A CINEMATIC LIE: AN ANALYSIS OF THE IMPACT OF TELEVISION AND FILM ON AMERICA’S MEMORY OF THE TRAUMATIC WAR IN VIETNAM

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Abstract

The modern perception of the Vietnam War is largely inspired by American-made representations of the war. Films, literature, television series, documentaries, plays, music, and more recently video games have given their audiences realistic but distorted impressions of the Vietnam War. These representations have instilled a kind of secondhand memory of the Vietnam War. For contemporary Americans the war was a national cultural trauma that shattered widely held beliefs about American identity and national myths. After the war, Americans replaced the damaging memory with a more suitable and socially acceptable version of the Vietnam War in order to overcome the trauma they had collectively experienced. Consequently, popular cultural representations of the Vietnam War need to be interpreted critically. These representations were the product of a nation recovering from a trauma, not accurate representations of the historical event itself. Such a critical perspective is necessary in order to prevent representations from replacing real events in historical memory.
Introduction

“Vietnam Vietnam Vietnam, we’ve all been there” (Herr 243). These closing words from Michael Herr’s Dispatches (1977) signify the long lasting effects the Vietnam War had and continues to have on American society. Ever since the U.S. withdrew from Vietnam, the war, its soldiers, the dead, and the missing have lingered within American consciousness. Despite many cultural and political attempts to move beyond the Vietnam War - through the silencing of the subject, cultural reenactments such as films and television and so on - America was not able to do so. It was only after the Gulf War that the legacy of Vietnam was put to rest by President George H. W. Bush, who declared, “By God, we’ve kicked the Vietnam syndrome once and for all!” (Franklin 27). But even now, many years after the end of both wars, Herr’s observation that everyone at least in some way has been in Vietnam, is still accurate. Of course, this observation should not be taken literally; instead one must recognize that through cultural recollections such as TV, movies, literature, and video games everybody has gained impressions of what the Vietnam War was like. Probably the most well-known representation that has allowed us insight into the Vietnam War is the film Apocalypse Now (1979). Consistent with Herr’s closing words cultural critic Jean Baudrillard has argued that Apocalypse Now is part of the Vietnam War as much as Vietnam itself (9, 60). He thus recognizes Herr’s claim that everyone “has been there”, in the sense that the filmic representation of the war has come to stand for the war itself. In Simulation and Simulacra Baudrillard discusses a similar mixing of the real and the representational in his discussion of the Lascaux caves:

With the pretext of saving the original, one forbade visitors to enter the Lascaux caves, but an exact replica was constructed five hundred meters from it, so that everyone could see them. It is possible that the memory of the original grottoes is
itself stamped in the minds of future generations, but from now on there no longer is any difference: the duplication suffices to render both artificial. (Baudrillard 9)

Ever since Baudrillard made this claim, representations such as Apocalypse Now arguably have made the Vietnam War as a historical memory event extremely ambiguous. Representations can make the memories of individuals seem irrelevant because the general public often only knows what it has seen in the movies or on TV. In this sense reality has been replaced by representation. This form of experience, scholars of memory have termed *vicarious experience*.

During the Vietnam War, the average American mostly received information about the Vietnam War through TV and newspapers. Consequently, the war in Vietnam has been called the first TV war because war reporting for the first time penetrated directly into American homes through a visual medium. Ever since the Vietnam War the television media have had such a pervasive presence and availability that (news)events are almost always witnessed by a camera that allows images of the specific event to be instantly presented to the viewer. However, what the camera registers is different not only from what a witness might see or experience but also from what is eventually shown to the audience, as material is edited out and narration is added or altered. The representation presented by the media therefore is not the original experience of bearing witness. But most acts of bearing witness or “*vicarious experience*” are indirect; the 9/11 terrorists attacks on the Twin Towers in New York and the Pentagon for instance were not witnessed in person by most Americans. Instead the presence of TV cameras ensured a direct experience by everyone watching television. This form of bearing witness, either in reality or through media such as TV or film, thus instantly creates a memory of the event as it was presented to the viewer. For collective and personal memory the media is the perfect purveyor for creating unity, but when one examines the limits of
representation through images one must realize that what is remembered is not personal experience, but an already adulterated version of the event.

Despite the limits of images in representation, the footage of the Vietnam War still presented Americans insight into what was happening in Vietnam. For many the footage that came from Vietnam was so gruesome that as soon as the war ended the Vietnam era had to be reconfigured in American memory. So, “rather than dealing with the events of the war, the country escaped into its own collective imagination” (Lembcke 141). This escape took place through Hollywood film and TV, which had been the prominent dream machine for the United States for years. Films such as *Coming Home* (1978), *The Deer Hunter* (1978), *Apocalypse Now* (1979), *Rambo: First Blood* (1982), *Platoon* (1986), *Hamburger Hill* (1987), and *Full Metal Jacket* (1987) provided Americans a new memory of the Vietnam War. After this escape into a filmic Vietnam War it was George H. W. Bush, vice-president under Reagan “who broke the silence with these words: ‘The final lessons of Vietnam is that no great nation can long afford to be sundered by a memory’” (Franklin 26).

If the nation was sundered by the legacy of Vietnam, why was that? And how did the history of the Vietnam War come to linger in the American psyche for so long? Over the last decades a great deal of scholarly attention has been given to memory studies. The field has its origins in the work of Maurice Halbwachs and Pierre Nora, two scholars who sought to distinguish history from memory. In fact, both Halbwachs and Nora sought to argue for a strict dichotomy between memory and history. However, more recently scholars have disagreed with this sharp conceptual distinction. Instead, they have focused on the interaction between memory and history and the “linking [of] history to social and cultural contexts” (Kitzmann et al. 11). This focus has become crucial in modernity where the modern media have become the major distributors of historical knowledge to society. Moreover, “the mass media can give people an experience of history that is felt at the deepest emotional and
somatic level, felt as memory is felt, giving rise to identification and empathy across existing social divisions” (Sjoberg 76). Together, the media and empathy were needed for the United States to feel united again after the Vietnam War. And in an era with an ever-increasing media power the linking of history and memory to social contexts explains the large role films and TV have played in reshaping the American memory of the Vietnam War.

More recently, films and videogames about the Vietnam War have come to function as tools of entrance into understanding the Vietnam War. The understanding these films and videogames promote has especially had effect on those born after the Vietnam War. This part of the general public has only seen and heard about Vietnam indirectly through representations, and have become familiar with the Vietnam War by the constant repetition of a couple of key representations.

Especially since the rise of structuralism and post-structuralism in cultural studies, representation has become an object of extensive debate. “The problem of representation, and most particularly of the representation of History is essentially a narrative problem, a question of the adequacy of any storytelling framework in which History might be represented” (Jameson 49). Structuralism argues that no language is sufficient to express reality because the ideas in the mind are always structurally different from what can be written down or articulated. Furthermore, Hayden White has argued that “there is no such thing as a single correct original description of anything, on the basis of which an interpretation of that thing can subsequently be brought to bear” (White 127). Accordingly, any event or thing has multiple interpretations and thus also multiple explanations. This is no new insight, because many movies about the war suggest that it was an entirely American war; they offer only an American interpretation. The problem is that films and TV suggest a Vietnam War that seems to be in contrast to what really happened in Vietnam. Of course, what really happened in Vietnam during the war can never exactly be uncovered. But, in contrast to history - which
isn’t reality either, but a disciplined way of talking about the past i.e. the construction of narratives that are the result of a disciplined use of evidence - the producers of films and TV diverge from the evidence of the past more freely. They often find the historical discipline to limiting when exploring events of the past. Consequently, they go about the business of representation and the construction of narratives more freely than historians do.

As White argues, there is no ‘correct’ version of the past to return to; there is no ur-reality that can be identified outside of forms of representation. Consequently, the focus of criticism is on how films and TV representations have come to dominate the representation of the Vietnam War, and the effects film and TV have on the memory and legacy of the war. Through these representations the media instills a pre-shaped memory in the viewer, which in contrast to historiography is more limited in its possibility for interpretation. This has the consequence, that film and TV representations of the Vietnam War that we experience as ‘authentic’ are actually nothing but a sanitized abstraction of reality.

**Objectives and Outline**

This thesis will explore how the cultural machinery of the United States has worked diligently to rescript the great traumatic experience of the Vietnam War into an American story of heroism, deceit, and overcoming of defeat. In three chapters and a general conclusion it argues that film has become the primary means for recollecting the Vietnam War and that film has exercised extraordinary power over the historical perception of the war. Dispensing with the historical complexity of the war – its multitude of actors, causes, and interpretations - these films present a sanitized simulational reality of a purely American conflict.

Chapter 1 introduces the concepts of history, memory, and trauma. It offers a short background of these concepts and introduces the theoretical frameworks through which the Vietnam representations will be investigated. The chapter also introduces the Vietnam War as
a historical and cultural trauma and will discuss how this has affected perceptions of the past and the formation and distribution of that trauma.

Chapter 2 discusses how television became the distributor of trauma. Through its popularity and often one-sided storytelling frameworks, television had a direct impact upon the American psyche. It allowed viewers to witness the events of the Vietnam War as they were happening. Television also pre-determined the form and content of following representations of the Vietnam War. Finally the chapter aims to discuss television’s impact upon the social perception of the Vietnam War in the United States.

Chapter 3 discusses how film, largely inspired by images from television, set out to rewrite the Vietnam story into something that could more easily be integrated into American consciousness. By focusing on the pivotal cinematic work *Apocalypse Now* this chapter will argue that films about the Vietnam War are the outcome of attempts to work through the trauma of the war. Their purpose was not to be historically accurate but rather to integrate the experience of the war in America’s cultural heritage.
Chapter 1: History, Memory, Trauma, Images, and the Vietnam War

The Vietnam War can be described as “a large-scale cataclysmic event” which tore open the collective sense of American identity (Holloway 61). As such, the Vietnam War can be called a trauma. Examining the Vietnam War as a collective trauma enables us to understand why the war had such a powerful impact on America. Every night, year after year, TV brought the war into American living rooms, slowly but gradually invading American consciousness with the images of war. Overall, the continuity of any group of people requires general consensus about pivotal defining moments in history. But the Vietnam War caused a rupture in how Americans perceived the past and historical origins of the United States. This had the result that history had to be reconsidered so that the Vietnam War could be more easily integrated into the larger historical frameworks that defined the United States. This could only be achieved by the distortion of memory, since memory defines how people perceive the past.

The academic discipline of memory studies offers useful approaches for studying these issues. In the aftermath of World War II and the Holocaust, memory emerged as a meta-historical category that came to subsume older terms such as folk history, popular history, oral history, public history, and myth (Klein 128-130). Most recently, memory studies have revolved around (post)modernist and structuralist arguments about the constructed nature of subjectivity. These scholars have paid special attention to the role of memory in rearticulating events that have disrupted master narratives.

Memory is the mode of discourse typical of the postmodern condition, and the moments that produce it are those that… disrupt master narratives of American imperialism, technology, science, and masculinity. Memory thus differentiates itself from ‘traditional’ ad ‘formal historical discourse’ that has been sanctioned or valorized by institutional frameworks or publishing enterprises. (Klein 138)
Memory in this respect is counter-traditional. It distinguishes itself from the historical discipline by investigating circumstances that run counter to official frameworks and narratives. Memory thus can easily become an alternative to history. Perhaps the most important aspect of memory is trauma. Many memory scholars have discussed how traumatic memories “are the most likely to subvert totalizing varieties of historicism” (Klein 138).

The traumatic era of the Vietnam War caused a dramatic change in the historical perception of many Americans, so when memory emerged as a discipline it offered a solution. Especially after the war “the old appeals to historical objectivity [had] become hopelessly suspect,” Klein writes. “Memory appeared to answer these problems, either by consuming history whole or by weaving into it so as to provide an authentic linkage with the past” (Klein 139). For many the Vietnam War proved to be a counter-historical event, that induced skepticism about previous episodes of heroic national history. The war brought into question “the founding premise of U.S. history itself” (Young 201). Accordingly, the Vietnam War became a traumatic event in American historical self-perception. By disrupting the previously established myths about the U.S., it threatened the national sense of self.

The group in American society most affected by the war were the soldiers sent to Vietnam. Their traumas were individual, as were their experiences. Their memories of traumatic events consequently were also located within themselves. “For the Vietnam war, national rites of reconciliation - from Oliver Stone’s movie Platoon to Tim O’Brien’s books to Jan Scruggs’s memorial - would largely be led by the war’s veterans” (Engelhardt 219). Through these media, individual experience and memory have been turned into a collective trauma. “Symbolically, the memories brought home belong to all of us. Retold in novels and films and volumes of history, these violent private recollections have become the stuff of our collective nightmares” (Turner 11).
Trauma and memory are closely related, as Freud’s *Analysis of a Case of Hysteria* (*Dora*) revealed. According to Freud’s research, trauma limits accurate recollection of events. The victims of trauma often knowingly withhold essential information in an effort to suppress its damaging effects. The Vietnam War was a collective trauma, and, as is often the case with memory, recollection of the war also took place collectively. Therefore, memory not only takes place in the cultural domain, it is also social in that it can only be recollected to others and can only have meaning within a particular social group. Americans as a social entity thus set about re-constructing their collective memory of the Vietnam War, in order to overcome the trauma. This reconstruction of memory involves the rewriting of history since the war had to be realigned with the revised memory. As Cathy Caruth has argued, the concept of trauma allows us “to recognize the possibility of a history that is no longer straightforwardly referential” (11). In essence, the concept of trauma offers a “powerful alternative to notions of history (and memory) that presume the existence of a single ‘true’ and ‘factual’ past that, with enough effort, can be made to reappear in the present” (Turner xxi). With the memory of the war still fresh in mind and the realization that their ideals had become unstable, Americans had to re-historicize the Vietnam War to enable the emergence of a more suitable historical memory.

Frederic Jameson has said that “history is what hurts, it is what refuses desire and sets inexorable limits to individual as well as collective praxis” (102). In this sense, collective national traumas are historical. History, trauma, and memory are thus all closely related. Many of the scholars of memory have discussed the Vietnam War and its effects on memory. They particularly have focused on the visual nature of the Vietnam War and the impact of these visual images on collective memory. They argue that in modernity images have become our primary means of recollecting the past. Consequently, the study of images has become central to the study of cultural memory.
The popularity of images has grown enormously since the invention of the television, and its appeal and availability to everyone has enabled the camera image to gain an important place in our culture and society. “The camera constitutes a significant technology of memory in contemporary American culture. Camera images, whether photographs, films, or television footage, whether documentary, docudrama, or fiction, are central to the interpretation of the past” (Sturken 11). The camera image has become an integral part of modern life, and the prime distributor of knowledge and information. “Camera images, still and moving provide important evidence of the past and help define its cultural meaning. They offer incomplete but often compelling versions of the past that often eclipse more in-depth historical texts. They are also primary mechanisms through which individuals participate in the nation” (20). Camera images, then, offer us the possibility to see exactly how a particular culture deals with the past. It enables us to see and learn what is deemed important for recollection, what should be forgotten, and what the past allows to be made of the future. Camera images enable us to witness how the past is reconfigured and represented. Moreover, film and especially TV allowed a more authentic witnessing of the past, since film has an aura of authenticity around it similar to the original authenticity of the photograph. Furthermore, moving images dissolved the time and distance separating the subject and the viewer. Consequently, watching moving images has often been ascribed the same characteristics as watching things happen directly in real-life.

For many people in modernity television and the movies have become something more. TV and film not only have become the prime distributors of knowledge, information, and entertainment, filmic images also have proved an escape into a world less harmful than reality. One of the major problems this poses is that images have become problematic because of their close boundary between reality and fiction. Images are not only used to represent real events, but also are used to offer entrance into fictional worlds. Images blur the boundary
between the real and the fictional. So, when images are used to represent real events, they run the serious risk of being misinterpreted. Consequently, when images are used for historical representation not only the reality of the present, but also the reality of the past can become unclear for those that place an ultimate belief in the representational capabilities of images.
Chapter 2: Television and the Vietnam War

Michael Arlen: “I can’t say I completely agree with people who think that when battle scenes are brought into the living room the hazards of war are necessarily made ‘real’ to the civilian audience. It seems to me that by the same process they are also made less ‘real’ – diminished, in part, by the physical size of the television screen, which, for all the industry’s advances, still shows a picture of men three inches tall shooting at other men three inches tall, trivialized, or at least tamed, by the enveloping cozy alarums of the household” (Hallin 103).

2:1 Introduction

Vietnam was the first war in history that was directly witnessed by television cameras on a daily basis. This direct coverage ensured that in contrast to World War II, in which cinema newsreels functioned as the distributors of images of war, film of the war could become part of daily television news coverage. Over the years the influence of television on the Vietnam War has been heavily discussed. Many scholars have commented on television’s impact upon the public perception of the war, and it is a widely held belief in the United States that the media had “a significant, even decisive, influence on the war’s outcome” (Wyatt 7). In certain respects this was true as the media - TV and newspapers - did present the war in Vietnam to Americans. Compared to the depiction of previous wars, these media were highly autonomous in what they presented to the public. Furthermore, the increased role of TV in American homes since the early 1960s also contributed greatly to the impact the media had on the outcome of the war. It was TV that had the power to speak to almost all Americans.

Although there was an overabundance of television coverage of the Vietnam War, conducting a study of television news during the Vietnam War is a difficult task. Not only did networks neglect to archive their news broadcasts, it was not until 1968 that the Vanderbilt
Television News Archive began to establish a complete record of network evening news. Scores of books, documentaries, articles, and investigations have been published that discuss the role of the American media in the Vietnam War. Utilizing these sources this chapter will argue that the pervasive influence and power of repetition in television had a large influence on the war itself and on American perspectives on the war. Consequently, television has greatly impacted the impressions left behind by the Vietnam War.

2:2 Television Theory

Theorists of television offer a variety of key analytical tools that help us to understand the role of TV in the war. Especially critics of consumer-capitalism have labeled television as the prime tool for shaping the social environment. For instance, Ien Ang has argued that “high modernity depended upon, and was sustained by, the transformation of populations into regular and dedicated television audiences” (6). Ang notes that “watching television is usually experienced as a ‘natural’ practice, firmly set within the routines of everyday life” (21). To the first argument we should add that watching television opens viewers to the opinions of others, often to subjects about which viewers do not have enough knowledge to form their own opinions. The consequence is that television has become an enormously powerful tool for forming and guiding public opinion. Mass broadcasting in this sense is thus inherently political. Ang’s second argument is derived from the characteristics of images used by television and the easy access television provides to a visual source of information. Some see it as a media form more democratic than newspapers, for instance. Also, television’s central location inside people’s homes has made the experience of watching television part of the everyday. People have made it an intimate and integral part of their lives.

Another theory about television and society argues that that the media functions as the ‘constructors of [the] social reality’ of the American people” (DiMaggio 9). Gerbner and
Gross discovered that the “heaviest viewers of television were the most likely to be cultivated by its patterns of images and accept the television world view as their vision of reality” (DiMaggio 9). Television thus directly impacts upon people’s perception of the world and reality. This confusion of television with reality has several consequences.

First, this confusion impacts upon people’s perception of experience and consequently also upon memory. Television’s pervasive influence has the effect that events do not have to be witnessed personally to be remembered; they only have to be seen on television for the individual to remember the specific event. In this sense television and its images are “not only collaborators in evoking organic memories, but also [are] the active producer[s] of memories in their own right” (Sjoberg 73). Television drastically altered the concepts of memory by making memory-events available to ever larger groups of indirect witnesses and by making possible an entirely new form of retrievable memory.

Second, television’s repetition fosters confusion between the past and the present. Television breaks the boundaries between time and space. “What matters is the moment of access, which effectively jumbles the past, present, and future into a ‘de-linearized’ hypertext of available moment and experiences” (Kitzmann 62). Therefore, television “evokes not a fixed history but, in its immediacy and continuity, a kind of history in the making” (Sturken 24). Television allows the past to become part of the present in unprecedented ways. The converse is true, as well - present motives and ideals affect the viewer while watching images from the past.

Third, in contrast to the real event, television does not necessarily need an audience, or a witness to make it worthy of recollection. Simultaneously television itself can function as the event and as its own witness. “The essence of the television image is transmission. It is relentlessly in the present, immediate, simultaneous, and continuous. Hence, television is defined by its capacity to monitor and to be monitored, to transmit images regardless of
whether anyone is watching” (Sturken 24). Television has become a reality on itself, and those who watch television can be absorbed into that reality and consequently become confused about the difference between life-reality and television-reality. In regard to this confusion between reality and television cultural critic Jean Baudrillard has argued that “the medium itself is no longer identifiable as such and the confusion of the medium and the message (McLuhan) is the first great formula of this new era. There is no longer a medium: it is now intangible, diffused, and diffracted in the real” (Baudrillard 30). In effect, television has become such a natural part of society that for many it is no longer recognized as a medium. According to Baudrillard, many see television as the portal through which information travels without being altered. This has the consequence that seeing something on TV has become similar to seeing something in real life. Baudrillard has said that “it is TV that is true, it is TV that renders true” (29). If television has become the provider of reality, it does not matter whether or not something has happened the way television portrays it. What does matter is that it is accepted as true. Television thus has become a very difficult topic in any argument about reality.

Keeping these theories in mind it is easier to investigate how Americans perceived television during the Vietnam War. At the time, some described television as the direct transmission of experience. For instance, NBC News commentator John Chancellor said that “television is the transmission of experience in its rawest form” (Wyatt 146). With this characteristic television has been able to position itself next to real experience. Television has been able to achieve this through its emotional immediacy. Especially during the Vietnam War, television functioned as tool to transport the war into the homes of Americans. Television’s focus on American soldiers allowed an emotional link to be established between the front and the home-front. This emotional closeness also gives television the aura of authenticity because people believe that television directly relays an event onto the screen.
Others have credited television for its accurate depiction of the reality of war compared to other media. ABC News Vice-President James Haggerty has argued “that the coverage of the sight and sound of the war in Vietnam by American television was exposing the false glory of the war” (Wyatt 147). Television demolished the traditional myths about the glory of war. By filming from the front lines television showed the American public that the war was not taking place exactly as officials had claimed.

Others have argued that television’s constant repetition of images of war dulled Americans’ senses and made them more tolerant of war. Psychiatrist Frederick Wertham has noted that “what we are getting [through television] is a hawk’s eye view of life and death [through which] war is becoming routine” (Wyatt 147). Ever since the deployment of American troops to Vietnam in 1965 the war was a constant presence in American society. So eventually the length of the war and the constant coverage of it led to a decline in interest by television audiences, who slowly lost interest in the war and started to pay less attention to coverage about. However, for many Americans the Vietnam War still lingers more than 38 years after U.S. withdrawal. For the Vietnam generation, and subsequent generations of Americans the war still holds an important place in society, and it is television’s extensive coverage of the war that is responsible for this.

2:3 American Television During the Vietnam War

The Vietnam War was the first American War that was covered directly and extensively by a television press. Although the Korean War had seen some reporting and coverage on television, this had been very limited because of equipment problems and the time limitations of the evening news. But in the early 1960s camera equipment had become more lightweight, and by 1963 television news went to half-hour evening broadcasts. A growing television audience and growing advertising revenue ensured that television had become a major player
in the American press corps when the first American ground troops were deployed to Vietnam in 1965. Indeed, TV was America’s most popular medium during the Vietnam War. In 1966, 93 percent of households owned a television (Bonior et al., 18). Because of its enormous popularity as a source for information and entertainment there is no doubt that television was the most important influence on public opinion during the Vietnam War (Hallin 18). The war took place alongside several other large-scale events in America that were shaped by the media. From its beginning, the civil rights movement used the media to influence public opinion. Also, the urban conflicts of the late 1960s, the Democratic convention in Chicago, the rise of new political movements, and the Watergate scandal were all played out on a media stage. In the course of the 1960s the media and especially television became very important players in the formation of public opinion.

In his work Hallin has shown that most Americans find television news more trustworthy than any other form of news reporting (106). This trust can be credited to the visual aspect of television, through which audiences feel as if they directly witness the events that are reported. This form of indirect witnessing also allows greater emotional involvement, which is very difficult to achieve in print. Although many people had heard about Vietnam and the unfolding conflict through other media, the images of the Vietnam War on television had the deepest impact on Americans’ perception of the war. Vietnam’s remoteness and the public’s unfamiliarity with the country initially created misunderstandings and skepticism about the necessity of American involvement. However, these were taken away by the TV camera that brought the war into American homes. “The war was right there in our living room, every night” (Heston). More than any other medium, television was how America became familiar with Vietnam and the events of the war. Although television influenced public opinion about the war, this does not necessarily mean that it impacted negatively upon Americans’ opinions. A Louis Harris poll commissioned in 1967 found that:
only 31 percent of those questioned said that TV moved them to oppose the war. The same group was then asked if television made them more inclined to ‘back up the boys in Vietnam’ or more inclined to oppose the war. By more than two to one, respondents said that television coverage of the war caused them to want to support the troops rather than to oppose the war they were fighting. (Wyatt 148)

Like most Americans during the initial years of the war the media steadfastly believed and supported the official arguments for war. It has been argued that “in 1965 official statements about the war or positive images of the American role flew through the gates of journalism unimpeded” (Hallin 133). In those early years television clearly followed the official arguments for the war: establishing democracy, aiding the population, and preventing the spread of communism. Ever since the end of World War II Americans had believed in the mythic status America had ascribed herself. According to this myth America was the country that had liberated the world from the most evil aggressors, and it was the country that had recovered from an initial devastating blow of Japanese aggression and evolved into the world’s most powerful nation. In his memoir A Rumor of War Philip Caputo powerfully voiced this belief in mythic America:

I guess we believed in our own publicity - Asian guerillas did not stand a chance against U.S. Marines - as we believed in all the myths created by that most articulate and elegant mythmaker, John Kennedy. If he was the King of Camelot, then we were his knights and Vietnam our crusade. There was nothing we could not do because we were Americans, and for the same reason, whatever we did was right. (Caputo 69-70)

Because of this mythic Americanism, most of the press as well as a large part of the American public initially accepted and openly supported government policy. Hence after arriving in Vietnam the press had no need to explain the Vietnamese problem because Vietnam was still seen as a vital part of the Cold War dogma. Accordingly, Wyatt has argued that “a better
understanding of the war was rarely a product of television news” (148). In those early years of the war almost nobody openly questioned the policies, motives, and other factors at play in the Vietnam conflict. Consequently television was not only limited in the depiction of the reality of war it also effectively limited itself in its possibility for the representation of reality.

In one sense, TV portrayed exactly what many Americans envisioned and regarded as America’s way of war. Television’s primary focus was on Americans in Vietnam. Research has shown that of all the nightly news reports produced by CBS and NBC, 86 percent focused on ground and air combat rather than on any other aspect of the war (Bonior et al, 4). The focus on images of ground and air combat greatly influenced how people perceived the war in Vietnam. “During the height of American military involvement, even the most interested, diligent news consumer could conclude that the war in Vietnam was primarily an American effort in which nonmilitary issues were either nonexistent or unimportant” (Wyatt 217). Of course, the logical explanation for this is that the American audience would be more deeply impacted by seeing Americans at war than by seeing Vietnamese, but through its limited depiction of Vietnamese and their struggle television images also served to legitimize the commitment to the fight against communism America had made to Vietnam.

The often spectacular scenes fit in perfectly with the 1950s American ideal of technological superiority. Televised media, with its constant focus on the spectacular and technological aspects of the Vietnam War ultimately determined the popular perception and expectations of the war. Television showed an unprecedented collage of spectacular images of destruction and technological prowess played out by American actors in a strange and far-away jungle country, set against a backdrop of popular music and American commodities. Inspired by years of Hollywood inspired faith in America the Vietnam War was portrayed as if it was the culmination of American ideals, technological progress, cultural superiority and the sublime, all in a wilderness location. The overabundance of American images of war also
created the first misconceptions about the war, and the question arises of not what and how much television showed of the war, but how it showed it.

Therefore, in any discussion on the role of television the camera plays an important part. When photography was first invented it was widely held that eventually photography would replace history, for it could make the past visible (Barthes 80, 88). Not much later people realized that although the camera could capture a part of the past, that part was always very limited in its representational capabilities. The same could be said about the television camera, which can only show a limited perspective of a much larger event. A television critic wrote in Life that:

‘difficult war aims and delicate policies are simply not rendered any clearer by genuine bravery of a correspondent putting on tape his own entrapment by Vietcong snipers.’ ‘Instead’, he continued, television left its viewers ‘an appalling record of surprise and death, its only cohesion being the Kilroyesque figure of the groggy GI slogging through the unfriendly terrain of any war, calmly convinced that he is getting a job done.’ (Wyatt 148)

Clearly, this critic points to the limited view a camera has in the middle of combat, and that in the difficult and confusing images of war the only recognizable person was the American soldier. Accordingly, the American soldier became the prime focus of many television reports.

For many soldiers the experience of being at war was one of long dull moments which were sporadically intervened by short bursts of action. Caputo explains: “I didn’t know then that nine-tenths of war is waiting around for the remaining one-tenth to happen” (43). This clarifies why before Tet “only about 22% of all film reports from Southeast Asia showed actual combat” (Hallin 129). Consequently, television was not so graphic because the reality of Vietnam in those early years was that the war “was mostly a matter of enduring weeks of
expectant waiting and, at random intervals, of conducting vicious manhunts through jungles and swamps where snipers harassed us constantly and booby traps cut us down one by one” (Caputo xv). Reporters thus had no choice other than to cover the war as it took place for Americans. Caputo’s quote also explains why so many news reports “consisted of American troops walking through the bush; American troops exchanging fire with an unseen enemy; Americans waiting for something to happen” (Wyatt 148). Moreover, for the television audience the American soldier was a recognizable figure who could easily remind them of someone they knew - or even themselves.

Television often has received critique for how its graphic depiction of the war greatly influenced criticism on the war. For instance, a writer in Newsweek observed that “because of TV Americans will know how it is for Americans to die in battle and how they kill” (Wyatt 147-148). This assumption takes for granted the horrible images of corpses, mutilation, and torture that are by-now well known to anyone who has seen The Deer Hunter (1978), Apocalypse Now (1979), and Platoon (1986). But in fact before the Tet-offensive, television rarely showed graphic portrayals of the effects of war on the human body. Although such images were filmed, television networks usually refrained from depicting gore and personal agony in their news broadcasts. “Network news executives were extremely sensitive to the limits of the public’s taste for reality. The networks routinely deleted particularly graphic footage, and also refrained from showing in close-up the faces of wounded” and dead casualties of war (Wyatt 148). Film that reporters sent from Vietnam intending to show the horrors of war was often edited into more publicly acceptable bits of film.

Television networks’ selective representation of the war demonstrated that television was the product of mediation, not only when it was created, but also when it was consumed. Like all media, television is a cultural artifact created under specific circumstances; it is determined by ideological, cultural, and economical factors as much as any cultural artifact is.
By contrast, form is relatively subordinate to content in print. But for television selection or editing over-determines the form of the work and directs our attention to the content in an arrangement that suits the aims of the maker. Journalists themselves have long been aware of the problems that images and their selection pose for the representation of reality. “They believe that what they do most of the time is simply tell ‘what happened’” (Hallin 131). Journalists thus position themselves as mirrors, which reflect the things witnessed back to the audience, but they are also very aware that their mirror analogy is extremely limited for accurate reflection. Consequently, although the camera functioned as the mirror through which the American audience could witness reality we must keep in mind that the positioning of the mirror determines its reflection.

Despite the trust many Americans placed in the accuracy of journalism, it is vital to recognize the inaccuracies that naturally occur in journalism. Like all other information in war, news depended on word of mouth, investigation, and witnessing, making the job of journalists extremely difficult. In *Dispatches* (1977) Herr explains the difficulties journalists faced in finding news: “if you wanted some war news in Saigon you had to hear it in stories brought from the field by friends, see it in the lost watchful eyes of the Saigonese, or do it like Trashman, reading the cracks in the sidewalk” (Herr 39). From this quote we can conclude that in the difficult setting of Vietnam most news of the war was the product of various layers of mediation. This makes “television’s visual images extremely ambiguous” (Hallin 131). The ambiguity is derived from various factors. For instance, specific film is selected from a much larger selection of film, and then shown to an audience that is completely unaware of the larger context of the images that are being shown. So unlike in Barthes’s discussion of photographs - in which people see the image shown on a photograph as ‘the present in a past state’ that can exactly be located - television allows images to become jumbled together so that it no longer is explicitly clear what belongs where. This had the consequence that the
evening news more often resembled infotainment, rather than a detailed realistic description of events that presented the viewers with the reality of the war. Laurence has noted that news reporting could only put out a limited version of the truth, not because of ideological convictions but because of network requirements, time-limitations, editing and mediation of the material shot and narrated. All of these constraints were far beyond the reporters’ control (8). The result was that no matter how a reporter reported his story, the network ultimately decided what to show and in what context.

Combined with the fact that television images are often accompanied by an explanatory narration - which most often has the effect that the audience sees what it is told it is seeing - Laurence’s argument shows great similarity with Sontag’s argument in her discussion of photographs. Sontag argues that “the problem is not that people remember through photographs, but that they remember only the photographs” (Polchin 214). Television has the same effect, in the sense that the audience is unlikely to align the events in Vietnam as portrayed on TV with reality and will be left with a memory of the war that might be historically inaccurate. This is perhaps the most important aspect of television news in contrast to printed news. In television news narration serves the goal of clarification, but it in effect limits the possibilities of interpretation. The nature of images forces television news to be scripted into a narrative format with a clear beginning, middle, and end. This organization in time rather than in space is a crucial element of television news (Hallin 118). The result of this is that television provides a form of closure, something the printed press does not necessarily provide. Consequently, television has a high entertainment value. It does not attract the gaze of the audience because of the information it provides but it attracts it through the visual spectacle of images and the narrative framework in which it is scripted.

Television showed the first moving images of American conduct in Vietnam, and it was also the most popular medium that issued negative reports about the war. On August 3,
1965 the first critical television news report of U.S conduct in Vietnam was shown on the *CBS Evening News with Walter Cronkite*. The report showed the burning of a small hamlet by U.S. Marines. While the images were being shown Vietnam correspondent Morley Safer provided the voiceover: “Today’s operation shows the frustration of Vietnam in miniature. There is little doubt that American fire power can win a military victory here. But to a Vietnamese peasant whose house means a life of backbreaking labor, it will take more than presidential promises to convince him that we are on his side” (Wyatt 145). The news broadcast quickly received criticism. For instance, CBS News president Frank Stanton “was awakened by a ringing telephone. As he put the receiver to his ear, the voice on the other end bellowed, ‘Frank, are you trying to fuck me?’ ‘Who is this?’ asked the groggy Stanton. ‘Frank,’ the voice drawled, ‘this is your President, and yesterday your boys shat on the American flag’” (Wyatt 145). According to Wyatt, the American public also reacted fiercely to the news report. CBS was “flooded with calls and letters critical of Safer’s report and the negative light it cast upon American servicemen” (145). Safer’s account proved to be the just one of the many critical media reports that would soon come out of Vietnam.

Notwithstanding several critical reports on the war the media’s general attitude towards the war did not change substantially until early 1968, when the North Vietnamese launched numerous attacks on cities across South Vietnam in an incident known as the Tet Offensive. Although militarily the Tet Offensive was a major success for the Americans and their South Vietnamese allies, it became a turning point for American public support for the war. Before Tet, officials had constantly told the American public and the press that the war was slowly being won, and although criticism of that argument was voiced previously, the American public still believed victory was likely. But the Tet Offensive crushed this belief. CBS news anchor Walter Cronkite popularly known as the "most trusted man in America" (Hallin 106), declared on air after a visit to Vietnam that the war could only end in a
stalemate. Cronkite’s frank assessment undercut popular belief in the possibility of victory in the war.

This sudden change in the media’s attitude had several causes. First of all, the length of the war had slowly but gradually eliminated trust in the winnable nature of the war. The continuous stream of images of the war lacked signs of clear progress towards victory. The length of the conflict, its repetitious images of seemingly similar episodes of combat, and the constant promises of a victory that failed to materialize caused people and journalists to abandon the hope for victory. In the words of reporter David Halberstam “the war played in American homes, and it played too long” (Wyatt 176).

Second, the years of Vietnam reporting brought the realization that war was not as glorious as had previously been imagined. In the first years of the war, the ingloriousness of war became accepted and many believed that victory would return the glory. But victory did not come at all. Instead, more and more stories about the ingloriousness of American conduct appeared eventually demolishing American beliefs.

Third, the press and especially television are economic entities that rely on an audience for income. This implicitly means that they also fulfill the needs and desires of their respective audiences, to ensure the perpetuation of income. It must be noted that already in early 1966 “a steady erosion in public support [for the Vietnam War] began” to take place (Hallin 168). More people came to oppose the war as it raged on. Television thus had an incentive to reorient its agenda to reflect the sensibilities of its audience.

After Tet, the television press was “imprisoned by a paradox” (Wyatt 164). It was highly dependent on the government and the military for information, but at the same time the press was obliged to question the information they were receiving. “What the news consumer saw, then, was a press that eagerly reported what the government told it, but also occasionally said that the government and its information were less than trustworthy. Left in the middle
was the poor public, not quite knowing whom to believe” (Wyatt 164). Because of its paradoxical position television had to reinvent its own position within the public domain. So later on, in line with popular opinion, negative coverage of the war became common practice for news reporting. It has been observed that especially after the Tet Offensive and the My Lai incident there was increased coverage of victims of the war and of graphic events, while attention for the war itself and other aspects of it declined. (Hallin 171, Bonior et al., 7). Eventually these graphic events initiated a shift in media attention. Instead of a focus on the war the news started to focus on the domestic problems of draft-dodging, civil unrest, and the political process. This sudden shift from Vietnam to the home front left the American public with an image of U.S. soldiers in Vietnam as the ones that had lost the Tet Offensive and had massacred civilians at My Lai.

2:4 Conclusion

Television made the historical event that was the Vietnam War more available than ever before; it provided direct contact between the war, its participants, and the television audience. It can be argued that through availability of the war by television, “television produce[d] ‘instant history” (Sturken 125). By providing a direct view on events unfolding thousands of miles away, television dramatically altered American perceptions of the world and, more importantly, of themselves. Television not only became instant history, it also became responsible for installing a memory of the Vietnam War. In Vietnam the media presence allowed the gap between the real event and its representation to collapse. Television news created the perception that what was witnessed on the screen was what was happening in Vietnam. This confusion between the event and its representation has enabled history and its image in popular memory to become intermingled. For many veterans and for those who became “virtual veterans” through media, the Vietnam War has become a confused collection
of representations. TV also contributed to the destruction of American myth and self-perception. Televised images of the Vietnam War “failed expectations generated by World War II” (Kuberski 181). Instead of glorious images of war, television repeatedly showed “a chaotic, visual, abrupt collage” of images of destruction caused by Americans in Vietnam (181). These images had a devastating impact upon the Americans’ self-perception and eventually altered their fundamental values.

Witnessing the war on television demonstrated that old perceptions and ideals no longer proved adequate. The Vietnam War became a breaking point in Americans’ perception of the accuracy of their history. Previously accepted socio-political-historical standards were discarded and replaced with new standards. During the war, Americans became aware of the vulnerability of national unity, and their moral values. In this sense the Vietnam War became a cultural trauma, whose shock effects caused such a wide disruption in the American social fabric. It challenged Americans’ sense of their national identity and their vision of the past. In order to overcome that trauma, Americans needed to revise that historical vision to reflect their new situation. So, in the late-1970s early 1980s filmmakers set out to rewrite the Vietnam story in more acceptable terms.
Chapter 3: Movies and Vietnam

3:1 Introduction

The Vietnam War was seen on TV every night by millions of Americans and the repetitive images of destruction, death, spectacle, and American men in the wilderness of the South-east Asian jungle provided them with a continuous film of the Vietnam War. In this sense, the Vietnam War was an instant movie shown to its American audience almost directly and constantly. Partly as a result of the televised history of the Vietnam War, Hollywood films often followed televisions example of the search for authenticity and truth, and it is through the popularity of television during the Vietnam War and film’s re-use of these authentic images of the war that these films have become so important for the historical perception of the Vietnam War. It has been argued that “the history of the Vietnam War is being ‘written’ not only by historians but also through Hollywood narrative films produced for popular audiences” (Sturken 23). At a time when both the historian and film have become distributors of history it is important to consider the effects of film on history, and of history as presented in film on audiences. The Vietnam War has generated expectations predominantly inspired by Hollywood films, and this especially has affected those generations too young to have seen it live on television. Through film the Vietnam War has been collectively witnessed by Americans, and this national witnessing has impacted upon American identity and upon the historical perception of the Vietnam War.

National identity is a construction of those things deemed necessary and important for the cohesion of individuals to the nation as a whole. This idea is “a commonplace that goes back at least to John Locke, who maintained that there is no such thing as an essential identity, but that identities have to be constructed and reconstructed by acts of memory, by remembering who one was and by setting this past Self in relation to the present Self” (Erll 6).
Memory not only determines group cohesion, but also the psychological, and moral behavior of members of that group. If memory is pivotal for personal and collective identity, it is pivotal for society to secure and guard that collective identity by enforcing a collective memory.

As one of the most popular forms of memory, film has an enormous role in the distribution of memory, and consequently films have become very important and dominant for the distribution of identity. Owen has argued that “popular film is a public site where matters of national identity, morality and historical representation are negotiated” (273). That this is the case is shown by the Vietnam genre and its effects on America. It shows that in modernity film has become just as important as experience, and this is especially the case for those who did not directly witness the Vietnam War. This is because of the “the vividness of film, in general, and the intensely vivid depiction of combat in post-Vietnam popular film, in particular, [which] speaks to the emergence of image as equally significant with lived experience as a source of meanings, understandings, and commitments” (Owen 273). Consequently, Vietnam films have come to possess a very powerful position in American cultural perceptions of the war. Especially since the late 1970s America has not remembered the war directly. Instead it has remembered the war through representations which consequently have shaped American identity.

But film has also impacted upon the historical perception of the audience. For instance, *Apocalypse Now* has greatly contributed to the belief “widely held across much of America, that service in Vietnam had uniquely bizarre and nihilistic qualities that had been absent in other wars” (Hillstrom 6). Other films, such as *Coming Home* (1978), *The Deer Hunter* (1978), *Rambo: First Blood* (1982), *Platoon* (1986), *Hamburger Hill* (1987), and *Full Metal Jacket* (1987) do the same thing; they also leave an imprint upon their audiences. Film
thus places memory both next to and in contrast with experience. In his discussion on film, history, and modern warfare Huppauf has suggested that:

the sheer mass of historical images transmitted by today’s media weakens the link between public memory and personal experience. [To such effects that] the past is in danger of becoming a rapidly expanding collection of images, easily retrievable but isolated from time and space. (Huppauf 41)

The unique status of Vietnam within American culture functions as a good example of Huppauf’s point because it is especially through filmic images that people have become familiar with the Vietnam War and its images. But as representations of a unique and difficult event, these films do not necessarily possess historical accuracy. Vietnam films are the result of various factors of mediation which all contribute and impact upon the Vietnam War film genre.

Thus, one can extend Sontag’s argument - that the problem with photographs “is not that people remember through photographs, but that they remember only the photographs” (Polchin 214) - beyond photographs to images in general so that it includes all visual representations that trigger memory. Then, images that are constantly repeated and are dominant in cultural representations of the past eventually become, as Sontag argues, “metonyms for the historical past.” That is precisely how images of Huey helicopters flying over a jungle terrain have come to represent the Vietnam War. The problem here is not that the images that trigger this memory are unrepresentative, but that the memory this image carries within itself is highly limited. Large historical events simply cannot fully be contained in a single photo or video sequence. However, this is exactly what has happened ever since the visual media have begun to play such a large role in our lives. Vietnam War films have come to replace the Vietnam War itself. What people remember of the Vietnam War is no longer the war itself, but the war as it is shown in the films. In this sense, Sontag’s argument
could be rephrased into: the problem with films is not that people remember through them, but that they remember only the film. This is how Apocalypse Now, and many other Vietnam War movies have come to replace the actual war.

Considering that the Vietnam War still is a highly charged event in American culture an investigation of film upon the historical perception and cultural memory of the Vietnam War is vital to understand how this war can still linger so much in the American psyche. Therefore, this chapter will argue that because the Vietnam films are the result of a traumatic working through of a national trauma, these films must not be ascribed great historical value, but should be assessed in light of their value for American cultural memory.

3:2 The Vietnam War Film

In our post-modern culture we have become accustomed to the “constant drift between televised [and filmic] representations and ordinary experience... [and] to the ways our experiences imitate television in very common and obvious ways” (Rowe 129). However, this was not yet the case in the 1960s. Moreover, soldiers in Vietnam had no access to American television; their perceptions were largely based on previously installed notions of moral, social, and cultural value. For them World War II movies had provided them the frameworks of moral conduct, social behavior, honor, heroism, love, hate, and most importantly a glorified image of war and soldiering, and it was with these ideas in mind that they went into combat in Vietnam.

The experience of those who participated was intimately bound up with our national fantasy life. Out in the field, dangerous areas were called ‘Indian country,’ Vietnamese scouts were known as ‘Kit Carsons,’ the infamous one-liner ‘The only good Indian is a dead Indian’ was updated as the slogan ‘The only good gook is a
Films served as the frameworks for conduct and expectations for the young Americans that were sent to Vietnam. But quickly after arriving in Vietnam many of them came to realize that these frameworks were insufficient. For instance, Ron Kovic, author of *Born on the Fourth of July* explains that: “I realized in Vietnam that the real experience of war was nothing like the comic books or movies I had watched as a kid” (Hillstrom 51). Another instance of the incongruence between film and the experience of Vietnam was offered by Steven Spielberg, who in an interview talked about the impact the Vietnam War had on movies. In the interview Spielberg discussed how initially in films “there was lots of glory and lots of dying,” but during the Vietnam War it became clear that “the years of glorifying war were coming to an end, and a new kind of dying was moving our way, uncut and uncensored” (Owen 252). The Hollywood combat genre faltered, Spielberg claimed “when the casualties from Vietnam stormed into our living rooms seven nights a week for nearly a decade” (Owen 252). Vietnam demolished all previously accepted notions of America and being American that Hollywood had promoted.

Most Vietnam War movies do not deal with the war itself. Since their main objective was to reposition the war within American culture rather than positioning it as a breaking point of American society, these films portrayed and framed the war in terms that allowed reconciliation and a restoration of American ideals. From these movies it becomes clear that they specifically were made for an American audience, with the result that most of these films deal with American issues and American ideals rather than with the brutal realities that could reveal the contradictory nature of America’s war in Vietnam. This American position is exemplified by the way that in many Vietnam films - similar to televisions focus on the American soldier - the grunt soldier comes to stand for the American people, betrayed by
government and military superiors whilst fighting against a relentless ghost enemy. This repositioning of the grunt soldier through cinematic retelling has shifted blame for the war to the common enemy Americans have always cooperatively fought against: an unjust government. By repositioning the soldier and aligning him with the American people cinematic retelling has enabled Americans to overcome the divisions that became so apparent during the Vietnam War. The soldier no longer was the reason of blame; instead soldiers became victims. In this sense, film became victim to the same paradox television fell victim to, the impossibility of moving beyond the American perspective.

Through cinematic retelling Hollywood rescripted the Vietnam story from one of national loss and failure into one of revenge, heroism, failure of leadership, and lack of support for the soldiers with the result that a new fictional reunited America emerged from the debris of Vietnam. Resulting from the broken link between image-induced expectations and reality the Vietnam genre is more realistic than previous films. Because Vietnam became the place where previous American cultural representations and perceptions were shattered, Vietnam became a new genre that no longer glorified war, but instead focused on personal sacrifices, personal impact, and loss of identity by both the soldier and the nation.

The television chapter has already shown that the representation of war and destruction are very difficult subjects. For cinema this is even more true since most war films are not made to portray a specific military action accurately but for economic reasons. Consequently, there are certain limits to the amount of violence that can be integrated into a film without losing too much of its audience. Huppauf has pointed to the difficulty of representation that affects the position of the war movie within society: “War films with a moral commitment face the problem that the nature of their images and indeed their very structure of representation contradict the subject of representation: the destruction of humanity by modern technological-scientific means” (46). Aiming at the contradiction that
arises by attaching a moral to a fictional recreation of something that was destroyed so violently in real life, Huppauf suggests that war films are a strange sort of oxymoron; what it tries to promote is that what is lost in the violence of its representation.

Nonetheless, through the use of authentic images film has been able to claim to represent the war authentically, and through this device of reality it has been able to rescript the story.

Whereas documentary photographic and film images of the Vietnam War carry particular national meanings, contemporary Hollywood films play a primary role in telling the story of the war. These popular films have come to represent the ‘authentic’ story of the war. They have eclipsed the documentary images of the war; indeed, many deliberately reenact iconic documentary images. (Sturken 86)

Roland Barthes in Camera Lucida has discussed at length how reality can never be captured on camera. Instead, it was precisely the combination of reality and the cameras powers of representation that created the perception that film captured life as it really was. Through this principle “cinema films, often combining original footage and modern acting (it is often difficult to distinguish between ‘genuine’ and ‘staged’ shots), made a considerable contribution to popularizing this image of the war as it really was” (Huppauf 52). Although films such as Apocalypse Now are completely staged, their closeness to reality ensured that the popular view of the image of war as it really was, was achieved. The recording of the film took place in Asia, the actors and material were all American, the enemies were all others, and the filmic destruction and madness was just as grand as the Vietnam War.

There is a scene in Apocalypse Now where Captain Willard is shocked to see a TV camera crew in the middle of a battle, but is then signaled by the TV crew to go on with his business and ignore the camera presence. This scene exemplifies the importance of television for Americans during the Vietnam War. Through the use of this television metaphor the
director brings the audience into the reality of the picture. The presence of the camera crew breaks down the boundary between the screen-reality and the reality of the audience, bringing them together in the film. Through this Coppola was able to integrate the reality of TV images into his film so that the audience easily forgets about the distinction between TV reality and the film and blurs them together as a single reality.

The incorporation of the television crew and their directions to the soldiers could imply that the director of the film wishes his audience to realize the constructed nature of all representations. Coppola seems to be aware of the differences between reality and camera images, and perhaps this is why the TV crew in included in the film. Either way the incorporation of the television crew into the film hints at the incongruence between film and reality. Consequently, it is not strange that by many people *Apocalypse Now* is perceived as the real thing. Yet when watching this film we must keep in mind that the explosions and bullets in the film did not kill people and the actors did not endure the hardships of war off camera. But of course, the only thing that matters is what happens in front of the camera because that is all that the audience will see. This problem of the limited scope of the camera is often overlooked, and consequently images have come to retain the aura of authenticity.

In this way, film has allowed Vietnam's meaning to be altered. Sturken has argued that in films such as *Apocalypse Now* “the myths about the war are established, questioned, and replaced with new myths; and [it is through these new myths that] the primary representation of Vietnam is constructed” (86). By erasing the Vietnam War from memory (perhaps even from history) as a definite event, these films have allowed the Vietnam war to become a mobile narrative in which various definitions and concepts can be positioned, replaced, or rewritten.

Consequently, film has become important for both memory and history. Pierre Nora has stated that “memory attaches itself to sites, whereas history attaches itself to events”
In the case of *Apocalypse Now* memory and history are attached to it as the film carries with it the memory of the Vietnam War, while it also carries the history of the war. In the film history and memory have merged as if the film itself has become a historical event worth remembering. According to Nora’s reasoning *Apocalypse Now* could very well be what he describes as a *lieu de mémoire*:

> [an object that has] no referent in reality; or, rather, [is its] own referent: [a] pure, exclusively self-referential sign. This is not to say these objects are without content, physical presence, or history; it is to suggest that what makes them *lieu de mémoire* is precisely that by which they escape from history. (Nora 23-24)

Accordingly, *Apocalypse Now* has become a historical event in itself. For its audience automatically relates it to the Vietnam War, and sees the Vietnam War as it is portrayed to be in the film. Vietnam in effect is located in the film; it is the war that is the film.

Cultural critic Jean Baudrillard has come to this same conclusion. In his discussion of *Apocalypse Now* he argued that “the war in Vietnam and this film are cut from the same cloth, nothing separates them” (Baudrillard 60). The film has become both sign and signified. It not only functions as a designator of the event that was the Vietnam War, the film itself has become an event. Even for its director (Francis Ford-Coppola) the filming of *Apocalypse Now* was a war-like experience:

> My film is not a movie. My film is not about Vietnam. It is Vietnam. It’s what it was really like. It’s crazy. And the way we made it was very much like the way Americans were in Vietnam. We were in the jungle. There were too many of us. We had access to too much money, too much equipment, and little by little we went insane. (Sturken 98)

*Apocalypse Now* became the Vietnam War through its similarity to the war in the sense of troubles, costs, madness, and loss of control by its directors. Although it started out as an
honest attempt at something good, just as the Vietnam War, the film proved to be more difficult than expected. So “by the time [Francis Ford-Coppola] stumbled out [of the jungle after] 10 months he had nearly killed two actors, tacked on millions of dollars to his budget and produced a truckload of film that, no matter how he put it together, had no logical or coherent ending” (Barra). The films creation combined with its final outcome had been just as chaotic and capital intensive as the war it represents.

In their attempts and claims to portray reality these films have managed to reconstruct memory, to inscribe it with meaning, and to change the memory of the war. The best examples of the success of this are the instances where “the memory text presented is one where the memory of the first hand lived experience is not clearly distinguishable from the mediated ones through films and television” in such a way that it becomes “hard to differentiate between real memories and reel memories” (Sjoberg 71). For example, it is well-known that Vietnam veterans themselves have become confused about the authenticity of their personal memories, compared to the authenticity claimed by film. “On one hand, photographed, filmed, and videotaped images can embody and create memories; on the other hand, they have the capacity, through the power of their presence, to obliterate them. Some Vietnam veterans say they have forgotten where some of their memories came from – their own experience, documentary photographs, or Hollywood movies” (Sturken 20). Authentic memory of the Vietnam War, in this sense, has become mixed up with its cinematic representations, in effect creating a “mixed up” cultural memory.

This is so effective that in time the differences between memories of veterans and those of the general public disappear. “People may have undergone comparable experiences, but the cultural memory of those experiences is the ongoing result of public communication and of the circulation of memories in mediated form” (Rigney 16). The memory of the Vietnam veterans becomes a shared generalization of individual experiences. This is not to
say that veterans will forget the peculiarities of the Vietnam War, but it does mean that when they speak about the Vietnam War it happens within a framework with which the whole society is familiar. It is the incorporation of individual memories into a larger shared memory, so that in effect, the importance of individual memories disappears, because everybody is familiar with the same general story about the war.

However, this generalization of memory is a characteristic of memory as Andreas Huyssen writes:

*Re*-presentation always comes after. Rather than leading us to some authentic origin or giving us verifiable access to the real, memory, is itself based on representation. The past is not simply there in memory, but it must be articulated to become memory. The fissure that opens up between experiencing an event and remembering it in representation is unavoidable. (Sturken 9)

Since memory already is an articulation of an original experience, it automatically adopts narrative characteristics. Because we use language as our representative format, the rules of semiotics limit us in the sense that the representation is always different from the original thought. In a discussion on critically discussing the past Adorno observed: “Only at a remove from life can the mental life exist, and truly engage the empirical. While thought relates to facts and moves by criticizing them, its movement depends no less on the maintenance of distance. It expresses exactly what is, precisely because what is, is never quite as thought expresses it” (Kuberski 173). Thought, or in this case experience thus can never directly be accessed and be represented. We can only access our experiences by relating them as memories. For veterans to adopt cinematic representations as part of their memories is a result of the inexpressibility of their experiences. Although cinematic representations do not exactly portray what is in their heads, it does portray the event represented in such a way that is acceptable to them as an articulation of their experiences. This has a simple reason, for “the
original experiences of memory are irretrievable; we can only ‘know’ them through memory
remains – images, objects, texts, stories” (Sturken 9). So when the individual fails to express
his memories personally, he easily accepts those representations that do succeed in being
spoken out as his. These films evoke the memory that this war was real, that these events
actually happened. It invites its audience to feel part of that reality, and makes them feel as if
they witnessed the graphic depictions in the film in reality. This displacement of reality added
a sort of realism to these films that allowed it to be remembered.

In his work *Echoes of Combat: Trauma, Memory, and the Vietnam War* Turner has
observed that there was a “fundamental similarity between traumatized combat veterans and
the civilians who made and watched the films about them. By the end of the war, great
numbers of both civilians and combat veterans were suffering a condition of split
recollection” (Turner 47). This condition of split recollection can be described as a condition
in which the individual undergoes a certain experience of which there is a certain memory,
but because of the contradictory nature of the recent experience the person clings to an earlier
more innocent image of the self. Split recollection was at the root of the re-scripting of the
Vietnam War. Believing in the loss of innocence due to the war many films went back to
restore that lost innocence, to explore its destruction, and to rebuild it in light of the Vietnam
War.

Lost innocence is an important subject within the study of trauma and memory. Many
of the Vietnam films can be understood in terms of Freud’s discussion of the dreams and
trauma that occur with patients that have suffered from traumatic neuroses. These dreams
place the patient repeatedly back into the traumatic situation in an “attempt at mastery” of the
event (Hoberman 192). It is as if the subject constantly repeats the event in order to try to
change its course so that the future will be without the burden, rather than remembering and
accepting the events past-ness, and living with the event in mind. In contrast to dreams, films
enabled the neurotic to actively engage the experience and the event and allowed him to change its course. Freud also has observed that because of the inexpressibility of traumatic events survivors often are unable to put what they experienced into a complete verbal narrative, [to] reenact their traumas. Rape survivors return to the alleys where they were attacked; combat medics go to work in hospital emergency rooms; survivors of incest dare older men to attack them. At the same time, many dream of revenge. (Turner 82)

This is exactly the theme of many of the “back to Nam” films, such as Rambo, in which the trauma victim (a Vietnam veteran) returns to inflict havoc on those that caused his trauma. Through Rambo, others also could find catharsis. In this sense, Rambo and the other “back to Nam” films have provided Americans with a chance for revenge.

Another principle introduced by Freud is that of acting out as tool for overcoming trauma. “The Freudian conception for acting out refers to those instances when a subject, in the grip of their unconscious desires, performs an act as a substitute and diversion from acknowledging the impact of a past trauma and attempting to engage with or ‘work through’ it” (Hill 19-20). Rambo films are a fine example of the veteran’s incapability to work through his experiences, and fall into a pattern of acting out. For Rambo acknowledging the trauma of Vietnam is impossible and therefore Rambo acts out in the only way he is familiar with: extreme violence. Films not only serve as a tool for overcoming trauma for veterans, but also for average citizens. For them Vietnam films offer insight into the experiences of the veterans and allow them to endure the same trauma. Consequently, in these films the real is a necessary component that allows emotional attachment so that the sharing of trauma can take place. These films provide catharsis, while they also are capable of revising the story of the trauma into something less traumatic.
The trauma of the war is overcome by film, which has allowed a traumatic moving on to take place. For instance: “We see that for Bob in Coming Home it is clearly the war which leaves him speechless. ‘Why don’t you talk to me about it? I want to know what it’s like,’ says Sally, his wife. ‘I don’t know what it’s like,’ Bob replies. ‘I only know what it is’” (Shewring 53). Films have allowed people like Sally and the American public entrance into the world of the Vietnam War through a realistic experiencing of graphic scenes. So that Sally too, learns what it is, rather than what it’s like. However, it is not only that these films are realistic in their representation that gave them these qualities, it also is the viewer’s desire to share, witness, and experience Vietnam that gives these films so much credence as realistic.

Furthermore, the inexpressibility of the actual experience is overcome by the filmic representations of the Vietnam War. In the case of Platoon this becomes clear from an advertisement accompanying its video in which a woman “informs the spectator that initially she could not understand her husband’s refusal to discuss the war. But having seen Platoon she now understands not only the experience of the war but also her husband’s reluctance to talk” (Westwell 152). Reality has been replaced by a representation, as the wife sees Platoon as an accurate representation of her husband’s experiences. This understanding causes a change in perception about the Vietnam War, as even veterans become forced into acknowledging the representations as true simply because their reality cannot be expressed. This representation thus fulfills the desire to be understood even when being understood means adopting a fake recollection of reality as true. Hollywood back-to-Nam films and other films about the war enabled a massive mastery of the event to take place. The whole nation overcame their memories of the horrors of the war and accepted alternatives as its hallmark.

Just as the survivors of trauma do, Hollywood narratives intentionally rescript the war and “many deliberately restage documentary images, blurring the boundaries between the re-enactment and the original event” (Sturken 94). This created a fissure between the real and the
representation. Through the use of television images and novels, film gives itself more credence and more realism. But in turn this realism is altered and replaced by something new that is not necessarily authentic. For instance veteran William Adams writes:

When *Platoon* was first released, a number of people asked me, ‘Was the war really like that?’ I never found an answer, in part because, no matter how graphic and realistic, a movie is after all a movie, and war is only like itself. But I also failed to find an answer because what ‘really’ happened is now so thoroughly mixed up in my mind with what has been said about what happened that the pure experience is no longer there. (Sturken 86)

Film does not only provide new generations an experience of what is was like, it also mixes itself with the experiences and memories of participants and of those who watched news coverage of it.

Film functions as a memory trigger for several layers of the population at once, and in this way film can become part of cultural memory. Film, although it might not represent authentic memory, sufficiently provides a basic framework of the event in question. As their function within cultural memory requires of them, “claims to the authenticity and realism of these films reflect a desire to construct through them a particular set of historical narratives: the brutal experience of the Americans in Vietnam, futility of the war, the victimization of the ‘grunt’ soldiers, and the Vietnam veterans as a figure of wisdom and truth” (Sturken 86). In essence, these films provided their audiences with a unified narrative of American experience that has promoted a single American cultural memory of the Vietnam War.

**3:3 Conclusion**

Baudrillard has argued that inspired by years of cultural myth creation and film, Vietnam became the stage for the movie script that had collectively been written in the U.S. in the
years before withdrawal from Vietnam (59). American expectations of war had predetermined the way America went into Vietnam. The many years of myth construction had finally led up to the first mythic American war. Accordingly, *Apocalypse Now* was created following these myths.

In the mind of the creator, the war in Vietnam would have been nothing other than what it is, would not fundamentally have existed – and it is necessary for us to believe in this: the war in Vietnam ‘in itself’ perhaps in fact never happened, it is a dream, a baroque dream of napalm and of the tropics, a psychotropic dream that had the goal neither of a victory nor of a policy at stake, but, rather, the sacrificial, excessive deployment of a power already filming itself as it unfolded, perhaps waiting for nothing but consecration by a superfilm, which completes the mass-spectacle effect of this war. (Baudrillard 59)

Because of its similarity with the real Vietnam War Baudrillard has argued that *Apocalypse Now* was the final end result of a process that was necessary within American culture. In a sense, what Baudrillard is arguing here is that the Vietnam War with its massive media coverage could be made into nothing else than *Apocalypse Now*. The end result of all the filmic images of the Vietnam War were combined to form that what Americans had come to expect of the Vietnam War.

Although many Americans soon after the start of this mythic war had already realized that these myths might not have been so accurate it was not until after *Apocalypse Now* that these myths were properly and openly discussed and handled. In the years after US withdrawal the war had already been silenced, and many Americans had moved on when suddenly *Apocalypse Now* reopened the wounds of the war. The film reminded Americans of their naivety and their vulnerability, it reminded them of social unrest, it reminded them of Vietnam, and most importantly it reminded them of themselves. *Apocalypse Now* as a
Vietnam representation can thus be seen as an anomaly rather than an accurate representation. It provided the American audience a reminder of what Americans had come to expect of the Vietnam War. *Apocalypse Now* was the basis for all the following Vietnam movies. Consequently, many of these films have become copies of a narrative that is not necessarily historically true. Owen has argued that “the Vietnam film has reached the point where previous Vietnam films, as much as Vietnam memory, determine its rough outlines” (Owen 256). Because of this we must not place too much trust in the historical accuracy of these films. These films provide us nothing other than an American cultural perspective upon the restructuring of a national disaster. The Vietnam War films provide a unified narrative for a difficult historical event. By incorporating the altered version of Vietnam into American cultural memory and American national identity, America was able to overcome the most decisive war since the Civil War.
Chapter 4: Conclusion

Since the invention and establishment of the United States, the nation and its inhabitants have constantly reinvented themselves. Early on, reinvention became a necessity for American continuity because of the variety of cultures residing and arriving in the new world. American identity had to be invented and distributed to its population to ensure and preserve social and cultural unity. To allow American identity to take root, histories and cultures of the old world had to be dis-remembered or altered. A guidebook for immigrants read: “Hold fast, this is most necessary in America. Forget your past, your customs, and your ideals” (Kammen 203). The entire foundation of America is based on these premises of letting go of the past and the acceptance of newly formed ideals.

Print became the dominant form for the distribution of American ideology and culture. Colonial authors such as John Winthrop, Increase Mather, and William Bradford wrote diligently to identify the differences between the old and the new world. Much later, Hector St. John de Crevecoeur’s Letters from an American Farmer became one of the emblematic works for the definition of the American character. During the debates about independence print again functioned as the prime medium for the distribution of the American spirit. Perhaps, the greatest example of American reinvention was the textual establishment of America through the Declaration of Independence, and the Constitution. The invention and establishment of America went hand-in-hand with the distortion and revision of history and memory.

In the twentieth century, new media such as television and film replaced print as the prime distributor and creator of American identity. Consequently, these new media also became responsible for the distortion of memory and history. The visual nature of these new media introduced a whole new variety of tools that could be employed, but their
characteristics also proved problematic for the creation of a coherent and continuous American identity. It has often been argued that the visual nature of these media allow for an immediate identification with the real and that these media allow a direct form of the witnessing of events. The way that specific events are portrayed therefore, has an immediate impact upon perceptions of that event. The saying ‘seeing is believing,’ suggests the great impact images in the media can have upon an audience. However, what must be kept in mind is that the media always are limited by various factors, such as the nature of the camera image, the editing that takes place, the limited viewing angle of the camera, the ideological position of the cameraman, narrator, editor, and many other such factors. These factors are often overlooked, and instead there is a widespread belief in the accuracy and correctness of the media when they represent events. Despite the ambiguity of these representations, and their inability to portray reality they are more and more becoming responsible for historical recall.

The ‘nature’ of the media, together with its widespread availability, and the nearly inescapable presence of these media in our visual culture has developed so far that in modernity historical recall and memory have become a collection of sources, news reels, photographs, and media images. History and memory have been reduced to a set of images. Consequently, the media in their role as the re-inventors of American identity have become dependent upon a limited number of versions of the past.

This has become very evident when one examines the media portrayal of the Vietnam War, in which the country of Vietnam was changed from a distinctive social and geographical landscape into the site of an American struggle against itself. This struggle became accessible for nearly all Americans through the media that brought the Vietnam War home through TV reporting and later through films. Consequently, Vietnam became Americanized for American
audiences. Vietnam was no longer an Asian country, but an American event. In his introduction to Herr’s *Dispatches* Turner writes:

> I believe that there is a sense in which we have all been to Vietnam and even a sense in which we linger there today. This Vietnam is not the historical landscape on which the fighting and dying took place, but the landscape of public memory. Its battlegrounds are monuments, movie screens, and public libraries, presidential campaign trails and the Oval Office. (Turner ix-x)

In April 1975 in an article entitled ‘How Should Americans Feel?’ the editors of *Time* explained that “the U.S. had paid for Viet Nam – many times over. A phase of American history has finished. It is time to begin anew” (Turner 45). This remark suggests that historical phases can finish, and can easily be discarded or replaced by something else. The relocation of Vietnam from Asia to America has enabled a structural revision of history and memory to take place.

Films such as *Apocalypse Now* and *Platoon*, have not only become emblematic for the Vietnam War, the filming of those movies themselves were simulations of the war. Filmed in exotic locations, with enormous special effects, these films used famous images of the Vietnam War as their references. For critics of history and memory in postmodernity this simulation and use of other representations has become a primary concern. Baudrillard has argued that “simulation threatens the difference between the ‘true’ and the ‘false,’ the ‘real’ and the ‘imaginary’” (3). As simulations of the war these films do not distribute authentic memory or authentic history, but they also do not distribute any false notions of history or memory. They distribute an imagined simulated form of memory. All that is needed for this simulation to become “real” is that it is widely accepted as true. Because of the pervasive influence of the media in America, this is exactly what has happened with the memory of Vietnam. As with the Lascaux caves, these representations of the Vietnam War obliterated the
real memories of individuals, and overtook the relevance of individual experience by
distributing its message beyond the realm of individual memory. Consequently, through their
transcending of individual memory these simulated ‘Vietnams’ have become part of
American cultural memory.

Moreover, the problem of memory distortion in the case of the Vietnam War is not
limited to Americans alone. In our globalized society, “American cultural symbols have
become an integral part of the way in which millions of Europeans construct their cultural
identities” (Ang 148). Any alterations in the American perception of the Vietnam War -
instigated by cultural products - has as a by-result that European and Western perceptions also
change. So, in effect, the Vietnam War has also become an integral part of European cultural
identity. Although this does not imply that the burden of Vietnam is also placed outside of the
United States, it does imply that Western culture as a whole has integrated the Vietnam War
(as it has been portrayed by American culture) into its cultural memory and social existence.
When Europeans think about the Vietnam War, American images of the war come to mind.
Although there were fierce protests in the Netherlands during the war, all that seems to be
remembered now are the American protests and the visual filmic recreations of the war such
as Apocalypse Now and Platoon. In Western European culture such films did not merely
serve an entertainment value, they also served the goal of transforming cultural memory as
they did in the United States. Even though the war did not affect Europeans in the way that it
affected Americans in the United States, Europeans have come to share with Americans the
same cultural references about the Vietnam War.

Furthermore, because of the influence of these films in Europe, there seems to be an
immediate identification with the American position while the position of the other – i.e. the
Vietnamese - is usually overlooked. It appears as if Europe’s cultural and historical
connection to the United States prevents Europeans from positioning themselves in the
position of the other – the one we are unfamiliar with - and thus the other disappears from the
story. From a Dutch perspective this seems especially cruel when we consider that the
Netherlands fought a similar war in Indonesia, where Dutch forces lost to the indigenous
people fighting for independence shortly after World War II. In that sense the Dutch Vietnam
War took place in Indonesia, with an outcome similar to the American Vietnam War. Maybe
it can be concluded that one of the reasons why Netherlanders so eagerly accept the Vietnam
War as a cultural artifact in their cultural memory is because the Vietnam War reminds them
of their history of colonialism in South East Asia. Because of that history Netherlanders can
identify with the American struggle in Asia. Western cultural memory thus transcends
national boundaries and cultures and becomes one.

The effects of the Vietnam War and the way the media and cultural institutions dealt
with it can still be observed now. Especially for America’s new wars, the legacy of Vietnam
has proven essential for the way the media has treated these new conflicts. Herr’s claim
“Vietnam Vietnam Vietnam, we’ve all been there” (243) sounds very much like Australian
cultural critic McKenzie Wark’s observations about the Gulf war:

The whole thing about the media vector is that its tendency is toward implicating the
entire globe. Its historic tendency is toward making any and every point a possible
connection […] In the Gulf War, to see it was to be implicated in it. […] We are all,
always, already there. (Ang 150)

The pervasiveness of television and the modern media has fostered the belief that these media
provide the live-broadcasting of history. As live-broadcasters of history, television networks
encourage vicarious participation and witnessing. Wark has described the effects of these
media on the experience of the Gulf War:

It was difficult, as an Australian, not to experience the war as something that
happened in America, performed, acted, and sponsored by Americans, for
Americans. On television, most voices were American. All the images looked American […] Iraq seemed to be a place in America. A place like Wounded Knee or Kent State or the Big Muddy. (Ang 161)

In this sense, ever since Vietnam the American media have been framing news items as strictly American events. Since the Vietnam War the media have become the suppliers of a universal positioning of events in which all Westerners witness through the same frameworks and perspectives as if everyone is an American. This relocation of the individual into an imaginary position that can be defined as Western and specifically American has become commonplace in American-led western media cultures. Something Ang has described as the “experience of decenteredness in an imaginary geography” (161). The phrase imaginary geography could be related to other cultural critics who argue that postmodern cultures have become increasingly simulational. For instance, Poster has argued that “the culture is increasingly simulational in the sense that the media often changes the things it treats, transforming the identity of originals and referentialities” to such an extent that “in the media ‘reality’ becomes multiple” (Poster 7). Linking back to structuralism and Hayden White’s argument that “there is no such thing as a single correct original description of anything, on the basis of which an interpretation of that thing can subseuently be brought to bear” (White 127), these critics argue that the media not only change the subjects they discuss, they also limit possible interpretations. This is what happened to the Vietnam War and all representations following the war. Even other wars have had to be fit into the storyline constructed by the media about the Vietnam War. Critics have also pointed to the media’s role in the construction of social reality. Media critic Michael Parenti “refers to the media’s power to ‘invent reality’ for its audience, as many consumers of media place tremendous stock in news outlets’ reporting as a serious and accurate reflection of events in the world around them” (DiMaggio 9). This is clarified by polls that have shown that over 70 percent of
Americans’ are confident in CNN’s reporting accuracy (DiMaggio). In this sense, the media have become responsible for making events into events. Remembering can only take place when an event is made into an event by the media.

The difficult nature of memory itself is also challenging for the interpretation of history through the media, especially because “memory is a process of encoding information, storing information, and strategically retrieving information; there are social, psychological, and historical influences at each point” (Schudson 348). Therefore, especially Vietnam War films fit Bernard Stiegler’s description of tertiary memory: “[…] all forms of objective memories which all witness a past which I myself have not necessarily experienced” (Sjoberg 77). One could argue that all mediated forms of memory - as tertiary memory - are documents of the historical past. Films, books and videogames thus serve as carriers of tertiary memory, to a past that was not necessarily experienced by the subject. Memory can thus be transported from one generation to another, but as representations change by the recollection of memory, the new generation automatically has a slightly altered version of the memory than the generation before. History for that matter, when one relates memory of the past to history, must also change over time, for else the historical representation will no longer be coherent with the memory.
Works Cited


