

Objectivity in Fictional War Cinema and our Collective Memory: Stanley Kubrick's Full Metal Jacket



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Introduction

Cinema can, in a way, depict the drama and chaos of war in a way that no other medium can. It is as Colonel Kurtz from APOCALYPSE NOW says at the end of the film after seeing the terrors of war: 'The Horror...The Horror'. We have all seen at least one war movie and whether it was about the First or Second World War, Vietnam or Iraq we felt something. These feelings differ from person to person, but the stories and images we see stir something inside us. We feel connected to what we see, we feel that it could be real. Many films follow actual historical events. Before we see the film the producers have done a thorough research on their subject as to recreate it as realistic as possible. We see shots that could have been taken in that time, where every detail is correct. So why is it that we never look at a film as a way of telling a truthful story? We always see a fiction film as just that, a work of fiction. But when we look at the scene of Kurtz's death we can question this. It's so vivid, the blood, the cross-cutting to shots of a cow being brutally slaughtered, the madness, it all seems 'real' to us. But we would never use these images as a source when looking at the Vietnam War.

War cinema contains a form of reproducing, processing and remembering that can only be seen in this genre. We try to reproduce a war so we can remember and understand what happened. We visualize what we read in history books, events we cannot remember ourselves. It shows the way that we think about the events that are depicted when we stand further away from them. Film can be a way to process traumatic experiences, we need only think of Oliver Stone's BORN ON THE FOURTH OF JULY¹. I believe that this is why war cinema can achieve a certain form of objectivity that cannot be found in any other film genre and maybe even in any other medium. War Cinema is connected to what is felt, to our collective history, its subject is something that stands close to us. We feel closer connected to something we see than to something we read. The fact that we can see it makes it 'real' to us. The Vietnam War can probably provide us with proof of this statement. It was the first war to be seen live on television and stirred the most emotions. This traumatic event is reflected in the many Hollywood productions that have been produced after the war. They show us so many aspects of the war that they become a monument of time itself. A monument in the way that most people who haven't witnessed the war themselves connect it with images from famous movies like APOCALYPSE NOW, PLATOON, THE DEER HUNTER, BORN ON THE FOURTH OF JULY and FULL METAL JACKET. These films show

¹ Oliver Stone was a Vietnam Veteran himself, he fought in the 25th Infantry Division.

us what happened, what it must have been like to be a part of that war. They tell us our collective history, they form our collective memory. Those of us who have not seen the war on television remember the images provided in these films. Many historians believe that the only type of film that can be objective is documentary, but as Bill Nichols is very just to say: 'Some documentaries make strong use of practices such as scripting, staging, reenactment, rehearsal, and performance that we associate with fiction.²'. We need only think of the documentaries of Michael Moore to find proof of this statement. They were very successful, but no one can deny that they're not objective.

This study will look into the possibility of objectivity in fictional war cinema and the way it can contribute to our collective memory. To support this research an analysis of Stanley Kubrick's *Full metal jacket* is included. In this analysis I will look at the way war cinema can contain a form of objectivity and how this affects our collective memory.

The main question we will tackle is: How can fictional war cinema be understood as objective and how can it attribute to our collective memory? We can distinguish two parts in this question. The first part includes objectivity and fiction film and the second part collective memory, these concepts will be treated separately before applying the results to our case-study.

There have been studies on objectivity in film, but it is an area that needs more research. Objectivity in film is mostly seen as a way of writing about history the same a book would do. The book *Writing history in Film* by William Guynn treats this form of objectivity, he looks at the way historical film can accurately reproduce historical events and how this makes us remember that event. The book doesn't include war cinema but I think we can see many similarities between the two genres. They both reproduce historical events and both try to mirror historical reality. I also use two books by Bill Nichols that treat documentary film, they don't mention war cinema but Nichols sees fiction film and documentary film as closely linked even though they differ in purpose. This link between the two can show that fiction film can be objective, but it can also show that documentary film can be subjective.

I have found no studies on objectivity in fictional war cinema, the literature I use treats different film genres but can also be applied to my subject. We always discover new areas in film studies that need to be looked into, but I believe that

² Nichols (2001) p. xi

objectivity in film should be researched more extensively. It can provide us with a new way of looking at fiction film and how we can place it in our society.

It is important to understand that the term objectivity is almost impossible to grasp. Despite extensive research there is no unambiguous outcome. Many see it as the myth of the century³. Some even see it as non-existent. I prefer thinking about the term as Gustave Courbet, leader of the realist art movement, said it: 'the reproduction of nature by man will never be a reproduction and imitation, but always an interpretation...'⁴. So everything we reproduce or retell is an interpretation of the truth. No one can ever be unbiased or totally objective, even a historian who writes a history book is. We can come closest to objectivity when we make a realistic interpretation of an event. In this way we can compare fictional film with assumed non-fictional media-content. They are equally objective because they are both interpretations. But this study will not investigate the term objectivity further, it will look at the possibility of its existence in fictional war cinema. As I said before objectivity in fiction film is a way of writing history, not producing a historical document.

The term collective memory is a little bit easier to understand. We can divide the term into two words; collective and memory. Memory is, as Plato has put it: 'the present representation of an absent thing'⁵. The word collective simply means something shared by a group or done by people acting as a group⁶. In social sciences Maurice Halbwachs has written extensively about collective memory. He links memory to a specific social group⁷, he treats collective memory as an active process that occurs in a society. Together we make our common history.

Objectivity in fiction film

Objectivity, as I already mentioned, is a very difficult term. It doesn't mean the same as truthfulness or historical correctness, it includes more. Objectivity means that we take notion of something without the distortion of a mediator but: 'Artists,

³ There has been written on this subject in many fields like education, medicine, science, psychology and press.

⁴ Daston (2007)p. 147. Even though this anecdote treats art it is very easy to apply to film.

⁵ Gynn (2006) p. 168

⁶ As found in the Oxford Dictionary

⁷ A social group can be bound by a collective history for example the native Americans or Americans in general, this group can differ in size.

even militantly realistic ones, agreed that their very presence meant that images were mediated⁸. This creates a paradox that cannot be solved easily. If the maker of a work of art (or a producer of a film, or the writer of a book) is the mediator than nothing is objective. So we look for a different kind of objectivity, a kind that does allow mediation without seeing it as a distortion.

The term historical correctness doesn't apply to this study because most fictional war films don't aim for this. We could look for objectivity in the drama and emotion of a film, by asking how cinema depicts these elements in images. In this way objectivity wouldn't mean an exact replica of the truth, we already found that to be impossible, but a way of writing the truth, be it in images or words. It becomes a way of writing about history.

The possibility of objectivity in a fictional film has long been denied by historians.⁹ First and foremost because the purpose of most historical films is not historical correctness. Second because historians see every form as editing as a distortion of the truth. Third, historians always see film as a narrative, and can therefore never correspond to precise historical facts. Fourth, a historical film always carries the present with it. In analogy with Henri-Irénée Marrou's equation $h = P + p$ ¹⁰, history is a mixture of Past and Present¹¹. A film will always tell us something about the time when it was produced. It doesn't just write about the history of its subject, it also writes about the time when it was produced. It shows the way we generally think about the depicted event at that moment, it shows our convictions. There has been critique on the point of view historians take. The reasons they give us for not trusting film could also be applied to their work. Apart from the first reason the remaining three also form a problem in their historical works. Roland Barthes found this fault as well:

'Is there in fact any specific difference between factual and imaginary narrative, any linguistic feature by which we may distinguish on the one hand the mode appropriate to the relations of historical events...and on the other hand the mode appropriate to the epic, novel or drama?'¹² Historical works as well as film make use of narrative, we need it to comprehend what is said. This does not mean that Barthes denies that there is any form of objectivity, it simply means that the two

⁸ Daston (2007)p. 146

⁹ Guynn mentions this in his introduction

¹⁰ Guynn (2006) p. 18

¹¹ Idem.

¹² Barthes (1970) p. 154

are very much alike.

There have been authors who did see the possibility of objectivity in fiction film. William Guynn, for example, wrote the book 'Writing History in Film' aims to look at objectivity in historical films and how we can write about history in film. He goes even further in his belief that film can hold a form of objectivity when he concludes that film can be a historical record as well: '...in the age of photography and cinematography, sources of historical evidence are as often visual as they are verbal.'¹³ He sees historical records (for example books, which Guynn sees as verbal) as a representation of the past, this representation or reconstruction is the work of a historian. In this way film could fulfill the same role as a book in reconstructing and representing something in the past but in a visual way instead of verbally.

Another form of film that is closely linked to the past is documentary. Bill Nichols sees a difference between fictional film and documentary in its purpose and the expectation of the audience.¹⁴ But he also sees similarities: 'Documentary voice is clearly akin to film style: both rely on the same cinematic techniques.'¹⁵ So even though both have a different purpose with regard to the audience and message there is no doubt that they are connected in the sense that they use the same cinematic techniques. Nichols even states that documentary could be regarded as just another film genre.¹⁶

What is important for this treatment is that Nichols doesn't see documentary as an objective means to tell us about something: 'The fact that documentaries are not a reproduction of reality gives them a voice of their own. They are, instead, a representation of the world.'¹⁷ The word 'voice' is critical here, Nichols tells us that every film has its voice, they all tell us something. If documentary has so much in common with fictional film and can be seen as a representation of the world the line between the two becomes very blurred. The difference between the two can be found in conventions but not in essence. They both use the same cinematic techniques and conventions but the essence lies in purpose and reception.

Objectivity in fiction film is very hard to grasp. There are so many factors to be

¹³ Guynn (2006) p. 68

¹⁴ Nichols (2001)

¹⁵ Ibid. p. 69

¹⁶ Nichols (1991)

¹⁷ Nichols (2001) p. 68

dealt with. But we can say that fictional war cinema could be just as objective as other historical works because it simply doesn't exist in one form. There are different kinds of objectivity. War cinema can be objective in the way that it expresses drama and emotion in the way that every person feels it. Even though historians have detached this from scientific historical records. Cinema can become a way of writing history.

But we have to watch out that our view of objectivity doesn't become too Baudrillardistic. If everything would be a signifier of something real and the only way we could see reality is through this signifier we would lose our connection with reality completely. This loss of connection would lead to our detachment from what actually happened. This could never happen because we are emotional beings, we cannot detach ourselves from our reality or history. It is a part of us, our history creates the way we look at things. We cannot look at something without prejudice, we cannot turn our emotions or knowledge off. In this way we become the mediator, we connect what we see.

So a better question about objectivity in fiction film would be, why do we think fiction film is less objective than other media? Other media aren't objective either, even if they suggest it. War cinema can speak to us directly in the way of showing common feelings and believes. What happened is connected with the public. This is something that other media cannot do, and perhaps it is there that we can find objectivity in film.

Even though objectivity will always be a problematic term, we can say that objectivity in fiction film can be found in the way that it writes about history. I believe that film can write about history the same a book does, it only focuses on different elements. Film focuses on drama and emotion while books focus on facts. The term objectivity is useful in this study because when a film achieves it will probably connect to the audience. They will see it as realistic, something that tells them about their history. It creates a memory.

Collective memory

As I mentioned in my introduction Halbwachs is one of the leading scholars that looked into the social process of collective memory. Even though his theory is over sixty years old it still is very relevant when looking at how society actively constructs the links to its past. In '*On Collective Memory*' (1950) Halbwachs distinguishes a difference between history and collective memory, for the first is dead and the latter is living. History therefore is something that no longer lives in

society while collective memory is an ongoing process within society. Halbwachs separates different kinds of memory: autobiographical, historical and collective memory. Autobiographical memory, refers to events that we experienced ourselves, even though our remembrance of them can be shaped by the group. More important to this study is the distinction between historical memory and collective memory. Historical memory includes the events we did not see for ourselves but are brought to us through historical records. Our memory of them is created by these sources and therefore may not always be truthful. We could share film under these records as well, even though Halbwachs doesn't include this in his study.

It is important to understand that Halbwachs refers to a very specific group of people when he mentions a social group. This group has to share a common background, place and history in order to feel connected. Lewis Coser gives us a very useful example in his introduction to Halbwachs' *On Collective Memory*: 'I came to this country as an immigrant shortly before Pearl Harbor. It did not take me long to establish friendships, or at least contacts, with young people of roughly my own age. But I felt for a long time that there was something in my relations with the native Americans that blocked full communication, and that there was a kind of impassible barrier between us. It was only after I remembered Halbwachs work on memory...that... I realized that they and I did not share enough collective memories.'¹⁸ In order to have a collective memory a certain historical connection is needed. In this case it is the historical connection of this social group in America. Lewis Coser, who came from Germany, did not share this collective memory and therefore did not feel completely integrated. Looking at collective memory connected to film in this way would mean that the social group we are talking about comes from the USA for they share the collective memory of the Vietnam War. Even though there are many who did not experience the war themselves there is a form of collective memory still alive today. Isn't it true that there are still people who say: 'I'm a Vietnam veteran so you don't know what you're talking about' . Many Americans take this for granted, they know exactly what he is talking about because they share a collective memory. It is crucial here to understand that our collective memory is mediated, be it in visual or verbal ways. If we don't see the event for ourselves all information that comes to us is mediated. Whether it is while reading a historical book or watching a film.

¹⁸ Halbwachs (1950) p. 21

I have said before that film can be a historical record that creates our historical memory. I would like to add that historical memory can attribute to our collective memory. Cinema provides us with images that we link to historical events and it are those images we remember when we talk about the war. Of course no one has seen all the Vietnam War films or has seen the same films: the images we have access to differ in many respects. Still there are many images that are roughly the same and that we all remember.

William Guynn has discussed collective memory in film in a chapter called *Film a Place of Memory*. Even though film is, as he says: 'a nonprofessional form of social remembrance'¹⁹ it is undeniable that it has a big influence on the public because it is visual and vivid. There have been situations when the mass media played a bigger role in remembering than historical sources, we all know the picture of Kim Phuc, the napalm girl. It are these images that stick, not the historical event.

Guynn calls film a nonprofessional historic source because most films are not produced by professional historians. Even if they did play a big role in the development of the film the main goal of the film probably isn't historical correctness. But what film can do better than any other historical medium is show the dramatics of a historical event that is so full of detail that it seems a truthful representation of the past.

Another important point Guynn mentions is the desire we feel to remember, whether it is for political, ethical or social reasons. This desire comes forth from the loss of our connection to history because of the ordering of history in the means of archives instead public memories. To find this connection we try and make representations of historical events. But this 'desire of collective memory to preserve the past in the present leads to distortions and "misrepresentations" because memory is steeped in emotion and is often guided by the self-interest of the group.'²⁰ In this case we could see the group as the film producers who have their own interests. What we can also conclude is that collective memory is not always linked to historical correctness. The influence of emotions has always bound us to our past, and Guynn already mentioned that we lost that when we started filing everything away. If this is the case, and the loss of emotion meant the loss of connection to our past, film might be the perfect way to regain that

¹⁹ Guynn (2006) p. 165

²⁰ Ibid. p. 173

connection. As I mentioned before, film is perfectly capable of capturing emotions and drama. It brings emotion back in our memory and, even though it might not be objective in the sense that is historical correct, there is no loss because human memory has always been linked to distortion by emotions.

Case Study – Stanley Kubrick’s Full Metal Jacket

Stanley Kubrick’s FULL METAL JACKET (1987) is one of the classical Vietnam war films. Kubrick already had experience in producing war cinema since he directed PATHS OF GLORY (1957). The film was one of the few that showed the real horrors of the First World War without glorifying them. Even though FULL METAL JACKET was released almost twenty years after the Vietnam War it still showed a vivid image of the Tet offensive of 1968. The Vietnam War was the first war to be broadcasted live. This led to a closer connection of the public to this war than any other had been before.²¹ The connection of images to events made the events much more vivid, war got a real face. This also resulted in a strong resistance against the war that can be seen in many Vietnam war films.²² These films, together with all the other images from the media, became a mixture of different opinions and images of the war that had not been seen before. This war lived into the memories of the public. These images became an instrument of public memory: ‘the intense coverage by the media, particularly television, survives in the public imagination in the form of highly selective and distilled images that, once ‘captured’ are manipulated and repeated.’²³ When we think of the war we all have certain images that are connected to it, even if we haven’t experienced that time ourselves. We remember the photo of Kim Phuc, the napalm girl. We don’t remember the precise event but we do remember this one girl because the image was so vivid.

It seems probable that objectivity can be achieved in war cinema better than in any other film genre. This is because we already know so many images and facts about for example the Vietnam War that any anomaly is noticed. What we see in a film needs to correspond with what the public knows.

FULL METAL JACKET is one of the more recent films about the Vietnam War. This means that Stanley Kubrick could take a more distant view of his subject. The

²¹ Dittmar (1990)

²² Ibid. p. 239

²³ Guynn (2006) p. 166

war no longer stood so emotionally close to his audience. There was more room for critique and even though the Vietnam War wasn't lost by the Americans, people did feel it as a defeat. This public feeling was also reflected in Vietnam war films: 'Beginning with the Deer Hunter in 1978, movies about Vietnam have documented the loss with more and more sophisticated confessions of failure, culminating in Full Metal Jacket a decade later in 1987.'²⁴

The film is divided into two parts. One part includes the training of the privates by the brutal sergeant Harman, the other part is unfolded in Vietnam during the Tet offensive. Both episodes tell us different things about the war and the army, but the film: 'had grander aspirations, dealing less with the concrete reality of Vietnam than with the military as an institution that breeds killers and projecting a vision of all men as potential destroyers and lovers of death.'²⁵ We clearly see how Kubrick took his distance from his subject and had a critical view on what happened.

The first part of the film is where Kubrick introduces his characters and statements. The training of the young boys takes place on the isolated Parris Island where they are excluded from their normal lives. They are taught that they are not individuals but a group and that anyone who doesn't adapt to this is worth nothing.²⁶ The first images of the film support this, everything that gives them their individuality is taken away. Their hair is shaved and they have to wear uniforms. This unanimity of the group is also reflected in the music of the film. During the entire film the group of marines sing songs like 'This is my Rifle' and 'Mickey Mouse'. These songs represent the loss of individuality and the inclusion into the group.

The chubby and slow-witted private Pyle 'Lawrence of Arabia' has problems with adapting to the group and is singled out and bullied. It isn't until he is beaten by the whole group that he starts to fit in. When he does fit in the boy Lawrence no longer exists: he is transformed into the insane killing machine private Pyle who sleeps with his gun. Engrossed as he is in this violence he goes off the tracks killing himself and sergeant Hartman. The weakest link of the group could not

²⁴ Anderegg (1991) p. 104-105 Ellen Draper "Finding a language for Vietnam in the action-adventure genre"

²⁵ Auster (1988) p. 142

²⁶ Anderegg (1991) p. 204-231 Susan White "Male bonding, Hollywood Orientalism and the Repression of the Feminine in Kubrick's Full metal jacket"

stand the pressure, but even the stronger members are not the same after their training. Except maybe for private Joker who keeps his own opinion throughout the film.

When the group arrives in Vietnam they are faced with the fear and horror of the battlefield. Only private Joker is spared because he works for the Stars and Stripes, the newspaper for the armed forces. The press was at that time distrusted by the public because: 'there was strong pressure to report only "progress" up the chain of command, to minimize failure on the part of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam, to eschew "pessimism" in favor of "can do" positive thinking.'²⁷ This is reflected in the film through character of Lieutenant Lockhart, editor of the Stars and Stripes: 'I've told you, we run two basic stories here. Grunts who give half their pay to buy gooks toothbrushes and deodorants-- Winning of Hearts and Minds--okay? And combat action that results in a kill-- Winning the War...Now rewrite it and give it a happy ending--say, uh, one kill. Make it a sapper or an officer.'

When Joker gets fired from the newspaper after giving a big mouth he is placed in the middle of the Crises of Tet and has to develop himself to a real soldier. He is placed in the group again, and has to fit in. The most dramatic scene from this part of the film the scene with the sniper. When Joker and his group take a wrong turn in Hue City they encounter a sniper who takes out several of their group. Joker's best friend private Cowboy is killed and this loss gives him the push to become a real warrior and yield to the group. The last shot of the film depicts this as a group marines, including Joker, disappear into the smoke singing .

What becomes clear at the end is Kubrick's voice in the film, it: 'asserts that after Vietnam the idea of easy military conquest of a Third World nation cannot be simply affirmed in conventional discourse as relatively unproblematic.'²⁸

It becomes clear that underneath the story of the film several strong opinions can be noticed. Kubrick always makes his characters real people, in the sense that they have strong personal opinions, and it is one of the parts of his genius. But there are several details in the film that I found very striking and that attribute to the message of the film. The first is the paradox of private Joker's helmet. He tries to fit into the group but at the same time he tries to show his individuality and opinion by writing 'Born to Kill' on his helmet and adding a button with a peace sign. When he is asked about this he answers: 'I think I was trying to suggest

²⁷ Braestup (1978) p. 3

²⁸ Dittmar (1990) p. 33

something about the duality of man, sir.' This corresponds with the conflict that was felt at home, there was a big group who was against the Vietnam War and a group who supported it. Joker's helmet also tells us about his own development from boy with his own opinions to the soldier who was born to kill.

In a way Stanley Kubrick must have asked himself the same questions as I did. Objectivity is a theme in the film. He clearly thought about the way film can be objective because he shows us how other sources can be unreliable. The press is illustrated as being even more subjective than film: there is no truth in what the Stars and Stripes publish. This in contrast with the strict narrative of the film where every shot attributes to the narrative. Even though the film itself does not necessarily focus on the dramatics of war it shows us the feelings of real persons and especially the social process of war. We see how it transforms people and are invited to the cinematic process of identification.

The collective memory of the feelings of loss are also depicted in the film. At the end of the film we do not only feel the loss of death but also the loss of individuality and emotion. We can very well remember how many soldiers came back completely crazy after the war. The film makes us understand this process a little better. None of the characters is a hero, it seems as if they all turn blank.

Conclusion

We now discussed the possibility of objectivity in fiction film and how film can attribute to our collective memory. It is clear that there is no such thing as Objectivity. There are so many forms of objectivity that it is hard to distinguish just one. In film we could say that we find objectivity in its representation of drama and emotions, something that we lost in other historical records. War cinema can give us these things back. Fictional film can be a way of writing history while focusing on different elements than historians. So maybe we can find the objectivity of fiction film in its depiction of drama and emotion. We need to ask ourselves: Why is fiction film not accepted as a form of objectivity? Why do we think that other historical records are more trustworthy? It becomes clear that there still is much to study in this field of objectivity. Of course my study stays on the surface but I believe that it is vital that we come to understand how fiction film can be objective. This can help us place film in a social process, it can become part of society. It can show that film is not only a form of entertainment.

What we did proof is that film can attribute to our collective memory. The theory

of Halbwachs was very useful in looking at collective memory and film. We found that memory is always linked to a social group, and collective memory is not possible without a common past. We all desire to remember and we use representations to make this possible. Film is one of the means to make us remember. It is the medium that helps us reconnect with our emotions. We lost this connection by structuring everything into historical archives instead of experiencing it through stories. Guynn in a way applies Halbwachs theory on film, by reminding us that: 'Film can be a place of memory insofar as it engages the public in a collective recollection that revivifies or creates a meaningful link between a past event and the identity of the social group in the present.'²⁹ Film can attribute to our collective memory because it is one of the most vivid and popular sources of audiovisual material. We remember the images we see of a historical moment better than we remember words. Everyone has at least seen one film about the Vietnam War, and the images from that film can be what we remember of the war. Especially for people who haven't experienced the war themselves.

War cinema is the only film genre that can, in a way, achieve a form of objectivity. It is always joined to facts, to what the public knows. It pretends to mirror the events and images that are already available to the public and that they know so well.

The film FULL METAL JACKET was Kubrick's way of connecting the Vietnam War to bigger social developments. Kubrick makes us realize that film can tell us a more objective story than the press, just because it can show us the drama and emotion of the war. This is , as I see it, the most important element in film objectivity.

²⁹ Guynn (2006) p. 178

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