CRITICIZING WAR THROUGH HOLLYWOOD

ANTI-WAR SENTIMENT IN OLIVER STONE’S VIETNAM WAR FILM TRILOGY

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ABSTRACT

This research examines Oliver Stone’s Vietnam War film trilogy, which consists of Platoon (1986), Born on the Fourth of July (1989), and Heaven & Earth (1993), and analyzes theme-based scenes that visually represent U.S. anti-war sentiment against the Vietnam War. The chosen themes are dominant and major themes regarding the war, namely PTSD, violence, and death. Inspired by the work of David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, I will use two cinematic techniques – mise-en-scène and cinematography – for the analyses of the scenes. This project aims to distinguish the ways a theme is embedded in each film and ultimately, it will answer the question of how Stone’s Vietnam War films differ from each other in portraying U.S. anti-war sentiment against the Vietnam War.

Keywords: Oliver Stone, Platoon (1986), Born on the Fourth of July (1989), Heaven & Earth (1993), Vietnam War, anti-war sentiment, PTSD, violence, death, mise-en-scène, cinematography
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INTRODUCTION

Oliver Stone once said, “I’ve been to war, and it’s not easy to kill. It’s bloody and messy and totally horrifying and the consequences are serious” (Tritle 163). Stone fought as a U.S. infantryman during the Vietnam War between 1967 and 1968, and used his military experiences for his filmmaking career. He rose to prominence as a film director and writer with *Platoon* (1986), which is the first film of the Vietnam War film trilogy that he made, followed by *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989) and *Heaven & Earth* (1993). This trilogy contributes to the general view of U.S. society on the Vietnam War, which was predominantly negative. Opposition to U.S. involvement in the war led to the rise of an anti-war movement initiated by a liberal minority group. This anti-war movement eventually became one of the most prominent social movements in U.S. history. The Vietnam War was also seen as the first war in which the United States was not victorious, unlike previous wars, such as World War I, World War II, and the Korean War. Stone’s trilogy shows realistic aspects of the Vietnam War and, as I will show in this thesis, it also expresses criticism.

Stone’s Vietnam War films, primarily *Platoon*, have been used as examples to analyze the effects of the war as well as the role of the cinema in historical events. Zuzana Hodbod’ová, for example, researched themes of the Vietnam War that contributed to the U.S. public opinion on the war and how those themes were represented in literature, music, and films, among which Stone’s trilogy. Raya Morag, on the other hand, opened up a discussion about cinematic representations of the war through the concept of defeated masculinity and argues that films made after the war tried to repress the sense of defeat, though not successfully. Morag used Stone’s trilogy as an example to substantiate her argument, but did so in combination with other Vietnam War films. Oliver Gruner, then, focused on *Platoon* to analyze “multifarious ways in which history manifests itself in and around a film” (Gruner 374). This means that scholars have researched both the Vietnam War and films about the war in an interrelated manner. However, not much research has been conducted on Stone’s trilogy itself and how Stone tried to embody criticism against the war. The films have been researched separately in relation to discussions of cinematic representations of the war. Hodbod’ová, Morag, and Gruner have touched upon several elements of Stone’s Vietnam War films, but not in terms of criticism or the trilogy as a collected series.

Stone’s trilogy primarily focuses on the portrayal of the Vietnam War. However, each film does so in its own way, because each film focuses on different aspects of the war. *Platoon*, as it is
based on Stone’s experience as an infantryman, gives a detailed image of life in combat during the Vietnam War. It was the first film in the history of the Hollywood cinema that was both written and directed by a Vietnam War veteran, making it an exemplary Vietnam War film. It follows the experiences of the protagonist private first class Chris Taylor, a naïve U.S. military volunteer, in an infantry platoon in Vietnam. The story begins in the year 1967, when the anti-war movement in the United States had gained increasingly more followers, and ends in the year 1968, the years in which Stone himself fought in Vietnam. The film primarily incorporates military events that visually represent the reasons for opposition to the war.

Born on the Fourth of July follows the journey of another Vietnam War veteran, Ron Kovic. The protagonist U.S. marine Ron Kovic is yet another naïve volunteer to join the U.S. military and eventually becomes a peace campaigner. The story is set in the period between 1956 and 1976 but, like Platoon, visuals of combat take place in 1967 and 1968. However, rather than focusing on the combat side of the war, this film offers more of an insight about traumatic experiences during the war.

Heaven & Earth, on the other hand, gives an entirely different point of view, as it is based on the experiences of the Vietnamese war survivor Le Ly Hayslip. This film tells the story of the experiences of the Vietnamese protagonist Le Ly during and after the war, starting in 1950 and concluding thirteen years after it had ended. It captures emotional moments of her life which indicate the dramatic effects of U.S. military involvement in Vietnam.

All three films were made after the war, as it was controversial to make Hollywood films about the war when it had not ended yet. According to John Belton, during peacetime, Hollywood was free to produce war films to express anti-war sentiment exposing the hypocrisy, incompetence, and insanity of the military establishment. With the exception of The Green Berets (1968), which was the only film about the Vietnam War made during the war itself, virtually every other film about the Vietnam War took an antiwar stance that was critical either of U.S. political policy that led to involvement in the war or of the physical, emotional, and psychological damage incurred by servicemen in Vietnam (217). This is also the case in Stone’s trilogy. In my opinion, Stone’s trilogy stands out because it successfully projects a period in U.S. history which “shook the very fabric of American society and threatened to finally destroy the belief in American exceptionalism” (McCriskens and Pepper 132), making them eminent films worth analyzing. It is also remarkable that Stone made three memorable Vietnam War films that examine different aspects of the war,
for which he was critically acclaimed, but that they have not been researched in relation to anti-war sentiment. Although the films do not build upon each other, they are still related to each other in terms of subject and attitude towards the war. By looking at the given descriptions of the films, one might still ask how they criticize U.S. involvement in the war. To answer that question, it is necessary to look at the films in greater detail. This thesis will, therefore, analyze several parts of the films as a means to answer the question: how do the films of Oliver Stone’s Vietnam War film trilogy differ from each other in portraying U.S. anti-war sentiment against the Vietnam War?

The concept of anti-war sentiment against the Vietnam War is covertly present in Stone’s trilogy. It is, therefore, necessary to use film theory in order to capture the essence of each film and relate it to specific themes that Stone used to criticize the war. In order to do so, I will analyze the cinematic techniques that are used in each of his Vietnam War films. This thesis focuses on two particular cinematic techniques explained by David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson – mise-en-scène and cinematography – as a means to distinguish the parts of each film that visually represent reasons for opposition to the war. This choice is not made as a means to denounce other cinematic techniques or to deem them as less important, but merely to narrow down the analyses of the films and the scope of this thesis. Mise-en-scène represents how a scene is set up and offers “four general areas: setting, costumes and makeup, lighting, and staging” (Bordwell and Thompson 115), with movement and performance as subareas of staging, and cinematography entails the control of “cinematographic qualities of the shot – not only what is filmed, but also how it is filmed. Cinematographic qualities involve three factors: the photographic aspects of the shot, the framing of the shot, and the duration of the shot” (Bordwell and Thompson 162). I will use these cinematic techniques to analyze three themes: post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), violence, and death, and how each film conveys them. It should be noted that not all aspects of mise-en-scène and cinematography can be used to analyze a scene within the given scope. However, I will try to include as many aspects as possible in the analysis of a scene.

The themes, which are interrelated as well as closely related to the Vietnam War and are then also embedded in Stone’s trilogy, are the most dominant and major themes regarding the war. Each film touches upon these themes not only to visualize the horrors of the war, but also to give a sense of realism. The films were made during a time in which the controversy of the war was still fresh in the minds of those who fought in Vietnam as well as those who opposed U.S. involvement. They were still haunted by matters such as PTSD, violence, and death. Trevor B.
McCrisken and Andrew Pepper explain that *Platoon* opened the way for mainstream Hollywood to confront combat in Vietnam and had a major impact on the processes of coming to terms with the experience of Vietnam that occupied American culture from the mid-1980s into the early 1990s. It did so with what was widely hailed as unprecedented realism (133). In other words, the sense of realism, in a way, worked soothingly. However, I intend to relate the notion of realism to the given themes in order to capture the criticism in the films. PTSD, violence, and death related events severely affected people involved in the war and thus, they justify the criticism of the people who were against the war.

Chapter 1 will focus on the first theme – PTSD – and provide specific scenes of all the films that can be related to PTSD. The chapter will start with an introduction about the theme, followed by scenes from *Platoon, Born on the Fourth of July* and *Heaven & Earth* respectively, creating a chronological coherence. Throughout the chapter, similarities and differences between the films in terms of PTSD will be given as to see how the theme is embedded in each film. The same method will be adopted in chapters 2 and 3. Chapter 2 will focus on the second theme – violence – and provide specific scenes of all the films that concern violence. This chapter will also start with an introduction about the theme, followed by scenes from the trilogy. Similarities and differences between the films in terms of violence will be given accordingly. Chapter 3, then, will focus on the third and last theme – death – and provide specific scenes of all the films that revolve around death. Subsequently, this chapter will also start with an introduction about the theme, followed by scenes from the trilogy as well as similarities and differences between the films in terms of death.

There are, of course, many other themes in each film that can be analyzed, but that means the scope of the thesis has to be extended. The chosen themes can be related to every war that took place, which means that they are recurring themes, rather than themes that can only be found in Stone’s trilogy. This will, then, also show how Stone dealt with such major themes in his films and how anti-war sentiment can be perceived through them.
1. **The Vietnam War and PTSD**

The concept of trauma has been closely related to war veterans, especially those of the Vietnam War. The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration explains that:

Trauma results from an event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or threatening and that has lasting adverse effects on the individual’s functioning and physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being (7).

A traumatic experience can be distinguished from an experience of a different form of emotional distress, such as shock or horror, by its lasting effects on the mental health. As the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration states:

Initial reactions to trauma can include exhaustion, confusion, sadness, anxiety, agitation, numbness, dissociation, confusion, physical arousal, and blunted affect. Indicators of more severe responses include continuous distress without periods of relative calm or rest, severe dissociation symptoms, and intense intrusive recollections that continue despite a return to safety. Delayed responses to trauma can include persistent fatigue, sleep disorders, nightmares, fear of recurrence, anxiety focused on flashbacks, depression, and avoidance of emotions, sensations, or activities that are associated with the trauma, even remotely (61).

This means that a traumatic experience has a more severe and long-lasting impact on the psychological well-being that can, in turn, adversely affect the physical health.

According to J. Douglas Bremner, traumatic stressors such as early trauma can lead to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which affects about 8% of Americans at some time in their lives (445). This means that trauma has PTSD as a potential effect. PTSD, then, can be defined as a “psychiatric disorder that can result from the experience or witnessing of traumatic or life-threatening events such as terrorist attack, violent crime and abuse, military combat, natural disasters, serious accidents or violent personal assaults” (Iribarren et al. 503-504). During the Vietnam War, many traumatic events took place that affected those who experienced or witnessed them. In this chapter, I will look at how PTSD is embedded in each film of Stone’s trilogy by looking at and analyzing scenes that portray trauma, as to gain a deeper understanding of how Stone used this theme as an artistic representation to criticize the war. The method that will be applied to analyze the scenes is the use of mise-en-scène and cinematography, as mentioned in the
introduction. Some analyses will be supported by images but this cannot be done for all the shots, considering the fact that the essence of some scenes cannot be captured with a single image.

1.1 Trauma in *Platoon*

Out of Stone’s three Vietnam War films, *Platoon* focuses the most on the combat side of the war. The film, which is based on Stone’s own military experiences of the war, visually portrays what life as an infantryman was like in Vietnam and includes multiple combat footages. Besides the battle scenes, Stone also allows the viewer to become familiar with the experiences of infantrymen within a platoon. It has an effect of taking the viewer back in time, as if they were part of the unit, giving it a sense of realism.

The film opens with a scene in which infantrymen, including the naïve protagonist Chris Taylor, arrive in Vietnam. The camera captures a medium close-up, which “frames the body from the chest up” (Bordwell and Thompson 191), of Taylor, who is rubbing and squinting his eyes, trying to adjust to the brightness around him. This brightness is perceived through the light color of the background of the shot, which contrasts the dark green outfit that Taylor is wearing. A hand then enters the shot from the bottom left corner, pointing in the opposite direction, after which the camera moves to a shot of body bags being transported. The camera follows the movement of a body bag being carried by two men and zooms in on a pile of body bags. This indicates that Taylor is standing close to them. The camera then moves back to a medium long shot, in which “the human figure is framed from about the knees up […]” (Bordwell and Thompson 191) that permits “a nice balance of figure and surroundings” (Bordwell and Thompson 191), of Taylor and his fellow recruits. In this shot, Taylor is staged in the center of the frame, with his fellow recruits beside and behind him, which stresses his role as the central character. Charlie Sheen, who plays the role of Taylor, slightly pulls back his upper body and looks disgusted. His performance, which “consists of visual elements (appearance, gestures, facial expressions) and sound (voice, effects)” (Bordwell and Thompson 133), indicates that he has never seen corpses before. Altogether, the idea that is put forward here is that immediately after arriving, when Taylor has not even had the time yet to get used to the brightness, he is already confronted with the unsettling experience of facing dead bodies near him.

Taylor’s naïveté is further impaired when he witnesses the brutality of some of his comrades towards Vietnamese civilians. According to Leonard Quart and Albert Auster, Stone
understood just how fear, fatigue and rage could undermine some G.I.s’ sense of moral restraint and balance, and turn them into savages who massacre civilians and torch villages (147). This is portrayed in a scene almost halfway through the film, in which the skull of an innocent Vietnamese teenager is “smashed to pieces with the butt of a gun […]” (McCriskin and Pepper 134) by a fellow infantryman, Bunny. After Bunny hits the teenager for the first time, there is a close-up of Taylor slightly turning his face sideward and shutting his eyes tight while blood splatters on his face. According to Bordwell and Thompson, the close-up is traditionally the shot showing just the head, hands, feet, or a small object. It emphasizes facial expression, the details of a gesture, or a significant object (191). In this frame, it is used to highlight Taylor’s disgust by what is staged before him. The blood on his face suggests that he was standing right in front of the murder. The camera then moves to a low-angle framing, which “positions us as looking up at the framed materials” (Bordwell and Thompson 190), that captures Bunny slightly from the side aggressively hitting the teenager. This type of framing positions the viewer on the ground next to the teenager, witnessing, and almost even experiencing, the brute force that Bunny uses. One can, then, begin to imagine what such an experience might do to someone like Taylor, who witnesses it first-hand.

A similar violent crime is committed in a following scene, in which “a woman is shot in the head by Sergeant Barnes (Tom Berenger) because she will not be quiet […]” (McCriskin and Pepper 134). It occurs while Barnes, one of the leaders of the group, interrogates the chief of a Vietnamese village, her husband, about their affiliation with the North Vietnamese Army (NVA). As a means to defend her husband, she stands up to Barnes, shouting at him in Vietnamese, while he walks away from the quarrel. There is a medium long shot of Barnes, staged in the center of the frame, with on the left side and the right side two other soldiers only partly visible, which shifts the focus onto him. Barnes is positioned with his right side facing the camera, while he is leaning on a bamboo hut with his left arm. He then moves towards the camera until there is a medium close-up of him, slightly from the side, aiming his rifle with a straight face. The scars on his face can be seen clearly and, as an aspect of makeup, it reinforces “the impression of a hard, serious gaze” (Bordwell and Thompson 124). It characterizes Barnes as a hardened man. After Barnes fires, the camera moves to a medium close-up of the woman. Even though the top of her head is not visible in the frame, blood splatters into the frame from the top, which indicates where the bullet hit her. In a following medium close-up, the camera captures Taylor, with blood still visible
on his cheek, frowning and with his mouth slightly open. This tells the viewer that right after the previous scene, Taylor witnesses yet another murder of an innocent villager.

As a means to discover the truth, Barnes proceeds to grab the chief’s daughter and hold her at gunpoint. This shot, which is portrayed in Figure 1, is staged in such a way that the encounter between Barnes and the chief, as well as his family, is positioned in the center of the frame, with several infantrymen and villagers surrounding them, marking the focus of the scene. Barnes and the chief’s daughter are across from the chief and the distance between them can be measured through the corpse of the chief’s wife, whose headwound is facing towards the camera and becomes visible for the viewer. The camera is positioned from a straight-on angle which, according to Bordwell and Thompson, is the most common angle (190). This angle allows the viewer to be at the same height as Barnes and the chief, as the corpse of the chief’s wife is positioned lower in the frame and the heads of the three soldiers standing directly around them are cut out of the frame. This does not only increase the intensity of the situation, but it also indicates that Barnes, the chief, and his family are moved to the foreground of the shot. Bordwell and Thompson explain that any movement from background to foreground is a strong attention-getter. At moments like these, the mise-en-scène is preparing us for what will happen, and by arousing our expectations, the style engages us with the unfolding action (151-52). In other words, through this shot, the viewer might expect that Barnes will shoot the chief’s daughter, considering the fact that he already murdered the chief’s wife without even blinking. It also gives the viewer an idea of the horrors that both Americans and Vietnamese witnessed during the war.
1.2 Trauma in *Born on the Fourth of July*

Stone’s second Vietnam film, *Born on the Fourth of July*, is also based on the experiences of a Vietnam War veteran, which is similar to *Platoon*. It is based on the autobiography of veteran Ron Kovic. Contrary to its predecessor, though, this film focuses less on the combat side of the war. Instead, the main focus is the life of the naïve protagonist Ron Kovic after he returns as a paraplegic from Vietnam. The small part of the film that does convey combat footage – less than 20 minutes of the overall 145 minutes of running time is reserved for this – however, inhabits important events that capture traumatic experiences.

During a patrol, Kovic’s platoon accidentally hits an allied Vietnamese village. Kovic finds several hurt villagers, including a surviving baby, in a hut whom he tries to help but is forced to leave as the NVA is infiltrating the village. There is a medium shot, which “frames the human body from the waist up” (Bordwell and Thompson 191), of Kovic pointing to the bottom left corner of the frame. This movement, which coincides with him saying “The baby!” (32:44), shows where both the camera and the baby are positioned. It also represents Kovic’s moral sense, since he wants to, at least, help and save an innocent baby. The camera then turns to a medium long shot of three wounded villagers and the baby, which can be seen in Figure 2. The baby is staged in the center of the frame, surrounded by the villagers who appear as dark figures, while light is shed on the baby. In the words of Bordwell and Thompson, this sets up a scale of importance, emphasizing the protagonist or, in this case the baby, by making it the most frontal and clearly lit figure (126). This composition also contributes to the idea that only the baby is still alive. The camera then slowly zooms out towards a long shot. According to Bordwell and Thompson, in the long shot, figures are more prominent, but the background is dominant (191). By zooming out, Stone makes the figures appear smaller in comparison to the surrounding, which implies that they are becoming less important as the U.S. soldiers are leaving them. The camera is positioned from an angle somewhere between a high-angle, which “positions us looking down at the material within the frame” (Bordwell and Thompson 190), and a straight-on angle. This strongly suggests that this shot was Kovic’s view as he was forced out the door, which gives the scene an even more dramatic touch.
Another dramatic scene is presented through the subsequent killing of a fellow soldier. The scene starts with a medium long shot of a figure, staged on the right side of the frame, in front of the sun. Stone made use of backlighting which, “as the name suggests, comes from behind the subject filmed” (Bordwell and Thompson 126). As Bordwell and Thompson explain, used with no other sources of light, backlighting tends to create silhouettes (126), which is done here. The camera then moves to a medium shot of Kovic, slightly from the side, aiming and firing his rifle, which almost mirrors the shot of Barnes. The photographic aspect slow-motion is used when Kovic fires, used for emphasis and a way of dwelling on a moment of spectacle or high drama, as mentioned by Bordwell and Thompson (167-68). Accordingly, the camera turns to a medium shot of the figure, still a silhouette but now staged in the center of the frame, which puts a dramatic focus on him and indicates where the bullets hit him, as he falls back in slow-motion. A subsequent medium long shot captures four silhouettes attending the fallen figure, whose identities remain unknown. However, the camera quickly zooms in and changes the shot into a medium close-up, revealing the wounded figure to be an ally, Wilson, with blood on his chest. A close-up of Kovic follows. He has sweat on his face, his mouth is slightly parted, and the use of sidelight shows only one of his eyes. His eye makes small movements to the left and right, examining the body. The performance of Tom Cruise, who plays the role of Kovic, and the use of sidelight imply that he is confused and anxious to face the fact that he killed one of his comrades.

Kovic is reminded of his first traumatic experience when, after he has returned to the United States, he is giving a speech in his hometown about the war. It starts with a medium long shot of Kovic in his wheelchair and his Marine Corps Blue Dress uniform. The straight-on angle makes
the people sitting as well as a banner that reads “Our Vietnam veteran Ron” behind him visible. A man is wearing a ribbon, which suggests that he is the mayor or another person of importance. The banner is clearly dedicated to Kovic and thus, the entire setting creates the idea that Kovic is being honored. However, the camera captures Kovic from his left side and zooms in to a medium close-up from a lower angle, while a baby in the crowd starts to cry. This causes Kovic to stutter and slightly frown. The change in camera distance allows the viewer to see the rest of the banner, which reads “Kovic”, ensuring that it is indeed dedicated to him. A following close-up of several people in the crowd who look worried indicates that they have an idea of what is happening to Kovic. The camera then returns to Kovic, moving to a low-angle shot, with the baby still crying in the background. The low-angle shot allows the roof of the stage to take over a large part of the frame. This can be seen as the notion that Kovic is being overwhelmed by the background, symbolic for the baby crying in the background. Kovic moves his mouth to the microphone but pulls back several times, as he is unable to speak, and he only seems to hear the sound of the baby crying. According to Ghaffarzadegan, Ebrahimvandi, and Jalali, individuals with PTSD continue to experience the psychological effects of trauma, including re-experiencing symptoms, long after being removed to a safe environment (2). The aspects of scene, in particular Cruise’s performance, then, point to PTSD, which substantiates the idea that Kovic was in fact traumatized by the experience.

This is also the case for his second traumatic experience, which becomes evident when Kovic visits Wilson’s parents. The scene is introduced by flashbacks of the first two analyzed scenes. Although flashbacks are aspects of narrative form, it is still worth mentioning them because “a flashback will often be caused by some incident that triggers a character’s recalling some event in the past” (Bordwell and Thompson 82). The film does not visually show an incident that triggered Kovic’s memory of killing Wilson. However, it can be said that the triggers are Kovic’s guilt and shame which, according to Ghaffarzadegan, Ebrahimvandi, and Jalali, are other psychological effects or mental illnesses that can occur following trauma and is highly comorbid with PTSD (2). This is, then, another form of re-experiencing. After the flashbacks, the camera captures a medium close-up of Kovic. In this shot, he is staged on the right side of the frame. The fact that Wilson’s parents are positioned on the left side of and outside the frame suggests that there should be a certain distance between them and Kovic. This is a valuable indication, considering the fact that Kovic is about to tell them that he killed their son. It should also be noted
that Kovic’s appearance has changed, as he now looks “physically unattractive with lank, unwashed long hair, a drooping moustache […]” (McCrisken and Pepper 136). In terms of movement and performance, Cruise is looking down, which demonstrates a feeling of shame, as he is avoiding any eye contact. When he confesses his guilt, however, he briefly looks in the direction of Wilson’s parents, showing the tears in his eyes. Altogether, this scene proves that Kovic was also traumatized by killing Wilson.

1.3 Trauma in Heaven & Earth

The third film of the trilogy, Heaven & Earth, is the most distinctive in terms point of view. Contrary to both Platoon and Born on the Fourth of July, this film offers an insight as to how a Vietnamese person experienced the war and contrary to Platoon, this film focuses the least on the combat side of the war. Similar to its predecessors, though, this film is based on the books of a Vietnamese war survivor, Le Ly Hayslip, and it provides events that can be linked to trauma. The film follows the life of the protagonist Le Ly during and after the war, which is mostly filled with traumatic events and experiences.

From an early age, Le Ly witnesses acts of violence and murder, including the murder of her teacher, who taught them to oppose the Viet Cong (VC). The scene starts with a medium shot of the teacher being dragged out of his house by VC soldiers, towards the camera. The camera moves back as they are coming outside, making the front of the teacher’s house visible. A medium close-up of the villagers, including Le Ly, follows, showing their worried expressions. The camera moves backward to a long shot of the teacher and VC soldiers. The long shot shows that they are standing on the front porch and it indicates where the villagers are standing. It also “prompts us to take it as seen through a character’s eyes” (Bordwell and Thompson 192-93), which Bordwell and Thompson define as an optically subjective shot, or a point-of-view (POV) shot (193). Thus, this shot is ought to be thought of what the villagers see. The teacher is staged in the center of the frame, on his knees and slightly facing to the left, where two VC soldiers stand before him. On the right side of the frame, there is a silhouette that looks like a villager from behind, which confirms the idea of the POV shot. After the teacher is killed, the camera moves back to a medium close-up of the villagers, with Le Ly and another woman, presumably her mother, in the center of the frame, surrounded by other villagers. Le Ly’s mother has one hand on her head, while the other is covering Le Ly’s head as she is burying her face in her mother’s shoulder. They both fall back a little, as
they are startled by the sound of the gun shot. This scene depicts Le Ly witnessing the murder of an acquaintance and it can be seen as the first traumatic event that she witnessed.

There is a shift from witnessing to truly suffering violence when Le Ly herself is captured, interrogated, and tortured by a South Vietnamese government soldier. The camera captures a close-up of a soldier’s hand holding two clamps and creating electric shocks as he puts them together. This foreshadows what is going to happen, namely that Le Ly is going to get shocked. A couple of close-ups of the soldier attaching the clamps to Le Ly’s hands follow, while he interrogates her. A close-up of Le Ly shows blood coming out of her nose and on her lips, and as Le Ly fails to provide the correct answers to his questions, she gets shocked. A subsequent close-up captures Le Ly throwing back her head in agony. It also shows the use of sidelight coming from the left top corner of the frame. This means that there is a single window in the room where Le Ly is being tortured, which heightens the feeling of imprisonment. It also serves the purpose of revealing the sweat on Le Ly’s face and in her hair as well as capturing the blood that she spits as she throws her head back from the electric shocks. The shot remains a close-up after Le Ly is shocked. The camera focuses on Le Ly gasping for breath and widening her eyes, which hints at the agony that she is going through. This scene draws the attention of the viewer to and clearly displays one of the realistic horrors, namely being tortured in a cruel way, that Le Ly suffered during the war.

The following scene does exactly the same. In this scene, two other Vietnamese girls besides Le Ly are captured and tortured jointly with her. A medium shot presents the three girls being tied to a post. They are staged in the center of the frame. The background shows a staircase and the front of a building. Several men in military uniforms are seen gathering people and commanding them to crouch in a row in front of the building. By judging the superior and inferior dynamic that takes place in the background, the people who are gathered must be other innocent villagers. The background also gives away the fact that the three girls are tied to a post in an open space, which supports the notion of the girls being publicly humiliated. After the soldiers spread honey on the girls’ legs, there is a close-up of their legs with bees swarming around and stinging them, as shown in Figure 3. The camera is positioned at the same height as the girls’ ankles and, as they cry out in pain and fear, the camera slowly moves up to medium close-up, capturing their facial expressions. The face of the girl on the left is not visible. The girl on the right is crying, while Le Ly looks up in despair without making any sound, as if she is too exhausted to resist. In this shot, Stone made use of top lighting which, as Bordwell and Thompson explain, is a spotlight
that shines down from above (127). This distinguishes Le Ly from the other girls as the central character. Symbolically, it hints that Le Ly is looking up to a God and the ray of light on her head can be seen as God’s answer that Le Ly will be saved. It is clear that this scene, similar to the preceding scene, presents a horrific and traumatic experience for Le Ly as well as other Vietnamese people.

Le Ly is confronted with another form of death when she finds the remains of a dead prostitute. The scene starts with a medium shot of Le Ly, staged on the right side of the frame, while she reaches down to grab something outside of the frame, which builds up the tension for the viewer. After she screams and jumps back, the camera immediately flashes to the direction of where Le Ly reached down to. The following shot captures a head and feet covered in blood. On the right side of the frame, Le Ly’s leg is visible, which shows her proximity to the remains, which is very close. The camera then changes to a medium close-up of Le Ly looking horrified, with wide eyes and arms slightly raised as a reflex, and anxiously walking backward, while a voice-over informs the viewer that it was the first time for Le Ly to see “the remains of poor prostitutes who had been murdered by men” (56:40). The camera returns to a close-up of the remains covered in blood and scars, only this time it is from the opposite side, Le Ly’s side. Thus, this scene also implies that during the war, men, presumably U.S. soldiers, were involved with prostitutes and murdered them afterwards. This, in turn, shows that there were far more casualties than simply soldiers and ‘normal’ civilians. According to Sara Martín Alegre, Hayslip herself noted how unfairly unbalanced the power to tell the story of the victims has been and still is, and how little
attention Americans have paid to the actual magnitude of the human catastrophe (81). This scene, then, sheds even more light on the death, destruction, and human suffering that the war brought, as Hayslip describes (187).

The scenes that are analyzed in this chapter all clearly portray traumatic events or experiences. There are, of course, many more scenes that can be analyzed in relation to trauma, but the chosen scenes fit the best with the theme of this chapter. The scenes that were not analyzed will perhaps be discussed in chapters 2 and 3, though it is important to note again that not all scenes of the entire trilogy can be analyzed in this thesis. The way PTSD is embedded in each film can now be distinguished. *Platoon* offers traumatic events that may have contributed to the development of PTSD for infantrymen, such as Taylor, but it does not actually address the theme nor does it visually portray signs of PTSD. *Born on the Fourth of July*, on the other hand, offers traumatic events in the beginning of the film that plausibly stimulated the development of PTSD. It is confirmed later in the film that these events indeed contributed to Kovic’s PTSD, as the last two scenes discussed prove. *Heaven & Earth*, then, offers traumatic events from the perspective of a Vietnamese person. However, similar to *Platoon* but different from *Born on the Fourth of July*, there are no clear signs of PTSD. This can either mean that Stone wanted to make it look like as if PTSD is more relatable to veterans, such as Kovic, although that would be a misleading statement. Or perhaps Stone wanted to portray Vietnamese people as strong people who were willing to fight for their country, trying to bear every burden that was put on them during the war. Overall, aspects of PTSD are presented in Stone’s trilogy and each film proves the difficulties that trauma and PTSD cause, which means that this theme can be seen as a representation of Stone’s criticism against the war.
2. **The Vietnam War and Violence**

Violence has become a widespread phenomenon in contemporary society. In a war, such as the Vietnam War, violence is even inevitable. This is a definitive statement, given the fact that war is a form of violence. The World Health Organization (WHO) defines violence as:

The intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment or deprivation (5).

Physical violence includes the use of weapons, such as guns and knives. In addition to physical violence, another type of violence is sexual in nature. The WHO defines sexual violence as:

Any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, unwanted sexual comments or advances, or acts to traffic, or otherwise directed, against a person’s sexuality using coercion, by any person regardless of their relationship to the victim, in any setting, including but not limited to home and work (149).

Sexual violence includes all forms of rape. Both physical and sexual violence occurred on a large scale during the Vietnam War. This chapter is dedicated to the analyses of scenes that depict physical or sexual violence, or the effects of it. Accordingly, I will be able to perceive how this theme is embedded in each film of Stone’s trilogy and how Stone used it as another artistic representation to criticize the war. The same method that was used in chapter 1 will be applied in this chapter as well. Some analyses will, again, be supported by images.

2.1 **Violence in Platoon**

As mentioned before, *Platoon* offers more combat footages than the other two films of the trilogy. It is, therefore, reasonable to say that the characters in this film are almost constantly engaging in violence. However, Taylor is portrayed as a victim of physical violence when he gets shot during an ambush. The camera captures a medium close-up of Taylor. He is not wearing a helmet or any other type of headgear, which means that his head was prone to physical damage. At the bottom of the frame, two fingers are visible, presumably with blood with them, while Taylor says “Oh shit. I’m hit!” (22:06). It becomes clear where Taylor was shot when he looks to his right and a red stain under his left ear is shown. The camera follows his movement as he falls on his back. His eyes are closed and his mouth is open, which represents a pained expression. The camera
then moves to a subsequent medium close-up of Taylor. In this shot, Taylor is clearly well camouflaged, which means that his uniform makes him blend in with his surroundings, as only his head and lower left arm are visible. His light skin tone markedly contrasts the dark setting. The use of sidelight from the right side of the frame draws the attention of the viewer to Taylor’s wound. However, his wound is not entirely visible, as a hand is covering it up with a bandage. The blood does not gush down Taylor’s neck, which means that it is a relatively small wound. Nonetheless, it still portrays an example of what the violence during the war inflicted and it hints at its excessive amount, seeing how easily it was to get hurt.

The true victims of violence, however, are innocent Vietnamese civilians. According to Bart van Tricht, *Platoon* is a film that keeps on emphasizing America’s violence and wastefulness in the war (55). In other words, this film marks the U.S. soldiers as the prime culprits. The following scene that represents rape exemplifies this notion. It starts with a medium close-up of Taylor looking agitated, after which the camera follows him as he moves in the direction of the source of his disturbance. The camera moves to a following medium long shot of Taylor from his left side, staged in the center of the frame, crouching in front of something. A young Vietnamese girl and two fellow infantrymen are staged in the background. It generates the idea that the young Vietnamese girl is forced to watch, while the infantrymen are involved. However, both Taylor’s position and the height of the camera block the view of the atrocity. A subsequent medium shot captures Taylor looking angry, with two girls in front of him. Only the top of their heads is visible, which means that the girls dropped their heads, doubtlessly in fear and presumably in shame. One of the girls has a twig in her hair, which reveals that she was lying on the ground in front of Taylor. This scene carefully presents a gang-rape which, according to the WHO, is rape of a person by two or more perpetrators (149), of at least one young Vietnamese girl by several members of Taylor’s platoon. It shows “the use of sexuality, sexual abuse, and rape as tools of war […]” (McCrisken and Pepper 140) and it is, without a doubt, a horrific form of violence.

The infliction of violence by the U.S. soldiers is not limited to Vietnamese victims, though. John Belton explains that *Platoon* dramatizes the internal division of America over the war through the ideological conflict between two platoon sergeants (217), one of which is the previously discussed Barnes. His antithesis is the moral sergeant Elias. Their dispute eventually becomes fatal for Elias when Barnes shoots him. The scene begins with an extreme long shot of Barnes aiming his rifle, surrounded by trees and bushes. As Bordwell and Thompson explain, in the extreme long
shot, the human figure is barely visible. This is the framing for landscapes, bird’s-eye views of cities, and other vistas (191). The camera is positioned from a straight-on angle, as if he is aiming at the viewer. The camera then turns to a medium shot of Elias, which changes into a medium close-up. As the type of the shot alters, Elias’ neutral facial expression transforms into a smile, presumably upon seeing Barnes. The camera moves back to a medium shot of Barnes still aiming his rifle but, upon seeing Elias, he lifts his head from his rifle scope. In a subsequent medium shot, he also starts to smile. The fact that both men start to smile allows the viewer to assume that they have resolved their dispute. Two succeeding extreme close-ups, which “singles out a portion of the face (often eyes or lips) or isolates and magnifies an object” (Bordwell and Thompson 191), of Elias’ eyes and Barnes’ eyes follow. This type of shot suggests that their true feelings can be seen in their eyes. However, a long shot of Barnes shooting Elias, as depicted in Figure 4, proves that they smiled to mock each other. In this shot, Stone used the photographic aspect selective focus to draw “the viewer’s attention to the main character or object” (Bordwell and Thompson 173) which, in this case, is Elias. Thus, it puts the focus on Elias getting shot or the violence inflicted by Barnes. The idea that is put forward is that U.S. soldiers were also capable of harming their own allies.

A similar act of violence is demonstrated in an ensuing scene, in which Barnes threatens Taylor, after Taylor attacked him for shooting Elias. In a medium close-up, Barnes holds a knife
with a threatening look in his eyes. The camera is positioned from a low-angle, slightly from the side, which makes Barnes dominant in the frame. A consecutive medium shot captures Barnes from the side pointing his knife at Taylor’s face. Barnes and Taylor are staged in the center of the frame, with several infantrymen staged on the left side of the frame beside Barnes, while Taylor is lying on his back and positioned below Barnes. This composition indicates that Taylor has no support and it marks the hierarchal structure within the platoon. Taylor, as one of the newest recruits, is literally positioned beneath Barnes and the other, more experienced, infantrymen. The camera then returns to a medium close-up of Barnes holding his knife, while another infantryman is trying to convince him not to harm Taylor. Barnes moves his eyes to the side and back to Taylor in contemplation, while a drop of sweat slowly runs down on his right cheek. This shot is a lengthy shot or, as Bordwell and Thompson explain, a long take, which exceeds the average shot length of about 5 seconds (208). This shot is approximately thirteen seconds long. According to Bordwell and Thompson, long takes represented a powerful creative resource. In this case, the long take greatly heightens the tension of the scene. Considering the fact that Barnes already harmed one of his comrades, he has to make a crucial decision on whether or not he can harm another. His decision is presented in a close-up of Taylor shutting his eyes in pain after Barnes cuts him right under his left eye, which becomes visible through the use of blood. Similar to the preceding scene, Barnes commits yet another violent act.

2.2 VIOLENCE IN _BORN ON THE FOURTH OF JULY_

Although _Born on the Fourth of July_ manifests less scenes of combat than its predecessor, it does embody a pivotal act of violence that profoundly changes Kovic’s life. This is the scene in which he gets shot during a firefight. The scene opens with a medium shot of Kovic moving his head to the left and right in frustration as his gun is jammed, which makes him incapable of fighting back. This movement is captured in slow-motion. Here, Stone changed the speed of motion in the course of the shot to enhance expressive effects, as stated by Bordwell and Thompson (168). The slow-motion effect dramatizes Kovic’s frustration and it also suggests that he is distracted by his frustration, which makes him an easy and vulnerable target. A medium close-up of a VC soldier firing his rifle is shown in less than one second, after which the camera moves back to a medium shot of Kovic being hit. The bullets can be seen to have hit him in his right shoulder where traces of blood appear. He falls back in slow-motion which both extends the duration of the shot and
amplifies the drama. The camera then turns to an extreme close-up of Kovic’s face from his right side while blood spurts out of his mouth. This expresses his critical injury. A following extreme close-up focuses on Kovic’s left hand grabbing and holding onto grass. This small movement represents both Kovic’s agony and a way for him to remain conscious. The scene is concluded with a close-up of Kovic’s face from below. Blood is visible on the grass leaves next to him and a drop of blood runs down on his left cheek. Altogether, this scene portrays Kovic as a victim of physical violence.

The permanent effect of the assault on Kovic becomes clear when doctors inform him about his injuries. The image of a doctor is presented in a medium close-up of a man wearing a white coat and glasses, who tells Kovic that he is “a T6, paralyzed from the mid-chest down” (49:25) and that he will be in a wheelchair for the rest of his life. The camera then turns to a medium shot of Kovic lying in bed in hospital clothing, which informs the viewer that the setting of this scene is a hospital. The camera zooms out and changes the shot into a medium long shot. By zooming out, the camera reveals that there are two doctors and a nurse present, who are standing in front of Kovic’s bed. The fact that there are two doctors staged in this frame suggests that they are both needed to explain how severe Kovic’s injuries are and the fact that a nurse is included in this frame tells the viewer that she is required to have a comforting role. As the camera zooms out, Kovic also finds out that he will not be able to have children. The camera is then positioned in between and behind the two doctors from an angle somewhere between a high-angle and a straight-on angle, and looks down on Kovic. This angle, which can be seen in Figure 5, makes Kovic appear smaller in the frame, as if he is being denigrated now that he is “transformed not only into a paraplegic but also the antithesis of the American hero […]” (McCrisken and Pepper 136). This is, of course, a serious effect of the physical violence that was inflicted on him.
2.3 Violence in *Heaven & Earth*

Similar to the two preceding films of the trilogy, *Heaven & Earth* illustrates several moments of brutal violence. Or, as McCrisken and Pepper describe, Americans are again seen perpetrating or condoning heinous acts, most graphically when Le Ly is tortured by a South Vietnamese officer under the compliant eye of a U.S. military adviser (140). This scene immediately precedes the second traumatic scene of this film that was analyzed in chapter 1. It opens with a medium long shot of the two soldiers and Le Ly. Le Ly is staged in a lower position than the soldiers, which means that she is sitting on a chair. Her lower position also refers to her inferior status that contradicts the soldiers’ superior status. The South Vietnamese government soldier is standing in front of her facing towards the camera, while Le Ly is staged with her back towards the camera. The U.S. soldier stands guard in the background in front of a blackboard, which hints that the setting of this scene is a classroom. After Le Ly gets hit and falls to the ground, a medium close-up follows that shows blood on her lip. The soldier enters the frame from the left side, with only his legs and arms visible. As he grabs Le Ly’s hair with both hands, the camera moves up to show the soldier’s upper body and the way he slightly pulls Le Ly up. The camera then moves back to a medium close-up of Le Ly being dragged by her hair with a clear pained facial expression. A subsequent long shot vividly shows Le Ly being kicked in the back. This shot also captures the other side of the room. Several open windows of the room and another room are brought into the frame. They suggest that Le Ly’s screams and the sound of the kicks can be heard
outside. Yet, she cannot be helped or saved. As a result, Le Ly is yet again the helpless victim of physical violence.

The next scene, then, marks Le Ly as a victim of sexual violence. This scene, contrary to the gang-rape scene in *Platoon*, contains more vivid imagery. In a medium close-up of a VC soldier, the back of Le Ly’s head is visible and staged in a lower position. This, again, makes her inferior to the soldier. Another VC soldier is staged on the left side of the frame watching, much like the U.S. soldier in the previous scene. The camera turns to a medium shot of Le Ly, slightly from the side, lying on the ground, which appears to be wet and muddy. Behind her, a grave that was dug for her can be seen. In other words, the entire setting of this scene is horribly gruesome. On the left side of the frame, the back of the VC soldier is shown as he is forcing himself on top of her. The camera then moves to their feet after revealing Le Ly’s bare legs, which indicates that her pants are already torn. As the camera moves around their feet to the other side, it captures a medium shot of Le Ly with the VC soldier positioned on top of her, as Figure 6 shows. Le Ly’s head is thrown back so her facial expression is not visible. Her shirt, on the other hand, can be seen to be unbuttoned. The scene ends with a medium close-up of the VC soldier on top of Le Ly. The camera is positioned from an angle somewhere between a straight-on angle and a low-angle. This angle does not only reveal Le Ly’s emotional expression, but it also stages the viewer in almost the same position as Le Ly. As Le Ly is “raped rather than being shot by two of her comrades” (McCriskken and Pepper 140), she is portrayed as the victim of another type of violence.

Figure 6
The identity of the culprit shifts from Vietnamese back to American when Le Ly’s husband Steve, a U.S. marine, threatens her. A medium shot captures Le Ly from the side, sitting in a chair. Steve is staged on the right side of the frame, with only his arms and one leg visible, holding a gun against the back of Le Ly’s head. The camera then moves to a subsequent medium close-up of Le Ly from a straight-on angle that reveals the shock and terror that she feels through her facial expression. Steve’s aggressive expression is captured in a succeeding close-up, which defines the gravity of the situation. It is worth mentioning that several flashbacks of almost every violence that Le Ly suffered are edited into this scene. This refers to the notion of a near-death experience as Le Ly is having her life ‘flash before her eyes’, which leads to an increased tension. The scene is, then, captured from a different perspective in a following shot. The camera is positioned from a high-angle behind Steve and gives the viewer a clear image of how Steve is holding the gun against the back of Le Ly’s head. The high-angle makes Steve appear large and dominant in the frame in comparison to Le Ly. It also gives the viewer a perspective that is similar to Steve’s. The WHO explains that one of the most common forms of violence against women is that performed by a husband or an intimate male partner (89). Although Steve is able to restrain himself from murdering his wife, he was still engaged in physical violence against her.

This chapter includes the analyses of scenes that depict both physical and sexual violence as well as their effects. It should be noted that the scenes discussed in the previous chapter also portray violence, considering the fact that violence can cause trauma which, in turn, can lead to PTSD. Likewise, the scenes in this chapter can be related to trauma and PTSD. The essence of each scene, however, is distinguishable and therefore, each scene can be categorized according to the themes in this thesis. There are, again, other scenes that could have been analyzed in this chapter, but some of them are more suitable for the next chapter. It is now possible to distinguish the similarities and differences between the films in terms of embedding violence. *Platoon*, with the exception of the first scene, portrays U.S. soldiers as committers of various violent and despicable acts. Those scenes represent violence that does not conform with the basic principle of war, namely to fight the enemy. *Born on the Fourth of July*, then, does not portray actual violence committed against the Vietnamese. Instead, it shows how the protagonist suffers violence that has a life-changing impact. This is similar to *Heaven & Earth*. In this film, though, the protagonist is also a victim of sexual violence. Moreover, she is the victim of violence committed by members
of both Vietnamese parties, the South Vietnamese government and the VC, as well as her American husband. On the whole, violence is clearly present in the trilogy and each film depicts the horrors of violence. Therefore, this theme can also be seen as a representation of Stone’s criticism against the war.
3. **THE VIETNAM WAR AND DEATH**

A highly probable outcome of violence is death. As mentioned in chapter 2, violence, both physical and sexual, occurred inevitably during the Vietnam War, which indicates that death was also, or seemingly, inevitable. There are, of course, other consequences of violence, which are stated in its definition. The WHO acknowledges that their definition:

> Covers a broad range of outcomes – including psychological harm, deprivation and maldevelopment. This reflects a growing recognition among researchers and practitioners of the need to include violence that does not necessarily result in injury or death, but that nonetheless poses a substantial burden on individuals, families, communities and health care systems worldwide (5).

The previous chapters have analyzed scenes that present psychological harm, injury, and deprivation as effects of violence as well as violence itself. Some of the scenes are, to a certain extent, also related to death. The number of deaths of both Americans and Vietnamese has not been ascertained, though. Charles Hirschman, Samuel Preston, and Vu Manh Loi, for example, observe that the human costs in Vietnamese lives of the American war from 1965 to 1975 have never been fully documented (789). Hayslip, on the other hand, states that two million of her people died in the Vietnam War (186). Either way, the fact remains that the war led to many deaths, a theme that Stone also included in his trilogy. The last chapter of this thesis will carry out the analyses of scenes in which death is central, as to understand how this theme is embedded in each film. In turn, it should become clear how this theme is yet another artistic representation that Stone used to criticize the war. I will, again, use the same method that was applied in the previous chapters as well as images to support some analyses.

3.1 **DEATH IN PLATOON**

In the previous chapter, the scene in which Barnes shoots Elias was analyzed. However, his death, as a result of the violence inflicted by Barnes, was not included. This is due to the fact that it was visualized in a subsequent scene. The scene opens with an extreme long shot of Elias being chased by VC soldiers in slow-motion from a high-angle. This angle represents the point of view of Taylor, as he is watching from a helicopter. It is a clear example of a crane shot, in which “the camera moves above ground level” (Bordwell and Thompson 195). Bordwell and Thompson explain that typically, it rises or descends, often thanks to a mechanical arm that lifts and lowers
it. In this case, however, the camera could have been on the plane, as “variations of the crane shot are helicopter and airplane shots” (Bordwell and Thompson 195). A subsequent extreme long shot captures several bombs being dropped behind Elias, though it is not clear which side dropped them. The camera then moves to a following long shot of Elias from a straight-on angle. He is staged in the center of the frame which emphasizes that he is the focus of this scene. He is covered in blood and he is running with a stagger, which means that his physique has become frail, partly due to the gun shots from Barnes. As he falls to the ground with his face downward several times, a couple of gunshot wounds on his back become visible. This reveals his immense strength. Regardless, the scene ends with a medium shot of Elias while one last bullet hits him in the back, after which he raises his head and arms, as presented in Figure 7. It symbolizes a prayer movement and this image, which is the DVD cover of the film, serves as an iconic commemoration of the virtuous soldiers who have fallen during the war. Still, Elias’ death serves to show the effect of violence inflicted against him by an alleged comrade.

Figure 7

Retribution for Elias’s death follows when Taylor kills Barnes. A medium long shot captures Taylor, slightly from the side, holding a rifle. His torso is exposed because of his unbuttoned shirt. It shows that, presumably, his entire body as well as his uniform are covered in blood and dirt. He is staged on the left side of the frame and in the background, piles of corpses are staged. Taylor then looks to the right side of the frame after which he heaves his chest, pulls a
stern face, and slowly walks in that direction. As the camera follows his movement, the shot gradually moves to a medium shot, a medium close-up, back to a medium shot, and finally down to the ground where Barnes is crawling away from Taylor. In this shot, only Taylor’s lower body, hands, and the rifle are captured. Barnes’ appearance is similar to Taylor, as his body and uniform are covered in blood and dirt as well. The camera moves back to a medium shot of Taylor from the front. His posture has changed, as he now stands upright and with new-found confidence. Rather than looking like an inexperienced soldier who became injured, he appears as a fierce high-ranking officer who has massacred many enemies. A following medium close-up of Taylor captures him raising his chin as a sign of challenging Barnes. It clearly reflects a change in dynamic between them. Whereas Barnes was superior throughout the film, he has become inferior to Taylor in this scene. In a following medium long shot of Barnes, he is shot multiple times in his torso. Ironically, it is the same part of the body where he shot Elias. The camera then moves to a medium shot of Taylor closing his eyes and sighing, slowly turning his back to the camera. Sheen’s performance suggests that a weight is lifted off his shoulders. Barnes’ death can be seen as the end of a domino effect that, ironically, he started, as “one American kills another only to be slain, in turn, by a third” (Belton 217).

Similar to the opening scene of the film, which was the first scene analyzed in chapter, the ending scene conveys the image of multiple corpses and the sight of a typical warzone. In this scene, however, it is captured in the form of an extreme long shot. The shot portrays a gaping crater that has been formed, seemingly, by a bomb explosion. A large number of bodies are staged around and in the crater. Here, Stone also made use of the crane shot. It is, again, possible to assume that the camera was on the plane. Bordwell and Thompson explain that a crane shot may move not only up and down, like an elevator, but forward and backward or from side to side (195). This is the case in this shot, as the camera follows the pattern of a semicircle, around half of the crater. The uniforms of the corpses appear to have different colors, some are dark while others are light, which indicates that both U.S. and VC soldiers were targeted. In this shot, multiple men, plausibly U.S. soldiers, are moving around the bodies, an indication that they are looking for survivors. A subsequent extreme long shot captures another part of the battlefield, where more corpses are staged. In this shot, similar to the previous one, multiple men are moving around them. This can be seen as a reference to the term ‘body count’. As the International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War (IPPNW) of Germany explains, the term was taken from the Vietnam
War, in which the U.S. army used body counts in the effort to show that the United States was winning the war (10). Here, Stone indicates that they were losing the war, given the fact that more deaths of U.S. soldiers have been visualized, in contrast to the portrayal of the deaths of VC soldiers.

3.2 Death in Born on the Fourth of July

It became clear in the previous chapter that Born on the Fourth of July does not visualize direct U.S. engagement in violence against the Vietnamese. In chapter 1, the first traumatic scene of this film that was analyzed gave a succinct image of the effects of U.S. violence. The following scene, though, which immediately precedes the previously mentioned scene, does give a more detailed illustration, especially in terms of death. It opens with a medium shot of Kovic entering the hut and aiming his rifle. The shot changes into a medium close-up as he lowers his rifle and then evolves into a close-up of him looking terrified. The camera then moves to the ground in front of him, capturing multiple corpses of the Vietnamese villagers as the source of Kovic’s distraught. His perspective is represented through the movement of the camera around the hut, providing a clearer image of the setting. It includes several food plates scattered around the floor, besides the bodies, and a darkness due to a lack of light inside the hut. The only light that is provided is coming through the cracks of the hut from outside, which gives the setting an even more horrifying touch and marks it as primitive. The camera then turns to a medium shot of the woman who has the baby on her lap. Light from outside shines on the top of her head showing her face which is covered in blood due to a headwound very similar to the headwound of the Vietnamese’s chief in Platoon, who was mentioned in chapter 1 as well. Figure 8 shows a following shot of another lifeless villager with an open wound that almost takes up an entire side of her torso. The following camera movement around the bodies from a closer proximity exposes that they all have the same wounds. This scene, thus, represents one of the biggest “horrors of battle combat” (Quart and Auster 149), that is so say the deaths of innocent Vietnamese civilians.
Zuzana Hodbod’ová mentioned that this film attempted to describe the living conditions of those Vietnam ex-servicemen who had the luck to survive all various types of war atrocities and returned back home (90). An example of a U.S. soldier who was less lucky is, of course, Wilson. Although his death was already touched upon in chapter 1, it is nonetheless still substantial, considering the fact that it is referred to multiple times. The next scene, in which Kovic visits Wilson’s grave, implies that Wilson, in a way, also returned to the United States. A long shot of Kovic’s taxi driver leaning against his car introduces the scene. Several gravestones as well as confederate battle flags are presented in this frame. This indicates that the graveyard, or the setting here, is especially for those who served in the army. The camera then moves to an extreme long shot of Kovic pushing himself forward in his wheelchair. In this frame, it becomes clear that he is the only one present, apart from his taxi driver. This can either mean that Kovic arrived when, coincidentally, nobody else was visiting or that he deliberately waited to visit until everybody left because he is ashamed. The camera slowly zooms in on a shot of Wilson’s gravestone. This is a representation of Kovic’s perspective as he slowly moves towards the grave. A long shot of Kovic sitting in his wheelchair in front of Wilson’s grave follows. The camera slowly zooms in and moves to a close-up of Kovic looking down to the gravestone. He is slightly frowning which makes it seem as if he is deep in thought, presumably about confronting Wilson’s parents as described in chapter 1. This scene does not only represent Wilson’s death as the effect of the violence that Kovic committed against him, even though it was by accident, but it also condemns Kovic for this outcome.
3.3 Death in *Heaven & Earth*

The portrayal of the deaths of innocent Vietnamese civilians can be called a prerequisite for the last film of Stone’s trilogy, especially after considering Hayslip’s brief statement about the war. She expressed that the fighting killed thousands of innocent women and children, that military action brought a holocaust to Vietnam, and that Americans have to face that disaster honestly so that it cannot happen again (185). Besides the death of Le Ly’s teacher, there is only one other scene that illustrates a direct bloodshed of Vietnamese villagers, though. In this scene, several villagers are killed by the VC amid false accusations of treason. It is presented in the form of a flashback and to emphasize that, the color of the shots has been changed to black-and-white. The scene starts with a medium shot of a VC soldier, slightly from the side, shooting a villager through the back of her head. The villager is captured from the chest up and positioned lower than the VC soldier, which indicates that she is on her knees. Her back is turned towards the soldier which stages her as a person awaiting execution. This becomes more apparent after a second and third villager are killed in the same manner. A following medium long shot captures the other villagers, including Le Ly’s father, as they all witness the execution. It can, then, be observed that the execution took place in their own village. The camera then turns to a subsequent medium close-up of Le Ly’s mother who looks sad and closes her eyes as the hand of the VC soldier holding his gun enters the frame from the right side. Another hand, however, enters the frame from the left side, stopping the VC soldier. This scene shows both the death of innocent Vietnamese civilians as well as the simplicity of murdering them.

Another type of violence is presented through Steve’s suicide. According to the WHO, self-directed violence entails suicidal behavior which, in turn, includes suicidal thoughts, attempted suicides, and completed suicides (6). The scene begins with a medium shot of Le Ly, staged on the left side of the frame, and another figure, staged on the right side of the frame, from behind. Due to selective focus, the other figure is blurred and the focus is put on Le Ly and Steve. He is staged in the driver’s seat of a van, the door of which is open, with his head on the steering wheel, facing towards the camera. The camera quickly turns back to a medium long shot of Le Ly crying out to one of her sons and grabbing him, while blocking the horrific sight from him. Le Ly’s sister Kim is positioned in the frame next to Le Ly’s son. In the background of the frame, several witnesses as well as a police car are staged, which marks the setting as a crime scene. A following long shot of Steve depicts his death, which can be seen in Figure 9. The car door window
is shattered. It is also covered in blood, along with the window behind it. This contrasts the white color of the van. The use of backlight makes Steve appear as a darker figure, though he has not become a silhouette. His face is covered in blood, but it is not clear where it is coming from. What is most striking in this shot is the fact that Steve is not wearing any clothes. The composition of this frame implies that he hit his head on the windows on the left side of the van, but it does not explain why he is not wearing clothes. Although it is not entirely clear how it happened, Mintz, Roberts, and Welky express that Steve’s suicide reinforced Stone’s view of the results of the American mission in Vietnam (318). His death can, therefore, be seen as the result of severe mental distress or even PTSD.

Figure 9

The last chapter of this thesis has analyzed scenes that represent death. In the previous chapters, several scenes already touched upon this theme to a certain extent. It was, however, not the main theme in those scenes. The scenes in this chapter, on the other hand, do explore the concept of death explicitly, which makes them the appropriate examples. It is, again, important to keep in mind that these scenes can also be related to the previous themes, though. It can now be distinguished how death is embedded in each film. *Platoon* depicts the deaths of two prominent yet antagonistic characters. One of them symbolizes the deaths of dishonorable U.S. soldiers, while the other one symbolizes the deaths of honorable U.S. soldiers but even so, it primarily exemplifies a fatal outcome of violence committed by an ally. In addition, a great number of deaths of other, unnamed, U.S. soldiers has been visualized, in contrast to the depiction of deaths of Vietnamese soldiers, which puts forward the idea that the former died in vain, given the fact that the United
States lost the war. *Born on the Fourth of July*, on the other hand, does depict the deaths of innocent Vietnamese civilians, which signifies the effect of excessive U.S. violence. Additionally, it also refers back to the death of a U.S. soldier, which was also caused by an ally, though unintentionally. Similarly, *Heaven & Earth* depicts the deaths of innocent civilians as well. It is, however, the only scene in the film that conveys this, besides the one that was discussed in chapter 1. Contrary to the previous film, these innocent civilians were killed by their own people. Alternatively, this film presents a death as a result of another type of violence, presumably caused by mental distress or PTSD, namely suicide. All in all, each film graphically shows a form of death as a result of the brutal violence that was used, either directly or indirectly and thus, this theme can be seen as yet another representation of Stone’s criticism against the war.
CONCLUSION

The main objective of this thesis was to demonstrate the incorporation of anti-war sentiment against the Vietnam War in Oliver Stone’s iconic Vietnam War film trilogy. The fact that few research has been conducted on this trilogy itself or on the relation between this trilogy and criticism against the war, while U.S. involvement in the war was heavily opposed, made it both an interesting and challenging project. For the purpose of understanding how Platoon (1986), Born on the Fourth of July (1989), and Heaven & Earth (1993) differ from each other in portraying this anti-war sentiment, it was essential to comprehend the way each film focuses on a particular aspect of the war. It was, therefore, necessary to analyze scenes that visualize artistic representations of criticism against the war through three major themes regarding the war – PTSD, violence, and death – by means of film theory and the cinematic techniques mise-en-scène and cinematography, as explained by David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson.

The first chapter of this thesis focused on PTSD and examined how this theme is embedded in each film of the trilogy. The analysis of the scenes of Platoon exemplifies traumatic events or experiences that the naïve protagonist Chris Taylor witnesses. In the beginning of the film, Taylor immediately encounters multiple corpses in body bags from a close range. He also becomes a witness of the brutality against Vietnamese civilians by his comrades, which is not in accordance with his glorified image of the war. Stone cleverly plays with Taylor’s naiveté, which becomes more and more tarnished throughout the film, by making him a bystander of various violent crimes or the results of such crimes. Although signs of PTSD are not visually portrayed, the film does offer traumatic events with a high probability of resulting in PTSD that the protagonist witnesses.

The analysis of the scenes of Born on the Fourth of July, on the other hand, elucidates that PTSD is a more embodied concept in this film. The protagonist Ron Kovic is also a naïve character, who experiences several traumatic incidents, such as abandoning a Vietnamese baby with the knowledge of the fact that it will be murdered and killing a member of his unit, Wilson. These scenes cause the viewer to rightly presume that he would become traumatized. This reasonable assumption is verified by subsequent scenes later in the film. While giving a speech, for example, Kovic becomes distracted by the sound of a baby crying, which reminds him of the Vietnamese baby. He eventually freezes due to the re-experience of the incident, which is a clear symptom of PTSD. Another symptom that coexists with PTSD is the expression of guilt and shame. This is
conceptualized in a scene in which Kovic confesses his guilt to Wilson’s parents. Thus, in this film both traumatic events and signs of PTSD are visualized.

The analysis of the scenes of *Heaven & Earth*, then, shows traumatic events that the protagonist Le Ly both witnesses and experiences. Early in the film, she witnesses the murder of her teacher from a close proximity. She eventually becomes a victim of traumatic experiences when she suffers brutal torture methods inflicted by her own people or, to be more precise, the South Vietnamese government army guided by the U.S. army. She, then, also encounters the remains of a dead body from a very small distance. A significant difference between this film and its predecessors is that this film’s protagonist directly suffers from several traumatic events rather than indirectly. In addition, Le Ly is Vietnamese rather than American. Similar to *Platoon* but different from *Born on the Fourth of July*, though, there are no clear signs of PTSD in this film, but it does offer traumatic events that are likely to cause PTSD.

The second chapter of this thesis focused on violence and examined how this theme is embedded in each film of the trilogy. In *Platoon*, Taylor suffers physical violence inflicted by the North Vietnamese Army (NVA), though not critically. He, then, becomes a witness of sexual violence inflicted against young Vietnamese girls by several members of his platoon. Also, this film portrays how easily U.S. soldiers use violence, even against their own allies, through the scenes in which sergeant Barnes shoots sergeant Elias and subsequently, threatens Taylor. Hence, it primarily incorporates the notion that U.S. soldiers were the main culprits of the war.

This is not so much the case in *Born on the Fourth of July*. In this film, direct violence committed against the Vietnamese is not portrayed. Instead, it shows how violence was inflicted against Kovic through the scene in which he gets shot. This leads to a life-changing results, as he becomes paralyzed and has to remain in a wheelchair for the rest of his life. An important notion in this film, which is contrary to its predecessor, is the fact that the U.S. soldier is not a perpetrator but rather a victim of physical violence.

In *Heaven & Earth*, violence is clearly shown. Le Ly suffers both physical and sexual violence. She suffers a severe beating by a South Vietnamese government soldier, under the supervision of a U.S. soldier. She also becomes a victim of rape by a VC soldier, while another VC soldier watches the atrocity. Contrary to the gang-rape in *Platoon*, this rape scene is presented more vividly. Finally, she suffers at the hands of her American husband Steve, who threatens her by holding a rifle against the back of her head. Thus, in this film the horrors of both physical and
sexual violence inflicted by both Americans and Vietnamese against the Vietnamese protagonist are graphically presented.

The last chapter of this thesis focused on death and examined this theme is embedded in each film of the trilogy. *Platoon* offers the deaths of two prominent characters, namely Elias and Barnes respectively. Additionally, the ending scene of this film, similar to its opening scene, depicts the deaths of a great number of other, though unnamed, U.S. soldiers. It does not capture the deaths of multiple Vietnamese soldiers or villagers, which generates the idea that more U.S. soldiers died. Accordingly, it refers to the notion that U.S. involvement was wasteful and meaningless, considering the fact that the United States lost the war.

*Born on the Fourth of July*, on the contrary, does provide a scene in which the deaths of multiple Vietnamese civilians are depicted, though not through a visualization of the violence that caused them. The death of Wilson is also commemorated through a scene in which Kovic visits his grave. Other than these scenes, and the scenes in which Kovic shoots Wilson and visits his parents to confess his guilt, this film does not present any other deaths.

Lastly, *Heaven & Earth*, also depicts the deaths of several Vietnamese civilians, besides the death of Le Ly’s teacher. Contrary to the previous film, though, these civilians were killed by other Vietnamese, instead of Americans. This film does provide a scene in which another type of violence is portrayed, namely Steve’s suicide. A feasible explanation for his death is mental distress or PTSD, although the film does not offer a confirmation for this.

Consequently, it can be concluded that each film focuses on a particular aspect of the war. First of all, *Platoon* focuses the most on the combat aspect of the war and through the depiction of multiple and various deaths, it criticizes the war for causing a very extensive number of American deaths and hints at a large amount of Vietnamese deaths, both caused by U.S. violence. Secondly, *Born on the Fourth of July* focuses the most on the effects of the war, both physical and, primarily, psychological. It criticizes the war for the psychological effects it caused on Vietnam War veterans by providing examples of both traumatic events and PTSD. Thirdly, *Heaven & Earth* focuses on numerous horrific experiences through the perspective of a Vietnamese person. By portraying the protagonist as the victim of both physical and sexual violence, it criticizes the war for enabling the use of such extreme and brutal violence, which was partly supervised by the U.S. army.

These results can be used in the broader theoretical framework of film studies, in particular in relation to the Vietnam War and how U.S. cinema can be used to perceive concepts such as anti-
war sentiment. Given that the results of this thesis imply that anti-war sentiment is indeed present in Stone’s trilogy, they allow further researches to be conducted. They can, for example, lead to a discussion of how other themes are embedded in the trilogy and how they contribute to the criticism against the war. Or perhaps this project will lead to an opposing opinion that argues that the discussed themes frame a different concept in the trilogy. This thesis can also be a foundation for researches on the trilogy through an analysis of other scenes by means of other cinematic techniques or a different methodology. I have used my own interpretations of the films as well as the analyzed scenes and therefore, other perceptions of the films and the scenes are also feasible. It is, for example, possible to analyze a PTSD scene and its relation to death. Reciprocally, it is possible to analyze a death scene and its relation to PTSD. In sum, the given scope allowed for the analysis of the trilogy in relation to three themes by means of two cinematic techniques, which leaves room for further researches.
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