

## Minor and Major Narratives: Building a Living Monument to the Vietnam War

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### Introduction

The result of the Vietnam War traumatized American society, shaking its belief in its own justice and the ideology of democracy, which had formerly justified its intervention in Vietnam. Vietnam veterans inevitably represent America's failure in Vietnam through their physical and mental wounds. Thus, the ways in which American popular culture such as films depicts Vietnam veterans reflect how America understands its collective trauma and struggles to deal with it. An event becomes a trauma for a collective through interpretations and representations. Jeffrey C. Alexander writes that some members of the collective create representations of ongoing social events, past, present, and future, which frames "the shape of social reality" (11). Borrowing Max Weber's term, Alexander calls these people "carrier groups." Carrier groups "are situated in particular places in the social structure, and they have particular discursive talents for articulating their claims—for what might be called "meaning making"—in the public sphere (11). Through representations, carrier groups convince the other members of the collective that a historical event is a trauma for the collective as a whole. Films can be seen as a means for carrier groups to convey the shape of social reality that they framed. The directors of the Vietnam War films, as "carrier groups," lead the audiences to understand how they were collectively traumatized by the War. This essay will compare Ron Kovic's memoir, *Born on the Fourth of July*, published in 1976, and its film adaptation by Oliver Stone, released in 1989, especially focusing on which part of the original book Stone intentionally altered. Then, this essay will consider how those alterations are related to public attitudes towards the Vietnam War, referring to the contemporary reviews of the respective works. In so doing, it will clarify one way in which American society tries to recover from its collective trauma.

### I.

The narrative structure Kovic adopts helps him to offer a "personal" narrative. His autobi-

ography is structured as a cyclical narrative that begins with a traumatic scene in which he is shot and severely wounded in the battlefield, and ends with the same scene. This structure demonstrates his thought process; he, as a traumatized individual, cannot help repeatedly thinking back to the same traumatic moment. Besides, instead of placing his experiences in a chronological order, Kovic adopts the flashback/flash-forward narrative style. This causes the readers to have some difficulty in reconstructing his experiences as a linear narrative. His narrative escapes from being simplified and generalized, and is paid attention to as a complicated “personal” narrative.

Likewise, Kovic’s combined use of first- and third-person perspectives makes his narrative a thoroughly personal one. For instance, in the first chapter showing his traumatic moment, he narrates in the first person and the present tense, which allows him to describe the moment as a never-completing event that he repeatedly experiences in his mind regardless of the passage of time. Here, trauma is a non-historical, personal experience. As for his experiences after returning from Vietnam, Kovic switches between first- and third-person perspectives. In most cases, he uses the present tense in the first-person narrative, and the past tense in the third-person narrative. If in his book, narratives in the present tense suggest the loss of historicalness, the third-person narratives in the past tense show that he sometimes tried to re-situate himself within the passage of time by keeping a certain distance from his own experiences. When Kovic recollects his participation in a big anti-war rally in Washington, he, for the first time, uses the past tense in his first-person narrative of his after-Vietnam experiences. This reflects his attempts to set himself free from the perpetuated past and reconnect himself with the rest of society. When a conflict between the participants in the rally and the police squads breaks out, he feels that he is “no longer an observer, sitting in my car at the edge of a demonstration [and he is] right in the middle of it” (141). After his return from Vietnam, he had always suffered from a perceived gap between him and others and felt as if he is standing “at the edge of” the present society. Now that he has a sense of togetherness with others living in the present society, he can use the past tense in his first-person, subjective narrative, re-situating himself within the passage of time. The formal characteristics of Kovic’s book show his “personal” suffering and recovery.

Unlike the original book, Stone rearranges Kovic’s experiences in a chronological order, and retells them as America’s collective story. Don Kunz points out that Stone’s film makes Kovic’s experiences a linear narrative that consists of three phases; “the formation of Kovic’s heroic masculine ideal in small-town American, its deformation in Vietnam service, then its ref-

ormation in the antiwar movement” (160). This “heroic masculine ideal” is not what Kovic personally believed in, but rather what many Americans of his generation were encouraged to acquire. Thus, the film’s construction of a linear story about Kovic’s masculinity leads to the generalization of his personal experiences. In the opening scene in which Ron and other kids play soldiers, the voice-over of the mature Ron says, “It was a long time ago...We turned the woods into a battlefield and dreamed that someday we would become men.” The use of the first-person plural pronoun “we” situates Ron’s experiences depicted following this scene as a collective story of his generation.

Stone’s film carefully prepares the contexts in which both Ron and America are traumatized by the Vietnam War. Any event is not intrinsically traumatic. Neil J. Smelser explains the relationship between the formation of cultural trauma and social context in the following way: “[T]he status of trauma as trauma is dependent on the sociocultural context of the affected society at the time the historical event or situation arises” (36). The scene in which all of Ron’s family members watch President Kennedy making his inaugural speech on TV shows that the ideas of pride and responsibility as an American citizen are key parts of Ron’s childhood education. His mother mentions her dream in which Ron delivers a good speech. She says, “You were speaking to a large crowd just like him. Just like him.” She repeats the phrase “just like him,” which suggests that she regards Kennedy as a model of a true, courageous, responsible American citizen, and expects her son to follow the model. This, however, does not simply introduce Ron’s personal background. The scenario for this scene indicates that American people collectively received Kennedy’s speech: “[T]he voice of PRESIDENT KENNEDY is growing louder the closer we get—as if coming from all the televisions and radios on the block” (13). The whole block rather than each person living on the block listens to Kennedy, and as the commonness of the everyday landscape in the Kovics’ neighborhood that the same scene shows suggests, numerous similar blocks throughout the United States also listen to the speech. In fact, the scenario calls Ron’s house “a house like any other,” which suggests that Ron grew up in an average American family (13). Another context the film shows is the lessons instilled into Ron’s mind. From his childhood to adolescence, Ron is always taught to win and to make sacrifices for victory. Since these lessons are offered as components of American ideal of masculinity, he considers that if he loses, he will fail in being an American man as well. His wrestling coach repeatedly calls the students “ladies,” which planted in Ron and the others, the recognition that unless they become winners, they are considered as women. This extreme and almost violent plantation of the ideal of masculinity indicates that any experience of being defeated might

traumatize Ron and Americans of his generation. The film intentionally generalizes Ron's background, and prepares the contexts in which many Americans are collectively traumatized.

Stone creates additional episodes of Ron's defeat, in order to reconstruct a personal narrative as America's collective story. One example can be seen in the opening scene where Ron and other kids play soldiers. When he falls flat on his back, the other kids shout at him, "You're dead, Ronnie Kovic, and you know it." Kunz points out that this scene undercuts Ron's aspiration to become a man (162). However, this scene does not just undercut it; the dead "you" refers to American ideal of masculinity as well as Ron. Another additional episode can be found in the scene of the Christmas wrestling tournament. Unlike the original book reporting Ron's success in becoming a winner, the film portrays him as a loser. As Kunz precisely observes, the camera work used to show Ron as a loser is similar to the one adopted in the scene of the war game in the woods (164). By showing him in a similar way in both scenes, the film makes his defeats a repetitive pattern, and strongly foreshadows his and America's defeat in Vietnam.

However, the scene of the wrestling tournament makes it clear that while Ron's defeat is partly shared with others, it is still a personal experience. On the one hand, the disappointed faces of his parents, girlfriend, coach, and the other town people suggest that they collectively experience Ron's defeat, and that their shared ideal of masculinity is now threatened by Ron's failure. On the other hand, this scene shows Ron's perceived gap between him and the other people, as the scenario writes: "He won't rise. The defeat is total—his and his alone"(19). Whereas the film tries to construct a widely sharable story based on Ron's experiences, it inevitably reveals that a person's experience has an absolutely individual sphere.

The film shows the process of how Ron recovers from his trauma through which it suggests the possibility for America's collective recovery. Unlike in the original book, Ron in the film visits the family of Corporal Wilson. The scenario describes Ron reading the epitaph of Wilson as follows: "He falls into a state of watching it...Him and Wilson. Locked in this strange cosmic dance across time...Interchangeable. He dead. Wilson alive" (126). These words suggest a shared experience between dead Wilson and living Ron, and transform both of them as irreplaceable individuals into two of numerous similar American soldiers. A one-time-only event in which Ron as an individual mistakenly killed Wilson as another individual becomes one case of numerous similar events that might have happened between other two Americans. Therefore, Ron's confession works as a turning point for not only his personal but also America's collective recovery. The Wilsons believe in American ideal of heroic masculinity. Mr. Wilson, Corporal Wilson's father, proudly talks of his family history in which men had fought for the

country, and places his son in the genealogy of those patriotic soldiers. The Wilsons had averted their eyes from the truth of their son's death as well as the Vietnam War by clinging to the illusion that American ideal of masculinity is still intact. Ron reveals that what he and Wilson did in Vietnam is not a noble fighting but a massacre of civilian women and children, which forces the Wilsons to see reality. Through Ron's attempts to recover from his trauma, the film tries to make American audiences as well as the Wilsons accept the fact that they were collectively traumatized, which is the necessary step for their recovery.

## II.

The difference between Kovic's book and Stone's film adaptation parallels Americans' different attitudes towards the Vietnam War at the time of each work's release. When the book was published, Americans saw Ron Kovic as another person who went through tragic experiences. It is only by distancing Vietnam veterans that Americans could tolerate the memories of the Vietnam War they represent. By contrast, when the film was released, Americans positively identified with Ron.

The principal public reaction to Kovic's autobiography at the time of its publication was to see otherness in him and regard him as the protagonist of his "personal" tragedy. For instance, in the *American Bar Association Journal* issued in October, 1977, a reviewer understands that Kovic, "the one-time hawk," was transformed into an "anti-war dove," due to the ill treatment and indifference he faced in hospitals. Also, the same reviewer writes, "Kovic deserved to be the hero of his dreams and probably was justified, at least in his mind, to become the antiwar dove and an idol of the radicals" (1442). What Kovic believed are "his" personal dreams, and his transformation is considered justifiable with the proviso, "at least in his mind," which suggests the reviewer's understanding of Kovic's story as a personal tragedy. At the same time, the use of the word "deserve" shows the reviewer's recognition that the sacrifices Kovic offered are not enough rewarded. The reviewer seems to consider Kovic to be tragic based on American ideal of masculinity, because it assumes that sacrifices are rewarded with victory, as the wrestling coach repeatedly said. When the reviewer writes, "His only medal was a Purple Heart," he tragedizes Kovic's story as his failure in gaining deserved glory (1442). Through this kind of interpretation, Kovic becomes the object of the readers' sympathy. The *New York Times* for August 15, 1976, supposes the readers' tolerant attitude coming from their sympathy for Kovic: "And what is so remarkable about Kovic's writing is that whereas one is perfectly prepared to forgive him occasional lapses into bitterness, self-pity or excesses of rage, he retains the most

extraordinary self-control throughout”(186). Here, the reviewer both commends and disparages Kovic. Because he is a traumatized individual, his possible lack of self-control can be tolerated. To the reviewer and the other readers at that time, Kovic was the protagonist of “his” tragedy, and the tolerable other in society.

Another reaction found in the contemporary reviews of the book is to see Vietnam veterans as unwanted monuments to the memories Americans would forget. The *Chicago Tribune* for August 29, 1976, reveals that American society attaches a negative meaning to Vietnam veterans. The reviewer says that if Kovic fought in any different war, he must have become a national hero, and points out the specificity of the Vietnam War in American society: “[H]e is a reminder of an unpopular war, a mistake we are trying to forget”. Vietnam veterans are constructed, in Americans’ minds, as unwanted monuments, because they inevitably awake the undesirable memories of the Vietnam War. The same reviewer expects that Kovic’s writing would arouse either sympathy or rejection among the readers. Kovic’s position as a Vietnam veteran is ambivalent. While his narrative awakes sympathy for “his” personal tragedy, it causes rejection because of its function as a reminder of America’s collective trauma.

The contemporary reviews of Stone’s film adaptation show a change in Americans’ collective attitudes towards Vietnam veterans. In *Cineaste* issued in 1990, a reviewer highly evaluates the film in that it focuses on the ideology underlying American society rather than the atrocities in the battlefield (48). The reviewer pays attention to the long opening sequence that situates American culture as the source of Ron’s physical and mental wounds. Unlike Kovic’s book, the film encourages the audiences to see a veteran’s experiences as their shared tragedy. If American culture caused Ron’s tragedy, American people who grew up in the same cultural environment cannot separate themselves from it. An article printed in the *Los Angeles Times* for January 27, 1990, clearly shows Americans’ newly developed tendency to identify with Vietnam veterans. The article reports the exchanges between Kovic, who was thinking about running for Congress, and people who had just watched Stone’s film. A Vietnam veteran, in an excitement at meeting Kovic, says, “I think anybody who went through that type of struggle can lead by example. (...) We need you.” Here, Kovic is no longer the tolerable other but regarded as a representative of “us.” It is because of his experiences in Vietnam that Kovic is qualified to represent other American citizens. When the veteran says, “We need you,” he suggests that American society, to which “we” refers, is ready to offer a certain space not only for Kovic as an individual person but also for the memories of the Vietnam War. Likewise in the same article, a woman in her forties says, “He gives me hope again, that there’s somebody

out here who will speak for us, (...) I agree totally with everything he says.” She situates Kovic as “our” hero. Her total trust in him has very much to do with his paralyzed body that continually reminds people of his sacrifices for America and its people. Vietnam veterans, who were once unwanted monuments to the memories that America tries to forget, are positively re-defined.

In Stone’s film, Ron, who is both a traumatized individual and the representation of America’s collective trauma, ultimately finds a place for him in American society. Toward the end, he becomes conscious of his social role as a living monument. At the Republican Party national convention, he explains why he and his fellow veterans are there as follows:

“We fought for it, we gave our bodies because we loved it and believed in everything it stood for and tonight we’re ashamed of it, and we’ve come from all the little towns, thousands of us to get this country back again, to make it whole again”(133).

The use of the word “whole” is suggestive, because Ron’s physical state of not being whole reveals that America itself is not whole. He shouts at a TV camera, “We’re never never gonna let the people forget that war (...) this wheelchair...this steel is your Memorial Day on wheels” (133). His shout is directed to both people watching the TV program within the film and the film audiences. While the supporters of the Republican Party struggle to hold him down and silence him, Nixon’s message “Let’s give those who have served in Vietnam the honor and the respect that they deserve and that they’ve earned” sounds hollow(133-134). This scene visualizes the ambivalent public attitudes towards the memories of the Vietnam War: superficial gesture of commemoration on the one hand, and the urge to forget on the other. Smelser points out that the dual tendency can be found at the collective level as well as the individual level: “Mass forgetting and collective campaigns on the part of groups to downplay or ‘put behind us,’ if not actually to deny a cultural trauma on one hand, and a compulsive preoccupation with the event, as well as group efforts to keep it in the public consciousness as a reminder that ‘we must remember,’ or ‘lest we forget,’ on the other” (53). Ron in the film finally succeeds in making American society offer a certain space for him and the memories he awakes. He becomes a living monument that reflects Americans’ ambivalent feelings.

## Conclusion

A person’s minor narrative inevitably loses its original complexity and irreplaceability in

the process of being retold as a collective, major narrative. In Stone's film adaptation of *Born on the Fourth of July*, Ron's experiences are reconstructed as a linear story that ends with his recovery from trauma. However, due to the prepared ending, the film conceals an essential characteristic of trauma: its forced repetition, its non-historicalness. Unlike the film, Kovic's original book puts the non-historicalness of trauma in the foreground; its cyclical structure indicates that at least at the individual level, a linear, irreversible recovery from trauma cannot be expected. Also, as the film itself reveals in the scene of the Christmas wrestling tournament, a personal experience cannot be totally shared with others. Nevertheless, the film neglects Ron's irreplaceable individuality and shows him as one of numerous traumatized veterans, an anonymous living monument to America's collective tragedy.

Not only the film but also American society itself needs such a living monument. During the decade since the publication of Kovic's book, Americans had changed their attitudes towards their memories of the Vietnam War, which is reflected in contemporary public reactions to the book and the film respectively. Americans came to re-interpret Vietnam veterans, originally considered the tolerable others and unwanted monuments, as their own representatives that can contribute to America's future. It appears that Americans collectively accepted their traumatic memories. At the same time, however, they seem to put an end to their act of repeatedly thinking back to those memories and escape from trauma's non-historicalness. They convince themselves that, now that they built living monuments to their traumatic memories and offer a certain space for those monuments, their work of memorizing were complete. As shown in the scene of the Republican Party national convention, Americans are torn between their will to memorize the Vietnam War and their desire to forget it. Stone's film reflects this ambivalence and constructs a linear story the ends with the suggestion of the possibility for America's collective recovery, in order to deal with America's collective trauma not as a never-completing, ongoing event but as an already-passed one.

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