

STANLEY KUBRICK NEW PERSPECTIVES



edited by TATJANA LJUJIĆ
PETER KRÄMER and RICHARD DANIELS

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“UK frost can kill palms”

Layers of Reality in Stanley Kubrick’s

Full Metal Jacket

KAREN A RITZENHOFF

An additional layer of absurdity is created by the backstory that one of these marines had been dismissed for compulsive masturbation and killed while waiting for his papers to clear. The correlation between violence, killing and sexuality is a dominant trope throughout *Full Metal Jacket*: the marines are supposed to call their rifles by women's names and take them to bed at night, and many of the vulgar slurs from the drill instructor have sexual, homophobic and misogynist undertones. The women the marines encounter in Vietnam are all prostitutes; in their ceaseless banter, the soldiers allude to raping their sisters and even their own mothers.²⁷ As James Naremore notes: "Also as in Kubrick's other pictures about war, the close encounter with the 'other' is with a female."²⁸ This invisible enemy is a parallel to current war propaganda and Marine recruitment posters in which the enemy also remains invisible (and the ideological void can be filled with the image of a Communist, terrorist etc.).

War in Kubrick is highly sexualised, rhetorically through Hartman's vulgar language when he humiliates the recruits to harden them into killing machines, and visually when Joker assassinates the female sniper, affirming his masculinity. Kubrick has been criticised for offering an erotic and violent depiction of war that viewers may have enjoyed, similar to Alex's transgressions in *A Clockwork Orange*: "There's a bit of Alex in even the best trained soldiers — a desire to 'fight, rape, war, pillage and burn'."²⁹

Ending: A Smothering Dream

Patrick Webster analyses the film's surreal ending in great detail. He draws a parallel between the marines marching off into an arbitrary direction, and the war's lack of meaning. The Vietnam War's ambivalent quality is also signified by the war propaganda that is one of the film's thematic preoccupations. Once Joker kills the female sniper, he seems to resolve his own ambivalence over the war. But the new confidence that he articulates in his last voice-over narration does not seem convincing. He is still lost in this war, but is no longer afraid. In Hasford's script, Joker dies and the plot ends with his father talking at the dead soldier's grave.³⁰ Matthew Modine suggested that Kubrick let Joker remain alive because he would have to endure the post-traumatic stress of having been exposed to suicide, death and killing. In Modine's words: "He [Joker] should have to spend the rest of his life thinking about Pyle blowing his brains out."³¹ Writing in his production diary in June 1986, Matthew Modine described how the sniper scene emotionally affected him as an actor:

I have to murder the Sniper. It is agonising for me to imagine standing over another human being and deciding their fate. Even with that person begging to end it. This is the moment that so many writers have struggled with. Stephen Crane. Gus Hasford. Michael Herr. But this is different. She's not running. She's no threat. The scene makes me sick to my stomach. I have to go there. I look at the ground. I have to do this. She's in pain. She's suffering. My emotions blur. Fear. Anger. Fear. Resentment. Revenge. Fear. Horror. Horror. Horror. BANG! I'm dizzy. Underwater.³²

The cinema audience never sees the sniper's head being blown off or being cut off with a machete. But the memory of the suffering stays with viewers, as in the nightmare depicted in

Smothering Dreams, Daniel Reeves award-winning documentary about the Vietnam War.³³ In this film, Reeves recreated nightmarish scenes with a group of actors, visualising post-traumatic stress disorder on video. Even though some of his visual transitional effects (such as an iris) look corny to a contemporary audience used to sophisticated special effects, Reeves creates an allegory of war. He switches back and forth between boys playing killing games with plastic rifles, and practising shooting at empty water bottles as targets. These boys' games are intercut with propaganda footage of marching soldiers and dying marines who suffer agonising pain before perishing in a swamp, their blood colouring the water red. Reeves shows himself screaming in his dreams, while the images of televised wars and re-enacted war scenes flash before his eyes. Kubrick uses the sound of suffering victims in a similar way. When the sniper stops whimpering, the memory of the killing remains like a nightmare, a smothering dream, in the audience's mind.

Disorientation is a continuous theme in Kubrick's film. Despite the fact that the movie was shot in such a comparatively small terrain, Kubrick establishes the sense of loss and the dream-like quality of the landscape, bathed in fire and smoke. In the scene preceding the sniper attack, the platoon, led by fellow marine “Cowboy” (Arliss Howard) loses the sense of direction. Cowboy involuntarily leads the marines into the line of fire.

This could be seen as a grand simile, depicting America's experience in Vietnam, as a whole. In other words, America had no overall strategic reason for fighting the war. In the “lost squad motif” three marines die in a brutal fashion, the surviving marines kill the sniper; but nothing has been gained, we are merely left with a number of meaningless deaths.³⁴

When Joker meets Cowboy and his platoon, one of the marines poses for Rafterman's camera and mocks TV and news reporting. He has seated a dead Vietcong soldier on an empty chair and covered his face with a hat. Then the marine playfully announces that the real story is covered underneath the hat and pulls it off, revealing the dead enemy body. He poses with the dead body and encourages Rafterman to document him and his war trophy. In this instance shooting takes on the multiple meanings of shooting a photograph, shooting a film and shooting the enemy.

This chapter reveals the parallel between Kubrick's fictional depiction of the Vietnam War in a highly manufactured film set and the role of equally fictitious and selective news reporting in the movie that also constructs an alternative reality. The film reflects systematically on the representation of war in television news and in the military paper *Stars and Stripes*. Stanley Kubrick reveals the mythic construction of war by comparing the artifice that helped to support the depiction of Vietnam in the popular press with highly fabricated news accounts that were delivered from reporters on location. He also de-mythologised the hero, shaping Joker into a reporter who steps outside his comfort zone of documenting suffering to become an assassin. The paradox is that Kubrick depicted the Vietnam experience with an authenticity that is still said to be closer to the truth than documentary war accounts. To this day, military recruits in the United States empathize with the film's depiction of boot camp and the battlefield, and say that no other film has reflected the emotions of war as accurately and poignantly as Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket*.³⁵

Stanley Kubrick (1928–1999) is widely regarded as one of the most important filmmakers of the twentieth century. After a precocious career as a photojournalist at *Look* magazine, he switched to moving pictures in the 1950s, soon to be recognised as one of cinema's foremost stylists and technological innovators. Ranging from documentary shorts and low-budget noir thrillers to historical and futuristic epics, from war films to erotic dramas, from horror to comedy, his films explore fundamental questions about sexuality and violence, military organisations and combat, male bonding and marriage, human nature and social change.

Kubrick's work has inspired a huge amount of critical commentary, yet until recently scholars have made little use of archival resources. *Stanley Kubrick: New Perspectives* brings together essays by writers who have examined the traces that Kubrick's work has left in archives, in particular his own archive, which was donated to the University of the Arts London in 2007. Richly illustrated with film stills and previously unseen material from the Stanley Kubrick Archive, this book is designed to open the reader's eyes to the wonder and richness of Kubrick's oeuvre. The essays included in this collection offer new perspectives on Kubrick's working methods, the manifold influences on his films, their themes and style, as well as their marketing and reception. Between them, the essays cover the totality of Kubrick's career, from his early work as a photojournalist to his last movie, *Eyes Wide Shut*, which was released a few months after his death in 1999.

EDITORS

Tatjana Ljujić (film scholar, University of Cambridge), Peter Krämer (author of BFI Film Classics volumes on *2001: A Space Odyssey* and *Dr. Strangelove*, and of a book on *A Clockwork Orange* in Palgrave's "Controversies" series) and Richard Daniels (Stanley Kubrick Archivist, University of the Arts London).

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