



CASUALTIES OF WAR

AN INVESTIGATION

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Brian De Palma's Vietnam movie *Casualties of War* had a mixed critical reception when released in 1989, with opinions ranging from "morally repugnant" to "masterpiece". There is no such equivocation in Nathan Rera's comprehensive book about its making (translated by Paul Cronin). His passionate advocacy is supported by astute critical analysis and comparison with other Vietnam movies.

Not for nothing is the book subtitled 'An Investigation'. Because it is dealing with a true story and because it took 20 years for the film to reach the screen, it is obliged to dig into the film's backstory and its path to production, which it does with a historian's relish for research. The starting point was an article published in the *New Yorker* in 1969 by Daniel Lang concerning the abduction, rape and murder of a young Vietnamese woman by four American soldiers and the reporting of that incident to his superior officers, at considerable risk to himself, by a fifth member of the group who refused to participate. What made them do it, and what made one individual *not* do it?

Rera's research revealed that Lang, in response to a proposed film version of the events, expressed a preference for Fred Zinnemann as director, but Zinnemann was embroiled in a legal battle

with MGM over the last-minute cancellation of *Man's Fate* and was unavailable. Over subsequent years, the project was to pass through the hands of such humane directors as John Schlesinger and Jack Clayton, and to inspire controversial independent movies, such as Michael Verhoeven's *o.k.* (1970) and Elia Kazan's *The Visitors* (1972). De Palma's film was given the go-ahead following the success of *The Untouchables* (1987). All of this is covered in great detail before a similarly fascinating account of the making of the film itself and its aftermath.

According to the author, the catalyst for his book came from a single image: "Brian De Palma's eyes flooded with tears, unable to continue his interview" after a screening of *Casualties of War* in Paris in 2018, still disturbed by the incident's shocking sexual violence which he depicted so powerfully. An epilogue, however, reveals a deeper, more personal motivation than simply the reclamation of an underrated masterwork and is almost as haunting and poignant as the film itself. It would be unpardonable to reveal this disclosure before allowing readers the opportunity to re-view the film for themselves and then read this remarkable book which so eloquently does it justice.