



# From Disability as Readjustment Problem to Civilian Life to Rehabilitation in Oliver Stone's *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989) and Hal Ashby's *Coming Home* (1978)

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**Abstract** - This article investigates the Vietnam War disabled veterans used as a form of metaphor, which represents the failure of the American dream. Oliver Stone's *Born on the Fourth of July*, embedded in post-Vietnam War era, explores a wide range of issues associated with demasculinization, dependency on a wheelchair for life and unconscious misunderstanding of America's involvement in Vietnam. Stone's film is a depiction of a disabled character, Ron Kovic, who epitomizes the shame of the wounded soldier, standing for the syndrome of a whole nation. This article lays foundation for the memoirs of Kovic. He returns to America as a disabled veteran and his attempts to readjust to an inaccessible and inhospitable American society are traumatic. Kovic's readjustment problems do not only stem from environmental barriers and social attitudes, but also from the deceitful behavior of US government upon neglecting him. He experiences disability, which causes his sexual impotence. This castration is perceived as a loss of masculinity in the framework of social and cultural identity. Ron Kovic's own experience of physical and intellectual restrictions convey those of the disabled veterans. Being aware of his unvoiced sufferings, he turns out to be an antiwar political activist to restore the situation of broken soldiers: their rehabilitation is a way of readjusting fully to civilian life.

**Key words:** *Disability, American Dream, Demasculinization, America, Disabled veteran, Readjustment, Masculinity*

**Résumé** - Cet article examine les mutilés de Guerre du Vietnam qui représentent une métaphore de l'échec du rêve Américain. *Born on the Fourth of July* d'Oliver Stone, ancré dans l'après-guerre du Vietnam, explore divers problèmes relatifs à l'émasculatation, à la dépendance à vie d'un fauteuil roulant et à l'incompréhension inconsciente de l'intervention de l'Amérique au Vietnam. Dans ce film, Ron Kovic incarne l'humiliation du soldat physiquement estropié qui fonctionne comme un syndrome, affectant toute une nation. Cet article établit les fondements des mémoires de Kovic. Ce dernier retourne en Amérique en tant que vétéran invalide. Ses tentatives de réintégrer une société Américaine inaccessible et inhospitalière sont éprouvantes. Les problèmes de sa réadaptation ne sont pas seulement liés aux barrières environnementales et aux attitudes sociales, mais ils émanent aussi de l'hypocrisie et de la négligence du Gouvernement Américain. L'expérience d'infirmité est la cause de son impuissance sexuelle. Cette castration est considérée comme une perte de masculinité se référant à l'identité sociale et culturelle. Les restrictions physiques et intellectuelles de l'expérience personnelle de Kovic traduisent celles des vétérans handicapés. Ayant pris conscience de ses souffrances inexprimées, il s'avère être un activiste politique anti-guerre afin de rétablir la situation des soldats brisés : leur réintégration à la vie civile passe par leur revalorisation.



**Mots clés :** *Mutilés, Rêve Américain, Emasculation, Amérique, Vétéran invalide, Réadaptation, Masculinité*

## INTRODUCTION

Oliver Stone is an American film director, producer and screenwriter. He is known as a controversial but acclaimed director, tackling subjects ranging from the Vietnam war, and American politics to musical biopics and crime dramas. Stone is one of post-Vietnam War prominent filmmakers who has a significant impact on popular understanding of American culture in the late twentieth century through a series of docudramas. These war narratives reread American history through the lens of conspiracy theory and paranoia. Actually, after taking a short back from war stories to direct *Wall Street* (1987), Oliver Stone ventures back into Vietnam with *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989). It is a biopic that dramatizes the true story of Vietnam veteran Ron Kovic (Tom Cruice). It tracks Kovic's life from an inspired all-American boy, born on the fourth of July, to an impassioned Marine sergeant in Vietnam, to a disabled veteran imploring his country to oppose the war. Kovic's PTSD narrative is more similar to Stone's life story. As we see in Kovic's disastrous attempt to reintegrate into family life, there is no simple way for soldiers to return to civil society after such a cruel, violent and corrupt tour of duty. In *Born on the Fourth of July*, disability is perceived to be incongruent with masculinity, shattering the individual's sense of self and forcing them to rebuild along lines of fragility, dependency and sexual impotence. Kovic's film presents soldiers whose minds and hearts are broken by the war. This text intertwines ideas of national shame, transgression of the parental and societal power figure and the inevitable loss of sexual power. According to Oliver Stone, disability is considered as a problem with society rather than as one within a damaged body. In post-Vietnam War, Hollywood shows a critical analysis with the field of disability studies. Stone's movie provides the foundation for the case of a disabled soldier, Ron Kovic, who copes with readjustment problems to civilian life and searches for a new identity within the American society.

The phenomenon of disability runs deep in Vietnam War films. Within these representations, disability is predominantly used as a metaphor or analogy to express the physical and emotional toll of combat, with depictions of struggling and broken soldiers standing in for the broader physical and psychological cost of war. While some critics argue that *Born on the Fourth of July* is not, in fact, about disability, but rather about the injustices of war itself, this work investigates how Oliver Stone's film is indeed about the destruction and preservation of masculinity, with ideas of gender and loss becoming imprinted upon the disabled character, Ron Kovic. This is a connection that is now



manifest in most representations of disability. By looking back at the way this Vietnam War film constructs and manages disability, we can see how these representations have profoundly impacted how we currently think about disability. The unconscious fantasies of disability built in *Born on the Fourth of July* have a cascading effect on daily or future representations of this phenomenon. Disability's greatest impact is not only physical ability, but rather on the development of self and identity. The reality of living with disability is then one of being consistently forced to confront and fit within the normate's hegemonic fantasies of what it means to be disabled. *Coming Home* (1978) by Hal Ashby also unveils the experience of disabled veterans from the Vietnam War, but it takes a different perspective. Instead of dealing with the brutality of combat, this film portrays the injustices committed against veterans upon returning home. *Coming Home* tells the story of a military woman, Sally (Jane Fonda) who decides to volunteer at the local veteran's hospital while her husband is fighting in Vietnam. It is at the hospital where she meets the former high school classmate Luke Martin (Jon Voight) who returns to America after being wounded in Vietnam. Voight's character is a paraplegic who uses a wheelchair.

In terms of methodology, the study delves into the experience of the war and the stand American people have had with regard to the phenomenon of disability. Scholars, filmmakers and writers provide deep insights into the physical and psychological aftermath of war on veterans. In that light, Michael Cimino's *The Deer Hunter* (1978) gives a portrayal of characters who experience traumatic situations. Focusing on this movie, we remark that some of them are broken and cope with physical scars of war. These wounds include the wheelchair-bound amputee Steven, the semi-psychotic at home Stan and the deceased Nick, ending with funeral. In many cases, the Vietnam veterans' disability is closely linked to much deeper psychological wounds. By the same token, Ron Kovic's *Born on the Fourth of July* (1976) is a poignant expression of his own feeling about the war. The book casts light on his experience as a disabled character from the waist down. Images of war and returning veterans are common motion picture themes that dramatize the intensity of combat in the forms of physical disabilities and emotional disorders. According to Quart and Auster, Vietnam combatants, in contrast, are often depicted as angry substance abusers, alienated from a hostile world that no longer understands their needs. In their work, *The Wounded Vet in Postwar Film: Social Policy* (1982), they examine disabilities, which can present a range of symbolic meanings, from brave, patriotic sacrifice to victimization in an unjust war. In that same vein, M. E. Norden, in his work, *The Cinema of Isolation: A History of Physical Disabilities in the Movies* (1994), explores the substantial impact of the motion



pictures on public attitudes toward individuals with disabilities. For him, while movies entertain, they simultaneously provide viewers with information about disabilities. Through the filmmaker's lens, they project representations of how individuals fit into a nation's social and political landscape. Warfare and disability are common in films. In post-Vietnam era, filmic narratives lay emphasis on the characteristics of disability conditions and its related social issues.

This project aims to uncover the dividence of the normal subject, as revealed by the chaotic encounter between disabled and non-disabled bodies. The best lens to understand what happens in this moment is the work of psychoanalysis. Julia Kristeva describes this encounter with disability and her work is built from two foundational psychoanalytic theories. They include Freud's groundbreaking work in positing the psychic realm and Jacques Lacan's elaboration of this imaginary order, in particular through his concept of castration and the phallus. Kristeva is one of the few psychoanalytic thinkers who begins to contemplate the impact disability has on the able-bodied subject. Buried within representations of disability is a mediated representation of the normate's fantasy of disability, which is a defensive dramatization of the intersubjective encounter between the normal and the disabled subject. As Kristeva explains, the disabled subject "*inflicts a threat of physical or psychological death, fear of collapse, and, beyond that, the anxiety of seeing the very borders of the human species explode.*" (Kristeva 29) Kristeva further posits that representations of disability in the media speak to the anxiety arising from this encounter. Such representations can be read as a defensive fantasy that is generated to neutralize these fears, to repress effectively the castration, anxiety that disability opens. The result is disavowal, a rejection of disability and an assurance that, as Kristeva claims, "*the disabled person is inevitably exposed to a discrimination that cannot be shared.*" (Kristeva 29) Stone's movie features a character, Ron Kovic, who bears witness of the misunderstanding between the normate and the disabled person. The main character transcends the feeling of anxiety and overcomes demasculinization to regenerate and gain a new identity.

This article explores the shifts from the disabled veteran's readjustment issues to civil society to rehabilitation in *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989). It is divided into three parts: the first part addresses the reintegration problems to civilian life. The second part explores the crisis of masculinity and the third and final part sheds light on the rehabilitation of the disabled soldier.

### **1. The Reintegration problems to civilian life**

Social connections after war are important aspects in terms of having trouble assimilating back to civilian life. In fact, this work examines how social



networks affect the American soldier. It investigates his war experiences, which affect the readjustment to society. Family is the link between the war and the home front. The connections at home, in many cases, play a vital role in a smooth transition back into the United States. The readjustment problems center on the stress of the returnee's initial reunion with his family from Vietnam. This reintegration to a changed and disrupted family situation is problematic. This study deals with the case of the veteran reuniting with his family once back home from Vietnam. The reality of homecoming is often different from what they idealize in their minds. Vets can change during deployment. While returning home, they can be angry, tense, nervous and traumatized from the events downrange. This goes without saying that the soldier who returns from combat is confronted with difficulties re-establishing relationship with his family. There is a lack of the families concern and understanding of the veterans. The readjustment problems are associated with the distance caused by the time away and the soldier's inability to leave the trauma and mindset of combat left behind them. This can make the return home from combat stressful and difficult for both the soldier and the family.

In *Born on the Fourth of July*, Oliver Stone examines the veterans' readjustment problems to civilian life. The attitude of US society toward veterans is shown within the hospital. When Kovic complains about the dreadful conditions in which he is, a hospital orderly told him, "you can take your Vietnam and shove it up your ass." (Stone, 1989) Actually, Stone unveils the feeling of hatred and suspicion Kovic is subject to within the Administration hospital. No matter how serious he is wounded, no one cares about him. The nurse's misbehavior drives him to despair.

More importantly, Stone's movie addresses another war at home. It examines the difference, the misunderstanding and the perverted nature of American way of life, which Ron Kovic faces. Oliver Stone shares Kovic's attitude toward the US society and his desire to shake his sleeping countrymen. America fights and loses the wrong war in the wrong place at the wrong time. This endeavor is considered as the product of a military culture and blind ideological faith because it is deprived of needs and meaningful purposes. *Born on the Fourth of July* by Oliver Stone features the veteran's reception within their families. Kovic's friends tend to avoid him when he returns from Vietnam in a wheelchair. People like husbands, fathers and budding entrepreneurs stay as distant as they can from him. Even more than his injuries, his friends' apathy gnaws at him. Stone shows the social disconnection veterans contend with on homecoming. The lack of social ties between civilians and service members is a major concern that impairs the readjustment problems. The soldier is portrayed as being unable to fit at home. He is physically and emotionally traumatized





because of his disability. The return home ultimately sets up the biggest conflict within these filmic representations. The moment when the disabled veteran is forced to grapple with his newly constructed identities is a fight that turns on whether he is still a man despite his disablement.

We strongly support the idea that the disabled are simply more comfortable in spaces designed for them and surrounded by others like them. However, this phenomenon leads to a linguistic, psychological and environmental divide between the disabled and normal civilians. They have a sense of being surrounded by people like them. This fantasy appears to safeguard the disabled subject, but it actually shelters the normal form encountering the trauma of radical vulnerability and breakdown. There is no problem with sequestering the disabled in institutions like hospital where they are presumed to be happier. This is where they can be taken care and supported. Leaving this safety environment may be a fear of reintegrating into civilian world. The strongest anxieties are wrapped up in questions of dependency and a lack of control over the body.

Luke, in Hal Ashby's *Coming Home* (1978), depends on wheelchair for life and he is both literally and figuratively on a different level from other men. Likewise, Oliver Stone evokes Kovic's anxiety of being in a wheelchair, meaning to be inferior, or worse, invisible. Then, the other problem about being confined to a wheelchair is that it limits you in a confined space. In *Born on the Fourth of July*, Ron Kovic is very hung up about his disability, which impedes his readjustment to civilian life. This is illustrated by the fact he is unable to follow his high school sweetheart inside after a date because of the stairs leading into her residence. (Stone, 1989) The social state of disability helps understand that this inaccessibility is not the result of being in a wheelchair, but owners of public and private spaces actively refuse to become accessible. Managing the threat that it poses; disability's stories are almost always focused on hope for a cure or at the very least escape from the crippled subject position.

In much the same, this issue is examined in Stone's movie *Born on the Fourth of July*. When Ron Kovic reads about the public opinion on the Vietnam War and the anti-war demonstrations, he finds out that veterans are not regarded as the masculine war-heroes they expect to be. For example, their sacrifices for the US are ignored and they are denied of any masculine status, humiliated and treated with disrespect. They are confronted with the anti-war demonstrations. Kovic seems to support this reflection in *Born on the Fourth of July* when he declares: "they have no idea what's going on over there, Mom- the men that are sacrificing their lives, people are dying every day over there, and nobody back here can seem to care" (Stone, 1989). Here, Kovic embodies the suffering of his fellow veterans and criticizes the attitude of the public opinion toward them. Despite their sacrifices



and efforts for the US society, they find it difficult to readjust to civilian life because of the American citizens' protest.

In his analysis of veterans' readjustment problems, Jack E. Davis argues that the Vietnam veterans, like Ron Kovic and Emmett, are "*being made to carry the burden of the still-troubled American conscience. Struggling to reconcile loss with honor, Americans needed their scapegoat*" (Davis 8). Davis highlights the problems veterans cope with on homecoming through the character of Kovic. He bears witness to the sufferings of the wounded veterans who return from the war. The traditional masculine status of soldiers becomes the victim of the Vietnam War.

Paul Higate, in his article "Review of 'Masculinity in Vietnam War Narratives. A Critical Study of Fiction, Films and Nonfiction' Writings," (2011) investigates the problems of Vietnam veterans' reintegration to society. He focuses on the shift of American soldier's status from the jungle warfare to homecoming. In that sense, he suggests that the image of the veteran as a masculine hero is replaced by the image of "*the 'freak', the amputee and the paraplegic, appearing uninvited in the back water towns of the United States*" (Higate 259). From this reflection, Higate brings to light the issue of disability that is an impediment to re-assimilation into society. The disabled veteran feels alienated from society because of his paraplegic status and functions as an outsider. The physically and mentally disabled Vietnam veteran becomes the embodiment of the failure of the United States. This is perceived as a great shame for these veterans.

This sense of failure and embarrassment is echoed by Ron Kovic who thinks that he deserves his wounds in Vietnam. That is what Kovic expresses in *Born on the Fourth of July* when he says: "*When I was in the hospital, I thought, yeah – yeah, this makes sense.*" (Stone, 1989) Kovic remarks that there is no sense of pride in being a Vietnam veteran. There is nothing left to feel masculine about it. Kovic's complaints result from the reception he experiences at home.

The Veterans' physical appearance also contributes greatly to their outsider status. Characters like Ron Kovic in *Born on the Fourth of July* and Emmett in *Country* (1985) carry visible effects of the war. Emmett's face is covered in pimples and he has terrible headaches that make him, as Mason notes it, "*jerk and twitch his forehead*" (Mason 41). Kovic loses the ability to move his legs and becomes disabled. While discussing the problem of disability, he emphasizes that he resents his body and links his physical disabilities to his masculine status. From this outlook, Ron Kovic states: "*I wanna get out of this fucking body I'm in. I just wanna be a man again*" (Stone, 1989). In his declaration, Kovic shows his impotence. This phenomenon obstructs his readjustment to society.



On coming home, veterans do not know how to react, what to think, or how to feel. All they know is to risk their lives for their country and no one appreciates their efforts and courage. Instead of being glorified, their actions and contributions are protested in their faces. The initial response of the main character, in *Born on the Fourth of July*, is to stand strong to his beliefs in honor, loyalty and pride. He is not ashamed of losing his legs for such a noble cause. In fact, he feels that the protesters of the war are simply ignorant and wrong. It seems as though all he wants to receive from those at home is a pat on the back for his efforts. Yet, that pat on the back never comes.

Kovic's frustration derives from the lack of respect he receives. He delves into this issue when he cries out: "I just want to be treated like a human being. I fought for my life like a human being. I fought for my country. I am a Vietnam War veteran" (Stone, 1989). Through this statement, Kovic expresses his unvoiced sufferings. As a disabled veteran, he is constantly surrounded by civilians who cannot relate to what he goes through in Vietnam. He begins to succumb to the beliefs and views of those who do not go to the war. Instead of remaining proud of what he believes in and fights for, Kovic, in *Born on the Fourth of July*, gradually deteriorates and weakens in their stance. In this film, Kovic admits that he trades in the morals and beliefs that he fights as to have his body back whole again. As time passes, he complains more and more openly about the Vietnam War's impact on him. Accordingly, he turns out to an opponent of the war.

Oliver Stone's film, *Born on the Fourth of July*, seeks to reinforce the sense of injustice felt by many veterans over their treatment. It shows Ron Kovic's political development and the poor reception that the returning veterans are given in the Administration hospital and back home. The final section of the film opens with a long crane shot of the veterans marching to the tune of "When Johnny Comes Marching Home" (Stone, 1989). The song's lyrics: "When Johnny comes marching home again, hurrah. We'll give him a hearty welcome then, hurrah!" (Stone, 1989) This song illustrates the way Veterans are treated on homecoming from Vietnam. It also conveys the lack of welcome they face. As the national anthem, it reasserts the patriotism of the returning soldiers because of their protest. It is not until the Vietnam Veterans Welcome Home Parade in New York in 1985 when Vietnam veterans receive a public welcome home. The country is locked in over Vietnam, therefore the use of this song sets characters free from disablement. It relieves them from war trauma.

The memories of Vietnam War take up lingering impacts on the minds of the veterans. The combat, with all its victories, failures and fear, provides the benchmark of their past, present and future lives. Within the daily interactions of warfare, the veterans become aware of the readjustment problems in society. Then, this feeling of recognition and identity permits to have a distinct and





powerful self-image. For example, Vietnam, as the larger context of the combat experience, gives them a notion of the social roles, which are available for them to play. This phenomenon comes through in the narratives of their lives after Vietnam, particularly in their tales of failure and betrayal. They return as social orphans, desiring the same admiration and respect like earlier veterans.

World War II veterans come home en masse to a grateful public and are honored with parades and great fanfare, however those who fight in Vietnam return alone. While drawing on the soldiers' treatment after the warfare, D. Michael Shafer claims: *"they were reinserted into civilian life one by one as they completed their tours, just as they had been inserted into combat one by one a year earlier"* (Shafer 94). According to Michael Shafer, earlier veterans are treated with respect and honor on returning to America. Although American soldiers enter the military with glamorous ideals of manhood, patriotism and heroic sacrifice, the realities of homecomings shatter these ideals of social gratitude and honor. The way they readjust to civilian world is the same as they start fighting in Vietnam.

Cathy Caruth delves into the readjustment problems the American soldier is confronted with back home. Despite his breakdowns in the battlefield, the real war seems to be at home. The adversity he faces on the home front results from the public's lack of support and the betrayal of the US government. The Vietnam veteran epitomizes America's failure in Vietnam. And his voice conveys the deceitfulness of American political leaders during the conflict. The fact that America fights aimlessly brings about the crisis of US ideology. The notion of American exceptionalism, its myth-making and the phenomenon of masculinity that make up the American identity are under threat because of Vietnam experience. In brief, we admit that the subversion of US identity causes a loss of confidence in the political realm of America and a reversal of its mission as savior of the world. Soldiers are physically and psychologically broken because of the scars of the war.

In *Born on the Fourth of July*, Ron Kovic does not know whom to blame for his sorrows, but he believes that it is the government's fault. The film ends with the main character and many other veterans as anti-war protesters. From this outlook, they complain: *"they told us to go, we'd fight communism. This country lied to me; it told me to fight against the Vietnamese."* *"We love America, but it stops with the government. The government is corrupt. They are killing our brothers in Vietnam."* (Stone, 1989) In this declaration, Vietnam veterans evoke the crucial problems they cope with while getting back into civilian life. In Vietnam, these powerful men make individuals based on what they need and want at the time. Back in the world, they find out that their status is significantly less meaningful and much less valuable than it is in the bush. They contend with the real



deceitfulness of the American government on homecoming. It fails to keep its promise and support for those who conduct the war in Vietnam. Accordingly, the transition from military service to civilian life takes a while to get them straight and back into society.

Oliver Stone's *Born on the Fourth of July* features the dreadful conditions that the returning wounded vets meet with in the Administration Hospital. As Ron Kovic complains about the medical treatment of veterans, he argues: "*why we fight for rights overseas when we ain't got no rights at home?*" and "*you ain't part of the solution, you're part of the problem*" (Stone, 1989). Though Kovic's ideological beliefs remain strong, he is mentally shocked when a shortage of medical equipment threatens to amputate his leg. A doctor tells him that even if you fight in Vietnam "*the government's just not giving us the money to take care of you guys*" (Stone, 1989). This shows a clear statement about the repercussions of political neglect of those who fight in Vietnam. This phenomenon fuels Kovic's anguish and frustration. The government does not provide the necessary medical care they need. There is a lack of politicians' support whereas many vets suffer from serious injuries. They keep complaining of the US government for its disrespect. In brief, we can say that vets face the deceitfulness of America's political leaders. There is so much American public and government ignorance about this problem.

To sum up, we can say that this study explores veterans' experience during their transition from active duty or military service to civilian life. It also examines the crisis state of the American soldiers in their transitions to society and the challenges they face on homecoming. After getting out of the military, they have to face up to the process of troubled social reintegration within their families and communities as civilians and the deceitfulness of the US government. The Vietnam War disabled veterans wage another war at home; they struggle to adjust again to social life and grapple with the horror of the war and societal disconnection. These veterans are confronted with crucial homecoming problems related to their reintegration to family and society, the antiwar protests and the deceitful behavior of the US government.

## **2. The crisis of masculinity**

The Vietnam War films depict the characters as being splintered and cracked by the violence of combat. This moment of castration and the injury caused by the jungle warfare break the character. All that they cannot be held together by the broken body. The destruction of the physical body is considered as a tragedy, but the greater fear is that a symbolic death of their masculinity occurs. Nevertheless, the person survives this moment of trauma, something cannot be



brought back from the battlefield. Something is killed in that moment of fracture and a deep anxiety is confirmed.

Metaphors are used to describe the wounds inflicted by the war in *Coming Home* (1978). In this film, paraplegia is meant to suggest the crippling effects of the war and fragmentation of society. In the case of *Coming Home*, the efficacy of the analogy rests with the audience to respect the reality and depth of this disability. While relying on this movie, audiences may be ready to accept a disabled soldier on the screen, which is an achievement in itself. However, the same audiences are not yet capable of dealing with the implications of such a disability. It is obvious that the same kind of magical alteration that sees Sally Hyde (Jane Fonda) transformed from a repressed housewife to a liberated woman takes hold of Luke Martin. In fact, Martin goes from a violently embittered, self-pitying, totally dependent cripple into a well-adjusted, emphatic, politically and sexually active handicapped person. Such a well-integrated figure is unlikely to suggest the fragmentation of society. This figure ends up pointing towards a reconstructed society.

More importantly, the notion of disability is merely deployed as an allegory or metaphor that is part of a broader claim about life or society. Allan Surtherland supports this view in relation to *Born on the Fourth of July*. In his analysis of disablement and its interpretations using allegory or metaphor based on Oliver Stone's film *Born on the Fourth of July*, Allan Surtherland puts it this way: "*In Oliver Stone's Born on the Fourth of July the real subject is the failure of the American Dream, disability being simply a metaphor for that failure (albeit a metaphor that treats disability as loss). The failure to distinguish between such different approaches is one of the most frequent causes of false analysis of film by disability community*" (Surtherland 19). In this remark, Surtherland evokes the reversal of American ideology Stone's film attempts to convey through its disabled character. The embodiment of this failure depicted in a metaphorical way accounts for the subversion of US identity in Vietnam.

Judith Williamson investigates the phenomenon of disability when he makes comment on films such as *Born on the Fourth of July* and *My Left Foot* (Sheriden, 1989). For Williamson, these films are not about disability at all, but "*are actually about how awful it is for a man to be dependent, in the emotional sense as much as the physical*" (Moris 23). In this outlook, Williamson brings to light the physical and emotional scars affecting American soldiers and the situation of the disabled's dependency for life. According to him, these films use disabled characters in order to depict America's shame. They give a depiction of the wounded veteran's body who functions as a stand-in for the wounded nation. By way of illustration, we remark that *Born on the Fourth of July* draws a direct connection between America's Independence Day and the protagonist, Ron Kovic, who



was also born on the fourth of July. It chronicles the problems of demasculinization, dependency and loss to our unconscious comprehension of America's involvement in the Vietnam War.

Martin Norden suggests that there is a link between the experiences of Kovic and America. From that perspective, Norden states: "*Born on the Fourth of July* is more than a personal, coming-to-terms kind of story. The film isn't about a man in a wheelchair. [It's about] the country, what it went through, was, became. You know, an invalid... It was a crippling time for this country, and you had to get beyond this man and a chair" (Norden 302). Through this statement, Norden describes Kovic as a character who bears witness of the status of disability of veterans and the experience of a whole nation in Vietnam. The country goes through a chaotic situation since it is a crippling moment for America. The US society is a wounded nation because of its disabled soldiers.

Post-Vietnam War films such as *The Deer Hunter*, *Born on the Fourth of July* and *Coming Home* examine disablement as a method to make a broader point reliant on the fact disability is culturally synonymous with the loss and weakness. Drawing on these films dealing with the case of disabled veterans, Jenny Morris asserts: "*The makers of these films are not actually portraying the lives of disabled individuals; rather the disability is vehicle for exploring the pain of dependency and vulnerability for men. A man in a wheelchair is an easily recognizable metaphor for a lack of autonomy, because this is how the general cultural perceives disabled people*" (Morris 24). According to Morris, these representations are not based on the lived experiences of disabilities, but rather on the perceptions and beliefs of the of the civilians. These prejudices have traumatically affected disabled soldiers. One of the most important things about the representations of disability is that nothing is said about the lives of disabled people, but about the attitudes of non-disabled people towards disability. It is used as a metaphor and a code, and the non-disabled writer wishes to convey this message.

Focusing on the veterans' impotence from Vietnam experience, Susan Bordo asserts: "*rings with disgrace and humiliation ... unlike other disorders, impotence implicates the whole man, not merely the body part. He is impotent*" (Bordo 202). In this statement, Bordo points out that impotent veterans feel very humiliated because they are reduced to the level of feminine status. Impotence is one of the worst experiences they go through Vietnam. This undermines their situation within families. Their wives can no longer put up with them. For Morag, impotence is the ultimate form of defeat for men. This paralysis has physical and mental impacts and on veterans' lives.

Mason's book, *In Country*, lays foundation for the problem of castration disabled soldiers face. This is shown when Sam learns about Tom's impotence.



She perceives the situation of Tom as not being able to grow up, as it said in the book, “and boys getting mutilated. And then not being allowed to grow up” (Mason 40). Actually, the disabled character handles issues related to the crisis of masculinity. Vietnam soldiers like Emmett and Ron Kovic, who return from the battle, expect the same glorious welcome the young volunteers dream of in Mark Twain’s *The War Prayer* (1935). However, they are welcome with feeling of suspicion and rejection from the public opinion. War is described as a kind of initiation-ritual for young men to obtain masculine status. In his work, *The War Prayer*, Twain explores the ideology of masculinity and the way soldiers are welcome while returning home after the war. Twain further analyzes this phenomenon when he points out: “Then home from the war, bronzed heroes, welcomed, adored, submerged in golden seas of glory!” (Twain 680) Actually, Twain takes into account the volunteers who, in *The War Prayer*, expect to be welcome back from war as bronzed heroes and true men.

Post-Vietnam War films chronicles the fantasy of masculinity and disability, epitomizing a whole broken. In this regard, the notion of gender and specifically the feminization of the male subject are grafted on to disablement. By attempting to depict the broken state of America after the loss in Vietnam, movies such as *Coming Home* and *Born on the Fourth of July* examine the phenomenon of disability as a conduct through which the audiences can experience the broader damage done to the nation. This wounded country often alludes to feminization and weakness. Disability is validated as being correlated with fantasies of loss, emasculation and disempowerment. In relation to the wounded soldier, this connection most often plays out as a castration, with disabled characters portrayed as being both physically and sexually impotent. The binding of disability and emasculation has a profound impact on stories about disabilities. There are correlating issues of disablement with those of castration in which characters are confronted with the questions of whether they can still be men despite being disabled.

This phenomenon is also set up as a tragedy in juxtaposition to the active and physical world of masculinity the characters occupy before being injured. Ron Kovic’s physical body, in *Born on the Fourth of July* or fond memories of Luke as a football star in *Coming Home*, are set as examples to illustrate this idea. Both characters do not only lose the ability to walk, but also the ability to perform tasks that are fundamental to their self-construction. If Kovic and Luke can no longer be active, sporting men after their disability, they are forced to become something new and align their sense of self. They change fundamentally the way they act and interact with the world around them. In that sense, disability is represented as a physical wound and an attack on the fundamental identity of the subject. Before Vietnam, Ron and Luke were active and had physical





strength. But they cannot be sustained after injury. They must find a new way of being and constructing the self.

Focusing on Vietnam War films, we remark that living through a traumatic experience associated with a POW camp or being shot on a sandy beach is a life-changing event. Life cannot go on as it once does; it must change to reflect the new reality of disablement. Soldiers, who return from Vietnam without serious physical injury, may return to their family and friends. Yet, the wounded soldiers like Steve, in Michael Cimino's *The Deer Hunter*, are unable to return in the same fashion.

The notion of disability is profoundly connected with the crisis of phallic impotence, a presumptive loss of power and sexual potency, which calls into question the gender of the subject. Actually, the depictions of injury are really that of castration, in which a body that is once symbolic of strength and virility becomes weak, fragile and sexually ruined. This castration is at the core of Vietnam films. Both *Coming Home* and *Born on the Fourth of July* focus on the fantasy that becoming disabled invalidates one's prior sexual relations and reduce the potential for future romantic relationships. The fear is that hardly does the individual's identity begin to shift when they become disabled and fractured. Julia Kristeva, in her work, *Hatred and Forgiveness* (2010) emphasizes the phenomenon of disability known as a "narcissistic wound." This injury exposes the potential fragility of our social relationships as if a medical complication is enough to obfuscate our identity to those around us and destroy any connection we previously share. This wounded ego devastates Kovic's pride and self-worth. The shame or disgrace is so significant that the individual loses his own identity. As Kristeva says, the disabled veteran experiences a profound discrimination that "*cannot be shared*" (Kristeva 29) and must remain unknowable. This requisite distance impairs our social relations. Narcissistic wounds or injuries are a result of loss, or even a sense of abandonment.

By drawing on Stone's movie, Jenny Morris explores the case of disabled veterans who have problems for reuniting with people around them. He denounces strongly this discrimination dealt with in *Born on the Fourth of July*, where: "*the character played by Tom Cruise has to confront not only the appalling lack of resources to meet the needs of those who returned from the Vietnam war permanently disabled but also the fear that his physical disability will destroy his relationship with others*" (Morris 23/24). In this remark, Morris accounts for the troubles disabled soldiers contend with after fighting in Vietnam. They no longer fit in society due to their weakness, fragility and sexual ruin. They are ignored and rejected due to their physical disability.



According to Oumar Ndongo, Ron Kovic talks about his painful ordeal during a conference of Vietnam ex-servicemen when he returns from Vietnam as a wounded soldier. As Ndongo words it: *"I was very upset. I felt physically wounded. I felt my wound come back. I was shot on January 20, 1968, through the right foot and right shoulder. The bullet that hit my shoulder went through my lung and it severed my spinal cord, paralyzing me for life. It's taken me almost eighteen years to come to terms with my paralysis. I'm paralyzed from my mid-chest down. I can't feel or move anything from my chest. I never be able to walk again or to make love"* (Ndongo 269). Through this statement, Ndongo gives a depiction of Kovic's physical wound that ruins his life. For Ndongo, Kovic perceives himself as more of a dead entity than a living being. He explains his feeling of helplessness and impotence.

Ron Kovic, in his book, *Born on the Fourth of July* (1976), expresses deeply his concern about the crisis of masculinity. He brings to light his impotence when he states: *"the sexless man, the sexless man, the man with numb dick..."* (Ron Kovic 38) Kovic's wound shatters his life and makes him helpless. This loss of masculinity is closely linked to his reversal identity, which is considered as an impotent failure to fulfill his martial duties with women. Oliver Stone's *Born on the Fourth of July* bares emphasis on this impotence. This is presented in a scene where Ron Kovic is drunk and argues with his parents. When Kovic laments through tears, he claims: *"I want to be a man again. Who's going to love me, Dad?"* (Stone, 1989) In fact, Kovic highlights that there is a deep fear that the disabled subject is not capable of sustaining loving and caring relationships. So, he complains about being impotent for life. This sense of fear appears to be directly tied to the myth that the disabled do not fit outside the walls of the hospital. They can only maintain professional relationship with those who help them and their friendships tend to be other disabled individuals. This idea of isolating the disabled subject almost exclusively serves the needs of the normal public. And this protects them, particularly, against the narcissistic identity wound discussed earlier. This myth is subtly propagated by these Vietnam War films. The disabled cannot maintain relationship with the civilians. Therefore, they seem happier when they are protected from this encounter.

The real tragedy of the disability moment is not the loss of the body or destruction of its parts, but the presumption associated with death of the sexual organ. It is considered as a source of power and pleasure. *Born on the Fourth of July* represents this perception clearly when Ron is talking to his friend Tim about the violent trauma inflicted not on his body, but also on his identity. He keeps complaining about his impotent situation when he declares: *"I was paralyzed, castrated that day. Why? Cause I was so stupid. I'd have my dick and my balls now and I think- I think, Timmy, I'd give everything I believe in, everything I've*



got, all my values, just to have my body back again. Just to be whole again. But I'm not whole, I never will be and that's the way it is, isn't it?" (Stone, 1989) In this passage, Ron talks about the damage to his body instead of the injury of his spine or the paralysis of his legs. He evokes his "dick" and "balls," the most important things lost the day he is shot. Ron only loses the ability to use his penis and testicles. Here the idea of "use" is intimately bound to physical loss. Although it appears, Ron still has a physical penis and testicles, the spinal cord injury prevents erection and ejaculation. The wound renders these parts dysfunctional and lacking physical sensation. They no longer exist. Kovic breaks down in front of his parents about the trauma and loss of masculinity when he returns home from the bar drunk and angry.

In their study of physical disability in *Born on the Fourth of July*, Trevor B. McCrisken and Andrew Pepper emphasize that Ron Kovic appears smaller in the frame, as if he is being denigrated now. According to them, Kovic is "transformed not only into a paraplegic but also the antithesis of the American hero [...]" (McCrisken and Pepper 136). According to McCrisken and Pepper, disability is a serious effect of the physical violence Kovic experiences in Vietnam. War experience causes his disablement for life. This traumatic situation reverses the American cultural ideology on the basis of myth-making. His role as a western hero is subverted in Vietnam.

Ron Kovic's physical disability is so dramatic as traumatic. For this reason, he wishes to die. Kovic complains that Jesus only has to spend three days on the cross, however he suffers an entire lifetime in the wheelchair. Comparing Christ's experience on the crucifix to life in a wheelchair is revealing because the crucifix is traditionally used as both a mechanism of torture and of public shame for those who transgress Roman law. This comparison marks the wheelchair as a similar device; it also publicly exposes Ron's sins. He is considered as a transgressor, an outsider or Christ like figure. His feelings of shame are expressed moments later when Ron accuses his mother of her feeling of betrayal and shame toward him.

Films such as *Born on the Fourth of July*, *The Deer Hunter* and *Coming Home* use these moments to make broader comment on the impotence of America in the wake of the Vietnam War. Their depiction fuses these anxieties of gender, sexuality and identity to the body of the disabled veteran. It adds that disability is relied upon to express concerns about America in the aftermath of the Vietnam War. The loss of masculinity is deployed to open up the deeper emotions and experiences of puberty and investigate broken bodies and identities in flux. This state of crisis of the disabled veteran has to be restored, which gives way to the rehabilitation of his own identity.



### 3. The rehabilitation of the disabled veteran

The disabled veteran is in search of a new world in which he deserves respect, dignity, humanity, hospitality and worth. He voices out his complaints to readjust to civilian life. This transfiguration from disability to reintegration to society can be successfully achieved by redeeming and rehabilitating the broken soldier. In *Born on the Fourth of July*, Kovic's disillusionment is fueled by a sense of outrage because he believes to be duped by their country's martial culture. The movie implies that only the true boastful boys like Kovic evince a willingness to stand up and die for their country. The message Stone conveys is that America fights and loses the wrong war in the wrong place at the wrong time. The war is the product of a military culture and blind ideological faith. The US government and its citizens do everything in their power to ignore the service of Vietnam veterans. They are victimized and torn out of American culture upon their return from Vietnam. In fact, this negative perception and social attitudes impede vets from readjusting to society. Then, the aftermath of the war reverses the soldier's sense of masculinity. The disabled veteran who faces impotence seeks healing and redemption. This healing process leads to the rehabilitation of the broken soldier.

Patrick Hagopian lays foundation for the Vietnam veterans' rehabilitation. He provides deeper insights into this phenomenon when he claims: "*The image of Vietnam veterans shifted from the 'psycho' stereotype of the mid 1970's to the more complex and sympathetic portrayals of the mid-1980*" (Hagopian 230). According to Hagopian, this shift, which coincides with changes in American society, is more and more responsive to traumatized veterans. It helps vets discover a new sense of identity. Civilians sympathize more with them and praise their heroic deeds.

Ron Kovic, in his work, *Born on the Fourth of July* (1976), suggests a struggle to see a world without wars. In a certain way, he devotes his writing to denounce the insanity and madness that wars generate. His literary voice brings another sense to the vets' lives after the conflict. It is a search for hope and meaning concerning their war experience. This endeavor is a constant attempt for those who believe they are betrayed by America. From this outlook, Kovic bears witness to vets' experience. He delves into this predicament while reminding them that:

Many of us promised ourselves long ago that we would never allow what happened to us in Vietnam happen again. We had an obligation, a responsibility as citizens, as Americans, as human beings, to raise our voices in protest. We could never forget the hospitals, the intensive care cards, the wounded all around us fighting for their lives, those long and painful years after we came home, those lonely nights. There were lives to save on both sides, young men and women who would be disfigured and maimed, mothers and fathers who lose their sons and



daughters, wives and loved ones who would suffer for decades to come if we did not do everything we could to stop the forward momentum of this madness (Kovic 22).

In this passage, Kovic writes to protest and declare firmly and emphatically his objection to the war. He undertakes to assert his complete disapproval of this act of mass destruction. He voices out to feel more alive before. His writing inspires others to protest in favor of peace. Thus, Kovic's endeavor works as a weapon to fight not just against the Vietnam War itself, but also their unexpected reception on the home front. The Vietnam War literature empowers the veterans who suffer a dramatic transformation from pro-war protests to anti-war dissidents. Even though the war is still going on in their hearts and souls, vets' accounts remain as a vital component of the trajectory between Vietnam and the other wars.

When encountering an individual with a disability, people often keep themselves separate and distinct from him. This desire betrays an unconscious recognition that the other is a reflection of us. As Kristeva words it, "*this recognition could have radical implications because it provides the grounds for the idea that we are all disabled.*" (Kristeva 44) Kristeva discloses the case of the disabled person who is inevitably exposed to discrimination.

Stone's film is a portrayal of Ron Kovic's rebirth as an antiwar activist. The transformation has occurred, and the audience sees the true calling of Kovic come to fruition. The overall framework for the fight of Stone is built around a very simple and effective device. He embodies the weapon used against the US government's prolongation of the Vietnam war. For example, his own body and story are a powerful weapon meant for this objection to war. Kovic's body becomes a counter-hegemonic cultural means designed to galvanize public opinion and help turn it against the war. In the Vietnam War films, the longing for walking again is most prominently dealt with in *Born on the Fourth of July*. Though Kovic will never walk again, he insists during his time at the hospital that he will recover. He becomes obsessed with the idea of walking as it is the main objective of his existence. Ron begins to make progress toward to the process of rehabilitation. He begins to walk around on crutches with leg braces to hold him up.

Ron Kovic's uncomfortable looking is perceived as a scene of hope and triumph. He acts more proudly while he is walking. Kovic appears more natural despite the awkward gait and struggles to remain upright. The hope for recovery is short-lived for Ron because he falls while walking, and his leg becomes infected and nearly requires amputation. Walking, even if it means using crutches and braces, is presented as a preferable future to one in a





wheelchair. The wheelchair is not just seen as the last option, but it becomes the symbol of failure to get better.

The symbolic power of the wheelchair is heavily deployed in *Born on the Fourth of July*, where it stands in as a memorial for the Vietnam War. Ron Kovic uses the chair to force people to remember it as a sign of national shame. His broken body is exposed by the metal frame of his wheelchair. Actually, it is symbolic of the national disrepair post-Vietnam war. He admits this openly when he argues with his parents. While expressing his feeling of anger, Kovic claims: "I've got to live, I've got to roll around and remind them of Vietnam." (Stone, 1989) Here, the confrontation with the disabled veterans both forces the public to acknowledge the war. Kovic seizes this opportunity to call on them to reconcile their feelings of shame toward their complacency in allowing it to go on so longer. The disabled soldiers use this powerful strategy when protesting at the Republican Party's national convention. In this scene, Ron calls out: "this steel, our steel, is your Memorial Day on wheels. We are, your Yankee-Doodle Dandy come home." (Stone, 1989) The wheelchair becomes symbolic of national disillusionment, entangled with the atrocities in Vietnam and the substandard treatment of veterans when they return home. However, this story is ultimately a redemptive one and the shameful feelings toward what happens in Vietnam burns off slowly. As the movie ends, Ron takes the stage at the Democratic Convention with a voice over explaining that he feels finally like having to come home.

While this seems to be a happy ending, a promise that America has recovered from the damage done to the collective self-conscious of the nation. The emphasis is still placed here on Ron being in a wheelchair, indeed, literally, engulfed by it. The wheelchair is the final star considered as the memorial of shame and sign of weakness from which Kovic will never escape. The film offers an accurate depiction of the lived experience of the disabled character. The final scene of *Born on the Fourth of July* seems to indicate a coming to terms with disablement for Ron since it highlights the acknowledgement and acceptance of his new identity.

More importantly, Oliver Stone, in the final scene of the film, depicts Ron Kovic as a man who has successfully reconfigured his identity in relation to his previous experience. By way of illustration, we can say that when Kovic is about to speak at the Democratic National Convention in 1976, he wheels himself down the ramp and onto the convention floor. The camera flashes and the accolades transport him back in time to key moments in his life. In this scene, Kovic unveils the symbolic images of the fireworks of the old Fourth of July parade. We see a young man on the shoulders of his father again, flag in hand, kissing his sweetheart at the high school. He is able to mobilize the same



hegemonic cultural forms that are so decisive in molding his pre-war identity (patriotism, nationalism, adulation for veterans, etc) into effective weapon or tools capable of galvanizing the public against the government prolongation of the war. This leads to hundreds of anti-war activists in a massive campaign to intervene in the 1972 Republican National Convention.

In *Born on the Fourth of July*, Stone cherishes and celebrates Ron Kovic's long journey and transformation. In Kovic's words, "It's been a long way for us, the vets, and just lately, I've felt like I'm home, you know? Like maybe we're home." (Stone, 1989) In this statement, Stone evokes Kovic's memories that are revindicated and used towards the healing of an entire nation. The film shows how hard it is for American families to come to terms with the devastating effects of the Vietnam War, on their own children and communities. There is a total breakdown of the veneer of American morality. The process of rehabilitation is incarnated by Kovic's long struggle that Stone depicts in this film. The filmic representation testifies to the importance of fighting back against these same hegemonic forms and structures although dissenting perspectives often cohabit with the dominant discourses and ideologies. The latter must be actively questioned and tested in order to construct pathways for the former. That is what Ron Kovic epitomizes in this film, a gift, a lesson and a calling for future generations to heed. The rehabilitation of the disabled veteran paves a way to a new sense of identity, which helps him to reconcile with his past. The transfiguration from disability to the healing process reconstructs the image of the broken soldier. This reaffirms the cultural ideology of masculinity he embodies. The restoration of the disabled veteran on the basis of myth-making reconnects America to its religious and cultural ideologies.

## CONCLUSION

Oliver Stone's *Born on the Fourth of July* seeks to explore disability, which is a problem veterans cope with while readjusting to civilian life. This article provides foundation for the experience of a disabled veteran, Ron Kovic, who cannot reintegrate into society because of his disability and restrictions that are socially created. He faces environmental barriers and social attitudes as a part of his experience, affecting his own identity. The realm of disability, dealt with in Stone's movie, is the connection between Kovic, as a disabled veteran, and his familial, social and cultural environment. Stone evokes the experience of Kovic who bears the burden of the unvoiced sufferings of disabled veterans in Vietnam War. This film features a character who is demasculinized and dependent on his wheelchair for life. Disablement, as depicted in this film, is deployed as an allegory or metaphor as part of a broader claim about life or society.



The anxiety, the disabled veteran faces, is centered on the fear that when bodies are broken, an individual's identity is shattered as well. The person is unable to perform identity and tasks. When an identity is built around ideas of strength and physical activity, the moment of disability marks the death of this previous self and requires a new identity to be constructed around actions and behaviors. The physical disability resulting from Vietnam War has traumatically affected veterans. Vietnam War films reflect the struggle of the physically disabled to rejoin American society. In these movies, the male characters like Ron Kovic are demasculinized through the loss of physical strength and sexual power. The psychoanalytic theory deals with the impact of disability on Kovic. As he faces familial misunderstandings, social restrictions and sexual impotence, this literary criticism advocated by Kristeva is used to help contend with his readjustment problems. The use of this theory is also a way of finding a new identity through regeneration and rehabilitation. The vets' physical wounds derive from the jungle warfare and the horrific and traumatic experience of war shatters their lives. This trauma has physically and emotionally affected Vietnam War veterans. Hollywood explores contemporary issues, notably those involving disability. Stone's film uses a disabled character to convey America's shame and failure, resulting in a wounded nation. The disabled character is redeemed, regenerated and rehabilitated by restoring the crisis of the cultural ideology he contends with. This shift from disability to rehabilitation opens up to a self-made male identity within civilian life. Social protection and rehabilitative assistance are important for people with disabilities who rely on societies committed to the principles of solidarity and equality instead of leaving them to destiny of negligence and ignorance.

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