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Moral Fragmentation and Spiritual Absence: The Representation of War in Contemporary American Films

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Most current social and cultural theory asserts that any form of social reality is not natural, adhering to an internal logic, but that it is constructed by human beings or what is termed human agency. The tools and motivations for any given construction of reality vary based on prevailing conditions or circumstance. Depending on a person's method of analysis, an analyst's citation of the elements involved in a particular act of social construction might be sorted out in terms of a hierarchy of importance (such as ideology, social class, and gender) or they might be brought together as being equally significant and interconnected forces.

Any analysis of social reality should consider that historical and material factors do limit the ability of individuals to build social structures and to bring particular states of being into existence. The limits imposed on human agency makes the construction of reality a relative and imperfect act, predisposing the results to instability and transformation, if not to some form of ultimate disintegration. At the theoretical level, post-modernist thinkers do not want to replace one "totalitarian" or absolutist form of analysis, based on unquestionable givens, with another that appears to be non-absolutist but which is in fact absolutist when it asserts that everything is relative and imperfect. I bring this issue up not because I want to examine one of the essential dilemmas of new theory; that it slides into a kind of solipsism because of its doctrine of relativity and the impossibility of arriving at truth. I focus on this point because it provides the context for the claim made by cultural theorists that social reality is by definition constructed by individuals or groups of individuals. Thus, any type of social construction, such as a particular organizational structure or political system, carries with it the limitations and contradictions inherent in any form of human agency.

Since social theory cannot endorse the existence of any absolute truth, "truth" as an overarching totality or "truth" of any kind, in this situation, is itself a social construction. "Truth" is deemed by theorists to be as an essentially ideological act that supports a historically and culturally specific set of beliefs. Generally speaking, any given "truths" emerge, dominate, and sustain themselves, as forms of political ideologies, functioning to uphold vested interest, because of the capacity of privileged groups or individuals to shape the world in which other people live. Individuals who did not originate and advocate such ideologies, who are subjected to the powerful agency of the privileged few individuals who do so, are not passive or simply forced to adhere to these imposed "truths". Regardless of the motivations on the part of individuals who support ideological

viewpoints that they did not originate, such as a coping mechanism against a punitive socio-political system or a strategy to attain personal profit, what remains as a given is the fact that "society" as a system for shaping and regulating behaviour is fundamentally coercive.

Individuals, then, in a given social environment know or sense in some fashion or another that their world is constructed and thus not natural. They experience the pressure that is constantly applied on them to conform in ways that matter to those individuals or groups that preside over the social system that they have built.

It is with these points in mind—what is social reality and how individuals exist in relation to it—that I want to talk about some recurring ideas related to empire. The focus on the philosophical underpinnings of empire is important in my examination of selected contemporary American war movies. My presentation will emphasize the gap between state ideology, referring to the so called ideals of civilization that are intrinsic to empire building, and the vicious, unredemptive experience of soldiers in the battlefield. The selected films, which I will allude to, attempt to reconstruct imaginatively, from the point of view of soldiers, the experience of being in battle during World War 2 and the Vietnam War. These films include *The Thin Red Line*, *Full Metal Jacket*, *The Deer Hunter*, and *Apocalypse Now*. In such war movies, the ideals of empire, embodied in nationalism and patriotism, exist in opposition to or are part of the contradictions of the emotional states and beliefs of the young men engaged in violent, death-inducing activity.

I will focus on some of the master themes of empire recurrent in the above cited films. One over-arching idea is related to the moral authority given to the American armies and their command to defeat armed, dangerous enemies who are inherently evil to the point of monstrosity. The American nation represents the positive values of human existence, essential goodness and altruism, self-sacrifice without personal gain for the greater benefit not just of the nation but the entire peoples of the world. This idea of goodness stems from the basic notion that American civilization exists in continuity with preceding civilizations, going back to western antiquity. Embodied in the American nation-state is Athenian democracy and Roman technological, military prowess. For instance, *The Emperor's Club*, a recent film about a private boy's school for the sons of the American aristocracy, places at its thematic centre the teaching of Roman imperialist history as the basis for the character development of the boys who, when they reach manhood, will help to administer the new empire. Moral virtue and military ability are the central tenets of this classical education.

Built into the idea that civilization is inherently good is the notion of social progress, that civilization develops elements that lead to the essential physical and mental improvement of individuals. In this context, wars are not fought to expand the territory of the elite or for

the elite to gain access to highly desirable resources at the cost of human lives. Wars are fought for noble and inevitable causes, transcending personal interest and the concern with individual lives.

Through patriotism, entailing loyalty and self-sacrifice to the nation-state, citizens as soldiers accept their natural responsibility to not only defend their country against a fearsome, destructive enemy but to maintain what is held to be universally good for the entire world. This kind of attitude is reinforced by a belief in the spirituality underlying civilization, since civilization, in its atemporal, constantly evolving condition, is an organic manifestation of the mighty, super-powerful force that has brought the world into existence. Loyalty then involves unquestioned support for the leadership of the nation-state evident in terms of the different levels of the military command. Equally important, loyalty assumes unwavering support for one's comrades in the pitch of battle. Along with loyalty, there is trust in the quality of the leadership and trust towards the commitment of one's fellow soldiers. The vast imperial army, with its specialized groupings, then becomes an extension of the great family that is the nation state.

When we examine the movies themselves, we begin to see that the grand themes about empire, civilization, and spirituality begin to fragment under the intense, debilitating pressures of warfare. On the battlefield, physical and psychological violence and horror are the immediate, unrelenting experience of the characters. Dazed, confused, bloodied, and exhausted by the sheer brutality of the fighting, the characters see a world turned into a vicious struggle for physical survival. The boundaries between normally acceptable and unacceptable behaviour, such as courage and cowardice as well as loyalty and betrayal, are shattered by the convulsions of warfare. Instead, such opposed emotional reactions become part of a constantly shifting ground where one act becomes ontologically indistinguishable from its conventional opposite. War as a noble cause for a higher good becomes an utter abstraction whose unreality intensifies the disorientation and suffering endured by the young male soldiers. In this reductive, social Darwinist environment, survival does not depend solely on any particular skill or strategy because among the badly wounded and the dead are fearsome young warriors. Instead, survival depends on circumstances beyond the soldier's control or it depends on simply pure luck in dodging an explosion or a burst of gunfire. In *The Deer Hunter*, the hunting, predatory skills of the Robert DeNiro character barely allow himself and his friends to survive imprisonment and torture at the hands of their Vietnamese captors. The game of Russian roulette with a hand-gun epitomizes the notion of the randomness of fortune in the field of battle. In the film, *The Thin Red Line*, this idea that survival in the field of battle is purely accidental and not a result of some grand military or even spiritual design is represented in harrowing, graphic detail in the long battle scene of American soldiers moving ant-like up along steep hillsides to take over a dubiously important Japanese military position. Innumerable American soldiers are just annihilated by the shelling from the Japanese artillery. In this Goya-esque depiction of horrible

physical destruction and continuous death, the advancing soldiers who do survive do so simply because they are lucky. To reinforce the idea of the randomness of death and the accidentality of good fortune, the film focuses on the fate of one of the soldiers who helps to storm the Japanese position on the hill, leading to the end of the needless carnage. This humble, deeply religious, unselfish, and heroic soldier is killed unceremoniously by a Japanese soldier near the end of the film. In the scene in the jungle, in which enemy soldiers surround him in all sides like nature itself, the American soldier tries to prepare himself psychically for his impending death. The nihilistic quality of the scene and his subsequent quick burial in a makeshift grave in a spot in the jungle by his fellow soldiers, who have no time to contemplate the significance of his death, negate any kind of glorification of warfare.

In the cited war movies, death is the primary reality for the young men whose illusions about the nobility and ultimate goodness of war and empire are slowly and violently stripped away. The prevalence of death and the complete helplessness of the soldiers to avoid it destroy their belief in the abstract notion of loyalty. These soldiers lose their trust for their commanding officers, who symbolize the leadership of the nation-state, and in turn the soldiers act in ways that demonstrate a lack of loyalty to the army and country that they are part of. This disloyalty is motivated by a kind of primordial sense of self-preservation. Such survivalism is in itself reflective of the idea that the society they belong to was not of their making and that the ideological views of that society are not deeply rooted in the psyche. Not only have these views been imposed on the soldiers but they are merely abstractions in the face of the unforgiving reality of war. The notions of loyalty and trust have very little relation to the behaviour of the soldiers who are just trying to stay alive.

The profound separation between the individual and the imperial order also exposes the fragile nature of the bond among the American soldiers. Loyalty and devotion to one's comrade are fluid and disposable ideas that depend purely on circumstance. In a particular scene, in *Full Metal Jacket*, the soldiers quarrel venomously over whether they should continue to withstand the sniper attack that has decimated most of their group so that they can take care of their seriously wounded sergeant or whether they should just choose another soldier among themselves as their new sergeant and leave the wounded man to die alone while they attempt to get out of harm's way. The quarrel happens in the middle of the fighting, as bullets fly by past the crawling soldiers, barely missing their mark.

These war movies do not suggest that the brutality of war is a necessary evil so that civilization and the goodness and progress that it represents can be maintained. Physical and psychological suffering and horrible death are not redemptive and ultimately meaningful. Instead, as *The Dear Hunter* and *The Thin Red Line* attest to, suffering and death are futile and a profound waste of human potential. The end of the warfare and the successful defense of the

nation-state against a putative monstrous invasion from the outside do not diminish the sense of meaninglessness and waste produced by the battlefield.

As the film *Enemy At the Gates* implies, for the working class soldier, the idea that war is waged to protect the nation-state, in this case the Soviet Union during the Second World War, does not remove the confusion over who is the true enemy: the invading German army or the Soviet high command. Like the self-interested American high command in *The Thin Red Line*, embodied in the almost insane Nick Nolte character, who cares not one bit for the lives lost in smashing a small Japanese artillery base, the Soviet military command sends numerous, unarmed, and expendable, peasant Russian soldiers to their deaths so that it can maintain its control over them in its authoritarian ambition. Whether it is a poor shepherd boy from rural Russia, as presented in *Enemy At The Gates*, or a pious son from the American rural south, who is the spiritual centre in *The Thin Red Line*, the soldier's sense of loyalty to the nation-state, his support for the enterprise of empire, dissipates suddenly when the gap between ideology and reality becomes insurmountable. The unbridgeable chasm between nationalistic beliefs and the consciousness that these beliefs do not match the horror visited upon soldiers on the battlefield erases any notion that imperialistic societies, or any form of society, is fundamentally moral or ethical.

Ideas about loyalty exist only in relation to power and to the requirements of self-preservation. "Truth" of any kind cannot stand up to any real test or to empirical scrutiny when it is divested of faith. It is faith that allows a given "truth" to pass any test or allows one to reconstruct empirical evidence to support it. In war movies, the idea of faith in any political or social ideology depends on the social context. When the conditions that keep the social system in place are removed, such as established rules of behavior and some process that provides benefits for those people who conform to the set rules, then the ideological foundations of the society disintegrate, as is evident in the extreme situations represented in the cited war movies. In American war movies, such *The Thin Red Line* and *Apocalypse Now*, the absence of a moral centre is felt in terms of the lack of a spiritual presence in the world. At the conclusion of *The Thin Red Line*, the Sean Penn character refers to God as a lack in the world, as a spiritual force that cannot possibly exist given the sheer meaninglessness and brutality of war. On the battlefield, moral and pious men die for a cause that has nothing to do with social progress. In *Apocalypse Now*, both the Marlon Brando character and his reluctant assassin, played by Martin Sheen, make themselves into terrible demi-gods, who represent the brutality and amorality of war. Warfare is essentially a means to maintain and expand the empire. By emphasizing the subjective experience of soldiers confronted with violence and death, such war movies expose the gap between ideology and reality. In the process, these cinematic representations not only question official interpretations of history, but also imply that conventional "truths" related to civilization and social progress are

fundamentally ideological, designed to advance the ambition of empire.

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