

Raphaella Delores Gomez*

***JOKER SAYS: “PEACE TO YOU..
I AM BORN TO KILL”
THE POLITICS OF NATIONAL TRAUMA AND
CULTURAL MEMORY IN STANLEY KUBRICK’S FULL
METAL JACKET***

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Abstract: *Walter Benjamin asserts that to come to terms with a past does not mean to recall it “as it really was” (Benjamin, 255), rather to seize hold of a memory at “a moment of danger”. In that sense, I view the recollection of a past as a cultural tool that has the potency to not just shape and rework on a memory, particularly that of a violent memory of an individual to his immediate present, but that it has the potential to transfer that individual’s traumatic frame to a collective, such as an audience. Hollywood films have lent lens to introspect within the archives of political histories to unveil trauma. And with the cinematic effects of fictional depiction of war and human ignobility, they have also aided in inspiring a rise in national consciousness. My paper examines the politics of the collective consciousness of national trauma formed through Kubrick’s film text, Full Metal Jacket. Kubrick’s masterpiece was introduced right at the end of a cycle of movies that paid attention to the Vietnam War genre. However, though the context of the film text is on Vietnam, it is not about Vietnam, in itself. My thesis will demonstrate how the political play of the recreation of the brutality of war invokes post-war consciousness in the American audience, and births the production of cultural memory; both in the veterans and especially in the new generation alike.*

As Marita Sturken states of Benjamin, history is nothing more than an image of a passing moment wherein the “historical image announces absence, loss irretrievability. Like a screen memory, it offers itself a substitute” (*Tangled Memories* 23). The captured form of an historical image that wields the force to shape memory is powerfully noted in photographic image and especially in films in the form of drama and docudrama. As Sturken further asserts, historical image in Hollywood films features a crucial element to the formation of national meaning. They “retain a cultural currency” by providing narratives that explosively further the urgency of any war documentary images and written texts could produce. Hollywood narrative films of the war genre do not merely pander up to a popular audience but are seen as promulgators which “are ascribed historical accuracy by the media and re-enact famous documentary images of the war. They represent the

* Universita di Roma, 'La Sapienza'; Rome, Italy

history of the war, in particular to a generation too young to have seen it represented contemporaneously on television” (23).

I notice a historic urgency that is imbued in cultural memory politics in Stanley Kubrick’s *Full Metal Jacket*, a film adaptation of Gustav Hasford’s semi-autobiographical novel, *The Short-Timers*. However, the question that often rings in the audience’s mind is, to what purpose does this film entail any sense of exploitation of violent memory? What is the agenda which the film text prescribes to the audience, particularly the national audience of United States of America?

I believe the answer lies in the commendable attempt to address the subject of national trauma in the audience and the subsequent exploration, location and admission of cultural memory buried within the folds of a fortified national consciousness. Hence in this essay I shall explore the notion of national trauma, the way in which the film addresses the preoccupation of such trauma in the collective consciousness of the American audience, both veterans and the new generation alike, and the production of cultural memory as a consequence of valuing such historical images.

Trauma in the basic sense is a word applied to unexpected and unpleasant experiences in one’s personal life. Tolerating on sudden and often painful shocks such as met in accidents and in violence as seen in sexual assaults, trauma is an event that supposedly disrupts a flow of normalcy and retains an indelible mark...a scar, in the life of an otherwise a normal individual. In other words, trauma, in the basic sense is viewed as a unitary infliction.

However, trauma can also be applied to a collective. A collective trauma can be found at a national level; i.e. a national trauma. Hence, national trauma occurs when an unexpected volatile experience is shared with other members of the public. It has a cohesive tendency wherein certain notions of expressions like anger and pain are seen as the appropriate conduct by the general public. As stated by Arthur G. Neal, “Under conditions of national trauma, the borders and boundaries between order and chaos, between the sacred and the profane, between good and evil, between life and death become fragile. People both individually and collectively see themselves as moving into uncharted territory” (*National Trauma* 5). Hence, a national trauma does not only disrupt an entire course of a social fabric but is “directed towards the repair work that needs be done” (5).

I note that it is such reparation Kubrick’s text ambitions itself to perform. Divided into three parts, the film bares to the audience first a stark image of spiritual turmoil, on the “perpetual moral uncertainty of the world as seen in war” (Kubrick, Special Feature Commentary) and then questions the furtherance of such chaos at a national level with a perplexing ending where Joker and his company march off to the rhythm of Mickey Mouse Club song. However, in order to comprehend the necessity of the uncertainties depicted in the text, we must first understand the underlying historic reasons behind depicting them that eventually call forth to the formation of a cultural memory. What historical uncertainties does the event itself hold?

As echoed by Fred Turner, “For many combat soldiers in Vietnam, survival really was the only form of victory. Brought into their units one at a time, made to fight for twelve or fourteen months, and sent home alone, many grunts of the

Vietnam era, unlike their fathers in World War II, saw little connection between their personal tours of duty and the aims and scope of America's national commitment to war" (*Echoes of Combat* 5). As the debased and doomed character Lawrence [nicknamed as Gomer Pyle] would say before shooting his drill sergeant at point blank and turning his rifle to himself, "I am in a world of shit" (Kubrick, *Full Metal Jacket*), morally brutalised at actual combat nobody back home welcomed nor appreciated, the film echoes these soldiers of the Vietnam war who faced a sense of loss in their rootedness to what is real and unreal, especially in the transformation of their own selves, which in turn was consciously felt as a collective trauma among these soldiers and later, as war veterans.

As John Calley, a former Warner Brothers Executive says of the film, the text explores "the transmutation of young men into killers...exploring the metamorphosis that occurs when you take young people and brutalise them" (Kubrick, Special Feature Commentary). Such a transformation is seen both in the characters Animal Mother and the film text's central protagonist, Joker. Deviating from the innocent apprehension written on the faces of the new recruits who get their hair shaved, the text traces the transformation of these characters to shocking extremes. Commenting on the character 'Animal Mother' played by Alec Baldwin, the only difference that stands between Pyle and him is that Animal Mother still holds on to his last shred of sanity...but at the cost of castigating his trauma needlessly and violently onto others. Baldwin further comments of his character in the final scene where the company of the remaining soldiers violently shoot at the single young female Vietcong sniper who has single-handedly taken the lives of many soldiers in their company, "Animal Mother has been carrying a machete on his back the whole show in order to do this one little thing...and so after Joker administers the coup de gras [killing off the mortally wounded sniper who begs for release from pain], Animal Mother...peels off his machete and lops off her head and picks it up" and says " 'Here's the head...that's not a big deal', that didn't make it into the film for reasons Stanley never told me" (Special Feature Commentary).

Joker, on the other hand, undergoes a different set of transmutation. Joker, played by Matthew Modine, undergoes change that can be visibly heard via his language. When a film crew interviews the marine at Hue city for a documentary on the war, Joker voices, "I wanted to see exotic Vietnam, the jewel of Southeast Asia. I wanted to meet interesting and stimulating people of an ancient culture, and... kill them. I wanted to be the first kid on my block to get a confirmed kill" (Kubrick, *Full Metal Jacket*). Modine comments on the second and third stanza of the movie, "his body language is different from the entire first stanza of the movie... and he has developed a real Joker's attitude about it" (Special Feature Commentary). We see in Joker a warring character of the self; half-committed in retaining his enforced identity as a firm marine, but just as determined to stay clear of that prescribed role. We note a crisis in Joker wherein a duality is found within his consciousness. The yin and yang of this crisis is demonstrated in his wearing a peace sign pinned to his uniform while donning a helmet that boldly states, 'Born to Kill'. Joker's transformation reveals the trauma that is invoked when innocence is violated and refashioned into a killing machine. As Cocks comments, " It makes him [Joker] almost literally bipolar; peace guy on one hand and has to kill to survive

on the other...visual illustration of that kind of moral purgatory that the film describes... there's no right or wrong" (Special Feature Commentary). Animal Mother's helmet also features a similar writing only that it reads 'I Am Become Death', a phrase taken from Robert Oppenheimer's appropriation of a Sanskrit poem to describe the atomic weapon he had created. However, the notion I would like to pursue here is what could have transpired a duality in selves and later the trauma to be reflected as national consciousness not only among veterans but also of those who are merely citizens of the nation?

World War II laid a positive impact on the soldiering of young Americans in combat as well as with those civilians back home. Americans were clearly seen as a foil to the 'evil' that Nazi Germany and Hitler represented. The aftermath of World War II, the holocaust and Oppenheimer's creations cemented America's reputation as saviours of a world that was almost led to a brink of destruction. As Mitchell Reyes states,

Doing violence to the complexities of America's role in World War II, American public memory largely simplified the conflict into a testament of American character. Such apotheosis created an idealistic framing of war in which the United States stood unambiguously for freedom, democracy, and self determination. This narrative granted to American military efforts a moral clarity beyond question- that is until the events in Vietnam. (Reyes 578)

The saviour image of American marines of World War II was fragmented with the American participation in Vietnam. Vietnam questions the moral fibre of America as a nation and duly fractures the American spirit and identity formerly gloriously upheld in the previous war. The question as to whether Vietnam was something America caused or was it something enforced upon them (Americans) became a subject of national consciousness. Such notions of public memory were primarily reworked and replayed to form a semblance of meaning to the horrors depicted and exacted in Vietnam by the marines.

Hence, Kubrick's text works as a powerful tool and was used, like in all Vietnam war movies made in the late 1970s and 1980s, to address the ambiguities that Vietnam entails. Vietnam primarily, in all of its valour, severed the connection between soldiers and the moral cause to why they were in Vietnam. That fracture promoted a spark of collective trauma. In the film, the audience view the rupture of the marines' moral fibre when a doorgunner in a helicopter randomly shoots at the civilians below and jests at the political rationale behind the marines presence in the "dead gooks" land: " Anyone who runs is a V.C. Anyone who stands still is a well-disciplined V.C." (Kubrick, *Full Metal Jacket*). The doorgunner's cold-blooded quip poignantly echoes the atrocities that were committed by the marines in view of liberating the innocents from Vietcong. Granted that members of the Vietcong operated in guises of civilians and roused marines to many surprise combats and casualties. However, the vengeance and the extreme of violence exacted on the innocents are what the film text instills into the cultural memory of the American audience. The wastage of the innocents on the paddy fields evokes the uncontrollable violence by many marines and the historical image of massacres

which the US marines carried out such as at My Lai on 16 March 1968. As Turner reveals, “Nearly one in every ten combat soldiers committed an act of abusive violence, such as torturing prisoners, raping civilians, or mutilating a corpse. Approximately one in three witnessed such an act and when they did, they suffered a severe blow to the assumptions about the world” (Turner 29).

The sufferance of violence is depicted in the film with the insanity and subsequent suicide of Pyle, while others like Joker who question the morality of the gunner, become indifferent to war. And then, there are those who are like Animal Mother and the door gunner who resemble those marines who have derived pleasure from combat brutalities. The likes of the gunner would trigger veterans like Jerry Samuels, who with his buddies, committed rape on several young girls and then watched his comrades shoot them:

I felt like a big bolt of lightning was supposed to come out of the sky with Uncle Sam’s name attached to it and strike me dead. But it didn’t. This wasn’t a conscious thought. It was just that now that I think about it later, I was hoping for some kind of reprimand, somebody to say, “You just murdered innocent people.” But nobody did... You know, I wanted God, somebody to show me that was wrong. This is one of the things I dwell on so damn much now- it wasn’t wrong then. (30)

We note in testimonies like the above, the dehumanisation of the self into bestiality. The ability to maintain a sense of self-control and composure is lost. The unexplainable need for aggression has robbed the young marines of their identity as human beings and especially, of their American identity.

However, at this juncture, what I would like to reveal is the validity of Vietnam war film texts to the evocation of national trauma and the subsequent rise of cultural memory in the audience. Why instill on such notions in the movies when the tangled memories of Vietnam result in recollection of violence, hatred and shame? How does Kubrick’s text come into play with the American audience? The war in Vietnam was first both unannounced and secondly, unwelcomed by the American public back home. Coupled with incidents such as the massacre of My Lai, combat brutalities came off as a betrayal of the American spirit to many back home, and with America’s ultimate withdrawal, a sense of loss and wasted effort in all manners. As Neal recounts:

The homecoming for the Vietnam veteran was a highly atomistic event. There were no community ceremonies or rituals, there were no parades or marching bands, there were no cheering crowds...The returning veterans were treated casually by others in the community, as if they had been away on vacation. They were expected to behave as if nothing had happened. The nation did not want to be reminded of our disastrous defeat in Vietnam...the victory celebrations helped “to purify” the men who had been required to kill other human beings. There were no such communal forms of purification for the veterans returning from Vietnam. (Neal 140)

Added to such unrecognition, many war veterans had to face a greater challenge of coming to terms with their subsequent nightmares established in

memories. As Neal further recounts of the horrors, “These included the indelible effects of exploding mortar rounds, which resulted in the tendency in civilian life to overreact to sudden and loud noises; recurring visions of comrades cutting ears off enemy corpses as trophies of war” (141).

Post traumatic stress syndrome became a predominant feature of Vietnam war veterans. As Kolk and McFarlane state, “The posttraumatic stress syndrome is the result of a failure to heal all wounds” (Kolk and McFarlane, 491). The past is constantly relived in this instance and “with an immediate sensory and emotional intensity that makes victims feels as if the event was occurring all over again” (491). To add to the intensity of the matter, the trauma suffered by the veterans was also shared but in a different light by the American public. The Vietnam war became an icon of defeat; a symbol of rupture to the myths of American culture as the combat experience was in the young minds of the marines.

However, the collective silence seemed to break in 1980 when Congress approved the construction of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington D.C. Turner says,

“Ronald Reagan, in a campaign speech to the Veterans of Foreign Wars, announced that ‘It is time we recognised that [in Vietnam] ours, in truth, was a noble cause. We dishonour the memory of 50000 young Americans who died when we give way to feelings of guilt...’ (Turner 15)

The war memorial in 1982 unveiled and removed the curtain of trauma that had been formerly hidden. It provided an impetus and a much needed opportunity to facilitate the meanings of the Vietnam war at a national level. The commemoration of the memorial bears as a reminder today that national trauma is not only a crucial ingredient in the formation of national identity, but is also a provider of impetus to explore cultural assertions like in the various media. Neal states, “In popular culture and mass entertainment, collective memories are reflected in the many ways stories are told to new generations about their historical past. In the realm of mass entertainment, the past becomes a form of constructed memory” (*National Trauma* 211). The blurring of parameters between the “image of history and history as an image” (*Tangled Memories* 24) between photograph and film, drama and documentary, recollection and fantasy and most importantly, between cultural memory and history, is all located within the formation of national memory. With the transformation of the cultural mindset in the 1980s, the American audience formed a sense of solidarity when viewing Hollywood docudramas, like *Full Metal Jacket*. As Sturken adds, such sense of solidarity is best seen in the concept of nationhood and national meaning as fostered with the implementation of Benedict Anderson’s “Imagined Community”. In his essay, Anderson states, “[The nation] is an imagined political community- and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign. It is imagined because members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members..., yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (24).

Hence likewise, and as Sturken states, when a person watches a “national” text such as a Hollywood film, one actually partakes a position among the audience

that is already collectively recognised as American. Therefore, Americans are provided an opportunity to “witness” history through the various media of camera/film images. I gather that like the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, films like *Full Metal Jacket* address the need of the affected, wherein the trauma itself is officially recognised and the cultural memory prescribed into history. Such notion is also reiterated by Sturken who further asserts

These films are sites of cultural re-enactment...their retelling of the war smooths over the ruptures of history, simplifying its narrative and providing a site for healing and redemption. These films can subsume personal and cultural memory, but they also work to rescript it as...”a collective and mobile script in which we continue to scrawl, erase, rewrite our conflicting a changing view of ourselves. Like the Vietnam Veterans memorial, these films tell the story of the Vietnam veterans struggle for closure. (89)

However, the closure which the audience would like to identify with *Full Metal Jacket*, is denied. The end march with the title song of Mickey Mouse Club restates the plight of innocence that is shed through the taste of first blood in characters such as Joker. We note that in the aftermath of such traumatic encounters, wherein Joker in the film dispatches the female sniper at point blank range, many soldiers desperately struggle to retain their state of innocence. Trapped in boyhoods but deemed as men of war, the song that they sing endorses their childhood fantasy and writes off the horror in which they have just partaken. However, the song is echoed even after the film ends and the images last before our closed eyes. What would become of these soldiers if and when they finally returned to their Motherland? How will they survive the guilt and blood that they have so callously partaken amongst themselves? The film powerfully questions these notions at a national level with its enigmatic pseudo-closure with a children’s song.

Hence, I note that cultural products such as war films are essentially reviewers of the past wherein they not only depict history, but also criticize them. Moreover, the film as a cultural text also offers not only access to the notions of viewing historic depictions and hence addressing the national trauma inherent behind the collective consciousness of the audience, but also as balm to the realities of war suffered by the veterans. As reiterated by Kevin Major Howard, who plays the character Rafterman, “*Full Metal Jacket* is their bible. I’ve heard from many marines; they simply say that that’s the most accurate, truthful, understanding of what marine warfare was about” (Kubrick, Special Feature Commentary). However, an interesting feature of such historic recollections, which I also observe, is that the text also provokes the memory of the audience to current events, such as the pre-occupations and the delicate state of a marine’s psyche in the current chaos of the Middle East.

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