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“We'll let the gooks play the Indians”

The Endurance of the Frontier Myth in the Hyperreality of *Full Metal Jacket* (Stanley Kubrick, 1987)

Vincent Jaunas

- 1 Upon their release, Stanley Kubrick's films were often misunderstood and only acquired a cult status in the long run. Yet before *Full Metal Jacket*, none of them was ever accused of being uninventive. However, when in 1987 the director released his own take on the Vietnam War, influential American critic Roger Ebert considered that “this isn't a bad film but it's not a great film and in the recent history of movies about Vietnam *Full Metal Jacket* is too little and too late” (Ebert 1987). Released almost a decade after Michael Cimino's *The Deer Hunter* (1978) and Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979), Kubrick's film even came after a new trend of 1980s Vietnam films such as the *Rambo* franchise or Oliver Stone's *Platoon* (1986). *Full Metal Jacket* has been seen as a mere Kubrickian recycling of what had then become an established Vietnam iconography, whose most prominent characteristic is arguably the depiction of Vietnam as a metaphoric space, a New Frontier faced by a new generation of Americans. By having Private Joker (Matthew Modine), the film's main protagonist, invoke John Wayne in his very first line—“Is that you John Wayne? Is this me?”—*Full Metal Jacket* summons the myth of the frontiersman Wayne came to embody, and in this respect reworks a firmly established intertextual relation, one that Wayne himself helped construct by transposing both his WWII soldier and frontiersman *persona* in Vietnam with his 1968 pro-war film *The Green Berets*.
- 2 According to John Svendsen, *Full Metal Jacket*, unlike its predecessors, is characterized by a “total absence of myth-making [which] presents a radical critique of [Vietnam] war movies” (1989). I will argue that by becoming the film's topic, the mythical weight of the war is approached through a reflexive lens that strives to prevent myth from structuring the movie's narrative, to keep it at bay by, paradoxically, acknowledging its overwhelming influence in the shaping of one's view of reality. In so doing, *Full Metal Jacket* questions the failure of the countercultural anti-frontier mythology of the 1970s

and takes into account the 1980s' neo-mythical approach of the war, by suggesting that the frontier myth, although criticized and devalued, has survived and even gained strength as pure representation. In other words, instead of criticizing the nefarious influence of America's mythical perception of the war—a theme that had already been explored for more than a decade before the release of *Full Metal Jacket*—Kubrick's film examines the endurance of the myth as a lens through which one still shapes one's reality, in spite of its obvious inadequacy.

Vietnam War films, the frontier and the myth

- 3 Following John Fitzgerald Kennedy's claim that the challenges faced by modern Americans represented a "New Frontier" (1960), the major events of the 1960s tended to be viewed through the lens of the mythical reenactment of the great pioneer spirit of American frontiersmen. According to John Hellman, "The new Kennedy administration presented the [soldiers] in Vietnam as symbols of a resurgence of the traditional American spirit of the frontier" (142). The New Frontier narrative, Richard Slotkin argues, harked back to the roots of America's feeling of exceptionalism, relying on the Turnerian frontier narrative—the country's conquest of the wild West endowed its inhabitants with a unique character that gave them the strength to accomplish their civilizing mission—in order to enforce a policy of "modernization" (1998, 492). Such a narrative aimed, then, to ensure public support for all of Kennedy's agenda, be it economic reforms or geopolitical strategies. The New Frontier narrative sought to justify the country's involvement in Asia by drawing a parallel between modern Vietnam and 19th century America. Americans had to intervene in Vietnam because this conflict represented the new step in the civilizing mission which, in the previous century, had justified the country's appropriation of a wilderness occupied by savage Indians:

The real power and relevance of the Indian War metaphor [to justify the US involvement in Vietnam] are rooted in its appropriateness as an expression of the New Frontier's basic assumptions about the relation between "primitive" and "advanced" peoples: that the natives ('savages') or "fledging" or "less developed" nations lacked anything like the equivalent of the political culture of a Western nation-state. This bias [...] became the doctrine of the new Frontier (Slotkin 1998, 493).

- 4 Unsurprisingly, such a narrative relied heavily on the influence of Western films, which, throughout the 20th century, had spread the frontier Narrative: "Kennedy's heroic myth derived much of its force and resonance from the symbolism of the combat film and the Western" (Slotkin 1998, 504). The New Frontier narrative, itself fueled by cinema, was in turn spread by films, as various movies sought to justify America's intervention in Vietnam by displaying the conflict through the lens of Kennedy's—and, following his death, Lyndon Johnson's—narrative. The most notorious (and explicit) example of such films is undoubtedly John Wayne's *The Green Berets*, a film "conceived from the start as a work of propaganda to convince the American people that 'it was necessary for us to be [in Vietnam]'" (Slotkin 1998, 520).
- 5 Even though Wayne's film was scored by critics for "its dishonesty, its simpleminded preachiness and its propagandistic use of imagery" (Slotkin 1998, 522), Slotkin argues that "what is interesting about the film is not the misrepresentation of the war-as-fought but the accuracy with which it reproduces and compounds the official

misunderstanding and falsification of the conflict" (1998, 522-523). Released in 1968, the film highlights—and fuels—the imposition of myth over the reality of the conflict, which, from the outset, had shaped America's involvement in Vietnam. The film displays various frontier-inspired interpretations of the conflict highlighting the civilizing mission of the United States, most notably as the hero ends up adopting a Vietnamese child, becoming a father figure intent on shielding him from the savagery of the Vietcong. Moreover, the sheer presence of John Wayne, whose persona came to embody the quintessential frontiersman, suffices to turn Vietnam into a reenactment of the conquest of the West.¹

- 6 It took almost a decade before any American director openly denounced the country's involvement in the war—Michael Cimino's *The Deer Hunter*, the first major anti-Vietnam War fiction film, was released in 1978. However, given the mythical weight surrounding the conflict, it is unsurprising that prior denunciations of the conflict were expressed through obvious parables drawn in revisionist Westerns. Both *Soldier Blue* (Ralph Nelson, 1970) and *Little Big Man* (Arthur Penn, 1972) obliquely criticized the 1968 My Lai massacre of Vietnamese civilians by American soldiers through depictions of the 1864 Sand Creek Massacre and 1868 Washita River massacre (of Cheyenne men, women and children by George A. Custer's cavalry regiment). When American directors started directly tackling the topic of Vietnam, the frontier myth logically became a recurring trope, to the point that the Western genre may be considered as an overarching architext shaping all Vietnam films.² Filmmakers from the New Hollywood, immersed as they were with the anti-war movement of the late 1960s, reworked the New Frontier ideology and proposed a counter-discourse which also acquired a mythical resonance. These artists were concerned with proposing a counter-myth, a depiction of Vietnam as the locus of the loss of American ideological naivety. Hellman, for instance, notes how

In *The Deer Hunter* Michael survives the threat of "one shot" in the forced Russian roulette game and kills his Vietcong captors, but on his return to the American wilderness realizes [...] he must give up his previous frontier code of seeking to control nature by killing a deer with "one shot" (146).

- 7 As for *Apocalypse Now*, Coppola's reworking of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* explicitly distorts the myth, since Americans are depicted as an imperialist people, a far cry from the collective representation of their founding fathers fleeing the tyranny and decadence of the British empire and regenerating through their taming of the wilderness. In *Apocalypse Now*, the wilderness is not a source of purification but a hindrance to be burnt down with napalm, the Marines' helicopters becoming a genocidal version of the US Cavalry as depicted in classical Westerns; whereas the cavalry was traditionally portrayed as the protector of civilization, saving frontiersmen from the threat of the barbaric Other (saving, for instance, the stagecoach in John Ford's 1939 eponymous film), Coppola's airborne cavalry becomes synonymous with the tyrannical oppression exerted by a technologically superior imperial America towards defenseless natives.
- 8 Due to the weight of the American myth in the perception of the war, its cinematic representations not only tackled the frontier, but also addressed the very myth-making power of representation. Indeed, in addition to the aforementioned influence of Hollywood in the ideological justification of the conflict, the war itself was marked by an unprecedented amount of television coverage, which deeply shaped public perception. Michael Anderegg notes that "the Vietnam war was the most represented war in history, existing, to a great degree, as moving image" (1991, 02), while Martin

Heusser considers that "the Vietnam War was a television war, a 'living-room war'" (Heusser 2003). News media originally helped propounding the image of the war as a "projected Western" (Hellman 142), in which American identity was to be reinforced and rejuvenated, but in the mid-1960s, TV news had shattered the myth and showed an entirely different facet of the war³. Confronted with an unprecedented amount of war footage and graphic violence, the public faced disorientation as the mythical interpretative device that had been theirs no longer seemed to apply. Filmmakers thus sought to create a counter-myth out of the shattered remains of the original frontier spirit that had dominated the first part of the conflict (Thoret 2013), while also questioning the responsibility of audiovisual representations in the shaping of America's ideology. *Apocalypse Now's* famous depiction of TV crews staging the war so as to make it look more spectacular is a case in point. Anti-Vietnam War films thus still depicted Vietnam through the lens of the frontier myth, albeit with the intent of creating a counter-myth aiming to reveal the dark side of the frontier ideology, as well as the way it misshaped Americans' perception of reality up until the Vietnam War.

- 9 Following the conservative backlash of the 1980s, a new wave of Vietnam films developed alongside the anti-war films still produced during this period (most notably Oliver Stone's *Platoon* and Brian de Palma's 1989 *Casualties of War*) and also reworked the frontier myth, albeit in a radically different way, since the trauma of Vietnam now had to be overcome. John Svendsen explains that in "the 80s [...] The Vietnam War was seen as having been fought for noble ends, but Americans had been suffered to lose through self-imposed restraints" (Svendsen 1989). In other words, films such as the *Rambo* series were concerned with erasing the counter-myth of 1970s and to revalue the validity of the frontier ideology, which had not failed but had been failed by a lack of popular support; Sylvester Stallone thus became a new, Reaganian frontiersman—particularly in *Rambo: First Blood Part II* (George Cosmatos, 1985), where Rambo even uses a bow and arrows—whose strength and values were to wash away the Vietnam experience and reignite America's frontier spirit.
- 10 In this context, Ebert's claim that *Full Metal Jacket* comes too late is understandable. After Vietnam was written and re-written as a myth or as a counter-myth, as a new frontier or as an anti-frontier manifesto, Stanley Kubrick's depiction of a war shaped by the distorted viewpoints of American soldiers quoting Western films may seem to rework what had, by then, become an established generic pattern. I would like to suggest that the film neither aims at proposing yet another version of the myth, or even at blaming past filmic and televisual representations for fostering a frontier mindset; instead, it addresses the palimpsest of audiovisual footage that shaped everyone's experience of the war, in order to explore Americans' ambiguous relation to representation and reality. During the shooting of *The Shining* (1980), Kubrick once stated he wasn't interested in photographing reality but in "photographing the photography of reality."⁴ Such a claim is all the more relevant regarding *Full Metal Jacket*, as ideology and representation are layered over the factual reality of the conflict which, as a result, tends to be erased.

The World as Representation

- 11 Through the character of Private Joker, employed as a combat correspondent, Kubrick shows how the reality of everyday fighting is immediately turned into a clear narrative

fit for the ideal of the Marine-as-frontiersman. Reporters are told to write stories depicting either a decisive American victory or how soldiers help the locals: "We run two basic stories here. Grunts who give half their pay to buy gooks toothbrush and deodorant—Winning of Hearts and Minds [...] and combat action which result in a kill—Winning the War" [48:12]. Kubrick's famous mistrust of language⁵ finds here one of its most potent expressions. While the words of journalists ordered to emphasize the civilizing intent of the Marines turn Vietnam into a frontier narrative in which brave pioneers defeated a wild enemy and accomplished their manifest destiny while bringing civilization to an untamed land, viewers, on the other hand, witness the random, useless and unmotivated killing of men, women and children. When Joker and his photographer Rafterman take a helicopter to join a squad, they encounter a mad killer who shoots everything on sight and suggests "you should write a story about me" [56:00]. However, it has, by then, become apparent that the frontier narrative may only be written by distorting facts and erasing cumbersome elements.

- 12 By highlighting the gap between official propagandistic discourses and the audiovisual depiction, the film highlights how a mythical narrative is forcibly imposed upon reality, one which not only targets the American public at home but is also summoned by the soldiers themselves in order to give meaning to what they experience and cope with reality. Yet the Marines of *Full Metal Jacket* fight according to a narrative they obviously do not believe in. The few characters who seem to truly believe the myth of the soldier-as-frontiersman are constantly ridiculed. The most striking example is, no doubt, the anonymous colonel who reminds Joker about the ideological purpose of the war by disclaiming stereotypical ethnocentric biases of America's civilizing mission: "We are here to help the Vietnamese, because inside every gook there is an American trying to get out" [61:32]. The ridicule of such a belief is accentuated by the scene itself as, while the colonel utters this sentence, a mass grave filled with the whitewashed bodies of Vietnamese casualties is visible in the background, thus implying the war to be more akin to a slaughter than to the advance of civilization (Fig. 1).

Fig. 1

The visuals ridicule the ideological vacuity of the Colonel (right)

- 13 The narrative indicates that these casualties are in fact victims of the Viet Cong, whose massacre Joker and Rafterman document so as to advertise the enemy's barbarity. The previously witnessed random killings made by the American helicopter shooter has made it clear that barbaric slaughters are committed on both sides; however, from the perspective of American officials, only the enemy's acts must be pictured so, in order to enforce a coherent mythical narrative in which America has come to shield a people from their own barbarity. In addition, the film maintains the viewer in a state of confusion due to the fact that the whitewashed victims were, indeed, killed by Viet Cong, as this information is briefly given by Touchdown, who explains the situation to Joker during a dialog whose sound is drowned by helicopter and tank noises, so that this explanation may easily be missed upon a first viewing. The confused sense of an absurd, unexplained slaughter thus reinforces the utter inappropriateness of the colonel's attempt at reaffirming a grand mythical narrative that would make sense of the conflict.
- 14 Such a display of the myth's ideological vacuity reflects what characterizes, according to Jean-François Lyotard (1979), the advent of the postmodern condition: men have stopped believing in grand narratives. Treated as farce, the frontier myth that justifies the war ceases to be a structuring grand narrative. At first sight, such a criticism may, indeed, as Ebert pointed out, be viewed as symptomatic of the absence of novelty of Kubrick's film. In both *The Deer Hunter* and *Apocalypse Now*, the ideological pointlessness of the war shakes the faith of a typical American frontiersman (Michael and Benjamin Willard) whose experience leads him to question his own mythical framework. However, I will now argue that unlike these films, *Full Metal Jacket* does not aim to reveal the inadequacy of such narratives, as no character is led to question his ideological beliefs and encourage viewers to do the same in the process. In the 1987 film, the characters' lack of ideological faith is a pre-established fact, one which does not lead to any anti-war sentiment. Joker's skepticism as to the ideological justification of the war is a case in point, since it manifests itself before the character even witnesses warfare, as implied by his provocative parody of John Wayne in the opening dialogue of the film when he arrives in Parris Island. Yet his lack of belief in the war's mythical justification does not prevent him from actively playing his part, as do most Marines whose lack of belief is equally blatant.

The Endurance of a Discarded Myth

- 15 During the initial training section on Parris Island, fearsome Sergeant Hartman (R. Lee Ermey) turns his Marines into hard "killing machines" in an act of brainwashing surprisingly devoid of any ideological grounding. Even though he does not hesitate to compare Marines to God-sent soldiers or to summon American mythology, such messages lose all meaning as they get drowned in Hartman's logorrhea and his wave of sexist, homophobic and scatological insults which evacuate any mythical didacticism. His only constant message is that Marines must look like Marines, and act like Marines. Hartman's songs underline the character's lack of ideological clarity:

I love working for Uncle Sam (I love working for Uncle Sam).
 Let's me know just who I am (Let's me know just who I am)
 1-2-3-4 United States Marine Corps (1-2-3-4 United States Marine Corps)
 1-2-3-4 I love the Marine Corps (1-2-3-4 I love the Marine Corps)
 [...]

I don't know but I've been told (I don't know but I've been told)
 Eskimo pussy is mighty cold (Eskimo pussy is mighty cold) ([22:07 – 23:01])

- 16 The instructor's first lines seem to make him a purveyor of the American myth: the belief in men's need to find their true self through their involvement in warfare being reminiscent of Theodore Roosevelt's argument in *The Winning of the West*, where the author argues that the fight of American pioneers against the uncivilized Indians enabled them to acquire a unique, superior character (Slotkin 1998, 52). However, the end of his song blurs the message and makes any ideological viewpoint moot, as it verges towards juvenile misogynistic nonsense. Expunged from all ideological clarity, all that remains from such a message is a gratuitous contempt of an Other whom one is taught to despise without any mythical justification, as suggested by the debasing portrayal of the female Eskimo.⁶ Even though the viewer understands the Marines are nonetheless taught ideologically coherent messages, such moments remain offscreen, and the Parris Island sequences emphasize the ideological groundlessness of Hartman's training: while the Marines' mission seems integrated within Kennedy's New Frontier narrative—"Chaplain Charlie will tell you about how the free world will conquer communism," Hartman declares on Christmas Eve [31:42]—the instructor goes as far as to name Kennedy's killer, Lee Harvey Oswald, as the epitome of the perfect Marine, as he is about to teach his recruits long range shooting. The characters are thus required to conform to a set of attitudes that may originally have been shaped through a mythical definition of one's identity, but which now appear devoid of any substance.
- 17 However, despite its satirical depiction of a narrative the characters appear detached from, *Full Metal Jacket* never suggests America's frontier spirit does not determine the characters' experience of the war. Nor does the film ambition to depict the reality beyond the myth. One scene epitomizes the film's ambivalent subservience to the myth. Following the first battle faced by Joker once he has rejoined Cowboy's squad, the song *Surfin' Bird* (The Trashmen, 1963) starts playing, while a static shot shows a television crew in the foreground filming the battle taking place in the background [72:12-73:34]. The TV crew moves left, while filming the soldiers in the middle ground, whereas the enemy, invisible in the background, is being shot at (Fig. 2). As the TV crew reaches the left side of the screen, a tracking shot follows it and reveals various soldiers both shooting at the enemy and playing a role for the sake of the diegetic camera. As Cowboy's squad enters the frame, the Marines, looking at the diegetic camera, pretend to be the heroes of a Western: "Is that you John Wayne, is this me?" Joker shouts, while Cowboy says: "Start the camera, this is Vietnam, the movie!" The soldiers then appoint themselves the roles they will play in this hypothetical film. Eightball argues that Joker could be John Wayne, whereas he himself would be a horse, etc. Animal Mother then suggests: "We'll let the gooks play the Indians."

Fig. 2

The diegetic camera shaping the battle scene

- 18 Through its reflexive depiction of the way the battlefield is being shaped by film, the scene highlights the frontier-biased depiction of the war that determines both the diegetic camera and the actions of the characters. Kubrick's camera takes a step back and observes the way filmmaking shapes reality by inscribing it within a mythical narrative. In so doing, however, the film does not claim to show an objective depiction of Vietnam, stripped away from all mythical misperceptions. The camera follows the exact same path as the diegetic camera and seems to be drawn by the tracking shot initiated by the latter, as if the narration were inextricably connected to the mythical representation of reality. Far from providing a window onto an objective world,⁷ the film thus asserts audiovisual footage to arise from one's subjective representation of reality, and in the process goes against the claim at authenticity, which various 1970s and 80s anti-war movies such as Stone's *Platoon* professed.⁸ While these anti-war films held the promise of showing what the war was actually like, thus revealing a truth distorted by previous false mythical representations, *Full Metal Jacket* asserts that all filmmaking is necessarily subjective, and therefore on the side of myth; such metafilmic displays, however, enable the audience to develop a critical distance towards the subjective biases that determine both individual experiences and their representations. Such self-reflexive considerations do not make of *Full Metal Jacket* a film solely concerned about cinema, however. The work captures the experience of Vietnam as representation.
- 19 Indeed, by acknowledging the role of the TV camera as a *de facto* diegetic presence in the war, *Full Metal Jacket* posits that myth-making devices and factual reality are virtually indistinguishable co-presences that shaped the soldiers' experiences of Vietnam. By highlighting the diegetic cameras mythologizing the war as it unfolds, the film shows Vietnam to be a spectacle existing only for the sake of its specularity. Even the Marines' killing of the Vietcong seems motivated only by their desire to play at Cowboys vs Indians. In the Stanley Kubrick Archives, which store all of the director's personal research to prepare his films, one may find an excerpt from Hannah Arendt's *Crises of the Republic* underlined by Kubrick during the pre-production of *Full Metal Jacket*. This excerpt analyses how Americans did not so much fight "for their country's survival – which was never at stake – as for its 'image' (...) the goal was now the image

itself" (Kubrick 1983). In *Full Metal Jacket*, however, it is the soldiers themselves who appear to consider the war as representation, and yet willingly decide to keep on playing their parts. Their goal is not the country's image, but the shaping of their individual warrior image. By altering the actions of the characters who, encouraged by the camera eye, play at Cowboys vs Indians, the camera seems to determine their behavior more dramatically than the actual war, which is relegated to a distant background, hardly visible for the spectator. The characters may not be fighting for a cause they believe in, but they do fight in order to project an image of themselves, one fitting previous representations of American toughness, manliness, etc.

- 20 Such willingness to adopt a set of behavioral codes no one believes in may be seen as Kubrick's response to the reactionary films of the 1980s, such as *Rambo II*. The Marines' apparent unwillingness to stop play-acting like cowboys highlights how the imposition of myth over reality provides a regressive comfort that requires neither reality, nor even belief. The motto "We will defend to the death our right to be misinformed" (Fig. 3) can be read on a banner hanging next to a drawing of cartoon dog Snoopy in the office of the propaganda newspaper *Stars and Stripes* [53:39]. The eagerness with which the unreality of myth is chosen over the reality of the war evokes the decade's regressive impulse and its willingness to both identify with images from an idealized pre-Vietnam America —exemplified by such films as *Back to the Future* (Robert Zemeckis, 1985)—and to use cinema as a way to fix the frontier myth after it was shaken by Vietnam ("Do we get to win this time?" famously exclaims Sylvester Stallone in *Rambo II* [3:26]). One's willingness to play a role thus seems to stem from a human desire to conceal reality behind a comforting fiction. "Truth or Falsehood – it does not matter which any more, if your life depends on your acting as though you trusted," Hannah Arendt writes in a passage underlined by Kubrick (Kubrick 1983).

Fig. 3

First to go, last to know: We will defend to the death our right to be misinformed

- 21 *Full Metal Jacket* suggests that, although the Vietnam experience may have destroyed America's grand frontier narrative, the reenactment of the country's mythical image lives on, despite its actors' lack of belief in it. In *Simulacra and Simulation*, Jean Baudrillard refers to the Vietnam War and its Hollywood counterpart, *Apocalypse Now*,

as symptomatic of the loss of the reality traditionally associated with modernity, a loss which the philosopher terms "hyperreality": in a world filled with images and representations, reality is lost as all that takes place becomes a simulation of previous images (Baudrillard 1981, 90).

- 22 The hyperreal quality of *Full Metal Jacket* was noted by Patrick Webster, for whom the film manifests "a loss of distinction between the real and the imagined" (132). Throughout the film, both the viewers and the characters seem stuck in a *mise en abyme* of filmic representations from which there is no way out, so that everything becomes representation. The mythical subtext of Western films takes precedence and shapes Vietnam in its image, so that the reality of the conflict becomes determined by the forms and conventions of Hollywood. In this respect, the mention of John Wayne can be seen as more than a mere reference to the mythical personification of America's frontier spirit. Indeed, Wayne also plays the mythmaker in John Ford's *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valence* (1962), which concludes with the iconic phrase: "When the legend becomes fact, print the legend." In *Full Metal Jacket*, which directly alludes to Ford's film through Joker's iconic quote ("Listen up, Pilgrim"), Kubrick ironically subverts this idea by suggesting that the legend, however unbelievable, has now managed to abandon reality altogether.
- 23 Cinema shapes the characters' experience of Vietnam, which determines new representations which, in turn, contribute to fictionalize the war and shape the viewer's own experience of it. Such entanglement is manifest during the interview given by Private Cowboy to the television crew, whose diegetic camera is, in this scene, aligned with the film's camera. Cowboy describes the battle he has just experienced in Hue City (the aforementioned battle during which Marines play at Cowboys vs Indians) as "like a war, you know. What I thought about a war, what I thought a war was supposed to be. There's the enemy, you kill' em" [76:03-76:17].
- 24 By describing this battle as how "it was supposed to be" while speaking to a camera making a movie, private Cowboy shows how the characters' experiences are grounded in fiction, thus turning Vietnam into a full-scale reenactment of an imagined war with a new frontier narrative. Ironically, the characters' loss of belief in this grand narrative is replaced by a playacting of previous representations, which thus enables the myth of the American soldier as frontiersman to survive its own demise. Such playacting, in turn, will shape the experience of warfare of the implied viewers for whom this diegetic film is destined according to a mythical framework devoid of any truthful belief. The character's playacting thus becomes the new vector of America's mythical representation, one which evacuates the concept of reality itself and lives on in spite of it. In this scene, the fictionalization of reality is underlined by the reflexivity of Arliss Howard's performance. Indeed, the actor paradoxically portrays Cowboy being filmed with an unprecedented level of naturalism—his many hesitations and ruptured sentences, combined with his look to the camera and his physical awkwardness (his whole body remains very stiff except for his left hand which he twitches nervously), realistically convey the impression of an amateur, who was unused to cameras and microphones, being interviewed (Fig. 4). Ironically, a particularly artificial scene is endowed with a naturalist quality: a real professional actor convincingly plays the role of an amateur behaving awkward in front of a camera. On the other hand, throughout the rest of the film, Howard's performance is much more theatrical, as, despite the absence of diegetic cameras, his character appears to be constantly striving to play the

role of the badass, slang-wielding soldier which he had been taught to play on Parris Island (where he also received his Westerner nickname). If the reflexive dimension of *Apocalypse Now* suggests Hollywood-inspired clichés have distorted reality by staging it and turning the war into a spectacle, the metafictional dimension of *Full Metal Jacket* questions the very validity of the binary opposition between reality and fiction, as both have become intermingled to the point of indiscernibility.

Fig. 4

The paradoxical naturalism of Adiss's performance in front of a diegetic camera

Kubrick's English Vietnam and the Wilderness as Frontier Space

- 25 Through its hyperreal entanglement, the film questions the potential for Vietnam War movies to denounce the validity of previous ideological assumptions and representational clichés, a potential implicitly acknowledged by both countercultural and reactionary films. In this regard, *Full Metal Jacket*'s late release becomes relevant, as the film bases its metafictional reflection on an intertextual dialogue with the Vietnam War film subgenre. In depicting the reality of a conflict pre-determined by a palimpsest of audiovisual clichés, the film questions the very possibility of ever representing a reality devoid of its hyperreal excess baggage.
- 26 This is underlined by its ambivalent setting. At first sight, the latter may appear to express the overlapping of an objective reality and a subjective mythical perception through the superimposition of the characters' self-conscious play-acting onto a highly realistic setting, one whose material reality is emphasized thanks to the careful attention given to details, spaces and textures. Kubrick declared:

The whole area of combat was one complete area – it actually exists. One of the things I tried to do was give you a sense of where you were, where everything else was [...] this is something we tried to make beautifully clear (Cahill 1987).
- 27 Mario Falsetto notes how the film achieved such effects through emphasis "on the physical textures of this world. This is a Vietnam of concrete, metal black smoke, fire

and rubble", while simultaneously arguing that "the film's visual design features a heightened sense of unreality" (2001, 72). A feeling of unreality is indeed conveyed by the settings themselves, however realistic they may look, so that the apparent dichotomy between subjective perception and objective reality becomes blurred: the very possibility of representing a "real" Vietnam devoid of any mythical subtext is thus called into question.

- 28 Far from the jungle productions of the other major Vietnam films such as *The Deer Hunter* (shot in Thailand) or *Apocalypse Now* (shot in the Philippines), Kubrick famously chose to shoot the Vietnam scenes of *Full Metal Jacket* near London. He used an abandoned gasworks factory that he was free to demolish at will, in which he imported various authentic props, including real palm trees, which he juxtaposed to fake, plastic trees. Paradoxically, the result looks both highly realistic and unreal.⁹ The realistic depiction of the terrain, combined with the realistic depiction of a city being torn down—as the profilmic factory was indeed destroyed during the shooting—contrasts with the evocation of Vietnam through a set of imported iconic signs (Fig. 5).

Fig. 5

Realism and surrealism in the Vietnam in *Full Metal Jacket*

- 29 The architectural style of the factory proves a far cry from the jungle landscapes associated with Vietnam, and yet it perfectly fits the kind of post-WWII functionalist architecture that could be found in the city of Hue where the last part of the film takes place.¹⁰ Ironically, the setting's urban dimension is what strikes the viewer as the film's most unreal quality, forcing the viewer to consider how Vietnam naturally came to be associated with a luxuriant jungle through layers and layers of past filmic representations which—whether pro or antiwar—required to transform Vietnam into a new wilderness, and the Vietnamese into a new tribe of Indians. The sense of unreality provoked by this urban Vietnam thus points to the perceptual distortions of the country induced by past representations—at least for the Westerner's perspective which the film centers on.¹¹
- 30 The urban setting of *Full Metal Jacket* suggests that the reality of Vietnam was also shaped by past Western representations. Far from living in the wilderness, the

Vietnamese population is depicted as living in an environment which, with the exception of the palm trees, hardly differs from the West. Their lifestyle is shown as largely Europeanized (through the presence of French Colonial architecture, cars and advertising) and Americanized (the women in miniskirts). As implied through the omnipresence of pop songs and the lack of markers of a traditional Asian culture, *Full Metal Jacket's* version of Vietnam is devoid of Orientalism. This paradoxically makes the setting look all the more unreal: this Americanized Vietnam does not correspond to the viewer's cinematic expectation of an Oriental wilderness which Americans must either save (from a mythical perspective) or destroy (from a counter-mythical perspective). Kubrick's English Vietnam thus underlines the mythical biases of Western culture by paradoxically depicting a country already shaped by Western representations (Fig. 6). As a result, subjective biases are both highlighted and shown as inextricably connected to reality.

Fig. 6

A westernized Vietnam

Joker and the Quest for Reality

- 31 In the hyperreal prison of *Full Metal Jacket*, Joker, the protagonist, stands out. Whereas most of the characters seem to derive pleasure from acting as though they believed, Joker constantly displays an ironic critical distance suggesting he is lucid as to the self-blinding impulse behind Vietnam's hyperreality. He impersonates John Wayne to parody the virile play-acting of the soldiers, mocks his newspaper's propaganda and even displays both a "born to kill" helmet and a peace button so as to "suggest something about the duality of Man [...] the Jungian thing" [61:16]. In a world of self-conscious actors, Joker's distancing tactics suggest a longing for an objective, unbiased reality. The various close-ups of his eyes, highlighted by his round glasses, underline his desire to see past the mask of delusional myths in order to face reality, unfiltered and untainted, no matter how horrible.

- 32 Such desire is epitomized by his willingness to go to the front and face a real life-or-death situation. Baudrillard, Randy Laist argues, considers death—in its irrevocable reality—to mark the limits of any hyperreal system: "Forces of death continually threaten to undermine the superstructure of hyperreal exchange" (102). Joker displays signs of envy when his comrade teases him for not having the "thousand-yard stare," a psychoanalytic term to refer to war traumas which, in *Full Metal Jacket*, becomes a badge of honor proving a soldier has been able to see humanity for what it really is: "It's like you've really seen beyond" [50:29]. Ironically, however, Joker's very desire to see past the veil of hyperreality and encounter a truth devoid of any mythical bias is itself hardly distinguishable from the other Marines' mythical play-acting. Joker's desire to acquire the thousand-yard stare is shared by his comrades and can also be interpreted as a desire for "regeneration through violence," which Richard Slotkin (2010) argues to be at the core of the frontier myth; according to the cultural historian, the myth characterizes the pioneer's escape from civilization, and into the wilderness, as an experience of regenerative violence, away from the corruption and falsity of civilization. Joker's need to face death in order to see the reality of mankind can thus paradoxically be interpreted as a desire to tear down the mask of society typically associated with the frontier myth, one befitting Hellman's assertion that "Vietnam's new frontiersmen were implicitly depicted as following the original pioneers in escaping the [...] corruptions of civilization" (142). The character's quest for unadorned truth, in effect, echoes the frontiersman's virile acceptance of the violence of reality epitomized by the piercing, lucid gaze of John Wayne's characters in the Westerns of John Ford.
- 33 The Marines' progression inside Hué ironically evokes the regenerative experience of exploring the wilderness, as the maze of the burnt down city evokes some of the characteristics associated with the outdoor space of the Hollywood Western, albeit transposed in an urban environment. Joker's squad, led by Cowboy, evokes the trope of the US cavalry claiming possession of a wild territory: a lateral tracking shot depicting the Marines running through the building in order to save their fallen comrade [94:45] notably evokes tracking shots depicting the cavalry charging to rescue the threatened civilians from the Indians in Westerns such as *Stagecoach*. On the other hand, the enemy sniper's invisible menace is reminiscent of the way classical Westerns depict Indians as an invisible threat, blending with their wild environment and killing silently, a trope also visible in *Stagecoach* through the first arrow shot at the American travelers from an unseen enemy [70:31]. This parallel proves, however, highly ironic, as the Marines, unlike Western cavalymen, have neither purpose nor direction: the climactic conflict arises after the squad has gotten lost and happens to walk through an area guarded by an enemy sniper in an effort to reach their actual destination. Furthermore, the urban wilderness that is Hué hardly harbors the purifying potential of the mythical wilderness. Regeneration through violence proves highly problematic in this climactic conflict. The parallel between Hué and the Western's regenerative wilderness thus reinforces the profound ambiguity of Joker's quest for truth, as the inadequacy of Vietnam to fit the frontier myth paradoxically also suggests that Hué may not enable the protagonist to reach any untainted reality, as this very notion is essentially a mythical one.
- 34 Joker finally faces the reality of death, in the film's last sequence which problematizes the protagonist's quest for truth [103:18-109:59]. His killing the enemy sniper who was

begging for death is highly paradoxical: it is both an affirmation of toughness and an act of mercy. The moral conundrum at the heart of the scene cannot be easily resolved. Joker encounters the overwhelming reality of death; the music subsides, with just a few deep, cavernous notes, and a lengthy close-up of his face highlights the awesome complexity of his emotions (Fig. 7). Not only did Joker have mixed feelings about killing, but his enemy turned out to be a teenage girl who managed to kill three of his friends, therefore turning this final victory into a highly bittersweet, anticlimactic one—an act inadequate to fit any mythical framework.

Fig. 7

Joker staring at the awesome reality of death

- 35 Yet the overwhelming complexity of the scene is negated by Joker's partners, who instantly integrate his killing within the mainframe of the frontier narrative and its ethos of regeneration through violence: by facing death in the eyes, Joker has proven his toughness; he is a "badass," a true soldier. Rafterman's high-pitched laughter and subsequent comments chillingly trivialize the awesomeness of what has been witnessed [107:30]. The character appears to celebrate a perfect, unilateral victory. In the final scene, Joker eventually seems to adopt such a simplified narrative: "I am in a world of shit, yes. But I am alive, and I am not afraid" [109:27]. The spectacle of the unadorned reality of death has been turned into a story of killing as part of a frontier *bildungsroman*, in which a man's encounter with violence and savagery results in his symbolic rebirth, a regenerative experience indeed. The tragic outcome as to the imposition of this grand narrative upon reality is ironically evoked as the soldiers summon Mickey Mouse in the midst of a blazing urban Vietnam, thus distorting the ideal of the frontiersman shining the light of civilization through the wilderness. The jarring quality of the soundtrack suggests that the Mickey Mouse Theme Song expresses the need for the soldiers to cling to simple, regressive make-believe, while the imagery depicts a reality too baffling—and too bleak—to hold any meaning of its own (Fig. 8).

Fig. 8

The *Mickey Mouse Theme Song* is invoked as the Marines walk through a blazing Vietnam.

- 36 Jean Baudrillard refers to Mickey Mouse and more generally to Disney theme parks as representative of the loss of reality which is symptomatic of modernity (24). In Disneyworld, the real is evinced as the world becomes fashioned in the image of an image: that is, a fake environment is constructed to refer to previous fictive representations. By singing along and asserting his desire to live on, Joker thus seems to abandon all desire to see past the filter of hyperreality and to wallow in the reassuring balm of mindless play-acting, where Mickey Mouse and John Wayne become interchangeable. Unbiased, objective reality is thus depicted as both unattainable and—if one nonetheless tries to reach it—too unbearable a presence to be faced without the support of a mythical framework. With *Full Metal Jacket*, consequently, Kubrick asserts that Vietnam did not represent an end to America's mythical perceptual framework, despite its manifold denunciations, as such a grand narrative satisfies a fundamental, irrevocable human need to deny reality. That need lives on, in the demystified postmodern age, as a set of signs to imitate.
- 37 Kubrick's hyperreality, unlike Baudrillard's, does not stem from the sheer quantity of representations which govern our contemporary lives; rather, it results from the human desire to shield oneself from the absurdity of the world—one which, the film implies, cinema may easily satisfy if used as a purveyor of illusions. The adjective "absurd" is frequently associated with the Vietnam War, perceived by many as a useless butchery which provoked a deep feeling of senselessness to all its participants.¹² In *Full Metal Jacket*, the absurdity of the war takes on a philosophical dimension akin to the speculations of Albert Camus in *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942). Beyond the veil of one's mythical perception of the world lies the absurd reality of a universe which does not make any sense; absurdity thus arises from the disconnection between mankind's desire to make sense of the world and its ontological senselessness (Camus 266). The 1987 film's depiction of a reality which mankind is incapable to face thus suggests that the Vietnam War may have destroyed the credibility of the mythical framework which structured America's self-representation, but its image lives on, as its reenactment enables humans to avert their eyes from the absurdity of a senseless world. The

frontier may be dead, but its image is immortal. For, as Joker's final reaction implies, it is better to act as though the world made sense rather than to face its absurdity. The Marines who fight for the preservation of their hyperreality are, in effect, determined to "defend to the death [their] rights to be misinformed."

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NOTES

1. Slotkin quotes P.F. Kluge's 1972 article in *Life*, which summarizes John Wayne's persona: "[Wayne] has been a leatherneck and he has been a Green Beret, but he has gone on being a cowboy" (Slotkin 1998, 513).
2. Gérard Genette defines architexts as indications of a text's "taxonomic category" (11).
3. Pratap Rughani considers the 1968 Tet Offensive—central to the plot of *Full Metal Jacket*—to have marked a turning point in the representation of the war by the independent media, which ceased to massively support the war and began to depict it under a more negative light, through violent footage fueling anti-war sentiment and decridbilising both ideological justifications of the conflict and government-approved footage (2015, 320).
4. Jack Nicholson claims Kubrick said this (Harlan 2001).
5. A failure analysed at length by such influential scholars as Michel Ciment (Ciment 2004).
6. On the rejection of Otherness in *Full Metal Jacket*, see Willoquet-Maricondi, 2010.
7. The highly subjective quality of Kubrick's films has been analyzed at length by Mario Falsetto (2001).
8. *Platoon's* claim of authenticity was notably supported by Charlie Sheen, who opposes Coppola's fantastic vision ("He wasn't there.") with Stone's realism: "[*Platoon* shows] what the guys really went through" (Sheen 1986).
9. As Filippo Ulivieri points out, the film's English setting was widely publicized prior to the film's release. Journalists relished in highlighting what they saw as yet another eccentricity from the legendary director who refused to take a plane. Such publicity therefore encouraged the viewer's perception of the setting as an unrealistic Vietnam (221-40).

10. "Some of the buildings were absolute carbon copies of the outer industrial areas of Hue," Kubrick claimed (Cahill 1987).

11. Archival evidence suggests Kubrick was aware of the lack of Vietnamese perspective of the war, which could be reproached him. Screenplay co-writer Gustav Hasford wrote him, during pre-production, that "There should be a Vietnamese character to represent, summarize the Vietnamese position. We totally lack a Vietnamese point of view" (Hasford 1985). As an exploration of the way past representations still determine reality, however, the film's absence of any alternate point of view is justified.

12. Michael Herr, co-writer of *Full Metal Jacket*, captured the sense of absurdity of the Vietnam War in his 1977 book *Dispatches*.

ABSTRACTS

This article focuses on the representation of the frontier myth as an ideological bias shaping one's perception of the Vietnam War in Stanley Kubrick's 1987 *Full Metal Jacket*. This article argues that whereas various Vietnam War films released prior to *Full Metal Jacket* depicted the frontier myth as a distorting lens imposed upon the reality of the conflict, the specificity of Kubrick's film lies in its depiction of the myth as a narrative believed by no one, yet actively playacted by everyone. Such a paradoxical endurance of a discarded myth is examined through Jean Baudrillard's notion of "hyperreality", which sheds light on the metafictional and phenomenological dimensions of *Full Metal Jacket* as an exploration of both the impossibility to access an unbiased perception of reality and the attractiveness of representation.

Cet article examine la façon dont *Full Metal Jacket* (Stanley Kubrick, 1987) dépeint le mythe de la frontière comme un biais idéologique ayant façonné la perception de la Guerre du Vietnam. Il suggère que tandis que plusieurs films centrés sur cette guerre et sortis avant l'œuvre de Kubrick font de la frontière un mythe déformant la réalité dont il s'agit de dénoncer les effets illusoires, *Full Metal Jacket* présente quant à lui le mythe comme un grand récit auquel personne ne croit, mais que tout le monde s'empresse néanmoins de simuler. La survivance paradoxale d'un mythe pourtant décrédibilisé est examinée à travers le prisme de la notion « d'hyperréalité » telle que définie par Jean Baudrillard. Cette étude met l'accent sur la dimension phénoménologique et métafictionnelle de *Full Metal Jacket*, film qui explore l'impossibilité d'accéder à une réalité objective tout en interrogeant le pouvoir d'attraction de la représentation.

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