

Waiting for Saddam

Keshav Srinivasan

Keshav Srinivasan is an MPhil student in Film and Screen Studies at Wolfson College, Cambridge. In the past, he has worked as a filmmaker and writer, writing and directing several short films. After his degree, he plans on returning to America to pursue a career in filmmaking.

One of Adolf Hitler's favorite musicians was Richard Wagner. His thunderous compositions were meant to instil a violent pride within the listener, with pieces like the 'Ride of the Valkyries' roaring into one's ears with bombastic brass and screeching violins. It is fitting, then, that an anti-war film like Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979) chose it to accompany a horrific act of violence, in a scene that involves US military helicopters launching rockets and firing machine guns at a Vietnamese settlement. The scene is emblematic of much of the New Hollywood movement of the 1970s. It is bleak, uncompromising, and deeply cynical, but also indulgent and excessive, revelling in its own glorification of stomach-churning violence.

In *Jarhead*, his memoir, former US marine Anthony Swofford describes his experience watching the movie during the Gulf War. His platoon would 'concentrate on the Vietnam films because it's the most recent war, and the successes and failures of that war helped write our training manuals'.¹ In Sam Mendes' 2005 film adaptation of the book, Swofford and his platoon are depicted singing along to the fascist anthem, cheering as Robert Duvall shoots down Vietnamese people. It is important to note that, within *Jarhead*, the *Apocalypse Now* clip is played out of context, separated from the preceding or following scenes. It is through this lack of context that the military can turn an ostensibly anti-war scene into a pro-war experience. 'Come get some, marines!', the announcer says after the clip finishes playing. Just like Coppola's characters, Swofford and his platoon cannot wait to smell napalm in the morning.

'There's no such thing as an anti-war film', French director François Truffaut once said.² According to the New Wave pioneer, the camera turns the world into a spectacle, the horrible into the voyeuristic, reality into construction. It is, in fact, why he refused to adapt *81.490*, a book comprising Alexandre Chambon's recollections of a concentration camp. 'I couldn't resolve to have characters weighing 30 kilos played by 60[-]kilo extras, for here, the physical, visual and bodily reality [was] too important to be sacrificed.'³ Truffaut explains the sacrificial aspect of narrative cinema, where one is forced to

create a representation of the 'real', sacrificing the actual 'real' in the process. The concept of construction (or reconstruction) was very much at the core French New Wave's ethos. A movement focussed on the noticeable arrangement of shots and edits, and spearheaded by Truffaut himself, the French New Wave drew attention to cinema's artifice with the intention of revealing its hidden truth. When Truffaut saw a film, he saw a beauty in its fakery, a reality within its unreality. Though no match for personal experience, film represented history and life in a manner that stood apart from other art forms.

This aspect of cinema collides with a tragedy as cosmic as war. How does one reconstruct what it feels like to partake in legalised mass murder when armed with nothing but a camera? The anti-war film is nothing new. An early example is *Westfront 1918* (1930), GW Pabst's study of PTSD. War, in its glory and horror, has long been a bedfellow of the cinematic form. Edmund Burke suggested in *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* that there was a perverse thrill in extricating beauty from violence. Misery is more palatable when viewed through a well-composed camera lens and perfectly positioned lighting. To say that cinema can't have a destructive aspect does a disservice to the medium. DW Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) was more than just a movie. It was a javelin aimed at the heart of Black America and must be remembered and condemned as such. But this hate crime on celluloid had its intended effect. What happens when the opposite is true? How can a director contend with the possibility of their message being received not indifferently, but with a rapturous wrongness?

Anthony Swofford contends with this inner turmoil with his journalistic integrity. Sam Mendes does so with his reflexive visual grammar. The opening of *Jarhead*, often accused of plagiarism, is an intentional copy of Stanley Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket* (1987). Swofford himself noted that the monstrous drill sergeant (R Lee Ermey) inspired many real-life drill sergeants. This is another example of the dangers of reappropriating art. Devoid of context, an anti-war statement on dehumanisation and abuse produces a manner to aspire to, complete with gendered and racialised jokes. However, there is a contrast between Kubrick's and Mendes' shooting styles. Kubrick emphasises the homogeneity of the military boot camp with stable, static, centred framing. Mendes uses an unsteady handheld camera. His intention differs greatly from Kubrick's. Instead of a portrait of a genericised collective, he makes a statement on the unsteadiness of the drill sergeant in *Jarhead*. By literally destabilising the camera, Mendes destabilises our perception of both the soldiers

1 Anthony Swofford, *Jarhead: A Marine's Chronicle of the Gulf War and Other Battles* (Scribner 2005) 6.

2 Tom Brook, 'Is there any such thing as an "anti-war film"?' (BBC, 10 July 2014) <<https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20140710-can-a-film-be-truly-anti-war>> accessed 19 February 2021.

3 Antoine De Baecque and Serge Toubiana, *Truffaut: A Biography* (University of California Press 2000) 162.

and the instructor. He thus calls attention to both the artifice of his visual grammar and the artifice of the sergeant.

We use stories to make sense of our world.⁴ Therefore, the lack of narratives around Swofford's Gulf War turns his and his fellow soldiers' lives into nonsense. It denies the catharsis that comes with making sense out of something as abstractly horrifying as war. The Gulf War was not given the same preferential treatment by cinema as the Vietnam War. This fact is referenced in *Jarhead* when a helicopter passes overhead playing 'Break On Through (To the Other Side)' (1962) by The Doors. 'That's Vietnam music. Can't we get our own music?', moans Swofford in the film. Music is prevalent not just in the Mendes film, but in the history of war itself. Take, for instance, 'Rock the Casbah' (1982) by The Clash. The song was written by Joe Strummer with an anti-war intention. However, 'one thing the pacifist anarchist Joe Strummer certainly never intended was for "Rock the Casbah" to become the anthem of the Gulf War soldiers during Operation "Desert Storm"'.⁵ This was a particularly horrifying act of artistic reappropriation. It was more than just an act of disrespect by American 'imperialists'. It was a desperate attempt to narrativise the unnarratable, using the sentiment of anti-war music to create the opportunity for the dramatic that Vietnam presented. When the war ends and the soldiers celebrate, they dance to 'Fight the Power' (1989) by the leftist hip-hop group Public Enemy, oblivious to the irony that they represent that same power.

Art presents a catharsis by narrativising the absurdity of life. Is it possible, then, to create 'uncathartic' art? It seems that this is Mendes's intention with *Jarhead*, a war film that presents very little warfare, if any. Swofford, and by extension the audience, feels 'blue-balled' by the Gulf War—promised adrenaline-fuelled action but presented with monotony. The frustration and lack of release are literalised in Swofford's inability to masturbate to a picture of his girlfriend. By relating the catharsis of violence to the orgasm (or lack thereof), Mendes links death to pleasure. Boot camp trained Swofford to treat the taking of life as a pleasurable act, but his incomplete masturbation represents a refusal of pleasure. It is a moment in which Mendes shows his intention to create an 'uncathartic' war film. Perhaps this is how *Jarhead* avoids Truffaut's trap. Can the war film avoid glamorisation by simply refusing to show warfare? Perhaps the considerable loss *Jarhead* made at the box office, despite its action-packed trailer, provides an answer. Perhaps audiences were hit with the same frustrations Swofford and his platoon felt. Tricked into expecting the indulgences of cinematic violence, they were instead left with a version of *Waiting for Godot* set in the blistering desert. It is through this very lack of release, this intentional frustration, that audiences were taught to reject cinematic depictions of violence. Nobody gets to take their shot.

4 Frank Rose, 'The Art of Immersion: Why Do We Tell Stories?' (*WIRED*, 3 August 2011) <<http://www.wired.com/2011/03/why-do-we-tell-stories/>> accessed 19 February 2021.

5 Amin Farzanefer, '25 Years of "Rock the Casbah": Anthem of US Marines', (*Qantara.de*, 2007) <<https://en.qantara.de/content/25-years-of-rock-the-casbah-anthem-of-us-marines>> accessed 19 February 2021.