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History 91  
21 December 2013

## The Evolution of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in American Cinema and Culture

### **Abstract**

This paper traces the emergence and progression of cultural representations of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in the United States from 1976-1988, as well as their impact on the present day. Due to the ambiguities left behind by the Vietnam War, American cinema became both a coping and exploratory vehicle for the population in the years that followed. Artistic and allegorical at first, the medium quickly shifted to commercially and patriotically driven with the election of President Reagan in 1981. As a result, this history was ostensibly rewritten. However, today, society has matured to a degree where it can look back on these times and better discern where certain inaccuracies might lie.

### **Introduction**

The Vietnam War ended in 1975 with approximately thirty percent of all veterans who served coming home with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).<sup>1</sup> PTSD was not a new occurrence, however, as evidence suggests that it was present in literature as early as the eighth century BC in Homer's *Iliad*.<sup>2</sup> Despite this, it was not until 1980 that the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders officially recognized the term.<sup>3</sup> Since this time, post-traumatic stress disorder has developed an increasingly strong presence in American film,

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, National Center for PTSD (Washington DC: USA, 2007). < <http://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/ptsd.asp>>.

<sup>2</sup> Pierre Vidal-Naquet, Le monde d'Homère (France: Perrin, 2000) 19.

<sup>3</sup> David H. Marlowe, Psychological Consequences of Combat and Deployment with Special Emphasis on the Gulf War (California: Rand, 2001) 98.

television, and media at large. This paper seeks to shed light on the reasons why PTSD made such a sudden and immediate impact on American entertainment and culture, as well as how it has managed to remain influential today. To do this, the paper will be divided into three main sections: cultural representations of PTSD post-Vietnam up to the *Rambo* era<sup>4</sup>, cultural representations of PTSD during the *Rambo* era, and cultural representations of PTSD today. The first section, cultural representations of PTSD post-Vietnam up to the *Rambo* era, will analyze the artistic, ethical, and social fabrics surrounding the years 1976 to 1982 and their effects on American perceptions of, and attitudes toward, PTSD. The second section, cultural representations of PTSD during the *Rambo* era, will place a special emphasis on PTSD's growing involvement in political tactics and media presence. The third section, cultural representations of PTSD today, will illustrate the extent to which PTSD as a subject matter has grown and the new mediums it encompasses. The objective of this history is to make more transparent PTSD's emergence and continued prevalence in American cinema and culture up to the present day.

Cultural representations of PTSD in the United States in the 1970s enabled Americans, for the first time, to define the disorder. Given the pessimism of the times and hyperrealistic portrayals of PTSD on the big screen, however, 1970s films dealing with PTSD were inclined to craft the disorder so as to highlight a larger theme: the irrationality of war. Then, in the 1980s, cultural representations of PTSD rapidly transformed into a means of manipulating both contemporary politics and historical memory. The *Rambo* films of the 1980s played an instrumental role in this change, as they focused more on becoming cinematic epics where PTSD was wielded not as a disorder, but as a weapon. Through an analysis of the changing cinematic

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<sup>4</sup> The *Rambo* era: 1982-1988 (*First Blood-Rambo III*)

portrayals of PTSD, the culture, politics, and attitudes of the times will be revealed as just as unstable and noteworthy as PTSD itself. Moreover, PTSD will be proven to be a culturally defined disorder that is as much a product of popular cultural representations and depictions as it is of clinical diagnoses; hence, a history of PTSD in American cinema will uncover the tenor of the politics and culture of the United States during the eras (the 1970s and 1980s) in which it was first named and conceptualized.

Despite roughly three thousand articles on the subject of PTSD having been published in the past twenty-five years, the scholarly works devoted to PTSD as a cinematic and cultural phenomenon are sparse.<sup>5</sup> For this reason, it is imperative to analyze the historiography of PTSD in American studies and history. Nearly all of the scholarship on the history of PTSD begins with the end of the Vietnam War and America's perception of what transpired during its first wartime loss. In the immediate aftermath of the war, back home in the United States, ordinary citizens were having trouble grasping how it was that the United States could lose to such an inferior adversary, and what modern warfare must be like that soldiers were coming back utterly broken down and lost. For the first time in the twentieth century, there were no great parades. Instead, more common were protests ostensibly geared towards the chastising of these returning veterans as murderers. With nothing uplifting about this war to be told and no exact feeling of being at war that could be relayed, Hollywood set out to portray the war as less about the soldier's impact on the war (as was a habit of cinema of the past) and more about the impact of the war on the soldier. As Mark Taylor points to in his *The Vietnam War in History, Literature, and Film*, "It has become a widely held assumption that, as a postmodern war, portrayals of the war in Vietnam demand a postmodern style to be meaningful, or indeed to be meaningless in

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<sup>5</sup> Marlowe, Psychological Consequences of Combat and Deployment with Special Emphasis on the Gulf War, 103.

order to reflect the meaninglessness of the war.”<sup>6</sup> Thus, the films of this generation depicted largely internal struggles. This was relatively unheard of in previous American war-based cinema as “psychic stress still made people uncomfortable.”<sup>7</sup> Now, however, with the release of critically acclaimed films such as *The Deer Hunter* (Cimino, 1978) and *Apocalypse Now* (Coppola, 1979), audiences became intrigued by these startling depictions of men at war. Most scholarly works agree, as stated specifically by Raya Morag in *Defeated Masculinity: Post-Traumatic Cinema in the Aftermath of War*, the humiliation of man by war through captivity, fratricide, demasculinization, torture, and split identities enthralled audiences, and so Hollywood continued to pour out films bound tightly to these themes.<sup>8</sup>

Then, in 1982, with a new president in the Oval Office, a new wave of PTSD cinema emerged: the *Rambo* era. Along with the three *Rambo* installments that comprised this decade came the reimagining of history, or as famed film critics, Siskel and Ebert, referred to such movies as, “‘this time we win films’.”<sup>9</sup> As much of the scholarship suggests, films of this nature (such as Clint Eastwood’s 1982 *Firefox*, Ted Kotcheff’s 1983 *Uncommon Valour*, Joseph Zito’s 1984 *Missing in Action*, Edward D. Murphy’s 1984 *Heated Vengeance*, and Fred Olen Ray’s 1986 *Armed Response*) were much more politically motivated than their predecessors, as they associated U.S. militarism with patriotism and treated PTSD as a weapon and not a defect. Whereas in the post-Vietnam PTSD cinema leading up to this point, veterans suffering from PTSD were seen as either lone, gun wielding, psychopaths like Travis Bickle in Martin

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<sup>6</sup> Mark Taylor, *The Vietnam War in History, Literature and Film* (Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 2003) 24.

<sup>7</sup> Rebeca Maseda and Patrick L. Dulin, “From Weaklings to Wounded Warriors: The Changing Portrayal of War-related Post Traumatic Stress Disorder in American Cinema,” *49<sup>th</sup> Parallel* 30 (2012): 6.

<sup>8</sup> Raya Morag, *Defeated Masculinity: Post-traumatic Cinema in the Aftermath of War* (Bruxelles: P.I.E. Peter Lang, 2009) 167-234.

<sup>9</sup> Maseda and Dulin, “From Weaklings to Wounded Warriors” 15.

Scorsese's 1976 *Taxi Driver*, or crippled, debilitated, suicide seekers like Nikonar Chevotarevich in *The Deer Hunter*, in the *Rambo* era they were portrayed as righters of wrongs and heroes. Then, as the decade winded down and the *Rambo* phenomenon exited the filmic scene, yet another wave came in—a wave that would be the last well-documented, and largely popular, of its kind.

Critical and commercial successes such as *Born on the Fourth of July* (Oliver Stone, 1989) and *Forrest Gump* (Robert Zemeckis, 1994) began to take on the themes of survival guilt, making peace with the past, soul-searching, and social activism. Through these films, a new trend was announced—the third and final with which nearly all of the historiography on the topic agrees upon: how the soldier copes with his wartime experiences. No longer were these veterans crazed loners or quasi-super heroes, but rather simply men trying to deal with immeasurable hardship; and audiences adored this for some time. That is until this trend continued with little to no growth and then another American war broke out—a war that did not translate on the big screen as well as the earlier Vietnam films had.

This is the point where it is generally understood that the U.S. underwent a cultural burnout with films dealing with PTSD. Many scholars, such as Martin Barker, believe audiences' feelings about more recent films on PTSD went beyond simply being worn out by the genre and more towards being poisoned by it.<sup>10</sup> They believe that the fact that the Iraq War ran concurrent with the releases of these films contributed to moviegoers becoming less enthused to go see them. Moreover, many people were immediately put off by these films due to their overt political agendas. And while films dealing with PTSD during the *Rambo* era are guilty of a similar act, they made certain to be clear that they were pro-American and in support of the

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<sup>10</sup> Martin Barker, *A 'Toxic Genre' The Iraq War Films* (London: Pluto Press, 2011), 1.

troops. It is unanimously recognized, however, that the sole universally acclaimed film from this more recent era, Kathryn Bigelow's 2008 Academy Award-winning *The Hurt Locker*, managed to avoid both saturating its core with politics and portraying PTSD as a disability. Instead, it focused entirely on its protagonist's need for adrenaline and how this fixation is advantageous to him in his heroic line of work. Still, *The Hurt Locker* is an isolated example for a genre that as a whole has not fared well at the box office since the early-mid 1990s. Even so, not a single historian has yet to declare that PTSD Cinema is on its way out, either in volume or in quality.

### **Cultural representations of PTSD post-Vietnam up to the *Rambo* era**

America in the 1970s was a place of great change all around. In terms of society at large, there was an overwhelming sense of national pessimism and individual hedonism. There was an increasing distrust of politics in the aftermath of the Watergate scandal; life was of a fickle and frantic stock with disillusionment running rampant, and any sort of optimism being pierced by a nostalgic and selfish entreaty for a time of innocence gone and done away with. In the words of famed countercultural icon, Hunter S. Thompson:

It seems like a lifetime, or at least a Main Era—the kind of peak that never comes again... the middle sixties was a very special time and place to be a part of.

Maybe it meant something. Maybe not, in the long run... but no explanation, no mix of words or music or memories can touch that sense of knowing that you were there and alive in that corner of time and the world. Whatever it meant...

History is hard to know, because of all the hired bullshit, but even without being sure of “history” it seems entirely reasonable to think that every now and then the energy of a whole generation comes to a head in a long fine flash, for reasons that

nobody really understands at the time—and which never explain, in retrospect, what actually happened... There was madness in any direction, at any hour... You could strike sparks anywhere. There was a fantastic universal sense that whatever we were doing was right, that we were winning... And that, I think, was the handle—that sense of inevitable victory over the forces of Old and Evil. Not in any mean or military sense; we didn't need that. Our energy would simply prevail. There was no point in fighting—on our side or theirs. We had all the momentum; we were riding the crest of a high and beautiful wave... So now, less than five years later, you can go up on a steep hill... and with the right kind of eyes you can almost see the high-water mark—that place where the wave finally broke and rolled back.<sup>11</sup>

People had become skeptical of the motives of those that had led them to war, a war that they had lost and had yet to find any meaning in. The economy continued to suffer after the 1973-1974 stock market crash, which came to be known as the first event since the Great Depression to have a long lasting effect on the American financial system.<sup>12</sup> Inflation was widespread. Government price controls became universal as the United States implemented odd-even rationing to restrict the consumption of gas in the United States.<sup>13</sup> Then, at the close of the decade, the 1979 energy crisis ushered the U.S. into the 1980s. With Reagan's election many more changes were to occur as much of the Democratic tapestry of the Carter administration was

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<sup>11</sup> Hunter S. Thompson. "Quote by Hunter S. Thompson." Goodreads. Goodreads, Inc., 2013. Web. 17 Dec. 2013. <<http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/1074-strange-memories-on-this-nervous-night-in-las-vegas-five>>.

<sup>12</sup> Pierre Perron, "The Great Crash, the Oil Price Shock, and the Unit Root Hypothesis." Econometrica. 57.6 (1989): 1361-1401.

<sup>13</sup> Michael J. Graetz, The End of Energy: The Unmaking of America's Environment, Security, and Independence (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2011) 284.

done away with and replaced with reduced tax rates, deregulation of the economy, a reduction in government spending, and a massive military buildup to ensure victory in the event of war with the USSR, or evil empire as Reagan was keen on calling it.

I wish to contend that American PTSD cinema began with *Taxi Driver* in 1976.<sup>14</sup> This is a departure from most previous analyses on PTSD in post-Vietnam American cinema, which typically cite *The Deer Hunter* as the first of this genre. While *Taxi Driver* does not address PTSD as directly as *The Deer Hunter* nor is its intent to show how the war directly affected its protagonist, Travis Bickle, the film's effect on American PTSD culture was immense nonetheless. Around this time, given the newfound reach of television and news publications, American society was just beginning to calibrate its mind to the idea that Vietnam veterans were mentally unstable and could become unhinged at any moment. Two examples of newspaper headlines of the times were, "'Veteran Beheads Wife With Jungle Machine' and 'Ex-Marine Held in Rape Murder'."<sup>15</sup> After seeing *Taxi Driver* in theaters and witnessing a delusional, insomniac assassin who is more than just on the loose, but rather hailed as a hero by society at large, audiences got their first taste of "what it must feel like" to be a veteran. Travis is a dangerous, drug-addicted, obsessive loner who is out of touch with reality to the point where he would take a girl he likes to a pornographic theater on their first date, and then harass and stalk her after she tells him that she does not want to see him again. In sum, Travis elicits the entire spectrum of PTSD symptoms. He has difficulty falling and staying asleep, is irritable and prone to outbursts of anger, finds it difficult to concentrate, maintains an exaggerated startle response,

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<sup>14</sup> At which point cultural representations of PTSD began.

<sup>15</sup> Taylor, The Vietnam War in History, Literature and Film, 132.



remains hypervigilant at all times, has lost interest in activities and life in general, feels detached from others and emotionally numb, and senses the limitedness of his future.<sup>16</sup>

Audiences were as drawn to *Taxi Driver* because it was unlike anything they had ever seen. Not only was it one of the first post-Vietnam films, but its plot was unlike anything that had ever been told, and Travis Bickle was a character unlike any they had been shown before. Scorsese asserted his preeminence as *the* director of his time, and the film's dark and unsettling ending was as powerful as Orson Welles' *Citizen Kane* (1941) and as open to interpretation as Christopher Nolan's *Inception* (2010). And while all of this was at the forefront of each audience members' mind, the film's subtle, PTSD-driven backdrop was left to fester in their subconscious for years to come. This inability to forget what the viewer had witnessed onscreen coupled with its provocative and ambiguous message played a tremendous role in the film's critical reception.<sup>17</sup>

The next dominant film in this early PTSD genre was *The Deer Hunter*. Like *Taxi Driver*, its cultural significance would prove astounding. Unlike *Taxi Driver*, though—which lost to a much more uplifting, crowd-pleasing *Rocky* (John G. Avildsen, 1976)—this morose film would go on to win the Academy Award for Best Picture.<sup>18</sup> *The Deer Hunter* was one of the first

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<sup>16</sup> United States. American Psychiatric Association. Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 4th ed. Washington: GPO, 1994. Print.

<sup>17</sup> In terms of accolades, the film wound up being nominated for four Academy Awards, including Best Picture, won the Palme d'Or at the 1976 Cannes Film Festival, was ranked by the American Film Institute as the 52<sup>nd</sup> greatest American film in their "AFI's 100 Years...100 Movies" (10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition) list, named the 31<sup>st</sup> greatest film ever by Sight & Sound on its decadal critics' poll and 5<sup>th</sup> on its directors' poll, and was selected to be preserved in the National Film Registry in 1994, as it was considered "culturally, historically or aesthetically" significant by the United States National Film Registry by the Library of Congress.

<sup>18</sup> Other accolades included being listed as the 53<sup>rd</sup> Greatest Movie of All Time on the 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition of the "AFRI's 100 years...100 Movies" list (one spot behind *Taxi Driver*) and being selected for preservation in the US National Registry by the Library of Congress.

Hollywood films to tackle American involvement in Vietnam and the first to directly approach the topic of post-traumatic stress disorder. That is to say, unlike any film before it, it presented PTSD (even if PTSD had yet to be entered in the medical vernacular at the time) as a central fixture in its plot. It was also the first film of its genre to utilize flashbacks in order to “cut scenes of warfare into civilian episodes in a dramatic and abrupt manner.”<sup>19</sup> This idea of veterans being able to slip out of reality and back into the war would be one of the most common tropes of PTSD films, even to the present day, and has formed a great part of Americans’ cultural misunderstandings of what PTSD actually is. Undeniably, the film’s use of flashbacks as a cinematic effect were a visceral means to a poignant end—one immersed in feelings of helplessness and disassociation, which many veterans who are suffering from the disorder could relate to. As a cultural phenomenon, these flashbacks contained an equally provocative meaning: the “Me” Generation losing faith in itself and being forced to retrace its steps to see where it all went bad. Once the fight for the Cold War had become dishonored in the wake of political scandal and a reawakening and reevaluation of social ideals had taken place during the counterculture’s rise and expansion, Americans far and wide were now asking themselves, “Are we truly the greatest nation in the world, or is that just another myth?” To search for the answer to this question, they began to rewind and internalize what had taken place; no longer would they simply submit to national hedonism masked by patriotism or remain willfully ignorant of atrocities now deemed bygone.

Other common elements in American PTSD cinema first evoked in *The Deer Hunter* include: a loss of innocence, captivity, fratricide, demasculinization, tortured body, ahistoricity, and split identity. Moreover, *The Deer Hunter* illustrates three different kinds of men afflicted

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<sup>19</sup> Edgar Jones, et al., “Flashbacks and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder: The Genesis of a 20<sup>th</sup>-Century Diagnosis,” The British Journal of Psychiatry 182 (2003): 158-163.

with PTSD: one being a demasculinized, disillusioned man, Mike, another being a physically disabled, handicapped man, Steven, and the third being an inconsolable, near vegetative man, Nick, who will not allow himself to go home and who subjects himself to suicidal actions day in and day out. The fact that the film builds multiple scenarios in which soldiers deal with PTSD is culturally significant in both how its makers were trying to convey this range of affliction, as well as how greatly it was overlooked by audiences. For example, when the majority of people recall the film, Nick is at the forefront of their minds, while Mike and Steven are hardly even in the running. This is important to note, because in the eighties this emphasis on the extreme proved exceedingly vital to American PTSD Cinema.

The final facet of this film I would like to point to is its ending. After three lengthy acts, *The Deer Hunter* concludes with a short epilogue. In it, the hometown group gets together after Nick's funeral and begins to sing "God Bless America" before the credits roll. This was supposed to add a sliver of optimism to an otherwise bleak portrayal of men whose lives were utterly ruined by the war. Its intent was to instill in the audience some sense of knowing that the soldiers' efforts were not meaningless, and that there is still hope. As well, it was meant to provide a sort of qualification for American involvement in Vietnam; while the war was an utter disaster in terms of the price American soldiers and legitimacy, it provided the country with insight as to how strong its convictions and resolve really are.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> It would make for interesting research on a similar topic, if one were to compare the endings of *The Deer Hunter* and *Full Metal Jacket* (Stanley Kubrick, 1987). In the final scene of the Vietnam-based picture, *Full Metal Jacket*, a group of Marines—having just killed a teenage female sniper—marches back to their camp singing the Mickey Mouse March, a song they had been taught during their basic training.

The final 1970s film that established the PTSD genre was *Apocalypse Now*, another award-winning film.<sup>21</sup> This film, like *The Deer Hunter*, explored multiple forms of PTSD. Captain Willard—the film’s protagonist—exhibits symptoms such as alcoholism, self-destruction, disillusionment, and hyperarousal, while Colonel Kurtz—the film’s antagonist—is portrayed as deranged, volatile, and has lost interest in life in general. Like *Taxi Driver*, this film does not intentionally direct its primary emphasis toward PTSD. Rather, it is set on portraying the hell that is war and how all that are a part of it will somehow be destroyed by it. However, the fact that its two main, somewhat polarized, characters both suffer severely from PTSD-like symptoms increases the role of the disorder in the viewer’s assessment of the film as a whole far more than if the viewer were to assess *Taxi Driver*.

Furthermore, unlike the other films mentioned so far, *Apocalypse Now* was the first post-Vietnam PTSD film to portray the afflicted solely as warriors. Captain Willard represents the order-obliging soldier who will regret his decision to blindly follow instructions until the day he dies, because he knows he is entirely responsible for the deaths of all those that were under his command. Colonel Kurtz represents the soldier who could not take it anymore and snapped, lost his foothold on reality, and refused to return to the life he led before—opting for death instead. And while these depictions offered audiences a great opportunity to probe the meanings surrounding them, newer, more action-packed Hollywood films would soon displace this mainstream and underground alike yearning for the truth—no matter how grim it might be; for as the seventies gave way to the eighties, a new president, new values, and a new depiction of the Vietnam War and the soldiers who fought in it would be ushered in as well.

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<sup>21</sup> Some of its accolades include a nomination for Best Picture at the 1979 Academy Awards, selection for preservation by the National Film Registry, and a ranking of #14 in the Sight and Sound Greatest Films poll.

### **Cultural representations of PTSD during the *Rambo* era**

The zeitgeist of the 1980s was meant to be one of acceleration to previous excellence. At the forefront of this was President Reagan, whom historian Gary Wills referred to as “the great American synecdoche,” or the embodiment of postwar America.<sup>22</sup> A man who lived in a nostalgic way—like a character from a film he might have acted in during the golden age of Hollywood—Reagan desperately sought a history that was uncomplicated by the history that the 1970s had complicated. Instead of looking inward, he ushered the U.S. to look outward to new horizons and possibilities. According to his principles, the cure for pessimism was patriotism, and the cure to mourning was going out and doing—reclaiming what was once and would soon again belong to the United States. With the subsequent collapse of the USSR, the U.S. economy in upswing, and “the greatest country in the world” once again situated as the world’s undisputed hegemon, Reagan’s promise of historical reversion would almost seem prophetic at surface level; and along with this renewed faith in American government coincided the rebirth of a national reverence for those who had fought and sacrificed so much for their country.

However, the 1980s were not only a time of Reaganomics and return to glory. Corruption on Wall Street, economic cycles of speculative boom and bust, widespread cultural wars, and the HIV/AIDS pandemic also steered the decade. As Graham Thompson writes in *American Culture in the 1980s*, “One of the problems with defining the 1980s as Reagan’s America is that it projects a sense of unity that does not stand up to analysis.”<sup>23</sup> Many felt that the decade was one of intolerance of dissension, or even tyranny of the majority. For the most

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<sup>22</sup> Graham Thompson, *American Culture in the 1980s*. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2007) 3.

<sup>23</sup> Thompson, *American Culture in the 1980s*, 30.

part, issues involving gay rights, abortion, education and the arts had been swept under the rug in an attempt to avoid confronting the ethical questions of the minority culture in the national spotlight.<sup>24</sup> As such, the zeitgeist of the 1980s might more accurately be conveyed as a polarization of American values and ideals as the country itself pursued preeminence by any means necessary.

In 1982, the first of three installments in the 1980s (and four total) of the *Rambo* franchise came into being. With less than half the budget of *Apocalypse Now*, it grossed roughly five-thirds the amount *Taxi Driver* and *The Deer Hunter* had at the box-office combined. Its 1985 sequel made over twice that. So, while these earlier films of the 1970s were critical and award-winning successes, they never reached the level of box-office blockbuster status as the *Rambo* films did. And while these films are more often than not equated with 1980s action movie blockbusters such as *The Terminator* (James Cameron, 1984) and *Predator* (McTiernan, 1987), they were also an integral part of the reconfiguration of American PTSD cinema cinematically, politically, and culturally.

In terms of their deviation from 1970s American PTSD cinema, films of the *Rambo* bloodline focused less on the soldier's internal war and more on how he could positively affect an ever belligerent world with his wartime experiences. Moreover, they also broached the themes of historical memory and nostalgia for a more simplified age—one where good was always positively good and evil was always demonstratively evil, or as film critic Vincent Canby called it, "pure 30's make-believe."<sup>25</sup> Feeding off of the realization that the American public—having been bogged down with the harsh realities of the Vietnam War since the 1960s—was

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<sup>24</sup> Thompson, *American Culture in the 1980s*, 31.

<sup>25</sup> Vincent Canby, "Pure 30's Make-Believe." [NYtimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com). The New York Times, 22 Nov. 1976. Web. 10 Dec. 2013.  
<<http://www.nytimes.com/packages/html/movies/bestpictures/rocky-re.html>>.

seeking a resolution to overcome the angst of the war, the producers of the *Rambo* films adopted the mentality of: because “objective truth is not attainable,” it is best to go with the *one* that will sell.<sup>26</sup> And while these movies still dealt with tried and true facets of PTSD cinema such as captivity, tortured body, and split identity, they did so in a far more reassuring, heroic light.

In the film’s first installment, *First Blood* (Ted Kotcheff, 1982), instead of the afflicted being assigned a relatively horrid lot for the rest of his life, its protagonist, John Rambo, would go on to use his skills and PTSD symptoms “to fight police brutality, prejudice against veterans and an overall inept bureaucracy, all the while bringing honour to his fellow Vietnam veterans.”<sup>27</sup> The film begins with the former elite United States Army Special Forces member returning home as the sole survivor of his unit. While walking through town, he is spotted and promptly escorted out by a loud and obnoxious sheriff. When Rambo returns a short while later, he is arrested and subsequently harassed by the head deputy. When the harassment escalates to the deputy and two other officers attempting to dry-shave him with a straight razor, this triggers a flashback of Rambo being tortured in a North Vietnamese POW Camp, causing him to lose all previously demonstrated restraint and control. Fighting his way out of the room, he escapes into the wilderness—a terrain he is all too familiar with due to his training and experiences at war—where he is pursued by the sheriff and all his troops. After being shot at without warning, Rambo indirectly causes the shooter to fall to his death. Unable to persuade the sheriff that his deputy’s death was an accident, Rambo escapes further into the wilderness where he is pursued at all costs. From this point until its conclusion, the film features little else besides Rambo exhibiting his extreme adroitness as a military weapon and the sheriff acting obstinately, irrationally, and with unbridled prejudice. As its conclusion is reached, Rambo is cornered but

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<sup>26</sup> Taylor, *The Vietnam War in History, Literature and Film*, 29.

<sup>27</sup> Maseda and Dulin, “From Weaklings to Wounded Warriors” 16.

will not surrender. When Colonel Trautman, the man who trained Rambo, attempts to reason with him and convince him that it is over, Rambo lashes out, “*NOTHING IS OVER!!! ... You just don't turn it off... It wasn't my war... you asked me, I didn't ask you!!! ... and I did what I had to do to win, but somebody wouldn't let us win! Then I come back to the world, and see all those maggots at the airport... spittin', callin' me baby-killer and all kinds of vile crap! Who are they to protest me? I've been there!*” before finally relenting and, through sobs, tries to explain the horrors he witnessed in Vietnam.<sup>28</sup> After turning himself in and subsequently being arrested, the credits roll as John Rambo walks out of the police station looking tired and beaten but not broken as Colonel Trautman flanks his side with his head held high.

With this, audiences and American culture at large came to view the Vietnam War and the veterans who fought in it under an entirely different, more expansive scope. For the first time, the war was depicted as something that could have and should have been won if it were not for the liberal left—if it had not impeded the United States’ military and its noble cause, headed by its noblest and bravest of troops. At the same time, American society was urged to peer within itself and at its treatment of Vietnam veterans up to this point. They were forced to come to terms with how *they* were responsible for inducing these feelings of distrust and hostility among the men who had fought so valiantly to protect their livelihood. As Harvey Greenberg cites in his *Screen Memories: Hollywood Cinema on the Psychoanalytic Couch*, “America created Rambo out of youth’s idealism, then abandoned him. His last shred of identity derives from the craft and fellowship of a war no one wants to remember.”<sup>29</sup> With this portrayal, the attitudes of the returning soldiers were put into perspective for all of America to see.

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<sup>28</sup> Harvey R. Greenberg, Screen Memories: Hollywood Cinema on the Psychoanalytic Couch (New York: Columbia UP, 1993) 104.

<sup>29</sup> Greenberg, Screen Memories: Hollywood Cinema on the Psychoanalytic Couch, 104.



Now, people had the opportunity to view not PTSD as the disease, but rather society's judgment of those affected by it. Even so, and akin to the temperament of Reagan's presidency as a whole, this ultimate good that the film managed to do was attained through relatively extreme means. For example, while it was helpful that the American public was at last presented with a depiction of PTSD as something that was not completely debilitating or entirely the fault of the soldier, the idea that it was just as guilty as the Viet Cong in triggering the disorder was as preposterous as defining the struggle between the U.S. and the USSR as an "age old struggle between good and evil."<sup>30</sup> Nevertheless, and again very much like Reagan's presidency as a whole, the message was clear and heard all around. As such, through its boldly improbable plot line, *First Blood* was more successful than any prior film of the PTSD genre in both stimulating reflection among audiences and deeply engaging them in a purely visceral, thrill-seeking manner.

In 1985, its sequel, *Rambo: First Blood Part II* (George P. Cosmatos), premiered with a different plotline but near identical themes. In this film, John Rambo is working in a labor camp prison after the events of the first film when Colonel Trautman visits him and offers him a chance to be released and given full clemency. Their deal is that Rambo must go back to North Vietnam and search for POWs for this to happen. While meeting with the unbearably bureaucratic Marshal Murdock, Rambo is told that he is only to photograph the POWs and not to rescue them so that the public's demand for knowledge of them can be quelled. After this exposition, like its predecessor, *Rambo: First Blood Part II* greatly abandons its post as a social commentary in favor of high-powered action sequences and unadulterated machismo. Stranded

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<sup>30</sup> G. Thomas Goodnight, "Ronald Reagan's Re-formulation of the Rhetoric of War: Analysis of the "Zero Option," "Evil Empire," and "Star Wars" Addresses." Quarterly Journal of Speech 72.4 (1986): 390. Web. 14 Dec. 2013.  
<<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00335638609383784> >.

and left only with his knives and bow and arrows, Rambo somehow manages to save the POWs; however, when he calls for extraction Murdock is afraid of the backlash that will follow with their arrival, and calls for the rescue helicopter to turn around. Rambo and the POWs are quickly recaptured and he is subsequently tortured by a Soviet officer until his love interest, Co Bao, helps him escape, only to be killed immediately afterwards. With Co Bao's death, Rambo explodes into a rage and manages to kill all enemies in his midst. He then proceeds to bury her before taking out the rest of the Vietnamese-Soviet army and rescuing all the POWs. In its resolution, like its predecessor, the film returns to the themes of injustice and mistreatment that were greatly present near the beginning. Rambo threatens Murdock with his knife and demands that he find and bring home all remaining U.S. POWs in Vietnam, at which point Trautman reappears. After urging him not to hate "our country" to which Rambo replies, "Hate? I'd die for it," he inquires, "Then what is it you want?" What follows next is essentially the political message of the film in its entirety: "I want, what they want, and every other guy who came over here and spilled his guts and gave everything he had, wants! For our country to love us as much as we love it!"<sup>31</sup> With this, Rambo walks off into the distance leaving his future to be decided.

Perhaps because the film was so much like its predecessor, or possibly because it was so much better known, *Rambo: First Blood Part II* injected itself into the lifeblood of society instantaneously. Spotting an opportunity to advance his own militaristic agenda, President Ronald Reagan cashed in on the fervor surrounding this reimagining of history at a Washington press conference in 1983 when he half-joked, "After seeing *Rambo* last night, I know what to do

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<sup>31</sup> "Rambo: First Blood Part II (1985) - Quotes." [IMDb.com](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0089880/quotes). IMDb, 1990. Web. 20 Dec. 2013. <<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0089880/quotes>>.

the next time this happens.”<sup>32</sup> This would not be the last time that President Reagan used the power of the media for his own intensive purposes in the 1980s. During his re-election campaign in 1984, after having been rebuffed by Bruce Springsteen—who at the time had the number one selling album in the United States and a record-tying seven Top 10 singles—Reagan went ahead anyway and used sound bites from his hit single, “Born in the U.S.A.,” remarking at a campaign stop in Springsteen’s home state of New Jersey, “America's future rests in a thousand dreams inside your hearts; it rests in the message of hope in songs so many young Americans admire: New Jersey's own Bruce Springsteen. And helping you make those dreams come true is what this job of mine is all about.”<sup>33</sup>

In these instances, by only unveiling the part of the picture he wanted people to see, Reagan was doing to Springsteen’s song what *Rambo* had done to PTSD. He was manipulating it to fit his agenda—making it a nationalistic anthem, something that when looked at more closely is really nothing of the kind. Just as the *Rambo* films were at a deeper level about one war hero’s struggle with the social injustices he faced once home, “Born in the U.S.A.” was really about “a working-class man” {in the midst of a} “spiritual crisis, in which man is left lost... It’s like he has nothing left to tie him into society anymore. He’s isolated from the government. Isolated from his family... to the point where nothing makes sense.”<sup>34</sup> Still, one would never know this judging by the snippets of the chorus Reagan used at various press stops along his path to re-election, just as one would not know the true nature of the *Rambo* films if

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<sup>32</sup> "25 Classic Quotes on Western Hegemony." [Sunnahonline.com](http://sunnahonline.com). N.p., n.d. Web. 01 Dec. 2013. <<http://sunnahonline.com/ilm/contemporary/0013.htm>>.

<sup>33</sup> Craig Hansen Werner, *A Change Is Gonna Come: Music, Race & the Soul of America* (New York: Plume, 1998) 246.

<sup>34</sup> Jefferson Cowie and Lauren Boehm, "Dead Man's Town: ‘Born in the U.S.A.,’ Social History, and Working-Class Identity." *American Quarterly* 58.2 (2006): 353-378. Web. 1 Dec. 2013. <[http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/american\\_quarterly/v058/58.2cowie.html](http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/american_quarterly/v058/58.2cowie.html)>.

one were to fixate only on the action sequences that made up roughly three-quarters of the first two of its kind. When Bruce Springsteen explained his understanding of this national phenomenon of forget-and-be-proud, he reasoned that it had come to preeminence because, "... what's happening now is people want to forget. There was Vietnam, there was Watergate, there was Iran—we were beaten, we were hustled, and then we were humiliated. And I think people got a need to feel good about the country they live in. But what's happening, I think, is that that need, which is a good thing, is gettin' manipulated and exploited."<sup>35</sup> Four years later, this need—while not totally disavowed—was running out of steam.

And so, with Reagan on his way out of office, the third and final installment of the *Rambo* era came to be, *Rambo III* (Peter MacDonald, 1988). The least commercially successful of the *Rambo* era, it was also the first to be directed by someone who had yet to direct a feature. Partly due to a cultural burnout in regards to militarization but more so simply because people had grown accustomed to the formula and strings behind its machination, the film did not fair well among critics or really anyone outside of the target young male audience. In fact, it currently holds the lowest IMDb score of all the *Rambo* installments (5.4/10<sup>36</sup>), has a mere 36% approval rating on Rotten Tomatoes<sup>37</sup> (compared to *First Blood*'s 87%<sup>38</sup>), and was even

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<sup>35</sup> Dave Marsh, *Bruce Springsteen: Two Hearts, the Story* (New York: Routledge, 2003). 504.

<sup>36</sup> "Rambo III." *IMDb.com*. IMDb, 1990. Web. 12 Dec. 2013. <<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0095956/>>.

<sup>37</sup> "Rambo III (1988)." *RottenTomatoes.com*. Flixter, 1998. Web. 12 Dec. 2013. <[http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/rambo\\_iii/](http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/rambo_iii/)>.

<sup>38</sup> "First Blood (Rambo: First Blood) (1982)" *RottenTomatoes.com*. Flixter, 1998. Web. 12 Dec. 2013. <[http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/rambo\\_iii/](http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/rambo_iii/)>.

nominated for five Razzie Awards with Sylvester Stallone taking home the award for worst actor of 1988 (his fourth in this category, one of the others being for *First Blood: Part II*).<sup>39</sup>

Given that the film is no longer about the Vietnam War and no longer truly addresses PTSD as a culturally derived affliction, its plot can best be summed up as: a superhero-like John Rambo reluctantly accepts a mission to free American POWs after being told by U.S. officials that if he is captured or killed the government will deny that it ever sanctioned the mission. Once there, he manages to save all the POWs, kill the Soviet villains, and barely make it out alive.

More so than the two films before it, *Rambo III* employs the theme of escapism with John Rambo having retreated into the jungle at its beginning.<sup>40</sup> Somewhat less than *First Blood* and *First Blood: Part II*, the film does not make it one of its core objectives to paint American liberalism and hypocrisy as an equally responsible enemy to America. Whereas in the first two films, the American public and government are made out to be active perpetrators of injustice, *Rambo III* portrays the U.S. government as keener on turning a blind eye and avoiding public outcry than actually doing any good. Like the others, it calls on much of its age's cultural representations of PTSD via John Rambo's superior strength, tolerance of pain, hypervigilance, isolationist tendencies, and overall portrayal as the quintessential tragic warrior. Essentially, it presents PTSD as a weapon that when put to use can do immeasurable good. What is also noteworthy is how the day-to-day struggles of living with PTSD are now omitted, or rather insinuated, and in its stead reigns the rare but always ready if need be ability to revert back to a wartime mentality and harness a vicious killer instinct.

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<sup>39</sup> "Sylvester Stallone Awards." [IMDb.com](http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0000230/awards). IMDb, 1990. Web. 12 Dec. 2013. <<http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0000230/awards>>.

<sup>40</sup> This theme continues into the fourth and final installment of the *Rambo* franchise, *Rambo* (Sylvester Stallone, 2008).

Since this time, relatively few films dealing with PTSD have been met with the critical acclaim of the artistic films of the 1970s or had the cultural impact of the blockbuster *Rambo* films of the 1980s, with the sole exception being 2008's *The Hurt Locker*.<sup>41</sup> And while there are numerous opinions on why this is so (e.g. cultural burnout with the genre in general, poor production quality behind these films being made, the adverse effect of movies being made about ongoing wars, etc.), at this point in time they are mostly speculative. Regardless, they are the topic of another study, as this paper is geared toward analyzing the relationship between the PTSD culture surrounding the Vietnam War and American society at large. Interestingly, however, while depictions of PTSD have not proven effective at the box-office in more recent times, they have found other ways of meaningfully injecting themselves into the culture.

### **Cultural representations of PTSD today**

While the 1970s exhibited a PTSD culture in film through the disillusionment and pure terror featured in classics such as *The Deer Hunter* and *Apocalypse Now*, and the 1980s illustrated their relationship with PTSD culture through a reinvention of the past and call for masculine pride in blockbusters such as *First Blood* and *First Blood: Part II*, as the latter period was ushered out so was much of the emotion attached to the culture of these eras. And although the PTSD culture still prevailed both commercially and critically until the mid-1990s, the films of this new era began to turn away from condemnations of war and its critics. Now, they began to focus on social issues and the idea of where the soldier goes after the war is in his past.

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<sup>41</sup> *The Hurt Locker* was nominated for nine Oscars and won six, including Best Picture, at the 2010 Academy Awards, and earned over triple its budget at the box office.

Once this honeymoon period (1989-1994<sup>42</sup>) was over, however, the American public's desire to voluntarily watch representations of PTSD onscreen hit an all-time low that I contend is still ongoing in terms of audience and critical interest. None of these films have even come close to reaching blockbuster status, and with the exception of *The Hurt Locker*, none of them have stood out critically either. Even so, films that embrace the topic of PTSD are still emerging from filmmakers' imaginations.

One of the main reasons for this, I believe, is because PTSD has become such an integral part of our everyday culture since the September 11 attacks. Today, it is estimated that 7-8% of the U.S. population will have PTSD at some point in their lives, approximately 5.2 million adults have PTSD during a given year, and 11-20% of veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, as many as 10% of Gulf War veterans, and 30% of Vietnam veterans are currently suffering from the disorder.<sup>43</sup> As well, twenty-two veterans commit suicide each day on average, with the overwhelming majority of them being over the age of fifty; and because the death toll rates in military interventions have substantially decreased since the Vietnam War, the percentage of troops that live through their service is much higher.<sup>44</sup> With this, we are now witnessing firsthand the simultaneous progression of aging veterans suffering from the disorder as well as the young men and women who are returning from Iraq and Afghanistan and being diagnosed with PTSD. This, coupled with the recently increased call for mental health reform, has turned PTSD into a national issue.

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<sup>42</sup> From Oliver Stone's *Born on the Fourth of July* through Robert Zemeckis' *Forrest Gump*.

<sup>43</sup> "PTSD: National Center for PTSD." [Ptds.va.gov](http://www.ptsd.va.gov). U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 31 Oct. 2013. Web. 01 Dec. 2013. <<http://www.ptsd.va.gov/public/pages/how-common-is-ptsd.asp>>.

<sup>44</sup> Kevin Freking, "Veteran Suicide Rate At 22 Each Day, Department Of Veterans Affairs Report Finds." *The Huffington Post*, 01 Feb. 2013. Web. 04 Dec. 2013. <[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/02/01/veteran-suicide-rate\\_n\\_2599019.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/02/01/veteran-suicide-rate_n_2599019.html)>.

The other reason I believe PTSD is still playing a large role in Hollywood films today is because kindred mediums have found great success working with it as a subject matter, and many filmmakers still believe this means that there is hope for PTSD on the big screen. The mediums I am referring to are premium and regular cable television, and include a range of genres. In terms of hit shows that have addressed the topic of PTSD in one or more episodes but have not focused on it for an extended period of time, there is: *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia* (FX, 2005), *Modern Family* (ABC, 2009), *Saturday Night Live* (NBC, 1975), and *The Simpsons* (Fox, 1989)—all of which are comedies. In terms of hit shows that have paid especial emphasis on the topic, there is: *Boardwalk Empire* (HBO, 2010), *Rescue Me* (FX, 2004), *Breaking Bad* (AMC, 2008), *Band of Brothers* (HBO, 2001), *The Pacific* (HBO, 2010), *Ray Donovan* (Showtime, 2013), and *Homeland* (Showtime, 2011)—all of which are dramas. This paper will focus solely on the comedic series in this spectrum, as they are more relevant to its particular topic of study. As such, I will now discuss each of these show's representation of PTSD and their relationship with our present day culture.

*It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia* has been making waves in the TV world ever since it debuted in 2005. It broaches controversial subject matter in the most irreverent ways imaginable in nearly all its episodes, and in two of its episodes—the season two premiere, “Charlie Gets Crippled”, and episode four of its ninth and most recent season, “Mac and Dennis Buy a Timeshare”—the show incorporates PTSD into its storyline. For purposes of brevity, I am going to solely focus my attention on the former of these episodes.

In “Charlie Gets Crippled”, Charlie—one of the show's five main characters—is bound to a wheelchair after being run over by a car. He then proceeds to milk his affliction by dressing up as a Vietnam veteran and playing on people's sympathies—strictly speaking, the strippers at a



club he goes to. After one of the strippers comes up to him and asks, “Look at you sweetie. What happened?” Charlie ostensibly snaps and yells in a war-torn voice, “Viet-goddamn-nam, that’s what happened! Go get me a beer, bitch!”<sup>45</sup> This incident highlights three things. Firstly, it sarcastically draws on the assumption that an unenlightened individual like Charlie would actually believe that is what most Vietnam veterans are like: crazed and abusive. Secondly, it shows how just because PTSD is a serious issue, it does not mean it cannot be the subject of humor. Lastly, it satirizes the oversaturation of images of suffering veterans from the Vietnam War in the media today and in recent past. Thus, this scene—while mildly insensitive and crass—brings levity to something that would otherwise be left alone as a dark thought in the back of most PTSD-aware Americans’ minds.

In the opening montage of the season five premiere of the Emmy award-winning sitcom, *Modern Family*, Claire Dunphy—one of the show’s leads—is walking through an exaggerated scene in her home where smoke (from the kitchen) and the sound of gunshots (from the television) fill the air. As she slowly makes her way through with an impeccable two-thousand-yard stare drawn to her face, a voiceover of her plays. “Soldiers talk about that moment when they shut off, when the war finally wins. For me, that moment is four days into summer vacation.”<sup>46</sup> A close-knit parody of the opening scene of Captain Willard’s voiceover in *Apocalypse Now*, this scene demonstrates how without purposely sounding offensive like Charlie in *It’s Always Sunny in Philadelphia*, a show can still make a comedic connection with a sensitive topic like PTSD. Furthermore, just as in *It’s Always Sunny in Philadelphia*, its humor

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<sup>45</sup> “Charlie Gets Crippled.” *It’s Always Sunny in Philadelphia*. FX. 29 June 2006. Television.

<sup>46</sup> “Suddenly, Last Summer.” *Modern Family*. ABC. KABC-TV, Los Angeles. 25 September 2013. Television.

rests equally in the awareness it exhibits by acknowledging the ubiquity of cultural images such as these in contemporary American society.

A somewhat less sympathetic example of humor being brought forth about PTSD was exhibited in a 2012 *Saturday Night Live* sketch about puppeteering, in which comedian Bill Hader played a veteran who fought in Operation Urgent Fury in Grenada. Purposely over-the-top and unsettling, the puppeteer—whose puppet is a replica of himself—conveys the horrors he witnessed while in Grenada repeatedly. Through exhibiting virtually every diagnosable symptom of PTSD, the sketch yields a reflexive portrayal of the caricature most uninformed Americans would think of when they try and picture a veteran living with PTSD.

A similar caricature exists in the Principal Seymour Skinner character on *The Simpsons*. Principal Skinner, who occasionally lapses into laughably nightmarish flashbacks of his time spent in Vietnam, was a Green Beret in the United States Army. For three to four days of the eighteen months he spent as a POW of the Viet Cong, he was trapped in a swimming pool full of earthworms. Aside from being a strict disciplinarian from his days in the army, Skinner is also extremely bitter about the treatment he and his fellow Vietnam veterans receives once back in the States. A clear-cut parody of John Rambo, Skinner's character can best be described as a comedic rehashing of novelist, Hari Kunzru's, belief that, "The true voice... is revealed to be that of American moralist... one who often makes himself ugly to expose the ugliness he sees around him."<sup>47</sup> Through Principal Skinner, the creators of *The Simpsons* are seeking to expose the absurdity of taking a character such as John Rambo as an accurate representation of what the average Vietnam veteran is like.

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<sup>47</sup> Hari Kunzru, "The First Person, Steroid-Enhanced." *London Review of Books*. 20.20 (1998): 33-34. Web. 01 Dec. 2013. <<http://www.lrb.co.uk/v20/n20/hari-kunzru/the-first-person-steroid-enhanced>>.

On this issue of mock representations of PTSD, Marine Corps veteran, Daniel Egbert, relayed, “I don’t mind if shows poke fun at PTSD, because it’s not just me or my fellow veterans that it’s poking fun at. I feel like people that can pick out the true problems of PTSD and exploit it for humor get it better than the *Hurt Locker* writers. Maybe they don’t understand it better, but they definitely deliver it in a way that resonates with veterans better. We laugh at it, enjoy it, share it, rather than the *Hurt Locker* or *Stop Loss* where it just pissed us off.”<sup>48</sup> Mr. Egbert highlights some very critical points here. First and foremost, he sees these scenes and characters not as attacks or judgments on veterans suffering from PTSD, but rather as humorous ways for people who do not have PTSD to relate. He recognizes that these shows are parodying the cultural representations of PTSD since *Taxi Driver* and not the actual cases or experiences of PTSD. Furthermore, they do not simply make him accept them as nonissues. Instead, he and his fellow veterans derive a sense of joy from seeing how people both view PTSD as well as how they view the people who believe they understand what PTSD is without having suffered from it. Lastly, because of this inundation of PTSD in film, television, on the Internet, and in the tabloids, he believes that its representations work best now as parody, not serious social drama. Nevertheless, their impact is just as significant as that of the films of the 1970s and 1980s.

From these shows we can pinpoint fairly accurately how America’s cultural representations of PTSD and relationship with it have matured since the thirteen years following the Vietnam War. They indicate that society has made great strides in terms of not only being able to deal with the idea of PTSD—as was the first necessary step for PTSD cinema’s birth post-Vietnam—but also in being able to find a grounds to relate with those suffering from it. By making light not of the disorder but of the universal perception of what it actually is, the culture

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<sup>48</sup> Daniel Egbert. Personal interview. 2 Nov. 2013.

affords itself the opportunities to both redress past prejudices as well as produce a starting point that allows for the opening up of a larger conversation: if *that* is not an accurate depiction of PTSD, then what is? And although there is no definitive answer to this statement, that is precisely the reason why this conversation needs to be had.

What these comedies also allow is for society to view other representations of PTSD with a keener, more discerning eye. With them, it can make more informed decisions of how to regard today's movie and television representations of PTSD whether it be William James<sup>49</sup> in *The Hurt Locker* or Jimmy Darmody<sup>50</sup> in *Boardwalk Empire*. Simply judging from this matchup alone, it can be said with a fair degree of certainty that America's perception of PTSD has both changed—which is noteworthy but not commendable in and of itself, as the shift from 1970s PTSD cinema to the 1980s illustrates—but more importantly been broadened; because while the cultural representations of PTSD in the 1970s and 1980s were expansive, they were also constricted by their desire to show too much in too little time.

Whereas the entire spectrum of PTSD symptoms is seemingly enumerated in the first three films discussed in this paper—from Travis Bickle's psychosis to Mike Vronsky's anxiety to Colonel Kurtz's delusions (each of which adheres more closely to providing an allegory of war than to depicting an accurate representation of a veteran with PTSD)—today's representations are more varied as well as relatively objective in their depth of analysis. Over the last decade, we have been able to peer into the minds of multiple people with PTSD and see how they can be self-destructive<sup>51</sup>, emotionally unstable<sup>52</sup>, conflicted<sup>53</sup>, apprehensive<sup>54</sup>,

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<sup>49</sup> The film's protagonist.

<sup>50</sup> Jimmy Darmody was a central character in the 1920s-based drama. Some of the PTSD symptoms he exhibited were: depressive and dissociative tendencies, survivor guilt, and a sense of a limited future.

<sup>51</sup> E.g. Tommy Gavin (main character) in *Rescue Me*.

alcoholic<sup>55</sup>, or lifted from their depression<sup>56</sup>. Moreover, a good number of these representations are not solely related to the character's experiences at war. This illustrates how America's cultural spectrum of PTSD has been augmented to include other forms of trauma as well. Now, its expanse ranges from genetic predispositions to childhood memories triggered by aging—although military service still remains a popular catalyst. This is critical because while less than 0.5% of the American population serves in the armed forces, as mentioned earlier, it is estimated that 7-8% will experience PTSD at some point in their lives (with women being twice as likely as men).<sup>57</sup> And while there are 5.2 million different ways PTSD can be conveyed in a given year, the simple fact that the culture's wealth of resources continues to grow enables its capacity to view and understand that much more.

## Conclusion

Cultural representations of the traumas of war were around for thousands of years before the term PTSD even entered the medical vernacular. And yet, it was not until the end of the Vietnam War that they really developed a mainstream presence in American society. Spurred by a group of films—of which, each was unprecedented in terms of material and execution—a subtle yet impactful revolution came alive in the United States. In this revolution, American citizens began to reevaluate their conceptions of war as well as the soldiers who fought in it. For the first time, they were granted permission to see what these men had seen and try and feel what

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<sup>52</sup> E.g. Brendan Donovan (lead character) in *Ray Donovan*.

<sup>53</sup> E.g. Nick Brody (main character) in *Homeland*.

<sup>54</sup> E.g. Hank Schrader (lead character) in *Breaking Bad*.

<sup>55</sup> E.g. Lewis Nixon (lead character) in *Band of Brothers*.

<sup>56</sup> E.g. Richard Harrow (lead character) in *Boardwalk Empire*.

<sup>57</sup> "PTSD Frequently Asked Questions." *Military.com*. Military Advantage, 2009. Web. 14 Dec. 2013. <<http://www.military.com/benefits/veterans-health-care/ptsd-frequently-asked-questions.html>>.

they now feel. And while these films were meant to be taken more figuratively than literally, they still provided an insight that had never before been available to them.

Then came the 1980s, Reagan, and the *Rambo* phenomena. Alongside an arms escalation, supply-side economics, and MTV, now came *First Blood*, *First Blood: Part II*, and *Rambo III*. In the spirit of threes, here are the three most critical things to take away from the cultural representations of PTSD in the 1980s. Firstly, never before had PTSD been shown as a strength and not a weakness. John Rambo used every ostensible negative allotted to him and turned it into something he could wield as a weapon. His hypervigilance made him harder to trace, his detachment made him more resistant to pain, and his outbursts of anger made him a force to be reckoned with. Secondly, the *Rambo* era called for the American public to reflect on the way they had treated the soldiers who fought to protect their freedoms and to contemplate their culpability in “inflicting” the disorder on these men. Whereas in the 1970s these men were typically viewed as the losers of an unnecessary war, now their efforts were lauded as heroic and admirable. Tied to this notion—and lastly, these films offered a new take on the war, its outcome, and who was to blame. They told an entirely different story, one where the war was a noble cause that could have and should have been won if not for the cowardly left.

As the 1980s came to a close, PTSD had been represented in two highly distinct forms: through the critical successes of internalized conflicts, and the commercial successes of action-packed hypermasculinity. Then, for a time that has continued for the most part into the present, there was a lull in American PTSD cinema. The issue was not that films on the subject stopped getting made, but rather that the culture had grown somewhat uninterested in them. However, beginning in the early 2000s a new surge of cultural representations of PTSD took over American society through a different medium: television. Along with this outpouring of newly

appreciated PTSD-related content came variation and clarity, essentials for cultural understanding that had been sorely missing from the 1970s and 1980s.

PTSD representations can presently be found in family sitcoms, cartoons, sketch comedy shows, dramas, and comedy-dramas. What this allows for is the topic of PTSD to be approached from newer, less intrusive places of intrigue. Furthermore, the current pool of TV characters with PTSD is larger than ever before. As such, there is a much lesser mandate to conflate these character's traits so as to represent them as more than who they really are.

While the issue of cultural understanding of PTSD is far from being resolved, it can at the very least be said that American society has made great strides in this direction. In the 1970s, PTSD was allowed to be almost anything in an attempt to explain the chaos and confusion of war to a body of people who up until that point knew nothing about the losing side of battle. In the 1980s, this culture grew into an unrecognized historical struggle that allowed for unrooted patriotism through the exploration of a fictitious past—one where the U.S. always came out on top. Today, PTSD culture is abundant, influential, and perhaps most importantly diverse in its portrayals and mediums of portrayal. There is, as there consistently has been ever since *Taxi Driver* in 1976, the dramatic angle. However, there is now a comedic one as well; and while comedy is assuredly not the solution to this problem, it helps better seek one out.

As society continues on its search, the culture will—as it has—become more attuned to the nature of trauma, and the optimism of today will eventually allow for tomorrow's casting of a great blanket of comfort, not shade, on the pessimism and uncertainties of the 1970s and 1980s.

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