This is the published version:


Available from Deakin Research Online:

[http://hdl.handle.net/10536/DRO/DU:30048841](http://hdl.handle.net/10536/DRO/DU:30048841)

Every reasonable effort has been made to ensure that permission has been obtained for items included in Deakin Research Online. If you believe that your rights have been infringed by this repository, please contact drosupport@deakin.edu.au

THE HEALED WOUND: METAPHOR AND THE IMPACT OF THE VIETNAM WAR

Keith Beattie

A picture held us captive. And we could not get outside it, for it lay in our language and language seemed to repeat it to us inexorably.

— Wittgenstein

It has been claimed that truth is the first casualty of war, cut down as hyperbole and metaphor escalate. America's war in Vietnam supported the claim by producing its own figurative language which made the rhetoric of earlier wars seem innocent by comparison. The end of the war has not altered the situation and metaphor is now extensively employed to interpret the impact of the war upon American society. It has become commonplace to refer to the deleterious effects of the war as a 'wound' and to reconciliatory efforts as 'healing'. The New York Times Magazine, for example, referring to the war's lingering impact has discussed the 'wound that will not heal' and Time magazine has used the same heading on a number of occasions.¹ Other journals have referred to the effects of the war as an 'unending trauma' and asked 'will there be a collective healing?' proceeding to postulate the fate of 'the healing nation'.² The Vietnam Veterans' Memorial in Washington, D.C., is now commonly referred to as the 'wall that heals the wounds of war'.³ A succession of American presidents have spoken of the need to heal the wounds inflicted by America's involvement in Vietnam. Johnson spoke of the need to 'heal' the divisions in American society including those created by the war in Vietnam. Ford entitled his post-Vietnam, post-Watergate memoir A Time to Heal and in a major message to Congress in October 1978 Carter spoke of the obligation to forgive Vietnam-era draft resisters as part of the process of 'healing (the war's) wounds'.⁴ The concepts of a wound and of healing are also expressed in certain films, fiction and memoir which habitually rely upon a physically or psychically wounded veteran to embody the metaphors. It would appear that 'the wound' and 'healing' have developed as the framework for interpreting the consequences of the Vietnam war, whether those consequences are seen as political, economic, social, or psychological. Given the widespread application of these metaphors it seems appropriate to inquire into their implications and to ask what it means to interpret the effects of a war in these terms. Two sources, narrative histories and films, offer a number of examples whereby answers to this question may be explored.

Though there are a number of written histories dealing in part with the impact of the war on the American homefront only a handful have focussed exclusively on the topic. One of these, The Wound Within: America in the Vietnam Years, 1945-1975 by Alexander Kendrick, not only embodies the 'wound' metaphor in its title but offers an elaboration in the opening chapter:

The war created an open suppurating wound which has not yet healed, and if it does, it may leave a permanent scar on the American body politic. In tropical Indochina wounds often go bad and gangrene sets in. Parts of the body in effect die and an atrophy of feeling results.⁵
To ‘arrest the spread of gangrene in the body politic from the wounds of Vietnam and Watergate’ Kendrick sees the need for ‘a blood transfusion … in the political process’ and calls for greater participation in freer elections.6

Throughout his book Kendrick relies on a variety of rhetorical devices, ‘… the pungent sentence, the evocative phrase’ according to one critic,7 to carry the narrative. Another, less enthusiastic, critic believes that if anything is in need of a transfusion it is Kendrick’s style. ‘Kendrick does not understate situations so much as drain them of life’.8 The same critic points out Kendrick’s lifeless description of the military’s response to Harrison Salisbury’s highly critical series of articles in the New York Times concerning the devastation caused by the intense bombing of North Vietnam: ‘The Pentagon was distinctly perturbed by Salisbury’s dispatches …’.9 Kendrick’s use of the ‘wound’ metaphor places it in the same category: it is beyond resuscitation. Through overwork, the ‘wound’ has become a dead metaphor, a cliché. This conclusion is supported through the use of the term in other texts. William Corson, for example, in his book Consequences of Failure employs the ‘wound’ metaphor, though in this case it is presented in a slightly attenuated form.

Corson assesses the impact that the war had upon the military, the people, the government and the economy. To Corson the war was a ‘failure’, as opposed to a defeat. Corson defines failure as ‘the nonperformance of something required or expected’. The fact that expectations were not matched by America’s actions in Vietnam has been profound. The effect of failure among ‘those who believed in the certainty of victory’ has been equivalent to a psychic trauma.10 Corson continues to stress the wounding by concluding that ‘to these people, the “Great Silent Majority” it was obvious that (America’s) military failure was personally painful …’.11 It is a pain which apparently reaches beyond the Silent Majority to include the entire population.

In The Unfinished War: Vietnam and the American Conscience Walter Capps follows Corson in using the term ‘trauma’ to express the effects of the war, yet whereas Corson believes that the trauma stemmed from defeat Capps believes that the trauma issues from tragedy. Capps describes tragedy as

... a dramatic event with an ending that was inevitably unhappy because integral elements eluded successful resolution ... Viewing the war in Vietnam as tragedy, we can identify ways in which we are accommodating the trauma...12

The synonyms increase in number: tragedy and trauma here become interchangeable and trauma and wound replace each other. The juggling of terms continues with Capps referring to the ‘... trauma we call Vietnam’.13 This use of the metonym ‘Vietnam’ to refer to the effects of the war in Vietnam is widespread. Variations of the term ‘Vietnam’ have also been used in a similar way. In The Wound Within Kendrick states that as ‘the war accentuated the negative in the theses and antitheses of American life …’, a circumlocution which could be added to the earlier criticisms of his style, that ‘... Vietnam became increasingly Americanised (and) America became increasingly Vietnamized’.14 Four years earlier David Halberstam had written of ‘the Vietnamization of America’ perhaps using the term for the first time to refer to situations on the homefront.15 These terms, it seems, could have supplanted the ‘wound’ as the preferred term when referring to the war’s impact. Their failure in this may have been a result of the fact that use of these terms would have meant promulgating the name of a country, and an experience, many felt best forgotten. The result has been the continued pre-eminence of the wound metaphor, a position no doubt enhanced by the function that this metaphor serves.
Typically, discussions of the functions of metaphor mention that it renders the unfamiliar in terms of the familiar. In a commentary upon Roland Barthes’ book *Mythologies* David Cooper argues that the various ‘symbols, clichés, and fetishes’ which Barthes has studied ‘might be more accurately entitled “metaphors”’ and applies this perception to the analogous functioning of metaphor when he quotes Barthes to the effect that ‘the very principle of myth is ... (to) transform history into nature’. Cooper adds that Barthes is here rephrasing the observation that metaphor ‘predominantly tends to represent the relatively more “cultural” in terms of the more “natural”, such as referring to states as families or organisms’. Quoting Barthes’ argument Cooper adds that the effect of this process ‘... is for people to treat as fixed and natural things which are historically contingent and for which human agents are responsible ...’. In support of this Cooper refers to metaphors in which economic problems are portrayed as illnesses. An example of this is inflation described as a cancer, a condition ‘that is, of economic life itself and not the product of bad management’. This argument lends itself to the way in which the wound metaphor functions. A wound, unlike cancer which is thought to occur naturally and spontaneously, has to be inflicted. In describing the war’s effects as a wound on America it is implied that America was not responsible for the problem; it suggests that the wound was inflicted by another. This conclusion would be modified if the wound were described as ‘self-inflicted’. However, in its present application the wound metaphor shifts responsibility, or culpability, elsewhere and in doing so America’s actions in relation to the war are distorted if not exonerated.

The same conclusion is suggested by a consideration of the changes that have taken place in the bodily metaphors used to describe societal disorders. In a discussion of the way in which problems associated with the ‘body politic’ are understood Susan Sontag has written that analogies based on infectious diseases such as syphilis and tuberculosis have been replaced by those based on cancer. The shift in the imagery from contagious diseases to cancer, an often fatal disease, gives the metaphor more weight and it implies ‘... that the event or situation is unqualifiedly or unredeemably wicked. It enormously ups the ante’.

Writing in 1978 Sontag could not have foreseen that the cancer metaphor would itself give way to that of the wound in discussions of the specific problems of the body politic. Sontag makes the point that the physical effects of cancer are often described in military metaphors. Accordingly cancer cells do not multiply, they are ‘invasive’, with carcinogenic cells mounting ‘assaults’ on the body’s ‘defences’. The wound metaphor reverses the situation by describing the effects of a war in bodily terms which raises the question as to why the metaphor changed from one of disease to one of physical impairment. The fact that during and after the war Americans were unavoidably confronted with physical disability in the form of 153,000 physically wounded veterans together with 58,000 mortally wounded may have impressed the concept of wounding upon the popular conscience. The result of the shift in metaphors from contagion to cancer is the implication that the body politic is now no longer threatened by external infection but rather is subject to internal illness. Reversing this, the wound trope re-establishes an outside agent, the nature of which is left open to conjecture, as the cause of disruption. The end result is that attention is diverted from domestic responsibility. Contrary to the many assertions that the nation lost its innocence fighting the war in Vietnam it can be seen that this denial of responsibility reasserts American innocence.
This implied assertion of innocence is not restricted to print sources such as written histories. In the films Taxi Driver (1976), Rolling Thunder (1977), Heroes (1977), and Who'll Stop the Rain (1978) the central character, a veteran, is psychologically trip-wired, a booby-trapped bundle of psychosis waiting to be detonated. Rambo also fits this mould with his comic book superhero character failing to preclude him from frequent violent outbursts when pushed too far. The result of this barrage of images is that ‘... Americans ... view Vietnam as a war fought by men psychically and morally different from themselves’. By placing the veterans in the category of outsider or scapegoat the broader community is effectively able to assert its innocence by denying any compliance with the war. In this way denial is aided by the fact that the ‘wound’ is interpreted through the character of a veteran.

Within the films the veteran’s wounds are meant to represent the scars inflicted upon American society by the war. It can be noted that there is little that is original in such a suggestion. Hemingway, for example, used his wounded World War I protagonist Jake Barnes to evoke the wound suffered by the larger, lost generation. By insisting on interpreting the impact of the war through the image of the wounded ‘vet’ the films ignore a range of issues associated with that impact. The audience is left with the hackneyed wounded veteran metaphor while the broader societal ‘wound’ remains inadequately addressed. If the ‘wound’ is the impact of the war upon American society then films that transcend the limited boundaries of the veteran’s experience make a larger contribution towards exemplifying this impact, examples here include Medium Cool (1969) or the more recent Running on Empty (1988). However, films such as Distant Thunder (1988), Casualties of War (1989), and to a lesser extent Born on the Fourth of July (1989) continue to ignore the wider issues through their insistence on returning to the (wounded) veteran’s experience in order to define the ‘wound’.

The limitations associated with metaphorical interpretations are evident in other ways. Paul Schrader, author of the scripts for Taxi Driver and Rolling Thunder, commented soon after the end of the war that ‘the war is still too close to most Americans for them sufficiently to detach themselves. One must work in metaphors for the moment ...’. This inability to directly confront the issues surrounding the war produced films that were themselves metaphorical interpretations, or allegories, for the war in Vietnam. The minor and shortlived genre of the ‘Vietnam western’ which included The Wild Bunch (1969), Soldier Blue (1970) and Little Big Man (1971), exemplifies this approach. These films are products of their times and reflect the prevailing ambivalent attitudes to the war: they desire to portray the war yet cannot do so in anything other than elliptical terms. The race for metaphors to describe either the war or its impact, or both, resulted in a number of gimmicks as varied, and distorted, as Russian roulette (The Deer Hunter, 1978), the ‘heart of darkness’ (Apocalypse Now, 1979), heroin (Who’ll Stop The Rain), and the wounds inflicted by the war as in Coming Home (1978), where paraplegia is meant to suggest the crippling effects of the war and the fragmentation of society. In the case of Coming Home the efficacy of the analogy rests with the audience respecting the reality and depth of this disability.

According to the makers of Coming Home audiences may have been ready to accept a paraplegic on the screen, which was an achievement in itself since physical disabilities are rarely seen on film, but the same audiences were not yet capable of dealing with the implications of such a disability. One reviewer criticised Coming Home for failing to convey the fact that the injuries sustained by Luke Martin (Jon Voight) irrevocably preclude him from walking and sexual intercourse.
Instead, viewers often miss the reality that Voight (sic) is impotent, expecting him to jump out of his wheelchair a la Dr Strangelove and yell, ‘Jane (sic), I can walk! I can make real love.’

It has been observed that the same kind of ‘magical alteration’ that sees Sally Hyde (Jane Fonda) transformed from a repressed housewife to a liberated woman takes hold of Luke Martin who ‘goes from a violently embittered, self-pitying, totally dependent cripple into a well-adjusted, emphatic, politically and sexually active handicapped person’. Such a well-integrated figure is unlikely to suggest the fragmentation of society. Such a figure does, however, point towards a reconstructed society.

Without mixing the metaphors the post-war reconstruction of society is expressed in the inverse of the wound: ‘healing’. In order for the healing metaphor to gain currency as an expression denoting a consensual society a change in the terms used to describe the ill effects besieging the body politic had to take place. Originally, assaults on the body politic were described in terms of viral infection. Such descriptions gave way in time to figurative descriptions based on cancer. Recently, certain disruptions have been described as a wound. Neither a viral infection nor cancer automatically imply healing, rather they tend to suggest chronic illness. Alternatively, a wound implies a trauma to the body that will eventually disappear allowing a ‘healed’ and healthy society to emerge. This points to a paradox in the way that the terms ‘wound’ and ‘healing’ have been employed: on the one hand the ‘wound’ inflicted upon American society by the war is described as verging towards life-threatening with various disastrous ramifications; while on the other hand the possibility of healing suggests that the wound was negligible. Indeed ultimately forgettable. Healing therefore signifies the desire to see the post-war American community unscarred with, to mix the metaphor, the damage to the consensus repaired. If the wound is denial then healing is denial taken to the extreme of enforced amnesia.

The forgetting associated with healing offers the dangerous opportunity that the war may be repeated elsewhere since images associated with the conflict are no longer held in the collective memory. Another opportunity inherent in the metaphor is that indicated by Barthes: myths, or metaphors, treat events and situations which are determined by human actions as palpable and ‘natural’. This situation serves established power which has an interest in propagating the belief that the prevailing order is itself natural. In this way widespread application of the ‘healing’ metaphor can be interpreted as yet another factor contributing to the ideological process by which such power maintains and solidifies its position. Such an interpretation provides the context for a number of statements by various presidents on the subject of ‘healing’. The Ford administration advised putting events such as the Vietnam war and Watergate ‘behind us’. In accepting the Vietnam Veterans’ Memorial on behalf of the U.S. nation Reagan’s colloquially styled speech intimates that ‘healing’ involves a reconstruction, with overtones of renewed strength, of the enduring order of things stretching back to Lincoln and Washington. Reagan, who was fond of evoking ‘heroes’ (Knute Rockne with ‘win one for the Gipper’, Rambo with ‘we get to win this time’) here recalls Hemingway’s Frederic Henry who was familiar with the wounds of war and believed that it is possible to be made ‘strong at the broken places’.

*The Memorial reflects as a mirror reflects ... And as you touch it ... you’re touching ... the reflection of the Washington Monument or the chair in which great Abe Lincoln sits ...
Reagan’s interpretation of the monument’s function is echoed by John Wheeler who sees the Memorial, together with the media, as being able to offer a variety of healing. In Touched With Fire Wheeler observes that:

... visitors to the Memorial are drawn to the names. They touch the names, running their fingers over the letters. To an observer, there is an evident satisfaction and a kind of healing in it.

He adds that ‘pictures of this touching have often appeared in the media. The pictures convey healing’. Another interpretation of the symbolic role of the Memorial has recently suggested that the 58,000 names on the wall resemble, oddly, early colonial catalogues of flora and fauna that were encountered in the New World by the early settlers. ‘Then, as now, fear and disorientation were held in abeyance by the calming effect of order, the power of a framework imposed through sheer force of will’. Paraphrasing this view it could be added that now, as then, another framework, that of language, helps to impose a consensual societal order through the operation of certain metaphors.

Seeking to find order and meaning in the post-Vietnam war era John Wheeler elsewhere argues that the legacy, the ‘wound’, of the war is primarily in the area of relationships. As a result of the war Wheeler sees a division between those who went to Vietnam and those who didn’t, between man and woman, and ‘self divided from self’. He feels that ‘the ... choices made by Americans during the Vietnam era created deep divisions and ... chilled the ... sense of community within the generation ...’ It is these divisions that Capps seeks to address through a focus on the attempts at ‘healing’ undertaken by the Vietnam veteran.

Using phraseology borrowed from Morris Dickstein, Capps notes that neither ‘Eden’ and the new religious faiths, nor ‘Armageddon’ and the beliefs of the religious right epitomised by people such as Jerry Falwell and the Moral Majority, provide an adequate solution to the problems spawned by the war. In his chapter ‘The healing process’ he offers the combat veterans in their acts of confession and self therapy as the only ones to have achieved practices capable of ‘healing’. Capps proposes these practices as exemplary for collective healing though he fails to propose how this would be carried out. Indeed it seems that Capps has a limited perception of the problems created by the war. To focus exclusively on the veterans as so many interpretations do is to deny other problems experienced throughout the wider society. It would seem, logically, that one section of the community, albeit a section which experienced more directly certain effects of the war, is unable to adequately represent and interpret the full impact of the war.

Peter Carroll in his history of the post-Vietnam war period, It Seemed Like Nothing Happened, also explores the disruption to the ‘sense of community’ in the wake of events such as the Vietnam war. Carroll, in opposition to Capps, sees the search for spiritual fulfilment carried out by the ‘alternative spiritualities’ as attempts at healing. In the chapter ‘To heal the fragmentation’ he feels that the ‘... consciousness revolution of the seventies involved a quest not simply for personal salvation but more fundamentally for a sense of cosmic connection’. This connection will, in the words of Jacob Needleman quoted by Carroll, ‘... heal the fragmentations and divisions that separate man from nature, man
from man and man from God'. Presumably, then, people of a common ‘alternative consciousness’ will create a bond with like-minded individuals and in their communion be healed of the various divisions in relationships that Wheeler saw as the wound left by the war in Vietnam.

Echoing the argument presented by Carroll, the majority of films dealing with ‘healing’ render the procedure through the reunification of the community and, in line with Capps’ approach, these films hope to accomplish this by focussing upon the veteran. The exemplary appeal for unity is enacted in a scene from Coming Home in which the three main characters confront each other after Bob (Bruce Dern) returns from Vietnam. Sally stands with arms outstretched and ‘literally pleads for reconciliation’ while the rifle, a crude symbol of the war, passes from the militaristic husband to the pacifist lover, who empties the magazine of its bullets and unlocks the bayonet. One reviewer has argued that Luke’s pacifism is actually a form of passivity which is a necessary condition for his integration into the community. Following this, Luke expresses the message of passivity when he encourages Bob to relinquish the rifle and find solace in Sally’s arms.

Having learnt the lesson of passivity Luke finds a way home while Bob, who has missed the point, is left out in the cold. The task of readjustment confronting Bob is as daunting as that before the withdrawn and disturbed Bill (Robert Carradine). In a film that relies upon contrasts and correspondences, as exemplified in the opening sequence in which shots of Bob Hyde jogging are intercut with those of the veterans in wheelchairs, Billy’s suicide prefigures Bob’s at the end of the film. Bob’s death implies that there is little room in the reunited, and thus ‘healed’, community for those unwilling or unable to accept passivity and love.

It has been noted that Coming Home demonstrates ‘the possibility of regeneration through love and forgiveness’. This statement could include ‘and forgetfulness’. If film narrative ‘... seeks to resolve contradictions and provide models for action in the present not the past, though it may use the past to do so’, then Coming Home reflects the mood of the late 1970s that awoke from amnesia concerning the Vietnam war only to state that the war must now be forgotten. Philip Bell has summed up this mood when he commented that popular culture’s reaction to the war has resulted in the view that the war is a ‘memory best forgotten’ and so ‘... perhaps one goes to the (Vietnam war) movies to remember to forget ...’. The outcome of this enforced amnesia, which effectively negates a potentially divisive event, is that it paves the way for the repositioning of the status quo in the popular mind. Only with the war firmly in the past, in fact out of sight out of mind, can the task of rebuilding the community take place.

According to Coming Home, though post-Vietnam America is populated by physical and emotional cripples many, happily, are well on the way towards an active recovery. Coming Home arrives at this position by insisting that no matter how strong or healthy ‘we’ may be if we fall we can still damage ourselves, leaving limbs scraped and scarred. The Deer Hunter, released the same year as Coming Home, interprets things differently. Nestled amidst its mountains, producing fire and sparks, the town of Clairton in The Deer Hunter ‘is America’ (yet another metaphor in a film that steadfastly refuses to deal with its topic head-on). Clairton is exemplified in the wedding sequence in the first section of the film where it has been suggested that director Cimino’s concern is with Clairton’s surfaces, ‘the color and vitality of this world’, and ‘less with its essence’. However, it is this lack of ‘depth’ that reflects the naive nature of this community. Clairton does
not concern itself with introspection. Its patriotism, for instance, is an unquestioned, and unquestioning, faith. A returned Green Beret soldier appears at the bar in the American Legion hall during the post-wedding celebration and in answer to Michael’s questions regarding ‘What’s it like over there?’ the soldier responds with a terse ‘fuck it’. Rather than serving as an introduction to a discussion of the war the soldier is little more than a walking uniform. While his words may convey a sense of the futility many veterans shared as a result of their war experiences, his uniform, like the American flags that adorn the American Legion hall, is a visible affirmation of the unquestioned patriotism that helps to bind this community. Clairton will survive the effects of the war unwounded and intact and it does so by denying the war’s impact. Clairton’s response to the war could be summed up in the same expletive used by the Green Beret.

The Deer Hunter, in contrast to Coming Home, starts from the position that America is strong and healthy and that scars like the war in Vietnam will not leave scars. It implies that with a little help from friends like Michael Vronsky (Robert De Niro), the able-bodied leader, its citizens can be made strong and whole. Michael takes it upon himself to restore his friends to the state of grace and camaraderie they occupied before the war. To this end he ignores protestations from Steven (John Savage). ‘I don’t want to go home … I don’t fit,’ and brings him home from the V.A. hospital and then returns to Vietnam in a futile attempt to repatriate Nick (Christopher Walken). The film’s much-disputed final scene shows the friends attempting to reaffirm their community by singing ‘God Bless America’ at Nick’s wake. Cimino’s intention here was to portray a group of characters who will win through their adversity and somehow grow as a result of their experiences. The reality depicted on screen is that Clairton’s ostensibly invulnerable, yet insular, attitude towards the war, finally, isn’t sufficient to protect the group from the war. As a result one impression available to the audience is that this community is a ‘pitiful refuge of the damaged, a defensive stockade’ within which ‘the brutalised and bewildered’ attempt to deny the war and the effect it has had upon them. ‘God Bless America’ could here have been replaced by a maudlin country and western song with lyrics involving crying in a bar and the need to forget all the hurt.

The need to forget the pain is a motif evident in other films ostensibly dealing with social issues raised by the war. In The Big Chill (1983), for example, the ‘world of hurt’ is forgotten in a return home. Indeed The Big Chill follows both Coming Home and The Deer Hunter here since both these earlier films assume that if a community is to be ‘healed’ its members must return, or be brought, home. Following this premise The Big Chill involves the wounded and cynical veteran, Nick (William Hurt), being brought home to a rural haven in South Carolina by his small circle of friends. Without his friends’ salvation Nick may have gone the same way as Alex who has committed suicide before the film begins. According to the funeral eulogy and the friends’ conversation Alex was an outsider unable to find a place in society. It is possible to draw parallels here to Bob Hyde in Coming Home who must commit suicide because he cannot, or will not, integrate into the community. In this sense the playing of the Rolling Stones’ ‘You Can’t Always Get What You Want (But You Get What You Need)’ at Alex’s funeral is highly ironic. Alex, unable to get what he wanted from or in society, got what he needed or deserved. Nick’s capitulation saves him from Alex’s fate and, further, pays rewards for his choice. Originally the dope-dealing, transient Nick had summed up his philosophy and the ‘big chill’ when he stated that ‘… we’re all alone out there and tomorrow we’re going out there again’. By the end of the film the same character, home from the war and home from the road,
is about to finish building Alex’s home and ‘settle down’ to domestic bliss with Alex’s ex-girlfriend Chloe (Meg Tilley).

In Nick’s fate the cold cruel world of post-Vietnam War America has become a warm, cosy country idyll devoid of the war. The film explores both senses of the word nostalgia through its constant reference to the past of ‘the 60s’ and in the desire for ‘home’, exemplified not only in Nick’s case but also in the comfortable, middle-class home created by Harold (Kevin Kline) and Sarah (Glenn Close) in which most of the film takes place. Just as home is a cosy place so too the past they evoke is convivial. Reference is made to ‘the march on Washington’ and to antiwar speeches at the University of Michigan in which Sam (Tom Berenger) seemed to excel, yet generally the past that is presented is one in which radical, or even alternative, politics are absent as a cogent force capable of influencing the present. Political commitment is associated with a youthful phase and as such can be outgrown. The film’s evasions in search of a healed America amount to ‘... the erasure of memory, the surrender of purpose, non-threatening nostalgia’. Recent interpretations continue this trend with only slight modification. Jacknife (1989), for example, replaces nostalgia with an all-purpose, non-threatening sentimentality embodied in a traditional boy finds girl happy ending. In place of a serious confrontation with the war’s impact on society filmmakers seek comfort in the concept of a ‘healing’ nation. ‘Coming to terms with the past’ in this way does not imply a serious working through of the past, as Adorno remarked in a different context, rather ‘it suggests ... wishing to turn the page’ on the past. However, the denial inherent in ‘healing’ is abrogated by a refusal to employ the concept.

While still relying upon the convention of the wounded veteran Cutter’s Way (1981) is perhaps the only film to date to deal with the war’s impact without referral to the dubious qualities associated with ‘healing’. The multiple amputee, Alex Cutter (John Heard) of the film’s title, is motivated by a desire to avenge a girl’s murder, a murder for which he holds the wealthy industrialist Cord responsible. Yet to Cutter, Cord’s culpability does not stop with the murdered girl. ‘(Cord’s) responsible’, Cutter insists, ‘he and his type. It’s never their ass that’s on the line.’ Cutter’s desire for revenge extends to include those in power who sent him to war, with the result that he is wounded, while they remained safely insulated by their position from the war and its effects. In the film’s final scenes Bone (Jeff Bridges), holding the dead Cutter’s gun, accuses Cord of killing the girl. Cord’s answer is the rhetorical, ‘What if it was?’ This ambiguity is maintained in the scene that follows: immediately the screen whitens out and a gunshot is heard leaving the audience to suspect that Bone has shot Cord. Yet just as we cannot be certain Cord is a murderer so we cannot be certain that Bone has pulled the trigger on Cord. If the ‘drive toward narrative closure in Hollywood films tends to “tame” alternative views and reaffirm dominant ones’ then the intentionally ambiguous ending of Cutter’s Way militates against such a reading.

While the ending fails to support dominant views it also fails to categorically dispute them. The ending neither confirms nor denies. However, the film maintains, unequivocally, the suggestion (‘it’s never their ass that’s on the line’), that society is composed of a number of different positions: ‘them’ and ‘us’. In addition, Cutter’s outburst hints at the fact that the division that is evident within U.S. society is long-standing. Traditionally one group has managed to insulate itself from the effect of war and similar disruptions (‘it’s never their ass ...’) thus underlining the enduring existence of division within society.
This simple fact has failed to enter the interpretations that embody the terms ‘wound’ and ‘healing’. Here the ‘wound’ is evoked so that the corollary, ‘healing’, can be summoned to redress the situation. The outcome is that ‘healing’ implies a consensual society where wounding disruptions to the status quo are attended to as a matter of imperative. Such an approach reflects community and homogeneity rather than division and diversity. The main implication of the use of the seemingly natural language of the ‘wound’ and ‘healing’ is to offer the opportunity to disavow the reality of segmentation and to insist upon consensus. These metaphors, and their currency, abet the imposition of a ‘natural’ unchanging and unchangeable consensual order upon society. In this case the prison house of language holds its inmates captive within an immutable social structure.

The various consequences of the war in Vietnam, whether they be political, economic, social or psychological, continue to be felt and described in a number of ways within the United States. Descriptions of the war’s impact that uncritically employ certain metaphors may, finally, prove to be one of the war’s most far-reaching and debilitating consequences.

NOTES


6. Ibid., p. 409.


9. Ibid.


11. Ibid., p. 133.


13. Ibid., p. 17.


18. Ibid., p. 42.


20. Ibid., p. 68.
33. Capps, *The Unfinished War*, talks of 'Eden' and 'Armageddon' in Chapters 4 and 7 respectively.
36. Carroll, *It Seemed Like Nothing Happened*, p. 250–51. One reviewer interpreted Carroll's methodology, which also searches for 'cosmic connections' in recent events, as being derived from the 'Great Mandala School of Spiritual Historiography'. S. Halpern, 'Small was beautiful', *The Nation*, December 18, 1982, p. 663.
42. Bell, *loc. cit.*
45. Critics have remarked on the 'Ancient Mariner' aspect of the Green Beret's presence in this scene. It is acceptable, however, that a soldier should be drinking at the bar of the town's American Legion. What is fortuitous is his insistence on wearing his uniform to the bar.
46. The fascistic implications of this have not escaped notice. One commentator felt that in its portrayal of the 'pathetically weak' friends in 'need of strong leadership' and in its 'use of a common Nazi motif of placing a leader on a mountaintop' that *The Deer Hunter* 'draws upon fascist images for its emotional power'. Philip Wander, 'The aesthetics of fascism', *Journal of Communication*, Vol. 33, No. 2, Spring 1983, p. 73.