



## War Trauma, Heroization, and Propaganda in «Rambo»

*Metsiou Anastasia<sup>a</sup>, Patra Anna<sup>a</sup>, Baltzis Prodromos<sup>b</sup>, Dellas Christos<sup>b</sup>, Manios Stefanos<sup>b</sup>, Gkertsis Constantinos<sup>b</sup>, Metsios Ioannis<sup>b</sup>.*

<sup>a</sup> University of Western Macedonia, Koila Kozanis, 50100, Greece

<sup>b</sup> Independent researcher

### ABSTRACT

The movie “Rambo”, and especially the first film “First Blood”, in 1982, offers a unique perspective, in order to examine the psychological and social impacts of war, alongside the mechanisms of military propaganda. The movie, with its evocative portrayal of post-war trauma, acts as an actual commentary, which not only exposes the scars that are inflicted upon soldiers by warfare, but also construct a “mythos” of the heroic soldier that feeds into a broader cultural narrative. From its point, the “Rambo” series has resonated with audiences for its gritty depiction of an individual's battle against a world that misunderstands him, as in the original film, John Rambo's internal and external conflicts lay upon as the alienation of veterans in a society unwilling to confront its own responsibilities and the trauma the society has caused to these men. However, as the franchise of the Rambo series evolve, the narratives shift dramatically, and move from an intimate examination of a broken man to a sweeping glorification of the militaristic ideals, that lay in Rambo's evolution into a near-superhuman figure, with this shift to not only mirror the society's attitudes toward war and heroism but also helps highlighting the power of cinema in shaping collective memory and ideology. So, the first film “First Blood”, offers a unique lens and help viewers to examine the psychological and social impacts of war, alongside the mechanisms of military propaganda, and while the original film serves as a poignant critique of the aftermath of combat, subsequent entries in the series shift toward heroizing (making a hero) its protagonist, John Rambo, aligning with broader ideological narratives.

Keywords: war, psychological and social consequences, military propaganda, heroization.

### 1. Main text

#### 1.1 War Trauma and Social Alienation

The movie “First Blood” introduces the protagonist, John Rambo, who is a veteran of the Vietnam War, struggling to reintegrate into society, with the film vividly portraying the psychological scars of war, including the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) such as flashbacks, hyper-vigilance, and emotional detachment. In the movie it is shown that Rambo's return to a civilized world, which misunderstands and marginalizes him represents the alienation experienced by many veterans, and this depiction critiques a society that demands sacrifices from its soldiers, yet neglects their needs upon their return.

Therefore, we can see that Rambo's violent outbursts and survival instincts are the direct consequences of his military training, and highlight the “dichotomy” he faces between his role as a soldier and his place in a peaceful society. Moreover, we witness his inability to disengage from his combat mindset that exemplifies the struggles of individuals who are prepared for the war but left unsupported in peacetime, and this psychological turmoil is exacerbated by a lack of institutional support, reflecting broader societal failures in addressing the long-term impacts of war on individuals and the need to seek and be helped by the society they fought to protect (Boggs & Pollard, 2008).

It is an interesting fact that Sun Tzu's principle in the “Art of War” that “All warfare is based on deception” resonates with Rambo's survivalist tactics, as Rambo is “programmed” to think like a warrior, who is in hostile terrain, and his approach mirrors Sun Tzu's insights on using unpredictability and misdirection as tools of survival. Thus, his instinct to “*appear where he is least expected to, like a phantom*” echoes Sun Tzu's quote for strategic invisibility, that underscores how ingrained these survival mechanisms become to soldiers, even when they come across civilized norms, where they are not needed theoretically. Also, his extreme and skillful use of military skills in survival against domestic authorities serves as a metaphor for the battle between Rambo's identity as a soldier and his attempt to exist as a civilian, as this conflict represents his psychological struggle to reconcile a combat mindset with the expectations of peaceful societal norms, that are not in hand, so the instinct to rely on military training in a domestic context underscores how deeply ingrained the habits of war have become to this person, creating a scenario where his own survival tactics pit him against the very society he once defended. This dynamic illustrates the immense difficulties that veteran soldiers face when finally they leave behind the soldier's identity, especially when societal structures fail to provide avenues for healing, reintegration and participation in the society. Moreover, the conflict reflects Rambo's profound feelings of betrayal and abandonment by the society he served, and his battle against domestic authorities symbolizes the broader societal

rejection of veterans, where the institutions that demanded loyalty and sacrifice now appear antagonistic or indifferent. By using a metaphor in battlefields, we extend to the psychological battlefield within Rambo himself, and that is the war between his memories of service and his present alienation, his yearning for belonging and the painful realization of being cast aside in return for everything he has offered (Tzu, 2008).

Sun Tzu emphasizes on “*knowing the enemy and knowing yourself*” and that quote adds another dimension to Rambo’s plight, and while Rambo excels at understanding his adversaries in combat scenarios, he struggles with self-awareness in the civilian world, trapped by his unprocessed trauma and unacknowledged need for reconciliation. Therefore, his failure to bridge the gap between these realms highlights the devastating consequences of a society unprepared to integrate its warriors and engulf them back to its structure. Also, by highlighting the lack of adequate mental health resources and community support, the film positions Rambo as a symbol of broader systemic failures in addressing the psychological and emotional needs of veterans and soldiers in general that return home from their service, so his story becomes an example for exploring the emotional anguish, isolation, and suppressed rage that makes many veterans suffer, soldiers who struggle to reconcile their service with a society that does not accommodate their pain, and that resonates deeply with the universal experience of disillusionment faced by those who return from war, only to find that their sacrifices are met with indifference or misunderstanding from the people they meet on their path, not only civilians who have no knowledge but from military men as well (Tzu, 2017).

### ***1.2 Heroization and the Shift in Narrative***

While the first movie of the series “First Blood” adopts a critical stance on the effects of war, the sequels, such as “Rambo: First Blood Part II” (1985) and “Rambo III” (1988), pivot toward glorifying their titular character, as these films transform Rambo into an almost mythical figure, capable of single-handedly defeating armies and rescuing prisoners of war. But, though it may not appear like that, this glorification serves as a deliberate tool of propaganda, emphasizing a narrative that aligns individual heroism with unquestioning loyalty to the nation, as governments often use such portrayals to cultivate an idealized image of the soldier, fostering obedience and readiness for military service among the population. So, by celebrating Rambo’s feats, the films subtly reinforce the belief that soldiers should embody superhuman qualities, remain unyieldingly patriotic, and sacrifice personal well-being for the perceived greater good (Sánta, 2017).

Thus, this heroization functions as a mechanism to manage soldiers’ identities, and to ensure that they view their role through the lens of duty and honor rather than personal agency or critical reflection, and by presenting Rambo’s victories as righteous and his actions as indispensable to national security, the narrative perpetuates a culture where dissent or questioning of authority is framed as unpatriotic. This also aligns with Cold War-era efforts to strengthen militaristic values and ensure a steady supply of obedient soldiers, molded by cinematic ideals rather than their lived realities. So, we see that the sequel movies portrays Rambo as an indomitable hero and that portrayal reflects a form of propaganda, crafting an idealized image of the soldier as a symbol of national strength and resilience, and by emphasizing his loyalty, physical prowess, and willingness to sacrifice, these films contribute to the narrative of the soldier-hero, designed to inspire admiration and emulation (Warner, 2013).

### ***1.3 Propaganda and the Manufacture of Obedience***

The heroization of the protagonist serves a double purpose, not only to entertain but also to propagate specific ideological messages, as by framing Rambo’s actions as morally justified and glorifying his combat achievements, the films subtly reinforce the notion of military obedience and the sanctity of patriotic duty. It is common that governments utilize such portrayals to shape soldiers’ perceptions of their roles, ensuring that they see military service as a noble and unquestionable calling, and also this framing functions as a psychological mechanism to instill loyalty and diminish dissent within the ranks. That means that by celebrating heroic combat achievements, the narrative cultivates a sense of purpose and moral clarity in soldiers, who are often placed in ethically ambiguous or physically grueling situations (Wilcox, 2005).

Therefore, in the movie the hero is portrayed as a recruitment tool, that fosters a perception of military service as an honorable and heroic pursuit, and presents this idealized image of the soldier-hero, that is crafted to inspire not only admiration but also emulation, ensuring a steady “supply” of soldiers that are willing to sacrifice their freedom and life for a greater cause. Also, by amplifying themes of valor and duty, the films mask the systemic and political dimensions of war, reducing complex geopolitical conflicts into simplified narratives that favor obedience and discourage critical thinking. Therefore, this strategic use of heroization enables governments to maintain control over soldiers’ identities and actions, aligning their motivations with nationalistic goals while downplaying the personal and collective costs of war. The films’ also emphasize on individual heroism and try to mask the systemic and political dimensions of warfare, as by reducing complex conflicts to simple binaries of good versus evil, the narrative shifts attention away from the human cost of war and the ethical dilemmas it entails. Like that, this simplification supports the construction of obedient soldiers, who are inspired by cinematic depictions of valor rather than critical reflections on the realities of combat (Jowett & O’donnell, 2018).

### ***1.4 Social Critique and Contradictions***

The “Rambo” series retain certain undercurrents of social critique, with Rambo’s struggle to be a symbol of the abandonment of veterans by the military and the institutions they serve, and this tension between critique and glorification can help in creating a narrative duality, that reflect both the disillusionment of war and the allure of heroism. Rambo was so wrongfully treated upon his return and the movie shows the way most veterans like Rambo in “First Blood” were treated. That stems from a combination of societal, psychological, and institutional factors, as during and after the Vietnam War, many returning soldiers were stigmatized, and were called “baby killers” rather than celebrated for their offer to their country, due to widespread anti-war sentiment and a lack of understanding about the mental health challenges these soldiers faced. Also, the civilians often project their anger or

disillusionment with the war onto the soldiers who fought in it, seeing them as representatives of a controversial and divisive conflict, that themselves weren't a part in. Moreover, institutional neglect contributed to this mistreatment, as the governments and support systems were ill-equipped to handle the psychological toll of war, leaving veterans without adequate mental health resources or reintegration programs (Gerrard, 2022).

This failure of the support systems perpetuated feelings of abandonment and alienation among veterans, who struggled to find acceptance or a sense of purpose in a society that did not honor their sacrifices. The movie helps the viewers to represent in their minds all these dynamics by showing Rambo's interactions with a hostile community and law enforcement, while that wrongful interaction shows the broader societal rejection these soldiers faced, and it criticizes that show the lack of empathy and understanding of people that deepens the divide between those who serve and the society they return to. This way, the movie exposes the societal contradictions, where soldiers are celebrated for their service yet marginalized upon their return, and with this scope, Rambo's descent into violence can be interpreted as a response to systemic failures, emphasizing the need for a more compassionate and inclusive approach to veteran reintegration (Monchinski & Monchinski, 2011).

In conclusion, the "Rambo" series presents the complexity between the psychological and social consequences of war, the heroization of soldiers, and the propagandistic mechanisms that sustain military ideals, and while the "First Blood" offers a sobering critique of the costs of combat, its sequels transition into a celebration of militaristic heroism, reflecting broader cultural and ideological currents. So, by examining these themes, the films serve as both a mirror and a tool of societal attitudes toward war, soldiers, and the narratives that shape their roles in history.

### 1.5 Parallels with Sun Tzu's "The Art of War"

Sun Tzu's principles in "The Art of War" provide a fascinating framework to analyze the "Rambo" movie, and particularly regarding discipline, strategy, and the role of individual heroics, as Rambo's actions in "First Blood" and beyond, reflects key elements of Sun Tzu's teachings, albeit through the lens of a traumatized individual rather than a cohesive military force. First of all, Sun Tzu emphasizes the importance of discipline and preparation, stating that *"the general who wins a battle makes many calculations in his temple before the battle is fought"*, and this principle resonates with Rambo's meticulous approach to survival and combat, as he has the ability to utilize his environment, anticipate enemy movements, and set traps, with all that mirroring the calculated tactics advocated by Sun Tzu. For example, Rambo's use of guerrilla warfare techniques in the forests of Hope exemplifies the strategic deployment of limited resources against a superior force, and that is a concept that Sun Tzu highlights as essential for overcoming disadvantage in a battle field (Dimovski et al., 2012).

However, Rambo's lack of broader support from the military or other institution underscores the psychological toll of being left to navigate these strategies alone, and while Sun Tzu's commanders operate within organized structures, Rambo's isolation amplifies his struggles, making his adherence to strategic principles a deeply personal and reactive endeavor rather than a coordinated effort. In this context, Rambo embodies the "lone wolf" archetype, blending strategy with desperation to survive. In his famous work "Art of War" Sun Tzu states that, *"Supreme excellence consists in breaking the enemy's resistance without fighting"*, and that quote is represented in the film, as Rambo's initial reluctance to engage in violence in "First Blood" aligns with this ideal, as he seeks peace after all the anger and loss he has endured but is ultimately forced into conflict by the hostility of those around him. Therefore, his transformation from a reluctant participant to an unstoppable force reflects the tension between Sun Tzu's ideal of minimal conflict and the brutal realities faced by soldiers in a hostile environment. In the films that follow, Rambo's heroic actions evolve into exaggerated depictions of warfare, diverging from Sun Tzu's emphasis on subtlety and efficiency, as while Sun Tzu advocates for the collective strength of an army, the "Rambo" movies glorifies the heroism an individual soldier has, turning its protagonist into a symbol of singular might and resilience, and this shift highlights the propagandistic underpinnings of the series, contrasting with the collaborative strategies central to Sun Tzu's philosophy (Treat & Croghan, 2001).

Another one of Sun Tzu's most famous quotes is that *"all warfare is based on deception"*, and it is shown in the films that Rambo's mastery of stealth and his ability to mislead his adversaries echo this principle, as in "First Blood", he uses the natural landscape to his advantage, creating an illusion of omnipresence that intimidates his pursuers. These tactics are filled of psychological warfare, forcing his opponents to question their every move and, ultimately, to concede defeat. However, Rambo's reliance on deception also reflects his internal battle, and unlike the calculated strategies of a commander, his actions are driven by survival instincts honed through years of combat training. These acts underscore the psychological scars of war, where survival becomes both a strategy and a way of life, blurring the line between calculated deception and sheer desperation. Sun Tzu focuses on adaptability and that is another parallel to the movie, as he asserts, *"In warfare, there are no constant conditions"*, and the protagonist, John Rambo exemplifies this adaptability, by adjusting his tactics that are based on his surroundings and the threats he faces, and his ability to transform everyday objects into weapons or find cover in unlikely places illustrates the principle of using available resources to their maximum potential (Levinson, 1999).

However, his adaptability comes at a cost, and while Sun Tzu emphasizes the calm deliberation, Rambo's actions are often reactionary, driven by the lingering effects of trauma. His battles against unseen enemies, both external and real ones who threaten him he faces internal, more dangerous enemies, with himself being the deadliest, that highlight the enduring impact of war on a soldier's psychology where every shadow becomes a potential threat. The "Rambo" movies can therefore be seen as a modern reflection of Sun Tzu's principles that shows the post-war trauma and the society's failure to rehabilitate the soldiers into the society. Bearing that in mind, while Rambo's strategies align with Sun Tzu's teachings on discipline, deception, and adaptability, his journey also underscores the profound psychological costs of war, adding a deeply human dimension to these timeless military philosophies, and by examining these themes, the films serve as both a mirror and a tool of societal attitudes toward war, soldiers, and the narratives that shape their roles in history.

### ***1.6 Historical Parallels: Heroization as a Tool of War***

The movies reflect an effort by producers to portray soldiers as heroes, aiming to instill a willingness among them to endure the harsh realities of war. This approach is not exclusive to the “Rambo” films but has been a recurring strategy throughout history. Governments and institutions have frequently glorified individual heroism to inspire soldiers and rationalize the human cost of war. For instance, during World War I, soldiers were often depicted as noble figures fighting for a righteous cause. Propaganda transformed ordinary soldiers into heroic icons, enduring the horrors of trench warfare for the greater good. This idealization masked the grim realities of industrialized warfare and the profound psychological impact it had on combatants, while poems and songs celebrated their courage and sacrifice, despite the dehumanizing conditions they faced. Similarly, in World War II, propaganda highlighted the heroics of the American GI and the Soviet partisan, using Hollywood films and government-sponsored media to present them as symbols of freedom and resilience. The notion of the “everyman” soldier became a heroic archetype, emphasizing individual bravery as a decisive force in global conflict. However, this narrative often oversimplified the complexities of war, ignoring its psychological toll and moral ambiguities by framing conflicts as clear-cut battles between good and evil (Allison, 2024).

Conversely, studies have identified the Vietnam War as a turning point in the portrayal of heroism. While early propaganda depicted American soldiers as defenders of democracy, the war’s prolonged duration and growing unpopularity led to a more fragmented narrative. Although the idealization of heroism endured in some circles, films such as “Apocalypse Now” and “Platoon” began to challenge the morality of the war and expose the psychological toll on soldiers. This shift underscores a growing awareness of the disconnection between the idealized hero and the harsh realities experienced by combatants. In contemporary times, especially in the post-9/11 era, the narrative of heroism has evolved. Media representations of elite military forces, such as Navy SEALs, emphasize their discipline, skill, and sacrifice. Films like “American Sniper” and “Zero Dark Thirty” continue to propagate the myth of the individual hero, showcasing acts of extraordinary bravery while often sidelining the broader political and ethical complexities of war. This framing bolsters public support for military interventions by focusing on personal stories of valor, even as these conflicts inflict lasting wounds on both individuals and societies. By drawing all these historical parallels, the “Rambo” movies can be placed between a broader context of heroization as a tool of war, and just as past societies have used narratives of individual heroism to inspire and control their soldiers, the movies reflect and critique the cultural mechanisms that shape perceptions of war and its participants (Igou, 2024).

Soldiers, often become “beasts” in order to survive the war, as when they are thrust into environments that demand dehumanization for survival, they often develop coping mechanisms and behaviors that align with these circumstances, and these behaviors include desensitization to violence, suppression of empathy, and reliance on instinctual responses, which can be likened to a “beast-like” state. Such transformation is of course a result of intense conditioning, prolonged exposure to trauma, and the necessity of abandoning moral and social norms to endure or win conflicts. War has a profound impact on the human soul and often forces people to adapt in ways that reveal the rawest and most primal aspects of their nature, therefore, the transformation of people into what might be described as “beasts”, is a consequence of the extreme conditions and pressures created by conflict. So, survival becomes the primary instinct, overshadowing moral considerations and ethical boundaries, as in life-threatening circumstances, the natural will to protect oneself or one’s loved ones takes precedence, overriding compassion and reasoning. The concept of “dehumanization” is another crucial factor of the beast-like transformation of a man, and as soldiers are often trained to see the enemy as less than human that represents a psychological mechanism that is designed to make violence more bearable and justifiable. With a similar way, civilians that are caught in the chaos of war are frequently reduced to collateral damage, further eroding a sense of shared humanity, and this dehumanization desensitizes individuals to suffering, making acts of violence and cruelty seem ordinary or necessary (Goren, 2007).

Also, according to Allison (2024), there appears to be a collapse of the societal norms during war that exacerbates this transformation, and laws and moral codes that govern behavior in peacetime, in times of war are often replaced by a brutal logic of survival, and it is when acts like stealing, killing, or betrayal, actions that would be unthinkable in normal circumstances, become commonplace. Therefore, the constant exposure to violence and the need to adapt to harsh realities gradually wear down the moral compass of those involved, leading to behavior that aligns with the metaphorical “beast”. Psychological trauma also plays a significant role in this transformation, because the horrors of war, such as witnessing death, enduring starvation, or living under constant threat, can leave deep emotional scars to people. Therefore, trauma can manifest as detachment, aggression, or a loss of empathy, driving individuals to acts of brutality, and over time, people can become numb to violence, perpetuating cycles of cruelty and further distancing themselves from their humanity. War also breaks down community bonds and solidarity, and lets fear, mistrust, and competition for scarce resources turn neighbors into enemies, fracturing the social environment, and in such an environment, people are often driven to act ruthlessly to ensure their survival, and they abandon the shared values and mutual support systems that define civilized society. Moreover, war makes people lose their identities and routines, leaving them disconnected from the roles and purposes that anchor them to their humanity, and in these situations, survival instincts dominate, and people may adopt roles that reflect the harsh realities of war. Unfortunately, history has provided and will continue to provide countless examples of how war transforms people, from child soldiers, that are forced to commit atrocities to civilians that resort to betrayal or theft, the extreme conditions of war push individuals into unimaginable roles.

### ***1.7 The Path to Reintegration***

The majority of the soldiers that returned from World War II have experienced profound difficulties to reenter the life of a civilian, and that was mostly due to PTSD, and some found healing through programs like the GI Bill, a program that provided education and job training, helping the soldiers redefine their roles within society. However, the scars of war lingered in their souls, as seen in the rise of psychological disorders like “combat fatigue”, that is now recognized as PTSD. Also, the Vietnam War highlighted the psychological toll of war more vividly than previous conflicts. It has shown that without

a cohesive support system and often facing societal rejection, many veterans struggled with addiction, homelessness, and mental health issues. Sun Tzu in his book suggests that discipline and self-awareness are vital to maintain a person's humanity even amidst chaos, and his quote "*Know yourself and you will win all battles*" reflects the necessity of self-reflection and understanding one's limits and values. Therefore, soldiers who can reconnect with their pre-war identities and process their experiences through therapeutic or social avenues may find a pathway back to "humanity". Of course there are many challenges faced in order to heal those soldiers' souls, as the reintegration process is hindered by several factors, such as the "stigma", as the society often fails to fully understand or accept the psychological impact of war, leading to the marginalization of veterans. Also, the guilt or shame that are associated with actions taken during war can create an internal conflict that is difficult to resolve by oneself and that is enhanced by the absence of robust systems to address mental health and reintegration the veterans face (Kuschminder & Kuschminder, 2017).

Hopefully, modern psychology and societal awareness offer hope, as therapy, community programs, and cultural narratives that validate veterans' struggles without glorifying violence provide a foundation for healing. In this scope, the heroization seen in media like the "Rambo" movies can play a double role, by inspiring pride in service while also serving as a critique of the systems that neglect those they elevate as heroes. The process of transitioning from the "beast-like" state necessitated by war back to a fully integrated human existence is profoundly challenging but can be achieved through a combination of psychological, social, and structural support mechanisms, such as therapeutic interventions, as modern psychology offers targeted approaches such as Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR), and trauma-focused therapies. All these methods help individuals process traumatic memories, reduce hyper-vigilance, and rebuild emotional regulation (Özdem, 2012).

War often involves actions that conflict with personal morals or societal values, and it is crucial to address the moral injuries, the guilt, the shame and the grief, but that requires an open dialogue with experts, the validation of experiences, and frameworks like forgiveness therapy or restorative justice to reconcile internal conflicts. Sun Tzu's principle, "*Know yourself*" resonates here, as veterans must rediscover who they are beyond the soldier's role, and guided self-reflection, mentorship, or philosophical approaches can help rebuild a sense of self that is not defined by war. It is also crucial to restore their empathy, as prolonged exposure to violence can suppress empathy, and rebuilding it involves creating safe places where veterans can connect with others, share stories, and experience mutual understanding, by participating in humanitarian work or community service that can also rekindle compassion. The act of reintegration is not an individual task but a societal one, thus family, friends, and community can play a crucial role in providing the emotional support and fostering a sense of belonging, with the help of support groups, veteran organizations, and shared narratives that can help create environments where veterans feel understood and valued. Transitioning from the war's brutality back to humanity requires the soldier to confront their inner turmoil, to reconcile their identity, and to embrace their vulnerability. It is not a "solo" work though, as society must create systems and narratives that welcome this transformation, offering both accountability and care. When these elements align, the possibility of becoming fully human again, after being obliged to become a "beast" in war, becomes not just achievable but a testament to resilience and hope.

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