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## The Subversion of the American Warrior-Hero Archetype in Michael Cimino's *The Deer Hunter* (1978)

Louis Mathias FAYE

Cheikh Anta Diop University, Dakar, Senegal

Email: [fayelouismathias@yahoo.fr](mailto:fayelouismathias@yahoo.fr)

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**Abstract** – *This article examines the complexities of social experience drawn from popular mythology for reconstructing the Vietnam War. It relates to issues on the construct of the warrior-hero in its American setting. The study focuses on Michael Cimino's *The Deer Hunter*, which depicts Mike as a heroic figure, setting out to conquer the wilderness by killing a deer with one shot. The act of killing is a rite of passage to manhood and the hunt is a spiritual endeavor. He is cast in the role of a western hero and leader of his friends, Nick and Steven. Mike attempts to dominate nature with his heroic deeds. This paper also unveils the reversal of American cultural ideology of masculinity when the main character comes into contact with Vietnam, which is a hostile frontier landscape. However, he is disillusioned because of the chaotic nightmare inversion of the environment. Despite his dreams of omnipotence, he dramatically collapses there. The US mythology is undermined by the encounter with the horrors of war in Vietnam. The realities of the battlefield foreshadow the crisis of cultural and religious myths Mike embodies.*

**Keywords:** mythology, warrior-hero, vietnam war, american, ideology, masculinity, inversion

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### INTRODUCTION

A seventy-seven-year-old American filmmaker and screenwriter Michael Cimino was born in New York City in 1939. He grew up on Long Island and attended Michigan state and Yale Universities. After graduate school, Cimino went to work on Madison Avenue in New York in advertising, where he eventually directed television commercials. He moved to Los Angeles in 1971 and began writing screenplays. Cimino is known as the director of films like *The Deer Hunter*. This movie won numerous Academy Awards. Cimino sets out to rewrite the Vietnam experience from the American perspective. He lays foundation for the Vietnam War and working-class life in America in *The Deer Hunter*. The film follows three young steelworkers from western Pennsylvania (Robert De Niro, Christopher Walken and John Savage) and their physical or moral destruction in the Vietnam. It also provides substantial character devolvement both before the men go off to war, and after they return. For the reconstruction of Vietnam experience, Michael Cimino draws on the American mythology to avoid depicting the harsh realities of war. *The Deer Hunter* is one of the most outstanding features of Vietnam War films. It is based on the degree of aesthetic excess employed to represent and ritualize the trauma of confrontation between civilization and the alien other. In Cimino's movie, the Vietnam War is erotized and the consecration of the combat atmosphere creates an exotic and even mythologized perception of the war.

This presents it to the spectator as a spiritual experience. By moving the war to the level of nightmare, this motion picture carries it to a mystical and even religious dimension. Regardless of the type of experience of war, both war itself and the warrior image are exalted and presented in visual form as an equivalent of the traditional myths with almost supernatural or transcendent values and meanings.

In post-Vietnam era, Scholars, writers and filmmakers provide deeper insights into the mythology of Vietnam landscape and the western hero's desire to conquer the wilderness. As Bill Nichols, in *Ideology and the image: Social representation in the cinema and other media* (1981) points out that the narrative in Vietnam War "approaches closer to myths than history" (1981: 76). According to Nichols, the filmic narrative presents a constructed and mythicized version of the Vietnam War based on individual perspective and memory. By the same token, Cimino sets out to reconsider the Vietnam experience and depicts it by displacing the scars of war. From this outlook, he gives a portrayal of the war on the basis of myth-making. John Hellmann, in his work, *American Myth and the Legacy of Vietnam* (1986) also highlights what the hero encounters in Vietnam, which is a complete reversal of his expectations. A study of Stanley's film *Full Metal Jacket* (1987) unveils the progressive processing which the character of the mythic warrior-hero begins to unravel in Vietnam landscape. And What he eventually embodies is a completely inverted version of the original myth.

The archetypal criticism is used in this work to interpret the meaning of a text through imagery and metaphor. Stemming from Carl Jung's theory, this approach searches for universal meanings in a piece of literature. Carl Gustav Jung and Northrop Frye are viewed as pioneering critics of archetype criticism. Jung, in his book, *The Spirit of Man, Art and Literature* (1922), examines the archetypes that are the contents of the collective unconscious, which can be found across cultures. According to him, these archetypes are symbols, characters and motifs that stir a primary feeling in the mind of humans everywhere. Through his essay "The Archetypes of Literature" (1963), Frye gives a deep analysis of literature with respect to various rituals and myths. An archetype is a symbol, character type or motif that is recognized in myth, dream and literature. Some images include animals, shapes, fire, numbers and the archetypal character can be a hero who is involved in a quest in which he overcomes obstacles. He experiences initiation, which involves a separation, transformation and return, and finally, he serves as a scapegoat. Michael Cimino's film is based on archetypes consisting of symbols, images, characters and motifs that work basically together within a text to impose certain effects on the readers. Cimino investigates the hero quest, the need to follow the path and the uncertainty of wide woods. This article discusses the inversions of American mythology in Vietnam in Michael Cimino's *The Deer Hunter*. It is divided into three parts: the first sheds light on the mythology of Vietnam landscape with the purpose of dealing with the notion of wilderness in American culture. The second explores the mythification of Vietnam landscape and the final examines the crisis of the warrior-hero's quest myth in Vietnam.

### **The Notion of the Wilderness in the American Culture**

In America, the term wilderness is associated with opportunities and the potential to achieve anything. It can be seen as one of the foundations of the American dream of success and prosperity. Early Americans see a great potential in their land. This is based on the huge opportunities provided by the western expansion. The waves of migrants who move to westward look for land, prosperity and freedom. They have to fight the natives, cultivate the land and face different dangers and obstacles. This experience is essential to the shaping of the American personality. From a religious perspective, the Judeo-Christian tradition is considered as a powerful formative influence on the attitude toward the wilderness. In fact, Many Europeans who discover and colonize the New World draw on the Christian vision of wilderness. The cultural framing of wild lands including places of solitude, regeneration and recovery is well developed in The Bible. As Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau examine

the notion of nature as an expression of the wilderness, they formulate their philosophy of transcendentalism. In fact, they postulate a series of higher spiritual truths known as transcendentalism and suggest nature as setting or even metaphor for such truths. In this outlook, Ralph Waldo Emerson states: “nature is the symbol of the spirit” (1883: 85). Similarly, Thoreau strongly supports this view when he highlights that nature is God’s purest creation and the best way to know God and divine revelation is to get as close as possible to nature. In this regard, it may even be the physical manifestation of God. And the image of Americans becomes closely associated with its wilderness.

In the Genesis book, Joel and Isaiah highlight the relationship between Eden and the wilderness. That in this context Joel says: “the land is like the garden of Eden before them,” and he also writes “after them a desolate wilderness” (2:3). Actually, Joel makes a comparison between Eden’s era and theirs. Previously, the land was full of potential that could benefit humankind, but nature is like a desert now. According to Isaiah, there is a promise that God will comfort Zion and “make her wilderness like Eden, her desert like the garden of the lord” (15:3). Much of the American mythology derives from the way the Bible perceives and interprets the wilderness. Both Joel and Isaiah demonstrate that the wilderness is akin to the Garden of Eden because they are closely connected. But all this is achieved through God’s promise.

One of the most featuring ideas that help understand the notion of wilderness is related to the history of the Israelite nation. The Israelites’ experience gives several meanings to the wilderness. On the one hand, it is looked upon as a sanctuary from a sinful and persecuting society. On the other hand, the wild country is the environment in which we can find and draw close to God. The wilderness is a testing ground where chosen people are purged, humbled and made ready for the land of promise. That is why the exodus experience establishes a tradition of going to the wilderness for freedom and the purification of faith. For example, when a society becomes complacent and ungodly, religious leaders look to the wilderness as a place for rededication and refuge. Focusing on the wilderness as a place of purification and refuge, Jeremiah asserts: “Oh that I had in the desert a lodging place of way faring men; that I might leave my people... for they are adulterers, a company of treacherous men” (9:2). This biblical verse unveils the purity of wilderness that is different from the community full of sinful people. Similarly, when the prophet Elijah seeks inspirational guidance from God, he goes into the wilderness and spends forty days there. Like Moses on a deserted mountain, Elijah receives the guidance he seeks from God. Then, the importance of wilderness as a sanctuary is perpetuated in Christianity. The case of John the Baptist can be put forward to illustrate this idea because John searches for the wild valley of the Jordan River to revitalize faith and makes ready for the Messiah.

Cimino’s film, *The Deer Hunter*, is depiction of Mike who crosses the mountains as a hunter. According to the Bible, the wilderness is particularly significant because mountains are the dwelling place of God. Exodus refers to Mount Sinai as the mountain of God. And several biblical verses describe the Lord’s holy mountain as the proper place of worship and the source of heavenly aid. When Mike ascends the mountains on the outskirts of his personal Eden, there is a garden that, like the mountain, identifies as the divine abode. He is imbued with Godlike power over creation.

Richard Warrington B. Lewis’s *The American Adam: Innocence, Tragedy and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century* features the protagonist at the center of his myth as “a figure of heroic innocence and vast potentialities, poised at the start of a new history” (1955:1). Lewis adds that the protagonist is “happily bereft of ancestry, untouched and undefiled by the usual Inheritances of family and race; an individual standing alone, self-reliant and self-propelling” (1955: 5). In his remark, Lewis underlines that, within this myth, maturation and self-discovery are defined by a linear journey in which the protagonist gains increasing levels of autonomy and separation from family and community.

Through *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1935), Mark Twain investigates the lone journey into the wilderness, which shapes the quintessential American experience. Huck's journey down Mississippi is perceived as a pervasive tradition in American mythology. Huck Finn, like other heroes in the canonical literature, flees the restrictions imposed by home and family to seek freedom on the great river. Thus, the Mississippi River Valley, described in terms, becomes a mythic wilderness in which Huck wrestles with his community's hypocrisy. It is a physical escape from society's structures and the struggle to transcend his community's values and act on his own innate sense of morality. In *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Huck Finn embarks on his journey and leaves behind not only his abusive father, but the widow Douglass, school, church and all other social forces, which threaten to civilize him. This American traditional quest is defined by the flight from family and community into an untamed wilderness. Mark Twain's work examines this American social myth. In Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Huck describes life on the river in Edenic terms. He highlights that he finds in the wilderness setting a transcendent sense of peace and freedom, which he is in search of. Huck wants to stay away from the corrupt world while fleeing towards the nature. The innocence of the quest American hero confronting with a corrupt civilization is well illustrated in Huck's encounter with the Grangerfords.

Vietnam as Western influences many Vietnam War films. As John Hellmann notes it, the western has traditionally dealt with specifically, US historical and cultural experience, namely "the flight from community (Europe, the East, restraint, the conscious) into the wilderness (America, the West, freedom, the unconscious)" (1982:419). From this outlook, Hellmann highlights the American cultural values that are in connection with the notion of wilderness. It gives meaning and enriches the US culture. According to Hellmann, *The Deer Hunter* features the Western characteristic narrative elements. They are related to the male bonding, the repressed love of the hero for a good woman and the terror of confrontation with savage denizens of a hostile landscape. Cimino's movie deals with the mythic themes of the classic western. It sheds light on the masculinity, the relationship between the individual and the community or civilization and the relationship between the hero and symbolic frontier landscape or wilderness.

Eben Muse perceives it as balancing "the need to establish order with violence against the paradoxical need for civilized men to eschew violence" (1994:308). For Muse, the western needs restoration. This order can only be made through violence. The structure of the western relies conventionally on the binaries: good and evil. These binaries are highlighted in *The Deer Hunter*, which portrays a violent confrontation between the conscious and unconscious, civilization and wilderness. They play out in the white imagination as a struggle between light and dark.

The frontier provides Americans with a set of meanings through which they can relate to themselves and to the world. In fact, the nature of these meanings appears to be harder in terms of definition, but we agree with Daniel Bell's definition of the frontier and its meaning when he states: "these meanings specify a set of purposes or, like myth and ritual, explain the character of shared experiences, or deal with the transformations of nature through powers of magic" (1978:146). In his analysis, Daniel Bell explains that one does not need to think of more dramatic transformation of nature. On the contrary, he can use human powers and equipment following the process through which the settlers reshape the face of an entire continent driven by God's call to rule the land.

Frederick Jackson Turner, in his seminal essay "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" (1893), deals with the theory that his ancestors set out, hundreds of years ago, as pioneers, to discover the unknown land of the Wild West beyond the frontier. For him, it is the American frontier that has the most significant formative influence not only on American history, but also on American character and culture. As Turner notes: "the existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance

of American settlement westward explain American development” (1893:3). Here, Turner lays foundation for the myth of the frontier, which comes to have pervasive influence on American culture and society. Turner highlights the notion that this westward expansion and the conquest of the wilderness result in developing America. The key aspects of the frontier, dealt with in the western genre, are already presented in Turner’s essay. According to Frederick Jackson Turner, the frontier myth is defined as “the meeting point between savagery and civilization” (1893: 2). Turner highlights that this meeting point is considered as a landscape of violence and a place to express conquest and domination.

Likewise, Francis Coppola’s *Apocalypse Now* features the conquest of the wilderness. This film depicts Willard who heads out to meet the patrol boat that takes him up river. This scene shows the rugged Vietnamese landscape from the perspective of a helicopter flying high above the jungle canopy can be gazed. This commanding view of the colonial landscape is one that offers the colonizer a “sense of mastery over the unknown” (1993:15), as Spurr puts it.

Furthermore, the vastness of the land gives a sense of emptiness. Focusing on Spurr’s words, we remark that a land needs the civilizing and the ordering hand of the conqueror. The destruction that the US military wreaks is thus representative of the American tradition of conquering the wilderness and remaking it in the white man image. The camera itself replicates this conquest of the landscape through its own circumscribing gaze, by ordering reality through the lens. In fact, the director exerts his own mastery over the scene. The Americans assert their ownership of the freshly taken behead through the act of surfing, even its renaming is an act of colonization.

Turner’s thesis “The Significance of the Frontier in American History” (1893) lays emphasis on the American mind, which is strongly attached to mythic conceptions about the American west. More importantly, the westward frontier describes the threshold for new discoveries and opportunities. A successful frontier experience, however, enables the frontier man to reap the benefits of exploring the outer edges of human knowledge and understanding. For Americans, the frontier epitomizes a wide range of cultural and historical connotations as well as a strong sense of nostalgia for traditional American life. By way of illustration, we can say that Frederick Jackson Turner’s seminal essay sheds light on the American mindset. It usually consists in perceiving events in their past, present and future through the lens of frontiers.

Turner explains that the frontier is a place where American culture experiences a “perennial rebirth” (1893 :2) and gains its insulation against what he describes as the corrupting forces of civilized life. Turner adds that throughout the frontier era, the empty landscape in the American west has guaranteed a steady flow of primitive conditions upon American people. He also highlights that the frontier, in the American west, represents an opportunity for Americans to restart the process of civilization. In fact, new forms of society and new political structures can be crafted on the frontier, fundamentally based upon agrarian values of self-determination, democracy, individualism and honest work. The sense of political, economic and social inequality in the American cities is erased on the frontier. According to Frederick Jackson Turner, the frontier includes a permanent equality, democracy and moral purity. In fact, the American experience in the west is a process of cultural creation that transcends ethnic, political and cultural boundaries. On the frontier, people with different nationalities enter a transnational crucible of cultural creation. Americans access and subdue the wild forests of the west. Focusing on the knowledge Turner gains from the wilderness, he points out: “out of his wilderness experience, out of the freedom of his opportunities, he fashioned a formula for social regeneration- the freedom of the individual to seek his own” (1893:48). Actually, Turner accounts for the experience and freedom of opportunities that exist in the wilderness. This wild area is perceived as a social rebirth. For Turner, the west helps renew the frontier man because of the unlimited potential and the freedom he can enjoy there.

In Cimino film, after a post-wedding deer hunt trip, Mike and his friends stumble drunkenly into Welsh's lounge, the local bar, singing the chorus of "Dropkick me, Jesus": Dropkick me, Jesus, through the goalposts of life, and over end neither left nor right; straight through the heart of them righteous uprights; dropkick me, Jesus, through the goal posts of life." (Cimino, 1978) The abundance of Christian language and symbolism throughout the opening act casts Clairton as a kind of Eden. This Edenic presentation of America contrasts with Vietnam as a hell that Cimino introduces amid fiery explosions and Mike setting ablaze an enemy soldier with a flamethrower. The Christian environment in which Cimino sets *The Deer Hunter* provides the foundation for understanding Mike's angelic function with the narrative.

### **Mythicizing the Vietnam landscape**

American culture is influenced by the Vietnam War in the years 1968-75 because there are transformations in the popular image of the American Indian and Native American political consciousness. Vietnam and the Indians share a curious association in the American imagination. When the war breaks out, the United States often thinks of Vietnam in images of the American West and cast the Vietnamese in the role of Indians. Frances Fitzgerald, in her work *Fire in the Lake* (1974), argues that the term "Indian Country" is just a joke or a figure of speech: "It put the Vietnam War into a definite mythological and historical perspective: the Americans were once again embarked upon a heroic... conquest of an inferior race" (1974: 368). In this remark, Fitzgerald examines the framework of mythicizing the Vietnam War. Drawing on the Indians' way of waging warfare, she highlights the role of the western that consists in civilizing the savages.

Compared to many film-makers, Michael Cimino suggests a reading of the film through the prism of American myth and acknowledges the importance of myth to life as well as to contemporary US society. He remarks that traditions, myths and religion are a set of beliefs that make life bearable. The term myth is narrowly defined here as the stories that contain a people's image of themselves in history. These myths are extremely simplifications of reality, but they are also necessary part of the culture of a nation. They can act as a blueprint, which examines either the past of a nation or prepares for its future. National myths do not merely offer versions of the past, but they also offer vision of the future. In the nineteenth century, the frontier was the most cherished of all-American myths used to give a religious foundation for the Indian wars. However, it proves equally serviceable as a rationalization for the superiority implied by the manifest destiny.

As John Hellmann delves into the importance of myth, he says: "Myths may often distort or conceal, but these stories are nevertheless always true in a sense that they express deeply held beliefs" (1986: IX). Through this statement, Hellmann defines myths as cultural beliefs. They can either be changed or hide a cultural way of life of a nation.

In Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*, the opening scene establishes the presentation of the symbolic journey of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. This mythic journey into an unknown territory is itself an adventure mystery tale, through the specific conventions of the hard-boiled detective formula. This use of popular genres is related to the Central American myths of the nineteenth and twentieth century connects two films. In this movie, Willard is cast in the role of a western hero because of the way he executes his mission to assassinate Kurtz. This categorizes him as being in a state of perfection in the war that takes place around him. The film implicitly codes this very functionality as a precursory state of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in the portrayed dissociation of the individual during trauma, exemplified by blurred images. In *Apocalypse Now*, Kurt draws on and engages in moral discourses on the US military involvement on a national and individual level. His monologue furthermore envisions a status of human perfection. That is to attain absolute moral "freedom from the opinion of others"

(Coppola :1979) and simultaneously reduces one's action to a mere functionality in emotionally charged situations, thereby excluding potentially traumatic events from consciousness.

The western and the hard-boiled detective formulas provide *The Deer Hunter* and *Apocalypse Now* with a cultural means to interpret a national experience. Both formulas are genres of romance characterized by its use of mythic, allegorical and symbolical forms. They are taken as the main strategy of America for encountering the traditions and extreme ranges of American culture and experience of which Vietnam is a recent and particularly a traumatic example. The western is the major formula story of American popular culture since it establishes its central significance as American myth.

Furthermore, the western is defined instead by the influence of its symbolic landscape, a frontier between civilization and wilderness, upon a lonely hero. The confrontation of these basic forces creates delineated conflicts resulting in a variety of stock characters and plot configurations. As the western lays emphasis on the relation between the hero and the frontier landscape, it deals with the conflict created by the dominant direction of American experience. The western represents the flight from the community symbolizing Europe, the East, Restraint and the Conscious into the wilderness related to America, the West, Freedom and the Unconscious.

Cimino examines America's experience in Vietnam through the conventions of the Western. While commenting on *The Deer Hunter* and *The Deerslayer*, Davide Axen and Colin Westerbeck, in separate articles, find out that there is a connection between the protagonist Michael and Bumpo in terms of characterization. They go beyond this to the perception that *The Deer Hunter* is presented in terms of the form Cooper invents. Instead of exploring the specific elements involved, both use the observation to dismiss the film for being, as Axen phrases it, "fatally *oversimplified*." David Axen delves deeply into the similarity existing between Cimino and Bumpo's characters. From this outlook, he claims:

"The problem with the Cooper-Cimino Western is that it asks us to suspend our knowledge of history, and ignore the realities of social structure... Neither Cooper nor Cimino wants to consider the people and forces really in control. They identify us with their heroes as natural aristocrats in still unspoiled wilderness domains" (1979: 17/18).

In this passage, Axen explains the romantic tradition of American literature that identifies the link between that tradition and Cimino's use of the western in *The Deer Hunter*. The Western formula affords Cimino the strengths of the central national myth in dealing with Vietnam as a collective American trauma.

*The Deer Hunter* by Michael Cimino achieves more than a perpetuation of past myth by its portrayal of the essence of myth and its critical examination. Unlike *The Green Berets* staying away from the use of the Western formula, *The Deer Hunter* is a Western affected by the shift in landscape. In Cimino's film, the actions and the lonely character, Michael Vronsky, are closely associated with wilderness landscape, which is the basis for violent conflicts and sharp oppositions. The film turns on such characteristic devices of the western as male bonding, the repressed love of the hero for a good woman, the terror of confrontation with savage denizens of a hostile landscape. In the film, Mike acts out as a western hero. Cimino thus sets Vietnam experience squarely in the context of the dominant American historical and mythic tradition. And he stands the genre on its head. In *The Deer Hunter*, the protagonist, has the salient traits embodied in his cooper prototype and in every Western hero. Living on the outer edge of the town in a trailer, he is part of the community. He is separated from it because of his alienation from its corruption. This can also be demonstrated by the fact he adheres to a personal code closely connected with the uncorrupted wilderness and its original inhabitants. For example, he despises all his friends, except Nick, for their inability to understand the ritualistic importance of killing a deer with one shot.

For the interpretation of Vietnam experience, these films draw on the boundary between civilization and wilderness. Michael Cimino's film, *The Deer Hunter*, is a depiction of this phenomenon. By way of illustration, we note that the movie starts with its title referring to the genre conventions of the frontier romance that is explicit and hardly subtle.

In his study of the frontier romance, Leonard Quart asserts that beginning with the hero of the film: "Like Cooper's Natty Bumppo in *The Deerslayer* and *The Last of the Mohicans*, Michael is an outsider-chaste, honourable, forbearing, revering the mountains and nature, and given to a purity of purpose embodied in his deer hunting gospel of the one shot kill" (1979 :160). In this statement, Quart depicts Mike as a character who lives on the edge between civilization and nature in an almost symbolic landscape. He embodies America's pastoral myth of the virgin land. Despite the hostility of the nature, he advances into the frontier landscape to master it. In this regard, he tests his potential for becoming a hero and attempts to achieve the American ideology related to the conquest of the wilderness. Mike's frontier code seeks to control nature by killing a deer with one shot. He ventures once again into the mountains to participate in the ritual of the hunt.

Besides, Michael Cimino offers a parallelism between the act of hunting on American mountains and fighting in Vietnam jungles in his film. As the title suggests, hunting is a kind of metaphor, which aims at establishing a commentary on the act of killing. The image of the hunters with their rifles in their hands is similar to the one of the early colonial hunters and frontiersmen who wander on the same mountains. For example, the central character, in the film, is Michael Vronsky, who serves both as a catalyst among the group and a spiritual leader. However, Michael finds little relevance in the old European traditions of the community. That is the reason why he turns to nature. In the opening sequence, he perplexes his companions by insisting that they go on a hunt that night because the sun dogs he sees in the sky are an old Indian sign of a blessing on the hunters sent by the Great Wolf to his children. Focusing on his separation from the community, we remark that Michael is characterized by the more disturbing traits of the western hero. He is a man of virtues and resources and he is in charge of protecting his community. This responsibility is shown in his deer hunting, which is attractive for its skill and sense of value. It results in the image of a gutted deer sprawled across his old Cadillac's hood as it speeds down the mountain road to drinking and singing. *The Deer Hunter* unveils the defining elements of the western that include the influence of a frontier landscape upon the character and actions of a lonely hero. They are perceived as being more complex and symbolic. The western has conventionally projected the conflicts between the community and the wilderness in a single landscape. The film develops through the stock oppositions and melodramatic confrontations of the western. They are featured more explicitly as external images of the protagonist's consciousness. Michael represents the mythic hero. In the film, Vietnam functions as a mirror image of America, which is a dark landscape turning up side down the benign landscape of Cimino's mythic Alleghenies.

Drawing on *The Deer Hunter*, Oumar Ndongo emphasizes that Michael gives a depiction of the characters who go hunting in the wilderness. Mike seems to be a young man of virtues and resources of small industrial town of Clairton. As an eager hunter, we can see the image of a gutted deer sprawled across his old Cadillac's hood as it speeds down the mountain. Mike's personality, however, is more complex than it seems. His casual pace hides disconcerting serenity that allows him to remain calm in certain circumstances. This aspect is more visible in the deer hunting scene and even in the second part when Mike, Nick and Steven intervene in Vietnam. Through his prominent doctoral dissertation, *La Représentation de la Guerre du Vietnam dans la Culture Américaine à travers les Romans et les films* (2006), Oumar Ndongo delves into the ritual hunt perceived as a spiritual endeavor in Cimino's film. According to Ndongo,



“Mike is a great hunter who imposes a code of honor, that of killing his deer of the first shot. He has gifts of nature, he can see the sun dogs in the sky, which are an old Indian sign of a blessing on the hunters sent by the Great Wolf to his children” (2006: 370/371).

From this outlook, Ndongo highlights the responsibility of Mike shown in his deer hunting, which is attractive for its skill and sense of value. He is more characterized by the more disturbing traits of the western hero. All this makes him a romantic character lies in perfect harmony with nature.

In his article, “The Vietnam War: Perceptions Through Literature, Film, and Television”, Peter Rollins evokes the metaphorical representation of Vietnam experience. Rollins gives deeper insights into metaphorical representation of the Vietnam War. That in this context he declares in his article: “these movies, which had great influence in shaping public perceptions of the war in America, are thus not realistic representations, but experiment with a variety of metaphors to comprehend the war [...]” (1984: 435). This remark emphasizes the war experience, which can only be comprehended by means of metaphors. The use of metaphorical elements helps retell, reimagine and rework the story of the Vietnam War as to come to terms with experience of moral doubt, guilt and loss.

John Hellmann, in his work, *American Myth and the Legacy of Vietnam*, explores the phenomenon of mythicizing the Vietnam Landscape. He further examines the war film or the genre itself that has become part of what is termed as “*America’s mythic landscape.*” (1986: IX). Hellmann unveils the value of American culture in terms of myth-making.

As Michael Ryan and Douglass Kellner deal with the featuring problem connected with the interpretation of Vietnam experience, they note that the use of metaphor is a highly ideological representation technique. They demonstrate that a metaphorical term assigns an idealized meaning to an image. For example, in the first scene of Cimino’s film, the hunting trip of Michael, Nick and Steven refers to their captivity known as the Russian roulette in Vietnam. In other words, the hunters become the hunted because they are captivated and forced to play this traumatized game. Each has to kill another with one shot in reference to the one Michael uses to kill the deer during their hunting. Similar to the interpretation of the one shot taken up by Michael, freedom is symbolized with the image of an eagle. There is no direct connection between eagle and freedom. The meaning of freedom is met by a highly idealized object, the eagle. This can also be seen through the sharp opposition between the civilization and wilderness. The former represents Europe, the East, the restraint associated with alienation and corruption whereas the latter means America, the West, freedom and the uncorrupt wilderness.

Louis Althusser, in his article “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses.” *Mapping Ideology* (1970), examines the interpretation of object through a metaphorical way. According to him, the process of attributing an idealized meaning to real object through metaphor is quite similar to the way reality is perceived through certain idealized meaning via ideology. While drawing on Althusser’s metaphorical way of interpreting object, Ryan and Kellner say: “the internalization of such idealized images causes people to think and live as if the situation is like that in real life” (1988:15). Actually, Ryan and Kellner evoke the importance of using objects to interpret things in a realistic manner. They seek to give meaning to war experience in a metaphorical way.

According to Richard Slotkin, the colonists need to identify themselves with a new type of the frontier hero “whose character and experiences would express their own sense of history, of their relationship to the American land, of their growing away from Europe” (1973:189). In this outlook, Slotkin underlines the creation of the new prototype based on their common understanding of the traditional romantic hero. His character is influenced by new experiences in his relationship with the American land and the wilderness. Slotkin contributes to the shaping of a newly emerging mythology. Thus, he

manifests it in a new symbolic figure or cultural archetype complete with a new set of values gleaned through his interaction with the frontier.

In Vietnam War literature, the American social development keeps continuing over again on the frontier. As a matter of fact, the American character bears witness to the perennial rebirth, the fluidity of American life and the expansion westward with its new opportunities. His continuous touch with the simplicity of primitive society furnishes the forces dominating the US society. According to Frederick Jackson Turner, the frontier is the line of most rapid and effective Americanization. The conquest of the frontier gives way to American expansion.

Focusing on the works such as *The Deerslayer*, *The Deer Hunter*, *Full Metal Jacket* and *The Short Timers*, we can say that all the protagonists bear strong resemblance to one another. Thus, the characters like Natty Bumppo, Michael and Jocker are identifiable with the basic archetypal hero myth of the romance quest. Despite the fact that they do not belong to the same environment, the culture of which they are part of has tremendously a profound effect on their behavioral patterns.

In comparison with Leyland, Hasford also evokes the link between the frontier hero, his weapon and masculinity. Just over a century later, this summation is repeated in the familiar Marine Corps Rifleman's Creed: "this is my rifle. There are many like it but this one is mine. My rifle is my best friend. It is my friend. I must master it as I master my life" (1983: 22). Hasford sheds light on the frontier hero who epitomizes the cultural ideology of masculinity. That can be considered as a feature that becomes more fully developed in the literature of American mythology.

In *The Deer Hunter*, Michael's insistence on taking the deer with one shot hints at this close connection between the frontier hero, his weapon and the notion of masculinity. Michael intends to prove his masculinity because he embodies the values of the American ideology. That is shown by the fact that he escapes from the society for discovering the uncorrupted wilderness. *The Deer Hunter* by Cimino depicts Mike as the lonely hero who is shown conveying almost all of the western hero's characteristics. Killing a deer with one shot in the wilderness and his friends Nick and Steven relying on him to bring them back from Vietnam demonstrate his heroic deeds. The town of Clairton represents both European tradition and modern industrialization meaning civilization and it functions as the place of domestic sphere. Mike, as a western hero, decides to be on the border between civilization and nature. He lives on the fringe of the community, in a tractor on the edge of town. Because of the heroic will and abilities, he avoids permanent relationship with women who can threaten his life. For example, he does not pursue Linda in the manner of a traditional Hollywood romance and appears to reject a permanent relationship with her. Like Cooper's *Deerslayer*, Michael is chaste and pure of purpose.

According to Hellmann, the protagonist of Cimino's film Michael is estranged from the community, as he puts it: "by his alienation from its corruption and by his strict adherence to personal code ['one shot'] closely associated with the uncorrupted wilderness and its original inhabitants" (1982: 421). Michael conveys the features of a real hero who, in keeping with the Western's generic conventions, is associated with the land and the Native American skills and traditions. The flight from the domestic community leads him to enlist in the Army Airborne Ranger.

*The Deer Hunter* portrays Michael as the archetypal American hero who is shown hunting on his own unlike Nick and Steven. They either forget their boots or makes noise. Mike's self-sufficiency and determination to kill, along with the metaphor of hunting and the moment of killing the deer, are intentional representations of masculinity. In fact, the film uses hunting and other similar masculine rituals to create a covert layer of meaning. And having the ability to kill is the measure of proving manhood. The Russian roulette scene that takes place in Vietnam is a game through which masculinity

is tested. In such rituals, the character should be able to pull the trigger and prove that he is not afraid to die.

In Cimino film, the car that Michael drives, a white 1959 Cadillac Coup Deville, both recalls the steel of the protective western hero and establishes Michael as a guardian angel. According to John Hellmann, “the film turns on such characteristic devices of the western as male-bonding, the repressed love of the hero for a ‘good woman’, the terror of confrontation with savage denizens of hostile landscape, dancehall girls, even a ‘shoot out’ across a table in a crowded gambling room” (1982: 175). In light of these motifs, Michael’s car stands in for the white house of the western protagonist. The final scene in which Michael stands out as an angelic figure is the deer hunt before entering the army. As he stalks his deer through the mountains outside of Clairton, the sacral, choral score highlights the hunt as a spiritual endeavor. Earlier in the film, Michael stresses the importance of killing a deer with “one shot”, and during the hunt he withholds his bullet until he can get a clear line of sight to his chosen animal. For Michael, pulling the trigger more than once would amount to ruining a rustic ritual. Eventually, he kills the deer with a single shot, a show of restraint and precision that confirms Nick’s earlier description of Michael on the hunt as a “control freak.” In his swift dispatching of the deer, Michael deals out death in a way not unlike that of the biblical “angel of the Lord” who is able to take human life in an instant. (Acts 12:23) In short, Michael, in *The Deer Hunter*, is cast in the role of a spiritual leader and western hero whose belief is to bear witness to the American religious and cultural ideology, founding America as a divine nation.

### **The crisis of the Warrior-Hero’s quest myth**

The destructive forces that subvert the American mythology are featured in Vietnam War films. The perceived reality of the Vietnam experience supersedes any myths and heroism created by American culture in the 1950s and 1960s. In fact, many of the defining forces that help shape the character of the traditional hero are subverted. The subversive process revolves around the hero’s initiation into a psychology of slaughter resulting from his engagement with the American military establishment. That can also be illustrated by the fact that he does not master the hostile environment in which he evolves. He is confronted with the destructive forces and a dark landscape in Vietnam. The American myths include the attitude of moral superiority he has inherited from his Puritan forefathers and the internal conflict of conscience between the self and the other implies.

In her analysis of the crisis of American male hero in Vietnam, Frances Fitzgerald, in her work, *Cities on a Hill: A Journey Through Contemporary American Cultures* (1986) describes the American Forces as:

“Like an Orwellian army, they knew everything about the military tactics, but nothing about where they were or who the enemy was....Their buddies were killed by landmines, sniper fire, and mortal attacks, but the enemy remained invisible, not only in the jungle but among the people of the villagers – an almost metaphysical enemy who inflicted upon heat, boredom, terror, and death, and gave them nothing to show for it- no territory taken, no visible sign of progress except the bodies of small yellow men” (1986:464).

In this passage, Fitzgerald examines the case of Americans who are unable to identify whom they fight in Vietnam. The invisible enemy is one of the main reasons why the American mythology is subverted in Vietnam War.

Because of the pre-conceived ideas of the Americans mythic hero, many soldiers go to Vietnam to defend a noble cause. We remark that these notions are kindled by Hollywood’s representation of war

through the figure of John Way. Ray Zimmerman supports this reflection when he declares: “By the time the recruits have experienced the war itself, the maddly comic figure of John Wayne is reduced to an object of utter derision.... The men finally associate the name of John Wayne with absurd acts of mock heroics or self-destructive (even psychotic) behavior in the combat zone” (1999:78). In his declaration, Zimmerman highlights John Wayne’s shortcomings. The Vietnam War experience has dramatically changed him from a praiseworthy hero to a subverted one. He becomes a ridiculous heroic figure for Americans.

According to Hellmann, Vietnam is an “ironic antimyth in which an archetypal warrior representative of the culture embarks on a quest that dissolves into an utter chaos of dark revolution” (1986:102). Here, Hellmann shows the chaotic situation in which the American mythic hero conducts the war in Vietnam. This hostile environment of warfare makes him fail there.

By investigating the crisis of American mythology through the book, *The End of Victory Culture*, Tom Engelhardt sheds light on the change in the genre of war movies as an end of victory culture. The Vietnam War movies such as *The Deer Hunter*, *Born on the Fourth of July*, *Apocalypse now* and *Coming Home* show a sense of loss. And they depict a character that connects the changing discourses in media narratives and political ideologies over the 1970s to the experiences of the communities whose members fight in Vietnam.

In Michael Cimino’s *The Deer Hunter*, the western binary structure and themes are in contrast with the context of Vietnam. They provide Cimino with, as John Hellmann puts it: “the strengths of central [US] national myth in dealing with Vietnam as a collective American trauma” (1982:420). These films about Vietnam War show an attempt to rationalize the senseless and brutality of the war by blaming the military leadership for being corrupt and incompetent. They also emphasize the lack of understanding of the Vietnamese people and the history of their nation. Movies do not offer evidence that the American public misunderstands the realities of the war in Vietnam. This is the crucial disconnection and the reason why the Vietnam War is such a tragedy in American memory.

*The Deer Hunter* is a portrayal of Vietnam as representing the frontier or the wilderness outside the Clairton’s domicile meaning civilization. However, the abrupt cut from the sombre post-hunt mood in the bar in Clairton to US helicopters napalming a village in the Indochinese jungle subverts the American hero. According to Hellmann, this shift represents “a nightmare inversion of the landscape and its relation to the hero and community” (1982:423). This inversion is revealed through the contrasting ‘mise-en-scene’ of the two places. Michael, during the first deer hunting, is shot from below. As a powerful figure in control, he is framed by downward-angled shots in Vietnam. In Cimino’s film, Mike is considered as a western hero, but he realizes that there is a stark contrast between the snowy mountains and the tropical Southeast Asian jungle and the Clairton steel mill.

The continual crisis in masculinity throughout American history results from the fact that Vietnam conflict is not fought out of necessity for morally defensible reasons. Masculinity, as a cultural construction, is in a state of fluctuation. War then unveils this instability. Brenda Boyle, in the book, *Masculinity in Vietnam War Narratives*, deals with the crisis of American myths. In this light, he claims: “Similar to the late nineteenth century, the period of the 1960s and 1970s experienced significant cultural upheaval suggesting a time of crisis for American men with corresponding heightened anxieties about masculinity” (2009:1). According to Boyle, this anxiety extends into the 1980s with the ambiguous outcome of the Vietnam War and the societal instability. In fact, Vietnam War films capture this continuous crisis of masculinity and depict the 1980s’ national perception of the state of manhood in America.

In *The Deer Hunter*, Michael's prowess amidst the mountains also foreshadows his upcoming fall from divine proximity. The book of Ezekiel contains a poetic polemic against the King of Tyre that describes the monarch in terms of a heavenly being whose arrogance causes his banishment from the mountain of God:

“You were in Eden, the garden of God.... You were an anointed guardian cherub and I appointed you; you were on the holy mountain of God—you walked around in the midst of the stones of fire. You were innocent in your ways from the day you were created until unrighteousness was found in you.... You were filled with violence in your midst, and you sinned, so I profaned you from the mountain of God, and I banished you, guardian cherub, from the midst of the stones of fire. Your heart was arrogant because of your beauty ; you corrupted your wisdom for the sake of your splendor. I cast you to the ground.” (28 :13-17)

This description of Tyre's king as an exceedingly wise guardian who walks upon God's mountain fits to Michael particularly well. As we see presently, the biblical king's fall from the divine garden or mountain due to his arrogance and violence also aligns with Mike's haughty disposition towards God and his violent action in Vietnam.

In Cimino film, while Michael exhibits angelic qualities, he operates without recourse to the Divine. More importantly, he has an overt lack of respect for christian ritual, and he exalts at the same time that he dismisses any need for God. Thus, he parallels a fallen angel who believes that he can replace the Most High. In Clairton, Mike does not hesitate to show his disdain for divine reverence, and his hubris culminates when he equates implicitly himself with God in the Vietcong prison camp. After his denial of the Divine in Vietnam, he suffers a metaphorical fall from heaven, his salvific powers and concomitant self-confidence begin to diminish. Therefore, he is emotionally damaged when he returns home. In the light of religious motifs in the film, *The Deer Hunter* can be seen as an allegory in which Mike assumes the role of an angel in Edenic hometown. He shares several attributes with biblical angels, including royal status, the ability to interpret heavenly signs, and supremacy over his surroundings. Yet, as an angel who does not give credit to his Creator, Michael undergoes a fall from grace in Vietnam that eradicates his former powers of near omnipotence and omniscience. The crisis of the American mythology derives from the abrupt destruction of nationalist martial mythologies and the disconnection between political objectives and the facts on the ground. The Vietnamese and the American public have little ability to make sense of the war. This warfare frames its memory in terms of chaos, disillusionment and cynicism. However, Americans project their own image on to the conflict and emphasize the trauma, suffering, confusion and racism that define their experience.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, we admit that the massive incursion of white settlers into the western wilderness enacts the American belief in a nation-building progress. Nature is fundamental in the Americans' way of life. It is a suitable place for freedom, democracy, or progress that define the US society. The American landscape has taken on more and more cultural and symbolic meanings. Wilderness and the frontier begin to represent symbolically American civilization. Its conquest becomes a ritual for reproducing the frontier experience. There are many opportunities in these vast areas, which help America strengthen its power, gain profit and increase the economy because of the raw materials. Natural landscapes always carry important and varied emotional, cultural and symbolic meanings. The idea of landscape refers to the symbolic environment constructed by human acts to assign meaningful interpretations to nature. In *The Deer Hunter*, Michael Cimino mythicizes the Vietnam War and casts the main character in the role of the western hero in American setting.

In post-Vietnam era, Cimino's film, *The Deer Hunter*, rewrites the war from the perspectives of the present and regenerates versions of this past war according to the requirements of the day. It is true that this mythopoeic approach creates fine cinematic examples. Yet, it also blurs the distinction between the complex realities of the war with a Puritanical dualistic reality created by pragmatic purposes. For reconstructing the Vietnam War, it is important to displace the complexities of social experience with a deeper meaning drawn from the popular mythology. The mythification of the Vietnam War and the consecration of the combat atmosphere create an exotic and even eroticizing perception of war and present it to the spectator as a spiritual experience. By moving the war to the level of nightmare, *The Deer Hunter* carries it to a mythical and even religious dimension. The hellish war represented in this movie may be a place to run away from, but it also offers redemption. Mythicizing the Vietnam War in the American setting constructs an attractive image of the military and war through the western hero. The Vietnam landscape is not a suitable place for Mike to wage a war. The realities of the environment foreshadow the crisis of the warrior character's cultural and religious myths. He collapses because of the snowy mountains and dark landscape of Vietnam. Mike copes with the chaos that surrounds the war and America's subsequent loss, which creates a historical trauma on a larger scale. Owing to the unpopularity of the war, America remains frozen in trauma. Instead of trying to transcend the Western, *The Deer Hunter* accepts its chivalric values associated with male bonding, honor and martial skill. It features the defense of the imperial progress being forced on native or savage cultures. Cimino enlarges the Western's locale, and his film is powerful and effective, but it is also fatally oversimplified. The difficulties he faces proceed from, particularly, native version of Western conventions he tries to revive.

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