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**The Presentation of the Gulf War in *Jarhead*: Heroic or Meaningless?**

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## **The Presentation of the Gulf War in *Jarhead*: Heroic or Meaningless?**

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## The Presentation of the Gulf War in *Jarhead*: Heroic or Meaningless?

*Jarhead*, directed by Sam Mendes and released in U.S. theaters in 2005, is a Gulf War movie based on the memoir *Jarhead: A Soldier's Story of Modern War* written by Anthony Swofford. The movie has its scene set on the background of Operation Desert Storm, which began on January 16, 1991, with George H. W. Bush announcing “a military operation to expel occupying Iraqi forces from Kuwait, which Iraq had invaded and annexed months earlier” (Taylor). Operation Desert Storm lasted five weeks. It was highly broadcasted yet severely restricted and censored by the media, as “[a]ll film footage and stories were then subject to review and censorship by military personnel” (Donaldson 172), and it has also been suggested that the “reporters in the field were simply regurgitating the military’s sanitized version of the war” (Donaldson 172). However, *Jarhead* as a movie that “does not glamorize war by glorifying soldiers or their mission, nor does it seek to traumatize the audience through horrific and violent images” (Wilz 583), in fact helps us see the war in retrospect, and examine problems underlying the particular nature of Gulf War.

*Jarhead*, as part of the anti-war movie genre, presents many aspects of the Gulf War that were being left unsaid by the media and the government. In definition, the genre of “War and Anti-War Films often acknowledge the horror and heartbreak of war, letting the actual combat fighting or conflict (against nations or humankind) provide the primary plot or background for the action of the film” and “many of them provide decisive criticism of senseless warfare” (Dirks). In this sense, one can definitely say that *Jarhead* adds a few new twists to this definition. *Jarhead* the movie, is told from the perspective of the marine sniper Anthony Swofford, which is of his personal experience enlisting in a U.S. Marine Corps boot camp and then in partaking in the Gulf War. However, instead of combat, the experience was composed of pointless drills, endless waiting for the imaginary enemy, witnessing the burning of oil

wells, and constant masturbation. He in the end is unable to fulfill his purpose as a sniper as the actual war ends in five days without the need for him and his comrades to fire their rifles at all. Anthony Swofford in the movie is depicted as a witness to the senselessness of war and how even when the war is over, his hands continue to remember the grip of the rifle and his mind stuck with the aftermath of his military experience. Despite the fact that “[t]he lack of full-blooded combat in *Jarhead*

brought about mixed responses”, and that there are critics who “bemoaned the movie’s departure from the more familiar examples of the genre” (Charles and Townsend, “Full” 917), for me as a viewer, the movie’s unorthodox depiction of the military lifestyle offers an insight into the particular conditions of Gulf War and the problems within troop culture. As a matter of fact, *Jarhead follows up on the anti-war film tradition to further debunk the masculine heroism celebrated in traditional war films, and discloses the meaninglessness of war, the Gulf War in particular.*

Current research regarding the movie, *Jarhead*, and the memoir that it is based on, focuses on whether a war experience told from an American perspective leads people closer to the political reality regarding the full scope of the Gulf War or not. For example, in *Fabricating the Absolute Fake*, the author takes the stance in stressing how war movies work to mediate people’s understanding of the American government’s political actions, and points out that even though the Gulf War movie, *Jarhead*, appears to be critical of the senselessness of war, it still attempts to depict the Gulf War from an American perspective that would portray the desert as an empty space penetrated only by American armies, and the war, a “‘real’ war” rather than a “pointless hoax” (Baudrillard qtd. in Kooijman 85). Mark Simpson also states in his article, “Attackability,” how *Jarhead* is an instance of “politicized amnesia” (303), he emphasizes the movie’s approach in depicting the war as a non-event “cannot manage to capture . . . the material, social effect of war on an embattled populace” (310). On

the other hand, however, some recognizes the movie's critique of war culture. For example, Kelly Wilz in her paper, "Ruhumanization through Reflective Oscillation in *Jarhead*," agrees of the movie's effect in fighting against war culture as it "challenges current ideologies of soldiers and their enemies" (581). In the article "Full Metal Jarhead: Shifting the Horizon of Expectation," Michael Charles and Keith Townsend further express how the movie offers an element of shock as it presents an unprecedented critique of how snipers are being deskilled in the context of modern warfare. Following up on these two approaches, respectively viewing the war in the film as a "non-event" and as revealing political reality from an American perspective, this article aims to examine how the absence of combat in *Jarhead* helps to penetrate into the problems within the military culture such as masculinized brutality, military deindividuation, meaninglessness of war, and postwar trauma.

From *Jarhead*, the Gulf War appears to be a war with no combat and little meaning, but in the real life context, the American government at the time presented the war in quite a contrasting light and played a huge part in shaping its own war rhetoric to justify its military operation. There were three reasons for the justification of the Gulf War. Under the shadow of the "Vietnam Syndrome," which refers to the American general public's aversion to the country's overseas military involvements, George Bush "had to take the United States into the Gulf War," as "clearly he saw that an American show of effective force in defense of a weak nation overrun by a nefarious villain would increase the stock of the United States and its military" (Donaldson 141). The war itself was also justified by the government as a preemptive warfare, explained through "the Munich Syndrome—the idea that if Saddam were allowed to keep his conquests in Kuwait, if he were simply appeased, he would continue to demand more and more territory" (Donaldson 142). It was thus believed that "if Saddam's war-making powers were not thwarted now there would be a

stronger, better equipped, and possibly nuclear-powered Saddam to deal with in the future”, which is a reason of justification quite unlike that during the Vietnam War (Donaldson 143). This military operation is also supported by the “Saddam-Hitler analogy” (Donaldson 142). The idea is that “Saddam was in many ways like Hitler in his character, demands, and actions” (Donaldson 142). Therefore, these reasons helped to compose the American government’s rhetoric of “restoring” the peace and “maintaining” the order that the opposing evil, Saddam Hussein, had threatened to destroy. Under the effects of “global mediation” presented through the media and the government’s rhetoric, it appears just as Jean Baudrillard has suggested, the USA is “a society that is endlessly concerned to vindicate itself, perpetually seeking to justify its own existence” (Kooijman 76).

Different from the US government’s position as the world’s policeman] However, *Jarhead* as an anti-war movie questions the morality and or correctness behind the Marines’ way of conduct, which is more often than not masculinist and sexist. In the first half of the movie, Swofford and his comrades watches the Vietnam War movie, *Apocalypse Now*, together. The soldiers seem extremely hyped and excited by the brutality and action happening in the movie, to the degree that they sing along through scenes while cheering “shoot the motherfucker!” or “die!” in absolute excitement and even standing up in ovation. This questionable representation of masculinity is not only demonstrated in the soldiers’ desire to perform brutality, but also revealed in their sexist, homophobic language and vulgar conducts. For example, while arriving at their camp in the Persian Gulf area, Swofford takes out a photo of his girlfriend and the marines start passing the picture around, making crass comments such as “that’s nice for a white chick” and even “I’d drink a gallon of her pee just to see where it came from” while the other guys all cheer in approval. The soldiers have their conversations constantly revolved around sex, and their lust and desires are often

connected with war frenzy. In fact, during a scene afterwards, a soldier actually receives a “family tape” that turns out to be pornography recorded by his own wife. After the soldier leaves in distress upon the sight of his wife’s own sex tape, Swofford says in a disturbingly excited tone, “fucking faggot, man! Let’s watch it again!” while many others cheer and exclaim in hysteria. Even though Swofford’s unsettling comment may be in reflection of his own fear and uneasiness of his girlfriend cheating on him, the soldiers in general often behave in a way that is not only masculine, but inconsiderate and sometimes even repulsive. Afterwards in the movie, we even see a soldier, Fowler, either molesting or abusing a burnt corpse in the desert. While the other soldiers look at him in disagreement, he responds, “This is war. You can’t handle it? What are you, a fag?” demonstrating an extension of sexism in its disregard of human dignity that is repeated throughout the whole film. From these depictions, it appears that there is only a thin line between the lust for possessing women and the lust to kill.

Besides objectifying others, the soldiers themselves in *Jarhead* are also de-individualized. In order to train to become snipers, Swofford and his comrades endure military drillings such as climbing under barbed wires while avoiding gunshots above them, learning to hide in camouflage, judging distance and wind direction in order to fire accurately, and learning to work in teams as spotters and shooters. Indeed, military training has to insist on discipline, obedience, physical dexterity, and prowess. However, the harsh training can go beyond bounds and de-individualize the trainees and even glorify brutality. In the beginning of the film, protagonist Anthony Swofford is being cruelly hazed by his senior Marines when he first arrives at the Second Platoon. Six men greet him by violently tying him up against the bedframe and bringing out a hot iron with the initials USMC (which stands for the United States Marine Corps) in a false attempt to brand him. Even though the

Marines have in fact secretly switched out the hot brand, thus, not imposing actual physical harm on him, Swofford is undeniably traumatized as he loses consciousness during the hazing ritual. One of the senior Marines, Troy, nonchalantly explains the cruel joke to Swofford afterwards as “a little fuck-fuck trick we play on the new guys” and goes on to say, “you want a brand, you gotta earn it”. The scene anticipates several questions of what it actually means to be a soldier: whether earning the USMC brand proves one to be worthy or honorable brothers, or reduces one to an animal possessed by the army. Even if such rituals facilitate “fraternal bonding,” it is actually “a first step toward soldiers’ dehumanizing others” (Wilz 595). As Simpson nicely puts it, “the prospect of seared flesh converts fear into longing. As torture constitutes ritual initiation, the sign of an exclusive membership, so hope-for-torture—brutality’s promise—serves to kindle new forms of militarized desire” (305)—desire for being abused and abusing others. From this point of view, the existence of these fraternal bonding rituals among troop culture can be seen to fuel or inspire the desire for brutality in the minds of the marines.

Another aspect of deindividuation happens with indoctrination through reciting rifle mantra. In the beginning of the soldiers’ training, Staff Sergeant Sykes asks the soldier to take out their rifles and repeat after him, “This is my rifle. There are many like it, but this one is mine. Without me, my rifle is useless. Without my rifle, I am useless”. From this scene, the soldier’s identity is reduced to the identity of the weapon, the identity of a killing machine. However, this process of identity reconstruction could become quite problematic if the individual soldier loses rationality. As we see in a scene later depicted in the movie, Anthony Swofford, due to being irresponsible during his shift, is being demoted to a private and penalized to dehumanizing tasks such as feces burning. On the verge of losing his mind, Swofford goes to Fergus (who he has previously asked to cover his shift but has instead



accidentally created trouble for him), loads his rifle, points it towards him, threatens to take his life, while demanding him to repeat after him the rifle mantra in the state of hysteria. Although Swofford in the end has his sanity restored and does not end up killing Fergus, the audience see Swofford in his “worst moment”, and witness him being reduced to the mind of a killing machine, who is brutal and cold. These significant scenes of deindividuation and dehumanization exhibit that conflict derives not only from war itself, but also from within the military camp and the soldier’s mind when one’s individual identity is reduced to the masculinized identity of the army. The movie therefore invites a discourse regarding what happens inside the camp rather than what happens out in the bloody battlefield where violence and brutality seems to be expected as the normality, it also forces audiences to question “the publicly manufactured image of the warrior” (Froula 102), who in other movie depictions is often either masculine and heroic, or virtuous and empathetic.

Besides masculinized objectification and military de-individuation, *Jarhead*, like many movies of its genre, also deals with the subject of the senselessness of war, but in a way quite peculiar as the soldier or the hero in the movie does not get to eliminate the enemy or partake in a combat-fueled war. As Charles and Townsend have expressed in their article that even when there is the presence of war movies such as *Full Metal Jacket* which “aims to be critical of war, and the apparent futility of waging it, it still allows the viewer to admire the skills and courage of those who fight in it” (“Full” 926). However, due to the nature of the Gulf War, the marines in *Jarhead* are not able to utilize their expertise as viewers may expect them to. As a matter of fact, “[t]he film’s action entails inaction; warfare for Swofford and his compatriots is all about frustration, the inability to find release through combat” (Simpson 303). In the movie, Swofford tells his military experience on the desert through monotonous narration that appropriately reflects his boredom, “us, six times a

day, we gather for formation. And we hydrate. We patrol the empty desert. And we dehydrate. We throw hand grenades into nowhere. We navigate imaginary minefields. We fire at nothing. And we hydrate some more. And we look north, towards the border and we wait for them. This is our labor. We wait.” With all the harsh training, the war, in this sense, is meaningless, because there is no fight or war to be waged. The Marines and their expertise appear to be useless in the modern context of war, and the exercises they perform repeatedly are futile tasks which seem to exist only to kill time: including the scene when Staff Sergeant Sykes orders the soldiers to play a football game under extreme heat in full chemical gear just to demonstrate the effects of the nuclear-biological-chemical protective suits to a reporter, and also the scene that follows in which Staff Sergeant Sykes punishes the Marines for poor behavior by making them pointlessly building a pyramid out of sandbags and then removing these sandbags soon after. Although the movie depicts such scenes in a rather comedic and satirical way, it still poses the question of the extent of these training and whether or not the marines’ expertise is being properly utilized.

This strong sense of “meaninglessness” is heightened especially towards the end of the movie when Swofford and his comrade, Troy, are denied the permission to take their first and only shot of two Iraqi soldiers, as the place is soon to be bombed by planes anyway. This particular moment in the movie is simultaneously climatic and anticlimactic, for on the one hand, audience sense the explosion of emotion coming from Troy as he desperately yells, “You don’t know what we go through! Hell!” after pleading to take the shot, while on the other hand, it is anticlimactic in the sense that the snipers have ultimately been training for a war that they cannot partake in. Therefore, the trainings they endure as snipers are proved in the end to be completely useless, just as how Charles and Townsend have expressed in their article, “technological developments have left this skilled artisan as a bystander in modern

set-piece warfare” (Charles and Townsend, “Jarhead” 64). This is especially true because the nature of the Gulf War as a technological warfare, creates a dilemma for snipers such as Swofford and Troy, as the acquirement of “[t]hese finely-honed and potentially lethal skills are rendered superfluous when precision-guided weapons use laser, radar and satellite technology as a means to increase the probability of hitting the target” (Charles and Townsend, “Jarhead” 67). It appears from this perspective that the absence of action and combat in the movie *Jarhead*, not only reveals the reality of modern technological warfare where snipers are deemed as useless, but also works as a subversion of cliché from the kind of war movies where satisfactory combat scenes can almost always be expected by the audience. This is because no matter how “anti-war” many war films may seem, Swofford points out during an interview that “[t]he population does enjoy seeing horrors of war” (Froula 103). Therefore, with the focus on war violence in more traditional depictions, vicarious pleasures are often being satisfied, whereas *Jarhead* offers audience a chance to find meaning through absence.

Not only is *Jarhead* critical about masculinized brutality, de-individuation, senselessness of the Gulf War, it also forces viewers to recognize the post-war trauma a soldier may go through, and explores the possibility of one not being able to overcome his war experience. *Jarhead* not only ends with a compilation of scenes with soldier’s returning back to their norms, such as Fowler drinking in the bar with his hands gripped around a woman or Cortez at a fair with his wife and three kids, but also presents contrasting scenes such as Swofford witnessing his girlfriend standing aside her new beau when returning home, and an even bigger shocker that is Swofford receiving the unfortunate news that his comrade, Troy, has passed due to what seems to be implied as a suicide. From this, what have been suggested by Troy’s death might have to do with his mental breakdown after being denied of the chance to fire his rifle,

and that “the frustrations associated with being unable to perform their expert marksmanship in a hostile environment would be a contributing factor to a veteran’s post-war experiences” (Charles and Townsend, “Jarhead” 72), which in Troy’s case, could have resulted in his death. As the movie ends with Swofford’s narration, “A story. A man fires a rifle for many years and he goes to war, and afterwards he comes home and he sees that whatever else he might do with his life, build a house, love a woman, change his son's diaper, he will always remain, a jarhead,” and his final statement, “we are still in the desert,” viewers are able to reexamine a soldier’s journey as more than a rite of passage, but perhaps a series of suffering that continues to haunt the soldier’s life no matter what he choose to do with his life even when the war is over. Moreover, even with a seemingly meaningless war like the Gulf War where the soldiers did not seem to participate in combat, the experience of troop culture, deindividuation, military subjection, and brutality in general, are enough to ravage the minds of the soldiers.

*Jarhead* as a war movie is significant not only because it is based on the real life war experience of an American soldier, Anthony Swofford, but also because it allows viewers to look into problems regarding masculinized brutalities, military deindividuation, meaninglessness of war, and post-war trauma, which are problems that deserve as much attention as the cliché anti-war motif. With *Jarhead*, viewers are given the chance to think critically beyond what is usually presented from the war movie genre, and investigate significant problems within troop culture from Swofford’s point of view. *Word Count: 3430*

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