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Joseph van der Naald
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The mission as a master signifier: Documentary film, social change and discourse analysis

Joseph van der Naald

Department of Psychology, Portland State University, P.O. Box 751, Portland, OR 97207, USA.

E-mail: jvandernaald@gradcenter.cuny.edu

Abstract This field note explores the ways in which the documentary *MIND ZONE: Therapists Behind the Front Lines* (forthcoming), directed by Dr. Jan Haaken, moves viewers into innovative and critical stances towards the U.S. military mental health program. Using a discourse analysis of the film and transcripts of interviews conducted by Haaken, I trace the deployment of the term “the mission” to show how the film teases apart problematic military discursive practices. Jacques Lacan’s theory of the four discourses is used to analyze how *MIND ZONE*’s content challenges audiences to produce their own critically informed opinions.

Keywords: military mental health; Lacanian discourse analysis; documentary film; ideology; psychology and military

Introduction

In the wake of the Fort Hood massacre of 2009, where former military psychiatrist Major Nidal Malik Hasan was suspected of fatally shooting 13 and injuring 30 individuals at the Fort Hood military base near Killeen, Texas, the question of the American military's infrastructural integrity, on the level of individual soldier health, began to take center stage (CBS News 2009). While the prospect of "radical Islamism" infiltrating a United States military stronghold became a fear promulgated by numerous American media outlets, this propagation conceals a much deeper question raised by the Fort Hood tragedy: namely, what, given the well-documented record of Hasan's mental health, is the U.S. military doing that could have allowed someone so troubled to evade detection (Zwerdling, 2009)? What has been brought into the spotlight after Fort Hood is the reality of the U.S military's use of psychology at home and abroad to mitigate the traumas of war and maintain the War on Terror's fighting force.

This field note explores the subversive capacity of film to move the viewer into a critical position with regard to ideology; specifically ideology transmitted through the U.S. Military's discursive strategies vis-à-vis the mission of military mental health personnel. Of particular interest is the way psychoanalytic discourse analysis can elucidate the ways in which film shapes viewers' reactions. Born out of post-production research for the documentary *MIND ZONE: Therapists Behind the Front Lines* (forthcoming), directed by Dr. Janice Haaken, this note examines the film from the perspective of a member of its post-production research team.

Extending Haaken's critique of the mission as contentious and untenable, I show that the discourse theory of Jacques Lacan, along with insights from an interdisciplinary mix of Lacanian discourse analysis scholars (Hook, 2008, 2013; Neill, 2013; Parker, 2010) and Lacanian literary theorist Mark Bracher (1993, 1997) can be used to map military discursive techniques. In doing so, I also demonstrate how films like *MIND ZONE* are ideal tools for subverting ideological discourse because of their ability to place viewers in the position of producing their own interpretations in accordance with repressed desires.

I begin by introducing the film *MIND ZONE*, outlining the problematic nature of military mental health, and presenting a definition of "the mission" for military mental health professionals, a major theme of *MIND ZONE*. Therapists deployed in combat stress control units are asked to undertake two conflicting missions: on the one hand as force multipliers, using psychology to keep soldiers in the fight and thus maintain a large fighting force; and, on the other, as therapeutic healers of soldiers, taking the present and future mental well-being of soldiers as their top priority.

Following this, I introduce relevant psychoanalytic concepts including Jacques Lacan's theory of the four discourses, alongside recent theoretical suggestions from the discipline of psychosocial studies. This theoretical mapping provides a support for reading *MIND ZONE* psychoanalytically.

Using this theoretical assemblage, I analyze how *MIND ZONE* moves its audience through the positions of discourse, into a space that invokes social change. I supplement my analysis of the film with the consideration of interview transcripts used for *MIND*

ZONE. In particular, I examine transcripts of Haaken's interviews with the Colonel of the 113th Army Combat Stress Control unit.

I have chosen the dialogue between the Colonel and Haaken in particular because it raises two important problematics. First, the interview texts display most clearly an exploration of the primary question guiding the documentary, namely: how do military behavioral health personnel simultaneously serve two opposing missions? Second, the Colonel's discourse with Haaken provides an optimistic yet contradictory authoritative voice in favor of the U.S. military agenda, as it uses discursive strategies to shape the public's understanding of military mental health.

These contradictions illuminate the tensions between these professionals' two opposing missions and characterize the Colonel's construction of the military mental health professional, and the viewer, as ideologically conditioned subjects, opening the possibility for providing a psychoanalytic discourse analysis.

MIND ZONE: Synopsis and Background

Born largely out of questions surrounding the Fort Hood massacre of 2009, *MIND ZONE* is a film that seeks to tell the story of military mental health professionals. What particularly alarmed Haaken and the research team about Fort Hood was the lack of attention paid to Hasan's mental health, despite previous concerns raised by his colleagues (Zwerdling, 2009). The question of mental health neglect in the U.S. military appears to have increasing relevance, as fatal incidences of mental health-related violence from those exposed to combat, during and after active duty, has become a trend (Leonnig, 2012; Roberts, 2011; Solomon, 2013). What sort of control does the military really have

over the psychological toll of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan? And what are the techniques of control being implemented to handle this toll?

As Haaken explains in an interview with Democracy Now! ("*Mind Zone*", 2012) the mission for military mental health personnel is an impossible one. While the U.S. military has deployed therapists into war zones since World War I, the combat stress control unit – a finely tuned, rationalized, and combat trained psychiatric team, using the latest scientifically tested psychological techniques to maintain soldier stress levels – represents the military's latest effort to keep troop levels high and psychiatric casualties low ("*Mind Zone*", 2012). No matter how advanced the stress control unit's tactics, however, the mission of both keeping soldiers in the fight and healing trauma presents powerful paradoxes.

Ethically, the work of military mental health personnel is dubious, as it requires clinicians treating traumatized patients to repeatedly re-expose them to traumatic situations. The success of military therapists is measured by return to duty rates, displaying their "efficiency as force multipliers" ("*Mind Zone*", 2012), and soldiers are often brought back into combat quickly if they feel they can do their job. Pressure to maintain the soldier identity and the rejection of what Haaken calls the "feminizing" discourse of therapy, coupled with the normalization of war-related stress reactions, represses mental trauma so that soldiers can return to combat faster ("*Mind Zone*", 2012).

The scope of Haaken's research for the documentary is expansive, as the film investigates both the domestic side of the military's mental health practices, interviewing therapists employed at the Veterans Administration Medical Center in Portland, OR, as well as mental health personnel stationed on military bases (only after being approved by

the United States Army's Chief Officer of Public Affairs in March 2011). Pre-production preparation for the film consisted of two components: first, interviewing more than 50 VA Medical Center and military mental health personnel, mainly on the subjects of combat stress and treatment during military service; second, archival research focusing on the history of resiliency training, forward psychiatry, and combat stress control.

After shooting more than 60 hours of footage at domestic bases, in June 2011 Haaken and the film crew traveled to Afghanistan, where they would be stationed with the 113th Combat Stress Control Detachment. The purpose of this field research was both to investigate how psychology, in the form combat stress control, was being utilized with soldiers on the ground in warzones, and to examine more closely the performance of military mental health personnel as they undertake the daunting task of controlling a seemingly uncontrollable situation.

Some of the film's most emotional segments occur when the spotlight is focused on the Colonel, leader of the 113th. Haaken's interviews with the Colonel span a number of different topics: from his personal struggles as a young man of color growing up in Chicago, to his opinions about the virtues of the military identity for soldiers looking for guidance, structure and purpose, to the intersecting roles of soldier and psychologist.

A significant aspect of the Colonel's interviews, as he emphasizes the importance of maintaining a military identity and sticking to the prescribed mission, is that his power and expertise constructs the United States Military's ideal soldier-therapist for the audience. The Colonel displays his dependency on equivocal language to negotiate the paradoxes of this dual role, as he speaks with authority about the mission of military mental health as identical to that of the force multiplier. However, despite the Colonel's

certainty in regards to the mission, his language also obfuscates the complicated narrative of military mental health professionals, masking over the dual role with a singular meaning.

Nevertheless, the Colonel metaphorically links the signifier “mission” to “force multiplier” – anchoring its meaning and fixing its nodal points (Hook, 2008), while also structurally repressing other signified meanings through the subject’s insistence that “‘this is the way things are’, that it is not subject to challenge or dissent” (Parker, 2005, p. 170). The mission operates here as a master signifier, placing the Colonel in what Lacan would have called “the discourse of the Master.”

The Theory of the Four Discourses

The discourse of the Master is one of the four fundamental structures of discourse in Lacan’s (1991, 2007) theory of the four discourses, derived from the 1969 seminar, *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, in which he posited that “what dominates society is the practice of language” (p. 107). For Bracher (1993), the value of Lacan’s theory of the four discourses lies in its emphasis on the role discourse plays in subjective psychological changes, and the consequent effects these changes have on society. Lacan postulated that discourse functions as a structuring force “subsist[ing] in certain fundamental relations” (Bracher, 1997, p. 107), both psychological and social, that governs the way subjectivity is constituted.

For Lacan, discourse “exercises force in the social order” (Bracher, 1997, p. 108) through the appeal to individuals’ subjective desires, while simultaneously constituting subjects’ identity, desire and sense of being. Thus, “all determination” – the function of

discourse to form one's ontology, identity, and desire – “of the subject, and therefore of thought, depends on discourse” (Lacan, 1991/2007, p. 152). “A change in discourse can produce” for Lacan, “changes in ... psychological and social realities” (Bracher, 1997, p. 108).

The theory of the four discourses provides a structural model to express how changes come about in the social bonds between individuals in discourse (Verhaeghe, 1995). Lacan’s theory accounts for four basic social phenomena, namely “educating, governing, desiring and protesting, and transforming or revolutionizing” (Bracher, 1997, p. 107).

The four fundamental structures of discourse, and the effects evoked by these discourses, are derived from the positioning of four “psychological functions” (Bracher, 1997, p. 108) into four different discourse positions.

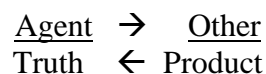


Figure 1. The four discourse positions. Adapted from Bracher, 1997, p. 54.

The left-hand side of the schema (see Figure 1) represents the speaking subject while the receiving other is represented on the right-hand side. The positions of “agent” and “other” represent the manifest content in discourse, and positions of “truth” and “product” represent latent or repressed content. The top left is reserved for the “agent” – the speaker who plays the active role in discourse – addressing the “other” – the receiver of the discourse – and is activated by the psychological factor in the agent position. The position at bottom left represents the desire, or hidden truth, that drives the speaker. Lastly, the position at the bottom right of the schema represents discourse’s effect on the receiver.

The four psychological functions include “knowledge” (S_2), master signifiers (S_1), “self-division” (\$) and the *petit objet a*. These functions occur in a fixed relationship with one another and rotate clockwise in the above positions. Depending on the factor that occupies the speaking agent, different effects are produced in each of the four discourses, resulting in one of the four basic social phenomena (Verhaeghe, 1995).

The discourse of the Master, where the master signifier is the agent position, and knowledge is in the position of the other, is characteristic of speech that asserts tyrannical and dominant ideologies. As master signifiers are imposed on the subject, discourse is locked down and meaning imperialized through totalizing rhetoric (Bracher, 1993).

Master signifiers both anchor meaning in an “ideological field” (Hook, 2008, p. 400) and delineate a concept through discursive insistence, which, effectively shuts down differing interpretations and dissent (Parker, 2005). A speaker who adopts the use of a master signifier in the discourse of the Master (S_1) suppresses the evocation of other signifiers corresponding to their repressed desire – for example the *objet petit a* which holds “the power of revolution” (Bracher, 1993, p. 64)

The goal, for Bracher (1993), is to move a subject from the ideologically interpellated position of the discourse of the Master to the discourse of the Analyst, generating new master signifiers that promote social change. The subject is required to come to terms with her own alienation by master signifiers by placing the *a* – the repressed desire and truth of the subject – into the dominant agentic position. The discourse of the Analyst requires the subject to “recognize, acknowledge, and deal with this excluded portion of being, to the extent of producing a new master signifier (S_1)” (Bracher, 1993, p. 68), replacing the alienating master signifier imposed on her by ideological discourses.

Bracher's (1993) "analytic strategy" (p. 14) – his cultural critique of ideological interpellation – modeled after Lacan's discourse of the Analyst uses discourse analysis to bring about psychological and social change through an awareness of ideological tyranny exercised through language. The goal of discourse analysis, then, is for audiences to produce their own values in accordance with their repressed desires so as to bring about radical social change (Bracher, 1993).

Discourse analysis, however, is a creative process, as there is no metalanguage, no "universe of discourse" (Neill, 2013, pg. 337) that gives one reader privileged access to the objective truth of a subject's utterance from the outside. To adopt a method of interpretation that naturalizes one meaning over another would fall prey to an imaginary identification, and would reassert an ideological discursive practice that social change hopes to dissolve. Instead, one might realize that the specific master signifier that I have identified here provides but one of many potential readings (Neill, 2013). One must, as Neill (2013) and Bracher (1993) suggest, approach discursive analysis as the play of specific signifiers for the purpose of exploring numerous interpretations.

Discursive Analysis and Critique

Bracher's (1993) analysis pushes the boundaries of psychoanalytic discourse theory beyond the realms of the clinic, as his cultural criticism places media into the agential subject position in Lacan's framework (for example, his analysis of political-rhetorical discourse in Ronald Reagan's television broadcasts), examining the effects of discourse on viewers as receivers. The analysis of film from a psychoanalytic discursive perspective demonstrates, as in the work of Ian Parker (2010), a "tailoring of theoretical

frameworks to a particular domain, rather than the simple transposition of concepts from the clinical context to an interview” (p. 158). *MIND ZONE* is a worthy text to be analyzed in this fashion, as its subject matter, as discursive agent, presents viewers with untenable ideologies in the form of military mental health rhetoric.

One of the foremost examples of ideological discourse *MIND ZONE* presents to the viewer is the tension over the content of the signifier “mission.” The mission, for military mental health professionals as force multipliers, is to keep soldiers in the fight, while simultaneously maintaining a sense of military brotherhood and identity, which is also the key to healing traumatized soldiers.

The Colonel: Taking the soldier away from where he or she feels connected can do more damage in the long run than taking that soldier and sending that soldier home ... There is a lot of thought and time that is put into creating the military identity ... But when you strip that identity from a person who has embraced it you’re doing more harm than good (personal communication, July 9, 2011).

Against the Colonel’s declaration that the maintenance of this identity is the key to healing traumatized soldiers, Haaken contends that the goal of healing mentally traumatized soldiers and the mission of keeping soldiers on the battlefield serve differing purposes and cannot be conceived of unitarily. What Haaken detects is the emergence of a fissure within the concept of the mission, in which one meaning (the force multiplier) overshadows the other (the mental health mission). The Colonel’s rhetoric shows the importance of Derek Hook’s (2013) argument with regard to tracing symbolic minutia, as the subtle manipulation of the signifier mission “performed in a particular societal

context” gives the Colonel’s utterance great “symbolic weight” (p. 249), allowing the analyst to map power’s symbolic workings.

Despite Haaken’s contentions, the Colonel insists on the unity of the overall military mission, arguing that the two missions are one and the same. The Colonel’s denial is always also an appeal to the U.S. Military’s omniscience, exposing the grounding of his claims in an ideological authority:

The Colonel: I wouldn’t say it’s separate. I would say it’s – everything’s connected to everything. You’re not going to seize and hold ground if you have soldiers who are not mentally fit or combat ready. You’re not. So I think it’s all associated and connected to – And that’s why we’re here.

It’s to accomplish the mission. ... You’re going to have casualties. ... That is the cost of war. You’re going to have people who are depressed, and people who are anxious, people who are tormented. But that’s part of war. We are at war. America. We are at war (personal communication, July 9, 2011).

The film’s presentation of military mental health rhetoric places its discourse first in the discourse of the Master, as the Colonel, addressing Haaken and the viewer, structurally represses other signified meanings of the mission through his insistence that “‘this is the way things are’, that it is not subject to challenge or dissent” (Parker, 2005, p. 170). While the Colonel is manifested by the master signifier, “a sense escapes, contradictions abound, and an opposition is created” (Neill, 2013, p. 345) – the *objet petit a*.

Haaken’s contentions move the film into the discourse of the Hysteric, as viewers identify with her impassioned questioning of the nature of the mission.

Haaken: [the] mission ... to stay alive and bring my unit back alive ... that's a different mission than the overall military objective. The Army's aim militarily is to seize and hold ground. Now, but then there's a mental health mission that's separate from that. So when you talk about the mission, which mission the military's overextended so it's been forced to embrace mental health in the way it didn't in the past. It's not just an enlightenment of policy, it's partly – you can't just keep telling, commanding people to march on. ... the force multiplier concept worries me, it's kind of like giving athletes steroids to keep going in the short run (personal communication, July 9, 2011).

The subject in the discourse of the Hysteric challenges the societal structures that master signifiers instantiate (Neill, 2013). The discourse of the Hysteric exemplifies a subject who is resistant to satisfaction offered by the embodiment of societal master signifiers (Bracher, 1993); it positions the speaker as the lacking “agent” (\$), motivated by an urge (the *objet petit a*), challenging the other (S_1) as producer of knowledge (S_2). The subject position of the hysteric is embodied by someone who is denied, or “barred from” (Parker, 2010, p. 165), knowledge, challenging the authority figure as one who possesses the master signifier.

While the discourse of the Hysteric does indeed push the receiver into a position of questioning oppressive discourse, it is, in itself, inadequate for achieving social change. This is because it is dependent on receiving a master signifier from the other instead of producing one for itself (Bracher, 1993).

Through the discourse of the Analyst, on the other hand, one can overcome the tyranny that is exercised socially and psychologically in language, effectively working towards social change (Bracher, 1993). The discourse of the Analyst forces the subject to come to terms with his own alienation and desire by placing the *a* – the remainder produced in the Colonel’s master discourse – into the dominant agentic position. The discourse of the Analyst requires the subject to “recognize, acknowledge, and deal with this excluded portion of being, to the extent of producing a new master signifier (S_1) in response to it” (Bracher, 1993, p. 68).

It is here that one can begin to understand why *MIND ZONE* fosters critique; *MIND ZONE* moves past the discourse of the Hysteric, positioning itself agentially into the discourse of the Analyst in relation to the viewer. Paradoxically, *MIND ZONE* achieves this position by simultaneously attempting to maintain no position in relation to the material and remaining critical by opening new avenues for understanding the phenomenon it examines. The film works to present military discursive practices evenhandedly to the viewer, while still being explicit about the desire for critique that motivates the film; it presents the subject matter “seeking to understand without seeking to impose, and, through doing so, produces new understandings” (Neill, 2013, p. 347).

Conclusions

The act of analysis both explores and explodes the text it addresses, creating a proliferation of new “meanings which are not in the text as such” (Neill, 2013, p. 347). *MIND ZONE*, however, does not attempt to produce a new, primary, master signifier that restrains this proliferation, arresting the process of signification (Neill, 2013). The film

avoids providing a “correct” interpretation, recreating the very sort of ideological repression that analysis attempts to subvert.

As Calum Neill (2013) notes, the aim of discursive analysis is to explore meaning and challenge the meanings that one initially comes to. While social change is the ultimate goal in the production of a film like *MIND ZONE*, the idea is to put the viewer into a position that questions existing structures, not arrest the viewer’s understanding with a new master signifier. After all, as Lacan’s discourse theory argues, revolutionary potential, and eventually social change, is activated when the viewer is driven to questioning, not when the viewer immediately accepts what is presented as truth.

About the Author

Joseph van der Naald is a post-baccalaureate researcher and graduate of Portland State University. He is currently in the process of applying for Ph.D. programs while assisting Jan Haaken in pre-production research for her upcoming documentary *Milk Men*.

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