

From Weaklings to Wounded Warriors:
The Changing Portrayal of War-related Post Traumatic Stress Disorder in
American Cinema

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“That which doesn’t kill me, can only make me stronger.”¹ Nietzsche’s manifesto, which promises that painful experiences develop nerves of steel and a formidable character, has not stood the test of time. After decades of research, we now know that traumatic events often lead to debilitating psychiatric symptoms, relationship difficulties, disillusionment and drug abuse, all of which have the potential to become chronic in nature.² The American public is now quite familiar with the term Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), its characteristics and associated problems. From what we know now, it would have been more appropriate for Nietzsche to have stated “That which doesn’t kill me sometimes makes me stronger, sometimes cripples me completely, but regardless, will stay with me until the end of my days.”

The effects of trauma have not only been a focus of mental health professionals, they have also captured the imagination of Americans through exposure to cultural artefacts. Traumatized veterans in particular have provided fascinating material for character development in Hollywood movies. In many film representations the returning veteran is violent, unpredictable and dehumanized; a portrayal that has consequences for the way veterans are viewed by U.S. society. Unlike the majority of literature stemming from trauma studies that utilizes Freudian

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theoretical foundations,³ this article draws from a combination of perspectives from cultural and film studies as well as current psychological research in order to analyze the evolution of the portrayal of war-related Posttraumatic Stress Disorder in mainstream American cinema, and how this evolution occurs in tandem with shifting social and political agendas. We discuss films that portray traumatized veterans from wars previous to Vietnam in order to establish prior trends, but focus on films during and after Vietnam as this was the period in which PTSD became a prevalent term in the American lexicon. Within this paper, we address the following questions: How has the depiction of veterans with PTSD in mainstream North American cinema changed over the years? What are the different messages about traumatized veterans that have been transmitted in these movies? And, how has this change influenced the public's perception of U.S. veterans as either victims or perpetrators of violence both during war and afterward?

A History of PTSD

The level of awareness regarding the nature and treatment of PTSD has increased dramatically during the past thirty years. There currently exists a great deal of information about vulnerability to PTSD, the specific symptoms of the disorder, the resultant interpersonal and psychological consequences, the course it takes, and how it is best treated. Once known as a psychiatric disorder associated only with veterans of the Vietnam War, PTSD is now diagnosed following many trauma inducing experiences such as rape, emotional and physical abuse, disasters, accidents, and torture.⁴ While the term has only been officially recognized by the American Psychiatric Association for the past three decades (since the third edition of the DSM-IV), according to Jonathan Shay, it has likely been experienced by traumatized people

for millennia. For instance, numerous symptoms of PTSD can be seen in Homer's Iliad, with Achilles suffering similar symptoms and re-adjustment difficulties after his battle with Achaean forces.⁵ According to Shay, Achilles lost his humanity and immersed himself in despair and oblivion following combat. He also felt betrayed by his king, Agamemnon. Vietnam veterans reported the same betrayal from the U.S. government upon their homecoming. Achilles also felt like many soldiers at the death of their comrades: guilty. He felt that he failed his friend Pátroklos and wished to replace him in his death. These are all common experiences of veterans returning from war throughout history and are not specific to Achilles or Vietnam veterans; the disorder is in no way a recent emergent. The specific manifestations are somewhat influenced by cultural variables, which are reflected in the various names for the disorder over the last two centuries; 'nostalgia' in the Civil War, 'war neurosis' and 'soldiers heart' in World War I, 'shell shock' and 'battle fatigue' in World War II. Regardless of the name given during different epochs, the core symptoms have likely been similar.⁶

If PTSD has indeed been prevalent throughout history, why has it only been since 1980 that it has been recognized by the medical and psychological establishments as a legitimate disorder? This is a complex question, but one that is relevant to the current investigation. Judith Lewis Herman writes in her seminal text *Trauma and Recovery* (1992) that the acknowledgement of PTSD as a legitimate disorder has evolved in tandem with cultural transformations and political movements. For instance, even during the latter half of the 20th century, there was great resistance among doctors, military leaders and the general public to acknowledge that PTSD was anything other than cowardice or evidence of a weak character. Against a cultural backdrop in which men are always tough and only the

weak shed tears, lament their losses and can't "get on with their lives" (the John Wayne mentality), a veteran with PTSD is not someone to receive compassion and care, but a weakling to despise, a 'moral invalid'. According to Herman, it wasn't until the 1970's when mainstream American society was reeling from having lost an unpopular war that produced tremendous physical and psychological casualties (and was questioning the legitimacy of war in general) that it become possible to officially recognise PTSD as a valid mental disorder among war veterans.

The resistance to officially acknowledge PTSD may have also had other motives. As war historian E.T. Dean reminds us, military psychiatry has always had a political agenda and, prior to the 1970s, this agenda involved returning traumatized soldiers to battle. In Vietnam, we witnessed a "change in emphasis as psychiatry moved away from serving the manpower needs of the military."⁷ Both the American public and many mental health professionals grew skeptical of the war and the methods previously used when dealing with traumatized soldiers. The anti-Vietnam War contingent utilized the alleged permanent psychological damage being done to soldiers as leverage to convince the nation that the U.S. should withdraw its troops. Second, psychologists and psychiatrists maintained that the soldiers' delayed stress and readjustment problems could be minimized with social support upon their return – "if returning veterans [were] greeted enthusiastically in their homeland."⁸ The best way to restore the image of the Vietnam Veteran was to convert it from violent, sometimes rapacious warrior to that of an actual victim of war. PTSD, therefore, can be seen as being shaped by a particular cultural context that is motivated to modify perceptions and memories of the war and its soldiers. The validation of PTSD as mental disorder was also necessary as a way of healing the cultural trauma of the Vietnam War for American society, including veterans and civilians. This shift in the

perception of veterans can also be seen in the cinematic representations of PTSD among combat veterans during the last fifty years.

Trauma Cinema

The portrayal of PTSD among combat veterans in movies can help us to understand not only each individual movie, but also the social and cultural context in which they emerged. The depiction of PTSD in movies not only reflects social trends, but also shapes discourses and attitudes towards the disorder (and possibly war in a broader sense) and the veterans who suffer it.

Prior to the Vietnam War, many men who went to war suffered psychological trauma. For the most part, people regarded these returning veterans as having adjusted back into civilian life well. Referring to the American Civil War, E.T. Dean states that veterans may have developed psychological problems due to exposure to combat, but the image transmitted is that their problems “were ‘washed away’ by the ritual of acceptance and celebration by appreciative civilians.”⁹ From a political standpoint, military authorities likely wanted to suppress information about the psychological casualties of war to keep morale high. Herman explains that the military’s attitude towards soldiers experiencing PTSD symptoms was such “that these men did not deserve to be patients at all; that they should be court-martialed or dishonorably discharged rather than given medical treatment. [...] Those who exhibited the ‘hideous enemy of negativism’ were threatened with court martial.”¹⁰ To suffer from war trauma was evidence of a character flaw, with few exceptions. Besides, when war was over, the presence of veterans with psychiatric disabilities became an “embarrassment to civilian societies eager to forget.”¹¹ Also, military psychiatric

methods did not support the removal of traumatized soldiers from the front lines; the preservation of military manpower was the priority.¹²

Depictions of what is known today as PTSD in earlier wars were largely characterized by avoidance, ignorance, or denigration. For example, Hollywood movies prior to 1970 portrayed earlier wars' veterans mainly with physical problems (paralysis, etc.). These movies reflected the general understanding that "military life could wear down the soldier mentally and physically, but the emphasis was on deteriorating physical health."¹³ Their physical problems "overshadowed the usually more subtle and secondary psychological issues."¹⁴ Also, as professor of Comparative Literary and Cultural Studies E. Ann Kaplan states when describing movies made during World War II, "psychic stress still made people uncomfortable."¹⁵ Only a few films suggested that there was a psychological component. Some examples of this phenomenon are visible in *So Proud We Hail!* (Mark Sandrich, 1943), *The Best Years of Our Lives* (William Wyler, 1946), *The Men* (Fred Zimmerman, 1950), *Men at War* (Anthony Mann, 1957), *Shell Shock* (John Hayes, 1964), or *Patton* (Franklin Schaffner, 1970). In these movies, the symptoms that were supposed to represent the effects of psychological trauma were somewhat naive. For instance, veterans were sometimes portrayed as suffering from catatonia following a traumatic battle, which is a highly unusual response to psychological trauma. Also in these movies, the returning veterans recovered after finding love (i.e., Brando in *The Men*) and/or a new meaning in life (family, career, a purpose, etc.) as in *So Proud*, *The Best Years*, and *Shell Shock*. This should not come as a surprise if we take into account that, prior to Vietnam, American war films generated support for home front sacrifices and as a call to arms in the pursuit of noble causes. Obviously, portraying an American veteran with chronic psychological and interpersonal problems as a result of his war

experiences would go against this purpose. The tales these movies provided softened the horror of war so that even tales of defeat stirred a sense of patriotism and an eagerness to fight.¹⁶ In the cinematographic construction of previous veterans, they either didn't suffer from serious psychological problems or, if they did, their problems were ameliorated by a warm homecoming. The veteran was more a heroic figure than a psychiatric casualty.

Some of these movies reflect the intolerance and hardship of the military culture towards psychological breakdowns, for instance *Shell shock*, *Men at War* and *Patton*. In *Shell shock*, a decorated WWII G.I., Wade, suffers from what are likely the early symptoms of PTSD. His Sergeant denies the possibility that he suffers a legitimate disorder and instead claims that he is pretending. He is then placed back in his combat unit and experiences more fighting and deaths and subsequently recovers from his "shell shock". The same occurs in *Men in War* in which Sergeant Montana's sole concern is getting his shell-shocked and catatonic colonel to safety during the Korean War, forcefully opposing Lt. Benson's disdain for his ailment. In this case, the Colonel also recovers after fighting his last battle. In reality, the opposite is true: symptoms of PTSD typically become worse after continued exposure to war trauma, not better. In fact, the most reliable predictor of PTSD among veterans is the total amount of combat they have experienced.¹⁷ In *Patton*, General Patton (George C. Scott) asks a GI patient what ails him. "It's my nerves, sir. I can't stand the shelling," he admits, breaking into tears. Patton becomes enraged and yells, "Hell, you are just a god damned coward! We have a yellow bastard sitting here crying in front of these brave men who have been wounded in battle. Shut up!" He interrupts his speech to slap the man, and then yells at the staff, "Don't admit this yellow bastard! We won't have sons of bitches who are afraid to fight stinking up this place of honor." Turning

back to the soldier, he pronounces, “You’re going back to the front my friend. You may get shot or you may get killed, but you are going to the fighting; either that or I’m going to stand you up in front of the firing squad.” This quote highlights the fact that while the movie was made during the early years of the Vietnam War, it still portrays traumatic symptomology among soldiers as being unacceptable.

The Vietnam War and its Veterans

A shift in American consciousness took place during the latter years of the Vietnam War that favoured the study and recognition of PTSD as a legitimate psychological condition. Vietnam was the most unpopular war in U.S history, and it eventually created large divisions among the American public. A turning point in opinions about the war occurred with media coverage of events such as the Mylai massacre. The public observed the catastrophic results on both sides of the fight: the victims of ruthless American attacks and the consequences of war among its own people. Some of the most vocal and influential anti-war activists were the Vietnam veterans themselves who formed a new organisation called Vietnam Veterans Against the War (formed in 1967).¹⁸

Throughout the Vietnam War, many opinions existed about the reasons for going to war, the role American veterans played as well as the government’s responsibility. By 1973, Americans had lost confidence in their leaders and in the “moral righteousness of their nation.”¹⁹ E. T. Dean places part of the responsibility for the official recognition of PTSD as an attempt to restore the image of heroism and patriotism of the soldiers. The American Psychiatric Association echoed this shift in 1982 by including the definition of PTSD in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders-Third Edition*. PTSD was officially recognized as a treatable

condition, and the research into the development and treatment of the disorder

burgeoned, resulting in heightened awareness among professionals and the lay public.

For the first time in history, veterans diagnosed with PTSD were provided treatment

and compensation through the Veterans Administration. These changing sentiments

are also visible in the Hollywood movies that depict the Vietnam War and its veterans

from the late 1960s to the late 1980s. The following sections address the different

movie epochs in relation to the changing socio-political climate.

Running Amok

Fred Turner notes in *Echoes of Combat. The Vietnam War in American Memory* that “until 1968, American journalists suggested that the American mission

in Vietnam differed little from its mission in Europe twenty-five years earlier.”²⁰ At

the beginning of the war, many believed that there was a noble cause behind sending

troops to South East Asia. After the Tet offensive and the My Lai massacre,

Americans learned that they were not winning the war and that they were destroying

the people and institutions they were supposed to defend. Some Americans

(particularly the liberals) “felt free to stop promoting the glories of American might

and to focus instead on its destructive force.”²¹ The movies about Vietnam during this

period mainly portrayed an attempt to reintegrate veterans into a society that greeted

them with suspicion or even hostility. A hyperviolent Vietnam veteran with PTSD

became a kind of archetype, his marginalised status became material for fiction.

Veterans felt betrayed (which generated a severe distrust of the government and anger

at American society in general) and they sometimes displayed anti-social behaviour

(but likely not to a greater extent than veterans from other wars), which provided a

useful platform for building characters for films. Interestingly, even if regarded as

potentially dangerous, these movies almost always cast them as protagonists –who, in general, took justice into their own hands because the police and the legal systems failed to do so. Viewers cannot help but admire their courage and warrior skills, but their uncontrolled hostility is frightening.

In the late 1960s, low-budget exploitation movies, which featured sensational violence, heavy drug use, destruction and mayhem, were among the first to add returning Vietnam veterans to their iconography. “All it required was to attribute the hero’s antisocial disposition, not to the traumatic withdrawal of parental love as in the 50’s, but to the collective trauma of the war.”²² Adair’s quote suggests that by signalling that the character was a returning Vietnam veteran, his violence was justified. In these movies, the sole PTSD symptoms portrayed are hyper arousal and re-experiencing resulting in extreme anger and anti-social behaviour. Some examples of this phenomenon are *Born Losers* (Tom Laughlin, 1967), *Angels From Hell* (Bruce Kessler, 1968), *Chrome and Hot Leather* (Lee Frost, 1971), *Welcome Home, Soldier Boys* (Richard Compton, 1972), and *Tracks* (Henry Jaglom, 1975). By 1973 (the official year for the withdrawal of troops), the representation of veterans as psychotic, gun-crazed loners became a common ground of action movies. In many of these movies, the traumatized veteran –dangerous, drug-abusing, psychopathic and subject to flashbacks that triggered their anger— seek justice through revenge with violence and murder. When they return from the war they encounter a variety of unjust situations; instead of being victimised, they utilise their military skills and pent up rage to achieve revenge.

If action movies were the main vehicle for portraying an archetypal veteran with PTSD in the late 60s and early 70s, by 1975 and into the 1980s, melodramas

took their place. For Hollywood, the Vietnam War was a traumatic event, a tragic memory, a scar; and what better genre than melodrama to alleviate the social anxieties resulting from the war? In the late 1970s, a group of filmmakers (including Coppola, Scorsese, Ashby, Kubrick, & Stone) were challenging the status quo and produced movies that were critical of the war, but not the warriors. If divisive views of the war were to be reconciled, the United States had to reconcile conflicting perspectives on Vietnam veterans and welcome them home. In these films, the soldiers struggle with physical and emotional problems of adaptation into their previous lives. The characters suffer from PTSD symptoms in a more detailed and accurate manner than in their portrayal in exploitation and action movies. The symptoms we see in these movies are mainly; anti-social behaviour (Travis in *Taxi Driver*, Nick in *The Deer Hunter*, Alex Cutter in *Cutter's Way*), preference for solitude (Stephen and Michael – at first— in *The Deer Hunter*), and emotional detachment (Willard in *Apocalypse Now*, Nick in *The Deer Hunter*). Although sympathetic to veterans, some of these movies portray characters engaging in criminal activities (Eddie in *Some Kind of Hero*, Travis in *Taxi Driver*), and their problems lead to drinking or drugs (Willard in *Apocalypse Now*, Cutter in *Cutter's Way*, Lyle in *The Choirboys*).²³ But the main features of PTSD in these melodramas are hyperarousal and violent behaviour (as in earlier exploitation and action films), as well as nightmares and flashbacks that trigger the violent episodes. These characters often succeed in their reintegration with the help of a compassionate woman, as in *Heroes* (Jeremy Kagan, 1977) or *Coming Home* (Hal Ashby, 1978), or recover after finding a cause that allows them to sublimate their anger and frustration (i.e. to impart a message to society based upon their war experiences) as in *Coming Home*.²⁴ However, the veteran's reintegration into society is not always possible in these films, and some characters commit suicide

or engage in suicidal actions (Nick in *The Deer Hunter*, Cutter in *Cutter's Way*, Bill in *Coming Home*).

Some of the most widely-viewed dramas portraying PTSD in Vietnam veterans from this era are *Taxi Driver*, *Apocalypse Now* and *The Deer Hunter*. It is evident that Scorsese and Coppola were not addressing PTSD *per se* in *Taxi Driver* and *Apocalypse Now* and appear to be more interested in the power of war to create a dehumanised character. In these movies, it is implicit that the process of dehumanisation (or undoing of character to use Shay's term)²⁵ is an integral aspect of war trauma. In *Taxi Driver*, the main character, Travis (De Niro), is a mentally unstable Vietnam veteran who works as a nighttime taxi driver because he cannot sleep. His antisocial behaviour and detachment from family and friends appears to bring him to this lonely existence. His mood swings become acute and he suits up for combat: he cuts his hair in a mohawk, adorns his army jacket and his gun and fires on a politician that he feels is a hypocrite. Afterwards, his pent-up rage explodes even further and he embarks on a 'scumbag' killing spree. Travis draws a bridge between the action movies of the late 60s and early 70s that portrayed 'crazed vets' unleashing hell on American soil, and the new trend of movies that focus on the sufferings of American soldiers. Travis is emblematic of a morphing public opinion towards the veterans in the mid-1970's, which could be described as an amalgamation of veterans as unpredictable, hyperviolent perpetrators who are incapable of properly re-adjusting to civilian life and heroic individuals who have themselves been victimised by war. PTSD provides a rationale for their unpredictability and hyper-violent behaviour, while simultaneously enhancing viewers' empathy for their damaged selves.

The Deer Hunter portrays the life of three friends before, during and after the Vietnam War, providing a triptych about how people cope differently with trauma.

Herman states that no two people have identical reactions to traumatic events; PTSD features are not the same for everyone and they largely depend on an individual's pre-existing emotional conflicts and adaptive style, as well as their overall resilience. According to Herman, someone that shows an unusual capacity to withstand an adverse environment, with high sociability and a strong sense of being able to affect their own destiny is less prone to develop PTSD.²⁶ The first part of *The Deer Hunter* establishes these differences in personality. When the war ends, Michael seems to function normally, Steve (Savage) isolates himself in a VA hospital, without legs, and severe depression, and Nick (Walken), who struggles to retain some shred of identity, is absolutely numbed. Nick, whose suffering is most acute, drifts aimlessly to the darker corners of Saigon until he's drawn to Russian roulette for money and stimulation, mesmerised by the game and perhaps re-enacting his experiences during the war. During a game, Nick ends his life, which could be regarded as a tragic representation of severe PTSD. Although the movie showed the dark side of the war for the ex-combatants, the final scene restores some sense of order in a cathartic moment during which Michael and his friends sing "God Bless America" together. In that moment, the historical and political contexts of the armed conflict lose relevance; what remains is that Americans are united.

These melodramas differed from previous movies that portrayed returning veterans as unpredictable, hostile vigilantes by acknowledging that their problems could be largely attributed to factors outside their control, such as having fought in an unpopular war, inadequate support and severe traumatic experiences. Their representation of symptoms of PTSD was not a vehicle to justify military skills and violent personalities, but a way to depict the consequences of war for the individual

soldier and their communities. A new political agenda was emerging in the U.S., which had its own motivation to re-cast the role of Vietnam veterans.

Second chance

Beginning around 1980, American society displayed a new sympathy for Vietnam veterans.²⁷ Consistent with the liberal agendas, veterans in this era were portrayed as traumatised victims of unhinged U.S. militarism and alienated warriors who fought against authority, lobbying for social justice. In a fascinating turn of events, the right wing began to spin a similar yarn. Those on the right of the political spectrum “began to interpret the Vietnam veteran not as victim of war’s madness but as a frustrated patriot betrayed by his own country that had not let him win.”²⁸ The early and mid 1980s produced, in an exacerbated vein of patriotism, a more dignified image of the returning veteran; an image found mainly in action movies, such as *Firefox* (Clint Eastwood, 1982), *Rambo: First Blood* (Ted Kotcheff, 1982), *Uncommon Valour* (Ted Kotcheff, 1983), *Missing in Action* (Joseph Zito 1984), *Heated Vengeance* (Edward D. Murphy, 1984), *Year of the Dragon* (Michael Cimino, 1985), *Rambo: First Blood Part II* (George Cosmatos, 1985), and *Armed Response* (Fred Olen Ray, 1986). In these movies, we witness a major trend of “reactionary populism”²⁹ that created the ‘Rambo phenomenon’, which coincided with the Reagan presidency. Katzman writes: “During his 1980s campaign, Reagan referred to the Vietnam War as a ‘noble cause’” and “largely because of Reagan’s efforts the military was injected with a new sense of honour.”³⁰

Abundant action movies during this epoch featured Vietnam veterans who return to Vietnam in order to free prisoners of war (POW). Most film commentators read these films as messages that America was right in Vietnam, and the fact that the

U.S. lost was not the soldiers' fault but the bureaucrats'. They also imply that the liberal left was largely responsible for losing the war by not allowing the military to adequately do its job. They essentially rewrite history, making the U.S. victorious ("this time we win" films – to use popular critics' Siskel and Ebert definition). Some of these movies created and reinforced through repetition the stereotype of the veteran as betrayed and misunderstood by the society that sent him there and who is subsequently spat on the face upon returning home (something shown to be largely a myth).³¹ As a result, the Vietnam veteran acquired, in the American consciousness, the stature of heroic survivor, even in the aftermath of knowledge about My Lai and other atrocities, even in defeat."³² The cause of their anguish in these movies is more related to having seen their fellow soldiers die in front of them, feeling guilty for having survived while others did not, or having been neglected upon their return, all precursors or symptoms of PTSD, which at this point was well entrenched in American cultural discourse.

The *Rambo* movies are now iconic, largely because of great success in terms of viewers. In *First Blood*, Rambo (Stallone), a former Green Beret and Congressional Medal of Honor recipient, wanders alone after finding out that the last of his friends from Vietnam died from Agent Orange-related cancer. A police officer (Dennehy) harasses him to leave town and when Rambo refuses he is placed in jail. Upon seeing the bars of his cell, he starts having flashbacks of the war and suffers a panic attack when he sees a knife blade, which triggers his memories of being tortured by the Viet-cong. He becomes violent and escapes by hiding in the forest with the entire police department on his heels. He is a resourceful, unbeatable marine who uses his skills from the war to avoid capture. Rambo, in some simplified way, is a reasonably accurate exemplar of PTSD because of his hyperarousal and emotional

numbing. There are numerous depictions of his flat affect, numbing, and interpersonal disconnection. Obviously, Rambo has been seriously altered as a result of his Vietnam experiences, which causes problems in his ability to function in society. But he is also a sort of hero whose skills and some of his PTSD symptoms contribute to his abilities to fight police brutality, prejudice against veterans and an overall inept bureaucracy, all the while bringing honour to his fellow Vietnam veterans. At the end of the second part of this saga, *Rambo: First Blood II*, Rambo asks Colonel Traubman (Crenna) why Vietnam soldiers returned to America only to face scorn from their fellow countrymen and to find that their heroism in action had become an embarrassment to U.S. politicians. His speech actually sheds light on an important factor in the development of PTSD: “the response of the community has a powerful influence on the ultimate resolution of the trauma”³³ and the response that Rambo received was, according to him, far from nurturing. The feelings of distrust and isolation among veterans may have been intensified by the incomprehension or frank hostility of those surrounding the veteran on his return home, amplifying his PTSD symptoms.³⁴ With these movies that re-enact rescue missions, Americans have, in Turner’s words, “sought to restore their moral and military self-confidence by staging fantasies of heroic redemption.”³⁵

In the late 1980s, the principles praised by the Reagan administration were questioned. The Rambo character came to be seen as a cliché representation of a Vietnam veteran. Movies concerning traumatised veterans were again being produced by the late 1980s, and well into the 1990s. The veteran, historian Guy Westwell writes, remains “the significant locus of continued anxiety about the war’s legacy,” and “the Vietnam War is thoroughly psychologised and made open to the work of therapeutic narratives.”³⁶ In movies of this era, there is an attempt to understand and

support the veterans, who are depicted in a more humane guise. They are naturally good people who faced the hardship of war and suffer the resulting disintegration of their lives and sometimes their fundamental character (Jacob in *Jacob's Ladder*).³⁷ They also suffer from severe survival guilt (*Born on the Fourth of July*, *Jacknife*, *In Country*). Films show their hardship in keeping jobs (*The War*), their trouble with alcohol consumption and anger management (*Jacknife*, Lt. Taylor in *Forrest Gump*, Steven in *Heaven and Earth*, Walter in *The Big Lebowski*), and their attempt to re-adapt into society through therapy (*Jacknife*).³⁸ In some cases, as in movies from the late 1970s, they seem to make peace with their past after finding love (Megs in *Jacknife*), an economic enterprise (Lt. Taylor in *Forrest Gump*) or a mission through activism (*Born on the Fourth of July*), and others seem to make peace with their experiences through a cathartic moment (Emmett in *In Country*).

Born on the Fourth of July, one of the more popular of the Vietnam veteran movies, was based on the memoirs of a real Vietnam veteran, Ron Kovic. In it, a patriotic youth (Cruise) enlists to go to Vietnam to fight. While there he witnesses the massacre of Vietnamese citizens and accidentally shoots another marine and subsequently feels overwhelmed by guilt. He then becomes paraplegic from a war related injury and when back in the U.S, suffers dreadful treatment in a V.A. hospital. Disappointed at his country for not providing decent services to veterans (and the American people for turning their backs on them), he begins his process of disintegration. He displays anti-social behavior, alienating his family and friends, starts drinking heavily and has sudden rage attacks. He shows symptoms of distress during the Independence Day parade, when firecrackers explode and a baby in the crowd starts crying (all triggers of PTSD in his case). He cannot find solace among family and friends from the past so he escapes society, like many other portrayed

Vietnam veterans, by retreating to a Mexican village where he truly hits bottom. He then starts putting himself together: he visits the family of the soldier he killed (lifting a heavy weight from his conscience), and he gets involved in political activism by joining Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW). Viewers are left with the unmistakable notion that Vietnam veterans were misunderstood and inadequately supported upon their return and that their anger and alienation is understandable, given the context. There has been an obvious shift of blame; it was the American public who should have warmly and proudly greeted returning veterans.

In Country follows the attempts of Samantha (Lloyd) to know her father, who died in Vietnam before her birth, by surrounding herself with her uncle Emmett (Willis) and other Vietnam veterans. But as is often the case, the characters don't want to talk about their war experiences. Emmett is often completely spaced out as demonstrated by his emotional numbness and flattened affect. He has sudden memories triggered by a storm, experiences flashbacks of Vietnam, and gets extremely angry. At the climax of the movie, in a forest that resembles Vietnam (according to Sam), Emmett has a cathartic moment. First he decides to tell Sam about Vietnam (emulating the talking cure) and then goes on a trip to the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington D.C. to see his brother's name on the wall. Emmett puts his medals there and his packet of cigarettes, a symbol of his malady, appearing to come to terms with the war. As an aside, Herman mentions how this memorial is the most significant public contribution to the healing of the Vietnam veterans, and therefore it stands as "a site of common mourning."³⁹ With this movie, the symptoms and recovery from PTSD displaced the debate about the war. Fred Turner concludes that the book the movie was based on (Bobbie Ann Mason's *In Country*) suggests that soldiers, civilians and "the soul of America" share the same disease.⁴⁰ And with

movies from this period, the healing begins. Turner exemplifies this process when he writes “The Vietnam War’s complexities have disappeared from discussion. Only images of veterans healing at the wall remain.”⁴¹

The movies from the 1980s and 1990s that portray veterans suffering from PTSD announce a new trend. The individual trauma of soldiers provided a convenient proxy for the cultural trauma of American society after the war was lost. Veterans are not aggressive and crazed loners capable of unleashing hell, but victims of the effects of watching beloved friends die, witnessing massacres and experiencing torture and deprivation. Ann Kaplan states, “individuals and cultures perform forgetting as a way of protecting themselves from the horrors of what one (or the culture) has done or what has been done to oneself or other in one’s society.”⁴² All references to why Americans fought in Vietnam disappear through this forgetting process and what is remembered are the victimised soldiers with PTSD. American society invested a great deal in understanding PTSD, the consequences of war exposure among veterans, and their treatment. The movies of this decade demonstrate a higher degree of concern about the veterans’ psyche. The depictions become more textured, perhaps because of the enhanced awareness of the course, symptoms and treatment of PTSD that stemmed from the large volume of psychological research performed on these topics that began in the early-80s. The characters portrayed in these movies are more multi-faceted. They are people with a past that was shattered by their war experiences and they try to reintegrate into society by different means: talking about it, going to therapy, making peace with themselves, etc. Their sudden manifestations of anger, heavy drinking, nightmares, flashbacks and numbness are traits of complex personalities struggling from the results of war trauma and despite their PTSD symptoms, there is room for redemption and tenderness.

The wars in which the U.S has been involved since the early 1990s have not met the extent of opposition seen during the Vietnam War. According to Guy Westwell, there was a reconceptualisation of war as humanitarian intervention in the 90s. He explains how recent wars have been represented according to a nostalgic and simplified version of America's experience in World War II.⁴³ In parallel, PTSD became fully integrated into the national consciousness to the point that in movies about the Iraq War, the PTSD theme predominates. Trauma has become a primary cultural trope in contemporary American culture post-Vietnam,⁴⁴ and "PTSD has become a vital juncture between caring politicians and military leaders and civilian critics."⁴⁵ The focus of movie narratives on soldiers from Iraq and Afghanistan suffering from PTSD allows the American public (of any ideology) to be united in their support of the troops, as well as it "enables a redemptive narrative of therapeutic healing."⁴⁶

The visibility of the Iraq/Afghanistan Wars in movies is fairly limited. Martin Barker argues that although the Iraq War has prompted some critical responses from filmmakers, they have proved unpopular with audiences, and have been mostly judged as 'failures'. All the movies, "bombed at the box office, if they made it there at all, and just about all of them vanished without trace," to the point of having been dubbed a "toxic genre" or "box-office poison."⁴⁷ Boggs and Pollard explain that there is a long-standing reluctance of the studios to make pictures about on-going warfare,⁴⁸ especially if they incorporate any criticism of military interventions. During the Iraq/Afghanistan era, criticising the war effort has been equated with not supporting the troops (a narrative that was ubiquitous during the second Bush presidency). Since the beginning of the Iraq War, supporting the troops has been seen as mandatory,

regardless of politics. In this context, a cinematic focus on veterans with PTSD maintains a supportive stance while simultaneously avoiding the terrible realities of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars that include heavy civilian death tolls among Iraqis and Afghans, high numbers of U.S. soldiers killed and maimed through IED blasts, and enormous economic costs.

Interestingly, the movie about the Iraq/Afghanistan Wars that received extensive public attention (especially after winning six Oscars in 2009), *The Hurt Locker* (Kathryn Bigelow, 2008), portrays a soldier suffering from PTSD symptoms under a positive light, presenting an unusual variation from the last two decades of traumatized veterans. Both Westwell and Barker consider its main character a living embodiment of PTSD, one who offers a completely different perspective than that of a victim.⁴⁹ Barker writes:

“[The main character, James] is treated by the film as not disordered at all. James is an ‘adrenaline junkie’, who lives off the risks he takes. James displays the full spectrum by which PTSD is defined. He has just forgotten how to be its victim, and thus becomes a poster-boy of the Iraq war generation. Seen in this light, he can be an attractive and fascinating character.”⁵⁰

With the exception of *The Hurt Locker*, most movies reinforce the image of PTSD as a disabling disorder with significant costs to the veteran and their families. They suggest that current veterans from Iraq and Afghanistan are less likely to retreat to the wilderness in solitude and they appear to have a desire for reintegration into society. Movies do not show veterans as outcasts but as community members going back to their families. Unlike movies from the Vietnam era, the veterans in recent movies do not direct their anger at the government or other groups that aggravated them, but instead experience conflict with their families and friends.⁵¹ This can be seen in movies such as *Courage Under Fire*, *In the Valley of Elah*, and *Badland*.⁵² In fact, it

is very common to see the veterans in these movies as courteous and disciplined in certain circumstances, as raucous chauvinists and racists in another, but ultimately innocent, bewildered and desperate as a result of their war experiences (*Redacted*, *Courage Under Fire*, and *In the Valley of Elah*).⁵³ Depiction of acute survivor's guilt is also common (*Redacted*, *Courage Under Fire*, *Home of the Brave*, *Brothers*).⁵⁴ These home-coming movies do not reflect a full recovery from PTSD, but rather demonstrate how veterans' lives continue in painful ways, despite great efforts at reintegration. They also add a new gender and class dimension to their themes and are unique in portraying PTSD in high ranking officers (Lieutenant Colonel Serling in *Courage Under Fire*, and surgeon Marsh in *Home of the Brave*). They demonstrate a new focus on Hispanics and African-Americans in the U.S. military who also suffer upon returning home (*Courage Under Fire*, *Home of the Brave*, *Redacted*, *In the Valley of Elah*, *The Lucky Ones*).⁵⁵ Another important difference between previous movies and their predecessors is the appearance of female veterans (still scarce, but exemplified) as in *Courage Under Fire*, *Home of the Brave*, *The Lucky Ones*, *Lioness*, and *Return*.⁵⁶ In many of these movies, veterans willingly return to combat [*Home of the Brave*, *The Lucky Ones*, *Stop-Loss* (Kimberly Peirce, 2008), *The Hurt Locker*]. The characters in these movies may acknowledge that the war may not be popular or even legitimate but it is where they belong nonetheless, ultimately avoiding a critical stance on the war.

Home of the Brave presents a broad spectrum of soldiers by choosing two African-American men as its main characters from different economic classes (Jackson and 50 Cent), a woman (Biel), and a white man (Presley). It is almost a revision of *The Best Years of our Lives* from a current standpoint. The four characters are ambushed in an Iraqi city and the movie follows them home. Their process of

adaptation with a focus on their daily routine is described. They integrate into society in some ways –they go back to work and to their families, they are not displaced - but they cannot sleep, they take psychotropic medications and attend psychotherapy. They all have recurrent flashbacks, are angry with the rest of the world because nobody can quite comprehend what they are going through, and they have explosions of anger that alienate their families and colleagues. The movie sends a positive message, though, by resolving its plot with an almost hopeful tone: Vanessa (Biel) finds a new comprehending lover; Will (Jackson), a surgeon who first refused to go to therapy, makes a commitment with his wife to see a psychologist; Jamal (50 Cent) keeps going to therapy after an initial eruption of rage in front of the group therapist; and Tommy (Presley) goes back to Iraq because he believes in the cause. We are led to believe that it may help him to sublimate his distress. The movie ends with a quote by Machiavelli: “Wars begin where you will but they do not end when you please.” This quote could be read as suggestion that while the characters are making progress, they continue to struggle with serious and lasting psychological problems that have no easy resolution, or as justification of why American troops should not retire from Iraq. Tommy’s return to Iraq supports the latter. As Douglas Kellner states, *Home of the Brave* “creaks on to themes of reconciliation and banal sentimentality,” eliminating any political analysis of the war. As Kellner comments, the movie “fails to address the fact that one of the reasons so many Iraq veterans return traumatised and deeply disturbed is that the Iraq intervention had no legitimate rational and was a disaster that greatly harmed the U.S.”⁵⁷

In *In the Valley of Elah*, viewers catch a glimpse of the losses that war creates for its warriors and the possible disintegration of their human decency. Interestingly, its main character is a Vietnam veteran (Jones) who is trying to discover the cause of

his son's mysterious death. Previously, the son had tried to communicate, fruitlessly, his despair to his father: "you have to get me out of here". We discover that his son had become emotionally detached to the extent of becoming cruel, possibly drug addicted, and a danger to his fellow soldiers. In the movie, different characters offer insights about what it is like to be back from the war: they drink heavily and frequently, one commits suicide, the others homicide. At the beginning of the movie, a woman tries desperately to get the attention of the police department. She complains that her husband (a recent veteran) killed his dog while in a rage, and she feels that she and her children's well-being is in jeopardy. Detective Sanders oversees her case and tells her that until he tries to physically attack her, they cannot do anything. More than mid-way through the movie, the returning soldier kills his wife and then shoots himself. PTSD becomes a valid means for explaining how this can develop: war trauma can turn good-natured boys into cruel, sadistic, murderous creatures.

A recent look at the consequences of war exposure is the mainstream *Brothers*, based on Danish Susanne Bier's *Brødre* (2005). Although Captain Sam Cahill (Maguire) at times resembles Travis Bickle (De Niro in *Taxi Driver*), the days in which the veteran is presented as a true lunatic are long gone. Sammy (Maguire) is reported dead in Afghanistan when his helicopter is shot down, when in reality he is held hostage with another soldier. His misfit brother Tommy (Gyllenhaal), recently released from prison after robbing a bank and assaulting a female employee, grows closer to his brother's wife Grace (Portman) and daughters, offering them aid and comfort. When Sammy is rescued by friendly forces and sent home, he tells no one what happened during his captivity (including his assassination of a fellow soldier). But he has changed and suffers visibly from PTSD: he is distant, irritable, and unaffectionate, he cannot discuss his war experiences, he seems alienated, drinks too

much, and he is often seized with rage. One night, suspicious and jealous of his brother, and drunk out of his mind, he destroys the kitchen and threatens to kill his wife and the girls. At the end of the movie, Grace refuses to let him back into their lives unless he opens up to her and tells her what happened in Afghanistan. Viewers are left with some hope for Tommy and his family, but are well aware that it will be a long and difficult road to recovery.

Among these recent home-coming and war films, we can see an evolution in the characterisation of veterans suffering from PTSD. The films that portray recently returning veterans provide serious accounts of their suffering, as well as their attempts to return to civilian life. Some of these end tragically, which is regrettably realistic. They have also begun to include minorities in their portrayals of these veterans, a badly needed change from the movies from prior eras considering the high numbers of African-american and Hispanic servicemen. Movies are also starting to reflect and new development in the military: the participation of women as combatants. Movies are, thus, developing a new focus on returning women veterans with PTSD. In the current movies, some veterans seek solace in drug and alcohol consumption, others participate in therapy groups, and some commit suicide. Most appear to be ordinary human beings who suffer deep psychological wounds from their combat experiences and are serious about re-integrating into their families and communities.

Conclusion

Movies have the potential to influence how we think about sociocultural issues, but those same sociocultural issues also inform the content of movies. The adoption and empirical understanding of PTSD has changed dramatically over the years, which is reflected in the cinematic portrayal of returning veterans. It is arguable that the early

movies promulgated unhelpful and even damaging societal attitudes about war veterans who couldn't "get over it" and move on with a productive life. Perhaps the most misinformed and detrimental aspect of those movies for veterans and their families was a denial that a problem existed in the first place and that, if the problem was acknowledged, it was chalked up to a weak character.

In the movies about Vietnam a new concept emerged: that of an inner, mysterious and often dangerous character transformation of American boys during war. At first, Vietnam era movies instilled a sense that veterans with PTSD were dangerous loners capable of wrongdoings and perhaps even "crazy", a stereotype that often suggested the necessity of ending the war. A visible shift can then be seen, one that helped to transfer the blame for the consequences of the war from the soldier to the government, a move that arguably helped Americans come to terms with having lost a war. These movies "provided a therapeutic aid in the aftermath of the divisive and traumatising experience,"⁵⁸ and presented an image of the Vietnam veteran that persists in current representations, ultimately that of a victim afflicted with PTSD symptoms. As Barker explains "PTSD has provided a common ground where pro- and anti-war speakers can meet, to care about the soldiers."⁵⁹

In the recent movies of the Iraq/Afghanistan Wars, highly textured portrayals of PTSD emerge among veteran groups (minorities, officers, women) who were previously seldom represented as suffering war-related trauma. Political pressure to minimise criticism of the war (because doing so implied a lack of support for the troops) is obvious in a majority of these films that portray traumatised veterans. The function of PTSD and the portrayal of the related suicidal and homicidal tendencies of veterans serve to highlight the ongoing need for care and support, while diverting our attention away from other harsh realities of the war. Movies from this era are

providing what can be described as a more true-to-life description of the severity and complexity of PTSD among veterans, perhaps as a means of avoiding a critical stance on these military excursions.

During the last six decades we have seen an evolving portrayal of the traumatized U.S. veteran that has shifted from that of a weakling to a wounded warrior; individuals from all walks of life in need of institutional and public support. The American public has recently been bombarded with this subject matter to the extent that movies focused on the recent conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan have largely failed in the box office. Perhaps this shift represents a cultural burnout with traumatized veterans as either victims or bloodthirsty savages. The most successful of the recent movies, *The Hurt Locker*, may have been received more enthusiastically because it suggested that PTSD in high intensity contexts is an asset that can result in heroic deeds. Of course, time will tell, but undoubtedly the portrayal of PTSD in American veterans will continue to evolve in tandem with changes in the American cultural and political landscape.

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