



# Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder among Vietnam War veterans: A Study in the Works of film-makers

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**Abstract** - This article addresses the American veterans' post-traumatic stress disorder during the Vietnam War. The aftermath of the Vietnam War has traumatically affected them on the battlefield. The focus of this work lies on the meaning of trauma as a psychological wound. In fact, the Veterans' mental breakdowns result from the events and factors, which have turned this war into one of the most problematic affairs in American history. The American soldiers contend with traumatic problems during combat, which is an emerging issue since the beginning of the War in Vietnam. This article lays emphasis on Veterans' psychological wounds that derive from the horrific conditions of the battlefield. Because of the emotional scars of the jungle, they display post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms that go beyond what they can endure in normal life. To cope with the Vietnam traumatic experience, they resort to alcohol and drug use as a way of self-medication.

**Keywords:** Post-traumatic stress disorder, Vietnam War, American, Veterans, Trauma, medication

**Résumé** - Cet article porte sur les vétérans Américains qui souffrent de trouble de stress post-traumatique pendant la guerre du Vietnam. Les séquelles traumatisantes de cette guerre ont affecté les vétérans lors des combats. Cette étude évoque le sens du traumatisme considéré comme une blessure psychologique. Ainsi, Les événements et facteurs causant la guerre du Vietnam, perçus comme l'un des problèmes majeurs de l'histoire de l'Amérique, sont à l'origine de leurs dépressions nerveuses. Ces soldats Américains sont aux prises avec des problèmes traumatiques surgissant depuis le début du conflit Vietnamien. Cet article met l'accent sur les troubles psychiques de ces derniers causés par les conditions horribles des combats. A cause des cicatrices psychologiques de la jungle, ils présentent des symptômes de trouble de stress post-traumatique qui vont au-delà de ce qu'ils peuvent endurer dans la vie normale. Ils s'adonnent à l'alcool et à la drogue comme moyen d'automédication pour affronter l'expérience traumatisante du Vietnam.

**Mots clés :** Trouble de stress post-traumatique, Guerre du Vietnam, Amérique, Vétérans, Traumatisme, médication

## INTRODUCTION

Hollywood's contribution to the American war efforts is by no means a much appraise development in the film industry. Throughout American history, Hollywood is asked by the US Government in various occasions to extend its support for presenting military conflicts. Thus, cinematic representations begin to be used for war effort. In the Vietnam War, there is a shift in the way the war is presented in many films because of the American defeat. From this outlook,



James William Gibson states: “the American defeat in Vietnam created such a serious crisis in the American identity, and particularly in the male identity – that these old-style patriotic films did no longer have any credibility.” (Gibson 7). In this statement, Gibson underscores the subversion of the masculinity and the reversal of myth-making. This shift has affected the US society and the psyche of American people.

Furthermore, filmmakers begin to have a critical view of the war due to its aftermath on veterans and America. The Vietnam War stands as one of the most traumatic events in American history. In terms of cultural representations, the Vietnam veteran is considered as the psychological embodiment of the national trauma. The Vietnam War experience becomes a major concern for the US society, let alone worldwide. We seek to explore the post-traumatic stress disorder syndrome. The Encyclopaedia Britannica Company defines Trauma as “a disordered psychic or behavioural state resulting from severe mental or emotional stress or physical injury.”<sup>1</sup> Trauma is the Greek word for wound. Although the Greeks use the term only for physical injuries, nowadays trauma is just as likely to refer to emotional wounds. The psychological reaction to emotional trauma now has an established name: Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, or PTSD. It usually occurs after an extremely stressful event, such as wartime combat, natural disaster..., its symptoms include depression, anxiety, flashback and recurring nightmares.

Drawing on the theoretical frameworks of trauma studies as well as on war prominent discursive, this work investigates the position and function of Vietnam War films with regard to a materializing collective memory of war. It contextualizes the movie within the interrelated history Hollywood war cinema, the reintegration of Vietnam veterans into US society, and the political and medical discourses surrounding the conceptualization of PTSD. In post-Vietnam era, *The Deer Hunter* (1978), *Apocalypse Now* (1978), *First Blood* (1982), and *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989) stand out to find a cultural mode of dealing with the Vietnam experience. Vietnam War has created physical and psychological trauma, affecting veterans and all levels of US society. The American soldiers are confronted with traumatic problems in the jungle warfare that give way to post traumatic stress disorder. By delving into these emotional scars of war American soldiers cope with may help have a deeper understanding of the physical and psychological trauma of Vietnam. This phenomenon, labelled as post-traumatic stress disorder, has become a major concern because of the Vietnam experience and its relevance to the current world conflicts that still affect all nations involved in war. The fact that we delve into issues associated with post-Vietnam traumatic stress disorder syndrome helps people clearly understand its aftermath on US cultural and political memory.

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<sup>1</sup> [www.merriam-webster.com/](http://www.merriam-webster.com/)



The psychoanalytic theory is used in this paper to provide deeper insights into the psychological problems of characters in the films as well as the psychology of authors in order to comprehend the human life experience. The psychoanalytic criticism is a form of literary criticism which uses some of the techniques of psychanalysis in the interpretation of literature. This theory delves into the neurosis and psychological states of characters in literature to interpret the meaning of a text. It does not only help understand the author's psychological state in life through literature, but readers can also understand the character's mind by what they go through within the story, especially if they have psychological problems. The goal of psychoanalysis is to help resolve psychological problems by focusing on patterns of behavior that are destructive in some way in the existence of the unconscious, the storehouse of painful experiences and, emotional and unresolved conflicts that people are overwhelmed by. Sigmund Freud, in his works, *An Outline of Psychoanalysis* (1949) and *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* (1991), sheds light on the realm of psychoanalysis. According to him, the larger part is the unconscious mind. Film-makers like Michael Cimino, Ted Kotcheff, Oliver Stone and Francis Ford Coppola are much more concerned about a set of psychological problems of characters, resulting from Vietnam traumatic experience. Therefore, the author deals with his or her psychosis in the text. This work requires a deeper analysis and investigation using the psychoanalytic theory with the purpose of illustrating the subject in a more exhaustive way and a better understanding of its current process in people's daily life.

This article investigates post-Vietnam War traumatic experience of veterans, which results in a national trauma. This traumatic problem, perceived as a battle against hearts and minds, still affects Americans' psyche. The research is structured around three parts. The first seeks to deal with the psychological and emotional trauma while focusing on the war horrors experience on American soldiers. The second lays emphasis on the representation of Vietnam War veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder and the final part explores the case of veterans who cope with trauma through drug and alcohol addiction.

### **1. The War Horrors Experience on American Soldiers**

The experiences on the battlefield in Vietnam have affected the American soldiers. This work examines the horrific situations in which they fight and the impacts of combat exposure. The horrors that veterans undergo in the jungle are depicted in movies. Furthermore, all veterans realize that their blood, sweat and tears accomplish nothing. Movies illustrate how all these factors contribute to the psychological effects of the Vietnam War. Some of the films portray soldiers who

are being affected mentally even before they leave the battlefields. After a great degree of exposure to war and towards the end of the film, the main character of Platoon states that: “*Day by day, I struggle not only to maintain my strength, but my sanity.*” (Stone, 1986) In these words, Stone depicts the traumatic situation characters experience in the jungle. Their health worsens and they become weak because of War trauma.

Many factors during the Vietnam War contribute to affecting the soldiers’ thoughts, emotions and minds. They feel that they cannot trust any of the Vietnamese, which makes them paranoid most of the time. They constantly fear death and are deeply traumatized as they see their comrades being shredded to pieces by bullets and mines. They are also frustrated and confused, ignoring exactly where they go or how America is about to win the war.

*First Blood* by Ted Kotcheff features issues related to vets’ experience in Vietnam. This happens when the Sheriff attempts to clean up Rambo; he flashes back to a Vietnam Prisoner of War camp and lashes out at the officers. Rambo goes through the same traumatic experience in POW camp as it happens in Vietnam. The training and combat experience in Vietnam cause John Rambo’s instability at home. In fact, Kotcheff creates a new vision of the Vietnam vet who is dysfunctional and unstable. He is also unable to cope with the stresses of the war.

In comparison with the traumatic situation that stems from the Vietnam experience depicted in *The Deer Hunter* through its characters, Coppola claims to have captured the war’s psychological reality that lends credence to the view of *Apocalypse Now* as an antiwar film. Indeed, the idea that war represents a kind of insanity now seems commonplace. As Brian J. Woodman puts it: “*Coppola’s movie does not seek textbook realism; rather, it strives for the feel of Vietnam: violence, confusion, and nihilism of the war.*” (Woodman 99). In these words, Woodman shows the horrors of war experience in Vietnam. For Woodman, the jungle warfare is as violent as confused and nihilist. Therefore, these horrific experiences psychologically affect Vietnam vets’ life.

*Apocalypse Now* is a portrayal of the horror that Kurtz talks about. By way of illustration, we can say that there are severed heads and dangling bodies at Kurtz’s compound where this horror lies. In Coppola’s film, the traumatic situations of killed Vietnamese show the horrors of war in Kurtz’s compound. The soldiers who fight in the Vietnam War suffer from uncontrollable emotional reaction to an extreme psychological trauma called post-traumatic stress disorder. Coppola’s film depicts the horrors of the Vietnam War. This movie describes the critical standpoint of the way that society works during the Vietnam War. It depicts two main heroes, Colonel Kurtz and Captain Willard who are very dissimilar personalities whose destiny and attitudes to life become similar.



Brando's colonel Kurtz is portrayed as a mad man who is a victim of the influence of war atrocities because he has virtually no chance how not to succumb to such a long-lasting impact. In the film, Coppola gives a portrayal of Captain Willard as follows: "at the beginning of the film, he was already a time-scarred war hero who knew that mankind was deprived. His journey to find Kurtz only confirmed this knowledge and turned him darker still." (Coppola, 1979) This remark highlights the idea that Willard is aware of all various kinds of horrors that happen in the world around him. After meeting Kurtz, his world becomes so deprived and lost that even the homecoming cannot save him from its obscurity. The movie points out that any man can truckle to all kinds of madness and unpredictability because every human being perceives the world around him in the same way. He just needs the right environment to allow his temptations and hidden imaginings to be free, which is confirmed through Captain Willard.

The end of the first scene, in *The Deer Hunter*, shows the Green Beret who, at John's Bar, is described as a vet who reflects the horrors of the Vietnam War. As the friends retire to the bar, they suddenly notice a grim-looking soldier in uniform. Steven yells: "It's a Green Beret" (Cimino, 1978), which means someone who fights in the United States' Special Forces. As Michael, Nick and Steven are very anxious to talk to him, they seize the opportunity to ask him some questions. The conversation between the friends and the Green Beret foreshadows their experience in Vietnam. This dialogue also reveals the horrors of the battlefield that Veterans go through. The Green Beret is sitting at the bar while a huge party is going on. His inability to narrate at least something of what happens to him bodes ill for what the Clairton friends have to face in Vietnam. In Cimino's movie, the peaceful atmosphere of Clairton is completely disrupted in the scene, which, without cinematic transition, shows helicopters, fire, explosions, dead bodies, and complete mayhem. These horrific images announce the second part of the film. In this way, the hunt, betting, alienated Green Beret and omnipresent good luck wishes denote that something, which will irrevocably change their lives, is about to follow. In the second part of the movie, we admit that the confusing images from exploding Vietnamese huts and pigs eating away at decaying corpses are horrific and traumatizing. Michael is enraged by this cruelty and the chaotic situation of the jungle warfare.

While drawing on these traumatic situations of the battlefield in Vietnam, Robin Wood, in the book *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan* (1986), remarks that: "Cimino's aim was clearly to convey the sense of horror and confusion through the abrupt and elliptical images" (Wood 271). In fact, Wood unveils the horrors of combat exposure on soldiers. Characters like Michael, Nick and Steven are unable to deal with these traumatic moments because the jagged representation can there be

linked to the inability to orderly arrange events while suffering from a traumatic experience.

In *The Deer Hunter*, the three characters are held captive in dreadful and traumatic conditions. They are peddling in the water, while above them; a game of Russian roulette is taking place, using up more and more of the prisoners. Each time a shot is fired, Steven starts to retch and almost hyperventilates. While he tries hard to control himself, Michael lets him think of more pleasant things like home. In attempting to overpower their hostage takers, Michael and Nick encounter the same fate. On the spot, Michael realizes the impacts of Russian roulette on Steven and he tells Nick: "look at him. He's in a daze. He ain't comin' out." (Cimino, 1978) Compared to the horrors of war affecting Steven, Nick, during their turn with Michael, also displays the same terror as Steven does. Nick is affected by the horrific environment of the hospital filled with dead bodies of his fellowmen. He feels at a loss when a man and a nurse come up to him and ask him: "Are you Nikanor Chevotarecich?" (Cimino, 1978) He seems to take some time before answering them. They insistently ask him: "can you understand me, Nikanor?" (Cimino, 1978) Nick is emotionally unable to respond in a normal way. Then, the admission into the hospital is an example of the traumatic impact of the Russian roulette on Nick since he seems to have great trouble to pronounce his parents' name. He remains muted and cannot recall his previous life and the near-death experience in the Vietcong pile dwelling because of the war horror experience.

In his analysis of the opening Vietnam scene of *The Deer hunter*, Hellmann points out that: "Michael and his friends found satisfaction in hunting and getting a deer; now pigs fight over the entrails of dead American soldiers" (Hellmann 423). In this outlook, Hellmann explores the contrast between the landscape of Clairton and the horrific conditions vets experience in the battlefield of Vietnam. Veterans are subjected to any dreadful situations, even their dead bodies are eaten away by pigs. By describing the devastating effects of War on soldiers, Hellmann evokes the traumatic conditions in which vets fight the war in Vietnam.

Oliver Stone's movie *Born on the Fourth of July* is a portrayal of combat exposure of war on soldiers. The horrors of the war are presented through the subsequent killing of a fellow soldier. The dramatic event is depicted as follows: the camera moves to a medium shot of Kovic who, slightly from the side, aims and fires his rifle. In Stone movie, Kovic gives a thrilling description of this dreadful event. A close-up of him follows. He has sweat on his face; his mouth is slightly parted and the use of sidelight shows only one of his eyes. His eye makes small movements to the left and right, examining the body. The performance of Tom Cruise, who plays the role of Kovic and the use of sidelight imply that he is confused and anxious to face his killing of one of his comrades. The exposure of combat experience has traumatically affected the American soldier in Vietnam.



The horrors of the war are depicted in the film through the character of Kovic who kills Wilson.

In his study, *The Things They Carried* (1990), Tim O'Brien addresses the traumatic experiences on Vietnamese people. O'Brien has a sense of guilty that still haunts him. As it is shown in this scene: "Tim O'Brien when the others urged him to stop staring, he could not realize anything else than his jaw was in his throat. His one eye was shut and the other was a star-shaped hole was red and yellow" (O'Brien 126). Here, O'Brien gives an accurate physical description of the soldier who is killed in the jungle. He is in a complete despair and the image of his broken body is perceived as deadly horrific.

In his analysis of the war horrors experience soldiers undergo in Vietnam, Mark Heberle states: "*such recursive scenes mimic the intrusion of past experiences that is one of the symptoms of continued traumatization*" (Heberle 7). According to Heberle, soldiers account for what they go through during the war. These two events, such as the death of Ted Lavender and the Vietnamese soldier happening in the Vietnam War, are examples of an attempt to represent trauma in a realist way with its distinctive and intrusive repetitions.

Coppola's film *Apocalypse Now* is a portrayal of the horrific combat exposure on veterans in Vietnam. When Willard and Chef first penetrate the jungle, eye-level pans followed by extreme long shots are employed to present them as enveloped by and almost invisible in the threatening shadow. In the jungle, an overwhelmingly spacious obscurity makes it impenetrable. According to Peter G. Bourne (1970), 'the mise-en-scène' and cinematography are used to generate a sense of what he calls "*anticipatory psychic stressors for the audience to experience*" (Bourne 7). In the film, a sudden confrontation with a tiger prompts acute stress reactions. Characters begin to experience overwhelming fear, impulsive firing, momentary disorientation and emotional breakdown. Because of this traumatic experience that Chef witnesses, he frantically repeats to himself the rule to "*never get out of the boat.*" (Coppola, 1979) What is traumatizing mostly in the journey up river is a close-up of Willard's vacant stare that accentuates his shortly dazed state. The images remain bleak and shadowy, thereby underlining his withdrawal from the situation. Throughout the film, for instance, the shots show the dense jungle metaphorically closing in on the boat. Francis Ford Coppola's movie is a depiction of the horrors in the jungle warfare. Characters such as Philips and Chief are tragically killed in attacks out of the jungle. This anticipates the intensification of the psychic stress. The film's closing statements "*horror, the horror,*" (Coppola, 1979) with the visual accompaniment of classics scattered on the floor, reveal that Kurtz is actually commenting on the history of the western civilization.

In conclusion, the American soldiers experience the horrors resulting from the jungle in Vietnam. The war exposure has emotionally and psychologically affected those who fight in Vietnam. Because of the horrific situations they undergo there, veterans display symptoms associated with posttraumatic stress disorder syndrome. Along with the attack on the national psychology in general, there is another similarly damaging attack on human psychology in particular. A majority of Vietnam veterans, whose souls are once distorted by the horrors in the war, continue to be traumatized by its unpleasant memories and suffer much emotional disturbance in their lives. They show symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder because of the war horrors experience in the jungle.

## 2. Representations of Vietnam War Veterans with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder is perceived as a development of characteristic symptoms following a psychologically distressing event. It can begin with an event in which the individual is threatened with his or her own death or the destruction of a body part, to such humiliation that their personal identity may be lost. Vietnam veterans who experience PTSD have a feeling of helplessness, worthlessness, dejection, insomnia and a tendency to react to a tense situation by using survival tactics. Examining PTSD among combat Veterans helps understand not only each individual movie, but also the social and cultural context in which they emerge. The depiction of PTSD, in films, reflects social trends, shapes discourses and attitudes toward the disorder and the veterans who suffer it. This work explores the symptoms of PTSD and its impacts on veterans. Before the Vietnam conflict, soldiers experience psychological trauma. For the most part, people regard these returning veterans as having adjusted back into civilian life. However, while focusing on the American Civil War, E.T. Dean argues that veterans may develop 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 appreciated civilians*" (Dean 8). According to Dean, the psychological problems veterans undergo before Vietnam War are taken into account. They are neither ignored nor neglected, but they face reintegration problems to their previous life. From a political standpoint, military authorities likely want to suppress information about the casualties of war to keep moral high.

While investigating soldiers' psychological problems and the military's attitudes towards those who experience PTSD symptoms, Judith Lewis Herman asserts that: "*these men did not deserve to be patients at all; that they should be court-martialed or dishonestly discharged rather than given medical treatment [...] Those who exhibited the 'hideous enemy of negativism' were threatened with court martial*" (Herman 21). In





this remark, Herman highlights the idea that suffering from war trauma is evidence of character flaw. Showing such psychological problems can subvert the western hero and reverse the American identity related to military supremacy and ideology of masculinity. Also, military psychiatric methods do not support the removal of traumatized soldiers from the front lines; the preservation of military manpower is the priority.

Post-traumatic stress disorder is associated with intrusive recollections, re-experiencing and reliving of traumatic events. These recurring recollections have many forms, including images of thoughts and perceptions. People experiencing PTSD may have recurrent bad dreams and nightmares about the events. They have flashbacks, illusions and hallucinations and feel like they go through the events once more. In *First Blood*, Rambo displays such symptoms while being captive. When the Sheriff attempts to shave him, the use of the razor makes him feel and act as if he were in Vietnam again. Like Rambo, veterans may see, hear or smell something that trigger reliving and re-experiencing of the events. Exposure to internal or external cues that symbolize or resemble an aspect of the traumatic event may result in intense psychological distress or reactivity.

Furthermore, these PTSD symptoms, related to physiological reactivity on exposure or resembling to an aspect of the traumatic events, are depicted in *The Deer Hunter* through the character of Nick. He re-experiences very intense psychological distress when he observes people who gamble on players in a bar. In there, Nick acts as if he were held captive in Vietnam. Therefore, he takes the gun from one of the players, points it toward his head and pulls the trigger. Nick is exposed to external cues, which symbolize an aspect of the traumatic event in Vietnam. *Casualties of War* (1989) by Brian de Palma examines post-traumatic stress disorder syndrome. In this film, a Vietnam veteran Max Eriksson sees a Vietnamese woman on a city bus that triggers his memories of traumatic events that take place in Vietnam within one of his missions.

In *Born on the Fourth of July*, Ron Kovic experiences a disturbing war flashback during his homecoming speech at an Independence Day parade. As he talks on the stage, he suddenly hears a little girl crying from the crowd in front of him. The baby cries remind him of the traumatic memories from Vietnam. He is evidently shaken and unable to finish his speech because he feels guilty while participating in the killing of Vietnamese women and children. Kovic is, in fact, traumatized by the experience in Vietnam when a patrol Kovic's platoon accidentally hits an allied Vietnamese village. He finds several hurt villagers, including a surviving baby. Due to his moral sense, he wants to, at least, help and save an innocent baby. Kovic contends with an intense psychological distress deriving from this traumatic event in Vietnam.

According to Navid Ghaffarzadegan, Alireza Ebrahimvandi and Mohammad Jalali, “individuals with PTSD continue to experience the psychological effects of trauma, including re-experiencing symptoms, long after being removed to a safe environment” (Ghaffarzadegan, Ebrahimvandi & Jalali 2). In these words, Ghaffarzadegan, Ebrahimvandi and Jalali demonstrate that traumatic events can be relived and trigger as flashbacks when people move to a safety area. For them, psychological impacts of trauma can last longer and people may display its symptoms at any time.

Although flashbacks are aspects of narrative form, it is still worth mentioning them because, as David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson put it, “a flashback will be often caused by some incident that triggers a character’s recalling some event in the past.” (Bordwell & Thompson 82). According to Bordwell and Thompson, traumatic situations can be relived and called back when the individual experiences such an event. Both characters Rambo in *First Blood* and Ron Kovic in *Born on the Fourth of July* embody these PTSD symptoms.

*The Deer Hunter* is a vivid portrayal of how the war can change people. It sheds light on the psychological consequences of exposure to a traumatic situation and the effects of the Vietnam War on soldiers. The three main characters of the film are able to survive the horrors in Vietnam, but they have to deal with the mental wounds they carry with themselves. The final part of the film depicts how the war changes them. These characters also show symptoms of PTSD, especially the character of Michael who is in the center of the story. The symptoms that are demonstrated in the story include avoidance, alienation, numbing, hyper arousal and flashback. Besides, characters like Nick, in *The Deer Hunter*, are exposed to a traumatic event they have experienced or witnessed. Nick himself undergoes an event in which he is threatened to death during the Russian roulette game. So, he has intense fear and feelings of hopelessness while being captive in Vietnam. In his analysis of post-traumatic stress disorder syndrome, Frank Burk focuses on Cimino’s film *The Deer Hunter*. Burke further illustrates this reflection when he states that: “It is his moment of awakening- his fleetly recognition of Michael and acknowledgement of himself and his past that moves him to put the gun to his head and blow his mind for good. In a world where origins and human connection are the effectively dead, their memory becomes so painful, it must be destroyed” (Burk 256). In this context, Burk highlights that Cimino’s characters like Nick choose death as a permanent state of numbness because they cannot bear to imagine their previous life. They prefer killing themselves to reliving the traumatic experience. Trauma needs to be represented as to come to terms with such a life-shattering experience.

In Ted Kotcheff’s film, *First Blood*, Rambo is seized by anger and openly expresses everything that burdens his troubled mind when Colonel Trautman tries to

convince him. The incident happens seven years before, but he cannot get it out of his mind. Rambo further illustrates this while saying to Trautman that every day it hurts him. Focusing on his own unforgettable traumatic experience in Vietnam, he argues that: *"Sometimes I walk up and don't know where I am. I don't talk to anybody. Sometimes a day. Sometimes a week. I can't put it out of my mind."* (Kotcheff, 1982) The final sequence of the film provides audiences an explanation of Rambo's behavior and actions. It unveils his traumatic experience while fighting in Vietnam. He evinces symptoms of PTSD such as emotional numbing, re-experiencing, hyper arousal and distaste after coming home. This phenomenon increases his mental troubles, making him dysfunctional. Through its main character, the film displays how the homecoming reception of the community is important for coping with the consequences of PTSD.

There are grounds for believing that Oumar Ndongo, in *La Représentation de la Guerre du Vietnam dans la Culture Américaine à travers les Romans et les Films* (2005-2006), investigates the symptoms of trauma resulting from the emotional scars that affect Vietnam veterans. According to Ndongo, a soldier gives evidence of his traumatic experience in Vietnam: *"For years after I left the army I underwent psychiatric care because it affected me very, very strongly, to the point that I just did not stop having hallucinations and felt that I was going to die any minute. I finally overcame a large part of that, but I still have dreams, wake-up, fear, and anxiety. I have emotional problems based on incidents in Vietnam with me to this. I suspect that it will always be there"* (Ndongo 379). Actually, Oumar Ndongo accounts for the case of a soldier who is psychologically affected by his war experience and displays post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms.

Similarly, Emilio Estevez' film *The War at Home* depicts the character Jeremy Collier who is haunted by disturbing flashbacks which make him upset. He has terrible nightmares that wake him up. Jeremy is constantly agitated, irritable and disconcerted. Like other disturbed Vietnam veteran characters, Jeremy comes to terms with his trauma through a cathartic moment in which he is able to express what actually troubles him. In the final sequence of the film, Jeremy Collier is on the verge of mental collapse and threatens his family with a gun. Compared to *The War at Home*, the characters Travis in *Taxi driver* film and Alex Cutter in *Cutter's way* also show symptoms associated with the antisocial behavior. Scorsese's movie depicts Travis as a character who is mentally unstable. He works as taxi driver because he cannot sleep. His antisocial behavior and detachment from family and friends appear to bring to this lonely existence. Because of his traumatic experience in Vietnam, Alex Cutter is unable to readjust to normal life. Cutter is a Vietnam vet who loses an eye, a leg and an arm. He drinks heavily and gets angry at America that mangles him. In this movie, the

atmosphere that envelops the character is intoxicating. According to him, America is nothing but the disillusionment of veterans in Vietnam War.

*In Country* (1985) by Bobbie Ann Mason, the character Emmet is depicted as showing symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder. Samantha wants to know her father who died in Vietnam before her birth, but her uncle Emmet does not want to talk about their war experiences. He is often completely spaced out as demonstrated by emotional numbness and flattened affect. He has sudden memories by a storm, experiences flashbacks of Vietnam and gets extremely angry. The manifestation of a soldier's breakdown usually involves a wide variety of symptoms, including fear of death, anger, depression, nightmares and vivid intrusive reliving of their most horrible experiences. Veteran characters like Rambo shows such symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder in a POW camp. It is described as a debilitating condition that often breaks down impersonal relationship, unemployment, alcoholism and even suicide like Nick in *The Deer Hunter*.

Focusing on Francis Ford Coppola's film, *Apocalypse Now*, Miriam Hansen perceives Willard's "state as one of trance and tension" (Miriam 123). Miriam emphasizes the PTSD symptoms that Willard displays as being in an unconscious situation. He is totally confused and distressed. In the same way, Guy Westwell merely describes this audiovisual match as the "fan recalling the blades of a helicopter" (Westwell 63). Willard experiences again the traumatic event as the blades of the fan recall those of the helicopter in Vietnam, which triggers his flashbacks. As far as Jeffrey Chown is concerned, he reads it as "suggesting the inescapability of the horror the character has experienced" (Chown, 127). The scene uses a cinematographic style that is strikingly reminiscent of symptoms associated with intrusions of combat impressions that blur the boundary of inner and outer reality for PTSD patients.

In the article "Trauma and Experience: Introduction." *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (1995), Cathy Caruth highlights that "one's own survival of the traumatic event is in fact often experienced as a crisis of the self" (Caruth 9) and this is clearly the case of Willard. When Willard shatters the mirror with his fist, his psychologically challenged self is identified as an alien and uncontrollable enemy who tries to repel with desolation.

Coppola's film is a depiction of the character Willard who expresses his feelings in the comment: "each time I looked around, the walls moved in a little tighter" (Coppola, 1979). It becomes graspable for the audience through the filmic realization of the scene. Willard displays PTSD symptoms since he suffers from flashbacks and hallucination. *Apocalypse Now* features the journey up to river to assassinate Kurtz, which is actually traumatizing for characters. While focusing



on the Kilgore episode, we can say that the crew is persistently exposed to intensifying but mostly indistinct stressors that produce initial perceptible stress reactions. As the film proceeds, the audience is left to witness how the soldiers' amplifying psychological stress and the cinematic encoding thereof, coincide with Willard's review of Kurtz's development. When the dossier gradually comes to its limit in providing the material for a logical narration and meaningful representation of an individual's traumatic experience, Willard asserts that: "*I felt I knew [...] things about Kurtz that weren't in the dossier*" (Coppola 1979). This reflects the shift in the film's logic. The journey up to river as to kill Kurtz is traumatizing. Characters like Willard display PTSD symptoms that reveal his anti-experience. These stress reactions attest that he has no absolute correlation with later occurrences of severe PTSD.

The psychoanalytic theory looks to the neuroses and psychological states of characters in literature to interpret the meaning of a text. In his analysis of the effects of trauma using this literary criticism, Kai Erikson asserts that not only one traumatizing event, but also a persistent condition, a prolonged exposure to highly stressful situations, can trigger "*an enduring state of mind*" (Erikson 185). Here, Erikson brings to light the aggravation, duration and severity of later PTSD symptoms and its inflicting effects on Veterans. This theory helps understand how the war affects the psyche of American soldiers.

In short, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder becomes a part of America's vernacular during the Vietnam War. Films such as *The Deer Hunter*, *First Blood*, *Born on the Fourth of July* and *Apocalypse Now* explore the struggle of a nation to come to grips with posttraumatic stress disorder syndrome. PTSD is not unique to the military experience, but the odds of suffering from it are greater in the military than in civilian life. Veterans display different kinds of PTSD symptoms which comprise recurrent thoughts about the trauma, avoidance of places and reminders of trauma, hyper alertness, irritability and anxiety. In attempting to deal with post-traumatic stress disorder syndrome, they resort to drug abuse and alcohol use or other substances. The Vietnam War traumatic experience turns service members to drug addiction and alcohol as a means of self-medication.

### **3. Veterans Coping PTSD with Drug Addiction and Alcoholism**

The substance-addicted veteran, escaping and reliving trauma through the substance abuse, is at the core of Vietnam War movies. These films feature the veterans who use substances like alcohol and drugs with the purpose of coping with traumatic experiences in the Vietnam War. Jeremy Kuzmarov addresses this issue in *The Myth of the Addicted Army: Vietnam and the Modern War on Drugs* (2009). According to Kuzmarov, the image of drug-addicted American soldier in Vietnam is, in reality, only a myth. Drug addiction among US soldiers is not

widespread during the war. For veterans, resorting to drug use is a way to come to terms with the Vietnam experience in the jungle and back home although it is not a well-known phenomenon in the Army. The widespread drug and alcohol use are considered as a major concern among veterans, especially those with psychological and physical injuries.

Addiction to drug and alcoholism is a crucial issue since the Vietnam experience is extremely traumatic. It causes soldiers to develop post-traumatic stress disorder, which is a condition that occurs with addiction and alcoholism. Ashby's *Coming Home* unveils Bob's feelings of avoidance. This is illustrated by the fact while Sally prepares a welcome party for her husband; Bob prefers going to pub and getting drunk with his friends. He is irritated and able to burst suddenly in anger. He sleeps with his gun. In this regard, we can say that traumatic images from Vietnam still haunt him and alcohol use is a way of forgetting his experience in Vietnam.

The use of drug addiction and alcohol is also depicted in *Apocalypse Now*. While focusing on the character Captain Willard, we realize that without a mission, Willard is already lost, drunk and deranged in the opening scene. He gets addicted to alcohol to ease his pain and stress on his journey upriver to assassinate Kurtz. The characters on the patrol boat gradually get killed or descend into drug and induced stupors. In Coppola's film, *Apocalypse Now*, the camera pans from an array of personal documents and pictures to Willard's motionless body with newly intruding overlay of the jungle scene. As this camera pans to drugs and alcohol, it creates a tableau that has become symptomatic of the depiction of Vietnam veterans. In that sense, social isolation, psychological numbing and drug abuse characterize the stylized image of an individual who tries to escape a haunting past. The movie underscores Willard's passivity, spatial seclusion and alienation from the outside world as well as his mental entrapment. The entire scene of the deranged and lonely drunkenness is set to show us a man literally closed in a cage, struggling against the nightmares that live within his own self.

Michael Cimino's *The Deer Hunter* examines issues associated with alcohol use through the character of the Green Beret at John Bar in the first scene of the movie. As the Green Beret is unable to cope with the traumatic experience in Vietnam, he resorts to alcohol to forget the horrors of the war. The presence of this vet at the bar foreshadows the events happening in Vietnam.

Stone's film *Born on the Fourth of July* depicts Kovic who, after a visit to her girlfriend, is addicted to alcohol. His descent into drunkenness and his expulsion from family home account for Ron Kovic's traumatic experience in Vietnam. He addicts to alcohol abuse and confronts Second World War veterans at the local



bar before enduring a confrontation with his mother. In this scene, Kovic starts casting doubt over his mother's ideology. He does not believe in God anymore and refers to him as a "fucking dummy" for "believing everything they told us." (Stone, 1989) Kovic also confesses to shooting women and children and calls the war a lie. He ends up in an unofficial community of disabled veterans in Mexico which represents his personal nadir of drunkenness.

Combat trauma manifests itself in the form of a substance abuse. Vietnam War veterans use drugs and drink alcohol in order to either distance themselves from distressing memories of war or to attempt to psychologically retrieve or relive such memories with more clarity. In his analysis of substance abuse as a way of escaping and relieving trauma, Larry Heinemann asserts that: "He'll [Vietnam veteran Paco Sullivan, US 54800409] take a couple of pills and a drink from his bottle, then sit down and untie his shoes" (Heinemann 205). From this reflection, Heinemann emphasizes the experience of Paco as a disheartening, somewhat ominous, a drug - and alcohol-induced war flashback. He also shows how survivors of war with psychological injuries may rely on mind-numbing, mind-altering substances to cope with trauma memories.

In *Apocalypse Now*, Captain Willard is depicted as being drunk because of the horrors of the upriver journey. Similarly, Larry Heinemann's book investigates the case of Paco who is immediately addicted to alcohol after killing a Viet Cong in a combat. In this regard, Paco, as Heinemann notes it, "drank every canteen [containing water] in sight and smoked dope marijuana until he was out of his mind" (Heinemann 196). As a matter of fact, Paco's dependency on drugs results mainly from a wartime injury. He is the only survivor of a deadly VC attack on Fire Base Harriette and many American soldiers die in Alpha Company.

More importantly, Jonathan Shay provides deeper insights into substance abuse as self-medication, when he emphasizes that such postwar: "selective suppression of emotion results from a very real adaptation from combat being carried over into civilian life after war. After all, suppressing one's emotions (such as fear or sadness) while in combat can lead to increased combat effectiveness and can save lives - including one's own life" (Shay 39). From this reflection, Shay highlights the case of veterans who attempt to suppress distressing traumatic memories that can secure a more emotionally productive postwar life. Alcohol is effective in helping to forget or cope with the traumatic experience in the battlefield.

In the Vietnam War, both American and Vietnamese veteran characters seek out the psychic numbing powers of alcohol in their postwar lives as a way to escape from traumatic memories. In fact, two cases involving American and Vietnamese veterans who are different survivors of the war use alcohol in similar ways. By way of illustration, we highlight the case of Kien, a Vietnamese veteran, in Bao



Ninh's *The Sorrow of War* (1991). Kien emphasizes how alcohol can be used to forget trauma. Like Paco, Kien experiences great loss and trauma during the war. He emerges at the end of the war as one of the only ten survivors out of his whole battalion.

In *Northern Lights*, Tim O'Brien gives a depiction of Harvey who is addicted to alcohol because of war experience. Harvey takes a swig on his wine bottle. He goes to the windows and locks out towards the west. Then, he comes back. He puts a hand on Perry's shoulder, slight at first and then harder. In that respect, he says that: "you're a good man, brother." He looked at Perry through his good eye. "I'm serious, you're really my goddamn brother, aren't you?" (O'Brien 146) In these words, Harvey shows the difficult situation that causes him to be a heavy drinker. The previous night, his wartime and homecoming experiences are more traumatic than his failure to seduce Addie. He hints at some painful memories when he underlines that war is not so good too. He keeps drinking in order to forget his wartime memories.

Post-Vietnam War traumatic stress disorder still continues to shock veterans' minds. For dealing with such traumatic problems, veterans use drugs or alcohol for self-medication. That is what Larry Heinemann expresses in book's *Paco's Story* when he claims that Paco is "luxuriating in the stupefying doses of librium and valium" (Heinemann 136) and he is constantly recalling the fascination lived on the battlefield. He needs to take daily doses of drugs to keep going and no matter how hard he works, or how long the war is over. There is nothing that he can do to ease the mental suffering he persistently experiences. The traumatic memories of the war keep affecting his mind like a ghost which he cannot escape. Thoughts and nightmares about cataclysmic Vietcong attacks are constant threats that overwhelm him.

In his study *Working-class war: American Combat Soldiers and Vietnam*, Christian Appy explores the overuse of substances as a self-medication to traumatic war experience. In attempting to provide deeper insights into the aftermath of Vietnam War on Veterans, Appy argues that: "while most Americans were all too able to forget the war, many veterans could not. Try as they might to bury the war, its unsolved emotions and memories festered below the surface, sometimes coming out in indirect, unpredictable, dangerous, and self-destructive ways: sudden flashes of anger, hard drinking or drug use, panic attacks, extreme distrust, inability to care about anything or anybody" (Appy 308). In his remark, Appy examines the difficult situation of veterans who are trapped in their own minds and bodies. They cannot escape from the madness of their traumas. These veterans are fenced in by destruction they are led to create. They attempt to handle the traumatic experience, resorting to substance abuse.





Many soldiers turn to drugs in Vietnam to deal with the stress of war. They are available to help numb the pain of war. Richard Stacewicz's book *Winter Soldiers: An Oral History of the Vietnam Veterans Against the War* (1997) is a portrayal of a soldier who undergoes war trauma and attempts to deal with this traumatic event using drugs. In that sense, the veteran explains that: *"I started using morphine. As a medic, I had an unlimited supply, I never mainlined; it was always in the ass cheek or arm. Under that medication, I was able to remember the good times we had. I could get away from the horror. I could get away from their deaths"* (Stacewicz 168). From this reflection, Stacewicz accounts for the purpose of using substance abuse. Despite his resort to drug, the veteran's traumatic experience still haunts him. The Vietnam War is the first introduction to the world of illegal substances. Drugs such as amphetamines help soldiers to remain alert on mission, while other drugs are used to escape the emotional pain of war. Soldiers turn to drugs to cope with the trauma of war. Resulting from a stressful event related to war, PTSD helps understand better why Vietnam veterans react as they do. They use alcohol and drugs to ease their war experiences.

Veterans who reputedly return from Vietnam are called baby killers and spat on by anti-war protestors. In fact, this iconic legend continues to linger in the memory of American soldiers in Vietnam. They have a heroin addiction problem that is serious enough to set off the war on drugs. Substance abuse is part of military life. In the *INSTITUTE OF MEDICINE SUBSTANCE USE DISORDERS IN THE U.S. ARMED FORCES*, it is declared that: *"Historically, the use of alcohol, illicit drugs, and tobacco has been common in the military. Heavy drinking is an accepted custom...that has become part of the military work culture and has been used for recreation, as well as to reward hard work, to ease interpersonal tensions, and to promote unit cohesion and camaraderie.... Alcoholic beverages have long been available to service at reduced prices at military installations, including during "happy hours".... [I]ncreases in alcohol use may be associated with the challenges of war, the alcohol being used in part as an aid in coping with stressful or traumatic events and as self-medication for mental health problems."*<sup>2</sup> In this passage, we realize that everyday drug use in Vietnam is rampant, but the substance abuse in the military is common. Veterans cope with mental problems caused by the jungle warfare in Vietnam. The returning Vietnam veterans are those who experience mental health problems that result in a significant drug use.

Because of Vietnam experience, veterans evince different kind of PTSD symptoms including recurrent thoughts about the trauma, avoidance of places, alertness, irritability and anxiety. Increased exposure to combat causes PTSD. As

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<sup>2</sup> INSTITUTE. OF MEDICINE SUBSTANCE USE DISORDERS IN THE U.S. ARMED FORCES- Washington, DC: The National Academies Press 29 (2013). <https://doi.org/10.17226/13441>.



it is mentioned in *INSTITUTE OF MEDICINE SUBSTANCE USE DISORDERS IN THE U.S. ARMED FORCES*:

there are several risk factors associated specifically with military service. Examples include service –related to injuries, trauma, and demands related to achieve duty (e.g. Carrying heavy equipment; witnessing and experiencing traumatic events during deployment; being separated from family members; experiencing occupational stress and boredom when serving in isolated sites; and being the objects of discriminatory treatment and, in some cases, acts of violence based on gender, race/ ethnicity, or sexual orientation.) Military service in general often involves exposure to stressful and traumatic events, and numerous studies have documented high rates of service-related mental health symptoms among military personnel, which are known to intensify the risk of substance use problems.<sup>3</sup>

Focusing on these words, we note that being in the military and war theatre increases the risks of mental health disorders and veterans' drug abuse. There is a connection between war-related experiences mental illness and drug abuse. Drug is a self-medicating strategy for PTSD's symptoms. There is a correlation between PTSD and drug use among Veterans. Combat veterans are likely to have worse substance abuse problems than those who do not have traumatic experience.

To put it in a nutshell, we can say that the self-medication hypothesis is proposed to explain the relationship between military traumatic stress and alcohol use disorders. While taking into consideration this phenomenon, we admit that the link between traumatic events and the heightened risk for alcohol use is mediated by the occurrence of PTSD. Specifically, traumatic experiences lead to psychiatric disorders such as depression and veterans who manifest these conditions turn to alcohol use as a means of self-medicating their symptoms. Within the self-medication framework, alcohol addiction can, in itself, be conceptualized as an avoidance behavior.

## CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study is to provide deeper insights into post-Vietnam War trauma. Film-makers like Michael Cimino, Ted Kotcheff, Oliver Stone and Francis Ford Coppola examine the psychological torment and moral doubts the nation expresses over the war. Films such as *The Deer Hunter*, *First Blood*, *Apocalypse Now* and *Born on the Fourth of July* explore the psychological problems veterans face in the aftermath of Vietnam War. The psychological theory that is used reveals the psychology of characters like Nick, Michael, John Rambo, Ron Kovic and Willard depicted in these movies. This literary criticism helps us

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<sup>3</sup> Idem.



understand that these characters contend with traumatic events experienced or witnesses during the battlefield, which go beyond what they can endure in normal life. The view of the Vietnam War as an American tragedy gives way naturally to the depiction of veterans as victims of this tragedy. This war is a humiliating and deeply frustrating experience for Americans who are accustomed to success. The Vietnam War subverts the American identity, reverses the western hero's role and brings about traumatic issues veterans experience in the jungle. Cimino, Kotcheff, Stone and Coppola feature characters who display PTSD symptoms deriving from war experience. The tense reaction to a traumatic situation results in flashbacks, hallucinations, depression, numbing, stress... Thus, they turn to alcohol and drug because they help reduce nightmares, difficulties and maintain sleep. The use of these substances among veterans is also attributed to many potential casual factors. Veterans drink alcohol when they reunite with family and friends. They resort to drug abuse and alcohol to self-medicate themselves because of the wartime experiences. This self-medication becomes a solution to post-traumatic stress disorder. Worse still, it takes a longer time for veterans to push successfully the images of Vietnam post-traumatic stress disorder to the back of their minds. Post-traumatic stress disorder syndrome, which continues to affect nations involved in world conflicts is still considered as a crucial and current issue in the mainstream of all societies. It necessitates a deeper concern and an investigation based on psychological interpretation of mental and emotional disorders of Vietnam veterans, resulting in a national trauma in America. This article examining post-Vietnam War traumatic stress disorder helps people have a better understanding of the conceptualization of PTSD from the Vietnam War to current conflicts and beyond.

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