

Seminar: "America at War" in cooperation with
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Teaching Unit

Peace Education by the film *Platoon*

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1. Introduction

1.1 Why is this topic relevant and should be dealt with in school?

Although we live in a country which is not directly involved in a war, we are surrounded by war and conflicts, everyday. You get informed about the Iraq War, suicide attempts, the conflict between Israel and Palestine, etc... by television, radio and newspapers. Especially in the age of media, in which the young generation is confronted with this topic by computer games and movies, it is necessary to sharpen their sense of reality: In those games they kill fictional enemies without thinking what this means in reality. War movies are frequently just watched because of the action in it. The students usually do not search for a message those films often include. However, after 9.11. at the latest, keeping peace in the world affects us all.

Although in our country the students' generation as well as ours haven't been affected by war or by aftermath of war, all the more it is important to inform the students about war and the effects it has on the people's mind who are involved. They have to get aware of its cruelty, its senselessness, and how important it is to keep the peace, especially because of the history of our country. We have to make them aware of the danger of war because as the generation of our future they will be responsible for keeping the peace in our world.

1.2 Where do we place the unit?

We place our unit in a 9th or even in a 10th grade because the students have to have a sufficient knowledge of vocabulary which is important for the understanding of the film sequences we are going to show. Students of that age should have enough background knowledge about war in general, why people fight against each other and they should know about the consequences.

1.3 Referring to the syllabus

English lessons make a contribution to the multilingualism and the cultural competence of the students. Apart from the different competences as knowing how to deal with texts, communicative competences and the command of linguistic means the cultural competence, especially in our teaching unit, plays a very important role.

Learning languages is not a linear, but a dynamic process. So the orientation at the students' competences plays an important role as well. The competences our teaching unit refers to are:

- The students are able to express their opinion about society and problems in our society.
(Syllabus "Realschule" 9th grade)¹
- The students get aware of their own behaviour and the behaviour of others.
(Syllabus "Realschule" 10th grade)
- The students develop a cultural sensibility which allows them to see their own cultural system of values not as the only one.
(Syllabus "Realschule" 10th grade)
- The students perceive consciously their own view of life and meet other views of life with esteem.
(Syllabus "Haupschule" 9th grade)²

2. Information about the filmmaker

"Platoon" is the film that made writer and director Oliver Stone famous. It won four Academic Awards, including Best Picture and Best Director. Stone was born on the 15th of September 1946 in New York City. His father was Jewish and his mother a Roman Catholic of French birth. He was raised an Episcopalian as a compromise. Oliver's parents were very much into the social scene and he spent a long time of his childhood raised by child minders. By the age of five, Oliver was already writing marionette-style skits in which he cast his cousins. At the age of seven he was writing stories, which his father would pay him a quarter a piece for. By the age of nine, Oliver began to write a nine-hundred-page book about his family and life in general. He attended Trinity School, an elite school in Manhattan, and later attended the Hill School, a college preparatory academy in Pottstown, Pennsylvania. In 1961 his parents divorced. Some years later Oliver's father was in big financial troubles and

¹ Vgl. Ministerium für Jugend, Kultus und Sport Baden Württemberg (Hrsg.): Bildungsplan 2004. Realschule. Villingen Schwenningen.

² Vgl. Ministerium für Jugend, Kultus und Sport Baden Württemberg (Hrsg.): Bildungsplan 2004. Hauptschule. Villingen Schwenningen.

said that he would pay for Oliver's college education, but otherwise he was on his own. Oliver realized that he had been taking all his privileges for granted. After graduating from high school, Oliver entered Yale University to study Liberal Arts. After only one year Stone left Yale and decided to move to Saigon and to serve there as a teacher. Stone was accepted and arrived in Saigon in June of 1965. His arrival was approximately at the same time that the first ground infantry troops and marines arrived, and Stone recalls in a Time magazine interview that many of the troops would walk around firing off their guns for no real reason.³ After six months of teaching the Vietnamese/Chinese students such things as English, Math, and History, he had enough. He signed on as a cleaner on a U.S. merchant marine ship. After a short stint in Oregon, he traveled on to Guadalajara, Mexico. There he began to write his first novel, a 1,400-page book titled "A child's Night Dream", based on his experiences in Southeast Asia. Stone decided to return to Yale and go to the college again. He was devoting much of his time writing his novel so that his grades suffered and he eventually dropped out of the University for good. After completing his novel and failing to interest a publisher, Stone became frustrated and threw half of the manuscript into the East River. Then, in 1967, feeling dejected and disillusioned with the direction his life was taking, Oliver Stone decided to enlist in the United States army, specifically requesting combat duty in Vietnam. Stone realized only a day into the war zone that his decision to join the army was a stupid one. No one there wanted to fight, they all just wanted to survive and go home. Two weeks into Stone's tour of duty (15 months), he was ambushed by three NVA soldiers and shot in the neck but luckily survived. Stone, like many other soldiers during that time, lost his sense of what was right and what was wrong. Many villages were set on fire and many people were killed. To the soldiers, it was just another day in the war. Much of Stone's experiences were brought to the big screen in his movie "Platoon". Stone was the victim of other injuries during the war. After a while he joined the First Cavalry, and eventually after his 15-months commitment, Stone was discharged and he returned to the U.S. in 1968. Very confused and regretful of things he had done, Stone went to Mexico. Upon his re-entry to the U.S., he was caught with two ounces of marijuana and thrown in jail. He eventually found the courage to call his father to bail him out but realized he needed to shape up his life. Under the G.I. bill, Oliver Stone enrolled in New York University's Film School, a decision that he proclaims

³ Vgl. <http://www.filmmakers.com/artists/Oliverstone/biography/htm>, eingesehen am 22. Januar 2006.

was his salvation. This decision offered Stone a way to express both his feelings and his creativity. In 1976, Oliver Stone began to put his experiences of Vietnam into words by writing the screenplay "Platoon". Producers optioned the script, but since another movie about war titled "Apocalypse Now" was currently in production, the company decided to put this movie off. After bad experiences in Hollywood he moved to Paris, where he was becoming dependent on drugs, was falling into the party scene and needed an escape. After a while Stone worked out a deal with the Producer Dino De Laurentiis that would be to the benefit of both parties. In exchange for Stone writing a script for a 1981 novel written by Robert Daly, titled "The Year of the Dragon", De Laurentiis promised Stone he would make "Platoon." "Year of the Dragon" turned out to be a flop, and as a result De Laurentiis neglected to keep up his part of the bargain with Stone. He was unable to find an American distributor for "Platoon" and therefore the film could not be made at that time. The first script for "Platoon" was written in the summer of 1976. At that time Stone broke down on his luck and had no prospects for the future. He spent 12 hours a day working on the script, which he completed in about five weeks. The script itself was generally based on Stone's own experiences in the war, along with the characters being based on people Stone had met during that time. As said before, the script was rejected several times as well as being placed aside for other projects by many studios. Finally, "Platoon" found financing through a foreign production company called Hemdale. "Platoon" was released into theaters in December of 1986. The film was a real success. Although Oliver Stone is only in his 50s, he is credited for writing and/or directing over 20 full-length feature films.⁴ Whether fact or fiction, his films always focus on some aspect of humanity and all our trials, tribulations and triumphs. Although often criticized and typed as a pulp writer, Stone has written and directed many of the most talked about and enjoyed films of the last 20+ years. To this day, he continues to search for inspiring people and their stories. Other famous movies directed by Oliver Stone: Midnight Express (1978), Wall Street (1987), Salvador (1986), Born on the Fourth of July (1989), JFK (1991), Heaven & Earth (1993), Natural Born Killers (1994), Nixon (1995) etc.⁵

⁴ Vgl. ebd.

⁵ Vgl. <http://www.filmmakers.com/artists/Oliverstone/biography/htm>

3. Historical Introduction

The Vietnam War was fought between 1964 and 1976 on the ground in South Vietnam and bordering areas of Cambodia and Laos, and in bombing runs over North Vietnam. A larger regional conflict (also called the Second Indochina War), the Vietnam War was also part of, involved the neighbouring countries of Cambodia and Laos.

The two sides or coalitions which fought against each other were as follows: The United States, the Republic of Vietnam, South Korea, New Zealand and Australia fought against North Vietnam/the Democratic Republic of Vietnam and the National Liberation Front, which was a communist-led South Vietnamese guerrilla movement. In many opinions the Vietnam War was a direct successor to the French Indochina War which was fought where the French wanted to uphold control of their colony against an independence movement led by Communist Party leader Ho Chi Minh (Viet Minh) in Indochina. This colony established independence after they beat the French colonial army in 1954.

We decided to begin with the historical part in 1945 to get to know every important detail concerning the Vietnam War. It is important also to list the dates so that you get to know how long the different incidents lasted.

Japan was beaten and forced to leave Indochina, a former French colony, in the fall of 1945. The Communist group of Ho Chi Minh fought against the Japanese and issued a "Declaration of Independence" when they were away. There the Vietnamese listed their complaints against the French rule:

"...they have robbed us of our rice fields, mines, forests,...they have enforced inhuman laws.." ⁶

The French promised to accept the "American declaration of Independence" but they did not. Ironically many points were taken from the "Declaration of Independence" of America and also France.

Between October 1945 and February 1946, Ho Chi Minh asked President Truman for financial help and reminded him of the promise of self determination of the Atlantic-Charta. However, there was no reply from Truman.

⁶ Zinn, Howard: A people's history of the United States. 1492-Present. London. Longman. 1994, p.640

The French bombarded Haiphong (Northern Vietnam) in October of 1946. There the eight- year war between the Vietminh movement and the French began because both wanted to rule Vietnam.

The Communist war in China lasted until 1949, the Korean war lasted until 1950. After that, the US gave large amount of military aid to the French. The Domino Theory said that the U.S was afraid that communism would spread. They had such a great fear because of the Russian communists with which they had made bad experiences.

In 1952 there was Communist control of all of the Southeast Asia (The Philippines, Taiwan, Japan, South Korea).

In 1953 it was going to be clear that the French were not able to win the war in Indochina. So in 1954 the French had to retreat and peace agreements between the French and the Vietminh followed. The U.S. was financing 80% of the French war effort at that time.

In 1958 Guerrilla activities against the regime of Diem began. The Communists gave aid and sent people south to support the guerrilla movement. Then, in 1960, the National Liberation Front was formed in the South.

Kennedy took office and continued Truman's policy in Southeast Asia in 1961. He permitted a secret plan for various military actions in Vietnam and Laos.

After a Buddhist monk set himself afire on 1963 others wanted to dramatize their position against the Diem regime and also began to commit suicide.

Finally, in November of 1963, the generals attacked the presidential palace. Diem fled and was executed. After that Kennedy was killed and Johnson took office.

To launch full-scale war on Vietnam President Johnson said in 1964 that in the Gulf of Tonkin there had been an attack by the northern Vietnamese. But the whole thing was a fake. The Tonkin "attack" gave Johnson the power to take military action as he saw fit in Southeast Asia. So in 1964/65 America warplanes were bombarding North Vietnam.

In the time of 1965-73 the North Vietnamese practiced a guerrilla war.

In 1966 the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee declared that the US was pursuing an aggressive policy in violation of international law. They called for withdrawal from Vietnam.

In 1967 there were draft cards "turnins" all over the country.⁷

⁷ Vgl. Zinn, Howard: A people's history of the United States. 1492-Present. London. Longman. 1994 p. 476

In 1968 more than 500.000 American troops entered Vietnam. One of the worst things which happened was that in March of the same year mainly old people, women and children but also other people were ordered into a ditch by the Americans where they were shot to death systematically.

All firepower delivered on Vietnam by the US had not destroyed the National Liberation Front though.

In early 1968 the American got conscious of the cruelty of the war. Most of them, because they realized that the US was unable to win the war while about 40.000 American soldiers had to die.

In the fall of 1968 Richard Nixon was elected president. He promised that he would get the US out of Vietnam.

In the following two years 1.785 student demonstrations took place. After more and more protests started, also nuns and priests of the Catholic Church did the same.

In the year 1970 Nixon launched an invasion of Cambodia, after a long bombardment that the government never disclosed to the public. In the same year Washington peace rallies were drawing hundreds of thousands of people.

One year later the "Pentagon Papers", a top-secret 7,000-pages study by the US Department of Defence, which documents the history of the United States' political and military involvement in the Vietnam War from 1945 to 1971, were stolen by Department of Defense employee Daniel Ellsberg. The "New York Times" published excerpts of the Papers in the same year.

20.000 people went to Washington to commit civil disobedience, trying to tie up Washington traffic to express their disgust against the killing still going on in Vietnam. What followed was a mass arrest.

The same year the US supported a South Vietnamese invasion of Laos and Cambodia. But both invasions failed.

One year later, in 1972, 150.000 soldiers were left, but the war did not stop, just the involvement of the American soldiers

In 1972 fierce bombings of Hanoi and Haiphong led to first defiances of B-52 pilots who refused to fly those missions.

In 1973 the US withdrew its troops from Vietnam. Revolutionary troops were supposed to stay where they were, until the government would be elected a integrating new Communist as well as Non-Communist elements.

The Saigon government did not agree. Consequently the US came to the decision to make a last attempt to bludgeon North Vietnam into submission. This was followed by plane bombing attacks but the attack did not work.

Finally in 1975 the North Vietnam troops entered Saigon and the government collapsed. The long war was over and America lost it. ⁸

4. Analysis of the genre

Vietnam War films served in the seventies as barometers which measured public opinion toward that war and toward the soldiers who fought in the war. They indicated that beneath the surface of American Society there is a society paralyzed by the disaster of that decade. There was a thoughtful sympathy, for understanding the situation of the veterans who fought and survived that war as well as a historical curiosity as to how that war was fought and what that war meant. Despite the great variety of Vietnam War films, they have one common characteristic: They all want to tell the “real” story of Vietnam. And this “real” story just lies with those who fought there.

In the eighties social interest in the Vietnam War lost its immediacy with increased assimilation of Vietnam veterans into American society. Vietnam became a warning, a symbol of defeat and loss, and most of all it became a text (movie, literature etc.). Since 1976 the Vietnam War films have progressed through three rather clearly phases: The Epic Phase (traditional, story-oriented texts, clichés, generative linearity of character development, traditional structures and themes etc.), which is the classic/modernist phase of the Vietnam War film history, the Comic-Book-Phase and the Symbolic Nihilist Phase. Most of the films of the last phase are set in Vietnam. Symbolic Nihilism is the “representation or dramatization of an individual’s or a group of individuals’ gradual movement into a void in which all positive aspects of the self, all powers of self-determination, and control are not simply temporarily lost, but rather are so totally annihilated that the self no longer believes in any contexts, no longer hopes for any progress toward any of the ideals, moral designs, social relationships

⁸ Zinn, Howard: A People’s History of the United States 1492-Present, In: Müller-Hartmann, Andreas: Reader. Hauptseminar America at War. p. 134-153

that it held before entering that void.”⁹ The release of “Platoon” opened the year of the Vietnam War movies (1986). This movie is less a war movie than a movie of war. It is about the effects on the psyches the infantrymen fighting there. “Platoon” attempts to tell the linear story of a group of allegorical “Bildungsroman” characters.¹⁰ You get to know what it was really like to be there in Vietnam in 1968. It shows how young and innocent the soldiers were, how they had to go through the jungle and how they got mad there. The film is about death, about fear, about anger, about pain, about honesty and dishonesty, about stupidity, about blood and rain, about children caught in war and especially about confusion.

“Platoon” has a three-part dramatic structure which overlays its linear plot and bursts of imagistic realism. Each of the three parts contains an apocalyptic scene in which ultimate chaos reigns.¹¹ In the first part it is shown how the horror gets more and more cruel. There the village burning scene is the most important one. Till this moment America’s only enemy have been the soldiers of the Northern Vietnam Army or the Viet Cong. The chaos and the destruction of normality were just produced by them. But in this scene you can see that the American soldiers were annihilating their own moral images of themselves and gave up pretensions to civilization. The young boys got mad as you can see when they kill, rape and burn the village and its inhabitants, before they carry out the children of their victims like missionaries. Relating to this behaviour, in his speech “A Rumor of War” Philip Caputo hits the mark, defining this obvious schizoid nature of the American soldier and the whole American psyche in Vietnam as “dialectical tensions between the “outlaw” and the “missionary”.¹² When Chris Taylor shoots at the ground to let a mad-eye Vietnamese boy dance, the “outlaw” is living in Taylor. But shortly after that scene, when an American soldier beats this boy to death with the butt of his rifle, Taylor suddenly changes from “outlaw” back to “missionary”.

The second part is a morality play resolved in the confrontation between Elias and Barnes in the jungle and the fire fight crucifixion of Elias as his fellows watch helplessly from on high. At this point of the film it is shown how the soldier’s

⁹ Palmer, William J: Symbolic Nihilism in Platoon, .p. 120.

¹⁰ Palmer, William J: Symbolic Nihilism in Platoon, .p. 122. In: Müller-Hartmann, Andreas: Reader. Hauptseminar America at War. p. 118-128.

¹¹ Palmer, William J: Symbolic Nihilism in Platoon, .p. 122. In: Müller-Hartmann, Andreas: Reader. Hauptseminar America at War. p. 118-128.

¹² Palmer, William J: Symbolic Nihilism in Platoon, .p. 124. In: Müller-Hartmann, Andreas: Reader. Hauptseminar America at War. p. 118-128.

confusion increasingly gets worse. They more and more lost their minds and functioned like machines, so that they even were able to kill each other out of a mood. The third part is the fire fight, presenting the nihilistic chaos. This is, what the film is really about: confusion escalates, no progress, no salvation, just endurance and survival. The film "Platoon" represents the third phase in the Vietnam War films: the Symbolic Nihilism Phase. That means that the film tries to give a full definition of the nihilism that all the soldiers in the Vietnam War movies of this year felt (1986). In this Nihilist Phase history makes an honest attempt to portray the Vietnam War in ways that film as medium best deals with human experience, history, and ideas. The film "Platoon" is one of the films that make a significant advance in the American perception of the Vietnam War. Professional film critics and Vietnam veterans wrote about the aesthetic realism of the scenes, praised its representation of life and death, authentic portrayal of infantrymen, tries to replicate the soldiers' experiences. "Platoon" is painfully realistic and especially shows the emptiness and nothingness in which the protagonist gets involved. Behind the confusion, "meaningless" is the central scheme in the movie.

The film depends on language to compensate for the cinematic appeal of the high-tech, hyper-real portrayal of violence. To comment on the physical violence "Platoon" works with a first person narrator.¹³ With the help of this voice-over the events and experiences conveyed in the narrative can be viewed from a future perspective which incorporates insights gathered

"I think now, looking back, we did not fight the enemy, we fought ourselves – and the enemy was in us...The war is over for me now, but it will always be there – the rest of my days. As I am sure Elias will be – fighting with Barnes for what Rhah called possession of my soul...There are times since I have felt like the child born of those two fathers. But be that as it may, those of us who did make it have an obligation to build again to teach to others what we know, and to try with what's left of our lives to find a goodness and meaning to his life."¹⁴

¹³ Palmer, William J: Symbolic Nihilism in Platoon, p. 125. In: Müller-Hartmann, Andreas: Reader. Hauptseminar America at War. p. 118-128.

¹⁴ „Platoon“, 1986

“Platoon” presents many of the human elements which made fighting during the time between the event itself and the eventual story-telling. This helps the audience to understand the complex emotional events. The first person narrator also creates a very contemplative and personalized narrative perspective, establishing a moral framework through which one views the atrocities of the film. This is especially supported through the last monologue of Chris Taylor in Vietnam. Things like the drug abuse, the inexperienced junior officers, the racial imbalances, the in-fighting and especially the loss of America’s belief in its own essential morality.

But the message of the film in general is that there are no winners in the war. Just loss in every respect.

5. Tasks for the classroom

5.1 Short summary of the film

“Platoon” opens in late 1967 with the arrival of the young man Chris Taylor, an idealistic student who has dropped out of college to join the army, and volunteering for Vietnam. His idealism and view of war in general rapidly changes during the course of the film. Most of the other soldiers, however, are draftees and they do not care about the newcomers. You only are somebody if you have put in your time. The enemy are the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong but you rarely see them except as shadowy figures in the jungle or momentarily illuminated by the light of a flare. There are no defined battle lines and the combat scenes lead you to believe that the enemy is everywhere. Chris Taylor is the narrator of the story and makes emotionally clear how it was to fight in the war. Where he is placed, there are two sergeants having different approaches to that war. Elias is intelligent and more about surviving without being undignified, brutal or cruel, whereas Barnes is crueller, more ruthless and violent, a killing machine. Elias escapes from reality by using drugs. Barnes doesn’t need them. He does not think about what he is doing everyday in war. Chris at the beginning admires Barnes and wants to follow his orders. But after being there for a while and after having seen how unscrupulously Barnes kills innocent Vietnamese without any reason he changes his attitude towards the war and towards

the sergeants. Taylor quickly sees that morale is low as the men battle heat, mud, stinging insects, and poisonous snakes. He is on Elias` side and tries to stay dignified although the things you see everyday in war make you confused and mad. In the middle of the film there is a fire fight in the jungle. The platoon is helpless and loses plenty of its men. So they decide to leave the place with a helicopter. Barnes lies at Chris when he says that Elias is dead and so he is left alone in the jungle with all the Vietcong. He dies.

From this time on Chris hates Barnes and cannot see any sense in that war anymore. In the last big fire fight where lots of American soldiers have no chance to survive, Chris takes revenge for Elias and kills Barnes. Chris is injured and can leave Vietnam. In the last scene the over-voice (Chris) speaks of the meaninglessness of the war how those cruel experiences will always be there in their minds.

5.2 The tasks and expected products

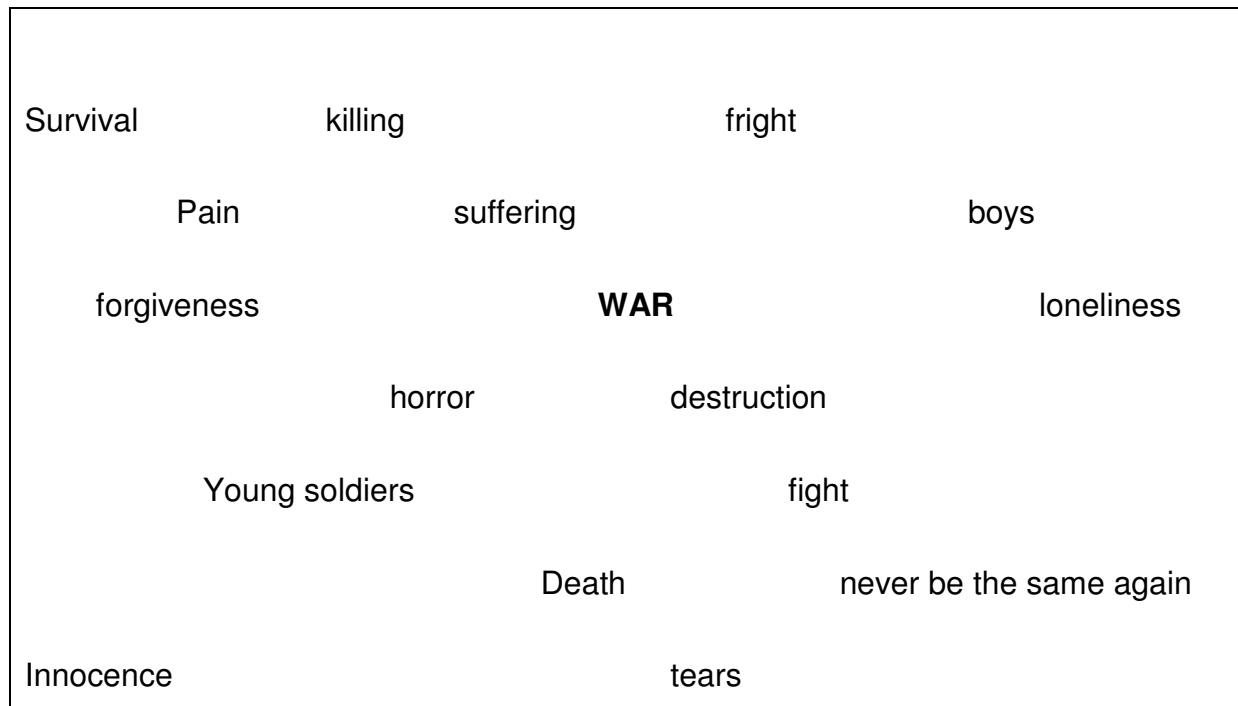
Task 1: The learners get two different poems dealing with the Vietnam War: “War Trauma” by Curt Bennet and “A time to heal” by Cecilia (CeCe) Upson Covera. Both poems deal with the cruelty of the war, the meaninglessness of the war, the coming home and the difficulties after the war.

The class is divided in 4 groups. The teacher hands out two poems so that 2 groups work on the same poem. The students read the poem and discuss it in their group: What is the poem about? Who is the main character of the poem? Which tone is used? (...)

They write their conclusions on a poster. Subsequently the groups present their poem and their poster to their classmates.

Then the teacher asks the class if they know which war was meant in the poems and lets the students guess. If they do not mention the Vietnam War the teacher tells them and asks if anybody has ever heard about that war. If this is the case contributions can be added to the war posters.

Expected product:



After creating the mind map we talk about the collected thoughts. The students are asked if they can imagine which war the poems are about. If they do not know the teacher asks if someone knows anything about the war in Vietnam and shows the place on a map. The students can say what they already know about that war.

Task 2: In the next lesson they get a short text including some important dates of the Vietnam War. The students create their own timeline.

Text for the students:

The Vietnam War: Historical background

Led by the Communist Ho Chi Minh, the revolutionaries fought against the Japanese and held a spectacular celebration in Hanoi in late 1945, when they were gone. They

issued a "Declaration of Independence". There the Vietnamese listed their complaints against the French rule.

"...they have robbed us of our rice fields, mines, forests,... they have enforced inhuman laws.."

The French promised to accept the "Declaration of Independence", but they did not. Ironically many points were out of the "American declaration of Independence" and also the France declaration.

Between October 1945 and February 1946, Ho Chi Minh asked President Truman for financial help and reminded him of the self-determination promises of the Atlantic-Charta. But there was no reply.

In October of 1946 the French bombarded Haiphong (Northern Vietnam). There the eight- year war about the dynasty of Vietnam between the Vietminh movement and the French began.

To help the French fight Communism the US in 1950 gave large amount of military aid, because of the so-called Domino Theory which says that if one country fell to Communism; the next one would bdo the same and so on. So it was necessary to keep the first one from falling.

But in 1952 all of Southeast Asia (the Philippines, Taiwan, Japan, South Korea) came under Communist control.

In 1953 it was going to be clear that the French were not able to win the war in Indochina. So, in 1954 the French had to withdraw. Peace agreements between the French and the Vietminh followed. The U.S. was financing 80% of the French war effort.

In 1958 guerrilla activities against the regime of Diem began. The Communists gave aid and sent people south to support the guerrilla movement.

Then, in 1960, the National Liberation Front was formed in the South. Kennedy took office and continued Truman's policy in Southeast Asia in 1961. He approved a secret plan for various military actions in Vietnam and Laos against the regime of Diem.

Finally, in November of 1963, the generals attacked the presidential palace. Diem fled and was executed. After Kennedy's death in 193 President Johnson took office.

To launch full-scale war on Vietnam President Johnson said in 1964 that in the Gulf of Tonkin there had been an attack by the northern Vietnamese. Although the whole thing was a fake the Tonkin "attack" gave Johnson the power to take military action

as he saw fit in Southeast Asia. So in 1964/65 America warplanes were bombarding North Vietnam.

From 1965 to 1973 the North Vietnamese led a guerrilla war.

In the USA people started to protest against this war. For example, the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee declared that the US was pursuing an aggressive policy in violation of international law. They called for a withdrawal from Vietnam. But in 1968 more than 500.000 American troops entered Vietnam. One of the worst things that happened was that in March of the same year mainly old people, women and children were ordered into a ditch by the Americans where they were shot to death systematically. The American became conscious of the cruelty of the war because they realized that the US was unable to win the war while about 40.000 American soldiers had to die.

The demonstrations against the Vietnam War spread all over the USA. Even nuns and priests started to demonstrate.

In the years 1969/70 1.785 student demonstrations took place.

In Washington peace rallies were drawing hundreds of thousands of people in 1970.

In 1973 the US withdrew its troops from Vietnam and left the revolutionary troops where they were, until a newly elected government would be set up including Communist and Non-Communist elements.

The Saigon government refused to agree. So the US decided to make a last attempt to bludgeon the North Vietnam into submission. This was followed by bombings but the attack did not work.

Finally in 1975: North Vietnam troops entered Saigon and the government collapsed. The long war was over and America lost it.

Expected product:

Timeline

1946: The French bombard Haiphong (Northern Vietnam) → eight- year war between the **Vietminh movement** and the French began who would rule Vietnam.

1950: The US gave large amount of military aid to the French because of **the Domino Theory**: The U.S was afraid that the communism would spread as it had done in Russia before.

1952: Communist Control of all of the Southeast Asia (the Philippines, Taiwan, Japan, South Korea).

1953: The French were not able to win the war in Indochina.

1954: The French had to withdraw.

Peace agreement between the French and the Vietminh.

The U.S. was financing 80% of the French war effort.

1958: **Guerrilla activities** against the regime of Diem. The Communists gave aid and sent people south to support the guerrilla movement.

1964: Fake attack in the Gulf of Tonkin by President Johnson to launch full-scale war on Vietnam. (he said there was an attack by the northern Vietnamese)

→ **The Tonkin “attack”** gave Johnson the power to take military action as he saw fit in Southeast Asia.

1964/ 65: American warplanes began bombarding Northern Vietnam.

1968: The American got conscious about the **cruelty of the war**. Most of them, because they realized that the US was unable to win the war since about 40.000 American soldiers had to die.

1969/70: 1.785 student **demonstrations**

→ More and more protests started, also of nuns and priests.

1970: Washington **peace rallies** were drawing hundreds of thousands of people.

1973: **The US withdrew its troops from Vietnam** and left the revolutionary troops where they were, until a newly elected government would be set up including Communist and Non-Communist elements.

→ The Saigon government refused to agree. So the US decided to make a last attempt to bludgeon the North Vietnam into submission.

→ Bombings

→ The attack did not work

1975: North Vietnam troops entered Saigon and the government collapsed. The long **war was over and America lost it.**

Task 3: As Introduction of the next lesson, we show them the quotation from the beginning of the film: They have to explain it in their own words.

“Rejoice O young man

in thy youth.”

Salomon.

Expected oral product:

“You should enjoy your youth”.

“You should do the things you like when you are young.”

“Don’t worry, be happy.” etc.

The students have to explain the quotation in their own words and say what they think is meant by it.

Task 4: The teacher shows them different scenes of the film:

Scene 1: Chris Taylor in the first fight. He is not able to kill the enemy and therefore gets into trouble.

Scene 2: The underground scene. The soldiers are smoking dope, drinking and celebrating to escape from reality.

Scene 3: The plot of the first part of the film: the village fire scene. → Meaninglessness and confusion is presented. An American soldier is executed by the Vietnamese. The soldiers get so angry, especially Barnes that they become crazy killers. ("At that day we loved Barnes") Village scene: Taylor lets the Vietnamese boy dance by shooting on the ground. But he cannot shoot him to death. The village is in the south of Vietnam, but they are searching for the Vietcong who executed the American soldier down by the river. They find weapons in the village. Barnes shoots mercilessly at the South Vietnamese old woman.

Elias – Barnes: Elias: "What the fuck are you doing Barnes? You are not an execution commando." → fight. They set the village on fire.

Rape: Taylor stops it: "They are fucking human beings man."

In this scene everything gets out of control.

After that the Platoon splits (Barnes – Elias).

Dialogue between Elias and Taylor. Elias does not believe in what they are doing. Not anymore! "We are going to lose this war."

Scene 4: Conflict Elias-Barnes → death of Elias because Barnes lies.

Scene 5: The end of the big fire fight. Chris and Barnes survive the fire fight. Chris kills Barnes to take revenge of Elias.

Scene 6: Last monologue (Chris, voice-over).

While-watching-task: The students have to describe the development of the soldiers' and especially Chris' behaviour during the war.

Expected product: Worksheet:

In the following we present the worksheet (questions) we would use and the answers we expect from the students:

Platoon

A. The scenes

1) What happens in the scene? (1-2 sentences)

Scene 1:

During the first fight at night Chris is afraid of throwing the hand grenade. That causes that the Vietcong can come too close. After that Chris gets in trouble because he was afraid of killing.

2.) What are the soldiers doing in this scene? Why?

Scene 2:

The soldiers are smoking dope and drinking. They are singing and celebrating throughout the night. They try to forget about the war.

3.) What happens in that scene?

The platoon finds a killed American soldier. They get angry and get off to find the killers. They come to a Vietnamese village and start killing the people there without any reason. Taylor cannot kill a boy. Barnes kills an old woman. Elias sees it and gets angry about that senseless killing. The two start to fight each other.

4.) Why does Elias have to die?

Elias has to die because Barnes lies to Taylor and tells him that he is already dead, although he could have been rescued. Out of the helicopter the others have to watch how Elias gets killed by the Vietcong. The scene shows that they are even able to kill their own men.

5.) What happens in this scene?

Chris takes revenge for Elias and kills Barnes

6.) What does this scene tell you about the war?

The war is cruel and senseless. The soldiers kill people without knowing what they are doing. The war will always be in their mind. Even when they are back home.

Describe the development of Chris' behaviour during his mission in the war:

At the beginning he is not able to kill other people. He is too soft. The longer he stays at the camp the more he learns to kill to survive. At the end he even does not hesitate to kill his own men. This development shows how the war destroys any kind of feelings.

B. The quotation

3) Remember the quotation "Rejoice young man thy youth". After watching the scenes what do you think does it mean, now?

It is ironical. The young boys who fought in that war could not enjoy their youth. Instead of having a good time they had to fight to survive or even died. The war destroys their life forever.

5. We go back to the quotation. The students have to compare the statement of the quotation and the soldiers' life in the war.

Does the quotation mean what it says? → Worksheet task 4.

6. Go back to the question: Who won the war?

Expected oral product:

Nobody won the war. They all have to get along with the cruelty they have experienced for the rest of their life.

5.3 Comment on the tasks**Comment on task 1:**

Through the poems, written by war veterans, the pupils get directly confronted with the topic. It is about the meaninglessness of the war and the nihilism. In the poems it is said that the war still goes on in the soldiers' minds afterwards. They try to get along with the demons of the Vietnam War but everyday of their life is influenced by those experiences. The pupils get to know that the soldiers in that war were about the same age they are now. This fact hopefully helps the students to get an emotional access to the topic. We have chosen two different poems because they are rather similar to each other. They both tell about the Vietnam War, about the soldiers' youth, about the meaninglessness and about the hard way you have to go back after the war. This means life will never be the same afterwards. We thought this was a good way to lead the students onto the topic 'war' because by dealing with the poem they start to deal with the topic 'war' in general, get interested and motivated. The poems' message is the same as the message of the movie: There are no winners in the war. Just loss in every respect!

Through the group work everybody can say something and talk about the text to exchange opinions, feelings, guesses.

Comment on task 2:

We hand out a short text to the students about Vietnam and the most important facts of the Vietnam War. The students' task is to read the text and to create a short timeline about it. So the pupils have to differentiate what is important and what is not important. This way the students get the background information, which is necessary for the further process of our teaching unit. In this way they deal with the topic and

get into it. Afterwards we compile the most important facts in class on a timeline on the OHP. It is important to reflect what the pupils have acquired in order to motivate them. The students have the possibility to ask questions about things that are not clear enough.

Comment on task 3:

The quotation is a good introduction to lead the students to the theme of the soldiers' age and innocence: How young the boys were and how the war made killing machines out of them.

We use this task as a pre-task for the film. Without a connection to the film the quotation has a positive tone. It tells us to enjoy the youth and represents it as a wonderful time which is understandable in general.

The students should try to explain the quotation in their own words to make sure that they really got the meaning of that lyrical text.

Comment on task 4:

The first scene is chosen to show that there still is a limit in the soldiers' mind which prevents them from killing other people even though it is the enemy.

The second scene is about how the soldiers try to escape from reality by taking drugs and celebrating at night.

The third scene supports the confusion and meaninglessness of the war. The soldiers do not know what to do. They got merciless and acted in confusion like killing machines. However, just some seconds later they were wondering what they are doing and helped the enemy they tried to kill before.

The conflict between Elias and Barnes in the fire fight (the fourth scene) is important because it demonstrates the nihilism and cruelty the soldiers experience. Barnes lies and so Elias has to die. The fire fight is the climax of the nihilism chaos.

In the next scene Chris kills Barnes. That shows that even Chris has not got the scruple to kill anymore.

The last scene is a monologue of the main character, the recruit Chris. It makes clear how difficult it is for the soldiers to get along with all those cruel experiences in their life after the war. The over-voice supports the meaninglessness of the war.

The pupils are asked to write down the development of Chris' behaviour during his mission in the war. They should make out the effects the war had on the soldiers' minds.

By doing this task the pupils learn about the cruelty of the war and what it does to the psyches of the people who are involved. They do not just hear about the demons of the war, they can experience them through the soldiers like Chris, Barnes, Elias etc.

Comment on task 5:

In the last part of our teaching unit we go back to the quotation we talked about before watching the scenes. It is a kind of control if the students really get what we want them to recognize. The students should then know that most of the soldiers had been young and innocent. But in contrast to the quotation they could not enjoy their youth at all. They had no uninhibited life as other boys of that age and they will never have one afterwards. The pupils should realize that the quotation in connection with the film has a totally different meaning than as it has when it is standing on its own.

The last question is to make clear the message of our unit. "There are no winners in the war. Just loss in every respect."

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6.1 Some annotated titles which are helpful for dealing with our topic:

Burkins, Lee (2003). *Soldier's Heart: An inspirational Menoir and Inquiry of War*. Lightning Source Inc. 1st Books Library.

This is an emotional and personal work of literature. It is a memoir of Lee's life before, during and after the war. He writes about his arrival in Vietnam as a young and innocent boy, about the time he was an experienced warrior and about the difficulties he had as a Veteran. Lee Burkin's story is very impressive and makes the readers appreciate what he had to go through until he finally found peace.

Buzzanco, Robert (1999). *Vietnam and the Transformation of American Life*. Malden [u.a.]: Blackwell.

This book is useful to find out about the historical background of the Vietnam War. It starts with the history of the emergence of Ho Chi Minh and about the Vietnamese nationalist movement and explains why the USA intervened in Vietnam. You can read about the course of the Vietnam War and about how American Life changed in consequence of this war.

We think the book *Vietnam and the Transformation of American Life* by Robert Buzzanco is very helpful to get an overview about the topic "Vietnam War".

Jim Nye (1991). *Aftershock. Poems and Prose of the Vietnam War*. Louisville, El Paso: Cinco Puntos Press.

Jim Nye himself served two 12 month tours of duty in Vietnam. He says of his book: "Some of these things happened, some did not. But that does not matter, because all are true. This is my attempt to realize and communicate that truth."

Poems are a very emotional way to express one's feelings. You read them and feel more and more empathy for the people who have experienced the war with every single word.

[http://: vietnamkrieg.know-library.net:](http://vietnamkrieg.know-library.net:)

This internet page gives a good overview of the most important events in the Vietnam War and their background. It is easy to read and you can find a lot of links to that topic.