The Balance of Order and Chaos in *Full Metal Jacket*

When Stanley Kubrick first met his co-writer for the screenplay *Full Metal Jacket*, Kubrick asked him if he was familiar with “the concept of Jung” and “the concept of the Shadow, of our hidden side” (Herr 6). This fascination with the Jungian archetypes of order and chaos permeates throughout the film *Full Metal Jacket* in the plot, mis-en-scene, and cinematography. Furthermore, Kubrick takes the archetypes of order and chaos to the extremes, both in the characters and settings that he uses in the film, to examine the human condition. In *Full Metal Jacket*, Kubrick suggests that order and chaos cannot exist independently; rather an acknowledgement and balance between the two archetypes must be found in order for an individual or a society to function properly. To examine this idea, the crucial scene of Private Leonard Pyle’s suicide can be deconstructed and analyzed. As well, the scene can be contextualized by the analyzing the film in its entirety to determine the film’s ideology.

In the film *Full Metal Jacket*, the narrative is comprised of two distinct acts; the first act details the marines’ training in the United States, while the second act follows the marines in the Vietnam War. These two acts, which are vastly different from one another, are linked by the bathroom scene in which Private Pyle commits suicide and kills Sergeant Hartman. Kubrick uses this scene to transition from the order and rigid structure of training, into the chaos and ambiguities of warfare. Taking the Jungian archetypes to their situational limits, Kubrick defines
the extremes of order and chaos and depicts their interdependence and duality. Marine training, based on tradition, obedience, and rules, is an extreme example of order. Likewise, the Vietnam War represents an extreme of chaos. All wars are chaotic, but the Vietnam War differed from previous conflicts. This war was defined by a blurred line between combatants and civilians, between war zones and urban centers, and between politics and motives.

The first act, detailing the training on Parris Island, represents order visually and through plot devices. The polarizing character of Sergeant Hartman dominates the screen with his berating and enforcing orders. Sergeant Hartman’s goal is to dehumanize his recruits, so he can rebrand them into killing machines. Through the use of grotesque and offensive language, physical violence, and strict living conditions, Hartman reduces his recruits to an infantile state where he can mould their views to align with the military’s desires. Such an atmosphere of strict adherence is also visually represented through the mis-en-scene and cinematography present in the first act.

To exemplify the acute structure inherent in the military, the mis-en-scene consists of clean, crisp, lines and patterns. The barracks are spotless, the bunks are made, and every object is aligned with each other to form rows. Kubrick uses empty spaces and polished surfaces to bounce light around and establish the perfect organization of the sleeping quarters. As Naremore said, Kubrick’s “photography emphasizes the spit-and-polish cleanliness of the room, in which reflected light shimmers off the bare floor; the clarity, symmetry, and aura of discipline” (13). In terms of camera angles, most shots are long, steady shots with deep focus. This clean style of shooting lends itself to a military establishment and encourages the audience to relate the setting
with extreme order. Kolker also notes the uses of repetitious tracking shots of Sergeant Hartman and suggests the repetition represents structure and order (114).

Looking at the tonal qualities of the first act, blue and green tones dominate the visual field. These colors make the image feel “cold and off-putting” as the “beautiful photography is filtered through steely, smoky blue” filters (Vineberg 62). The traditionally warmer tones of red and orange are not prevalent in first act, giving the impression of a sterile atmosphere of order. Even the dialogue is said without normal inflection and emotion. “The actors punch even the funniest lines evenly – they’re like sardonic robots”, which leads the audience to a blend of uneasy laughter with sterile detachment and associate those feeling with the extreme order.

Having established a correlation between Hartman, the archetype of strict order, and training camp, the audience witnesses the first sign of chaos during the transitional bathroom scene. Pyle, Hartman, and Joker, the three characters in the scene, all represent different ideals. Pyle, who has suffered constant abuse from Hartman and fellow recruits, is at a point where he has mentally collapsed. His failures, inability to adapt, and rejection from the cohesiveness of the squad has pushed him into a state of neurosis. In the bathroom scene, he is representative of chaos. He is speaking irrationally, has a demented appearance, and his actions are unpredictable to the other characters. He has been reduced to mimicry behavior, as shown by his unprovoked demonstrations of rifle skills and memorized military chants. On the other end of the spectrum is Hartman, who as previously noted, represents unrepentant order and structure. Holding the middle ground between these extremes is Joker, the main character who unites both acts of the narrative. From the beginning of the film, the audience associates most with Joker, due to his
presence on the screen and his narration. Joker sees both archetypes, and holds a balance between order and chaos, and likewise, a balance between Pyle and Hartman. Joker often aids Pyle in his training and is the only recruit who offers friendship to Pyle. However, Joker excels under Hartman’s orders and impresses Hartman enough that Joker is given the title of squad leader. Joker also betrays Pyle in the soap-in-a-sock beatings, where group pressure and unity overwhelmed Joker’s sympathy towards Pyle.

With the three different characters and standpoints, the climax in the bathroom scene occurs when Pyle shoots Hartman and then proceeds to commit suicide. Joker, who represents a balance between the two extremes, is the only character left standing. It is his rationality, his recognition and acceptance of the duality between order and chaos that keeps him alive. He identifies Pyle’s fragile state, and attempts to remedy the situation through negotiation and conversation. The climax suggests that if Hartman was able to recognize Pyle’s mental situation, both of their lives may have been saved. However, his inability to change and his strict adherence to yelling and imposing order further provoked Pyle and resulted in death. Perel claims that “duality is necessary for a man’s identity, [and] Hartman ultimately dies because of his refusal to acknowledge it” (Perel 4).

Deconstructing the scene, the first hint of visual disorder is seen in when Pyle’s incessant chanting causes the barracks and Hartman to wake up. A long shot of the barracks is shown, and all the recruits are seen getting out of their bunks in bewilderment, mirroring an early shot of the barracks in perfect order. The primary location of the scene, in the bathroom, is a significant choice as Hartman had the recruits rigorously clean the bathroom repeatedly. It is one of the
cleanest and sparsest areas, consisting of only rows of sinks and toilets. When the shots are fired, the red blood is in stark contrast to the pristine white walls. As well, the red color stands out due to the lack of red and orange tones throughout the film up to that point. With the red tones introduced in this scene, the second half of the film uses primarily red and oranges tones to symbolize chaos and to contrast blue tones of the training camp. Another notable visual element is the lighting. In the highly contrasted scene, Joker’s face is fully lit, while Pyle stands in the shadows. This lighting difference symbolizes good and evil, adding to the dementia of Pyle. Pyle shoots Hartman, and then himself, disturbing the rigid order seen in the film up to that point. As Conard states, “the neat orderliness is thus shown to be a sham; Leonard shows us that the world really is all chaos” (Conard 41).

The second half of the film, set in Vietnam, represents chaos through cluttered scenes, layered dialogue, and violence. We are still reminded of the duality seen in Joker, who wears the conflicting symbols of both a peace sign and the words “Born to Kill” on his helmet. When questioned by a senior official about these symbols, Joker responds that he is making a statement about “the duality of man”. The second half of the film, dominated by chaos, ends with a semblance of order, mirroring the glimpse of chaos seen at the end of the first act. Joker stands above a mortally wounded sniper, who is begging for death. He makes a difficult decision and puts the sniper out of misery. The film concludes with the troops marching away, signing a familiar Disney song in amidst the burning ruins. This conclusion brings the narrative full circle, demonstrating the duality present in life and the need for this duality to exist.
Kubrick’s idea of this inherent duality in humanity echoes of Freud’s psychoanalytical theories on the ego, superego, and the id. Freud theorizes that behavior arose from the battle between the superego, which is the critical and moral desires, and the id, referring the unconscious and subverted desires of a person. The battleground between these two parts of the personality is the ego, or the organized and conscious realm of the brain. Applying this theory to Full Metal Jacket, and particularly the bathroom scene, Hartman represents the superego, Pyle symbolizes the id, and Joker stands on the middle ground of the ego. Freud describes that neurosis is a result of the id dominating the brain, which describes Pyle’s mental state. A personality is not stable if it is dominated by the id or superego, a balance must exist and this is illustrated in the deaths of Pyle and Hartman.

Looking at the film Full Metal Jacket, the two distinct acts of the film embody the duality emphasized by Kubrick. While “the notion that opposite traits make up human nature is not an insight original to either Kubrick or the characters”, the film Full Metal Jacket subverts the traditional narrative structure and supports the idea of the duality between order and chaos in many capacities (Falsetto 1). It is in the cinematography, the mis-en-scene, and at the very core of the main character. It is what makes a Kubrick film the logical contradiction that distinguishes his work; as Naramore put best, “he aims to show a paradoxical and potentially disturbing truth: at the farthest reaches of our experience, extremes meet and transform themselves” (14).
Works Cited


Reference Texts

