

Introduction

Concerning the relationship between state politics and popular culture, the 1980s could be considered one of the most widely discussed periods of American film history. From military funded box-office hits such as *Top Gun* (1985), to Ronald Reagan citing the *Rambo*-franchise as an inspiration to his foreign policy¹, the cinema of the Reagan-years has generated many popular examples of the ideological associations between Hollywood and the White House. Evidently, the rigidity of the his relationship is open for discussion as many of films did not adhere to hegemonically embedded logics of conservatism and militarism. However, Stephen Prince² notes that while we should be critical of projecting Reaganite politics onto the era's cinema, the action film genre is one type of films in which clear correlations can be found. Originating after the dust had definitively settled from the New Hollywood movement, the American action film signaled the dawn of a new type of hyper-commercial, ultra-violent cinema that coincided with the rise of the Reagan administration. Since this genre emanated in a time of great national socio-political change, it's often assumed the genre signified a triumphant return to American exceptionalism and Cold War paranoia³. Within these projects of national glorification and revitalization, the memory of the Vietnam War is widely considered to be a key nodal point in forging a new type of victory from defeat⁴.

This article will investigate the action film as a prominent cultural site for the construction of the Vietnam War as national trauma. However bountiful scholarly literature on the Vietnam War as American action film theme, to date no systematic analysis has been conducted into the genre's forms of trauma work. Politically hard-lined genre products such as *Missing in Action* (1984) and *Rambo: First Blood Part II* (1985) have been canonized in its treatment of the conflict, but how such attitudes relate to other genre outings, as well as the genre's formal properties, has been underdeveloped. Building on existing arguments an analysis of the dynamics of commemoration and memorialization operating within the genre will be provided

in relation to notions of national trauma and enemy image construction. This article makes a contribution to an old debate by way of a theoretical and methodological reorientation. Firstly, a theoretical overview will be presented in which enemy making and nationalist revival are discussed from the vantage point of memory studies. The mnemonic turn in critical theory has greatly matured film studies in understanding national trauma and provided a contribution to subjects ranging from Holocaust Cinema to Post-Colonial filmmaking. These theories will be brought into relation with the generic conventions and formal properties action film genre, assembling an analytic toolset to reevaluate the genre's treatment of the Vietnam War.

A secondary contribution of this study lies in its choice to not limit itself to canonized texts, but rather engage with a wider selection of films. The Vietnam theme in the action film is here addressed in a more empirically grounded manner through a thematic analysis of a large number of films. During this preliminary thematic analysis dominant themes, narrative topoi and enemy identities were coded in a sample of 40 American action films throughout the two presidential terms of Ronald Reagan (1981-1988). Working outside pre-ordained samples of genre cinema and subjecting these films to a systematic form of analysis, opens up the possibility of providing new insights to well-discussed themes. This exploratory thematic coding will be subsequently expanded upon by a textual analysis of several cases, each focusing on a different form of traumatic remembrance within the genre. Since the recuperation of the Vietnam War was instrumental in crafting a new narrative for the nation⁵ my final argument will build on how the memory of the conflict were integrated into the generic logics of the action film as “antagonistic adhesive”. The Vietnam War is used both as an underlying motivation that sparks the hero's will to action, as well as a component that binds these traumatic tensions together with new enemies. Through the discursive power that stems from such state ordained forms of trauma work, the action film employed the Vietnam legacy as a bottleneck that redirects feelings of loss and guilt towards righteous heroic violence and nationalist restoration.

Traumatic history and national identity

Most of the literature on memory and politics focuses on the construction, reproduction and contestation of national identities. How the transmission of traumatic historical events such as war and genocide interacts with a type of collective memory has for the last decades led to a rich body of theoretical work. According to Duncan Bell⁶, collective memory refers to a wider set of perceptions of the past as shared by a specific community, whether socially, nationally or culturally defined. Hunt⁷ expands on this concept of collective memory and considers it to be a type of ‘social fund’ stemming from information about society accumulated over the years. This tapestry of supposedly shared memories provides a community with historic antecedents and reference points to draw upon in the development of collective narratives and social discourses, all contributing to the social structuring of meaning of past and present. Because the potential of memory to provide a symbolic coat hanger for communal solidarity, the cultivation of collective memory is related intimately to the formation and reproduction of larger collective identities⁸. Or as Anthony Smith argues⁹: ‘no memory, no identity; no identity, no nation’. For this reason, nation states invest in the shaping and framing of histories personal and collective as a way to shape and mobilize political subjects.

The risk of imprinting such narrative scripts in collective memory lies in the possibilities of structuring history in line with projects of nationalist glorification and enemy image construction. While the 20th century produced its fair share of images of war, disaster, genocide, and destructive catastrophes, theorists such as Avishai Margalit¹⁰ rightfully claim that the collective remembrance of these events in a wider social sphere is not equally distributed. Some events such as the Holocaust, 9/11 and the Vietnam War for example, are subjected to a systematic sense of recollection in the form of didactical or dramatized accounts proliferating through mass media, while others are forgotten, minimalized or contested. Whereas trauma is mostly interpreted as something individual, Assmann¹¹ and LaCapra¹² contribute to an

understanding of how collectives construct notions of traumatic histories. Jeffrey Alexander¹³, for example, deems the likes of collective trauma as something inherently socially mediated and negotiated, since events cannot themselves be traumatic to group entities. Building from this argument, he states that traumas occur ‘when individuals and groups feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their consciousness, will mark their memories forever, and will change their future in fundamental and irrevocable ways’¹⁴. Events thus become historically or nationally traumatic when a community deems them as such because of the perceived effect they’ve had on a shared collective identity. The way for events to be considered ‘traumatic’ is paved by a form of trauma work. Conceptualizing this cross-fertilization of mnemonic and ideological labor as a ‘trauma process’, Alexander considers its power to stem from its attempts to solidify discourses through forms of collective representation. Ann Kaplan¹⁵ points out that identity formation connected to collective memory, is not only rooted in triumph, but also in loss and crisis. It is in this sense that ‘trauma produces new subjects’. Through mediated experiences of collective suffering, victimization, witnessing and enemy making political identities can be constructed, reiterated or subverted.

While it could be argued that American nationalism has always been rooted in a sense of loss and victimhood, the Vietnam War is often cited as providing the basis for the new right America of the 1980s¹⁶. After all, the resistance of ‘big government’, jingoist foreign policy and resurgent militarism that coincided with the Reagan administration, was part of the republican project to ‘*Make America Great Again*’. Such narratives of national renewal and revitalization have since long been employed in political discourse – and as Donald Trump’s 2016 campaign slogan proved, remain viable to this day – because of the undeniably powerful part they play in constructing a sense of patriotism and national engagement. Reagan attempted to frame the nation as being rooted in greatness, but somehow having lost the way to its manifest destiny. From the 1960s onward the conservative ideal of the nation had to deal with considerable threats

to national-self-esteem: the rise of a leftist counter-culture, government related scandals such as Watergate, tensions with the Middle East and most prominently the loss of the Vietnam War destabilized the belief in the position of the USA as global superpower. The triumph of the new Reaganite conservatism lay in the reactionary ambitions to restore the USA to its “former glory”¹⁷. This was articulated through the existence of several myths gaining power in political discourse, such as the Vietnam-syndrome which provided a stab-in-the-back type narrative for understanding this loss and the war vet motif heavily featured in popular culture. As such Reagan succeeded in discursively framing America’s involvement in the Vietnam War not as that of perpetrators, but as that of victims who had to be vindicated. So while the 1980s supposedly signified ‘Morning Again in America’, the grounds on which this new dawn for American geopolitical strength was achieved have to be approached critically. It can be argued that the notion of the Vietnam Conflict as national trauma provided the ideological groundwork for the revival of the United States as superpower. Building on this position of victimized nation the American self-restoration was auspiciously equated with principles of military renewal and interventionism.

Negotiating painful pasts

Institutionalized or commercialized, all images and narratives attribute to the construction of a larger post-traumatic space in which these discourses are negotiated¹⁸. In this light cinema should be considered as a powerful agent for the affirmation of collective suffering and the construction of a sense of national trauma. Not only do films function as mnemonic aids keeping the memory of such events alive, but they equally form new memories in their own right – functioning as a type of prosthetic memory¹⁹. On account of the role cinema can play in the symbolic struggles over identity and interpreting the past, the types of trauma that are represented as well as the ways of representing trauma have been continuing subjects of

scholarly debate. Authors such as Joshua Hirsh, Amy Kaplan, and Janet Walker²⁰ all assist in the construction of a theoretical framework concerning cinema in relation to cultural memory and trauma.

Following Kaplan²¹ I consider cinema to be a space in which a culture can unconsciously deal with the traumas that haunt it, but also want to stress the ideological nature of such processes of ‘working through’. As Kamran Rastegar²² states, films provide ‘a critical arena for discerning the process of competition over cultural memory’. Because these insights are evidently applicable to films addressing geo-political conflicts, genocides and others violent atrocities, most case-studies in this topic have been made in the categories of ‘trauma cinema’²³, horror films²⁴ and the war genre²⁵. This article opts to expand on this basis of theory by analyzing how trauma is thematically and aesthetically articulated in the genre of the American action film. Because of genre’s massive popularity and consistent commitment to geopolitical adversities, both past and present, the American action film provides an interesting site for the investigation of cinematic processes of commemoration and memorialization. Foremost, few categories of film make greater work of historical narratives of conflict and violence. When adopting a ritual stance to genre²⁶, these films can be considered a form of modern mythology; repeatedly delivering distinct readings of history and interacting with wider discourses on the self, the Other and the nation. I argue that the generically specific structures of the action film not only offer narrativised, symbolized and stylized evocation of national trauma, but do so in a manner connected to the justification of a jingoist policy on geo-political conflicts. These films aid in the construction of what Wendy Brown²⁷ defined as ‘wounded attachments’; a ‘mutual history of pain, resentment, and hope that constructs the subject’. Elisabeth Bronfen’s²⁸ argument is of particular relevance here, since I will analyze how discourses of remembrance around American conflict are reiterated and contested within the genre. Indicating that violent imaginaries of American warfare perpetuates a type of cultural haunting, she indicated that ‘Each visitation of

war Hollywood undertakes places a given military conflict in dialogue with those preceding as well as those succeeding it’.

Such dynamics of remembrance and representation play a key part in how conflicts and violent events are perceived. As such, they not only contribute in determining which events get deemed traumatic or not, but also to the manner in which conflicts are to be understood. In that sense the treatment of conflict and trauma in cinema can come in different types of narratives, tones and poetics. These narratives can take the form of a cautionary tale arguing for a pacifist identity of cosmopolitanism, but just as much they can be stories of injustice and indignation that incite and agitate towards vengeance and retribution. The process of hero making is so often entwined with a discourse of what Joanna Bourke²⁹ calls ‘sanctioned bloodletting’. Equally, Alexander³⁰ warns for the perpetration of a sacred evil myth. Narratives can also create a sense of national trauma as the basis for acts of violent retribution and revenge. In theorizing the interrelatedness of memory, ideology and genre I’m mainly interested in how American cinema deals with the dynamics of retaliation and reparation of trauma. As Bronfen already noted of the Hollywood war films, many of these narratives deal with the concept of returning to the battlefield to avenge losses and finish battles. Here traumas and conflicts of the past can be wielded in a way that legitimizes the violent actions of the present.

One of the central debates regarding the remembrance of cultural trauma in relation to film representation deals with the challenges of engaging these histories without simplifying the them into Manichaeist narratives of good versus evil. Thomas Elsaesser³¹ states that the cinematic treatment of conflict-related traumas often denies the complexities characterising such painful passages of the past in favour of a clear-cut categorization of victims and villains. This can be attributed to discourses of remembrance, but the narrative characteristics of certain Hollywood genres also have a part to play in this type of trauma work. Antagonists are a central component of the many Hollywood narratives³² and accordingly genres such as the war film,

Western and action film provide threatening enemies in service of the story's need for drama and suspense. Ragnhild Fiebig-von Hase and Ursula Lehmkuhl³³ argue that the repetitious presence of such enemy image reinforces dichotomies of good versus evil in relation to the self-group and enemy-others, over time solidifying a negative and stereotypical evaluation of ethnic and national identities. This process is being referred to as enemy image construction³⁴ and is of importance when studying trauma representation. After all, the attribution of perpetrators is strongly embedded in the construction of collective trauma³⁵. Enemy perpetrators become a conveniently shaped canvas to project the tensions and negative emotions (such as resentment, shame, anger and indignation) on stemming from these histories. By incorporating traumatic histories in the conventions and structures of popular genre cinema, such perpetrator parties are individualized and placed in the role of villain.

A cinema of striking back

If an event's remembrance is entwined to its regimes of representation³⁶, the workings of genre should be reserved a special place in the construction of national trauma in American cinema. I argue that American action film provides especially interesting site to tackle the relationship between collective memory and national identity. Whereas there is some contestation whether the action film constitutes as a specific genre, if not a mode of cinema, it's widely agreed upon that both the form and the content of these films are built on the concept of violence, conflict and viscerality³⁷. Historically the action film genre can be seen as stemming out of a coalescence from core aspects of the cinema of the 1970s. Eric Lichtendfeld³⁸ identifies the changes in attitudes towards screen violence, rise of blockbuster culture, technological advancements that characterized the Hollywood Renaissance as key to the inception of the action film as a distinguishable genre. Conventions and themes of the revisionist genre cycles of the Western, war film and crime thriller further synthesized into a new breed of violent crime

film, popularized through *Dirty Harry* (1971) and *Death Wish* (1974). To Barry Langford³⁹ this confrontation of generic, economic and technological circumstances amounted to a series of films ‘centering on lone, or more often paired, male adventurers in contemporary urban and warzone settings, highlighting massive and spectacular destructive of person and property often accompanied by extreme and graphic violence’. The action film was subsequently embedded in the industrial logics of Hollywood during the early 1980s when producers started referring to the label ‘Action’ as a self-conscious genre-category⁴⁰. According to Andrew Britton⁴¹, the socio-political environment of the time also played a pivotal role, as the genre’s narrative logics that centered around offence and revenge are emblematic for a wider cycle of ‘Reaganite entertainment’ sweeping Hollywood in the 1980s. The action film’s focus on violent conflict made it an ideal ideological site of struggle through which many themes, fears and anxieties were be discussed, and therefore cemented its popularity amongst American audiences.

Authors such as Lisa Purse⁴² debate against the notion that the action film naturally progressed from the genre cinema of the 1970s. Whereas it’s true that these film share many similarities with the revenge films and post-traumatic cycle of the time⁴³, it could be argued that the action film is a continuation of underlying forces that predates even New Hollywood. Both Yvonne Tasker⁴⁴ and Jonna Eagle⁴⁵ trace the cinematic rhetoric of the genre back to that spectacular melodrama of early cinema. For Eagle the two share a similar affective agenda as she constitutes the action film to be ‘a privileged site for the melodramatic merger of morality and feeling’⁴⁶. What ties the ends of this merger together is that vulnerability and victimhood account for the moral sensations propelling the genre’s drive for action. These affective agenda are also in line with the often imperialist ideologies of the genre, since the power of the imperialist subject ‘depends upon a simultaneous repression of and insistence on the conditions of injurability’⁴⁷. Action films are a type of cinema that centers around power and domination, presenting narratives about crisis, reaction and, eventually, resolution. In this respect the American action

film can be defined as both a generic category and political means of expression. As a genre the action film might have took definitive form during the cultural wars of Reaganite America, but as a mode it is equally embedded in the imperialist affects of melodrama. These films all feature a loss of power, followed by a restoration of these power positions by violent displays of will. For this reason Harvey O'Brien⁴⁸ claims it is a cinema of trauma and post-traumatic tensions in which heroes are placed in situations of stress and unease to remain heroes or reclaim their position as such. The action film can therefore be considered to derive its popularity from its ability to engage their audiences in a narrative system where anxieties are first developed and subsequently resolved through violent retribution.

Accordingly, the narrative structure of the action film usually consist of a three-act structure of survival, resistance and revenge⁴⁹. In the course of the story's plot, the hero is first tested, then traumatized and eventually emerges triumphant. The narrative start with situations in which the hero either carries with him a form of trauma or, as is more often the case, is subjected to a traumatic experience at the hand of the film's antagonist. Action heroes are, in Elsaesser's⁵⁰ words, 'reaction heroes'. This is what makes the action cinema as a 'cinema of striking back – of restoration and reassurance'⁵¹. If we follow Eagle's affective interpretation of the genre, it's evident to see how the legitimization of the hero's violent actions partially lies in his status of victimhood. By departing from a situation of disempowerment audiences are delivered with an affect-laden interpretative framework for understanding and condoning whatever form of vindication that ensues. The reason why so many action films adopt this rhetoric of retaliation is because revenge operates as an powerful affective apparatus⁵². Holger Pötzsch⁵³ conceptualizes the actions of enemy actors leading to this dynamic of revenge as 'evil deeds'. As a narrative and ideological cornerstone of both the war and action film genre, these 'evil deeds' function to confirm the remorseless, inhumane nature of the enemy. By accordingly framing these enemy actors as unnegotiable, the revenge of the hero is thus implicitly warranted

not only because of the affective structure of humiliation/retaliation, but also because they are vested in a type of ‘doubtless necessity’⁵⁴.

Since the genre’s formative period is often considered vested in Reaganite America⁵⁵, many scholarly endeavors have been made into the construction of Vietnam as collective trauma within the genre. The majority of the research deals with notions of masculine empowerment in relations to national renewal. Most notably, Tasker⁵⁶ Susan Jeffords⁵⁷ provide an account of how the body of the male action hero became a site of suffering and triumph in light of the heroic restoration of a post-Vietnam America. This need for nationalist recovery is often narratively represented through a form of myth-making, as Gaylin Studlar and David Desser⁵⁸ noticed that through POW-myth America addressed and amended for its own military inadequacies. While such heroic images of Vietnam vets might appear to be embedded in notions of masculine omnipotence, Eagle⁵⁹ demonstrates that the ironically the Vietnam hero’s victimhood which lies at the source of their power. Sympathy stemming for the hero’s humiliation and failure and aggression towards the enemy perpetrators here function as two sides of the same coin. When shifting attention from the hero towards the role of enemyhood in the construction of this national trauma, we have to take in consideration on account of whom such heroic outings of the nation body find their redemption. Most often the ghost of the Vietnam War is seen exorcised by pitting traumatizes veterans against bureaucratic logic of big government which is reframed as the true responsible agent behind America’s loss⁶⁰. The enemy within is more often discussed to that of the enemy Other, since, as Ellen Draper⁶¹ notes, even when the enemy is shaped as a monstrous metaphor ‘the alien we engaged with in that war was not foreign but familiar’. However, despite addressing populist myths of anti-government rebellion and alien abjections, scholarly research does not go into great detail of how the generic archetype of the villain interacts with the remembrance of the Vietnam Conflict. This article

will further explore how enemy-others work as mnemonic locus-points through which guilt attribution and violent retaliation is discursively structured.

Vietnam, with a vengeance

To expand on this argument and illustrate the ideological power of traumatic revisiting I will discuss the treatment of the Vietnam War as cultural specter in 1980s American action cinema in relation to enemy image construction through a thematic analysis. With this new conservatism as political backdrop, the American action film genre aided in this republican recuperation of the Vietnam Conflict. These films present a purgation of traumatic anxieties through interventionist violence actions against ruthless enemies, both old and new. As part of a first explorative phase, a thematic analysis was conducted of action films in the 1981-1988 period. While being a long-established form of genre studies methodology, the thematic analysis has become increasingly rare amongst film scholars. The benefits that a thematic analysis yields is that it allows us to look at a relatively large sample of films and find larger patterns in representation⁶². Evidently, the methodology is at its most useful when combined with a more in depth textual analysis of individual films. Michael Shull⁶³, for example, conducted a thematic analysis and complemented this with a close reading of specific film texts in his exhaustive filmography of the Hollywood war film. To set up my analysis dominant themes and enemy identities were measured and clustered in different categories¹. The coding of themes took place by coding the conflicts, historical characters and wider geo-political events that featured in the film. Enemy identities were measured in a second cycle by coding every

¹IMDB was used to compose a selection of 40 films based on the label 'Action'. Films were selected by combining the highest grossing films, as an indicator of past popularity, with the highest number of votes, as an indicator of present popularity, in the action film genre. Science-fiction and fantasy films were excluded from the sample as obtain a sample that did not deal outside of the realm of past and contemporary geopolitics. This data is part of a larger research project. For a complete list of analyzed films please contact the author.

villain character present in the film sample, resulting in a total number of 285 coded enemy characters. For this coding cycle variables such as ethnicity, nationality, gender, sexuality and roles were taken into consideration. It's important to note that in coding the variable of the 'Vietnam War', the conflict was read as more than a specific time period or geographical location featured in these films. Much rather than being an historical event, and as is often the case in the representation of national trauma, the action film was seen to refer to the conflict precisely because of its lack of representation. Through evocative referencing and backstory allusions, for example, these films can integrate the Vietnam War into the narrative without revisiting the actual time and place of the conflict.

Results from this macro-analysis show that the theme of the Vietnam War was present in over 40% of the selected films. However, the manner in which the conflict made its appearance should be noted to differ greatly. To better grasp the dynamics of traumatic representation in relation to the genre, I propose a typology of ways in which the American action film engages with the conflict. Here I propose a typology in representing the Vietnam War as 1) narrative setting, 2) thematic backdrop and 3) individual/cultural haunting. The films using Vietnam as narrative setting relate to films that use the conflict, as Langford⁶⁴ articulated, as a 'mythic landscape across which symbolic narratives of American male selfhood are enacted'. Here the conflict is recreated by a group of characters returning to the place of battle in order to symbolically win a lost conflict. Representative for this type of film are *Missing in Action* (1984) and *Rambo: First Blood Part II* (1985). Within such narratives Douglas Kellner⁶⁵ recognizes an inability to accept defeat, in which America tried to fantasize of victory in its media culture to compensate for its actual military failures. While these heavy handed allegories of American dominance has been subjected most intensively to scholarly analysis, these should be recognized as only one of the modes through which the Vietnam War manifests itself and propose to steer away from them in favor of more subtle types of traumatic remembrance. Only

a relatively small percentage of 10% (partially) utilize Vietnam as setting, and except for one film, all these narratives are set post-conflict. The presence of the Vietnam Conflict is most notably defined in the genre by its absence. These films seldom offer an attempt of direct referencing or representing actual events, but rather offer an abstract and subjective account of the Vietnam War with the veteran character as victim-intermediary for delivering these horrifying experiences.

Subsequently a distinction can be made between Vietnam as thematic backdrop and as an individually/culturally embedded trauma. In the first category filmmakers use Vietnam as way to easily inject context and/or backstory into the narrative. The usage of Vietnam veterans as villains in films such as *Blue Thunder* (1983) and *Lethal Weapon* (1987) is an example of how these events are utilized as cultural markers, quickly rendering relevance and meaning to generic plot structures. Despite featuring several Vietnam veteran characters, *Lethal Weapon* is not really about Vietnam, but simply uses the Vietnam legacy as a kit of variables through which a classic genre narrative receives characterization. This is different from films in which the conflict is an ubiquitous force driving the actions of the protagonist. In the third category, which is the most present manifestation in the genre, the Vietnam War functions as both a personal and national trauma pushing the narrative forward. I argue that such abstractions of the Vietnam War do not lessen its discursive power, but are precisely what renders it its potency. The memory of national loss can reach beyond that of an historical event becomes a type of emotional state that the hero protagonist, and by effect the tone for the film, is situated in.

Over a quarter of these film explicitly deal with the theme of posttraumatic stress or the societal rehabilitation of soldiers post-conflict. It's therefore no surprise that many of the heroes in the film are recovering war veterans that have trouble to adjust to life back home. Heroes of films such as *Forced Vengeance* (1982), *Firefox* (1982), *Blue Thunder* (1983), *Year of the Dragon* (1985), to name a few, are all emotionally scarred at the start of the narrative. Serving in the

Vietnam War and now coping with forms of PTSD, these characters attempt to reintegrate into American civil life or withdraw from it altogether. In accordance with the generic structures of the action film, the hero starts from a demasculinated position of powerlessness. Interestingly enough, while these events usually take place through the course of the film's first act, the traumatic experience of the Vietnam War is here engrained in the protagonist's psyche before the start of the syuzhet, only to be briefly mentioned by way of flashback or expositional referencing. The conflict is here integrated into what Neal King⁶⁶ considers to be the inner demons of the action hero. Burdened by self-doubt and neurosis, these characters struggle with their position of law enforcer or soldier in a world which they can no longer control.

Trauma as antagonistic adhesive

The narrative importance of the hero's traumatic wounds are most apparent in Michael Cimino's *Year of the Dragon*. When police detective Stanley White starts investigating a Triad takeover in Chinatown at the start of the film, he is a workaholic wreck whose life and marriage are on the verge of collapsing. The personal and national tragedies of losing the war weigh heavily on him, as he's constantly reminded by his superiors that he's not in Vietnam anymore, and therefore has to move on with his life. As is common in the genre, Stanley soon finds himself confronted with the forces of the past he hoped to escape. Framing the Chinatown gang wars as an extension of South-East Asian domination, the film's hero receives a shot at redemption by battling the Chinese druglords waging a war within America. Not only are the films' Chinese villains put in a chain of equivalence with the communist threat or 'yellow peril' of the Vietnam Conflict, but the symbolic struggle is further recreated by pitting the nonsense approach of Stanley against the inefficient hesitance of his superiors. When Stanley is reprimanded for violating civil liberties and causing collateral damage, he blatantly observes that "this is Vietnam all over again". The struggles of Stanley are hereby analogized with that

of the Vietnam Conflict: both are framed as conflicts where determined individuals knew what had to be done, but were prevented from winning by the red tape of lackluster bureaucrats. As the example above illustrates, filmmakers adopt the memory of the Vietnam War into the generic structure of traumatic violation and violent retaliation. The imperial subject position of the action hero as trauma victim can be seen as offering a frame through which conflict – both past and contemporary – is discursively negotiated.

Action films offer a focalization that relies heavily on subjective experiences and emotional states, thus making them suitable for establishing affective relationships of antagonism and moments of vicarious witnessing. The drum of post-traumatic stress is tightened throughout these films not only by way of explicit referencing, but also formally. Foremost these films recall the traumatic passages the hero had to endure by subjecting the character (and with him the audience) to brief, yet brutal, flashbacks. This way the trauma is always present, ready to be recalled at any time, sustaining the traumatic tensions set up at the start of the film. Here experimental, modernist stylistic strategies of representing trauma, often described as ‘trauma aesthetics’⁶⁷ find their way into popular genre cinema. Textual techniques built around notions of disturbance and fragmentation, most known from films such as *Hiroshima mon amour* (1959), are here adopted to bring the evil actions of the enemies of the past violently back into the present. Similarly to *First Blood* (1981) and *Missing in Action*, the war veteran hero in *Firefox* is repeatedly subjected to traumatic flashbacks taunting him with his failures in Vietnam. During critical moments in the story when he strenuously performs heroic actions he relives the traumas of torture underwent in the Vietnamese prison camp. With every shot fired during the film’s climactic dogfight, he is thrust back to the horrors within his personal history. This type of associational editing brings the pains of the past of both the action hero and the nation back to the surface. The Vietnam War here becomes a type of antagonistic adhesive that ties together the hero’s victimization at the hand of old enemies with the vindication against

new ones. *Firefox* manages to avoid the problematic legacy of the Vietnam war by diverting the attention to the threat of a Soviet superweapon that gives the Russian the possibility to win the Cold War. The old adage of “losing the battle, but not losing the war” thus comes to life as the film's hero is given the opportunity to make amends for past failures by drawing power from his traumatic experiences in the fight against an even bigger evil.

Within the formal properties of the film, these flashback sequences function as ‘backstory wounds’⁶⁸, associated with the ‘bending, shortening, or destabilization of the intra-filmic timeline; traumatic iconographies; sounds that allegorize the past’. In these instances audiences are put into a position of vicarious witnessing. *Firefox*'s pained hero becomes our vehicle for living through the horrific experiences of the Vietnam War as we're asked to emotionally engage with the protagonist during such moment of traumatic revisiting. Not only do action films use the bodies of their heroes as a site of political contestation, but through empathic allegiances with these characters audiences are also involved into a ‘geopolitics of affect’⁶⁹ in which the suffering of the individual and the nation are entwined. Such esthetically articulated traumatic hauntings are important because of their potential to form bridges between past grievances and contemporary resentments. By recalling and reenacting the traumatic event, these events are thus actualized and have the potential to be applied as a politically charged analogy. The character of the Vietnam veteran is here embalmed and mourned in ways that reiterate hegemonic discourses on interventionist politics. These heroes are turned into figures of martyrdom, ready to be exploited for commemorative practices. The audience is further encouraged to adopt the subject position of the victim war vet by a series of formal characteristics evoking the psychological torment of post-traumatic stress. The aesthetics of *Firefox*'s Vietnam flashbacks are often defined by their fragmented and instable nature, since they attempt to simulate the way trauma intrudes into the psychological condition. Another layer of meaning added to this textual strategy is that these flashbacks are shot in the style of

Vietnam newsreel footage – sometimes even utilizing actual historical documentary material. Such visual register is adopted to create what Astrid Erll⁷⁰ refers to as an ‘effet de reel’; an audiovisual reference point implying an indexical link between the story and the historical events it represents.

Out of the past, onto the battlefield

By placing the traumatic loss of the Vietnam war into a larger narrative of heroic revival, the memory of Vietnam is attempted to be overwritten by a set of myths that discursively forge victory out of defeat. This type of hero-making, however, forms only one side of the coin in the process of commemoration noted in these films. The cultivation of the affective bonds forged between the audience and the hero-victim serve a second agenda in demonizing the enemy perpetrators of these cruel actions. The Vietnam War and its ubiquitously absent enemies position as antagonistic adhesive works to hold the narrative together by creating a relentless state of threat throughout the film’s duration –stemming from past traumas and future fears. Firstly, a tone of loss is cultivated by conjuring up the specters of the Vietnam War. The affective patterning makes many of these film start in a melancholic mood stemming from the defeat and demasculization of the hero, a sentiment that’s further intensified through repeated flashbacks to the hero’s wartime traumas. In such scenes the Vietnamese enemy is dug up from the past and reinstated in the position of violent foe. Vietnamese soldiers, rebels and civilians alike are here represented as cruel, sadistic agents of evil, with barbarism belonging to their more defining characters. The actions these actors most often engage in are those that sustain discourses of their cruelty and primitiveness. Torture, mutilation betrayal and sexually violent conduct, such as featured in *Firefox* and *Missing in Action*, belong to the bag of tricks the action film employs in reaffirming such enemy images. Such aforementioned stereotypes build on discourses that perpetuated during the Vietnam Conflict and are recycled precisely on account

of being well-established in the cultural memory. To give form to this Vietnam enemy, filmmakers even recycled representation from other genres and conflicts. A striking resemblance can, for example, be noted between the portrayal of the Vietnam POW forces and that of Japanese camp commanders in 1950s war films such as *Three Came Home* (1950) and *The Bridge on the River Kwai* (1957). The result is a villain archetype that is a hybrid of social and cinematic stereotypes that have perpetuated over decades in cultural history. Because stereotypes can be considered schemata of meaning partially organized within networks of memory and experience⁷¹, by building on representations of the past, these films also interact with wider Orientalist, anti-communist and generally jingoist sentiments. The Vietnam War memory boom that took place in the 1980s action film – and wider popular culture – in this sense aided in the revitalization of the Cold War. Reviving the Vietnamese villain in American popular culture, the action film proves to be a nodal point in a wider discursive network that affirms Reaganite perspectives on foreign policy.

More than just featuring a new wave of communist screen villains, these films also aided in establishing a new aesthetic for the Vietnam War villain. By incorporating Vietnam villain characters in the ‘trauma aesthetics’ of the post-war flashback, a formal strategy was introduced or refined that constructed enemies through traumatic abstraction. Pötzsch⁷² noted of the portrayal of enemy-others in Vietnam war films as being characterized by ubiquitous absence, or ‘hidden, inaccessible, incomprehensible yet potentially omnipresent as a deadly threat’. In the American action film we are dealing with an extension of this formal strategy of dehumanization. Here enemies are not only ubiquitously absent, but also psychologically pervasive. Despite relating to previous struggles these foes are an omnipresent force existing in the heroes’ consciousness. Building on an intimate focalization stemming from character experiences, the enemy poses a problem that extends beyond the physical and into the realm of the psychological/emotional. The traumatic flashbacks of the enemy here operates as a moment

of shock and surprise, keeping both the protagonist and the audience painfully reminded of the enemy's actions. This strategy of enemy image construction makes the enemy more a symbolic danger than a physical problem since they are now completely stripped from the need of context to appear onscreen. With the mental arena as their battlefield and the flashback as their weapon, these enemies can strike at any time and subject the hero to moments of torture and humiliation. Their presence is therefore more taunt than threat; a systematic reminder of the demasculinization the hero underwent.

The re-introduction of the Vietnam War villain is not the only aspect aiding in the fixation of these discourses. Once these traumatic tensions are established, the generic framework of the action film and the rhetoric of revenge it follows, permits them to be directed towards other villains. As the thematic analysis showed, only 10% of the film sample feature Vietnamese villain characters. While the remaining villains identities are both ethically and nationally diverse, the action film does feature a proportionally high number of villains with Soviet-Russian (18%), other Asian (20%) and Latin-American (35%) nationalities. What these enemies have in common is that under the antagonistic adhesive of the Vietnam war, they are all discursively chained together as unified threat. The Vietnam War is systematically referred to as laying at the basis of these villains' newfound dominance, before being interlinked with the Reagan Doctrine, or even Reagan's War on Drugs. The memory of the conflict and its implied adversaries was strategically employed through political discourse by the Reagan administration in a similar fashion and further fueled anti-communist sentiments. Reagan repeatedly referred to the Soviets as the '*focus of evil*' and it's precisely this Manichean consideration that the action film articulates by placing the communist front in the role of past, present and possible future enemy of the free West. The majority of these films are accordingly built on two types of narratives, both relating to continuations of past struggles. Either these stories are centered on new chapters in the Cold War, such as the fight for Afghanistan in *Rambo*

III (1987), or about past fights left unfinished and therefore having led to new problems. For example, films as *The Evil That Men Do* (1984), *Invasion USA* (1985) and *Iron Eagle* (1986) start from the nation's past failures and respectively turn the spotlights of state sanctioned violence towards corrupt Latin-American governments, Soviet terrorism and Arab dictatorships. Many of these cases thus offer a rhetoric of revenge in which the legitimacy in fighting the enemies of the present is built on the lost or unfinished battles still lingering in the American cultural memory.

Settling the score

As argued above, the ideological and affective logic of national revitalization through violent retaliation can be noted as the driving force of both the 1980s American action film and Reaganite rhetoric around foreign policy. The Reagan doctrine was built on the belief of necessary global rollback of communism, to be achieved by way of an intensified militarization and covert action programs in countries governed by socialist regimes or considered as 'failed states'. Justifying the military actions undertaken in countries such as Nicaragua, Angola and Afghanistan, to name a few, could only be achieved by building on a vested belief in the threat of a globally active 'red terror'. After all, drawing on the pain stemming from past wounds provided the Reagan administration with the aggressive anima needed to legitimize such new military endeavors. Paralleling this political discourse, the myths the action film distilled out of collective memory functioned through an affective logic in which agency lost due to past offences had to be retained through violent acts of vengeance. In the process Soviet adversaries and other antagonists were demonized and rendered as ungrivable lives⁷³. The cause and effect structure through which the genre functions offers a dialectics of violence in which the film's villains inflict suffering on a hero or his beloved, who then has to avenge these injustices and humiliations by vanquishing the foe who placed him in this situation (or another type of enemy)

proved an ideal framework for understating the remasculinization of America as superpower. Trauma had become a type of narrative topoi through which violent conflict gets contextualized and justified. Or as O'Brien⁷⁴ concludes for the Vietnam action hero: 'In acting he dramatizes both the inner struggles of himself and the outer struggles of America on the whole in physically processing the Vietnam experience'.

How traumatic remembrance and violent retaliation are interlinked is effectively illustrated in the Clint Eastwood starring and directed film *Heartbreak Ridge* (1986). Here Eastwood plays an ageing and dysfunctional, yet highly decorated, war veteran assigned with the task to train a team of new army recruits. In line with the genre's conventions, the hero copes with issues of post-traumatic stress stemming from his failures in Vietnam. This failure on a personal level is complemented by a failure on a national scale, as the film presents a demasculinized vision of America, in which the country's means of self-defense now rest in the hands of hippies, bureaucrats and "faggots". For *Heartbreak Ridge*, a post-Vietnam America is an America stripped of its heroic status. Or as one character summarizes in accordance with the theme of the film: 'We're 0-1-1 [...] No wins. One tie, Korean, and one loss, Vietnam'. When the stationed army troops are deployed for the invasion of Grenada in the third act of the film, both Clint Eastwood and America receive their chance for atonement. The entry of new conflict is here structured as a rite of national restoration. By invading Grenada and eliminating 'Cuban regulars with Russian rifles' holding captive a collection of American medical students, the film frames an actual – not to mention, very politically contested – passage of Reaganite foreign policy not only as just, but also as a way for the nation to redeem itself by offering a symbolic blow in the battle against communism. This way the construction of the Vietnam loss in Hollywood action films functions as an ideological thumbnail that tied together the discursive shift America underwent under Reagan from perpetrator to victim, and ultimately back to its perceived place of superior state force.

Authors such as Ryan and Kellner⁷⁵ consider the cinematic treatment of the Vietnam War as national trauma to be the result of a state promoted discursive negotiation. Whereas it's definitely the case that these films implicitly aided in the political projects of Reaganite foreign policy, I take a critical stance towards considering this type of trauma work as stemming from the rigid regulation of Hollywood's cultural output by the Regan administration. Instead of considering the American action film genre as a form of policy sanctioned propaganda, a more satisfactory account for these representations would be to consider them as the result of an elaborate interplay between regimes of verisimilitude⁷⁶. The generic verisimilitude of the action film demands a melodramatic narrative of enacted wrongdoing and ensuing violent retribution. While the mythic template of these films lend themselves to many themes, commercially oriented filmmakers attempt to tell stories that resonate with contemporary audiences and adhere to a certain cultural verisimilitude. In the Vietnam War filmmakers found a set of culturally engaging variables which were not only particularly fitting to the genre's conventions, but also proved to be suitable for screenwriters, directors and producers searching actuality and societal relevance in otherwise interchangeable narratives. This article therefore doesn't argue that the American action film delivered a deliberate reactionary representation of American warfare. Much rather I believe that the melodramatic structures of trauma and triumph lay at the heart of how American conflict both past and present was, and continues to be, legitimized.

The collective trauma of the conflict thus functions as an affective framework ensuring the hero's struggle as righteous and the villain's deeds entwined with a longer legacy of American adversities. Filmmakers adopt these traumatic histories because they occupy a part of a wider cultural memory and easily fit in the genre's narratives organization. Nevertheless, even though national trauma is employed as a cultural marker that aids in contextualizing and condoning acts of violence, I consider the genre's antagonistic structures to work just as effectively for

audiences who aren't familiar with, nor emotionally invested in, these histories. Rather than forming the crux of the narrative, the engagement with American national traumas sticks to the genre's melodramatic structures as a second skin. This ensures that even a global audience can find appeal in the push and pull coming from heroic loss and redemption, whilst in the process reframing a strictly national trauma as a universal one⁷⁷. For this reason, within the violent melodrama of the action film, the Vietnam War can be easily interchanged with other collective traumas as antagonistic adhesive. It could be argued, for example, that 9/11, and even the Iraq war, were mediated and adopted in a similar structure during the more recent outings of the genre – a conclusion that Prince's⁷⁸ observations on the rise of vengeance narratives post 9/11 surely confirms.

Conclusion

Upon being inaugurated for the position as president, Reagan famously stated '*It is time for us to realize that we're too great a nation to limit ourselves to small dreams*'⁷⁹. The new conservatism and American exceptionalism of the 1980s coincided with a belief in America's reinvigoration from damaged nation back into position of global superpower. Recovering the Vietnam War as a well-meant but ill-fated undertaking from the collective memory was strongly embedded in the discursive structures which the Reagan administration attempted to establish. It is evident that post-memory representations should be considered something highly politicized. Traumatic narratives contribute to more than the remembrance of events and the formation of national identities, but are powerful markers of meaning that potentially form discursive weapons; armed and ready to serve hegemonic projects. In the American action film I recognize a site that implicitly supported this heroic recuperation of the Vietnam War. The rhetoric of wrongdoings and revenge that rule the action film could easily adopt the likes of national trauma for its cultural relevance and integrate these painful pasts in a generic framework that creates and combats new enemies.

By defining what is traumatic, who is to blame and directing compensatory action, the American action film thus successfully weaponized trauma. Within the melodramatic structures of the genre the Vietnam War functioned as antagonistic adhesive to the legitimization of violent retaliation against an ideological or ethnic Other. This resulted in a surge of anti-communist sentiments in the genre and the dawn of a type of enemy image construction where enemies are rendered as psychologically pervasive that haunt both the hero and the nation. Furthermore, such affectively engaged reenactment of American history also fueled feelings of loss and humiliation. Commemoration and trauma form a wider web of historic referents together, layered with antecedents and cause/effects relations. In this sense, traumatic events enter as nodal points in wider chains of equivalence of discourses on the self, the enemy and

the victim⁸⁰. By structuring the Vietnam War in the genre's framework of national humiliation and heroic vindication, the action film genre inadvertently aided in the affirmation of Reaganite discourses on American foreign policy. The likes of trauma might be located in the past, but its wounds still provide fruitful soil for the cultivation of new conflicts.

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