

## CULTURE & MEDIA



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# Genre, Narrative, and (Mis)remembering the Vietnam War in *Jacob's Ladder* (1990)

**Abstract.** In this article I examine the role of memory in *Jacob's Ladder* (1990), and I argue that *Jacob's Ladder* takes as its subject cultural memories of the war and dramatizes the problematic status of cinematic representations of the past as public memory. This is evident in the way in which the film draws on the viewer's generic memory through the remediation of the iconography of contemporary Vietnam War films such as *Platoon* (1986), *Hamburger Hill* (1987), *Casualties of War* (1989), and *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989) but refuses the narrativization of the soldiers' experience through the use of a modular narrative form. I argue that *Jacob's Ladder* inhibits the formation of cultural memories about the war through a critique of the 'veteranness' of the 'grunts' war' films of the late-1980s that sought to extend the experience of the Vietnam War to the viewer cinematically as a form of recovered memory. I also examine the ways in which *Jacob's Ladder* represents the scenes of reminiscence as being both therapeutic and traumatic and discuss how the film presents an alternative path to coming to terms with the past through conscious acts of remembering and forgetting.

**Keywords:** cultural memory, genre, Vietnam War films, *Jacob's Ladder*, modular narration

### 1. Introduction

Cinema occupies a privileged position as a technology and art form that functions as both a documentary record of the past and as the mediated representation of public cultural memories (Erl 2012; Kilbourn 2013). Drawing on Allison Landsberg's concept of 'prosthetic memories' (Landsberg 2004), in which mass media produce and disseminate memories that enable individuals to connect their personal mediated experiences

derived from viewing a film to the collective remembering of a public past, Robert Burgoyne (2009, 142) describes cinema as an ‘apparatus of memory, a technology that burns in memories so as to create a form of bodily relation to events that one has not organically experienced.’ Similarly, Paul Grainge writes that as ‘a technology able to picture and embody the temporality of the past cinema has become central to the mediation of memory,’ noting that memory has ‘garnered a powerful currency in the discursive operations of contemporary American life,’ and that ‘Hollywood has functioned strategically in the articulation and codification of the cultural past’ (2003, 1–4).

In this article, I analyse the role of memory in *Jacob's Ladder* (Adrian Lyne, 1990), a film about a Vietnam veteran haunted by his experiences as a soldier and who sets out to discover the truth behind his fragmentary memories of the war. *Jacob's Ladder* is rarely discussed within the cultural context of the Vietnam War and the Vietnam War film. Seth Friedman (2017: 82–89) discusses the film in the context of cultural paranoia in the late-twentieth century United States, addressing the use of multiple narratives to blur the distinction between dream and reality in depth but does not focus on the role of memory and its relationship to contemporary Vietnam War films. James Burton (2008, 104–107) briefly mentions *Jacob's Ladder* in his study of Vietnam war films, noting that the film cannibalises the iconography of earlier films about the war but does not address why or how this iconography is re-mediated, the role of memory in the film, or its relationship to discourses about cultural memories of the war. Marita Sturken (1997) does not mention *Jacob's Ladder* in her discussion of cultural memory, the Vietnam War, and American cinema. This is surprising because *Jacob's Ladder* specifically addresses issues of ‘veteranness’ and memory in the dramatization of the Vietnam War in American cinema. This may be attributed to the fact that *Jacob's Ladder* is widely considered to be a horror film (Abu Sarah 2014, 83; Burton 2008, 104; Early 2010; West 2021), inducing a genre-based blindness in critics to the film with the result that it has not been recognised as a Vietnam War film. For example, James Kendrick (2009: 134) describes *Jacob's Ladder* as a film with sequences set in Vietnam but which is not actually *about* Vietnam. Questions of genre are therefore central to understanding *Jacob's Ladder*'s critique of the Vietnam War film.

I argue that *Jacob's Ladder* critiques the role of the Vietnam war film in shaping cultural memory in the U.S., presenting the ‘veteranness’ of the viewer associated with the ‘grunts’ war’ films of the late-1980s as a form of recovered memory that questions the relationship between viewership, experience, and memory. I discuss how *Jacob's Ladder* challenges the ways in which cinema mediates memories of the war through its use of the iconography of late-1980s Vietnam War films and the use of modular narration as a formal strategy to problematise the Vietnam War film as a mode of cultural memory. Finally, I analyse scenes of remembering in *Jacob's Ladder*, focussing on the range of formal devices used in the film to present memories associated with the body of the veteran and evocative objects, to argue that, while the film rejects the ‘veteranness’ of the viewer as a means of coming to terms with the war, it nonetheless presents a way of coming to terms with a traumatic past through therapeutic reminiscence.

## 2. Cultural memory and the Vietnam War film in Hollywood

John Whitely Chambers and David Culbert (1996) and Pierre Sorlin (1994, 2000) argue that the prevailing public images of war in the twentieth century have been established by war films, with the result that ‘public memory of war in the twentieth century has been created less from a remembered past than from a manufactured past, one substantially shaped by images in documentaries, feature films, and television programmes’ (Chambers and Culbert 1996, 6) and those images ‘very often, substitute for actual memories, creating a contrived but very effective idea of the past’ (Sorlin 2000, 107). War films have become both the form and content of memories about wars so that ‘representations of the past popularised by films matter as much as the actual facts’ (Sorlin 2000, 107). Consequently, cinema has become a major source of knowledge about the past that privileges sensory and emotional experiences over historical analysis (Fluck 2008).

Benjamin de Carvalho (2006) argues that Hollywood’s representations of the Vietnam War came to occupy a key role in shaping public memories for combatants and civilians alike because of the war’s absence from the public sphere. Linda Dittmar and Gene Michaud (1990) deny that Vietnam War films constitute a genre because the public memories they engendered were inscribed in the tradition of Hollywood war films, drawing on earlier combat films, such as *Sands of Iwo Jima* (Allan Dwan, 1949), *The Steel Helmet* (Samuel Fuller, 1951), and *Pork Chop Hill* (Lewis Milestone, 1959), for their narrative structure, character construction, and film style; earlier prisoner-of-war movies, such as *The Bridge on the River Kwai* (David Lean, 1957), for their depiction of a sadistic Asian enemy; and films such as *The Best Years of Our Lives* (William Wyler, 1946) for their representations of the returning veteran. In contrast, Albert Auster and Leonard Quart argue that the failure of the U.S.’s mission in Vietnam meant that the mythology of the ‘just’ and ‘victorious’ American soldier could not tell the story of the Vietnam War because ‘Hollywood could neither fit the Vietnam War into any of its old formulas nor create new ones for it’ (1988, 34).’ Similarly, Sturken (1997, 87) argues that the moral ambiguity of the Vietnam War resisted Hollywood’s ‘standard narratives of technology, masculinity, and US nationalism,’ undermining the narratives of heroism and of technological and masculine prowess that emerged from the cinema of World War II: ‘American Culture did not have any mythical narratives and visual symbols to explain why US forces had not achieved victory. There was no popular cultural archetype to account for successful Vietnamese resistance to foreign invaders – the Indians had always lost’ (Sturken 1997, 94). For Auster, Quart, and Sturken, the Hollywood Vietnam War film is, then, a search for a stable set of narratives and images – that is, a search for a genre – capable of making the war intelligible to American cinemagoers.

The Hollywood Vietnam War film had three main cycles between 1978 and 1990 that provided different interpretations of the war (see James 1990; Fluck 2008, 366–381; King 2000, 127–139; Westwell 2006, 57–83). Early cycles were characterised by

their fantasy elements, engaging in a ‘will to myth’ by telling – first pessimistically and then optimistically – the story of American heroes entering the jungle to restore civilisation by drawing upon a range of different generic regimes. The late-1970s cycle of films depicted the war metaphorically, drawing on mythic traditions and genres (James Fennimore Cooper, war films, westerns, detective fiction) in American culture to explore the ‘contradictions and extremes’ of that culture (Hellmann 1991). Michael Cimino’s *The Deer Hunter* (1978) was criticized, and protested, by veterans who felt that the film’s portrayal of American prisoners of war forced to play Russian roulette by their captors elided the truth about the war. Oliver Stone has stated that, as a filmmaker, he respects the technique involved in Cimino’s film, but that, as a veteran, he recognises its shortcomings in its depiction of the war. *The Deer Hunter* is, he states, a ‘sensory experience that is in many ways unrealistic,’ and that ‘the whole premise of the movie is based on an impossibility’ (Riordan 1996, 104). *Coming Home* (Hal Ashby, 1978) focussed on the aftereffects of the war, dramatizing the story of a man returning from the war as an embittered paraplegic but did not provide any experience of the war itself. *Apocalypse Now* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1979) continued the role of fantasy in the Hollywood Vietnam War movie through its blending of counter-culture surrealism with Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*. The Vietnam War films of the early 1980s were equally as fanciful. Through films such as *Heated Vengeance* (Edward Murphy, 1985), *Uncommon Valour* (Ted Kotcheff, 1983), *Missing in Action* (Joseph Zito, 1984), and *Rambo: First Blood, Part II* (George P. Cosmatos, 1985) the war was re-fought cinematically to a more satisfactory (Hollywood) conclusion that legitimised the war and established a particular regime of truth that explained America’s defeat to an economically and technologically inferior enemy (Storey 2003; Williams 1991). These films engaged in what Gaylyn Studlar and David Desser (1988) describe as a ‘strategy of mythic displacement’ in which the cultural memories of the Vietnam War generated by films like *Rambo: First Blood, Part II* – and the audience’s memories of watching these films – usurp history. These films drew heavily on the action film for their narrative and spectacle of the individual waging a war against a massive yet disposable enemy single-handedly, and featured stars from the genre such as Sylvester Stallone and Chuck Norris.

With the release of a group of films from 1987 to 1989, Hollywood’s treatment of the Vietnam War came to focus on the soldier’s experience in Vietnam – the so-called ‘grunts’ war’ (Kinney 1991). Films such as *Platoon* (Oliver Stone, 1986), *Full Metal Jacket* (Stanley Kubrick, 1987), *Hamburger Hill* (John Irvin, 1987), *Casualties of War* (Brian De Palma, 1989), *84 Charlie MoPic* (Patrick Sheane Duncan, 1989), *Born on the Fourth of July* (Oliver Stone, 1989), and *Heaven and Earth* (Oliver Stone, 1993) presented the veteran as traumatised by their experiences of war, a victim of the dehumanizing effects of war (*Full Metal Jacket*, *Hamburger Hill*), a victim of betrayal by both the American people and government (*Born on the Fourth of July*), and as physical and/or psychological casualties (*Platoon*, *Casualties of War*, *Born on the Fourth of July*). These films not only depicted the war from the point of view of veterans;

they extended the role of the veteran to the viewer. Sturken (1997) has discussed this effect of films such as *Platoon*, *Casualties of War*, and *Born on the Fourth of July* in her study of the national memory surrounding the Vietnam War. Films depicting the 'grunts' war,' Sturken argues, provide 'experience' for those who did not serve in Vietnam, fulfilling the desire for veteran status vicariously through retelling the soldier's narrative: 'Re-enactment is a form of re-experiencing; within the codes of realism, viewers are allowed to feel that they, too, have undergone the trauma of the war by experiencing its cinematic relationship' (1997, 96).

The key text presenting the experience of the soldier that allows the viewer to fulfil a desire for veteran status is Oliver Stone's *Platoon*, lauded on its release as a realistic reflection of the Vietnam experience from the point of view of the veteran (Kellner 1995, 118–121). Stone was recognized as a privileged narrator who could speak truthfully about the war as a veteran. The narrative of *Platoon* retells Stone's own experiences of leaving university to join the infantry, of being wounded having fallen asleep in the jungle, of being ambushed in the jungle, and the characters are based on people Stone encountered in Vietnam. The viewer gains experience by aligning their knowledge with that of Stone's surrogate within the film, Taylor, who appears in almost every scene and who is transformed from clean-cut recruit to dirty, tired veteran over the course of the film. His experiences are our experiences, and the letters home provide a degree of access to his experiences denied to the other soldiers. Storey (2003, 111) argues that *Platoon* reduces the Vietnam War to a psychodrama that serves to heal the American body politic by rewriting the war as a narrative of Taylor's discovery of his identity with the war recast as a rite of passage for the American hero.

*Platoon*'s ability to re-enact the 'grunts' war' is contingent on following certain codes of cinematic realism. Sturken (1997, 96ff.) argues that this is achieved in two ways. First, the film is not a moral tale regarding America's involvement in Southeast Asia and such issues are dismissed by the film's platoon as 'politics.' The focus is on the details of the troop's daily routine: the boredom, the tiredness, the ants and leeches, the equipment, and the confusion of battle. Unlike the fantasy-based anti-war films of the 1970s and the gung-ho movies of the early 1980s, *Platoon* deals with issues from the perspective of the ground soldier, and, unless motivated by a character's point-of-view from a helicopter, the camera is restricted to ground level. The viewer is thus always placed within the platoon. Second, Sturken notes that *Platoon* provides a heightened sensory experience. The sounds of the jungle dominate the soldiers almost forcing the dialogue in early scenes into the background. The oppressiveness of the vegetation is suggested early on when our view is obscured, making it difficult to see the action as the troop struggle through the undergrowth. The viewer's knowledge is restricted and never knows more than the platoon: 'When darkness falls, we are prevented from seeing any more than the soldiers themselves do; our own perception of the action is never privileged in relation to theirs. Which means that if, for instance, they have not yet sighted the presence of an enemy, then neither have we' (Adair 1989, 148). In this way, the film aligns the viewer's sensory and emotional experiences with

that of the platoon. For Sturken, the result is that the ‘positioning of viewership as a kind of veteranship results directly from the codes of realism applied in Vietnam War films (1997, 96), so that through the deployment of this heightened, realistic style, the viewer does not simply watch *Platoon*; they are there and, through the act of viewing, also become a veteran.

### 3. Genre and memory in *Jacob's Ladder*

Astrid Erll (2012, 232) argues that cinema plays a key role in the *narrativization* and *iconization* of war to create memorable stories and images:

What is known about a war, a revolution, or any other event which has been turned into a site of memory, therefore, seems to refer not so much to what one might cautiously call the ‘actual events,’ but instead to a canon of existing medial constructions, to the narratives and images circulating in a media culture (Erll 2008, 392).

In other words, memories about a war are *generic*, restricted to a small number of recurrent themes produced and circulated via media technologies (Sorlin 1994) that create generic event-related images that have mnemonic effects similar to personal images for an individual’s personal recollections (Blandón-Gitlin and Gerkens 2010). More than this, for viewers, genre *is* memory: a storehouse of shared cultural knowledge inferred from the production and consumption of individual texts (Steveker 2009, 126–134; Wesseling 1991, 18) that serve as the basis for an audience community with a shared experience of cultural texts (Kukkonen 2008). In Hollywood cinema, genre is a mode of institutional and cultural memory that fulfils a range of functions, providing producers with a cultural toolkit for developing novel films that build upon existing cinematic conventions and a privileged mode of communication between creative personnel, enabling distributors to endow individual films with an identity in a market space defined by a set of relatively stable product categories, and providing audiences with prototypical mental schemas that enable them to make sense of new films (Redfern 2012). Genres allow audiences to store information at an aggregate rather than at a specific level, enabling filmmakers and audiences to manage the contradictory requirements that films must be both familiar enough to be intelligible but novel enough to be enjoyable. As a reservoir of memories about the past and about past films, genres are a ‘concretisation’ of public recollections of the past where the structures and rituals of cultural memories overlap with the institutional structures and production practices of the film industry and the formal structures and of cinematic texts those industries produce to emerge as *media memories* of the past (Cohen, Boudana, and Frosh, 2018; Neiger, Meyers, and Zandberg, 2011).

Although it is considered to be a horror film, in this section I discuss *Jacob's Ladder* as a Vietnam war film focussing on the ways in which this film draws on the iconography of Vietnam war films of the late-1980s by appealing directly to viewers’

memories of other films in the genre and the use of a modular narrative form that obstructs the stable narrativization of the war.

### 3.1 Iconography

*Jacob's Ladder* opens like many of the ‘grunts’ war’ cycle Vietnam War movies, drawing on a recognisable set of images derived from earlier films: helicopters flying against the background of a setting sun (Figures 1.1 and 1.2); men and equipment being deposited in terraced rice paddies; the boredom of the troops sweating in the heat of the jungle whilst they share a joint (Figures 1.3 and 1.4); the sudden onset of action and the rush to respond; and the confusion of battle in a jungle where it is impossible to orient oneself or identify a clearly defined enemy. The casual bullshitting and in-jokes of the troops as they rest is familiar both as a dramatic device to introduce us to the soldiers and in its combination of slang (‘gooks,’ ‘boo-coo’/‘beaucoup’) and military jargon (‘Charlie-Fox-6,’ ‘movement in the treeline’) that feature in every film about the ‘grunts’ war.’ In the opening sequence of the film, Jacob is the only character from the platoon to be named, whereas the rest of the troop remain unnamed until much later in the film. As such, they are presented to the viewer at this stage as purely generic, the same mixed-race group in sweat-stained fatigues and muddy boots we have encountered in other films. The camera remains at the eye-level of the soldiers at all times, placing the viewer alongside them in the jungle and the use of rapid camera movements once combat has begun recreates the confusion of battle from *Platoon*, *Full Metal Jacket*, *Born on the Fourth of July*, and *Casualties of War*, with the viewer unable to clearly identify the enemy in the heat and the jungle. The soundtrack is also familiar, with the background hum of jungle insects and the dull, repetitive throb of the helicopters interrupted by mortar explosions and the sharp crack of gunfire. The iconography of combat in the Vietnam War film provides the viewer with a set of familiar cultural reference points, and *Jacob's Ladder* crams all these elements into the first seven minutes of the film.

Other elements of the film reference prior movies about the war. The main character, Jacob Singer, is a Doctor of Philosophy and is nicknamed ‘Professor’ by the other soldiers, which brings to mind Taylor’s decision in *Platoon* to leave college and join the army. Taylor’s first voice-over begins ‘Someone once wrote, “hell is the impossibility of reason”’,<sup>1</sup> establishing him as someone who can speak about the war philosophically whilst also being a soldier on the ground, and this is reflected in Jacob’s doctorate in philosophy. *Jacob's Ladder* frames its narrative as a flashback with a direct reference to *Casualties of War*, which begins and ends with shots of a veteran, Max Eriksson, falling asleep and then waking on a tram, with the narrative of the film presented as a dream about his experiences in Vietnam. In *Jacob's Ladder*, the film cuts from the scenes in the jungle to Jacob waking with a start on the New York

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<sup>1</sup> This phrase, however, appears to originate with director and screenwriter, Oliver Stone.



1.1



1.2



1.3



1.4



1.5



1.6



1.7



1.8

Figure 1: *Jacob's Ladder* (1990) consciously draws on the iconography of the Vietnam War to remediate shots of helicopters (1.1) from *Hamburger Hill* (1987) (1.2), the troops in the jungle (1.3) from *Platoon* (1986) (1.4), the veteran asleep on public transport (1.5) from *Casualties of War* (1988) (1.6), and the hospital (1.7) from *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989) (1.8).

subway recalling Eriksson's nightmare thus transforming the status of the opening sequence from the narrated past (history) to the recalled autobiographical past (memory), while at the same time drawing on the viewer's prior experience of similar films (Figures 1.5 and 1.6). Later scenes from the war when the injured Jacob is evacuated aboard a helicopter recall similar scenes in *Platoon*, *Casualties of War*, and *Hamburger Hill*, with shots of the wounded soldier looking straight up directly at the camera and the door gunner returning fire to an unseen enemy below. Jacob's time in the hospital recalls the indifference of the staff to the patients, drab institutional colours, noise, grime, dirt, and general squalor of the veteran's hospital in *Born on the Fourth of July* (Figures 1.7 and 1.8).

Films such as *Platoon* and *Casualties of War* are defined by the *immediacy* of their *mediation* of a historical past and, through these mediated experiences the viewer is able to attain a degree of 'veteranness.' In contrast, *Jacob's Ladder* is a *remediation* of the Vietnam War film, employing the visual conventions of the genre to draw attention to itself as a film and is defined by its *hypermediacy*, with no reference point outside the genre of the Vietnam War film (Erl and Rigney 2009). The references to other films in *Jacob's Ladder* are embedded in regimes of generic verisimilitude, the sets of norms and expectations that viewers bring to each film and that allow them to understand a novel text (Neale 2000). The viewers' capacity to understand the images in Figure 1 is therefore dependent upon their ability to recognise the iconography of the Vietnam War film and to interpret it as a representation of the recent past. That past is not the Vietnam War, but the mediation of the war by Hollywood in the mid- to late-1980s.

### 3.2 Modular narrativization

Genres function as prototypical narratives that enable the viewer to make sense of the events presented to them. As Judith Keene notes:

Narrative and plot can serve as the container that gives shape to fragmentary, and often inchoate, public, and private recollection, while providing the templates of meaning and the language with which to evaluate the wartime past (2010, 2).

However, this is not possible in *Jacob's Ladder*. If the film's iconography is familiar to viewers from other Vietnam War films and engages their generic memory, its formal structure undermines the narrational processes of those films through the use of a modular narrative form.

Allan Cameron argues that modular narration in the cinema draws attention to the temporality of a story and the order of its presentation to create a mood of crisis by the breaking down of the narrative structure of a film, presenting the viewer with 'a series of disarticulated narrative pieces, often arranged in radically achronological ways via flashforwards, overt repetition or a destabilisation of the relationship between pres-

ent and past' (2008, 1). As a modular narrative, *Jacob's Ladder* exhibits features of anachronic narratives at the level of plot (syuzhet) to present alternative temporalities that can be considered to be equally valid despite their manifest contradictions. Panek (2006) describes *Jacob's Ladder* as an example of a 'psychological puzzle' film that presents the viewer with a central enigma that must be solved (*what happened to Jacob in Vietnam?*) and deploys modular narration as a manifestation of Jacob's inability to remember the war that is the result of his traumatic experiences. Panek (2006, 70) presents four possible narratives of *Jacob's Ladder* (see Figure 2).<sup>2</sup>

1. Jacob is a Vietnam veteran working for the post office, living with Jezebel, having become estranged from his family, and trying to uncover the cause of his delusions about the world.
2. Jacob is in hell, and his impressions of the everyday world disguise the true nature of reality.
3. Jacob lives at home with his wife and children and is dreaming about his relationship with Jezebel.
4. Jacob is a soldier wounded in combat in Vietnam, hallucinating about a life after the war the nature of which is determined by his sexual fantasies about Jezebel and his paranoia about the government.

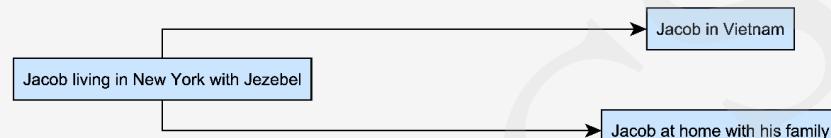
Panek enumerates these possible stories to illustrate the formal possibilities of the psychological puzzle film, and Cameron (2008, 119) acknowledges that Jacob's 'tortured mnemonic experience exists within, and is determined by' the broader historic context of the Vietnam War. However, neither addresses what it means for *Jacob's Ladder* to employ this mode of narration as a Vietnam War film.

In classical Hollywood narration, a scene that the viewer has understood to be set in the present may be re-cast as a flashback through the use of appropriate narrative markers that let the viewer retrospectively understand the relationship between the two temporalities. However, anachronic narratives deploy flashbacks and flashforwards in ways that depart from their commonly understood usage in classical Hollywood narration to undermine the relationship between the primary temporality of a film – that is, the temporality against which we measure the narrative order of flashbacks and flashforwards – and the secondary temporalities of those flashbacks and flashforwards. In *Jacob's Ladder*, the opening of the film shifts from a sequence showing combat in the jungle to Jacob waking up on a subway, clearly establishing that everything we have seen thus far are Jacob's memories of the war. In this case, the primary temporality is New York in 1975 and the scenes in Vietnam are the secondary temporality. However, the ending of the film implies the exact opposite, leading the viewer to conclude that Jacob died in Vietnam in 1971, that this is the primary temporality, and that the

<sup>2</sup> The numbering of these explanations here should not be taken to imply any ordering or preference and is for convenience only.

scenes in New York are Jacob's hallucinations during surgery and are, therefore, the secondary temporality. Consequently, it is not possible to determine which temporality is primary and which is secondary for narratives one and four.

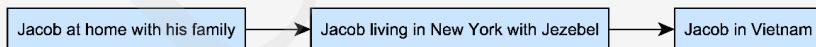
#### Narrative 1



#### Narrative 2



#### Narrative 3



#### Narrative 4

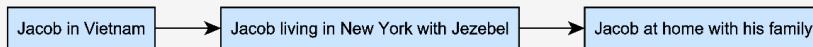


Figure 2: The four different narrative possibilities of *Jacob's Ladder* (1990)

The temporalities of narratives three and four are mirror images of one another, with the primary temporality of each narrative embedded as a memory, dream, or hallucination within the secondary temporality of the other, and both are equally valid based on the film's narration. Either Jacob is dying on the surgical table in Vietnam, hallucinating about his life with Jezebel and remembering his life with his family as a traumatic memory within that hallucination; or he is living with his family, dreaming of living with Jezebel and hallucinating about the war in Vietnam within that dream.

Similarly, narratives one and three can be understood as embedded within one another: either Jacob's memory of living with his family is a psychophysiological response to being put into an ice-bath with a dangerously high fever after collapsing at a party; or narrative one is the content of Jacob's dream in narrative three and is

not actually happening. The fact that everything the viewer has witnessed so far is only a dream is explained rationally when Jacob wakes up in bed with his wife and complains of feeling cold because the bedroom window is open (thereby explaining the ice-bath) and describes to his wife his life with Jezebel and the demons he keeps seeing as both a dream and a nightmare, which accounts for the plot of the film so far because illogical and under-motivated events, such as these, occur in dreams. At the end of the sequence at the Singer family home, the film cuts from a shot of Jacob in bed with his wife looking into the middle distance to a shot of tree branches against the sky, followed by a close-up of Jacob's face in the bathtub, utilising commonly used stylistic devices to re-cast the scenes the viewer has just witnessed as being the interior experience of a character (see below) but which do *not* identify which experience is the primary temporality. There is no reason to prefer one narrative over the other, with the transitions between the scenes properly motivated within aesthetic norms of classical Hollywood narration.

*Jacob's Ladder* also disturbs the viewer's understanding of narrative space in two ways. First, the film presents contradictory information about where action takes place. It is not possible to identify where the jungle scenes take place. At the beginning of the film a title card orientates the viewer by announcing a specific location and a specific date – 'Mekong Delta, 6th Oct. 1971;' but this does not align with either Jacob's memory, who later claims his platoon was in Da Nang (some 429 miles away),<sup>3</sup> or the Army Bureau of Information, which locates the scenes in the jungle in Thailand, with Jacob's platoon never having made it to Vietnam. Here, the film draws on the generic imagery of the Vietnam War film so that these scenes could be set anywhere.

Second, the film does not always make clear distinctions between the real and the imaginary. For some scenes in the film, it is clear that when Jacob sees a demon it is a response to traumatic experiences. For example, Jacob's hallucinations of horrific surgery featuring Jezebel as one of the nurses and an eyeless doctor who forces a needle into Jacob's skull can be explained by a potential head injury, when one of the stretcher-bearers states, 'They said he slipped on the ice. May have hit his head;' or as a response to the anaesthetic, which is administered just before the surgery sequence begins. However, in other scenes Jacob sees demons in the everyday world and no attempt is made to establish that these events are dreams or hallucinations, such as when Jacob sees the tail of the man sleeping on the subway or when the hat of the reception nurse at Bellevue Hospital slips from her head to reveal horns protruding from her skull. Furthermore, another member of Jacob's platoon, Paul, tells Jacob he too sees the demons, lending credence to their objective existence and reducing the possibility they are Jacob's hallucinations. The presence of fantastical creatures in Jacob's apparent everyday reality lends validity to narrative two, with Jacob living in a hell popu-

<sup>3</sup> The distance from Sa Đéc in the middle of the Mekong Delta region to Da Nang is approximately 429 miles (690 kilometres) as the crow flies.

lated by demons which takes the form of Jacob living in 1975 New York with Jezebel, and his soul is tortured by the memories of his lives with his family and in Vietnam.

Maureen Turim (2013) argues that flashbacks in the cinema negotiate the relationship between two levels of remembering, merging memory and history as ways of recollecting the past, presenting large-scale historical events through the recalled, subjective mode of the individual's localised experiences of those events. This merging of memory and history is common in Vietnam War films. The narrative of *Causalities of War* is presented to the viewer as memory re-experienced by Erickson as a dream and is framed by shots of him asleep on a tram. As noted above, at the beginning of the film, *Jacob's Ladder* established the subjective nature of memory in the same way and marks the first transition between different realities with Jacob waking from dream-memory of being bayoneted with his hand placed over his mid-riff roughly where he was stabbed to create a physical echo of memory after Jacob wakes from his nightmare. The conscious referencing of *Causalities of War* provides the viewer with a reference point for how the film will construct its relationship between the present and the past, inviting the viewer to trust that the film's narration transitions of space and time are sufficiently motivated and intelligible within the aesthetic norms of Hollywood cinema.

However, the merging of memory and history is not possible in *Jacob's Ladder* because personal memories do not align with official records. Jacob visits a veterans' mental health clinic and asks to speak to a Dr. Carlson only to be told by the nurse at the reception that there is not only no such doctor at the clinic but that there is also no record of a Jacob Singer ever having attended the clinic despite his claims to have been a patient there for years. Jacob's inability to remember his service in Vietnam is shared by the other members of his platoon and they are forced to look elsewhere to discover what happened to them, bringing their subjective, autobiographical memories into contact with objective, historical reality. However, the lawyer, Geary, refuses to take on the case of Jacob's platoon because the army records show that they were never in Vietnam and did not participate in the war, having been discharged on psychological grounds following war games in Thailand. The reaction of the other members of Jacob's platoon to learning this news suggests that historical records dominate personal and collective memory, and they elect not to proceed with the lawsuit against the army to discover what happened to them during the war. The lawyer's explanation appears to contradict everything the viewer knows about Jacob's time in Vietnam. Significantly, it implies that Jacob did *not* serve in Vietnam, rendering his status as a veteran doubtful.

The account of the chemist, Newman, who claims to have developed 'the Ladder' as a drug to enhance the fighting, appears to give coherence to the narrative of the film. His unofficial 'history' of events appears to explain everything the viewer has seen so far in the film: the inability of the soldiers to respond to the enemy under fire, the troops in the jungle attacking each other, the 'demons' in New York and Jacob's other hallucinations, and the conspiracy against the platoon can all be explained away by the use and aftereffects of an experimental hallucinogenic drug. The film seemingly gives

credence to this interpretation with a closing title card that states, 'It was reported that the hallucinogenic drug BZ was used in experiments on soldiers during the Vietnam War. The Pentagon denied the story.' However, Newman's account does not, in fact, explain anything. If Jacob is a traumatised veteran living in New York in 1975 (narrative one), then it makes sense that he could learn about the hidden history of the war; but how, then, can he be a soldier dying in Vietnam in 1971 (narrative four)? If narrative four is a valid interpretation and Jacob dies in Vietnam, so that this scene is a part of his hallucination about life after the war, how can he know any of this information? Is the meeting between Jacob and Newman part of the illusion of the everyday world Jacob experiences whilst being in hell (narrative two) or part of his dream he has in bed at home (narrative three)? Newman's account is consistent with Geary's statement that the platoon was taking part in war games in Thailand, but this directly contradicts the opening of the film that locates the scenes of the fighting between the U.S. troops in the Mekong Delta. Newman's account is superficially satisfying for the viewer, but the confusion of time and space in *Jacob's Ladder* renders it impossible to distinguish between different versions of the film in which this scene is consistent with the logic of the narrative and those versions in which it is not consistent.

Unlike the 'grunts' war' films that present a singular and coherent narrative of the young soldier's journey to 'veteran-ness,' the formal structure in *Jacob's Ladder* breaks with the narrative conventions of these films. Having invoked the viewer's generic memory through the remediation of the iconography of the Vietnam War film in the opening sequence, the film's failure to adhere to established narrative conventions renders its status within that cycle of Vietnam War films questionable. Consequently, the modularity of *Jacob's Ladder* inhibits the narrativization of the Vietnam War, denying the viewer the status of 'veteran.' The film fails to solve its central mystery of what happened to Jacob in the jungle, leaving open the gap in the platoon's collective memory of the war, not because it fails to provide a narrative that can account for events but because it offers too many possible explanations. Different viewers will interpret the film in different – but equally valid – ways, so that the formation of a collective memory of the war is no longer possible even though those viewers have experienced the same events. Viewing *Jacob's Ladder*, it is not possible to have an 'authentic experience' of the war through which one acquires 'truth' about the war via its cinematic representations (Sturken 1997, 99), because it is not clear what is or is not an authentic experience and what is or is not truth.

#### 4. Scenes of reminiscence

*Jacob's Ladder* denies the viewer the opportunity to attain the status of 'veteran' through the consumption of cultural memories of the Vietnam war. Nevertheless, it is, above all, a film about remembering. The film presents the viewer with multiple scenes of reminiscence that dramatize the tension between failing to address a past that will never go away and which will always return as a trauma, and the consciously recalling

of the past as a ‘life review,’ described by Robert N. Butler as ‘a naturally occurring, universal mental process characterized by the progressive return to consciousness of past experiences, and, particularly, the resurgence of unresolved conflicts’ (1963, 66). The therapeutic reminiscences of the life review allow Jacob to overcome his past traumas and move beyond them to begin the process of forgetting.

Therapeutic reminiscences in which Jacob explores his memories as a way of coming to terms with the past occur in three scenes. The first scene occurs when Jacob is handed a bag of photographs of his family that he explores with evident delight followed by grief when he finds an image of his dead son, Gabriel. The second scene of reminiscence occurs following Geary’s revelation that Jacob was never in Vietnam and his stay in hospital. Returning to his apartment, Jacob takes out a cigar box in which he keeps the significant objects of his life – his dog tags, a torch, army discharge papers, some Vietnamese money, his doctorate, a letter from his dead son – leading him to be thrown back in time as he explores the contents of this time capsule. Gabriel’s death is a part of this sequence, though the moment when he is struck by a car is not shown, the one event in the film when the viewer witnesses Jacob remember but not the memory itself, which remains unrepresentable. Finally, after learning the (apparent) truth about ‘the Ladder’ and the war from Newman, Jacob visits his old family home and holding a photograph of his family he sits in an armchair and reminisces about his time with his family, recalling his sons playing together on the beach, his wife, and teaching Gabriel to ride a bike.

In each of these scenes Jacob’s reminiscences are prompted by photographs and mementoes that are stored within containers – a bag, a box, a house – that must be opened for Jacob to become deeply immersed in the state of reminiscing. Jacob’s mementoes are *revealed* items, which when uncovered ‘regenerate forgotten experiences relating to concealed collections of objects’ (Petrelli, Whittaker, and Brockmeier 2008, 61). Richard Heersmink describes artefacts imbued with significant personal meaning connected to episodes from one’s past as *evocative objects*, arguing that the self is ‘essentially a narrative construct realised by autobiographical memory systems’ (2018, 1830) and that evocative objects function as a scaffold for the process of constructing the self as part of our *autobiography*:

Our autobiography, that is, the network of evocative objects in which we are embedded, provides stability and continuity for our autobiographical memory and narrative self. By interacting with these objects, we construct and reconstruct our past and by doing so also our personal identity. Objects and narratives complement each other. Our embodied interactions with evocative objects trigger and sometimes constitute emotionally-laden autobiographical memories, which are the building blocks of our narrative. Our narrative, in turn, helps to make sense of our autobiography (2018, 1846).

The power of evocative objects to provoke reminiscence is evident in Jezebel’s reaction to Jacob’s ‘emotionally-laden’ response to the image of his dead son: she tips the photographs down a garbage chute where they are destroyed in the apartment build-

ing's incinerator. The memories themselves cannot be destroyed, but by removing the objects that evoke those memories, Jezebel aims to protect Jacob by constraining his ability to construct a particular autobiographical self.

In his attempts to understand what is happening to him, Jacob is trying to re-construct his past, but he is unable to construct a narrative to make sense of the evocative objects he owns. Within the narrative economy of the film, the first moment of reminiscence is a key scene in establishing Jacob's character: the viewer understands who Jacob is because they know his biography and he emerges as the psychologically defined individual 'endowed with a consistent batch of evident traits, qualities, and behaviours' of classical Hollywood narration (Bordwell 1985, 157). However, the status of these regenerated experiences becomes less stable over the course of the film. As he explores the contents of his cigar box-time capsule, Jacob is caught in the narrative disjuncture between his memories of the war, apparently based on his tactile experience of the artefacts that evoke them, and the official record that contradicts his understanding of his own past. He returns to these objects to recover a past he now knows may be radically different from how he remembers it to be, breaking the link between objects and memory.

If memories in *Jacob's Ladder* are evoked by objects, it is the body of the veteran that is the storehouse of memory. Jacob's memories are *within* him, and the film employs a range of stylistic features to present these memories as interior to him, linking the cinematic convention of the flashback to moments of reminiscence. Close-ups presented before and after a memory (Figure 3.1 and 3.4) establish interiority of the images of the past, and in some sequences are the result of the camera moving in closer to Jacob, isolating him in the frame from the world of the present. The memories in the flashback are often presented in ways that mimic photographs or home movies to distinguish them from the cinematic qualities of the film's diegesis through the use of black-and-white (Figure 3.3) or the grain of 8 mm film stock of images of the platoon in the jungle or of Jacob with his family (Figure 3.9 and 3.10). These are often presented directly after a close-up on the photograph that evokes the memory (Figure 3.2). Dialogue and sound effects are absent during these moments of interiority, with the soundtrack comprised of the musical score only. Slow motion is often used in such sequences to create a different sense of time to the present: for example, one of Jacob's memories of being airlifted out of the jungle slows the rotor blades of the helicopter to emphasise the subjective experience of time in contrast to the temporality of the present. The conventions of point-of-view editing (Carroll 1993) are also used to establish interiority and to create relationships between images unrelated in space and time. A graphical match from Jacob's point-of-view is used to shift between the party and the jungle, with both shots showing concerned groups of people looking down at Jacob in different contexts (Figure 3.7 and 3.8); while in Figures 3.5 and 3.6, the two shots of point-of-view editing are used to transition between scenes as Jacob lies in the ice bath, with the point/glance shot of Jacob, again in close-up, juxtaposed with the point/object shot of the helicopter organising the relationship between different

temporalities through the viewer's understanding of the stylistic conventions of Hollywood cinema. Jacob's memories are often presented as fragments through the use of montage sequences that link images thematically (the platoon in the jungle, Jacob's family) but which do not depend on spatial or temporal relationships between consecutive shots that are often divided by black frames. At these times, the film becomes what Annette Kuhn (2010, 299) describes as a *memory text*, characterised by their collagist, fragmentary, and timeless nature with abrupt shifts of scene to create montages of events that do not adhere to the forward flow of historical time, and which amplify the non-linearities of the film's modular narration.

The representation of the veteran's body as a reservoir of memories also means that recollection of the past occurs as a response to the experience of trauma, causing Jacob to remember the war when his body is subjected to physical stress. This is evident by the fact that in one version of the film's narrative it is revealed at the end of the film that all Jacob's memories, dreams, and nightmares are a response to the trauma of being stabbed in the stomach. It is also evident when Jacob remembers when he wakes up on the subway with his hand over his stomach where we have just seen him stabbed in the jungle; when he has – in his own words – 'flashes' of the past as a reaction to the realignment of his body by his chiropractor, Louis; when he must be given an ice-bath after collapsing with a fever at the party; and when he is knocked to the ground by the force of an explosion that kills a fellow veteran. Unlike the scenes in which Jacob consciously reminiscences, actively and willingly finding comfort in the process of recalling the past, his recollections in response to trauma are uncontrolled, the memories unbidden and intrusive.

Ultimately, reminiscing is essential, but it is not an end in itself and the film ends with a lesson for Jacob in forgetting. Quoting the fourteenth century Christian mystic, Meister Eckhart, Louis tells Jacob:

Eckhart saw Hell too. He said: "The only thing that burns in Hell is the part of you that won't let go of life, your memories, your attachments. They burn them all away. But they're not punishing you," he said. "They're freeing your soul. So, if you're frightened of dying and you're holding on, you'll see devils tearing your life away. But if you've made your peace, then the devils are really angels, freeing you from the earth."

In *Jacob's Ladder*, the reminiscence of the life review is a precondition to moving beyond the ordeal of the Vietnam War and a prelude to the necessary forgetting of personal (and social) traumas. At the end of the third scene of therapeutic reminiscence, Gabriel takes his father by the hand and leads him upstairs towards a white light that fades to become the surgeon's light in a field hospital in the jungle, before cutting to the Jacob on the operating table, dead but at peace. The final shot of the film is a black-and-white photograph of Jacob and Gabriel together.



Figure 3: *Jacob's Ladder* employs a wide range of devices to initiate moments of reminiscence, including reverse-angle cuts of close-ups between Jacob and black-and-white photographs (3.1–3.4), point-of-view editing (3.5–3.6), graphical matches (3.7–3.8), and the grain of 8 mm film stock to simulate the appearance of home movies (3.9–3.10).

## 5. Conclusion

Unlike the ‘grunts’ war’ films which sought to become prosthetic cultural memories by extending the experience of the Vietnam War to the viewer cinematically, *Jacob’s Ladder* is a film about the remembering of the war and engages the viewer in a critique about the role cinema plays in the construction of public memory about historical events. It achieves this by problematising the generic features of the Vietnam War film, creating a tension between the familiar iconization of the war that invokes viewers’ memories of the ‘grunts’ war’ films and the anachronies of a modularized narrativization that undermines the viewer’s ability to make sense of the information presented to them, denying them the possibility of ‘veteran-ness’ and drawing attention to the ways in which narrative is constructed. The film dramatizes the act of remembering the war as both therapeutic reminiscing and traumatic eruption, with memories stored in the body of the veteran brought to the surface by evocative objects or physical stress. *Jacob’s Ladder* is unique among films about the Vietnam War because, rather than refighting the war on the screen, it demonstrates a way of coming to terms with America’s past through deliberate acts of remembering and forgetting, positing the act of a life review as an essential stage for coming to terms with the past not only for the individual but also for the nation.

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