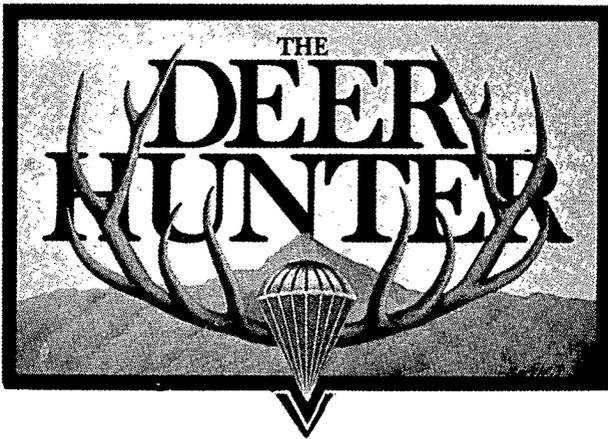


THE DEER HUNTER AND THE JAUNDICED ANGEL

Frank Burke

THE LOGO



An antlered parachute: the perverse hybridization of nature and military technology.

No deer attached to the antlers, no person attached to the parachute, no ground or "body" attached to the mountaintop: radical dissociation, total rootlessness.

"The Deer Hunter": less a person than a role or abstraction. Words enthroned, godlike, in the heavens. At the same time, words — and identity — entangled in antlers (and colored blood red in the original logo): a deer hunter impaled on the horns of his own abstractions.

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A five act tragedy. Imperialism the tragic flaw. Not just political or military imperialism, but imperialism as a way of life. The terminal disease — psychological, economic, technological, sociological, sexual — of a society in which the urge to connect has been conquered by the impulse to control.

A tragedy with neither *peripeteia* (change of fortune) nor *anagnorisis* (recognition). Just the irreversible moral decay of the deer hunter and his world.

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Act. I. The rootlessness and alienation of Clairton, Pa. A world of industrial domination and appropriation. Alienation breeds escape: military enlistment and the quest for meaning, adventure and identity abroad. Act II. Escape to Nam. Pioneering as soldiery. Greater rootlessness, greater alienation. Military domination and appropriation. The erosion of identity in a foreign, imperialized landscape. Act III. The return of the uprooted to an alien homeland. Sexual domination and appropriation. Encounter with the emptiness of the past. Fabrication of one last "deer hunt": the quest for Nicky. Act IV. Deer hunter in exile, Nam in exodus, all roots severed. Symbolic domination and control. Imperialism = macho American heroism. The quest becomes homo/sui/cidal; total imperialization of the self. Act V. Requiem for the dead souls of the living. Nothing left to dominate or control. Obliterative self-surrender to the nonmeaning, nonbeing of *God Bless America*.

Act I. Clairton, U.S.A.

SCENE ONE. *Light comes up on the outskirts of Clairton, accompanied by the roar of a truck (offscreen). An oil tanker-truck explodes onto the frame, careens wildly around a corner, passes a figure filling a gas tank at the rear of a car, and storms through the streets of dormant Clairton.*

An invasion. An act of territorial conquest by a machine (no truck *driver* is visible). Simultaneously, two mechanical sex acts: the brutal penetration-rape of the town by the phallic-spermatoc truck — as a man pederastically nozzles his car from the rear.

Human relations polarized into "war" (masculine aggression) and "love" (feminine connection), with the clear predominance of the former. The primacy of machinery = man-as-alien. Connected neither with nature nor with fellow man — and certainly not with woman. Human relations = mechanical relations.

SCENE TWO. *Inside a steel mill, enormous pieces of machinery perform a complicated but meaningless dance, seemingly of their own volition — while a fire rages almost out of control. Men, disguised and isolated in hideous costumes, carry out disconnected tasks which effect nothing tangible — until they are rescued from their Sisyphean labors by a deafening whistle.*

A world of plunder. Technological and commercial imperialism. The earth

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invaded for its ore, the ore transformed into adamantine commodity. A world devoid of identity, connection and meaning. Environment-as-enemy. Machinery and fire release terrifying energy that can't be appeased — only controlled or evaded. A life of reaction in which motion derives from without, metronomed by machines and work whistles. The division not only of labour but of the labourer.

Dead center in the vortex of technological violence: Michael-the-Deer Hunter, Vronsky. Michael-the-Archangel. A spirit forged in the infernal fires of a blast furnace; an angel turned demon; a perverse (though *not* unsympathetic) hero of a perverse world. His first action a reaction, a job-dictated act of negation as he slams his protective visor over his protective safety glasses and equally "protective" beard. A denial of self, a denial of world. The death of visible identity — the perceivable interface of world-self. The primal assertion of radical disconnection.

Michael-the-Ukrainian/American. The offspring of disconnection and uprootedness. His forebearers imperialized out of their land, language and culture by the Russians. Forced to abandon their homeland for the identity-dissolving melting pot of the U.S.A. His adoptive identity no real identity. American patriotism + army enlistment = the negation of roots. *God Bless America* = God Damn Russia — and the Ukraine which lies within it. A killing paradox of self-imperialization.

Ethnic rootlessness ... personal rootlessness. "Born" in a steel mill, Michael retires at quitting time to a bar. What home exists is familyless: a trailer stashed remotely on a hill.

Disconnection and uprootedness = alienation. The fuel that powers Michael. The source of his (non)sense of (non)identity. Alienation = world/fear, world/hate = self/fear, self/hate. Paranoia. "I don't like no surprises." A consequent mania for domination. "You're a maniac ... a control freak" (Nicky). Total self-control. A right way to do everything from polishing boots to opening a car trunk to killing a deer. Strict delimitation of experience. "This is this. This isn't something else." Hemingwayesque reduction of life to a single event — the deer hunt — in a controlled "arena" ruled by a single figure invested with priestly powers of ritualized male domination. Self and world so circumscribed that there *are* no surprises, either from within (intense, unexpected feeling, involvement, love) or from without. The ultimate, self-consuming game of REPRESSION.

Repression = even greater alienation, even greater distance. The impossibility of "marriage" in any sense. Michael-at-the-wedding: an alien drinking himself out of touch at the bar. His sole social act a toast to "Fuckit," the Green Beret isolate that Michael will become. His involvement with the wedding party forced on him by others — after alcohol has dissolved any possibility for real communication.

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The process of Act I: oscillation and conflict between "war" and "love," "masculine" and "feminine." The two principal events: the deer hunt and the wedding. The two principal facets of the wedding reception: the celebration of marriage; the "celebration" of Michael's, Nicky's, and Stevie's imminent departure for war. Recurrent domination of war over love, masculine over feminine. The reception takes place in a Veterans' Hall; the army enlistment makes marriage impending divorce; the female "lovers" (Angela, Linda, Stanley's bridesmaid/date/K.O. victim) prove subordinate to men. The deer hunt appropriates and supplants marriage as the culminative event of Act I.

Deer hunt = *dear* hunt. A complex act of displacement and symbolism. Michael's projection of all that's dear to him onto the deer and onto single-minded pursuit of the deer/dear. The first major transformation of love into war. Imperialization in the extreme. The invasion of foreign territory. The destruction of the inhabitants. The removal of the remains from their "homeland." A one-shot, no-win situation. The deer — and by projection everything dear — is either killed or allowed to escape.

The deer hunt = marriage-become-divorce. The divorce of the hunters from society, of males from females. The replacement of Stevie-Angela with Michael-Nicky, then the divorce of Michael from Nicky. Finally, the divorce of Michael from the deer in the ultimate act of divorce: killing.

Post Mortem. "Connection," "community," "rootedness" = five males, isolated in a bar-not-a-home, lost each in his own reverie, as John plays the alien music of a dead exile: Chopin.

Act II. Vietnam

Part I. Agraria.

The steel mill inferno of Clairton becomes the military inferno of Nam. Helicopters waste an agrarian hamlet. A Vietnamese soldier wastes women and children. Michael wastes the Vietnamese soldier.

Sanity gives way to insanity. A crazed Michael awakens to a crazed world. "Sanity" regained only at the price of murder. Victory and freedom = slaughter.

Domestic imperialism becomes foreign. War and invasion = imperialism in its natural state. Helicopter destruction from above = the American eagle at work.

Personal/ethnic rootlessness infinitely intensified. Capture in an alien land. Escape on an uprooted tree. Separation at an uncrossed bridge. The death of Stevie's roots (legs). The slinging of Stevie deer-like across the hood of a military vehicle amidst a parade of the homeless.

War = the erosion of personal identity. Michael, Nicky, Stevie trade in their

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individuality for the corporate identity of soldiers. Life becomes a game of military roulette; selfhood becomes uniformed names and numbers in the U.S. Army.

Marriage and family annihilated as a Vietnamese male ("father") destroys a mother-with-child: the reincarnation of pregnant Angela. Family becomes Michael the father, Nicky the mother/wife, Stevie the child. All male. Nonregenerative. A community bound by terror not love, capable of giving birth only to destruction.

A world of total *reaction*. World/fear, world/hate rule supreme.

The Vietnamese = the Ukrainians of Act II. But even more imperialized. Captives of war, prisoners in their own land. One century of French domination + two decades of American brutalization = no identity. Born into a world of war, they can function only as paranoid, violent warriors (the guerilla captors) or passive victims of war (the spiritless participants in exodus). Aggression or submission, slavery or domination. The only, polar, possibilities in an imperialized society. No "real" Vietnamese. No "real" Vietnam. Just an American national playground for the release of repressed violence.

The central paradigm of Act II: Russian roulette. An imperialist sport in which the captors use the captives as pawns. A replacement for the deer hunt as the principal game in a world at war. The perversion of one-to-one relations into killing competition. The reduction of people to hands and heads. The virtual and visual amputation of legs/roots. The equation of success with annihilation. The killing of the head: identity, consciousness, self-determination. The blowing of the mind either physically or psychologically. Like the deer hunt, a no-win situation in which there are no real survivors.

Part II. Saigon.

Yet further dehumanization. The U.S. Army Hospital a bastion of military abstraction. Dog tags, charts, case histories / doctors, nurses, patients. NO PERSONS. Saigon proper: the deadquarters of rootlessness. The degenerate soul of imperialism. Whorehouses, nightclubs, gambling dens. Everything for sale — particularly false forms of freedom. Dying proof that beneath the facade of military domination lies something more destructive: capitalism. The devil who owns the Saigon soul is not Uncle Sam but a nameless conscienceless French entrepreneur. A highpriest of Western commerce. The effete spectre of French colonialism.

Saigon = the death of Nicky's identity. Asked for his I.D. tags, he produces another's. Asked if his name's Russian (not even Ukrainian), he replies "No. American." Questioned about his parents, he becomes increasingly inarticulate. Unable to complete a long distance call to Linda, he tells the operator "Never mind." The end of emotional involvement, personal ties.

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"Never mind" the only solution to a rootless existence. The antidote to feeling in a world in which all one can feel is pain. "Never mind" = Nicky's motto and new identity as he dissolves into the streets of Saigon, the employ of the Frenchman, and the self-lobotomy of Russian roulette.

Nicky's self-obliteration = the death of the "best man" — both of wedding and film. A lover as well as a warrior, a "female" as well as a male. Ambisexual in name, image, and nature. Everything Michael isn't. The principal embodiment of synthesis, "marriage," potential integration. A woman-surrogate in a world of annihilated womanhood. A dear.

His self-lobotomy = the death of love as a concrete possibility. The replacement of love with its illusion. Nicky a mere hollow projection in the minds of Clairtonians. A symbol for Michael to pursue and the others to mourn. A love surrogate in a world without love.

Act III. Clairton Revisited

The return of Michael-the-Soldier to a world of civilians. Total alienation. "I feel a lot of distance. I feel far away." A world without Nicky. A world without roots. Personified by Stevie: a motorized amputee who prefers the cloistered life of a V. A. Hospital to his former life and family.

Michael a walking uniform who applies jungle tactics to everything: "raiding" his trailer-home at dawn to reunite with Linda, "capturing" Axel and Stanley from behind at the steel mill. His "courtship" of Linda a guerilla campaign. Conceived in the isolation of a motel room. Partially executed during the dawn raid. Consummated with a pre-lovemaking, dark-of-night "ambush" and "kidnapping" outside the supermarket.

The death of the past. Gang camaraderie dissipates quickly and painfully in the back of John's bar. The deer hunt proves meaningless after Nam. The failure of the hunt triggers the negation of fellowship when Michael plays Russian roulette on Stanley.

Russian roulette *replaces* the deer hunt. War again supplants love. Michael *willingly* plays roulette, in contrast to his earlier forced participation.

The death of love. Michael and Linda use each other as Nicky-surrogates. Michael substitutes lovemaking with Linda for the failed hunt and dead male friendship. "Love" making = compensation for the *absence* of love.

The death of meaning. Linda: "Did you ever think that life would turn out like this?" Michael: "No."

Failure and substitution = growing illusion. Manufactured goals supplant concrete relationships. "Visiting the sick" (Stevie) replaces lovemaking with Linda, then is swiftly replaced with "Saving Nicky" — the last and most illusory hope for redemption in a valueless world. An even more abstract adventure than the war. The urge of one identityless creature to "marry"

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another in a culminative devolution of the deer/dear hunt to radical, irrevocable roulette.

Illusion = obsession. Michael's total disregard for reality. Not only the monomaniacal pursuit of Nicky but the singleminded insistence on a shotgun remarriage of Stevie and Angela. The senseless splicing of a wounded body to a wounded mind in a relationship of separate but equal catatonia.

Act IV. Saigon Revisited

The return of Michael-the-Soldier to Nam. A world of total escape and exodus. The complete capitalization and imperialization of Vietnam. Vietnamese "identity" = five English-speaking Saigon businessmen in Western dress, who eat insulated by their black market wealth while their homeland dissolves in flame.

Michael an alien invasive force. Fixated with guerillan intensity on the one-shot recapture of Nicky, he moves oblivious and counter to the masses around him. A role rather than an individual. "I want to play the American." *I.e.*, "I want to play [the role of] the American." John Wayne swashbuckling his way into foreign territory, risking self to save the good guy. The consummate American movie (anti)hero. A pure illusion and stereotype. The American pioneer-turned-military imperialist.

Nicky a high-priced hooker. A love object whose services can only be obtained through extensive financial negotiations with assorted pimps: the Frenchman, a doorman/bouncer, the Vietnamese businessmen. An image of waxen, hollow perfection, yellowed by the light and his own degeneracy. A jaundiced angel whose beauty has been falsely "orientalized" by Saigon — itself the perversion of Oriental authenticity. An anaesthetized robot bereft of the grace and agility that once aligned him with the deer.

His lack of memory a denial of Michael's and his past and ethnicity. His unwillingness and inability to communicate an annihilation of community, fellowship, love. Communication = spitting on Michael: the perversion of love into hate. Nicky = Saigon = imperialized existence in the final stages of decomposition.

Nicky the blank screen on which Michael projects his own identity. A mirror from which Michael *demand*s his identity: "Tell me it's Mike. Tell me it's Mike." A pure projection of Michael's narcissism and solipsistic obsession. Identity-transference so complete that Michael is willing to kill himself via roulette to save himself-as-Nicky. Another no-win situation.

Everything breeds its own negation. Nicky's moment of awareness necessitates the killing of awareness. Recognition of Michael and remembrance of the past make him blow his mind for good. In a loveless world the memory

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of love is unendurable. Self-extinction, self-imperialization the only remaining means of self-assertion.

The final image: Michael holds Nicky's dead head in his hands and views the external image of his own moral death. The imperialist imperialized. Lobotomy as communicable disease. The only thing left to be shared.

Act V. Clairton Yet Again

A funeral. A visit to the grave. A *post mortem* brunch. A world in which everything worth loving has died and all that remains is the necrophilia of death-worship.

Paradigm: Following the funeral, Michael bends over to bid "Nicky" a final farewell, only to have his own image reflected back by the highly polished casket. Nicky's death reflects everyone else's.

Last scene. The embodiment and culmination of film-long negation. Homelessness and the death of roots: mourners gather not at someone's house but at the bar which has been a surrogate home throughout. Death of community: "society" consists only of a small, disconnected group whose insularity surpasses that of the five Westernized Saigonese. Death of marriage and love: Angela and Stevie reduced to a permanent state of shock, totally dependent on their companions; while Michael and Linda repeatedly fail in their efforts to establish visual or verbal contact. Death of communication: *all* the characters — not just Michael and Linda — prove incapable of connecting. All they can do is narcotically chat about the upcoming meal or the weather.

The "solution" to all-pervasive death-in-life: a *God-Bless-America* singalong. The apotheosis of illusion. The pretense of community, which inures the participants to the real absence of community. An act of total displacement, projection and self-surrogation. The culminative abdication of identity, individuality, authenticity.

God Bless America. A compendium of value-perversions. God as Supreme Imperialist. Not a Creator but a Landlord who keeps an eye on his possessions. "Love" as patriotism — mere abstraction and projection — or as the "marriage" of abstractions: a male dominant God and a female dependent America. "Home, sweet home" the Motherland, not a personal, felt reality.

Singalong = reenlistment. Reaffirmation of an imperialized/imperializing world that has robbed Steven of his legs, Nicky of his life, and everyone of his/her humanity.

Last things. Couples sit at square tables, paired and facing one another. Russian roulette revisited. Tables obliterate bodies from the waist down, imaging group amputation. A community of "Stevies": spiritual amputees whose roots have been not only severed but dissolved. Their last rite: a thrusting forth of glasses in a toast to Nicky. A replacement for the wedding

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toasts of Act I. More evidence of war triumphant over love. Roulette yet again, with glasses replacing the guns, beer replacing bullets. "To Nicky." A salute to death: the death of the dear. Even the toast succumbs to death — "killed" before completion by a freeze frame. The final one-shot act of devitalization in the film. The conclusive cinematic assertion of life-denying control. The aesthetic triumph of imperialism, stasis, death, in a world wholly subjugate to each.

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