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ACTUALITY OR MYSTIFYING SPECTACLE? WAR IN CINEMA AND ELECTRONIC GAMING

by

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ABSTRACT

ACTUALITY OR MYSTIFYING SPECTACLE? WAR IN CINEMA AND ELECTRONIC GAMING

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This essay, using as a jump-off point François Truffaut's view that it is impossible to make a true anti-war film, examines the degree to which certain Hollywood films about war treat the subject as a spectacle for the audience. With the aid of critical articles discussing the war film's presentation from the standpoint of narrative and aesthetic, three films are examined for their ability (or lack thereof) to curtail the tendency of war as entertainment. Furthermore, with the increasing prominence of the videogame as a narrative medium, as well as the prevalence of game narratives dealing with war, the question of the subject's impact being lost on the audience is just as relevant. To that end, this thesis explores examples of games that follow mystifying representations of war in movies along with other titles that reflexively question the player's experience of the subject. It is, on the whole, an effort to apply aspects of film studies to the younger medium.

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1. Introduction

War has always been and will no doubt remain an inscrutable phenomenon to those who do not experience it *a posteriori*. Even for a number of individuals who engage in combat, it is not enough that a term is served; the sheer impact of the experience can lead to Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), a debilitating condition difficult to treat. It is a single, simplistic, and broad example, but one that holds true. The overall inscrutability of war is easily matched by its implacability— this idea, as well, applies to those who engage in it, whether they actually fight, preside over the conflict, receive information on the news, or otherwise. Thus, the unease of understanding war along with its unyielding ubiquity throughout history naturally leads to the impulse for documentation. Journalistic coverage of international conflicts can privilege the people who do not have to involve themselves in the life or death situations of those actually involved. A myriad of resources, from the more hallowed examples of oration and writing to the relatively younger media based in audiovisual communication, work to that end.

Regardless of the authenticity inherent to these texts, there are limitations to this attribute. It is a fool's game to consider the possibility of any one journalistic text as panoramic with respect to the wartime experience. To use World War II as an example, Joe Rosenthal's Associated Press photograph "Raising the Flag on Iwo Jima" can be metonymic for an aspect of the war, namely the success of the United States over the Axis powers. Nevertheless, even as a real moment captured during wartime, its capacity as a document is limited to associations such as this. Two decades later, on-site news coverage of the US's involvement in Vietnam was widespread, leading to the popular designation of it as the "living room war." Be that as it may, this media phenomenon was, for various reasons, not without its own holes in coverage. Leo Cawley, an ex-marine who served in Vietnam, describes the situation: "The impossibility of filming small unit combat kept the actual fighting off the network news, even though most

people seem to think they saw pretty much all there was to see" (50). He concludes, "…the problem with television is not so much what it shows or doesn't show but the bogus impression it gives of having informed" (50). Cawley's words encapsulate the inherent issue with journalism, even after a considerable deal of technological progression and the further potential for comprehension that comes with it. Media coverage has limitations to begin with when faced with such a phenomenon. Furthermore, there is a danger in the idea that it can objectively transmit the phenomenon to people who do not participate in it firsthand. Despite these shortcomings, attempts to represent war through reportage will persist as it remains a prevalent facet of history.

Journalistic documentary coverage is at a clear representational remove from actual conflict, and further still lies the fictional narrative film. Nonetheless, there is far-reaching demand for films that situate their story within this territory. Jay M. Winter addresses one reason for the prevailing tendency towards this filmmaking subject, writing that, "box office considerations are never absent in the framing and gestation of commercial film" while remarking upon "the perennial popularity of films about combat" (100). There is an essential reassertion of war's simultaneous inscrutability and implacability in these words. On a widespread basis, people will pay money to see a depiction of extraordinary events with such historical and cultural breadth. Many of these viewers, once again, have not been in combat but there is still an urge to be entertained by it.

A subgenre of the war film is the "anti-war film," one that attempts to represent the full extent of the loss and brutality that are immediate consequences of international conflict. There is little to no intention to entertain through an indulgence of depicting the battlefield as spectacular— often enough, the point is to disturb and cause discomfort in them— as the idea of

the anti-war film is to deter the possibility of combat in the future. As war continues to occur, the intention to produce anti-war movies proceeds with it; however, this also raises the question of whether such a conceit can ever be successful. François Truffaut, a prolific director rooted in the French New Wave movement of the 1960s, has expressed views to the contrary. The director contemplated the production of a film regarding Maurice Audin, an Algerian Communist Party member who was arrested and disappeared by French Army authorities during the Battle of Algiers. Truffaut decided against it though, commenting that "Perhaps it could be done by sticking to the facts. But a fiction film entails looking for other people's motives, not just their political motives but their personal motives…for to show something is to ennoble it" (in Baecque and Toubiana 164). Truffaut was concerned that giving any narrative weight to this kind of atrocity leaves the possibility open for Audin's captors to elude condemnation, defeating the proposed text's purpose. The director's association of ennoblement with filmic display speaks even further to the medium's difficulty in representing war— whether this refers to, for example, the complex sociocultural circumstances surrounding it or the psychological repercussions from different standpoints. To be sure, if the idea of condemning war through film is problematic, representing it in a non-slanted fashion appears scarcely possible.

Despite this, war films are still stalwarts of cinematic narrative, for whatever purpose their stories are told. As several popular narrative films concerning war continued to release throughout the 1980s, another audiovisual medium was realizing its own potential as a widespread form of entertainment. Electronic gaming, in the fledgling years of home consoles, paled in comparison to film in its accuracy of visual representation. There is little wonder that many of the initial characters on screen, of such limited pixel quantities, were accompanied by similarly limited narratives. *Pong* (1972), one of the perennial examples of early gaming, is

nothing more than a simulation of table tennis. *Super Mario Bros.* (1985) has a loosely told story that is more or less an ancillary "feature" of the game. Normative storytelling in popular gaming is certainly more of a recent quality of the medium, and in the last decade or so, this quality has progressed along with the verisimilitude of the visuals. More importantly, just as gaming representation has become more capable of affording the player conceits of realism, developers have placed a significant priority on making games about warfare.

Combat has always been a fairly integral component in gaming's enduring titles. The aforementioned *Super Mario Bros.* contained a non-graphic appropriation of it through its fantastical, child-friendly presentation. In the 90s, the First-Person Shooter (FPS) genre became popular in arcades and at home with games such as *Wolfenstein 3D* (1992), *Doom* (1993), and the adaptation of the 1995 James Bond film *Goldeneye* (1997). With this latter title, there was an indirect precedent set for games of this type to narratively engage with historical wars. The online article "The making of: Medal of Honor," describes how Stephen Spielberg was inspired to develop the World War II-based FPS *Medal of Honor* (1999)— in the midst of production for 1998's *Saving Private Ryan*— after watching his son play the Bond game (*edge-online.com*). The following decade took this even further with a variety of FPS series centered around warfare, be it historical or fictional. By the end of the decade, the priority shifted fully towards a presentation that favored modern military aesthetics. The immense popularity and success achieved by *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* (2007) maintained the demand for similar looking titles in series such as *Battlefield* and even the originator *Medal of Honor*.

This simultaneity between the rise of the "Modern Warfare" aesthetic in gaming and the increase in the medium's overall visual fidelity can be located in a simple pretension of the format. As an audiovisual form of narrative, there is a more pronounced capacity for immersion

with video games. While film has many formal cues that can align its spectators with the characters onscreen, video gaming (and especially FPS games) at its base intends to engage its players with direct agency over most of the in-game actions. Thus, the impulse to understand armed combat outside of actual experience, or at the very least glean entertainment out of it as in film finds a potentially stronger representational medium.

Where the conceit of a more accurate portrayal falters, again, is in the limitations of this base feature when set against the need to tell a story. With games that place greater emphasis on narrative, the linearity of these titles' storytelling taxes the agency that a player has over the events of the diegesis. It is a norm for a game with an ongoing plot to break up the segments of gameplay with non-interactive segments usually referred to as "cutscenes." These cutscenes are essentially in line with sitting down to watch a film. It is also worth noting that as an audiovisual medium for storytelling, there is the immediate potential for gaming's particular representation of war to, in actuality, be a case of intertextuality. Therefore, instead of playing a game that attempts to simulate armed conflict, the player may engage with a story that relies on transmediality— essentially, a representation of a pre-existing representation. From this standpoint, the same limitations that can affect a film's story content can also move a video game's story in the direction of spectacle rather than provide active engagement with the circumstances involved. The narratives of both media, in this case, favor the audiovisual grandness of the phenomenon over the cultural and psychological impact of it. Few texts go further than that to demystify spectacle by foregrounding their representational limits.

What we are left with is a potentially nebulous situation in terms of the purposes that these narrative media serve by attempting to represent war. Film and video gaming, it can be concluded, cannot accurately represent the complete experience of war to the wide reach of the

population that does not have the experience of it firsthand. At best, however, they can do a great deal to inform viewers and players alike of qualities inherent to the inscrutable and implacable phenomenon. From this perspective, both media cannot represent, but they can stand as texts that strive to do so. Within these bounds, then, there is an informal spectrum upon which filmmakers and game developers can situate their stories about war. On one end, as Winter pointed out, there is the impulse to release entertainment for widespread financial gain; using war as a vehicle for spectacle is a prevailing quality of both gaming and film. On the other, film and gaming can be produced with the aforementioned effort at realism. Further still, texts of these media can function self-consciously with respect to their storytelling artifice. Through self-reflexive devices realized both formally and within the narrative, there are distinct examples of film and video gaming that attempt to inform audiences about the nuances of war while relaying awareness of their representational shortcomings.

The relevant films to be examined are Oliver Stone's *Platoon* (1986), Stanley Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket* (1987), and Ridley Scott's *Black Hawk Down* (2001). Stone's film predominately attempts to inform viewers about the Vietnam War through its formal elements but tends to waver between realism and spectacle in its content. Kubrick is given to some elements of dramatization, but his picture ultimately presents a stark display of Vietnam; as well, a number of touches bring the futility of its representational attempts to the forefront. *Black Hawk Down*, on the other hand, is predominately spectacle. From the standpoint of both form and content, there is a blurring of attempts toward reality in the portrayal of the Battle of Mogadishu. For gaming, the aforementioned *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare*, as well as *Spec Ops: The Line* (2012) will be used as cases. The former title is one of the foremost examples of the spectacle-leaning war narrative in gaming. *Spec Ops*, itself a Third-Person Shooter (TPS)

rather than an FPS, presumes the modern military aesthetic of its more successful peer but does so in order to question a number of tendencies in this style of game along with the player's agency. By applying certain qualities of its forebears, *Spec-Ops* is able to deconstruct these recent archetypes through its gameplay and narrative.

With the film examples, there have been a number of texts written that ascertain which purpose the filmmakers intend in representing armed combat. Referring again to Leo Cawley's text "An Ex-Marine Sees *Platoon*," his comments are useful not just for the specific film to be discussed, or simply for films about Vietnam, but the portrayal of war in general. His writing ascertains certain aspects of content such as the depiction of soldiers and the general atmosphere of war. Also, Cawley's status as a veteran of a commonly represented conflict grants his writing authority over both the aspects of war films to be presumed as realistic and the thinner movie tropes that diminish these qualities. For instance, in reference to the types of actors, and consequently characters that make up stories about war with greater authenticity, Cawley remarks, "War movies don't usually recognize that most wars, including Vietnam, are fought by teenagers" (52). This casting and thus character choice can be tested for the films' accuracy of providing, as he calls it, a "grunt's eye view" of the events (50). For narrative archetypes that Cawley cautions against, his distaste for the brazen, gung-ho veteran soldier is plainly stated with the writing "After all, [a grunt] probably bought some part of the cowboy, tough-guy ethic: every American boy does. But he almost always wises up" (56). Ultimately, what Cawley wants out of film about armed conflict (certainly Vietnam) is a sense of base authenticity in the characters and events in order to achieve a "hidden history" that was not covered by journalistic sources (55).

Other critics who are removed from the same firsthand experiences of war that Cawley had nevertheless stress similar leanings as far as the general imagery of the phenomenon goes.

Ken Betsalel and Mark Gibney address this notion in their more politically charged article "Can

a Film End a War?" They begin by addressing two historical critics' viewpoints on the use of

bloodshed and atrocity in representational visuals. Oliver Wendell Holmes believed that

paintings of atrocities "grow more terrible with familiarity" (in 522) whereas Susan Sontag

would caution against the frequent exposure to such violence for its capacity to induce "boredom

and cynicism" (522). For their part, the authors attest to the effectiveness of depicting violence,

specifically in the context of films produced long after the wars have finished being fought.

Betsalel and Gibney articulate it as such: "This removal from the actual conflict provided

something elemental to the appeal of [later Vietnam-oriented films]…it provided…nuanced story

telling and sparked actual visceral reaction without numbing the audience" (523). The authors'

ruminations on this specific feature of what they deem the more effective Vietnam war pictures

immediately recalls what Cawley writes about the effect of certain more visceral scenes in

Platoon "…this immediately changes to stupefaction as the scene turns to murder and the

reaction becomes 'Wait! This isn't how it goes'" (54). The voices in both articles agree about the

effectiveness of horrific content when it can subvert expectations. Therefore, what Betsalel and

Gibney commit to with their short article in lieu of Cawley's more qualified critical eye still

finds a degree of resonance when evaluating war's representation.

The aforementioned Jay M. Winter affects a similar stance to the preceding texts in his

article "Filming War." His text breaks down the film genre into three distinct phases, the third

(post 1968) being of the greatest pertinence to the views already discussed. He concedes that war

is in essence "unrepresentable," because of its "chaotic character…Battle has no vanishing

point" (104). Expanding upon his idea of the war films' third phase while using Francis

Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979) as well as *Full Metal Jacket* as examples, Winter writes that

these films brought home the concept of "war as madness…both tales of disillusionment and savagery" (108). In a decidedly broader way, Winter finds accord with Cawley, Betsalel and Gibney in his designation of war as inscrutable and unclean. War as chaos, savagery and madness echoes the previous authors in their discussion of how the more effective movies about war subvert narrative expectations through confrontations of shocking imagery. Winter sums up his sentiments of an effective war film by quoting the director and combat veteran Samuel Fuller: "'one which cultivates dignity and does not pursue voyeurism…' Dignity without voyeurism is indeed a good measure of the balance war films aim to achieve. And yet few succeed. The reason is that showing war without terror is a recipe for voyeurism" (110). Beyond once again echoing the previous authors with his remark about "terror," he prescribes the basic necessity for closeness to fidelity of a film narrative that deals with war. War films may not be able to represent the experience accurately, but they stray even further if the imagery brings about pleasure in the viewer. The quality that these three discussions do not take as fully into account, however, is that of film form.

Their contributions examine, for the most part, story content and the general tone of the film with some perspective on the way the films' diegeses are constructed. To that end, Holger Potzsch's essay "Ubiquitous Absence: Character Engagement in the Contemporary War Film" is of significant use. The author examines different film narratives about war through the lens of Murray Smith's book *Engaging Characters*. Smith's text sets up a three part system for the way audiences respond to characters on film: Recognition refers to the acknowledgment of salient human-like characteristics in a character; alignment occurs as the film gives the audience access via plot to a character's subjectivity; allegiance orients the previous two systems towards a moral designation of the character based on how the film's form and plot situate him or her. From these

categories, Smith then sketches a couple of structures for engaging with the characters. The author's Manichaean structural concept refers to a simple moral division between good and evil in a film's characters. For Potzsch, the binary nature of this structure is of the utmost importance when dealing with the contemporary war film.

Essentially, Potzsch argues that the contemporary war film subscribes to a Manichaean structure of character engagement that favors only one side of the depicted conflict. Per the author: "the construction of a biased structure of engagement is motivated that unilaterally aligns and allies the spectator with one side, while it discourages such involvement with the enemy" (128). As a result, the genre fosters a rigidity of interpretation in terms of the phenomenon it attempts to show (128). There is the firm resistance, again, to the idea that war films achieve any considerable fidelity to their subject— this time, issues of political bias arise. Potzsch then explains what formal cues foster the three levels of character engagement: For recognition, the author marks the basic techniques of the close-up and medium shot, along with names and speech to facilitate individuation (129); for alignment, cues such as POV shots, shot/reverse shot, close-ups of faces accompanied by flashback or voiceover narration, and others signal subjective access to a character (129); for allegiance, the techniques of slow motion, glorification through drawn out music, and the combination of these along with extended close-ups to emphasize heroism or suffering earns the audience's sympathy (130). To the contrary, the enemies come off as "others" through quick cuts, foreboding music, or their lack of presence during wary conversation about them (131). In this case, the characters are regarded as "other" in a somewhat Hegelian sense. They are divergent from the norm represented by the side that the protagonist character is a part of; this divergence occurs through a lack of basic features that provide any form of recognition and alignment, let alone allegiance. The enemy is essentially marked by the

camera either featuring them very little or only quickly, to contrast the habituation that the film inundates upon the audience for its central characters— it is to the point that it would be difficult to even consider the diegetic enemies as characters.

These articles, thus, do a considerable job laying the groundwork for close readings of where the chosen films exist in the dichotomy between entertainment and an effort in the direction toward realism. Oliver Stone's *Platoon* is, on the whole, closer to the latter priority than the former one, but there is a palpable tug-of-war at play between these filmmaking impulses. What it lacks is any overriding awareness of its more caricatured aspects, although this reflexivity exists to a degree. In any case, it sets out mostly to dignify what it represents, to echo Sam Fuller's assertion. Based on Stone's own script, which he wrote shortly after serving in Vietnam, it focuses on Private Chris Taylor (Charlie Sheen) as his innocence gradually gives way to experience through grueling, prolonged combat. The film initially wavers between cynicism and hope, which the film represents via Taylor's two immediate poles of authority: the ruthless Sergeant Barnes (Tom Berenger) and the comparatively empathetic Sergeant Elias (Willem Dafoe). Ultimately, Taylor reaches a state of disillusioned ambivalence in regards to both the setting he is in and the country he is serving. The film has something of an episodic layout for its plot.

2. Film Selections

2.1 *Oliver Stone's "grunt's-eye view" of an emotionally-charged Vietnam*

The episodic structure that *Platoon* takes on works to the benefit of reflecting much of the authors' qualities prescribed to war films that strive towards actuality. The time lapses between sequences are rarely signaled so clearly, and what occurs in each is somehow spontaneous and at the same time rote. For instance, the audience becomes overly used to the scenes where the platoon is trudging through jungles as well as the numerous scenes involving idle banter between the troops. However, there is little indication when each of these will begin or end. In addition, the reactions of the characters themselves speak volumes. An example occurs by the end when the sycophantic Sergeant O'Neill (John C. McGinley) addresses a higher-up only to be told he has to lead another platoon into a mission. His cocksure look completely drops in an instant, as a small articulation of the unpredictable tone of war that can affect any one soldier. This type of structure echoes much of what Winter has to say regarding the inability for anyone to pin down war; as Stone rightfully shows through the film's structure, this applies even to people who have been through combat. That his script does not have a deliberate pace leaves the question of war's comprehension hanging. While the film does not have an overabundance of self-awareness, this is the most striking element of this quality.

The director's resistance to clearly structure the soldiers' experience is asserted even further with the specific content of the imagery. As Cawley, Betsalel and Gibney assert, a war film achieves value with shocking visuals that both subvert audience expectations and do not appear oversaturated throughout the text. To this end, the graphicness of Stone's visuals do not bombard the audience, instead being intermittently placed and happening at a moment's notice. For instance, during a late scene in the film when the platoon is hiding from approaching North

Vietnamese Army soldiers, O'Neill hides in a trench and quickly pulls an unidentified corpse over to conceal himself. What this does for the character, a consummate coward and petty bully, is to insert a more morbid dimension to his antagonism. Had it been anyone else, it would have still played into the "not shown on television" ethic that Cawley appreciatively pins on the film. In a further example that asserts the more indirect consequences of combat, there is a jarring cut to a scene that begins with an extreme close-up showing the inflamed foot of "Junior" (Reggie Johnson). While might be more in line with the type of visuals that the public would have access to, the way it is presented reaffirms the movie's overall chaotic feel. Again, Stone does not revel in this type of shock. There are a number of instances where death in Vietnam is shown much less viscerally, as in the opening when Taylor's eyes follow a body bag being carried onto a plane. For a subtler companion to the inflamed foot scene, there is a moment when Rhah (Francesco Quinn) removes heroin from an enemy soldier's pocket. This other contextual moment of truth unseen by the general public is not directly addressed let alone dwelt upon. Instead of bludgeoning the viewer with terror, the director either earnestly acknowledges it or allows it to strike at a moment's notice without dwelling. Winter asserts that terror grants a war film more accuracy, but it can reach a point where any film that overindulges becomes exploitative as a result. Stone finds a balance.

The film also manages to effect the madness and chaos of war. Winter argues this is the central quality that makes it elude clean intellectualization. With Stone using his own experiences as a basis for his script, this awareness comes through via portions of Taylor's intermittent voiceover narration. Early on in the plot, the protagonist gives a verbal cross section of the "grunts" he is surrounded by: "…guys nobody cares about…most of 'em got nothing. They're the unwanted…They're the bottom of the barrel and they know it…They're the best I've

ever seen, grandma." Taylor's explanation for the last line is that the grunts can deal with whatever is given to them, however unfair the circumstances may be. Still, he engages in a contradiction with his attempts to rationalize the situation around him. It is exacting of him to say that "nobody" cares about his fellow infantry (rather than "nobody else") when this remark is set against the conclusion that they are in any case "the best." There is an acknowledgment of the event's chaos with Taylor's designation of his peers (thus himself) as occupying both extremes of societal value. The protagonist sends the point home that he counts himself among this unstably designated group when he remarks "Maybe I finally found it, way down here in the mud. Maybe from down here I can start up again. Be something I can be proud of…" Like the previous quote, on the surface what Taylor says can refer to the archetype of hitting one's nadir in order to start anew. However, there is still a sense of schism between the sentiments laid out. The idea that one can achieve self-actualization by completely lowering oneself presents a figurative rupture in logic. The lack of assurance in Taylor's diction compounds his inability to define his circumstances. All in all, Stone is able to present the madness of war through his main character's failed recourse towards rationalization.

As far as the general character interactions are concerned, they follow the overall schismatic quality of the film's structure. Following the words of Winter and Cawley, there is no consistency in the camaraderie between the supporting characters. On the other hand, their conversations contribute to much of the tension within the platoon. In one scene, the troops may be harmlessly chiding each other over a game of cards or their differing music tastes. During and immediately after combat, however, hair-trigger tempers begin to take over. The unpredictability of their situation can lead to fellow soldiers furiously passing the blame for perceived slip-ups, or in the case of Junior airing out racial grievances at a moment's notice. The exceptions to this rule

are found in the opposition between Barnes and Elias. The dichotomy between the former's embracement of Vietnam's chaos and the latter's struggle to maintain fairness between the soldiers is clear-cut. The film wants its audience to root for Elias, and to hope for his ideology to prevail. If there is any sense of deliberation in the way the film presents its characters, it is through these two moral poles.

In the case of the protagonist, there can be difficulty determining whether Stone characterizes him through a Manichaean binary or portrays him as morally ambivalent. The delineations that Potzsch gives to Smith's theories of character engagement when dealing with war films are thus applied (with some reservations). Of course, it barely needs to be said that the film aligns the audience with Taylor. The formal cues that Potzsch applies to character alignment are frequent throughout the audience's time with him. As the film follows his actions, there are numerous close-ups as well as point of view shots from a variety of angles. Throughout the narrative, we hear his voiceover recite letters to his grandmother at home; ultimately, his take on the war and the US's involvement in it closes the plot. While the audience has the utmost subjective access to Taylor, our allegiance with respect to him is left more ambiguous by the movie's resolution. This lack of ease with respect to a notion of moral centering is foreshadowed in the scene where Taylor and a couple of other soldiers have cornered a disabled, noncompliant villager (Romy Sevilla). The main character furiously questions why the man is not listening to him, and his rage causes him to begin firing at the villager's leg while screaming at him to dance. There is no constructive reason for him to do this, and the character soon stops after realizing this. Another soldier referred to as Bunny (Kevin Dillon) then ends up clubbing the man to death with his rifle butt. The significance of this beat is that it tempts the viewer to see Taylor's acts as comparatively small but with how the film climaxes his innocence is put into question.

The conflict between Elias and Barnes comes to blows, but eventually this reaches a point where Barnes kills him. They encounter each other in the middle of the jungle, point their rifles at one another, and Elias lowers his with a somewhat mocking smile before Barnes takes the shots. Taylor correctly intuits the murder and they get into a similar fistfight later on. At the climax of the film, the protagonist walks through the jungle only to find Barnes crawling on the ground, wounded. The sergeant dares Taylor to shoot him and the latter complies. The significance of this scene is its parallels with the two previously mentioned examples. In establishing the three central characters, Stone misleads the audience into believing this action is fully justifiable. This continues during the ending, when Taylor watches Rhah aggressively raise his arms in a similar style that Elias did before NVA forces finally killed him. The director, in essence, builds up alignment with Taylor for the whole of the plot to instill a false sense of justice when he eventually kills Barnes. He does this by setting up other characters as comparatively deplorable through their actions and a relative lack of alignment. However, Taylor's single action at the end asserts a greater comparison with Bunny and Barnes than with Elias. Just as Bunny kills a handicapped civilian, Taylor kills a wounded ally; Barnes kills an unarmed ally, and Taylor does the same. For the resolution, the protagonist's acknowledgment of Rhah imitating Elias is empty. When the "good sergeant" did it, he was engaging in self-sacrifice, and when Taylor watches Rhah, he is about to go home while the latter still serves. Both occur from a distance, displacing Taylor from this gesture.

By Potzsch's own analysis, audience allegiance is tried by Taylor's final action. The author writes that while it is presumably difficult to ally with a character that commits killings, this is alleviated by "a major atrocity committed by the enemy…that frames these killings as justified…At the same time, an unexpected event often pins down the main protagonist…and as

such precludes retreat as a nonviolent alternative" (131). In the first justification, Potzsch is referring to the "enemy other" represented by whatever oppositional entity the protagonist's army faces, not an antagonistic case such as Barnes. The second example also fails to apply to *Platoon*'s climax because it is Taylor who "pins down" Barnes, not the other way around. The author nonetheless declares that Stone uses psychological trauma to foster allegiance with Taylor throughout the film "even though he severely harasses unarmed villagers" (135). What Potzsch misses is the escalation of atrocity from this harassment that turns Taylor into the type of person he despises in Barnes. Stone does not necessarily close the question of allegiance with the central character. This ambivalence reasserts the film's overriding effort away from spectacle.

With that in mind, however, Potzsch's assertion that the Vietnamese enemy is subject to deindividuation and thus contributes to a bias on the part of the film's presentation holds true. There is nary a scene where the NVA are even brightly lit, to say nothing of how frequently those soldiers elude the camera. Cawley, for his part, argues that this is reflective of the experience that American soldiers had during the war: "The grunts-eye-view the film adheres to presents the Vietnamese from a distance, very much as remote figures in a backdrop. This has been objected to, but it reflects the experience of most of the troops" (55). That the views of the two authors are in conflict is a snapshot of sorts for the film's edging towards the center on the spectrum between actuality and spectacle. As a result of the film subjectively aligning its audience with the American soldiers in general and Taylor in particular, the NVA soldiers are made other. They do not contain even the basic qualities of recognition, making them marginal when juxtaposed with the American soldiers, who are comparatively normalized through identifiable traits or basic formal cues. For Cawley, however the film may choose to align itself, it does so accurately; for Potzsch, this is problematic. The latter author would not argue that the

one-sided perspective of those participating in the overall combat gives audiences genuine access

to the event.

Where the latter author finds further confirmation of the film's one-sidedness is both

from Cawley himself as well as Betsalel and Gibney. The ex-Marine writes in some detail about

certain tactics of the NVA and even the tenets that informed them through quotes from a general

(51). Betsalel and Gibney, as mentioned before, stress the importance of certain films about

Vietnam in terms of their removal of several years from the actual conflict. This remove allows

for audience enlightenment about facts not covered in the news or more mystifying

representations. Cawley's own knowledge relates to this idea in the sense that with significant

enough historical distance from the event, Stone himself would have access to similar

information. This in turn could have provided for a more multifaceted perspective on the conflict

through concession to the army opposite America. Nevertheless, the writer/director's priority

was to present only a portion of actuality years after the conflict. Thus, Cawley's writing

simultaneously validates and invalidates Stone's representation, and the latter side of this

dichotomy is furthered by Potzsch's general interpretation of the film's genre. The shadowing of

the NVA forces, despite being accurate from one perspective, remains an indication of the film's

representational limits.

The constraints on the narrative are the result of determination on the part of the

writer/director. In the case of some of the film's formal particulars, this sense of determination is

stretched to an even further degree. A formal quality that serves as an example is the music. This

is unsurprising, as non-diegetic music in particular is often used to inform a film's emotional

tone; to this end, Potzsch concedes its use to garner allegiance with the "heroic" side of a typical

war movie. *Platoon*, for its part, does not excessively use non-diegetic music throughout the film

for the express purpose of emotional accentuation. However, the timbre of certain pieces as well as the overwhelming quality of another certainly strikes as serving the end that Potzsch illustrates. There is one identifiable cue in the music track that occurs intermittently during scenes of the soldiers carefully moving along the jungles; more notably, it plays before Taylor kills Barnes. It consists of sparse percussion and woodwind, along with strained strings of varying registers. Without question, this leitmotif of sorts serves to emphasize the anticipation and strain collectively felt by the American soldiers. For most of the cue's use, the deliberateness of it is betrayed by its redundancy. Cawley speaks of the general fidelity of the scenes it usually accompanies, wherein "the misery of the rain is followed almost immediately by the misery of the insects that come out a moment after the rain stops" (51). These two aspects are signaled a significant deal through the sound design that favors their presence. Thus, the addition of music to align and furthermore ally the audience with the American characters is questionable. The diegetic sounds of rain, plants, and insects not only serve the same purpose as the music track but they do so in order to provide the semblance of actuality. The use of this cue during the scene where Taylor executes Barnes is, however, slightly more fitting in the vein of the former character's ambivalent heroic status. Since it predominately played during scenes of jungle warfare earlier on, its use for this climax achieves the blurring of the audience's admiration by associating Taylor with the enemies his platoon had previously anticipated. Still, this moment ends up falling into Potzsch's trap of presenting the opposing side as an ill defined other when this type of association is put to use. Thus, while there is an instance of the prevalent non-diegetic cue providing an aware moment of commentary against mythologizing war, its overriding use contributes to the other end.

The aforementioned cue presents its form of over determined artifice, but that quality is mobilized even more through the use of Samuel Barber's "Adagio for Strings" on a few occasions. The piece is identifiable for its building, mid to high-register phrases of utter melancholy. It plays during four scenes: in the opening as Taylor arrives for duty and surveys the desolate scene, while the soldiers burn down a village after confronting the locals, during a montage of rote patrols in the jungles, and at the end as Taylor departs. This portion of the music track is used in a blunt, abrupt way, and similarly to the jungle raid piece comes off as redundant with respect to what the film shows. That the imagery involved is violent and tragic is articulated enough by itself. Furthermore, the piece's presence during the accompanying scenes overwhelms the rest of the soundtrack. This is to the point of overriding the focus away from the images, even. The use of the Barber piece has been attributed to the film's editor, Claire Simpson, "who found it very difficult to watch much of the footage depicting the horrors of war…[she] would hum…'Adagio for Strings' to help her get through it. Ultimately, Stone found it to be the perfect accompaniment…" (Chew et al. 156). The director's spontaneous inclusion of the piece— along with Simpson's idea to use it as personal accompaniment for her editing— explains its status as a formal tool simply for the sake of manipulating the audience's response. Furthermore, the last minute decision to use it accounts for its arbitrariness. In addition, the filmmakers' choice brings to mind Betsalel and Gibney's arguments about the use of violence in cinematic portrayals of war. Their stance that visceral imagery should figure into the visual narration without appearing overabundant applies. The Barber cue is played over scenes featuring wounded men, burning huts, and mass graves. These images are not excessively lingered upon, for instance with the use of extreme close up or sustained long takes to emphasize their graphicness; at the same time, they are not stylized with quick cuts or sustained reaction shots. Their content speaks for itself in

a stark but ultimately moderate way. In that sense, the use of "Adagio for Strings" lessens the impact of the images as shocking actualities by over-informing them as tragic.

In the case of the film's non-diegetic pop music, however, there is something to be said about its fairly reflexive inclusion. The film uses three songs for the scenes of downtime between the troops: "Tracks of My Tears" by Smokey Robinson, "Okie From Muskogee" by Merle Haggard, and Jefferson Airplane's "White Rabbit." The Haggard song is integrated in a fairly neutral way with respect to the film's presentation of war; its lyrics lean on the side of authenticity in their accuracy based on the time period and as a reflection of that period's spirit. The Robinson song, on the other hand, reflects more of a schismatic perspective from the scene in which it is placed. Its lyrics contrast the speaker's outwardly bright and cheerful demeanor with his inward melancholy. Indeed, the soldiers recapitulate the song's situation through their mutually stoned and celebratory karaoke of sorts. What works as a simultaneous respite for the audience and the characters still betrays its limitations as such when considering the events surrounding the characters' joy. Preceding the Robinson song, the Jefferson Airplane tune— perennial almost to the point of cliché for its association with the 60s in general and drug experiences in particular— begins, initially buried in the diegesis, as Taylor smokes cannabis for the first time. After taking another hit, this time through the barrel of Elias's shotgun, the song rises in volume while the song's "feed your head" refrain plays. The significance of this buildup is twofold. While the song builds aural prominence by the close of its lyrics, this final verse begins with the line "when logic and proportion have fallen sloppy dead." That line prompts Elias to cock his shotgun so he can pass the hit to Taylor. In turn, it both prompts the instability of the main character's mental state as well as the absurd image of using an instrument of death

to bring about euphoria. With the selection of the film's diegetic music, the audience gets both accuracy in its setting and an acknowledgment of its subject.

2.2 Action movie tropes and archetypal characterization in *Black Hawk Down*

The director and filmmakers behind *Platoon* may have sensationalized some of its qualities, but the resulting text has overriding aspects that either shy away from this kind of voyeurism or attempt to express the inscrutability of war. 15 years later, Ridley Scott, in adapting Mark Bowden's novel *Black Hawk Down*, achieves an effect opposite to films like this. John McGuigan details the ways that the Battle of Mogadishu's cinematic rendering inaccurately depicts the conflict and oversimplifies Bowden's novel in the article "On the Danger of Heroes." He writes that the movie "completely erases the irreducible complexities the book evoked to explain the incident…[which] shows the generic formulas of war fiction to be inadequate" (222). His critique is useful in that its application can be broadened beyond the portrayal of the single conflict to that of war in general. Through locating the extent of the factual inaccuracies in Scott's movie, McGuigan ends up coinciding with the thoughts of previous authors such as Winter, Cawley, Potzsch, Betsalel and Gibney. At the movie's base, the voyeuristic way it presents the narrative and character interactions recalls Winter's conclusion about the problematic qualities of the war film genre. The way it visually orients certain characters, as well as the dialogue between them affirms the intention to titillate audiences.

As the novel that forms its basis, *Black Hawk Down* retells the dire circumstances surrounding the US capture of two top advisors of Somali militia leader Mohamed Farrah Aidid; all the while, the country is embroiled in a civil war. In particular, it explores the arcs of United States soldiers from disparate military divisions as they find themselves locked in combat with the militants of Mogadishu. If there were an expectation for the common war film to avoid

mystification in its presentation, it would be difficult to consider this movie under such a category. Instead, it is easier to regard *Black Hawk Down* as an "action movie about war" than simply a "film about war." The "generic formulas" that McGuigan speaks of and other authors denounce are abundant in the film, such as a sense of bias with respect to the opposing forces in conflict; a great deal of closed, archetypal renderings of characters rather than ambivalent ones; numerous instances of comic relief to diffuse the situation; and an overall tone of anticipation and catharsis, among other qualities.

To extend the designation of Scott producing an "action movie about war," it is useful to compare the film's general structure with that of *Platoon*. It is true that the events portrayed in each movie drastically differ in their necessary timeframe; the Vietnam narrative deals with multiple months in a single soldier's tour while the Mogadishu raid lasted just two days. However, with the 2001 film, there is an urge for the audience to minutely ascertain a linear path towards its resolution. This is indicated through onscreen timecards showing this aspect of the setting to the minute in some cases. As the plot goes on, its linearity does not waver, with one beat cleanly precipitating another and few (if any) breaks in the progression. There is no sense of synchronic time as a result, which could have been a possible way to disrupt such an immaculate plot layout. In *Platoon* it is seldom clear how far along Taylor is in his tour unless he alludes to it in the dialogue. These ellipses are furthered by the asides in the form of his voiceover letters that do not give the spectators any other clear indication about the passage of time. Ultimately, the later film's blueprint goes against the general tendency that Winter ascribed to the more "dignified" portrayals of war.

Leaving the overlying structure aside, the action that fills the screen is unrelenting. For almost 90 of the approximately 140 minute runtime, there is a predominating kinesis to the plot,

which is achieved through generally rapid editing, frantic camera movement, and an overload of sound. These aesthetics make the events of the plot overwhelming, creating a spectacle for the audience. While there may be an impulse to read this overlying feature as conceding the general chaos of conflict, the kinetic aspect of the movie turns out to be fitting alongside its rigid structure. With *Platoon*, Stone's episodic structure corresponds with the ideas Betsalel and Gibney espouse about the chaos and shock inherent in war. Thus, during the downtime scenes there are more than enough possibilities of interruption along with an underlying sense that the platoon is in continuous conflict with each other even when the troops are away from their assignments. Thus, there is an overall chaotic feeling to the events, despite the difference in pacing between scenes. The rapid movement of Scott's film, on the other hand, does not give the same indication because it becomes par for course. There are certainly scenes away from the battlefield, but they proceed with the same urgency and rapidity that is typical of the plot. Betsalel and Gibney crucially mention that the madness of war should be presented in a way that subverts expectations and does not "[numb]" the viewer (523). With *Black Hawk Down*, the continuousness of its hasty progression belies the sense of unpredictability that authors argue should be inherent in war films.

Of course, this trapping also informs the specific content that races through the movie. Compared to the isolated moments in *Platoon*, which stand out for their visceral bluntness and the time taken on them, any potential analog in *Black Hawk Down* is left in the dust by the film's pacing. Often enough as well, the circumstances of character and story negate the impact that the imagery can contain. As soon as the mission goes wrong, images of bloodletting succeed each other on a frequent basis. Everything— from the brutal fall of PFC Todd Blackburn (Orlando Bloom), to a random shot of a blood covering a Humvee door, to a soldier named Othic (Kent

Linville) putting a severed hand in his pouch, to Pvt. Richard Kowalewski (Brendan Sexton III)

getting pierced by a rocket propelled grenade, to various background characters on both sides of

the conflict splattering blood— comes with that same sense of routine accompanying the

movie's breakneck pace. As well, the examples provided from *Platoon* either subvert character

expectations or reveal more nuances. Much of the scenes detailed from Scott's movie, again,

simply move the plot along. This overall effect ends up dulling the impact of a later scene

wherein the main character, Sgt. Matt Eversmann (Josh Hartnett), is assisting in the operation of

Cpl. Jamie Smith (Charlie Hofheimer). All the close-ups to his gaping wound, Eversmann's

physical interactions with it, and the medium shots showing blood spraying have been

abundantly preceded by similarly graphic imagery. The dampening of these visuals holds despite

even the sequence's relative isolation compared to the aforementioned examples. Scott further

asserts the overall spectacle by depicting bloodshed left and right. It betrays the numbing effect

that Betsalel and Gibney attribute to overuse like this.

  Cawley glibly states, "As everyone in combat soon learns, modern war kills very, very

tough guys much like it kills everybody else" (56). One of the foremost aspects of artifice that

Black Hawk Down contains is a veritable aloofness towards the author's sentiment. The character

of SFC Norm "Hoot" Gibson (Eric Bana) embodies this tough guy aesthetic full stop in his

appearance and actions throughout the narrative. Hoot's extended introduction glorifies him to a

considerable degree: the Delta Force soldier wears identifiable Oakley sunglasses (spoken of

admiringly by a lower-ranked and less reputable Ranger), proudly sets his hunted game against

the other soldiers' mess hall food, and walks around with his rifle's safety off, defiantly

indicating his index finger as his real safety. According to McGuigan, screenwriter Ken Nolan

created Hoot as an amalgamation of various Delta operatives (230). One can conclude that he

figuratively stands in for the Delta Force unit in general, personifying their legendary repute

through his cowboy attitude. It is not simply the existence of the character that goes against what

Cawley argues, but the film's ultimate validation of this action movie archetype. The character is

not as prominently occurring as many of the US soldiers but the dialogue, identifying features,

and close-up shots that Scott gives him precludes the character from being regarded as an other.

Despite the movie's positioning of Hoot in the periphery of the conflict compared to most of the

soldiers, it essentially saves the more crucial actions for him; for instance, he goes on to dispatch

Yousuf Dahir Mo'alim (Razaaq Adoti), in essence the film's main antagonist, in a stealthy and

"clean" manner. When Eversmann doubts his place as a soldier due to the loss of a comrade,

Hoot is there to reassure him but also sternly rebuke the Sergeant. ("See you're thinking.

Don't"). McGuigan once again offers criticism of this latter scene based on the obtuse sentiment

Hoot expresses (231). With all this in mind, it is in keeping with the movie's overall stagnancy

towards its portrayal of war. Corresponding to the continuously quick pace, there is never any

diegetic questioning towards the caricatured "tough guy." If there is, the plot brushes it aside for

the sake of maintaining a genre convention. Like the uniformity of the pace, there is also a

pretension towards acknowledging the madness of war with the anti-rational quality of Hoot's

line. Still, this is contradictory when set against the grace and cunning of his actions. The

audience does not get a sense that the character operates solely on instinct. For Hoot, there is no

chaos in war as the film does not allow his character to interact with that quality. Therefore, the

archetypal tough guy furthers the film's capacity for a voyeuristic display of war.

   In terms of the general interactions between the other characters as well as their overall

qualities, there is prevalence towards comic relief and further archetypal portrayals. This results,

of course, in favoring the film as a pleasurable viewing experience over one with fidelity towards

its subject. In *Platoon*, there are jokes among the soldiers, but in most cases they serve to increase the tension and lack of order between them. The writer and director instead situate the humor firmly outside of the diegesis, effecting an almost complete reversal of Stone's portrayals. One of the more prominent characters in the film is SPC John Grimes (Ewan McGregor). He is introduced as a jaded desk clerk who hungers to see combat after years staying behind while his fellow men play the heroes. There is a continuously running gag regarding his greenness in the field; soldiers have to slowly tutor him in the midst of the unceasing firefight and bullets whiz by him while he nervously runs past them spouting curses. Another example is SPC Lance Twombly (Tom Hardy) and SPC Shawn Nelson (Ewen Bremner), who fulfill buddy movie clichés. Twombly goes deaf at some point in the middle of combat and their interactions proceed in a lighthearted way as Nelson tries in vain to communicate to him. These character interactions add another dimension in explaining why some of the more graphic content holds minimal subversive weight. Not only does the movie diminish potential for fidelity through oversaturation, but also with a deliberate disruption of its tone. Additionally, there is nothing particularly dark about this humor save for the subject matter it is set against. It simply adds to the spectacle. The characters, as McGuigan asserts in general, function to these ends rather than contribute to an actualization of the events.

McGuigan's illustrations of the film's factual inaccuracies also find resonance, in a number of ways, with Potzsch's analysis of the war film. This is of pertinence to the way *Black Hawk Down* depicts the Somalis that the US soldiers are surrounded by. Potzsch marks it as a tendency of war films to present a biased, Manichaean structure of the conflict. While the audience may occasionally have access to the subjectivity of the antagonistically represented characters, the issue of spectator allegiance is at a clear binary. Indeed, the director and writer

present a wholly limited view of the characters who live in Mogadishu— this extends not just to

the militiamen but the civilians and other characters. McGuigan, for his part, summarily

delineates this type of portrayal as a negative reinforcement of racial stereotypes (234). The

author's critique certainly holds weight, but the standpoint from which he analyzes this is not

entirely relevant here. Either way, in a similar sense as the Hoot character's problematic

relationship with the text's subject, the way the people of Somalia come off does not deepen the

spectator's understanding of the events.

    First, to touch upon the civilian depictions throughout the film, there is an entirely spare

and incomprehensible quality to them. The Somalis tend toward the background or function to

establish the setting. Their incomprehensibility stems from the film's lack of delineation between

the Somalis associated with the militia and those of neutral standing. For instance, in a scene

where the downed helicopter pilot Michael Durant (Ron Eldard) gets knocked out and captured

by Aidid's militia, there are numerous Somalis raucously crowded around the blurrily presented

scene. Later on, there are some establishing shots featuring the downed chopper surrounded by

locals, without any clarity given with respect to their alignment. The limitation imposed upon

this broad portrayal is taken even further in the climax. As the surviving soldiers' humvees

advance towards their base, they are greeted by cheering locals and offered glasses of water. One

can locate a trend in the way the people of Somalia are represented— for the bulk of the movie,

they come off as a kinetic mass, essentially reflective of the film's pace. Also, their status during

any give scene is unspecified, except as other in the face of the US soldiers; some portions of

their presence bring about sympathy for the US, others such as the climax cultivate their

archetypal status as heroic. This betrays the overall impediment upon that aspect of the movie,

however. The fast cuts, longer shots, and low depth of field in many of the sequences featuring

them reflect Potzsch's assertions about war films' representational tendencies towards other countries. There is no overlying idea that the Somalis in this film are anything more than just an aspect of the setting by which the US soldiers can be defined. This may not distinctly render them as other in a Manichaean sense, but the preclusion of qualities affording the audience recognition, alignment, or allegiance makes them unfathomable.

From a broad standpoint, it is difficult to describe the Somali militiamen and those associated with them as anything but antagonistic. One of the opening scenes shows the capture of Aidid's arms dealer, Osman Atto (George Harris), who is confronted by the Deltas' major general, William Garrison (Sam Shepard). Their dialogue is tense and sardonic, with Atto grinningly offering Garrison a Cuban cigar then patronizing his American adversary via a malapropism: "You put up reward signs. 25,000 dollars! What is this, gunfight at the K.O. Corral?" With the addition of further hostilities, the character is fleshed out to the extent that the film deems; in any case there is little opportunity to describe Atto in terms further than garish (his sunglasses and jewelry), ignorant, and hostile. Another ostensibly prominent character is the aforesaid Mo'alim. He occupies a scene in the opening involving him shouting through a megaphone at famished civilians trying to receive food that belongs, in his words, to Aidid. While he lasts quite long throughout the movie, his subsequent scenes consist of shouting incomprehensibly, taking up arms, and firing a machinegun surrounded by his supporters. Like Atto, he wears jewelry and sunglasses (though Mo'alim rarely removes them), and nothing much is heard from him. The formal features that Potzsch applies to the war film's Manichaean bias include quick cuts, minimal features, foreboding music, and conversation predominately about the opposing side rather than between it. This applies to both characters, with Atto's scene obscuring most of the character's face in shadow and containing tremolo violin in the

background. The score surrounding Mo'alim is a clash of cultural influences, with melismatic

plucked strings set against harsh percussion and firm electric guitar chords; in all, it is both

militaristic and simultaneously exotic to Western audiences. The character, as Atto, is cursorily

presented, although Mo'alim has more quick cuts surrounding him. Whatever the case,

McGuigan's political critique of these characters' portrayal is firmly supported by the generic

analysis that Potzsch offers.

This is honed in more narrowly through the interaction between Durant and his captor,

Abdullah 'Firimbi' Hassan (Treva Etienne). At certain points in the movie, the audience is

reminded that Durant has a wife and child: he makes a phone call home that she misses, and we

see a photo of the family. The Somali forces capture him in a slow-motion scene while he is

trapped in his helicopter thinking of his family. Firimbi's confrontation with his hostage is nearly

identical to the scene between Atto and Garrison in its dialogue— to wit, he offers the American

soldier a smoke, makes dry remarks about US culture, and argues against the country's presence

in Somalia. Of particular note are Firimbi's lines, "in Somalia, killing is negotiation…there will

always be killing, see? This is how things are in our world." Now, there is little need to

exhaustively address the factual inaccuracies that McGuigan details, but it must be

acknowledged that according to Bowden, Firimbi's conduct towards Durant was honorable and

caring (in 234). As far as Potzsch's writing is concerned, the characterization of Firimbi is not

only formally similar to that of Atto and Mo'alim, but it is also buttressed by the simultaneous

affectation of alignment and allegiance towards Durant. The slow motion of Durant's capture

scene along with the close up cuts to his desperate countenance make a salient effort to engender

sympathy in the audience. Repeated visual concession to his family photo emphasizes this.

Firimbi may not be shadowed throughout his dialogue with Durant, but the film instead employs

a contrasting high-angle/low-angle shot/reverse shot structure for the adversaries; the scene ends with a melismatic and somber bowed string phrase. All of these components come together for a troublingly problematic summation of both an individual character and the people he verbally represents. The dialogic symmetry between the scenes featuring Atto and Firimbi adds to this, but the latter's dialogue in particular cements the film's biased structure of sympathy. It is not enough that some of the formal designations Potzsch details work to pigeonhole the Somalis of the film as all but deindividuated antagonists— this is downright confirmed by the Firimbi portrayal. This is similar, in a sense, to the way *Platoon* presents the NVA forces. As mentioned before though, Cawley's article somewhat validates this perspective. The way Stone chooses to present the enemy soldiers was reflective of his experience despite him potentially having access (as Cawley did) to information that could offer an additional facet of view. Both situations represent conscious decisions on the part of the filmmakers, but with *Black Hawk Down*, the overriding motivation towards voyeuristic spectacle leads to dire representational pitfalls on its part. Its pretension of true events as a basis does the film no favors in this regard.

There are few instances where *Black Hawk Down* breaks away from its designation as a spectacle-oriented representation of war. The overall mystification throughout it, however, is belied by a selection of diegetic music. The first occurs near the beginning as a helicopter takes off from Mogadishu's US Army Headquarters. The Elvis Presley song "Suspicious Minds" plays on the chopper radio, and the audience hears these lines: "We're caught in a trap/I can't walk out/Because I love you too much baby/Why can't you see/What you're doing to me/When you don't believe a word I say?" By the time the lattermost lyric finishes, the two pilots' argument about Scrabble drowns the words out. There is a contradiction in the idea that the speaker is caught in a trap "because" of his love. This brings to mind the inner-conflict Eversmann would

later recall by the end of the film. Although he claims that he wants to help the Somalis out in the beginning, he reveals by the end that he had doubts about the US's intervention while shipping off. The contradiction in the song simultaneously betrays this doubt and foreshadows the trap-like battlefield he will eventually find himself in. Also, all of the lines in the song relate to the US involvement in general; the rejection on the part of the Somalis comes through, as does a lack of trust between parties. To add a sense of irony, however, the lines' favoring of a single perspective is indicative of shortsightedness, and the lines highlighted predominate towards only his perspective. Again, it is considerably isolated but the inclusion of this song adds a sense of reflexivity in regards to the film's one-sided perspective throughout.

2.3 *Full Metal Jacket*: The madness of war through reflexivity and inescapability

Not a year after the release of *Platoon*, Stanley Kubrick's own Vietnam War film *Full Metal Jacket* made its way to theaters. Like its predecessor, the Kubrick film takes the distilled experiences of a veteran soldier as its basis. It adapts Gustav Hasford's fictionalized account of his own experiences in Vietnam somewhat faithfully. The story, both novel and film, can be thought of as comprising two distinct parts. Through the narration of Pvt. "Joker" (Matthew Modine), the audience first follows a number of Marine Corps recruits as they receive training. The narrative then transitions into loosely held together sequences where Joker, now a Sergeant, serves in different parts of Vietnam. Similarly to Stone's account of Pvt. Taylor, Joker's arc traces a path from expectations to experience. However, there are significant differences between the nature of the adaptation and what the narrative presents. Right off the bat there are more layers of representational removal from the event rather than Stone's firsthand experience directly informing his fiction. In addition, the plot spends a considerable amount of time away from the actual conflict. Kubrick reconciles these potential roadblocks through awareness of the

trappings of war's representation, as well as an underlying sense of irony and self-reflexivity towards the film medium in general. The result of these impulses holds both parts together thematically through their shared qualities of chaos and perpetuity.

The two overlying portions of *Full Metal Jacket* proceed, not unlike *Platoon*, in an unprompted and sporadic way. Within each "half," the sequences are presented episodically. Nevertheless, there is a constant that is either embodied by all of the characters or ends up affecting each of them. At one point or another, Joker and the rest of the soldiers will succumb to the chaotic violence inherent to combat— the culmination of this being their full acceptance of it. Where Stone emphasized the physical perpetuity of the phenomenon's toil, Kubrick presents this constancy from a psychological standpoint. Thus, the first half of the film establishes the phenomenon in terms of its resistance to a consistent designation and its inescapability. Gunnery Sgt. Hartman (R. Lee Ermey) signals both of these ideas during his opening monologue, which consist of the first lines spoken in the film: "…if you survive recruit training, you will be a weapon. You will be a minister of death praying for war." He then goes on to describe his training, saying "there is no racial bigotry here," after which he spouts off a handful of ethnic epithets that he will not "look down on." This is simply one example, but the latter line establishes the unfathomable quality that the new recruits are subject to. Furthermore, though Hartman willingly contradicts himself, he stresses that the soldiers will be trained to embrace this type of irrationality. The unrepresentable madness that Winter attributes to the concept applies here also through the nonchalant quality of the character's hate speech. Hartman addresses his soldiers with a loud, aggressive voice, but there is normality to it. Ultimately, their conceptions of what is normal or rational have no place.

Throughout *Full Metal Jacket*, and especially during the recruit training scenes, Kubrick stresses his awareness of war's incomprehensibility by repeatedly appealing to associational discord. War is seen as both encapsulating prominent forms of cultural exchange and rejecting them. For instance, despite being trained as soldiers serving the United States, different high-ranking characters espouse conflicting perspectives of these concepts. One of Hartman's speeches involves a pop quiz of sorts about former marines Charles Whitman and Lee Harvey Oswald. The instructor asserts that both a mass murderer and the man who assassinated President Kennedy "showed what one motivated Marine and his rifle can do." Hartman's nonchalance once again applies here, as his examples of "motivated Marines" conflict with their actions, which saliently go against American values and laws. Be that as it may, later on, during Joker's time in Vietnam, a "Pogue" Colonel (Bruce Boa) reprimands him for perceived insubordination, saying "we are here to help the Vietnamese, because inside every gook there is an American trying to get out." In the latter case, the war is directly associated with the cultivation of American values. With this schism in dialogue between characters, Kubrick articulates the lack of any central association between war and nation. Hartman's sentiment in particular rejects the possibility of applying Potzsch's Manichaean bias to the film. The character's positive association of Oswald and Whitman with the Marine Corps presents an issue with considering this war film a reflection of the soldiers' national values. Instead, the association perpetuates war as the end value for the soldiers.

Another prominent cultural value that Hartman indiscernibly applies to the Marines is Christianity. As he trains the recruits, he continually makes references to the Christian god, Jesus Christ, and the Virgin Mary. In one monologue, he remarks "God has a hard-on for Marines because we kill everything we see…to show our appreciation for so much power, we keep

heaven packed with fresh souls." Later on, he scolds Joker for expressing atheistic views, calls

him a "communist heathen," and orders him to say he "[loves] the Virgin Mary." The recruit

does not relent because he believes Hartman will strike him whether or not he complies. The Sgt.

nonetheless promotes Joker to the position of Pyle's squad leader because "[Joker] is silly and

he's ignorant, but he's got guts, and guts is enough." In this case, Hartman rejects the hardline

association between the Marine Corps and Christian faith— perverse as much of that sentiment

is— that he normally emphasizes in favor of Joker's courage. His praise for the recruit weakens

the pretension that the Marines necessarily serve God; in the process, he also rejects the

ideological binary between opposing forces when he had previously called Joker a "communist

heathen." According to Hartman, even though Joker is at odds with religious values

corresponding to his role as a soldier, he still has the qualities of one. With this contradiction,

Kubrick furthers the film's awareness of war's madness. There are pretensions of spirituality

associated with it that do not hold up in the end.

Finally, another one of the more prevalent discordant associations is between war and

love or sex. Hartman makes his trainees sleep next to their rifles, with the order "you will give

your rifle a girl's name because this is the only pussy you people are going to get…you're

married to this piece…and you will be faithful." This psychological association blurs notions of

heterosexual love and lust while applying them to a single object. It is, however, at odds with

other procedures that the instructor puts the soldiers through. During a running routine, Hartman

makes them engage in a call and response chant: when he says, "this is my rifle, this is my gun,"

they respond, "this is for fighting, this is for fun;" on the second line, the recruits grab their

genitals. This drill introduces more of a differentiation between the soldiers and their rifles while

reaffirming the overall sexual association in the military. Instead of the guns representing the

objects of their love and lust, the juxtaposition makes them come off more phallic. Such an

inconsistency is reiterated in Vietnam, first when the soldiers gather around a couple of corpses

from their squad and discuss the reason they are fighting. Animal Mother (Adam Baldwin) offers

the viewpoint "this isn't about freedom, this is a slaughter. If I'm gonna get my balls blown off

for a word, my word is 'poontang.'" In an earlier scene, the door gunner of a helicopter (Tim

Colceri) shoots at civilians while yelling, "get some!" In both the recruit training and scenes of

combat, the use of sexual metaphors to designate rifles is nigh indiscernible for their amorphous

quality. They are as much an object of lust and love as they are extensions of these urges. This

reiterates the overall lack of delineation for what how combat can be represented.

The greatest articulation that the madness of war is inescapable for those that participate

in it plays out through Joker's character arc. Despite the protagonist's attempts to resist the

tempestuous nature of war, he ultimately succumbs. Until the film's climax, Joker is unrelenting

in his awareness of war's fractured quality along with the problems of its representation. A

repeated line in the film is his quip "is that you, John Wayne? Is this me?" It is his first line in

the plot, and he says it in defiance of Hartman while the instructor shouts his inauguration; the

"Joker" nickname is then given to him. The references to Wayne allude to the actor's strong

association with war films of heroism and bravery, i.e. the voyeurism that Fuller chastises and

Winter rejects. In an instance of non-diegetic intertextuality, this also associates heavily with his

starring role in the 1968 Vietnam film *The Green Berets* (*Full Metal Jacket* is set in 1967, so the

reference can hardly be considered diegetic). With this particular Wayne allusion, Kubrick

comments on the earlier film's unambiguous glorification of the conflict. Joker's wry evocation

of the icon is thus his first attempt to resist the contradictions of his situation, which are

represented by the first speech that Hartman gives. He attempts to make a mockery of this by

appealing to something unrepresentative of war, and is from then on identified by this tendency. The second time he refers to John Wayne in this way is in Vietnam when his troops are on camera for the news. In this case, the sound bite serves a couple of purposes: first, to further his mockery and awareness of the conflict's chaotic quality as before. Also, that the line is read in front of a news camera overlaps with the limitations journalism has in representing war. Instead of appealing to actualities of his life as a soldier, he allows the news to capitulate to the Vietnam seen as another film spectacle.

Joker's status in Vietnam as a war journalist is a further attempt to resist being pulled in by war's chaos. During the recruits' graduation, the announcement of Joker as a reporter gives Hartman emphatic pause, and he responds, "You're not a writer. You're a killer!" The Sgt., of course, is attempting to reassert war's madness but he relents when Joker, in a humoring show of obedience says "A killer, yes, sir." Despite trying to resist the war through his occupation, Joker finds the same contradictions in it. Later on in Vietnam, he and other military reporters attend a briefing from *Stars and Stripes* magazine. The magazine's assignment editor, Lt. Lockhart (John Terry), administers new rules to help steer the American public's support in favor of the war. One of them involves euphemistically modifying missions designated as "search and destroy" to "sweep and clear—" Joker sarcastically replies "got it. Very catchy." Further into his briefing, Lockhart stresses that the road ahead of them will be tough due to a lack of public support, and after another quip by the main character, the Lt. assigns him to active combat, adding in frustration "you will take off that damn peace button. How's it gonna look if you get killed wearing a peace symbol?" The fractured aspect of war comes about this time through Lockhart's hypocrisy. The editor argues that the American public prefers more saccharine verbiage when digesting a phenomenon defined by violence and bloodshed. He then proceeds to reprimand

Joker for integrating a decidedly nonviolent image into his gear. Joker's responses to Lockhart's orders nevertheless reassert his awareness of these contradictions. The protagonist's initial attempt to avoid war's inherent instability only leads to more of it in his experience, which he still tries to remain above.

Lockhart is not the only person to question Joker's choice of a peace button on his fatigues. After Joker is reassigned, the aforementioned Pogue Colonel angrily confronts him about his accessory when juxtaposed with the inscription "BORN TO KiLL" on his helmet. Joker explains that it is a reference to Carl Jung and the "duality of man." This is another attempt to comment on rather than participate in war's contradictions and savagery. Whether or not the soldiers he speaks to accept the self-reflexivity with which he engages his situation, he continues to display a sardonic attitude so he can remain external to it. This futile rationalization occurs once again during another news interview, when Joker explains, "I wanted to see exotic Vietnam, the crown jewel of Southeast Asia. I wanted to meet interesting and stimulating people of an ancient culture, and kill them." In a verbal encapsulation of his sartorial comment, Joker seemingly asserts peaceful interaction before ultimately giving concession to violence. By wryly dealing in such contradictions, the protagonist shows that he may be aware of them but he does not accept them.

The motivic conflict throughout Kubrick's film occurs between Joker's resistance to war's qualities and essentially all of the other soldiers he encounters, who aggressively bite back with their acceptance of them. This not only restricts itself to his superiors but also his fellow infantrymen. The character Payback (Kirk Taylor) angrily responds to Joker's John Wayne impressions and paper-thin combat enthusiasm by rejecting his authenticity as a soldier. In particular, Payback antagonizes him in front of the other infantrymen for lacking the "thousand-

yard stare," which is the result of "[being] in the shit for too long." Of course, the main character

scoffs at Payback's assessment, but by the end of film, Joker's continued resistance proves

ineffective. After losing a few men in his squad to a lone sniper (Ngoc Le)— including his best

friend Sgt. "Cowboy" (Arliss Howard)— the soldiers finally corner the wounded young woman

in a burning building. They decide that Joker should execute the sniper, due in no small part to

her own enfeebled cries of "shoot me." The way Kubrick renders Joker's subsequent

compliance, as well as the resolving scene in the film is the essential culmination of his failed

resistance to war. The camera reverses between a high-angle of the sniper's wide-eyed, desperate

expression and Joker's action. He slowly pulls out his pistol, progressively obscuring the peace

symbol on his jacket and at the moment of firing it, the button is all but unseen. His expression

speaks volumes, appearing completely blank— the character thus attains the thousand-yard stare.

The action is met with approval from his fellow soldiers, with one of them, Don Lon (Gary

Landon Mills) declaring it "hardcore." Following this, the remaining soldiers march,

predominately silhouetted against the night, with prominent fire in the background as they sing

the theme song to the Mickey Mouse Club; Joker sings in unison with them as his voiceover

narration sums up his thoughts, which "drift back to Mary Jane Rottencrotch and the

homecoming fuck fantasy. I am alive, in one piece and short. I'm in a world of shit, yes, but I am

alive. And I am not afraid." In summation, every discernible aspect of Joker's demeanor is

converted to align with what he goes up against prior to the film's climax. His awareness of

war's savagery gives way to an acceptance of it, represented by the visual irrelevance of his

peace button. He then embraces his situation through the thousand-yard stare and his

incomprehensible monologue at the close. Nevertheless, Hartman alludes to "Mary Jane

Rottencrotch" during his training, and Joker's admission that he is no longer afraid is another

capitulation to his instructor. Kubrick furthers the fracturing of this scene even more through its editing: he first presents the soldiers mostly from the back, then cuts to a medium long shot (Joker is in the foreground) with their march moving from right-screen to left-screen, and finally cuts to another shot from their back with their movement appearing in the opposite direction of the first shot. The intermediate shot identifies Joker and serves to show the audience that he also sings the dissonant anthem, necessitating the third shot, which does not visually separate the protagonist from his comrades. The final scene asserts the film's theme regarding the perpetuity of war in the strictest sense via Joker's conversion. On the whole, it lends itself to a resistance of war as an object of voyeurism.

The editing and composition of this final scene is striking as well for its contrast to the formal and narrative qualities of the preceding Vietnam scenes. To parallel Joker's endeavors towards being above the chaos of war through rationalization and humor, Kubrick's shots are composed in an orderly and symmetrical fashion. In one scene, the American soldiers are seen left-screen walking towards the foreground while NVA prisoners are led away in shackles right-screen, moving towards the background. During the aforesaid scene with the news crew, Joker and the Lust Hog squad are crouched against rubble in a deadpan tracking shot following them from left to right— all the while, firefights and explosions go on in the distant background. The scene cuts to a reverse low-angle on the crew themselves at least once. The boisterous rock 'n roll song "Surfin' Bird" by the Trashmen plays, and the soldiers rattle off film references, with Cowboy shouting "Hey start the cameras, this is 'Vietnam: The Movie!'" In another scene, the camera crew sets up one to one interviews with members of the squad, prepping the shots with a clapboard. Cowboy, in a medium long shot with a boom mic right-screen, remarks "when we're in Huế, when we're in Huế city, it's like a war, you know? Like what I thought a war…was

supposed to be." The first example is illustrative of the symmetry with which the scenes preceding the climax are presented. Reflecting Joker's initial experience, the American soldiers and NVA captives are clearly demarcated or formally rationalized. With the second example, the shot keeps Joker and the Lust Hogs at a safe distance from the activity in the background; this is furthered through the cuts back to the camera crew. Cowboy's line signals the artifice of this scene, and it appears constructed rather than disorderly, which the non-diegetic music also asserts. The third scene reiterates this idea, and with Cowboy's lines articulating more of an impression of war than one that actually occurs; the presence of the crew setting up the shot as well as the visible film equipment emphasizes this lack of actuality. The lattermost scene ends with Joker's quip about discovering people of a stimulating culture and killing them. Ultimately, the choice of ending the scene on his remark brings the point home that the scene is reflective of his uninitiated perspective. There are attempts at either rationalizing their circumstances or presenting them as constructed impressions. This contrasts with the final scene, which absorbs Joker into the incomprehensibility of war through its silhouetting and relatively fractured editing.

3. Video Game Selections

3.1 The erosion of clarity in *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare*

Not unlike narrative filmmaking, there are different impulses that go into the development of narrative-based video games. Whereas some games are written and structured with the express purpose of offering spectacle for the player, there are others that aim for a more complex story, sometimes offering commentary on the former type of experience. *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* certainly strives for a degree of authenticity in its base presentation, but this does not find support in the otherwise limited output of its narrative. Because the story gives concession to spectacle, any presentational actualities come off superficially as the game progresses. The result, looking at it from the perspective of Winter, gives way to voyeurism in the player rather than dignity for the type of events shown. This voyeuristic quality also results from the basic mechanics of the game. In all, the design of the game as well as the scenes wherein the player is a passive viewer do little to quell the idea that there is not much access to the experience of war.

The game's story, set in 2011, concerns an ultranationalist group operating within Russia who attempts to overthrow the government in an effort to return the country back to its Soviet state. The player discovers that the ultranationalists and their leader Imran Zakhaev (voiced by Evgeniy Lazarev) have ties to a separatist group in the Middle East led by Khaled Al-Asad (Gabriel Al-Rajhi). Ultimately, the player's mission is to stop Zakhaev before he is able to launch nuclear missiles at the United States' East Coast. Throughout the game, the player switches between the perspectives of multiple characters: SAS Sgt. John "Soap" MacTavish and Sgt. Paul Jackson of the Marine Corps do not have voice actors, a design choice that is usually done for the purpose of facilitating the player's immersion. Instead of experiencing the plot

through the eyes of a constructed character, these "silent protagonists" serve as an analog for the player. Nevertheless, the SAS Cpt. John Price (Billy Murray) accompanies the first protagonist throughout most of the game and is playable during a couple of flashback sections. In addition, the player assumes limited control of two unnamed tertiary characters, as well as the president of the also unnamed Middle Eastern country just before Al-Asad publicly executes him.

In terms of the characters, one of the limitations that the game exhibits is a lack of focus and access. Instead of the several different characters offering a multifaceted viewpoint from which to see the fictional conflict (or the notion of international conflict in general), they both obscure the import of the events going on and— recalling Potzsch's criticism of the war film— present a bias with respect to the antagonists. This unfocused form of representation is distinct from the ideas that Winter, Betsalel and Gibney speak of with regard to subverting an audience's expectations of war through shocking imagery or a representation of war's savagery. With the way the "missions" are presented and structured, the perspectival switches dull the impact of any attempt at this kind of imagery or representation. The first example of this occurs as a credit sequence of sorts to the game's events. As president Yasir Al-Fulani is driven through a bazaar-like area of the Middle Eastern country in which he was overthrown, the player can look around the town at various civilians in a state of panic, as well as the insurgents shooting them. Al-Fulani is knocked unconscious and dragged in the middle of a square, where Al-Asad shoots him before the screen goes black. Immediately following this, the game switches to the perspective of MacTavish, Price, and his team as they search for the previous scene's executioner. The second instance features the abrupt death of Jackson after a nuclear device detonates in the midst of their pursuit of Al-Asad. We look through Jackson's perspective as he feebly crawls out of his downed helicopter. The visuals affect a dark brown hue and the player can hear his erratic

breathing as we are given the option (like in the first example) to slowly survey the progressing destruction. A mushroom cloud is seen in the distance, the screen fades to white, and Jackson perishes. Once again, the game switches to the perspective of MacTavish in pursuit of Al-Asad.

In both of these scenes, the first-person perspective is detrimental to the events' portrayal. The potential for viscerally presenting Al-Fulani and Jackson's viewpoints is obscured by the game fading to black and white respectively, with the chaos rendered difficult to see through each scene's own hindrances. In the first case, the distance from the Middle Eastern civilians, the surrounding interior of the car that the player sees from, as well as the cast and crew credits being displayed all contribute to a limited view of the player's surroundings. During Jackson's death, this form of limitation comes from the dark brown hue and overall short duration. The structure of these sequences also dampens any impact. Between missions, the game must load the contents on the disc. These interstitials appear as a mock computer interface scanning the mission areas and providing intelligence while characters narrate the situation. After Al-Fulani's execution, the display shows a medium shot of Al-Asad firing his pistol, with the former president off-screen. After Jackson succumbs to the blast, the display appears, with the soldier's name on-screen along with the "K.I.A." designation flashing. Both of these loading screens simply add to the effect of rendering the imagery inconsequential. Instead of taking the opportunity to for present a more total view of these incidents, the interstitials end up blocking them out even more. The game's structure and presentation ultimately work against its pretensions of verisimilitude.

From the perspective of character sympathy, there is also a limiting factor to the different viewpoints that the player takes on. Potzsch's use of Murray Smith to delineate aspects of recognition, alignment, and allegiance between audience and character applies to the game, but

only in the sense that there is little to speak of in these categories. Even though the author utilizes

aspects of film form, these can and often are realized in the presentation of a game such as

Modern Warfare. For instance, by virtue of its genre, necessarily every "shot" in-game can be

considered a POV shot. On the other hand, during cutscenes there is an option for developers to

present the character outside his or her perspective; this can entail techniques such as close-up

for all three categories, voiceover narration for alignment, and a combination of these with others

for allegiance. Infinity Ward, the development team behind the game, chooses not to develop it

with these things in mind however, and in doing so contributes to the overall lack of focus for the

different player characters. Some of the formal techniques that Potzsch outlines appear in part,

such as the basic method of naming to foster recognition, flashback sequences featuring Price for

the purpose of alignment, and the allegiance generating slow-motion climax where the player as

MacTavish can take down the main antagonist. Still, this leaves the game with both an

incomplete and inconsistent portrayal of the main characters. The end result is, again, distinct

from the idea of presenting war with no "vanishing point" as Winter writes. In the case of

Platoon, the protagonist embodies the madness of war because of how the film takes the time to

cultivate an ambivalent reading of him. With Kubrick, Joker's consistent definition throughout

gives way to a similar expression by the film's climax. Taking *Modern Warfare*, however,

limitations of recognition such as a lack of speech, limitations of alignment such as a lack of

extended close-ups, and general limitations of allegiance preclude such a reading. Because the

game constantly switches perspectives, there is little chance for any of this— even with the

occasional switch to Price, a comparatively fleshed-out character, the game does not provide

much access. Thus, the protagonists of the game are defined simply by their function as player

avatars. They contribute to the overall spectacle that the game prioritizes.

In a manner similar to *Black Hawk Down*, and yet more prominently occurring, *Modern Warfare* presents a rigid, Manichaean characterization of its antagonists. First, this is reflected in the choice of setting for the game's diegesis. During the aforementioned loading screens, some of the onscreen text shows the player the mission's locations. The two most prominent settings throughout the game are "The Middle East" and "Western Russia," with isolated excursions occurring in Hamburg, Germany and Pripyat, Ukraine. By contrast, during a scene towards the end of the game that simulates the trajectory of Zakhaev's nuclear device, a map of the United States displays a number of specific cities on the Eastern Seaboard. In a marginal yet telling way, the game applies less specificity to the antagonists' locations, situating them in broadly defined areas of the globe. On the other hand, the threat they pose is given emphasis through the list of cities shown during the latter scene, perhaps with the intention to reflect the game's primary audience. In terms of the villains themselves, the similarities to Ridley Scott's film are noticeable with the portrayal of Zakhaev and Al-Asad. The latter character, who occupies the first half of the game, even sartorially resembles the film's Mo'alim character with his prominent headgear and aviator sunglasses. For both Al-Asad and Zakhaev, their screen presence is again quite limited. The two antagonists are mostly seen giving speeches about Western imperialism and their threats. Otherwise, their dialogue is not subtitled. Like the antagonists in Scott's film, their lack of overall presence simply renders them plot devices, contributing to a rigid and clearly defined idea of the conflict the game depicts. This culminates in the climactic scene, where in a blurry slow motion sequence, the player gets the chance to shoot Zakhaev. The role that the players take allows them to fulfill the goal that the game proposes.

To a somewhat lesser degree, the enemies that the player contends with throughout the game also qualify for the Manichaean binary. The reason for this is a fundamental consequence

of many FPS video games. Non-player characters (NPCs) are commonly ill defined and

repetitively presented. Nevertheless, there are examples in other games of exceptions to this

ostensible rule. As well, the way in which the game portrays the two main antagonists makes the

presence of the ultranationalists in Russia and the separatists in the Middle East an extension of

the straightforward way the game presents its conflict. Like the two distinct villains, most of

what the player encounters of these two groups is gunfire and shouts. Also, an exchange between

Price and Lt. "Gaz" (Craig Fairbrass) at the beginning of an early mission furthers this idea.

Price briefs the squad, saying "the loyalists are expecting us half a klick to the north." Gaz

responds, "loyalists, eh? Are those the good Russians or the bad Russians?" to which Price offers

"well they won't shoot us on sight, if that's what you're asking." This piece of dialogue,

specifically Gaz's question, signals the game's clear moral division between its two opposing

forces. Thus, the game's common enemies fall under the same characteristic lack of alignment

that Potzsch attributes to the spectacle-oriented war film.

One of the qualities that Cawley does not favor in the war film is the use of the "tough

guy" archetype in characters. To him, reality most often does not favor the caricatured attitude of

hyper-heroic characters in spectacle-oriented war movies. *Black Hawk Down* makes use of that

archetype frequently, and the same is true of *Modern Warfare*. A motif of the in-game dialogue

is the witticisms that the characters with dialogue engage in throughout combat. For a small

example, during the "Crew Expendable" mission, MacTavish, Price, and Gaz sneak through an

oil tanker while enemy soldiers rest. The player encounters a couple of soldiers sleeping in

bunks, and they can be dispatched with a silenced rifle, to which the SAS Command Post

responds "sleep tight." Another mission, "Death From Above," involves the player taking

control of multiple guns in an AC-130 aircraft to defend the SAS squad. The Marine Corps CP in

this case responds to more or less every target that the player hits, with lines such as "ooh, that's got to hurt" and "this is going to be one hell of a highlight reel." Cawley's preference against the trope that the game exhibits here comes from a similar viewpoint Winter expresses. There is a definite sense of voyeurism attached to these segments in the game. The lines serve as a confirmation that the player has successfully hit an enemy onscreen but their content reestablishes the distance between the two sides of the conflict. The mission, as a whole, is reminiscent of the scene in *Full Metal Jacket* featuring the door-gunner indiscriminately targeting Vietnamese bystanders while boastfully remarking about his kill count. Despite the notion that in the video game, the player is not gunning down innocents, the distance between him or her and the "targets" on the ground— this is furthered by the literally black and white perspective of the aircraft guns' thermal sight— parallels that of the imagery in Kubrick's film. In this case, however, the remarks made by the Marine CP do not have the reflective element that those of the gunner do in Joker's bemused questioning. Where *Full Metal Jacket* deconstructs the idea of voyeuristic distance from the enemy, *Modern Warfare* participates in it.

3.2 Deconstructing heroism and exploring agency in *Spec Ops: The Line*

While Infinity Ward falls short of its expectation to present a game that simulates war through a fictional narrative, there are other titles that achieve the more authentic qualities in some of the films that are illustrated by the authors. One example comes from Yager Development's 2012 game *Spec Ops: The Line*. The narrative is indeterminately set with respect to year, although considering there is mention of the more recent conflict in Afghanistan, as well as the type of firearms in use throughout, it can be pinpointed as near enough to the year of the game's release. Borrowing heavy elements from Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (and in turn *Apocalypse Now*), the game deals with a catastrophic sandstorm in the midst of Dubai. With the

population of Emiratis and migrants in grave danger, the US Army sends in Col. John Konrad (voiced by Bruce Boxleitner) and his battalion "The Damned 33rd" to evacuate as many civilians as they can. The storms proving to be worse than anticipated, Konrad's communications eventually cease. To provide reconnaissance for Konrad, his team, and any civilians, the army sends in a three-man Delta team consisting of Cpt. Martin Walker (Nolan North), Lt. Alphanso Adams (Christopher Reid), and SSgt. John Lugo (Omid Abtahi). Although the player simply controls Walker, his Delta teammates accompany him as NPCs for the bulk of the plot.

The game bears some basic similarities to *Modern Warfare* through the authenticity of its firearms and equipment, as well as the presence of the NPCs, but by virtue of its status as a third-person shooter, it also carries fundamental differences. As the player controls Walker, he can be seen, and his dialogue is heard throughout. In addition, while the FPS downplays the occurrence of cutscenes in favor of either loading screen interstitials or a reliance on the first-person viewpoint, the TPS includes a variety of cutscenes to break up segments of the gameplay and further the plot. Like *Modern Warfare* as well, though, the dialogue between the squad during gameplay sequences also works to move the plot along. One of the striking differences between the two games lies in their use of the more mundane lines spoken by the protagonist and his squad. For instance, in the Infinity Ward title, eliminating enemy threats often leads to one of the player's squad mates shouting, "tango down!" or some other variation. *Spec-Ops*, on the other hand, uses casual voiceovers like this to further characterization. The narrative contains similarities to films such as *Full Metal Jacket* and *Platoon* in that throughout Walker's pursuit of Konrad, what he comes up against ultimately changes his perspective on the circumstances surrounding him. The primary way that the game gets the point of war's savagery across is through the main character's mental deterioration. This is articulated through the casual dialogue

between the squad during gameplay. In the early portions of the game, the players' squad mates may assist them by shouting "on your left!" with Walker saying, "target down!" or "threat eliminated!" upon dispatching an enemy. However, by the climax of the game, both the squad mates and the protagonist react much more aggressively to their opposition. In one of the later missions, Adams' assistance can come in the form of shouting, with significant frustration, "eyes on that shotgun, now!" When the player kills an enemy, Walker may yell, "go to hell!" or bark, "that's one!" The significance of this progression is that it reflects basic, medium specific qualities. The reactions of Walker and his squad, as well as those of Price and Gaz in *Modern Warfare* are programmed to occur indeterminately with respect to the player's actions or those of the enemies onscreen. In *Spec Ops*, however, it both reflects the game's narrative and steers it in the direction away from voyeurism. Winter emphasizes the "disillusionment and savagery" found in that type of war film, and the game in question exhibits this quality through these voiceovers. There is little pleasure, if any, in the way Walker and his team react as they continue to survive their conflict.

There is also a difference between the ways that the two games consider enemy NPCs. In the 2007 title, as previously stated, the common in-game enemy characters are a source of fodder for the player by distinctly rendering them as others similarly to the way *Black Hawk Down* portrays its Somalis. In *Spec Ops*, at the very least, some of the enemy NPCs from Konrad's 33rd Division are given their own dialogue. As Potzsch outlines, speech is a quality that can foster recognition of characters from the audience, while voiceover narration and flashback lead to subjective access. During a late mission, after the Deltas hear sniper fire ring out, a conversation occurs between two enemy NPCs regarding a civilian riot. One of them says "it's like the first storm all over again," the other responds "all that work for nothing," and the first remarks

"Colonel said we can always rebuild." Immediately afterwards, the player will engage with them in combat like any other enemy in a shooter game. This is not actually a flashback sequence, but the presence of the dialogue, in addition to its reference to past events creates some semblance of recognition of and alignment with what is usually considered a non-entity in video games—especially those of this genre. Through moments like this one, the game manages to avoid the straightforward Manichaean bias that Potzsch illustrates. By giving a number of NPCs throughout the game even these basic features, they cease to be the ill defined others that are usually understood to be an inherent quality of the genre.

This type of inclusion also occurs during a pivotal moment in the narrative. The Deltas are at an impasse and must advance forward in pursuit of Konrad. Walker makes the decision to use mortars loaded with white phosphorous, a destructive chemical agent. There is initial disagreement among the squad as they had previously seen its severe effects on other soldiers; in the end, they wipe out their opposition completely with the chemical. What follows is both an in-game segment and a cutscene. First, the player takes control of the squad as they carefully move through the affected areas. Soldiers from the 33rd battalion writhe in pain and struggle to even move. After walking through the bulk of the location, a cutscene plays with prominent shot-reverse shot editing. In a high-angle close-up, a battalion soldier, his face charred to black whimpers "why?" Walker, in a close-up, asserts "you brought this upon yourself," after which the dying soldier says, "we were helping." The Deltas soon find out that they are responsible for the deaths of numerous Emirati civilians. For the in-game portion of the sequence, it is more of an option for the player to focus on the dying NPCs. Still, the accentuation of its tone by way of the low-register, tremolo strings and stark electric guitar music that plays shifts the allegiance of the scene away from the Deltas. In terms of the cutscene that follows, the extended close-up of

the dying soldier contributes to this shift. In Potzsch's terms, it would be inaccurate to consider

the enemy NPCs of this game fodder in the same way as *Modern Warfare*. Despite containing

basic features of third or first person shooters that entail this reading, the game also subverts this

element to avoid a rigid structuring of the conflict it portrays.

A significant theme throughout the game's narrative is the instability of the notion of

heroism during conflicts like these. Instead of allying the player with the protagonist, one is

made to question Walker's decisions despite his justifications for them. The quality that Potzsch

argues is a standard for protagonists in war films— one that indeed holds up for certain films and

games— does not figure into the game's diegesis. To this end, the game deconstructs certain

ancillary features found in titles such as *Modern Warfare*. The aforementioned "Death From

Above" mission is an example where by virtue of the literal distance provided by the AC-130

gunner's heads-up display, there is voyeuristic distance involved in the player picking off enemy

NPCs. In *Spec Ops*, the subversion of gameplay like this occurs during the white phosphorous

scene, before Walker and the Deltas see the results of their attack. Despite objections from Lugo,

who stresses "there's always a choice," the protagonist goes forward, responding, "no, there's

really not." He takes command of the targeting module for the white phosphorous mortars, and

the gameplay's perspective switches to a HUD similar to that of the *Modern Warfare* mission.

Once again, the game displays the enemy NPCs as specks in a monochromatic infrared style. In

this case, however, as the player chooses targets to hit, the screams of the NPCs can be heard

clearly. In addition, as the display becomes obscured with smoke (and the screams die down), the

glass screen shows a reflection of Walker's deadpan countenance. On an audiovisual level, this

sequence of gameplay heavily asserts the agency that the protagonist has over the unfolding

events. Instead of *Modern Warfare*, wherein nothing is known about the person firing the gun, let alone the "targets" he or she is required to hit, there is a constant reminder of both elements.

The scene illustrates another idea that the game entertains, which is a blurring of the separation between the agency of the player and the character one controls. Considering that the player commands the targeting reticle throughout the sequence as opposed to, for instance, externalizing Walker through a cutscene, the game articulates the shared responsibility between the player and the character. In what is otherwise a third-person shooter, the segment's first-person viewpoint is a crucial divergence from the game's norm. Nevertheless, there are other elements of the game that assert the player's agency while deconstructing the notion of heroism. The earliest indication of this appears during the opening credits, wherein after listing the cast and crew, we see a "Special Guest" billing for the player's online screen name. This example is inter-diegetic, because despite the credits' non-diegetic status, the player's involvement affects the diegesis by moving the plot forward. Furthermore, despite the credit appearing at the end of the sequence, that type of billing usually accompanies other actors or voice actors. The player is thus positioned in a role that indicates the realization of a character, in this case Walker. By attributing this kind of agency to gamers, the credit sequence diminishes the distinction between them and their character.

Another, more overt example comes in the form of the game's loading screens. These are not quite as stylized as those of *Modern Warfare*, instead taking after a wider variety of games in many genres where there is a static background with onscreen text that provides the player with tutorial information. In a large part, *Spec-Ops* is no exception, with some of the loading screens containing hints such as "you can view intel items from the campaign menu" and "look for weak barriers. They can be destroyed to bury your enemy under a mountain of sand" as well as story

details, for instance "Walker and Konrad once served together in Kabul." Nevertheless, as the

game progresses, the "tips" become self-reflexive, and the gameplay-oriented lines are

juxtaposed with others such as "the US military does not condone the killing of unarmed

combatants. But this isn't real, so why should you care?" and "To kill for yourself is murder. To

kill for your government is heroic. To kill for entertainment is harmless." Like the credit

sequence, these messages obscure the split between the player and Walker. Although in both

messages there is a concession towards the artifice of the diegesis, the sardonic tone that they

effect weakens the "reassurance" attempted by their closing statements. As well, that kind of

rationalization reflects Walker's own attempts to convince his squad and himself that the actions

he takes (such as the use of white phosphorous) are necessary. *Spec Ops* concerns itself with the

madness of war through the deterioration of Walker and his squad, but it does so without

intending to incite pleasure in its audience. Instead, by interrogating the ideas of heroism and

responsibility notwithstanding attributed to war's brutality— especially in its fictional

portrayal— the game's narrative shies away from this reading

4. Conclusion

An attempt to fully encapsulate war through a film or video game text will inevitably end up with shortcomings in its execution. It is a conceit for anyone to develop a narrative with the aim of objectively representing it, because it is impossible to consider war a phenomenon that is given to objective readings. Regardless of the fact that these texts may represent historical wars that have been analyzed from a multitude of perspectives, it is too unstable as a concept to be completely rendered. The depiction of war through this media will never cease to persist, however, and even those who participate in combat make their own contributions to the subgenre in each medium.

Film narration and audiovisual form, through their deference to widely accepted generic narrative concepts in addition to the impulse to entertain audiences, appear ill-equipped to deal with the representation of armed combat. Leo Cawley, himself an ex-Marine, and Jay Winter both argue that this appeal to pleasure in fictionalizing it ultimately makes many films about the subject fall short. Cawley stresses the need for accuracy of the depicted soldiers' experience, and Winter asserts the importance of respect for the general subject, which should inherently entail a great deal of discomfort in the viewer. War, in the chaos of its events, easily facilitates human alienation and terror, hence the priority for this in its fictionalization; Ken Betsalel and Mark Gibney agree with confronting this quality in terms of the war film's imagery (if the filmmaker does not overindulge in this type of imagery). Holger Potzsch and John McGuigan argue against war films being given to archetypal characterization, in particular rendering war as simply a conflict between virtuous, complex protagonists and villainous, ill-defined antagonists. Ultimately, filmmakers either reaffirm these generic codes and titillate audiences or deconstruct them, whether by rejecting the conventions or subversively highlighting them.

Quite a bit has been achieved in that regard for films about the Vietnam War, and this is understandable with the worldwide controversy surrounding it. It is no surprise that a veteran infantryman of the US Army is able to relate his experiences with audiovisual and cultural accuracy. Perhaps more importantly, *Platoon* effects tension through the moral ambivalence of its central character rather than presenting him as a hero without question. Despite this, Oliver Stone is sometimes given to emotional coloring and even the accuracy with which he presents a US soldier's experience entails a limited view of the North Vietnamese Army and civilians his soldiers encounter. Stanley Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket*, instead of simply attempting fidelity in its presentation, foregrounds its artifice through a motivic failure of rationalizing the war in Vietnam. The director represents war as chaotic throughout, and anyone involved gets absorbed into this human cacophony; the protagonist is aware of its contradictions, but his attempts to remain above it only make him succumb to the dissonance of his circumstances. Ridley Scott's *Black Hawk Down* is proof that a narrative premise based in reality does not necessarily betray an ultimately fanciful text. Thus, the film contains numerous inaccuracies with respect to the Battle of Mogadishu through the application of archetype, stereotype, and Manichaean bias to its characterization. Leaving aside evaluative concerns, the films illustrate both the medium's capacity and deficiency in representing war.

Narrative in video gaming, in many ways, is not exceptionally complex in comparison to cinema. Despite the visual remove from reality with the lack of photorealism and sometimes a comparative lack in digital fidelity, it uses many of the same formal tools that narrative cinema does. Regardless, there are medium specific conventions in its stringently goal-oriented layout and oft-repetitive structure, both of which have to do with the player's agency over the progression of the narrative. Both the medium's similarity and differences with cinema can be

directed towards either impulse when rendering war. *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 4* operates as a spectacle, not unlike Scott's film, in its vague settings and archetypal antagonists— this concerns both the villains of the narrative and the enemy soldiers that the player encounters. Instead of portraying alienation on a human level, the game and narrative distance players from any examination of the fictional events. Perhaps as a reaction to the popularity of such a game, *Spec Ops*: *The Line* offers the opposite experience. War is never glorified, with its chaotic tone coming through narratively and while the player actively progresses. Also, the rote elements of gaming that *Modern Warfare* reiterates (and the player engages in) are reflexively questioned. This type of active storytelling— whether it is upheld or deconstructed— moves the gaming examples beyond their status as analogic to those of film.

Video game narrative concerning war thus accounts for the medium's multiple modes of execution while still having the same options as its media forebears for telling stories. Until there is a substantial body of scholarly research in regards to the medium's specific qualities, film studies serves as a significant vantage point from which to engage with video game narrative. Aside from the close formal similarity of the two media, they interact with each other on the level of genre and source. As evidenced by *Spec Ops*, developers are as interested in adapting other forms of media as filmmakers. While more examples of prose based game narratives are developed, studies on adaptation in film will be useful. Furthermore, despite the base difference between film and video game from the standpoint of spectator engagement, there can still be overlap between texts of each form. Related to this, a component of video games that is worthwhile for discussion is the shared engagement involved in the "multiplayer" feature of many titles. Although this aspect does not directly contribute to the narrative, it can become a unique way to orient studies about video games, especially examples regarding war.

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