
Through the Eyes of *Jarhead*: The Representation of the Gulf War and Arab Identity

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ABSTRACT

Insofar as the Gulf War films go, we are provided with war narratives that are western-centered, giving Arab identity no subject position and consequently dominating the narrative concerning Islam. Sontag posited that the modern understanding of war is mainly a product of war images. In this sense, cinematic representation of war contributes to the audience's knowledge of the war itself. This essay dwells on the narrative of identities and the representation of the Gulf War in the film Jarhead. The narrative of identity told by Anthony Swofford suggests an interplay between two identities, his and Arab identity. In Foucauldian framework, the subject position of the marine is shaped through the making of docile bodies. Furthermore, the representation of Arab identity is arguably very limited and unclear, a reluctant outsider point of view. To disseminate this narrative of identities, this essay uses textual narrative analysis proposed by Bordwell and Thompson. This representation makes up the war narrative that Baudrillard, in The Gulf War did not Take Place, claims as a spectacle made by the media, devoid the traditionally thought truth. Reflecting on Baudrillard, this essay finally argues that in order to reinforce the hegemonic war narrative, the Arab identity represented in the Gulf War films is made to remain indiscernible and alien.

Keywords: Gulf War, representation, subject position, war narrative, film

INTRODUCTION

The media in all its types assumes an important role in the dissemination of information today. It undoubtedly shapes the perception of the general public on issues only few have direct access to. With the advance of technology, war as a distant event can be readily brought to the public's eye by means of media exposure. As a result, public perception on the war is shaped by the ways the media represent (or not represent) the involved parties. While the necessity to be well informed of issues around the world turns into a business, the claim that the media is selectively representing certain ideological preferences cannot be disregarded. Due to the proliferation of war images, the public's attention on the war can be garnered and then made to produce active reaction from the public. The Vietnam War is a good example of how the success of the first media coverage on war resulted in a strong opposition from the public, inciting protests from around the world. In other words, through dissemination of information by the media, thoughts can be manifested into movement which eventually triggers political changes.

In her seminal work *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003), Susan Sontag argues that the modern understanding of war is mainly constructed by the war images. Claiming that 'understanding' is a problematic statement, Sontag further states that the proliferation of war images in the media raises questions on whether or not they are objective. Furthermore, as more and more war images are produced, war becomes redundant. As a consequence, war images desensitize and turn us to be less emotionally affected by the images. Turning to films depicting the Gulf War made in Hollywood, we often see representation of the war which focuses on the subject position of Western identities, while there is hardly any film telling the Arabs' experience of the war. This under-representation is surely not unintended as films, while there are other who are responsible enough to attempt truthful projection of the reality, are made to convey certain ideological preferences.

Linking the argument raised by Sontag and the phenomenon of war representation in the media, this essay discusses the relationship between representation and the present dominant war narrative. While most popular war films center in the US military serving in the Middle East, there seems to be far fewer references in which the audience is allowed to fully understand Arab identity. In most mainstream Gulf War films, the Arab identity, and thus Islam, appear as the indiscernible others, misunderstood and even antagonized. Furthermore, such

representation might be used to reinforce war narrative which is Western-centered. To closely examine this phenomenon, this essay uses the film *Jarhead* (dir. Sam Mendes, 2005) which illustrates the making of docile bodies, hailed as deadly killing machines which are physically and ideologically manipulated to reinforce the hegemonic or dominant narrative of war and the interplay of this identity with its counterpart, Arab identity. This essay argues that the Arab identity in this film, and indeed in many Hollywood-made Gulf War films, is intentionally made to be hardly represented in order to maintain its presence as others. This way, the hegemonic narrative of war can be reinforced.

Method and Critical Frameworks

Film is a product of literature which uses both narrative and visual cues in order to convey meaning. For film to deliver its story, dialogues and visualization of the scenes are carefully selected and crafted in order to not only achieve artistic success, but also convey strategically made message. The work by Bordwell and Thompson, *Film Art an Introduction* (2004) elaborates film making techniques and principles for film makers and film enthusiasts alike for the purpose of understanding cinematic art better. This essay uses critical frameworks in order to analyse the scenes and dialogues of the selected film. Thus, a formal analysis technique is used in this study. Bordwell and Thompson (2004) suggests that a formal analysis involves collaboration of all elements of films, all of the visual and narrative aspects, in order to acquire thorough comprehension of the story. In doing so, the analysis examines both the narrative and the visualization of the narrative through scenes of the film. Narrative textual analysis is an important part of formal analysis where a focus on the description of the events on the scenes in relation to the intrinsic elements of the films, such as camera angles, points of view, and framing, is the main concern of the analysis.

There are two frameworks of thinking used to give context to the selected dialogues and scenes which project the narrative of identity in the film. The first is the theory of subject position proposed by Foucault in *The Order of Things* (2002). This theory explains a subject through its relation with power and knowledge. A subject cannot exist outside discourse and therefore it is determined by it. An individual actively and repeatedly engages with discourse at the expense of their conformity to the society. According to Foucault, such conformity, exercised through language, can define what is wrong or right and normal or not normal. In the theory of subjectivity, discourse can relate to gender, race, nationality, and culture, meaning that through these aspects subject position is made. Theorists in Cultural Studies have explored the relationship of these aspects with subjectivity, including Butler (1993), Hall (1990), and Said (1978).

Another framework of thinking crucial in examining post-modernist concept of subjectivity is the work of Foucault called *Discipline and Punish* (1977). Foucault discusses the mechanism of power by relating discourse through which the body is constituted.

In becoming the target for new mechanisms of power, the body is offered up to new forms of knowledge. It is the body of exercise, rather than of speculative physics; a body manipulated by authority, rather than imbued with animal spirits; a body of useful training and not of rational mechanics, but one in which, by virtue of that very fact, a number of natural requirements and functional constraints are beginning to emerge (Foucault 1977: 155)

The above statement encapsulates the position of the body and the power mechanism which is used to regulate it. Through such mechanism, Foucault suggests docile bodies, bodies which “may be subjected, used, transformed and improved” (ibid, p. 136). As a target for new mechanisms of power, transformation into docile bodies is necessary in order to guarantee that labor, the military duties, could be performed. Turning the body into docile, Foucault argues, is to implement practices that are not in the form of coercion, but rather a combination of practices and techniques, through which subordination or obedience could be acquired. In order to achieve this state, the ‘aptitude’ and ‘capacity’ (ibid, 138) of the military body must be formed. Through control, the power of the body is gradually improved and such disciplinary power “reaches into the very grain of individuals, touches their bodies and inserts itself into their actions and attitudes, their discourses, learning processes and everyday lives” (ibid, 39).

The two frameworks for determining identity and subject position are used to further the argument to the reinforcement of hegemonic or dominant war narrative in Western-centered

Gulf War films. To examine this, Baudrillard offers a critical idea concerning the representation of the Gulf War in the media. In *The Gulf War Did not Take Place* (1991), Baudrillard argues that our traditionally thought truth is being replaced by hyperreality, that we are more concerned on appearance rather than the reality itself. Thus, the war, he further claims, in either conventional or modern terms, is no longer about occupation in Iraq, but a matter of appearance. He claims that the military occupation in Iraq has a “hyperrealistic logic of deterrance of the real by the virtual” (ibid, p. 27), which is emphasized on maintaining an image of power. This is exercised through media which comprehensively relays broadcasts of the war, possibly by carefully selecting footage that gives idea to certain war narrative. Inasmuch, the war becomes a spectacle created by the media, through which the war image circulating in the public is made (Beck, 2008; Stewards, 2009; Cantey, 2018).

This essay attempts to elaborate the arguments previously raised through textual narrative analysis. The mechanism for the analysis is by identifying the critical scenes and dialogues which show narrative of identity and dominant narrative of war, and then analyzing the selected scenes and dialogues with the relevant discussions on subject position and hegemonic war narrative.

The Docile Bodies and its Projection of the Arab Identity

Jarhead tags itself as a war film which aims to faithfully and closely recount the Gulf War experience from the perspective of a military personnel. It follows the military career of a US marine, Anthony Swofford, starting from his training with the notorious US marine boot camp to his deployment to Iraq as a part of the Operation Desert Shield mission and eventually to his return to the civilian life. Through his narrative, the audience learns that the intense marine training, expected to culminate in shooting down Iraqi opponents, ends anticlimactically for the marines because eventually the war is won with barely any direct combat, rendering the training useless. More essentially, the story leaves us with representation of a military subject position and its projection of its enemy, the Arab identity.

The marine training is essential in the making of the military subject position. The training produces docile bodies which subsequently, through the process of othering, projects the Arab identity. The first half of the film, which starts with the commencement of the notoriously gruesome US Marine Corps Boot Camp, illustrates the making of the docile body and how it is made to adapt to military labors and acquire military obedience. In *Jarhead*, Swofford opens his narrative by providing the definition of the marine.

Swofford: *Jarhead*: noun. Slang for “Marine.” Origin: from the resemblance to a jar of the regulation high-and-tight haircut. The Marine’s head, by implication, therefore also a jar. An empty vessel (*Jarhead*, 2005)

The empty vessel refers to both the physical and mental states of the docile body which, through regulations, is made to adhere to the discipline. The resemblance to a jar alludes to the idea that the body must be not only physically transformed, but also be considered as a container, ready to be filled with the discipline given by the authority. This way, the body achieves military obedience.



Figure 1. Marines standing in line (long shot)



Figure 2. Physical training (long shot)

Employing long shots, the film captures obedience by displaying uniformity and order. The marines live in a shared living quarter, where all of their items are arranged neatly and orderly, as is their physical appearance strictly regulated. When they greet their superior, they have to line up, bodies straight and conditioned to receive order. The scene in Figure 1 shows that there is no irregularity, meaning that all aspect of marines' life is made to display obedience. The scene in Figure 2 shows the marines performing routine physical exercise in which they are yet again showing order and uniformity. As they run, they follow the order of their superior. These scenes visually display the making of docile bodies, where the military bodies are made to be obedience by means of regulating not only their physicality, but also their mentality. They are trained to follow order which results in distinct military disciplined bodies.

As the training progresses, Staff Sergeant Sykes defines the marines as "the meanest motherf***" in "God's cruel kingdom" Further, he recites the Bible, "Thou shall not kill" and proceeds to say "F*** that s***". These scenes are important in defining the docile bodies in the film in two ways. First, the association of military prowess with violence suggests that the aptitude of a military body, the ability of annihilating the opponents, can be achieved by switching off their humanity. Therefore, violence is a part of the transformation into this docile body. Secondly, the Biblical reference on the sanctity of life suggests that in the process of transforming into docile bodies, all ideological preferences are to be disregarded. Mentioning the Bible, while it alludes to the Crusade, has nothing to do with the religiosity, but rather to invoke the discipline which all recruits are expected to serve. The Staff Sergeant further asserts that marines do not have freedom of speech, indicating that idealism is suppressed as they are instructed to not express their thoughts.

The film gives the military identity subject position by the practice of obedience given during the marine training and through this subjectivity the Arab identity is projected. The relation of the docile bodies with the Arab identity is founded on the basis of the lacking of acknowledgement of the Arab subject position by Swofford. From few encounters with the Arabs, Swofford's narrative seems to steer away from contact with them, passing the possibilities of knowing his unknown other, whom he so passionately wishes to kill. This lack of contact in the narrative suggests that the Arab identity is made indiscernible and alien. By maintaining such war narrative, the audience only learns the dominant subject position, the military body, who only minimally understands their supposedly enemy and therefore not giving them subjectivity in such narrative.

As Swofford's squad performs their routine desert patrol, they are encountered by passing Arab civilians. As the alarmed marines stand in guard with the rifles pointed to the distant Arab civilians, they are arguing about how they should approach them, one suggesting that raising left hand is considered offensive. As this display of miss-communication goes on, the Arabic speaking Swofford greets and slowly approaches the civilians while the remaining of the squad covers him anxiously. The tension disappears as Swofford comes back to inform the squad that one of the civilian's camels was shot. On the way returning to their base, it is revealed that one of the marines has shot the camel and then proceeds to taunt a passing civilian car carrying a female Arab with sexually inappropriate gestures.

The representation of Arab identity in the film discussed in this essay goes beyond the use of derogatory addresses, like "rag heads", and the marines' atrocity or taunts on passing Arab civilians, but the use of the Arab identity as backgrounds who are unable to speak for themselves. In the narrative, the Arabs are represented as the incomprehensible enemy, towards whom the US military personnel must be alerted and suspicious. The vague line that separates enemies and civilians implies that the Arabs are alien. As the film does not give enough interaction between the marines and the enemies, the audience is left to ponder on the Arab identity based on the distant image of travelling civilians, female dressed in *burqa* briefly passing the patrol and her contempt look on the soldier who taunted her, and the remains of refugees who were burned to death on their way to flee the war. On these scenes, they remain silenced subjects who wait to be narrated by Swofford.

Visually, the audience is given an impression of the Arabs as a distant and incomprehensible object which the narrator is reluctant to approach. The film employs wide angle long shot in order to emphasize the distant and unfriendly contact between the marines and the Arabs. Close up shot, which indicates intimate contact with the object on the screen, involving the Arabs is rarely used. There is one close up shot where an Arab female gazes on the camera while riding on a moving car which allows brief yet almost intimate contact with Arab

identity. This scene of an Arab showing contempt to the marines is the only scene where the Arab is given the power to confront the dominant. This visual analysis of the film shows that both visual and narrative presences of the Arabs in this film is very limited and puts them as merely an object with no subject position.



Figure 3. Swofford approaching the Arabs (long shot)



Figure 4. Dead bodies (long shot)



Figure 5. Arab woman in a passing car (close up)

Ultimately, the objective of their presence in Iraq is to kill Iraqi militia. As Swofford's STA fire team was assigned to take down an important target, they have to acknowledge the superiority of the literal killing machine, a fighter aircraft, over their rifle. Troy, who shares the same desire to shot Iraqi targets with Swofford, breaks down crying knowing that his hellish training is in vain because he is not given the small favor to take down an enemy by his superior. This penultimate scene suggests that the interplay between the two identities is defined by the intention of annihilating the other. This is ominous throughout the film, starting with *Apocalypse Now* screening to the very end where Swofford realized that the war ended with his realization of missing his 'pink mist' forever.

The Interplay of Two Identities and its Implication on the Reinforcement of Dominant War Narrative

Scholars alike have claimed that many Gulf War films are western-centered, indicating a one-sided representation of the identities involved in this war. Mainstream Gulf War films produced by Hollywood are mostly narrated from the US military personnel's point of view, focusing on their comradeship, patriotism, and/or heroism. Meanwhile, the presence of the Arab is kept at minimum by limiting their narrative and/or reducing their roles in the film to insurgents or unknown passers. Lacking of diversity in the subject position presented in these films can affect the perception towards the under-represented side of the war.

While anxiously waiting for their deployment to Iraq, the marines are watching the news on the Iraqi's invasion to Kuwait. The news refers Saddam Hussein as dictator who endorses Kuwaiti revolutionist to revolt to and overthrow the then incumbent government. The scene proceeds with an authentic news footage in which Kuwaiti Ambassador calls for aid from the

United Nation and the US, to which one of the marine concludes with a statement of eagerness to go to war. The scene continues to a night of entertainment where the marines euphorically scream over *Apocalypse Now*, maniacally shouting 'shot them!' to a scene displaying civilians running for their life from the flying Apaches spraying bullets towards them.

While also appealing to their humanitarian mission, the commander of the battalion, Lt. Col. Kazinski states that their presence in Iraq is mainly to help the Kuwaiti government protecting their natural resources. During the induction to the Desert Shield Operation, he informs the freshly deployed marines that they have to wait for the war to commence by securing and guarding the Kuwaiti oil fields, repeatedly mentioning the words 'lot of oil'. Later on the trip to their station, Swofford's squad discusses about their presence in Iraq. A marine said that they are there to protect the properties of Kuwaiti conglomerates, to which another marine mockingly rejects, and then the following dialogue happens.

Unknown Marine: Who do you think give Saddam his weapons? We did!

Troy: F*** politics. We're here. All the rest is B*****. (Jarhead, 2005)

The scene suggests that in performing their duties, these marines are bound to their military obedience, regardless of what they believe or know. Throughout the film, the audience learns that the obedience is voluntary rather than forced. The marine training helped to ingrain the purposes of the war in their head. Ultimately, rather than losing faith to the missing during long idleness in the middle of the desert and being away from their loved ones, their sense of belonging to the US Marine Corps caused them to remain obedient to their corps.



Figure 6. News footage of the Iraq War (medium shot, over the shoulder)

The film pays attention to the issue concerning with the presence of the US military in Iraq. The use of authentic news footage displaying a Kuwaiti authority asking for help from the US allows the film to blend the virtual and the reality, creating a hyperreality. The over the shoulder shot allows the audience to see the footage and the marine watching it simultaneously, despite the facial expression is not shown. While the scene gives the audience the justification for the US military presence in Iraq, the scene really highlights the idea of "logic of deterrance" that Baudrillard offers in his essays. The film seems to justify the appearance of power that the US military is trying to show through its presence in Iraq. As the film uses hyperreal to show some faithfulness to war reporting, it wants to show the full preparation culminating to the readiness for war, showcasing the power of docile bodies for narrating the war.

Henceforth, as the dominant Gulf War films often focus on Western-centered representation, the mainstream media is reinforcing a hegemonic narrative where military identity puts the Arab identity as other. As a genre in which the division of what is evil and right can be readily drawn through the display of patriotism or heroism, war films are clearly capable of othering.

Conclusions

The representation of Arab identity in the film *Jarhead* is essentially limited into distant indiscernible subject position which the dominant military bodies reluctantly project. The analysis on the making of docile bodies in the film shows that while the bodies are made physically and mentally obedient, these docile bodies are given the agency by narrating the war. Meanwhile, the Arab identity is merely a distant projection, gazed with alertness and hostility, making their representation in the film be reduced to visually and narratively peripheral. This lack of representation supports the claim that there is a dominant war narrative that the mainstream media is reinforcing and this involves the representation of the military identity as

dominant as opposed to the Arab other. In the era where perception of Islam is mainly obtained through media projection, no representation is still a representation. That being said, having no narrative in the mainstream media makes Islam remain misunderstood and even antagonized. Therefore, a counter-narrative, one which is not western-centered, is needed so that Islam can be better understood.

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