

“Ain’t War Hell?”: A film review of Stanley Kubrick’s *Full Metal Jacket*

Full Metal Jacket offers a candid, raw, unapologetic, and sometimes brutal look at the life of U.S. Marines and the Vietnam War. The film is a symphony of highs and lows that plays heavily on questions of ethics, patriotism, racism, comradeship, personal identity, and free will (Defreece, 2017, para. 1). The film has a fragmented progression that jumps from one scene to the next offering little transition between scenes, and with the many contradictions that pop-up in the film it seems that “Disorder is virtually the order of *Full Metal Jacket*” (Canby, 1987, para. 8). While the film evokes strong emotions, unlike some war movies *Full Metal Jacket* offers no easy answers to the questions it raises; which Stanley Kubrick would respond to by saying “That’s because I don’t have any easy answers” (Cahill, 1987, para. 86). Morality, liberty, and individuality are constant themes of the film that bring light to the difficult questions raised during the Vietnam War, which are as still as valid today as they were then.

Full Metal Jacket was produced and written by Stanley Kubrick, and is based on a book written by Gustav Hasford entitled *The Short-Timers* (Cahill, 1987, para. 44). The characters that play major, or more influential roles in the film consist of Private James T. "Joker" Davis (Mathew Modine), Private Leonard "Gomer Pyle" Lawrence (Vincent D'Onofrio), Private "Snowball" Brown (Peter Edmund), Private/Sergeant Robert "Cowboy" Evans (Arliss Howard), Gunnery Sergeant Hartman (R. Lee Ermey); and later Sergeant "Animal Mother" (Adam Baldwin), Corporal "Eightball" (Dorian Harewood), Private First Class "Rafterman" (Kevyn Major Howard), Lieutenant Walter J. "Touchdown" Schinoski (Ed O’Ross), Lieutenant Lockhart (John Terry),

Sergeant "Crazy Earl" (Kieron Jecchinis), Doc Jay (John Stafford), and Tim Colceri as a helicopter door gunner (Kubrick, 1987). The film is primarily broken up in to two distinct parts, or acts, that serve to stand in juxtaposition to one another while simultaneously working with the reoccurring themes.

The first act of the movie begins by following a group of young men as they go through boot camp on Parris Island. The opening credits begin with showing the recruits as they have their heads shaved upon arrival. Then, a sudden transition occurs to the freshly shaved recruits all lined up in the barracks as Gunnery Sergeant Hartman give them a harsh, demoralizing welcome to boot camp by berating, and even assaulting them. The film follows the recruits through their grueling training as Hartman beats them down and breaks them before rebuilding them as soldiers and killers (Kubrick, 1987). In this first half, there is an almost clinically sterile feel to the scenes as the recruits are relentlessly tortured by their Gunnery Sergeant to the breaking point. It's during this point that some of the questions of individuality, morality, and liberty are brought up as the soldiers are subjected to mental, verbal, and physical punishment by Hartman as he reforges them as Marines. The soldiers also begin to learn to work together and aid one another at this time; seemingly forming bonds to one another, though this too is brought in to question. The Marines finally finish their training on Parris Island and graduate before preparing to be shipped off. The last scene of the first act is a hair-raising final confrontation, which happens in the bathroom between Gunnery Sergeant Hartman and Private "Gomer Pyle", who Hartman has relentlessly hounded through boot camp, while Private "Joker" watches the nerve wracking events unfold.

Act one shifts in to act two suddenly, and it follows Private "Joker", who is now a journalist for the Marine Corps, as the Tet Offensive begins to the surprise of the American Armed Forces. Joker is thrust in to action, to his excitement, and is assigned to a platoon on the front lines. From

here we follow Joker as he meets back up with “Cowboy” who he’d trained with during boot camp. Joker and Rafterman follow Cowboy and the rest of the platoon through the fighting, documenting the horrors of the war as they witness them first hand. These scenes are characterized by their gritty, dirty feel which contrasts with the look of the sterile scenes at boot camp, as well as the music and chaotic feel to the scenes, which only adds to the controlled disorder (Canby, 1987, para. 8). The feel of the movie changes completely and evokes feelings of anger, sorrow, and confusion as characters are thrust in to difficult scenarios that many soldiers dealt with during the Vietnam War. The film also plays heavily with the duality of man by showing both the worst and best of the soldiers, even doing so one after another; leaving notions of right and wrong, good and bad heavily blurred at times (Kubrick, 1987). The movie’s climax is a hard-fought battle that happens when Joker, Cowboy, and the rest of their platoon must face off against a Viet-Kong sniper hiding in the burned-out shell of an old building. The final shots of the film is from a wide-angle view of Marines marching across a barren, smoke-filled battlefield dotted with rubble and ruins as they chant the Mickey Mouse Club theme song in a very memorable, but also eerie scene.

The musical score of the movie is very interesting and fitting. All the music was time-period appropriate with none of the songs coming after 1968 to keep with the setting, and all of them are from the hit music charts (Cahill, 1987, para. 30). At moments, some the songs seem inappropriate at first, but at the same time very relevant giving a realistic feel to the movie that helps immerse the viewer in the scenes. One very memorable moment where the music and movie sink is when “These Boots Are Made for Walking” plays, which when taken in different context could be applied to the U.S. Marines’ boots marching across Vietnam as they go on the war path. The song “Surfing Bird” also appears during a memorable scene when the troops are having to get

a medevac on a helicopter for a wounded comrade; a fitting play on words since many Armed Forces personnel refer to helicopters, or planes as “birds.”

The lighting and sets for the movie also aid in helping the viewer become immersed in the film, and bring it to life in a realistic way. The sanitary feel at the beginning of the movie, as opposed to the dirty, gritty feel it has later helps to break up the movie in to the two distinct parts. Also, the war-torn look of the Vietnam sets, and the three-dimensional way the characters move through and negotiate their surroundings only further adds to the sense immersion. At one point the three-dimensional nature of the surroundings is made abundantly clear as the Marines take cover behind a blown-out building to hide from an enemy sniper only for the sniper to shoot one of them through a hole in the side of the building that they weren't aware the sniper could see them through (Kubrick, 1987). Then, on one continuous shot, the marines grab their wounded brother-in-arms and drag him around the side of the building to safety before we follow them through the streets and blown out buildings as they hunt down their enemy; giving the feel of being right there in the action with them.

Full Metal Jacket is an amazing piece of cinematic history that I feel everyone should watch. Whether you are a fan of Vietnam War history, have a political mind, enjoy the culture and music of the 1960's, share a fellowship with those in the Armed Forces, or just want a good war movie to watch *Full Metal Jacket* is an awesome film that takes the viewer on a philosophical and emotional rollercoaster ride. The message of the film is still as relevant today as it was in 1987, or during the Vietnam War. While the film answers few questions, and raises even more for the viewer, it does perhaps answer one question without a doubt, a question posed to Private Joker by a rather maniacal helicopter door-gunner, “Ain't war Hell?” (Kubrick, 1987). It's a question

that *Full Metal Jacket* answers, and one that the viewer would have no problem answer it after watching the film; yes, war is Hell.

References

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