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Kalea Borling

Western Oregon University, kborling16@mail.wou.edu

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Kalea Borling

Professor Dana Schowalter

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The Government vs. The Free:

A Textual, Discourse, and Political Analysis of A Scene from *Across the Universe*

America the brave. America the free. America; the symbol of liberation and freedom for all. A country that was founded off the breaking of unjust ties from dictating countries. This was the idea that America has held since its birth in the 1700's. Today, that idea has changed from a country of freedom to a country that lies and forces its citizens into unnecessary and unpopular foreign wars. There has always been a history of wars in every country. For America, there were a few that were vastly important. One of which was the Vietnam War. This war, however, was not very popular with the American citizens. It was in the 1960's where because of this war, and the draft of citizens that it required, called for protests and unrest amongst the people. A popular movie that showed this story through the tune of Beatles music, was the musical *Across the Universe*. Released in 2007 and directed by Julie Taymor, this movie showed fictional events that symbolically presented the feelings and events that took place during the time of the Vietnam War. One particular scene depicted a citizen being completely objectified and degraded after being drafted, which gave off the impression that they were being molded into these perfect soldiers that could be used by the government to show its domination over its citizens. In

addition to being able to artistically show the effects of citizens being drafted, this movie also succeeded in being able to resonate with its audience in a time when the country was in an unpopular war with foreign countries, and as a result was able to sell this idea of understanding and validation for the public to their benefit.

I will be using a variety of Analysis methods in my discourse of this media text. First, I will use Textual Analysis which is an analysis of a piece of media that attempts to explain and interpret what is going on in the text, and why it is significant. It evaluates the assumptions that both the text and the audience suggests, as well as why they are important. For my paper, this will be beneficial in understanding the piece of media from detailed descriptions of the scenes that I will be referring to in my paper. I will be specifically referring to key moments in the scene that I have chosen in this movie that supports my point of the objectification of soldiers and the domination of the government over the citizens. Next, I will use discourse analysis which explores why the text would be important in society regarding its function and response from the people that find it relevant to them. It also evaluates how that is related to structures of power. Since the government holds a lot of power in our society, it will be beneficial to examine how the power of the government affects the soldiers lives in our society today, and also of their experiences during the war. This type of analysis will also serve to explore the relation of the movie, which was set in the time of the Vietnam War, and of the war in Iraq that was happening during the time of the movie's release. This will in turn lead to my final analysis which is Political Analysis. This explores the way that money and finances are factored in to the media text. It attempts to understand how money is related to how the text came to be, or the result of the money that came from the text and all it's related parts. For this analysis I will continue with

the notion of today's government, and other companies, and their financial relationship with the war. This is important to understand since there were conflicts and later realizations that the government lied to the citizens of the justification for going to war in Iraq. I will also discuss the ways that the movie itself has benefitted from featuring a movie about the Vietnam War in a time when the US was also in a war that was unpopular like the Vietnam War.

For my paper, I will be focusing on a particular scene from a 2007 musical, *Across the Universe*. This scene artistically described the situation in America during the time of the draft for the Vietnam War. The scene started with one of the main characters of the movie, whose name is Max Carrigan. He was shown in this scene being handled by the various officers who were to decide if he was fit to serve in the Vietnam war. It was accompanied with a song by the Beatles called "I Want You (She's So Heavy)" which was used with interpretive dancing and singing by both the newly drafted soldiers and the officers. The scene combined dancing, singing, and particular movements that gave off the impression that the people being drafted and forced in the war were being molded into these perfect soldiers that could be used by the government as objects. This part in the movie symbolizes the objectification of soldiers being drafted into the army during the Vietnam War which showed the dominance of the American government over its' citizens.

The first example that showed this objectification came from the use of the conveyor belts. These belts were the same kind of belts that would be used in a factory to efficiently move items from one place to the other. In this scene, the soldiers were being transported from scene to scene by these conveyor belts. They first were placed onto the belt where they were surrounded by army officers on both sides, who proceeded to strip the main character in my media text,

named Max, of his clothes. He was being forcibly handled by these officers while they were ripping off his clothes and pushing him from all directions to have him end up in only his underwear. During this scene Max was visibly very frightened and confused by what was going on. The stripping of his clothes symbolized the stripping of his former life in order to begin his life as a soldier in the US army. He is no longer able to exercise his rights as a citizen as America since he has been stripped of his freedom by these officers. Just like that of an object, he is now a fresh slate of which can be altered and built to perfection in the eyes of the government. This conveyor belt was used throughout the scene on all the new soldiers being brought in. It transported all of them from scene to scene to be examined, tested, and then later shipped off to war.

In the scene where the soldiers were being examined, the new soldiers were moved (by conveyor belt of course) to individual cubicles to be carefully inspected for any disparities or flaws that would qualify for them to not be shipped off to war. This process included the soldiers being weighed, getting their eyes checked, teeth checked, legs checked, measuring their hands and feet, and even getting their hands weighed. This is similar to like that of an object being examined for 'pristine-ness' so that they could be effectively used as a proficient instrument in the war. Another scene, after the examination, included the soldiers being 'puppeteered' by the officers. This scene showed the soldiers being forced to dance with the officers while they forced them to do different moved by physically moving their bodies into certain positions. They made the soldiers hold their hand up in salute, do pushups, and march. This is another example of the soldiers being tested and examined before they are chosen to serve in the war. After this specific scene, they are then placed back onto the conveyor belts where they are put into a scene of the

war. They are essentially creating more of these ‘perfect soldiers’ that are no longer part of society, but are used as an object for the government to use for the Vietnam war. The ability of the government to be free to do this to the soldiers shows that they are establishing their dominance over them. They are able to conduct these extensive examinations because they are the dominating government over these vulnerable citizens, who must bend to their will. Also, in order for the government to be successful in the war, they must be able to have these soldiers be able to be of the utmost health, and to also be vulnerable enough to take orders as they come.

One particular part in the scene stood out towards the end, which was the part of the stripped group of soldiers holding the statue of liberty on their backs as they tread across the foreign terrain of Vietnam. This image was so captivating and really symbolized the burden of America on the backs of the American soldiers. This burden of holding up their country while being stripped and vulnerable themselves showed that the strength of the US government in being able to shape these citizens into soldiers that would be willing to hold America on their backs while they fought in a war that many of them did not want to be in. This burden of America is brought upon these soldiers by their own country where they are claimed to be free. The song that was showcased during this scene was the words, “She’s So Heavy” which was originally written by the Beatles. Accompanied by strong guitar riffs, and orchestra sounding backup, this haunting song features emotional vocals with simple and direct lyrics that repeat over and over again.

I want you

I want you so bad

I want you

I want you so bad, it's driving me mad

It's driving me mad

[Chorus]

She's so...

Heavy

Heavy (heavy)

From these words, it can be interpreted that the burden of America is so heavy on the backs of these soldiers. The landscape of Vietnam itself was shown to be in the form of a miniature model, with the soldiers being able to literally walk all over it, establishing the American dominance over the land, and also over their own American citizens as they hold this heavy Statue of Liberty on their backs.

The visual aspects of this scene are compelling to the audience as they reflect the feelings of some of the people that really served in the war. Many of the soldiers that were sent to war were treated poorly while in the army. They were stripped of their humanity and were trained to be objects that could be manipulated. This was expressed by a former Vietnam War veteran, Allen Nelson, who spoke in an interview published in the *Nanzan review of American Studies*, about his experience in the army during his time. He says, "We're marines. We're trained to kill. So the first thing they want to do is to remove your civilian life from you; they want to take your civilian thinking away from you. In the military there's no thinking. You're trained to follow orders. You don't ask any questions. You never say, "now or later?" So part of the military training is brainwashing." ("Interview with Allen Nelson"). There is no room for civility or

humanity in the army. You must bend to their will and dominance. Doing the act of killing is not in human nature. In order to do this, they must be shaped and bent to follow these orders.

Joining the army at this time stemmed from the majority of the people having vulnerability and desperation as this was sometimes their last choice, or only choice (“Interview with Allen Nelson”). The ones that were best able to follow orders were the ones that were chosen to serve. For some of the soldiers, it was their only choice. “Because of the United States’ military presence in our schools, many children are convinced that the military is a good thing. Before they even look at universities or colleges or programs, the military would send them overseas where they could grow up and learn something else. They automatically figure the military is good because it’s easy and it’s right there.” (“Interview with Allen Nelson”). This made it easy for the government to manipulate these citizens. Many of the soldiers were those who came from the lower or working class; very few were from the upper class (“Interview with Allen Nelson”). In the beginning, it was frowned upon to dodge the draft, and you were considered a coward for doing so; but with the growing unpopularity of the draft, these “draft dodgers” were backed up by those who opposed America’s involvement in the war. “As a result, more people got involved in the anti-war and draft resistance movement and backed these draft-dodgers. The draft process was also scrutinized carefully owing to the increasingly unpopularity of the Vietnam War” (“Interview with Allen Nelson”). This changing mindset is the basis of which comes the argument of the citizens of America realizing that they were being manipulated and dominated by their government to be used as object in the war for the benefit of the few who were in power.

Even though this movie featured the events of the Vietnam war which was in the 1960's and 1970's, it was released in 2007 which was significant because of the situation of America in the war in Iraq. In 2007, it was stated to be the deadliest year for the United States troops during this time in this war, according to an article by Damien Cave, published in the New York Times (Cave). This was reported at the end of the year, after the decision of President Bush making the decision to send more than "20,000 additional American troops into combat" (Sanger). In comparison to the number of soldiers that died while in Iraq, the death rate was 5.4 times higher than the death rate of Iraq (Buzzell 557). However, by releasing a movie about the Vietnam War in the same year that had the most soldier deaths during America's presence in Iraq, the audience is able to make that connection of their own situation to the situation presented in the movie. The significance of releasing this movie in 2007 while all of these events were occurring were important because it would remind the public of the history of the government in their treatment of their citizen soldiers, and of the government's control of what to do with this much power over these life and death decisions. By using this popular media platform, viewers are able to analyze their own situation during a war in their own country. It reminds the audience that they are still living in the days of power and control of the government over the soldiers that are being sent off to war. With the power of the president to make these important decision to put these soldiers into these life and death situations, it establishes that they have dominance over the people, in a country that is supposed to be free.

The view from the citizens in Vietnam were that they were initially confident in the US and its military power. In an article named "The Vietnam Syndrome and the American People" by Harry G. Summers, Jr., he discussed Vietnam's trust in the US because they were powerful.

“Faith in the U.S. was total simply because...they thought that the powerful and disinterested U.S. could not be wrong, and all the more so because the U.S. had never lost a war in its history” (Summers 53). Vietnam trusted that from the U.S. reputation of success and domination over their opponents in former wars, they would be a worthy ally to include. However, the decision of the US to enter the war was one that had many factors that led to its eventual decision to join; one of which was a financial decision. There were very influential and powerful groups of people that were involved with the financial gains of war. In an article titled “10 companies profiting the most from war”, the companies that profited the most were the ones that were selling arms and machinery to the US army that would lead them to profit billions of dollars. (Weigley). This is a problem when the most powerful and influential business leaders in America are able to profit off the deaths of thousands of American soldiers. Because of the power of these few, the American people were made to hold this burden of either participating in, or being impacted by a war that they did not support. This fact has a direct correlation to the moment in the scene that showed the newly drafted soldiers carrying the Statue of Liberty across the foreign land of Vietnam. It points towards the notion that they are holding this heavy representation of America, which was characterized as The Statue of Liberty on their backs, while they are walking over this grassy and war filled foreign land that they were put into. The decision to use the Beatles music at this part shows the audience that they understand the burden they are given to support a country that enters into a war that was unnecessary and unwanted for many. They understand that America is a heavy burden to bear in the affairs of foreign war. Once the audience sees this scene and is able to relate to this popular music with these popular beliefs being expressed right in front of them, they resonate with the movie more and in turn will benefit the movie itself.

The makers of this movie made an important decision when they decided to use Beatles music as their main artist throughout the movie. The Beatles were a widely popular band back in the 1960's, popular during the time of the movie's release, and also still very popular today. The 1960's was a time of anti-government and revolutionary thoughts, which the Beatles were a part of. It is a perfect band to use because it fits with the message of the movie (which was based in the time of the unpopular Vietnam War) and also with the message they were trying to get across to the audience. Much of the Beatles music was made in context with trying to connect with audience. In an article titled "John Lennon: The Last Great Anti-War Activist", the Beatles were credited to be associated with an antiwar stance and tried to send out a message to the world that they should protest against violence and root for peace ("John Lennon"). The audience the Beatles were playing to were revolutionaries and were against the war. The song, "I Want You (She's So Heavy)" was showcased in this scene which was played in the moment of trying to say that the government wanted Max to be in the army. They wanted him "so bad" in order to continue their dominance over their citizens. The Beatles were so widely popular in that time and is still very popular today. By using their music, they were able to draw in people who remember those times, and also people who were a fan of them when this production was released.

Another relatable tactic that is used by the movie is one that involves emotions. This scene in particular showed one of the main protagonists, Max, being scared and vulnerable while in the process of being drafted. There was a scene in the beginning where he was being forcibly carried into the evaluation room by two officers while he is visually very afraid and confused by what is going on around him. In this time of power over the soldiers being drafted, it is relatable to the audience when this movie was released in 2007 because it showed the side of the people

being scared and vulnerable against the government's power. This was also a time when there was a question whether there was to be another draft. According to an article titled "Vast Majority of Americans Opposed to Reinstating Military Draft", there was an overwhelming majority of people against restoring the draft with 80% of Americans against the notion (Jones). Although many politicians were against it, there were some people who were considering it. This was explained in an article called "Bush Adviser: Military Draft Worth Considering" from NBC news that said although the president was against reinstating the draft, there were some like the Army Lieutenant General Douglas Lute who said they should consider it ("Bush Adviser").

Showing these emotions of fear towards the government in this movie created a sort of mirror-like impression of what American citizens were going through as well. They were fearful that they would have to relive the draft like it was back in the 1960's. These emotions are important to include to create a truthful and realistic representation of the feelings of some of the men that were being drafted for the Vietnam War, and to also relate these feelings towards the audience in 2007 when these fears were also being felt from a fear of a rekindling of the draft. In addition to these fears of going to fight in the war, there was also a large amount of stress that was produced at this time as it was released in a time of a financial recession in the United States. In an article published by Stella Lange called, "Cinematic Narratives of Crises in the Film Musical *Across the Universe*", she talked about this crises represented in 2007 and how it resonated with the audience; "Last but not least, the year of release of *Across the Universe* in 2007, offers a supplementary historic perspective on crisis. As the film was produced in the period of the American financial crises, which still has enormous impact on people's lives in and outside of America, the film proposes a suprahistoric and transcultural view on crisis...the film

relates a bundle of crisis in the past (i.e. the Vietnam War) with the manifold crises in our time...” (Lange, 2007) Therefore, with the combination of emotions of stress, resentment, and worry, *Across the Universe* was able to justify the audiences feelings and led to the success of the film.

From the analyzation of this scene from *Across the Universe*, I was able to establish points that explained how this piece of text depicted a citizen being objectified and dominated by their government. It is through this analysis that there were real life connections to be made from it’s relevance of being released in 2007, during the time of the Iraq War. It is through these connections, the testimonies of Vietnam War Veterans and the following of the financial connections of this movie and the people who made it that we are able to see that this scene was important to analyze. It allows us to see why it matters to show a soldier being objectified on screen because of the relevance of its message in a world of war, which led to the ways that media and war can be used for financial gain. It allows us to observe the effects it produces when pieces of media are shared to the public. These reactions and observations are what’s important in order to understand the society that we live in, and the place that media has in all of our lives.

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