



SCREEN

Full Force

by Katherine Dalton

Full Metal Jacket; directed by Stanley Kubrick; screenplay by Kubrick, Michael Herr, and Gustav Hasford; based on the novel *The Short-Timers* by Hasford; Warner Bros.

Funny, that a film about "Vietnam as it really was," as *Platoon* was touted, should fall so wide of any mark of merit, and that Vietnam films with a surreal twist—*Apocalypse Now* and Kubrick's latest, *Full Metal Jacket*—should be so much more interesting. If only Kubrick had stuck with the movie he started with, instead of switching gears entirely after the first third, we might have really had something here; another Kubrickian warped reality, to be sure, but nonetheless fascinating for that.

Full Metal Jacket traces the fate of a young man (dubbed Private Joker by his sergeant) from training at Parris Island, South Carolina, through the Tet offensive. Joker (Matthew Modine) is the central character of this movie, but only slowly and only after about a half hour's worth of film do we really begin to focus on him. Up to that

point the screen is dominated by the coarse running commentary and orders from Gunnery Sergeant Hartman, played wonderfully by Lee Emery.

Hartman is molding a bunch of soft kids into killers. It's that plain and that simple, and all cards are on the barrel. He will use any tactic that works—intimidation, force, physical abuse, peer pressure. There is no malice in him, but that only makes him that much more awful to watch. "I do not look down on niggers," he hollers, and rattles through a list of racial slurs. "You are all equally worthless here." "Make your war face," he yells at Joker; "Make your war face—you don't scare me; work on it." "You are so ugly," he tells another, "you could be a piece of modern art." It is terrible, but as delivered by Emery (a former sergeant in real life who actually wrote many of his own lines) it is also very funny. Right from the start the audience is giggling, and so is the recruit Hartman dubs Private Gomer Pyle, until Hartman takes him by the neck and chokes the smile off his face, and ours. Marines, as Hartman tells his charges, are not to think even of dying without permission.

It is all horrible and beautifully done. Kubrick descends slowly from the funny into the frightening, and from the frightening into hell. Seeing Pyle trying to maneuver his fat self through a seemingly endless obstacle course, with a screaming Hartman perched at every turn, is still funny. Watching the recruits lined up in a double row on Christmas Day singing Happy Birthday Dear Jesus is disturbing, but still funny. One afternoon Hartman mentions Charles Whitman and Lee Harvey Oswald. Whitman, he reminds the recruits, was the sniper at the University of Texas who picked people off from a distance of 400 yards, and Oswald plugged Kennedy in a moving car from 250 feet. "Where do you boys think these men learned how to shoot?" Hartman bellows. Even this is funny, still.

But in an effort to motivate Pyle, Hartman takes to punishing the rest of the group every time Pyle makes a mistake, which is often. One night, when everyone's had it, the recruits gag Pyle and beat him up. After this, Pyle takes to talking to his gun; but he gets motivated. He turns out to be an excellent shot, and he starts getting everything else right, as well.

The night before graduation, Joker, on fire watch, finds Pyle in the head with his rifle loaded: full metal jacket. Hartman hears them and storms in, professionally furious as usual. Though the tension is high it's just the same thing all over again, Hartman yelling and Pyle taking it, half sick and half funny, until Pyle shoots the sergeant full in the chest, then sticks the barrel in his own mouth and rips the back of his head off.

It is perfect, concise, horrible, hell; a minimovie complete. You get the message loud and clear, and there's nothing banal about it. Why, then, does Kubrick press on with the much more traditional second half to his story? Which is banal? Which effectively ruins the first part?

Kubrick's characters are almost always done well, but they are, almost always, upstaged by the movie itself. Who remembers the names of any of the astronauts in 2001? You remember Hal, though, and that spinning-through-time death sequence. Putting small men into a larger-than-life movie is practically a Kubrick trademark. It is the same here. Though by this time in *Full Metal Jacket* we can distinguish Joker from the rest (after boot camp he's allowed to grow his hair back, which helps), he still seems an odd choice for a main character. There's just not that much to him. We like Joker for standing up to Hartman—once, on a religious question—and dislike him for joining in to beat up poor dumb Pyle. We can see he's a cynic, doing a barely passable John Wayne imitation. Otherwise, what is there? To compare him with the characters in *Platoon*, Joker is not, like

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Elias, a good soldier fighting a bad war, or like Chris, green and maybe a little stupid but still capable of getting by and, when the times comes, of wreaking his own justice with a rifle.

Joker is something real to *Platoon's* paper cutouts, but he's not something especially admirable. He's gotten himself assigned as a reporter for *Stars & Stripes*, which means he's a hack for the military PR—a not entirely willing one, but still a hack. He's not even a proper poor slob of a grunt sure to see action; he's behind it.

Our hero is no hero; nothing even close. You could call him an antihero, maybe. Kubrick certainly undermines him all the way. When the big moment comes, when Joker's friend Cowboy is shot through by a sniper and dies in Joker's arms, he does set his jaw as true John Wayne tradition dictates and goes after the killer. But he doesn't get him. Or rather, he doesn't get her—the sniper who has decimated this patrol ends up being a teenage girl. Joker runs out of bullets once he finds her and drops his gun in the confusion of being fired at. His little sidekick, the erstwhile so innocent Rafterman, is the one who actually shoots her down, yelping and grinning like a hound that's ripped its first fox.

While it happens to be Joker who ends up giving the coup de grace, that coup de grace is really a mercy bullet she is begging for. Some victory, Kubrick is saying; some revenge, and some war.

Kubrick seems fascinated not by characters but by the lack, the butt-end, the eradication of personality. Think again of *2001*, or of *A Clockwork Orange*. What Hartman has started, Kubrick's Vietnam finishes. The war has given Kubrick another forum on which to stage his favored cult of the antipersonality. There is so little in this movie of what normally defines a man. With two small exceptions, we never learn where any of the characters are from. We don't get their real names, either, just their nicknames, many of which were given contemptuously by Hartman. Barely, and only because of Tet, do we learn when all this is happening. These men are only so much matter in a moral void—one simply there and given, a hell that popped up full-formed out of Kubrick's odd head. Is this a political

movie or only Stanley Kubrick once again falling in love with a hell of his own making?

Katherine Dalton writes from New York.

Gluttons for Punishment

by Gary S. Vasilash

Recently, NBC News, and the *Wall Street Journal* devoted features to what they claim, to an editor, is an American "obsession" with being thin. There may have been many more reports devoted to the topic—now that the passive-smoke issue is passé, people are refocusing their attention on the state of bustlines, waistlines, buttocks form, etc., etc., etc.

For years, people have struggled with diet, stuffing themselves with bran or grapefruit or rice, while attempting to abstain from foods that don't leave the abdominal region feeling like a bowling alley. The other part of the equation is exercise. Despite the efforts of running-shoe manufacturers and Vic Tanny ads showing Cher looking like she just crawled off the set of *Mad Max IV*, working out is usually meant to make proper clothes fit well. And who would want to sweat in ultracostly ensembles?

The point is, both diet and exercise require suffering. No matter how strong the desire to look good, the physics of inertia and the instinct for calories from nonnutritional sources (e.g., White Castle hamburgers, hot fudge sundaes) are more compelling. Today's pop-culture person is in a quandary.

But medical technology has come to the rescue. Now we can have our Dove Bar and eat it too.

The July issue of *D*, the Dallas city magazine, includes a feature modestly titled "The Ultimate Insider's Guide to Dallas." We are made to realize we are not merely in Texas, which in itself is astounding, but in its pivotal point. One article in the guide is "The Women: Why They Look So Good" and explains why Dallas has "more

than its share of gorgeous women." The authors (two women) maintain the reason for this blessedness is that the Dallas Woman spends inordinate time curling eyelashes, applying makeup, and, yes, actually exercising in outfits Ordinary Women can only gaze at in fashion magazines.

But the real reason why there are so many daughters of Aphrodite in Dallas is to be found on the following page. It's not magical, nor is it chemical—more to the point, it is medical. So much for romance. The page in question includes an ad for the Aesthetic Surgical Center, which is not to be confused with your local College of Beauty Culture.

At the risk of providing a free ad for the firm, the level to which medical science has taken us must be cited in a hungry Homeric list. To wit:

*Abdomen: Abdominoplasty, suction-assisted lipectomy (SAL)

*Arms: Lipectomy, SAL

*Breasts: Augmentation mammoplasty, gynecomastia, mastopexy, reduction mammoplasty

*Buttocks: Buttock lift, fat reintroduction, SAL

*Cheeks: Malar augmentation, SAL

*Chin: Augmentation mentoplasty, reduction mentoplasty, submental SAL

*Ears: Otoplasty

*Eyes: Accents permanent lash-liner, blepharoplasty

*Face: Forehead lift, rhytidectomy, SAL

*Hair: Flaps, plugs, scalp reduction

*Hips: SAL

*Mouth: Augmentation cheiloplasty, reduction cheiloplasty

*Nose: Rhinoplasty

*Skin: Chemabrasion, dermabrasion, zyderm collagen, zyplast collagen

*Thighs: SAL, thigh lift

Certainly, one can only stare in wonder at this technological arsenal of plastic reconfiguration.

Far be it from me to impugn the beauty of the women of Dallas. I lust in my heart as well as the next guy. But the whole thing strikes me as analogous to the food-engineered Butterball turkey: It sure may look good, but it can't sing.

Gary Vasilash eats hamburgers, triglycerides notwithstanding.