Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) as a Cinematic Motif in Contemporary American Cinema and Its Didactic Potential in Media Education

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Abstract
The article is an analysis of depictions of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in American feature films from 2021–2024, such as *The Throwback, Lonesome Soldier, The Fallout, Causeway* and *Cherry.* The main concern of the study focuses on how PTSD, being a film motif, reflects the broader social and psychological anxieties of contemporary societies. The research focuses on three questions: in what historical context the films are placed, how trauma is symbolized, and what moral and existential dilemmas are portrayed. The article uses the method of analyzing films as media messages, highlighting their social, symbolic and ethical contexts. In the context of previous research, the article is part of a trend of analyses showing the impact of PTSD not only on individuals, but also on social narratives about war, trauma and national identity in the post-9/11 era. The results of the analysis indicate that contemporary productions strive for a realistic portrayal of PTSD, taking into account its psychological and social consequences, although simplifications and stereotypes still appear. This phenomenon has important implications not only for film audiences, but also for film education in schools, where an analysis of how PTSD is portrayed can contribute to a better understanding of the issue of trauma and the role of film as a social and educational tool.

Keywords: analysis of films as media messages, American cinema, film education, PTSD, trauma, media education.

1. Introduction

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is now one of the central motifs of contemporary audiovisual culture, particularly American cinema. PTSD, a result of traumatic experiences, plays a key role in film narratives that explore both the psychological and social consequences of trauma, as well as the transformations that occur in individuals and entire communities as a result. In these films, trauma is presented not only as an individual experience, but also as a universal reaction to extreme situations, such as war, terrorist attacks, domestic violence or other events leading to psychological disintegration. PTSD, becoming a major theme, shapes the way modern societies – especially in the United States – view the effects of crises and trauma in the post-9/11 era. PTSD has become a new paradigm of trauma, providing an interpretive framework for its analysis in not only medical, but also political and cultural aspects (Diedrich, 2018).

American cinema has successfully used PTSD as a tool to portray individual fates, but also to symbolically portray larger social phenomena. One of the most common representations of PTSD in cinema is the portrayal of war veterans, especially those who have returned from armed conflicts such as the Vietnam War, the Gulf War, or the more contemporary conflicts in Iraq and

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Afghanistan. In this context, the trauma of war has not only defined an entire generation, but has also left a deep mark on American culture, as evident in many film productions from the 1970s to the present day. This motif reflects a broader historical narrative in which war gradually becomes something beyond normal life for the individual, and PTSD, as shown in contemporary films, becomes a disease specific to our times (Beidler, 2021).

2. Materials and methods

5 feature films of US production from 2021–2024 were selected for detailed analysis. They are: *The Throwback* (2024) directed by Mario Garcia, *Lonesome Soldier* (2023) directed by Nino Aldi, *The Fallout* (2022) directed by Megan Park, *Causeway* (2022) directed by Lila Neugebauer and *Cherry* (2021) directed by Anthony Russo. These five films are united by themes of traumatic experiences, personal struggles, and the search for identity and the meaning of life in the face of difficult challenges. Each of the characters faces deep emotional and psychological wounds – whether as a result of war, school tragedy or systemic injustice. Many of these films focus on returning to normalcy after dramatic experiences and trying to find one's place in the world, reflecting the universal human desire to survive and rebuild. The selection of these films highlights contemporary issues related to war, violence, addiction and the psychological effects of trauma, while presenting a variety of narratives about human strength and fragility. *The Throwback* tells the story of an adult woman who gets a chance to relive his youth, which leads him to reflect on the choices he made and his future. *Lonesome Soldier* tells the story of a war veteran who struggles with loneliness after returning home and trying to adapt to civilian life. *The Fallout* focuses on a young girl trying to find herself after a school tragedy, analyzing the impact of the trauma on her future life. *Causeway* tells the story of a female soldier returning from war, struggling with physical and psychological wounds and trying to find meaning in life. Finally, *Cherry* depicts a young man who, after returning from war, falls into drug addiction and becomes involved in crime.

The method of analyzing films and television series as media messages, proposed by Grzegorz Łęcicki, was applied. First, this method focuses not only on the artistic dimension of audiovisual productions, but primarily on their social contexts. Historical contexts, including processes of historical ideologization, play a key role here, showing how film can influence the perception of past events and shape historical narratives. Secondly, Łęcicki's method involves uncovering the cultural symbolism present in films, which brings it closer to semiotic analysis of media messages. Discovering cultural symbols, signs and meanings allows for a deeper understanding of the hidden content that audiovisual creators weave into their works, which makes the analysis of films more multidimensional and rich in meaning. Third, the ethical analysis of the films allows us to look at the moral and existential dilemmas experienced by the characters, revealing often universal questions about right and wrong, freedom and responsibility, as well as individual and social justice. Łęcicki points out that ethical analysis is an indispensable part of interpreting the films, as the dilemmas of the characters reflect the deeper, universal values and ethical conflicts present in society. The films can serve as a medium for considering the human condition, how individuals respond to moral challenges and what decisions they make when faced with difficult situations (Łęcicki, 2017).

Three research questions were posed in the analysis of the films. 1) In what historical context – authentic events and characters – is the plot of each film with the theme of PTSD presented? 2) How are the issues of PTSD addressed symbolically, what social myths are referred to in the analyzed films? 3) What moral and existential dilemmas do the characters of the films experience? Common problem categories, similar contexts of events, symbolism and moral-ethical issues were sought.

3. Discussion

As mentioned at the beginning, the topic of trauma in cinema is a modern sign of the times. We have been observing its evolution since the 1980s. In particular, films from the 1980s, such as the *First Blood* (1982) directed by Ted Kotcheff and *Missing in Action* (1984) directed by Joseph Zito, depicted veterans as extremely traumatized individuals who find their psychological healing through revenge and violence. In these narratives, war trauma is combined with the hypermasculine image of the male hero who, by defeating his enemies and "redeeming" his loss, finds a way to return to normalcy (Diefenderfer, 2018). These types of films had a distinctly political undertone, where PTSD became an excuse to portray veterans as heroes regaining America's

lost power and strength. It's not only a narrative about an individual's struggle with trauma, but also about the rebuilding of American militarism and strength after the defeats in Vietnam.

In films such as *Top Gun* (1986) directed by Tony Scott, PTSD is symbolically framed as part of the veteran's experience, which teaches others – both inside the narrative and the audience – how to cope with trauma. In these productions, veterans become not only characters going through a crisis, but also teachers of a society in which the normalization of war trauma becomes part of a broader dialogue about national identity. This cinema suggests that trauma, even trauma as severe as PTSD, can be overcome with the right approach, and that the narrative resolution of trauma often leads to a moral and physical recovery that supports the broader social order. Contemporary U.S. film productions are increasingly portraying veterans not only through the lens of PTSD, but also through the theme of moral trauma, which occurs in the context of difficult ethical choices on the battlefield. Research on veterans shows that religion and moral beliefs can both mitigate the effects of trauma and exacerbate them, depending on the individual's ability to find meaning in their experiences (Suitt, 2021).

Contemporary cinema, however, is going a step further, expanding the way PTSD is portrayed, not only in the context of veterans, but also in anti-hero and antagonist characters. As research shows, PTSD has become the most commonly attributed mental disorder to anti-hero characters, which contrasts sharply with the traditional association of villains with narcissistic personality disorder (Vidal-Mestre et al., 2024). Anti-heroes in films such as *Taxi Driver* (1976) directed by Martin Scorsese or our more contemporary *Joker* (2019) directed Todd Phillips are portrayed as clearly traumatized individuals who gain a deeper dimension in their mental and moral complexity than typical action movie heroes. PTSD in this context becomes a tool for building characters who more realistically, though often in extremis, reflect the contemporary struggles of individuals with psychological and social crises. They are often anti-heroes searching for their place in a chaotic and hostile world, and depict PTSD as a chronic condition that finds no easy solution in either violence or revenge, but rather leads to further deepening isolation and personality disintegration.

Cinema dealing with PTSD also transcends individual experience and enters the territory of collective trauma, particularly evident in narratives dedicated to the September 11, 2001 attacks. Films and literature related to the event, such as *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2011) directed by Stephen Daldry, portrays PTSD as a collective experience that affects not only the individuals directly involved in the events, but also society as a whole, trying to cope with the new reality and find meaning in the chaos. The trauma of child survivors of the attacks becomes the central theme of these narratives, and PTSD is depicted through subtle symbols and artistic techniques, such as symbolic imagery of symptoms or escape into a fantasy world (Shalagina, Shamina, 2023). These films use themes of childhood innocence and loss to explore deeper issues of memory, loss and trying to recover from traumatic events.

In a broader context, contemporary representations of PTSD in audiovisual culture attempt to grapple with difficult issues of identity, trauma and politics. The advent of postmodernity brought the undermining of social stability and cohesion and the systematic weakening of cultural institutions that provided individuals with meaning and order, leading to the development of the characteristic symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (Bracken, 2001). PTSD becomes a vehicle for broader discussions of responsibility, guilt and ways of dealing with a difficult past. In films such as The *Hurt Locker* (2008) directed by Kathryn Bigelow or *American Sniper* (2014) directed by Clint Eastwood, the trauma of the individual gains a political dimension, and the narrative of healing is intertwined with questions about the morality of warfare and its consequences for society. PTSD here is not just a personal struggle, but also part of a broader story about how societies deal with the legacy of violence and war.

Audiovisual culture, especially in the United States, is increasingly treating PTSD as a central theme that allows filmmakers to reflect more deeply on the nature of trauma and the ways in which it is portrayed. PTSD thus becomes not only a narrative motif, but also a medium through which American cinema expresses collective fears, anxieties and hopes about the future and ways of coping with the past (Görgen, 2019). The cinema's depictions of PTSD introduce audiences to a world of complex emotions, symbols and images that are designed not only to move, but also to make them reflect on the limits of human endurance and the possibilities of recovery in the face of indescribable tragedy.

4. Results
Historical contexts of contemporary American films with a PTSD theme

The films analyzed looked for common historical themes. Three titles deal with PTSD problems resulting from participation in military missions. The other two depict trauma in other contexts of contemporary American society. The film *Lonesome Soldier* is set in the context of the Iraq War and its aftermath, focusing on the life of Jackson Harlow, a soldier from Tennessee. The story is based on true events and depicts Harlow's journey from youthful dreams to a war veteran who struggles with the trauma of returning from war. The main historical backdrop is the Iraq War, and the storyline shows not only the immediate aftermath of combat, but especially the veterans' difficulties in returning to everyday life, especially related to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The film highlights how emotional and mental challenges affect soldiers and their loved ones as they try to find their way back to reality after returning from the front. Elements of historical ideologization can be seen in the film, which portrays the return of war veterans as a heroic yet tragic struggle against a reality not understood by society. The film reinforces the stereotypical image of the soldier as a suffering hero whom society cannot help, thus clearly highlighting the dilemmas of patriotism and sacrifice for the country. In this way, the film fits into the broader context of American narratives about veterans, depicting war not only as a physical conflict, but also as a traumatic experience that continues long after the end of hostilities.

The film *Cherry* is set in the authentic context of contemporary events, especially the war in Iraq and the opioid crisis in the United States. The main character, Cherry, played by Tom Holland, is inspired by the character of Nico Walker, the author of the novel on which the film is based. Walker, a former army medic, suffered from PTSD after returning from Iraq, which led him to become addicted to opioids and enter the path of crime, including bank robberies. The film reveals the reality of the lives of war veterans who, upon returning home, have to face serious mental problems, including PTSD, which leads many of them to addictions and criminal actions in an attempt to cope with the trauma. Cherry's story depicts the tragic consequences of not adjusting to life after war, which reflect a broader social problem in the US related to the lack of support for veterans. *Cherry* ideologizes history by portraying the Iraq War as the starting point of an individual's personal and social decline. The film portrays the American soldier as a victim of a larger structure in which patriotism and military service become a trap leading to trauma, addiction and criminal deviancy. Ideologically, it fits into the narrative of the inadequate support US veterans receive upon returning from war, while highlighting the unresolved problems associated with war and its long-term consequences.

Causeway is set in the context of modern warfare, particularly the conflict in Afghanistan. The plot focuses on Lynsey, an American soldier who, upon her return to New Orleans, is struggling with the trauma and physical effects of a brain injury she suffered as a result of an improvised explosive device (IED) blast during her service in Afghanistan. The film reveals the difficulties of war veterans in adapting to civilian life after returning from the front lines, particularly in the context of their struggles with PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) and the dilemmas of trying to return to the military. In a historical context, *Causeway*'s plot relates to the real-life events of the war in Afghanistan, where many American soldiers experienced not only physical injuries, but also deep psychological trauma. The character of Lynsey symbolizes a broad problem among veterans – alienation, identity crisis and the difficulty of returning to normalcy after traumatic war experiences. The film's historical ideologization involves depicting the return of war veterans as symbolic not only of individual trauma, but also of the broader social problem of marginalization of those who served in the military. Ideologically, the film alludes to myths of patriotism and sacrifice, but at the same time critically demonstrates the lack of real support for those struggling with the long-term effects of war.

The Fallout explores themes of trauma, fear and violence in schools, especially after shootings, which are a painful part of contemporary reality in the United States. Against this dramatic backdrop, there is also a strong historical context and ideologization of history, which adds an additional layer of interpretation. School shootings, especially high-profile ones like Columbine (1999) and Newton (2012), have become part of modern US history. They have become ingrained in public discourse as tragic symbols of the problems with firearms, as well as the failure of the political system to respond to these tragedies. The film references this generational trauma, showing how the fear of such events permeates the daily lives of young people. The historical context includes the debate over the right to own guns and the political and social responses to

violence in schools. The treatments of ideologization are evident in the way the film presents the trauma of individuals in the context of a larger social problem. The narrative emphasizes the inaction of the authorities and the systemic problems that lead to repeated tragedies. The ideological message of the film can be read as a criticism of the ineffectiveness of a political system that fails to enact real reforms regarding gun control.

The Throwback is a family comedy set in a contemporary context, rather than rooted in historical events or real-life characters. It revolves around a contemporary crisis facing a married couple during the holiday season. The story focuses on the wife, an overworked and underappreciated "supermom" who has a breakdown and returns to her carefree "partying" self from her college days. This regression leads to humorous and chaotic situations in which her husband tries to manage the family. The film's themes touch on the pressures of modern parenting, mid-life crises and the importance of taking care of oneself, all in a light-hearted, comedic setting. Although it does not delve into historical events, it captures the social dynamics of modern family life. We can find elements of historical ideologization in the film, even though it does not directly refer to historical events. By portraying contemporary family dilemmas as universal, the film suggests that these problems are immutable, which may blur awareness of their variability throughout history. In addition, the heroine's return to the "party" days of her youth presents a vision of nostalgia for traditional gender roles, which may promote ideological conservative values as natural. Finally, the storyline's focus on individual family crises marginalizes the more complex historical and social contexts that could affect these problems.

The films analyzed above depict the various difficulties faced by characters after traumatic events, such as war, addiction, school violence and family crises. They also reveal the lack of adequate support for individuals struggling with trauma and criticize systemic social and political problems. They emphasize that traumatic experiences have long-term consequences, affecting the lives of the protagonists and their loved ones, regardless of the historical or social context.

Symbolism of films about PTSD

Symbolic themes were sought in the analyzed films. First of all, the social and cultural myths that the presented American productions reveal. Three films in particular refer to the modern mythology of the war hero. In *Lonesome Soldier*, the issue of PTSD is portrayed in a symbolic way, referring to the social myths of strength, perseverance and heroism that often accompany images of soldiers in American culture. PTSD, in this film, is not just portrayed as a mental disorder, but as a symbol of the struggle that the protagonist continues to fight after returning from the front – a struggle that most of society does not see or understand. Symbolically, Jackson Harlow's PTSD embodies the invisible wounds of war, which become a metaphor for his inner conflict and unresolved traumatic experience. In the tradition of veterans' narratives, PTSD is often associated with myths of the "damaged hero" – a character who, despite his enormous sacrifices and courage, cannot find his place in society after the war. This motif evokes the myth of the archetypal "lone warrior", who must grapple with the consequences of his experiences alone. The film also appeals to social narratives that emphasize the idea of martyrdom and sacrifice, where suffering after the war is presented as proof of devotion and patriotism. In this way, PTSD is not just a pathology, but a condition that in some way defines a soldier's identity – it is like a "badge" of a battle that did not end on the battlefield, but continues in the veteran's mind.

In *Cherry*, the issue of PTSD is also portrayed symbolically, as a metaphor for deep internal destruction that not only destroys the protagonist's life, but also reflects the broader societal problem of unresolved suffering among veterans. Cherry's PTSD is shown as an invisible wound, leading to heroin addiction and bank robberies, symbolizing the loss of control over one's life and the inability to return to "normalcy" after the traumas of war. The film appeals to the myth of the "damaged war hero" who, despite his sacrifices for his homeland, is neglected by the system upon his return home. The character Cherry represents the widespread social image of the veteran as a victim of both war and inadequate care from the state, which leads to his moral and social decline. The film also refers to the myth of the "American Dream," which is deconstructed in the film. The protagonist, who is at first a young, ambitious man, falls into a spiral of self-destruction, which shows the impossibility of realizing the traditional idea of success and self-fulfillment. His downfall after the war symbolizes his disillusionment with the promises of the American Dream – war and service, which were supposed to lead to honor and fulfillment, actually lead to trauma, addiction and marginalization.

In *Causeway*, too, the issue of PTSD is framed in a similar symbolic way, showing the deep internal conflict with which the characters, especially Lynsey, struggle. PTSD here becomes a symbol of the invisible wounds of war, which do not go away with the physical return home, but remain, accompanying the heroine in every daily activity. PTSD is presented not only as a medical diagnosis, but also as an expression of alienation and isolation from the rest of society, which cannot fully understand the veterans' experience. The film appeals to the myth of the war hero who sacrifices himself for the greater good, but at the same time presents a deconstruction of this myth, showing how sacrifice on the battlefield is not rewarded with understanding or support upon return. Lynsey wants to return to service, which can be interpreted as a desire to belong again to a meaningful role in life that civilian society is unable to offer her.

The other two films refer to other mythological categories of contemporary American society. In *The Fallout*, PTSD is portrayed symbolically by showing the emotional and psychological aftermath of a school shooting. Megan Park, the film's director, focuses on the traumatic aftermath of the event, but does so subtly, without epic brutal images. Key scenes, such as the characters hiding in a cramped bathroom during the shooting, symbolize confinement and an attempt to escape reality. PTSD is shown here through the feeling of constant danger and the inability to escape from fear, which perfectly reflects the tense atmosphere and trauma associated with the events. Mia, one of the main characters, outwardly displays confidence on social media, which symbolizes the way people often hide their inner suffering. Her emotional mask eventually cracks, revealing that PTSD is not visible at first glance, but is deeply rooted in the character's psyche. The characters try to cope with the trauma in a variety of ways – from isolating themselves, to destructive behavior, to getting closer to each other. The film emphasizes that the process of returning to normalcy is difficult and full of contradictions, symbolizing the various forms of emotional coping with PTSD, such as escaping into substances or seeking closeness.

The Throwback symbolically captures issues of the pressures of modern family life, the struggle with maternal responsibilities and identity crisis. The central motif is the heroine's regression to the period of her youth, which can be interpreted as a symbolic escape from contemporary social roles and expectations, especially for women who perform multiple functions simultaneously – from mothers to working people. Such a return to "better" times can be seen as an appeal to the myth of youth as a period of freedom and carefree, which is a popular theme in mass culture. The film refers to the myth of the "supermother" – a woman who manages her family, career and daily life with superhuman strength and dedication, often forgetting her needs. The main character, through the experience of her breakdown and return to the past, discovers the need for balance and self-realization. Such a theme can be combined with the myth of the "heroic mother", who undergoes a trial to understand her true worth and regain control over her own life. The film also fits into the myth of "eternal youth", which in Western culture is associated with the cult of youth as an ideal of beauty, energy and freedom. The protagonist, returning to her former self, alludes to nostalgia for a time when she was not burdened with the responsibilities of adulthood. The very structure of the plot is reminiscent of archetypal stories of inner transformation, in which the hero or heroine must go through a crisis to rediscover her identity and regain balance in life.

In the analysis, we listed the following myths: the myth of the "damaged hero", the "lone warrior", the "damaged war hero", the myth of "martyrdom and sacrifice", the myth of the "American Dream", and the myth of the "supermother". PTSD in these narratives often symbolizes the hero's deep inner struggle and trauma, which society fails to recognize or understand. Each of these myths depicts the hero's struggle to cope with the consequences of war or social pressures, showing how the trauma of war results in the isolation and destruction of the individual, which is often beyond the reach of social support and understanding.

Moral and existential dilemmas

Also of interest in the analysis of the films is the ethical perspective in which the characters operate. The protagonists of *Lonesome Soldier* experience a series of moral and existential dilemmas that arise from their war experiences and their attempts to adapt to life after returning from the front. The main character, Jackson Harlow, struggles primarily with the question of the meaning of his actions in the war and their impact on his present life. He has a sense of guilt for the deaths of his comrades, as well as for actions that may have affected the lives of civilians. This internal struggle symbolizes the classic dilemma of a soldier who, after experiencing the extremes of war, tries to come to terms with the morality of his actions. After returning to Tennessee,

Jackson is unable to find his place in a society that does not understand his experiences. This leads to an existential crisis of identity, where the protagonist asks himself questions about who he is, if not a soldier, and whether he can return to a "normal" life after the war. In the film, this is portrayed as feelings of isolation and loneliness, characteristic of those struggling with PTSD. Jackson also has to deal with thoughts of death and the desire to escape the pain he feels every day. The film also explores questions about the meaning of the sacrifice Jackson and his comrades made in the war. This reflection on the meaning of sacrifice is often evident in narratives about veterans, where the protagonists try to understand whether their hardship was worth it, especially if they face incomprehension or indifference from society after returning from war.

The characters in *Cherry*'s film also struggle with a number of moral and existential dilemmas that stem from their war experiences, addiction and identity crisis. Cherry, after his experiences as a medic in Iraq, grapples with the question of the value of life and the meaning of his sacrifices. Witnessing the brutal scenes of war, he begins to question whether his actions made sense and what the moral consequences are. The war confronts him with an ethical problem: how to preserve his humanity when the lives of others depend on his decisions. After returning from the war and struggling with addiction, Cherry begins to lose his sense of who he is. Faced with difficult war experiences, trauma and a return to normalcy, his previous beliefs and values are called into question. This crisis leads to a search for the meaning of life and his own identity, which seem increasingly elusive to him. As the addiction deepens, Cherry becomes increasingly isolated from those around him and himself. In this state, his attempts to cope with his pain and suffering become desperate, and he distances himself from his own past and values.

The characters in *Causeway*'s film struggle with dilemmas that stem from their traumatic experiences and their attempts to find their way back into society. The main character, Lynsey, faces an existential crisis about her identity after returning from the war in Afghanistan. She struggles with the question of whether she should return to the army, even though physically and mentally she is not yet ready, or try to find meaning in civilian life, which seems alien and empty to her. An important moral dilemma for Lynsey is the guilt she feels for what she experienced in the war and the difficulty of coming to terms with her own limitations, both physical and mental. She tries to confront this internal struggle by seeking escape by returning to the battlefield, which symbolizes her inability to fully integrate into the civilian world. In contrast, James, with whom she establishes a relationship, struggles with the moral burden of responsibility for his brother's death, leading to his emotional isolation and self-criticism. Their shared experiences of trauma cause them both to face the question of how to live on with the burden of the past and whether they are able to find a true closeness that is not based solely on sympathy and mutual trauma. Both characters face the dilemma of whether their relationship can be more than a way to temporarily heal emotional wounds. Both Lynsey and James must face the question of whether they can build a new identity by accepting their past, or whether they will be constantly defined by their traumas and guilt.

The protagonists of *The Fallout*, Vada and Mia, experience a series of moral and existential dilemmas that reflect their struggles with the consequences of a school shooting. Vada, the main character, struggles with an existential dilemma stemming from the fact that she survived the shooting while her peers died. She feels guilty that her life goes on, which leads to questions about the meaning of her existence and the value of her own actions in the face of such a tragedy. A moral problem arises: how to deal with the fact that others were not as lucky as she was. Mia, outwardly confident and popular, also struggles with inner emptiness and a sense of alienation. Although the two girls become closer, Mia chooses isolation as a way to cope with her pain, which raises the question of whether cutting herself off from the world and loved ones is the right way to heal the trauma. Both protagonists, Vada and Mia, have to make decisions about how to deal with the emotional impact of the school shooting. Vada, in an attempt to escape the pain, turns to psychoactive substances as her way to temporarily forget the trauma. This, however, leads to further problems, such as isolation from family and friends and a deepening sense of confusion. Mia, on the other hand, tries to find solace in art and music. Both protagonists must decide whether to confront the trauma directly or seek escape in various forms.

In *The Throwback*, the characters face a series of moral and existential dilemmas that reflect the difficulties of modern family life and individual identity crises. First, there are identity dilemmas. The main character, who is a mother and wife, undergoes a regression to her former, youthful self. This creates a conflict between who she is now as a responsible adult and who she

was before – a carefree, partying girl. This dilemma symbolizes the struggle between the responsibilities of adulthood and the desire to return to a time when she was free of those responsibilities. She faces the question of who she really wants to be: a mother and wife, or the self of the past. Secondly, the film shows the crisis of social roles. We get a glimpse of the pressures on modern women who have to reconcile family, professional and social responsibilities. The protagonist struggles with the expectations placed on her by society and her family – to be a perfect mother, wife and organizer of home life. Her mental breakdown is the result of an imbalance between these roles and her personal needs. This is an age-old existential dilemma related to self-realization and the meaning of life: how to find time for herself in a world full of expectations? Her husband faces a moral dilemma: how to respond to what is happening? Should he support his wife in her crisis, or confront her with reality? This also raises questions about responsibility to the family and the duties that come with being a partner and parent.

Based on an ethical analysis of the films, it can be seen that the characters struggle with deep moral and existential dilemmas that stem from their traumatic experiences, such as war, addiction, school violence and family crises. A common thread is the search for meaning in life and identity in the face of difficult experiences, which often leads to isolation, guilt and identity crisis. The films highlight the lack of adequate social and systemic support, which exacerbates the characters' difficulties in coping with trauma and finding their way in everyday life.

Didactic potential of PTSD motifs in media education

The analysis of post-traumatic stress disorder as depicted in American feature films from 2021 to 2024 can serve as a valuable didactic tool within media education courses, particularly in the development of students' critical thinking skills and their ability to perform symbolic and ethical analyses of audiovisual content. Films such as *Lonesome Soldier*, *Cherry*, *Causeway*, *The Fallout*, and *19 Again* offer complex portrayals of trauma, which can serve as entry points for broader cultural and ethical discussions on war, memory, identity, and social crisis.

During the course, students can be asked to identify recurring cultural myths related to PTSD representations in cinema – such as the "damaged hero," the "lone warrior," or the "American dream." Applying analytical frameworks (historical, symbolic, and ethical) enables students to recognize how media narratives construct public perceptions of trauma and conflict. These films provide rich material for workshop-based teaching, where students can examine PTSD as a narrative device used to express psychological, moral, and social breakdown.

In the 2024/2025 academic year, selected films discussed in this article were used in the course *Educational Challenges of Media Technologies*, offered within the Journalism and Social Communication program. Students analyzing *Causeway* and *Cherry* identified tensions between personal experiences of trauma and the societal expectation of returning to "normalcy." They noted that these films often depict the lack of systemic support for individuals struggling with trauma, while simultaneously drawing on cultural myths that obscure a more nuanced understanding of their condition.

At the end of the course, an anonymous survey was conducted among participants (N = 109). The results indicate a positive evaluation of the didactic value of film analysis involving the PTSD motif:

– 91 % of respondents stated that analyzing the films helped them better understand the complexity of trauma in social and cultural contexts;

– 84 % of students reported that films such as *Cherry* and *Causeway* prompted reflection on the real-world problems faced by veterans and victims of violence;

– 79 % felt the course enhanced their competencies in symbolic and ethical analysis of media content;

– 60 % expressed interest in continuing to work with film analysis focused on other contemporary societal issues, such as migration, environmental crises, or social exclusion.

In open-ended responses, students emphasized that working with films allowed them to better grasp how symbols and cultural myths operate in media narratives and helped them understand the ethical responsibility of audiovisual creators when representing complex and sensitive topics.

In future iterations of the course, the curriculum will be expanded to include semiotic and ethical analysis of other forms of audiovisual media – such as series, documentaries, online content, and public awareness campaigns. This interdisciplinary approach fosters the integration of knowledge from media studies, cultural studies, and communication, equipping students with the tools for critical and reflective engagement with contemporary media narratives.

5. Conclusion

From a historical perspective, contemporary representations of PTSD in American cinema, such as *Causeway*, *Lonesome Soldier*, *Cherry*, *The Throwback* and *The Fallout*, reflect the profound social and political changes associated with the experience of trauma. *Causeway* depicts the dramatic journey of a female soldier returning from war, whose physical and psychological wounds become a reflection of a broader narrative about the modern soldier struggling to return to normalcy. *Cherry*, telling the story of a young veteran caught up in drug addiction, reveals how PTSD can lead to a disintegrated personal life and moral disinclination. *Lonesome Soldier*, on the other hand, explores the loneliness of a veteran trying to find his place in society after returning from armed conflict. *The Throwback*, while not directly about the war, presents a deep reflection on the past and life choices in the face of trauma, while *The Fallout* shows the psychological struggles of a young girl after a school tragedy, an allegory for the collective trauma of modern societies. Each of these films places traumatic experiences at the center, which are rooted in the realities of modern history, highlighting how war and crisis affect the psyche of the individual and society.

Symbolically, PTSD in American cinema often acts as a metaphor for broader social anxieties and traumas. The protagonists, especially veterans, become bearers not only of their own psychological wounds, but also of broader social burdens. In films such as *Cherry* and *Lonesome Soldier*, trauma is presented as a symbol of disorientation and isolation that affects not only individuals, but entire communities. In *Cherry*, the main character symbolizes the individual's loss in a world where war and its aftermath lead to addiction, and personal destruction becomes a reflection of social decay. Similarly, in *Lonesome Soldier*, the veteran struggles with loneliness and alienation, reflecting the broader phenomenon of alienation in modern societies. In films such as *Causeway* and *The Fallout*, the symbolism of PTSD shifts from individual experiences to social tensions and dilemmas. In *Causeway*, the trauma of the protagonist, returning from war, becomes an allegory for the difficulty of rebuilding oneself in the face of devastation that affects both body and psyche. In *The Fallout*, on the other hand, a young girl's experience after a school tragedy symbolizes the struggles of contemporary young people with traumas that have no simple solutions and reflect the uncertainty of the future. In *The Throwback*, a flashback to youth, on the other hand, shows a symbolic struggle with the choices that determine life after traumatic events, giving the film a dimension of reflection on the existential burden of the past. PTSD here becomes a narrative tool for exploring the fragility of the individual and society, which is still searching for stability and meaning in a chaotic reality.

Finally, an ethical analysis of films such as *Causeway*, *The Fallout*, *The Throwback*, *Cherry* and *Lonesome Soldier* reveals the complex moral dilemmas associated with PTSD and questions about personal responsibility and the moral consequences of trauma. In *Causeway*, a protagonist struggling with physical and psychological wounds faces the challenge of not only coming to terms with her traumatic war experiences, but also finding meaning in a world that seems morally shattered. Her struggle with guilt and responsibility for her own actions becomes a central thread that engages the viewer in deep reflection on the ethical costs of warfare. Similar moral dilemmas arise in *The Fallout*, where the young protagonist, after a school tragedy, confronts the question of whether moral reconstruction is possible after a traumatic event that destroyed her sense of security. The film asks whether trauma can only be something to overcome, or whether it remains an inherent part of her existence that redefines her relationships with others and her view of the world. In *The Throwback*, ethical dilemmas are linked to the flashback of the protagonist, who gets a chance to relive her youth, which leads to a moral confrontation with the past. The film shows how choices made in the face of trauma can shape one's entire life, highlighting the ethical consequences of those decisions. *Cherry*, on the other hand, illustrates the moral decay of the protagonist, who loses control of his life after the war, falling into addiction and crime. In his case, the question of personal responsibility for one's own actions is a central motif that shows how trauma can lead to a loss of moral foundation. *Lonesome Soldier*, on the other hand, portrays a veteran who struggles with loneliness and the search for redemption after his wartime experiences, making attempts to understand his actions and their impact on others. These films not only document the struggles of individuals with PTSD, but also raise questions about the limits of human resilience and responsibility in the face of unimaginable loss, clearly showing the complexity of moral choices in the face of trauma.

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