture of "front groups," of which the World Peace Council is the jewel in the crown, to channel peace sentiment into anti-American agitation.

Like the earlier *KGB Connections*, produced by the same team (finally shown in 1982 on New York City's Channel 11, that film never succeeded in surmounting the roadblocks to national distribution), *Agents of*

Deception is noteworthy not only for its extraordinary material, but for its innovative methods. The research that went into these films would support serious scholarly papers, and their impact derives from their meticulous accumulation of evidence. Television's gatekeepers, accustomed to documentaries where opposing talking heads provide "balance," are acutely uncomfortable with this technique, especially as applied to such unpleasant subjects as Soviet spying and disinformation. In the eighteen months he sought a U.S. outlet for the film (it was shown on CTV in Canada in May 1986), producer Kitson Vincent found that he repeatedly encountered the objection: "That film has such a strong point of view. We don't do point-of-view journalism like that." Vincent told me of his frustration: "I tell them I'm confused. How can it be called 'point of view' if in fact all the evidence is thoroughly documented and verified? If you say someone is doing something and this is how they do it and this is why they do it and here are the people who do it, how is that point-of-view journalism? There are twenty-two people testifying in *Agents of Deception*, from the little old lady who was a translator for the World Peace Council for twenty years right on to the top. I tell them if you have any problems

with our evidence go after it. But of course they don't."

While the earlier *KGB Connections*, which focused on Soviet spying, made extensive use of hidden cameras, it is interesting that in *Agents of Deception* these were not needed. The tools of Soviet disinformation were amazingly ready to speak for the camera, perhaps because vanity seems to be their overriding characteristic and the trait, one suspects, that first made them vulnerable to Soviet approaches. Both French journalist Pierre Charles Pathé and Danish journalist Arne Petersen, for example, who provide two of the most illuminating interviews in the film, preen themselves before the camera. They are not merely unrepentant; their air is self-congratulatory. Pathé, son of the creator of the Pathé newsreel, and editor of *Synthesis*, a news bulletin on French national security, who was caught passing documents to a KGB officer, dismisses the charges of disinformation as "completely silly." He admits the Soviets gave him the money to sustain his publication but declares loftily this had no impact on his publication. "It was independent, very independent." (Intelligence expert Roy Godson is interviewed, and points out that the themes of the publication

were denigration of the United States and support for the Soviet Union.)

Denmark's Arne Petersen, who took money from the KGB to pay for an ad in favor of a nuclear free zone which he induced 181 Danish artists and writers to sign, displays the same sense of superiority to the carping of lesser minds. "It's been charged that the people I knew from the Soviet embassy were from the KGB. Quite frankly I don't know. I know them as persons, as personal friends. They came here and brought along their wives and children." Asked if he might have been duped, Petersen replies: "I have an IQ of 161. I don't know how easy I am to dupe." A small self-satisfied smile comes to his lips. "I don't think so."

The Soviet Union's witting agents display a charming effrontery. Asked if the World Peace Council is a Soviet front, its long-time head Romesh Chandra replies easily: "It is not. It is by no means." Arkady Shevchenko, the former U.N. undersecretary general who defected to the U.S., describes how at the U.N. he would receive instructions from Moscow to make the arrangements for Chandra's visits. The camera returns to Chandra who declares that Shevchenko knows nothing about the WPC. "He has no knowledge of it. He has no reason to speak of it." The camera pans to a 1978 photo before the U.N. of a younger Shevchenko and beside him a smiling Romesh Chandra.

More surprising, for its candor, is the interview with Michael Meyerson, head of the U.S. Peace Council, the WPC's American affiliate. Meyerson, who is also a senior official of the U.S. Communist Party, shares the weakness for self-congratulation. He boasts that the Communist Party works within virtually every peace movement in the United States, and takes credit for a key role in organizing the huge 1982 peace demonstration in New York. "The U.S. Peace Council—I must confirm the FBI's intelligence—was instrumental in initiating June 12. We from the beginning helped to build it, supplied staff, and went all out to build it." Meyerson points out that the U.S. Peace Council includes among its members congressmen, members of state legislatures, and mayors. And sure enough, the film summons up Berkeley mayor

'That one showing led to Glen Cove, Long Island, achieving brief international fame. The town's mayor, Alan Parente, learned from the film that the Soviet Union used its Glen Cove estate for sophisticated electronic espionage against local defense industries. The City Council took the only measures in its power and revoked permits for Soviet citizens living on the estate to use the town's recreational facilities. This in turn led the State Department to order the town to cease meddling in foreign affairs and let Soviet diplomats back on the beaches. The town initially defied the State Department edict but eventually succumbed.

Rael Jean Isaac's most recent book (with Erich Isaac) is *The Coercive Utopians (Regnery Gateway)*.

