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Digital Ghosts: The Lingering Presence of Vietnam in Films of Modern Warfare

by Emily Joosten

The nature of warfare has dramatically evolved in both technological innovation and visual representation in the decades following the Vietnam War. This advancement in military technology has forever altered the combat experience, just as developments in the production of media have changed the aesthetic of combat on screen. The constant, twenty-four hour television coverage introduced by CNN during the first Gulf War depicted the conflict as a clean, clear-cut victory in an attempt to create a positive metanarrative that would counter the frustrating confusion of the "living room war." In the years following the 1991 expedition, several films centered in the gulf emerged with a new hyper-realistic digital aesthetic that complicated many aspects of the media coverage. Films such as David O. Russell's *Three Kings* and Sam Mendes' *Jarhead* use this raw and detailed visual style to represent the gory, dirty consequences of warfare, which were absent from the media's treatment of events. This trend in representation further developed with the onset of the Iraq war, in films such as Kathryn Bigelow's *The Hurt Locker*. In addition, this treatment allowed for an even more immersive and authentic "experience" for the viewer – an obsessive tradition present throughout military cinema that is especially evident in the films of the Vietnam War.

Despite this change in aesthetic, the haunting presence of Vietnam lingers in these modern works in the confusing nature of the conflicts depicted, in both direct and indirect references, and in the ambiguity concerning enemy identity. Many films released during the Vietnam War conveyed personal and historical trauma through characters that were unable to use action to resolve tensions, and through an overall mood of helplessness or powerlessness. Recent Gulf War films display this quality as well, as evidenced in the conclusions of *Three Kings*, *Jarhead*, and *The Hurt Locker*. The continual repetition of these visual and thematic tropes is indicative that the Vietnam War has a lasting influence upon the way war is seen and interpreted, and upon the combat genre itself.

Television news coverage was first used to document the daily process of war in Vietnam, but in 1991 this medium had reached new levels of prominence in American culture. With the emergence of CNN, a twenty-four hour broadcast news channel, the media construction of the conflict in the Gulf was made available to the public in a constant flow of information and updates. It was now easier to develop a cohesive construction of the war, as television was now a more seasoned and controlled method of representation. In this era of news, "the Gulf War was a highly successful made-for television movie even while it was happening. Never before in the annals of instant history had an international combat situation so merged with its own representation" (Hoberman 18). In addition, the nature of war itself had changed, evolving from the physical combat of search and destroy missions with troops, to a hyper-technologized battle ground equipped with modern radar, and computerized weapons, which further advanced with the Iraq War. There was no clear enemy identity to oppose, as "personified Terror is now the stated US enemy. And it is the military that is busy framing itself at every turn, from high altitude surveillance transmits to video diaries and cell phone souvenirs" (Stewart 45).

This modern concept of warfare and the representation of it in the television medium called for a new method of visual representation on screen. The digitized images of war proved very popular

amongst the American masses, as it provided an intimate or personalized view of war without the consequences. As Marilyn Young states in her work on the modern combat film, "High-tech war, war as a video game played well. The entire population had the experience of being in the nose cone of a missile as it descended towards its target, and all but those on the ground were spared what happened next" (319). Media outlets ignored the realistic images of the physical effects of war on civilians or soldiers, as had been previously presented in the "living room war," in favour of the construction of the Gulf War as a "clean" conflict. Modern news coverage was now defined by the concept of the "vanishing body," as "media imagery focused on clean, surgical air strikes and the machinery of war rather than on the face it left behind on the bodies of the dead or maimed" (Prince 204). Images of the dead or injured were replaced by visual symbols such as a crushed helmet or damaged machinery. As a result, "war equipment thus eclipses human bodies, shifting attention from the physical being affected by the war onto technology" (Kendrick 67).

The Gulf War films released after the end of the conflict reflect upon the dehumanized version of war depicted in television news through the use of extreme gore and its detailed effects on the body. In previous wars, "communicating truths about the pain and death of war presented Americans with a particularly difficult challenge. The culture had no common visual language of communication for dealing with these phenomena" (Roeder 75). Everything changed with the arrival of the digital medium that allowed for a more detailed and realistic aesthetic. David O. Russell's 1999 film *Three Kings* is a darkly comedic action film that depicts the adventures of three soldiers after the 1991 ceasefire as they attempt to steal a treasure of Iraqi gold. The film utilizes modern media to counter the conventions of representation, as it "launches a savage analysis of the first Gulf War, using the methods of the action genre and music video as counter critique" (Rich 111). In one sequence, the characters discuss the dangers of a bullet wound on the vocal track as the visuals depict the medical and anatomical consequences with digital clarity. The viewer sees the inner organs, bodily fluids and possible infection that can result from such an injury. This occurs again when one of the main characters is shot, and the disturbing imagery resonates; we are familiar with the individual who has been wounded. Russell, in fact, claims that a real cadaver was used to record the scene, which only heightens the sense of reality. For critic John Wrathall, "what lingers in the mind far longer than the smart dialogue, the slightly cartoon characterizations… is a vivid sense of the sickening nature of warfare: poison gas, land mines, cluster bombs, and chemical pollution" (55).

A similar level of traumatic gore is demonstrated in Sam Mendes' 2005 film *Jarhead*, which tells the story of a group of grunt Marines as they wait for battle in the first Gulf War. As they march through the desert, the troop stumbles upon a caravan of civilians that have been bombed by American forces. The bodies are charred and crumbling, although still human in appearance as they maintain the physical positions the held in their final moments of life. The effect is visually devastating and humanizes the hyper-technical nature of modern war, diametrically opposing the sterile reporting on the small screen.

One complicating factor in the production of Gulf War combat films is that there was little actual combat. The war only lasted several months in which most soldiers were not involved in any battle, and culminated in a ceasefire in early 1991. As Jean Baudrillard argues in his controversial writing on this conflict, he claims the Gulf War did not exist because it was fought entirely through political strategy

and military technology. This presented the combat genre with the unique problem of depicting war without the traditional battle scene. In his work on recent war films, Garret Stewart argues "with no genre formats to count on, these narratives can only project a visual "look", where the graininess of the image, infrared, or video, must stand in for the true grittiness of the mission" (47). This absence of a staple convention resulted in the development of a new digital aesthetic of violence, defined by hand held cameras, the desaturation of colours, a sharper and detailed image, and the presence of dirt or blood on camera. This style is especially effective in the desert setting of the Gulf, and is suited for the depiction of technologized warfare such as gunfire and explosions: "when the sand is blasted into the air you can see every particle, almost every grain, coming down" (Peebles 49). Both *Three Kings* and *Jarhead* utilize these techniques to construct a simultaneously surrealistic and realistic atmosphere of high contrast and bleached out colours that compliment the desert setting (McCarthy 48).

This aesthetic is perhaps the most evident in Kathryn Bigelow's 2009 Iraq War film *The Hurt Locker*, which depicts a specialized military group that defuses bombs in civilian areas after the war has already been "won." There are no conventional battle scenes in this film, save for a small group sniper combat fought from a great distance, and it is through this lack of traditional action that this aesthetic of violence emerges. Through the use of hand held cameras and rapid shots, the cinematography "reflects "the hard and exact truth as it seemed"… the "picture" of war shakes, jerks, and is often clouded by dirt and blood" (Peebles 52). In the opening scene, a bomb explodes in a visual spectacle depicted trough slow motion in which every grain of sand and piece of debris is visible to the viewer. This style was intended to create the verisimilitude of the military experience as described by Bigelow in an interview in which she claims "the effect we were after was predominantly a very dense, black, thick, almost completely opaque explosion filled with lots of particulate matter and shrapnel" (Thomson 47). The sniper stand off sequence presents the spectator with an intimate close up of the soldiers' faces; sand covered features and chapped lips weathered by the environment and experience. In the scene the camera closes in on "James' sand-encrusted face and the bug that maybe mistakes his eyeball for a wading pool… the camera discloses the visceral reality as if we've never seen the image properly before" (Taubin 34). This focused, gritty aesthetic substitutes for the combat action in the modern war film, in order to provide the viewer with a realistic experience.

Throughout the tradition of military narratives and cinema, there has always been an emphasis on creating the most authentic and "true" experience of war for the public. In Vietnam, this was partially achieved by the dominance of the figure of the veteran in film and television. The veteran was a moral compass for the nation to comprehend the events that occurred in warfare in foreign lands. However, as time passes "such historical events demand a modernist style of representation" (Keathley 302). The recent digital aesthetic of violence served as a modern solution to spectator demands, because "the eye sees differently from the lens, but with multiple focal lengths and a muscular editing style, the lens can give you that microcosm/macrocosm perspective, and that contributes to the feeling of total immersion" (Thomson 45). *Jarhead* provides the viewer with a first person perspective by positioning the point of view through the lens of the main character's rifle; we see what he sees. *In The Hurt Locker*, the paranoia of diffusing a bomb surrounded by unidentified, and possibly hostile civilians, is demonstrated through "the rapid changes in point of view as they cut from one camera's coverage to

another… make you feel as if you, like the characters, are under threat from all sides" (Taubin 34). The shaky view and collage of brief shots come together to create a coherent sequence that conveys to viewers the immediacy of the screen action (Sklar 55). The obsession with capturing the authentic soldier experience that was so prevalent in the films of Vietnam has simply evolved with the technical innovations of the cinematic medium.

Although the visual style of Gulf War films may have changed, they are connected to their Vietnam cinematic counterparts thematically. The ambiguous nature of war in the Persian Gulf recalls the frustration of Vietnam. This confusion is evident in the questions posed in both *Three Kings* and *Jarhead*: "Are we shooting?" "Do we get to kill anyone?" Few American soldiers were killed, wounded, "or even faced combat with an enemy that could return their fire" (Hallin 54). As represented by the television media, the Gulf War was not a war at all, but a "contest between two "teams" and not as a policy intended to shape the political future" (56). This concept is reflected in the football sequence in *Jarhead*, in which the game is televised for the American public on the home front. As this specific troop sees no real action throughout the narrative, their only combat is literally played out between two teams on the desert field. Baudrillard emphasizes the absence of a defined enemy when he states, "they never saw each other: when the Americans finally appeared behind their curtain of bombs the Iraqis disappeared behind their curtain of smoke" (303).

In past traditional military representations, such as the popular war films of World War II, "filmmakers found easier ways of indentifying ethnic affiliations of characters so that the audience could sort out the good and bad" (Roeder 74). This dichotomy no longer exists in the wake of Vietnam – for the soldiers in the Gulf, they face a nation of ethnic and religious subgroups with multiple allegiances. In addition civilian militant involvement makes it extremely difficult to decipher friend from foe, mirroring the difficulties of eradicating the Viet Cong. With an ambiguous enemy, "you don't know where to focus your attention. You don't know where to focus your anger" (Prince 210). This confused targeting is demonstrated by the all-encompassing racism of the soldiers in *Three Kings*, and the paranoia of the bomb squad surrounded by possible insurgents in *The Hurt Locker*. In the new age of warfare "there is no longer an enemy, there is only a refractory element which must be neutralized and consensualized" (Baudrillard 313). The only clearly identified "enemy" is represented as an explosive device that can be dismantled, or a vast ethnic group that must be suppressed.

The Vietnam War is also contextually present in the modern combat film, through both direct and indirect references to the long-term conflict. Repeated claims of "exorcising the ghosts of Vietnam," were prevalent in the media, and countered by satirical use in Gulf War films like *Three Kings*. Although the war ended in a victory, "intended to vanquish the memory of Vietnam, the only notable movies made about Desert Storm…were haunted by it" (Young 315). The narratives may focus on the conflict in the Gulf, however the Vietnam war is continuously embedded in these works as a secondary narrative: "its chaotic, nonlinear, postmodern elements are evoked, in both verbal and visual representations, to make the Persian Gulf War by contrast seem like a coherent narrative" (Kendrick 60). The historical narrative of the war may seem streamlined and cohesive, but this construction is consistently undermined by the subtext of its cinematic representations. In *Jarhead*, the grunts are pumped up for battle by watching *Apocalypse Now*, imitating the actions of the figures on screen and performing along

with the music. The ambiguous nature of the violence of the original scene complicates the meaning of this reenactment, indicating that this war will not necessarily solve the issues of Vietnam. 1960s music, like the Doors, is played on the film's soundtrack, prompting one character to exclaim "This is Vietnam music…can't we get our own fucking music?" In his review of *Jarhead*, Tom McCarthy expresses his frustration by the lack of action and political commentary within the film, indicating the viewer still maintains certain expectations and seeks answers from the war film. The critic dislikes the references to Vietnam as he claims that, "forcibly reminding the audience of its forebears has the simultaneous negative effect of spotlighting the picture's own lack of comparable boldness and invention. Nope. The Gulf War is no Vietnam, and *Jarhead* is no *Platoon*" (McCarthy 47). The constant presence of the most traumatic war to the American psyche, indicates that the Gulf War did not provided the total closure to Vietnam, and that the nature of warfare and war cinema has perhaps been altered permanently by its legacy.

Finally, many of the films released during the Vietnam War were part of a post-traumatic cycle that often conveyed an overall thematic tone of total powerlessness (Keathley 296). In these narratives, characters were unable to use action to resolve dramatic tensions, and were often trapped in what Christian Keathley termed the "affectation image." This cycle repeats itself in the films of the Gulf War. Russell's *Three Kings* are unable to complete their heartfelt objective of getting innocent civilians across the Iranian border due to the conditions of the ceasefire agreement, until they barter away their share of the treasure. The "Jarheads" in Mendes' film go to hell and back training for a battle they will not be allowed to participate in. One soldier, Troy, begs to be allowed to shoot a human target before the inevitable air raid arrives to the point of traumatic breakdown. And at the conclusion of *The Hurt Locker*, James is unable to return to home life and deal with the structured social norms of American life as represented by the impossible choice of selecting cereal. He is literally frozen in the image unable to grab a box from the vast selection, until he finally returns to Iraq to concrete tasks in which he can successfully disarm an explosive device. These thematic tropes of Vietnam haunt recent war films, and remain beneath the narrative surface as a reminder of national trauma.

The evolution of modern warfare, and the lack of a realistic depiction of the Gulf War in the constant coverage provided by the television media prompted a drastic change in the aesthetic of combat films. Filmmakers utilized new digital technology to convey a detailed and gory depiction of violence to represent both the bodily consequences of war, and provide an authentic experience for the viewer. Despite this modern cinematic change, the Vietnam War remains present in these films thematically and contextually. The recent films *Three Kings*, *Jarhead*, and *The Hurt Locker* all employ the new aesthetic of violence while continually referencing the Vietnam War, its films and music, and it conventional tropes. The conflicts are connected on screen by the ambiguous nature of war and the undecipherable enemy, and the powerlessness of characters to resolve issues through action. As the modern combat film demonstrates: "without clear lines drawn in the sand, there is only dust on the nervous hand held lens" (Stewart 47).

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