



“THERE IS NO OUT OF HERE”: JACOB’S LADDER AS HISTORICAL TESTAMENT TO VIETNAM-ERA TRAUMA

JAYATI DAS

Research Scholar, Department of English, Tezpur University, Napaam, Assam.
E-mail: jayatidasid@gmail.com

Abstract: In 1990 when Adrian Lyne’s psychological horror film *Jacob’s Ladder* was released it transcended the cinematic genre to operate as a potent, albeit allegorical, historical document. This paper attempts to show that the film serves as a critical lens through which to examine three interconnected and historically verifiable events of disaster confronting Vietnam veterans: the pervasive psychological disability caused by Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), the institutional betrayal manifested through non-consensual military drug experimentation, and the societal marginalization veterans faced upon arriving home. By contextualizing the film’s narrative universe within declassified government records, veteran testimonies, psychiatric research, and the socio-political discourse of the relevant era, this study attempts to present how *Jacob’s Ladder* aptly portrays the “hallucinatory purgatory” suffered by a generation of soldiers. Further, the paper demonstrates the film as a form of cinematic historiography that provides an insight into existential realities that reflect the psychological trauma generally sidelined by official narratives and societal neglect.

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Introduction: Cinema as Historical Archive

The wounds of Vietnam War (1955-1975) that scarred the American veterans did not limit itself to only the physical battlefield. It transcended through time to become a continuing reality. While films like Oliver Stone’s *Platoon* (1986)

and Stanley Kubrick’s *Full Metal Jacket* (1987) offered raw, often realistically jarring depictions of combat, Adrian Lyne’s *Jacob’s Ladder* (1990) ventured into a different, yet equally crucial, terrain: the psychological aftermath of war.

Through the fractured consciousness of Jacob Singer, a veteran experiencing a terrifying, hallucinatory “post-war” existence while corporeally dying on a Vietnam medevac table in 1971, the film constructs a powerful allegory for historical trauma. This paper repositions *Jacob’s Ladder* as a significant historical text. It contends that the film’s hyper-natural horrors are not mere fantasy but potent metaphors for documented historical phenomena: the distortion of reality through PTSD, the violation of bodily and mental autonomy by state-sanctioned experiments, and the social neglect and erasure experienced by veterans struggling to reintegrate into a nation eager to forget or unable to comprehend. By analyzing the film alongside primary historical sources – declassified documents, Senate hearings, psychiatric studies, and veteran memoirs – this research hopes to illuminate how *Jacob’s Ladder* encodes the suppressed historical truths of the Vietnam veteran’s post-combatant experience.

PTSD as Historical Reality – Visualizing the Invisible Wound

Jacob’s Ladder masterfully translates the subjective torment of PTSD into palpable cinematic language, providing a disturbing visual corollary to the historical reality faced by countless Vietnam veterans.

Clinical Resonance- Jacob’s experiences as a catalogue of PTSD symptoms

Jacob’s uncontrollable, violent flashbacks to the traumatic event in Vietnam (the convulsive attack, the bayoneting) mirror the “intrusive recollections” and “recurrent distressing dreams” central to PTSD diagnosis (Center for Substance Abuse Treatment (US) 2014). The fragmented, sensory-overloaded nature of these flashbacks aligns with clinical descriptions of traumatic memory (van der Kolk 1996).

Jacob’s constant state of anxiety, his paranoia on the subway rides, his violent reactions to perceived

threats (like the speeding cars that seem intent to run him over), and the pervasive sense of being watched embody the hyper-arousal symptomatic of PTSD (Figley: 1978). The distorted faces and demonic figures that he encounters around him on the subway, and other social spaces he navigates through, can be interpreted as visual manifestations of this hyper-vigilant state, where his immediate environment itself becomes threatening.

His abandonment of his PhD for a non-ambitious job as a mailman (“I didn’t want to think anymore”) is probably a symptom of emotional numbing, and avoidance of stimuli associated with the trauma (his intellectual self-linked to a life before/outside the Vietnam War). His strained relationship with Jezebel, focused solely on physicality, and the constant flitting to a stable family life as another reality, further suggests an inability to engage emotionally.

Survivor guilt permeates Jacob’s existence – guilt over surviving his platoon’s destruction (“brother against brother”) and, crucially, the pre-war guilt over his son Gabe’s death. This intertwining guilt reflects the complex “moral injury” increasingly recognized as a core component of combat trauma (Shay: 1994), where veterans grapple with transgressions of deeply-held moral beliefs or failures to prevent harm to those around them.

Historical Prevalence

The film’s portrayal is not exaggerated. By the time of its release (in 1990), studies estimated that a significant number of Vietnam veterans suffered from PTSD (Magruder: 2016). The National Vietnam Veterans Readjustment Study (NVVRS), published in 1990, provided stark epidemiological data confirming the scale of the crisis (Schlenger: 2015). Jacob’s alienation, his difficulty maintaining stable relationships (with Jezebel, or his estranged wife Sarah), and his downward social spiralling, mirrors the documented struggles with employment, substance abuse, and family

breakdown prevalent among veterans (Matthew: 2023). The film’s horror lies precisely in its grounding of Jacob’s psychological unravelling within this historical reality; the “demons” being manifestations of a historically widespread and debilitating condition. The official military consultant for the film was Captain Dale Dye, who besides being a Vietnam veteran himself, has been an advisor to Hollywood.

Government Betrayal and Conspiracy— “Something Was Done to Us”

The film’s central narrative thread—Jacob’s journey to uncover a government conspiracy involving drug testing on his platoon – is not exaggerated fiction but rooted in disturbing historical truths about Cold War military experimentation.

The MKULTRA Legacy & Project SHAD

Jacob’s war buddy Michael, a Chemical Corps member, reveals unofficial tests of a drug designed to trigger the “primal instinct” and aggression drive in men. This reference can be alluding to real-world programs like the CIA’s MKULTRA (1953-1973), which explored mind control and chemical interrogation techniques, often using unwitting subjects, including military personnel (Lee and Shlain, 1985). Project SHAD (Shipboard Hazard and Defense, 1962-1973) exposed thousands of service members to biological and chemical agents during simulated warfare scenarios without informed consent. The specific drug mentioned in the film’s final title card, BZ (3-Quinuclidinyl benzilate), was indeed developed and tested by the U.S. Army Chemical Corps at Edgewood Arsenal. BZ is a potent, long-lasting hallucinogen intended as an incapacitating agent, known to cause delirium, paranoia, and aggression.

Plausible Deniability and Institutional Gaslighting

The film powerfully portrays the government’s mechanisms of denial. The attorney’s brutal

dismissal of Jacob and his comrades – claiming official records showing they were never in Vietnam, only involved in “war games in Thailand” – mirrors the historical reality veterans faced when seeking answers or medical help for exposure-related illnesses. Declassification, obfuscation, and the destruction of records were common tactics (Sheehan: 2017). The harassment by “government agents” (the arguable thuggish figures in speeding cars) symbolizes the immense institutional pressure exerted to silence whistleblowers and discredit veterans’ claims. The government’s refusal to acknowledge the experiments becomes a secondary trauma, compounding the initial violation.

“We Fought Ourselves”: The Historical Resonance of Fratricide

Michael’s explanation that the drug caused Jacob’s platoon to turn on each other, unable to distinguish friend from foe, is the film’s most potent indictment. While the specific scenario is fictionalised, it resonates with the documented effects of BZ and other agents tested on soldiers: psychosis, extreme paranoia, and violence (Ketchum: 2006).

As Chris Taylor states in *Platoon*, “We did not fight the enemy; we fought ourselves.” The war’s ambiguous morality, the difficulty identifying the enemy (exacerbated by counterinsurgency tactics), the sizeable number of “friendly fire” incidents, and the profound psychological fracturing experienced by soldiers all contribute to a sense that the war turned Americans against themselves. The government’s role in potentially exacerbating this through unethical experimentation amplifies the betrayal.

Social Alienation and the Purgatory of Homecoming

Jacob’s hallucinated 1975 New York is not a sanctuary but a hostile landscape reflecting the profound societal neglect and alienation, and

misunderstanding faced by Vietnam veterans. *Stiffed: The Betrayal of Modern Man* (1999), discusses various kinds of normative masculinity formation and how the war at Vietnam reconfigured the rigid normative notion of what defines the American man.

When the battling men came back home, expecting glory and acceptance from the nation and society they had been conditioned to fight for, things had changed, against their favour. While they had been away in the battlefield, the counter-culture that conscientiously protested the violence done by the American nation state and its deployed troops in Vietnam facilitated the reworking of erstwhile notions of masculinity; one that had earlier ensconced the roles of provider and protector of women folk and the nation. (Faludi: 1999: 29)

Jezebel: Embodiment of Societal Apathy and Misunderstanding

Jezebel is not merely an insensitive lover; she functions as a powerful symbol of societal attitudes. Her attempts to physically cool Jacob's fever by immersing him in ice ("burning from ice") and her aggressive disposal of his painful mementos (photos of Gabe and Sarah) represent a society desperate to suppress the uncomfortable realities of trauma and loss. Her eventual demonization within Jacob's psyche signifies how societal pressure to "move on" becomes internalized as a diabolical force hindering recovery. Her biblical namesake (a temptress and false prophet) underscores her role in leading Jacob away from confronting his truth.

Louis's Philosophy as Societal Erasure

Louis the chiropractor offers temporary physical relief but his philosophical advice is problematic within the historical context. Quoting Meister Eckhart – "If you're holding on... that's the only part that's gonna burn. You gotta let go, Jacob" – he advocates for complete detachment from

memory and earthly ties as the path to peace. This mirrors society's implicit and often explicit demand: veterans were expected to suppress their trauma, forget the war, and quietly assimilate back into civilian life (Lembcke: 1998). It signifies a form of historical erasure, by suggesting that the way forward lies in forgetting, rather than remembering and processing.

Systems of Neglect- Hospitals and Bureaucracy

The film's institutions offer no refuge. The psychiatric counsellor Jacob seeks, Dr. Carlson, does not seem to exist within the hospital's records – a commentary on the lack of adequate mental health resources for veterans, particularly in the early years before PTSD was formally recognized and VA services were overwhelmed (Scott: 1993).

The hellish hospital sequence, culminating in the doctor's chilling pronouncement "There is no out of here" symbolizes the bureaucratic maze and diagnostic failures that trapped veterans in their suffering without offering real pathways to healing. The subway, a recurring motif, becomes a purgatorial space of entrapment and disorientation, reflecting the veteran's feeling of being stuck between worlds, unable to find a way back to a recognisable "home."

The Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, popularly called the G.I. Bill, had legislated provisions for the educational requirements of veterans, financial assistance for acquiring homes or businesses, as well as a year's coverage of unemployment assistance. The war in Vietnam changed things, and the otherization of veterans in society and state became prominent. Anyone speaking against the official narrative of the state would not be welcomed, even if he were a war hero. Moreover, the reduced benefits of the G.I. Bill, and the method of Selective Service System created a military force based on the working class, quite unlike the universal conscription systems in force during World War II (Schmidt:

2012: 21).

Cinematic Purgatory as Historical Metaphor – Structure, Symbolism, and Resolution

The film’s temporally disjointed narrative structure and symbolic language are not merely stylistic choices but core components of its historical argument and politics.

Temporal Dislocation and Lateral Inversion: The revelation that the entire “post-war” narrative is a dying hallucination occurring in the moments after Jacob’s bayoneting in Vietnam fundamentally reframes the film. It transforms Jacob’s 1975 experience from a potential future into a purgatorial state – a suspended animation between life and death, war and peace. This directly parallels the historical experience of many veterans who felt perpetually stranded in a psychological no-man’s-land, unable to fully return to civilian life while no longer being in combat (Herman: 1992).

Jacob’s persistent confusion between left and right, and the laterally inverted license plates on the threatening cars, symbolize this dislocation in perception. His perception is inverted, mirroring how trauma and institutional gaslighting distort one’s sense of reality and history.

“You’re Already Dead”: The Veteran as Social Ghost: The fortune teller’s pronouncement – “according to this, you’re already dead. You’re out of here, baby” – cuts to the core of the veteran’s historical social status. Many felt like ghosts, corporeally present but psychologically absent, unmoored from the society they returned to, their traumatic experiences rendering them fundamentally “other” (Herr: 1977).

Ascension as Historical Catharsis and Critique: Jacob’s final choice to follow his deceased son Gabe up the illuminated staircase towards a heavenly light, abandoning the torment of his hallucinated purgatory, is ambiguous. It can represent an acceptance of death and a release from suffering, offering Jacob peace.

Historically, this can be seen as analogous to the therapeutic process of confronting and integrating trauma, leading to a form of reconciliation (Tick: 2005). Be it about Gabe’s death or that of his platoon.

The “rosier” afterlife he ascends to is inauthentic – it is not historically probable. It is not congruent with the PTSD-scarred, potentially marginalized existence he might have faced had he survived, but an idealized, guilt-free reunion.

The film thus suggests that true peace for the Vietnam veteran, within the historical context depicted, was only attainable through a form of surrender – accepting death or abandoning the fight for recognition and truth. The final title card, starkly stating the Army’s use of BZ, immediately undercuts the sentimentality of the ascension, forcing the viewer back to the historical reality of betrayal. It implies that the “heaven” offered is an escape from, not a resolution to, the historical war crimes and traumas inflicted.

Conclusion

In the light of the above discussion, *Jacob’s Ladder* appears to be far more than a masterful horror film. It becomes a politically potent work of historiographical meta-fiction. It utilises the conventions of psychological horror not for mere thrills, but to construct a vivid, allegorical testimony to the multifaceted historical trauma endured by Vietnam veterans. By amalgamating the psychological hell of PTSD, the corporeal and mental violation of state-sponsored experiments, and the social death of homecoming into a singular, nightmarish narrative, the film creates a potent historical document that resonates where official records may be redacted or incomplete.

The purgatory Jacob inhabits is not merely a plot device; it is the film’s central historical metaphor. It captures the suspended state veterans were forced into – caught between the indelible memories of war and a society unwilling or unable to receive their stories, between the physical

reality of survival and the psychological reality of damage, between seeking truth and facing institutional denial.

The closing title card, anchoring the film's speculative horrors in the documented reality of BZ testing, is its final historical assertion. *Jacob's Ladder* compels the viewer to recognize that for countless Vietnam veterans, the "afterlife" was not some distant theological concept; it was the purgatory they were condemned to inhabit in the present. A living hell forged by combatant trauma, survivor guilt, betrayal by the state, and societal alienation, where, "there is no out of here." The film stands as a testament to this historical truth.

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