

FILM REVIEWS

First Kill

Directed by Coco Schrijber
First Run/Icarus Films, 2002

This past semester, Fall 2003, I taught an introductory psychology course in Motivation and Emotion. This is the third time I've taught the course, and I'm always looking for ways to spice up the class. In the back of my mind, I'm always looking for material of any kind that might keep my students engaged and interested in the material. Around the time I was planning the course, I received a VHS tape of *First Kill* from First Run/Icarus films. When I first watched the film, I was mesmerized and knew immediately that it would be a great way to generate discussion in class. In fact, it worked out perfectly. When I teach the class, I teach a section on drugs and addiction, which is followed by a section on anger and aggression. *First Kill* provided an excellent bridge between these two topics: it is, after all, a film about the addiction to murder.

Another moment of serendipity (also see my review of Jonathan Diamond's *Narrative Means to Sober Ends*): Here I am, editing this special issue of *Janus Head* on the topic of addiction. I'm teaching a course on motivation, and I receive Schrijber's excellent film on the relationship between addiction and aggression. Then, I read Roget Lockard's essay, which is the lead paper in this special issue: Lockard masterfully extends the rhetoric of AA to better understand contemporary events: the earth's addiction to blood and war. Uncanny. You can't plan these things; they just kind of fall from the sky.

First Kill is a film that is as spectacular as it is disturbing. The film opens with a slow motion shot of a brightly lit pig's head against a black background. Ominous music accompanies the opening credits. All at once, in slow motion, the audience witnesses a bullet pass through the head of the pig as the animal dances in its wake. It is a beautiful image. Yes, *beautiful*. The central theme of the film is encapsulated in this single image: We are invited to participate in the disturbing truth that we are all compelled by violence and death. The image is affective; it works subliminally to entice us into accepting what is to follow.

What follows is a series of interviews with Vietnam veterans who discuss their experience of killing people during the war. Respected author Michael Herr, best known for penning the screenplay for Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket*, also conveys his experience as a war correspondent during Vietnam, a subject he tackled previously in his acclaimed book, *Dispatches*. In one of the more notable moments of the film, Herr contemplates the motivation for war: "If war was hell and only hell and there were no other colors in the palate, [if] that was the essence of the experience and all that there was to the experience, I don't think people would continue to make war." Indeed, why are people compelled to commit acts of ultra-violence? *First Kill* is gutsy enough to look the answer in the face without flinching.

Schrijber supplies an answer to this question, but is smart enough to show it rather than tell it. The answer haunts the film in the form of a famous photograph from the war. The photo is a 1968 still shot of General Nguyen Ngoc Loan, head of the South Vietnamese police, shooting a Viet Cong POW in the head. The photograph appears throughout the film in different contexts, but the repetition is readily noted by the viewer. The shot recalls the image of the pig from the opening credits of the film, both in its theme and in the visceral response it provokes, an uncanny combination of awe, aesthetic pleasure and disgust. The image is compelling. It is beautiful, like war, like other images of violence and death. We hear this theme repeated throughout the many interviews: These men are ashamed and guilty, not simply because they shot other men, but because they found joy in their acts of violence. These vets, we find, are torn apart because of their moral repulsion at their own ambivalence, at their uncanny recollection that killing was good. The film eludes in various ways to the aesthetics of war and violence, but this theme becomes explicit at a key point toward the film's end, when we witness a tourist shop in Vietnam that, among other things, features a wall of art reproductions from the "Mona Lisa" to Van Gogh's "Starry Starry Night." The audience is given to witness a shop employee hanging the newest reproduction: an art print of that famous photograph of Nguyen Ngoc Loan shooting the POW in the head. What more can be said for the aesthetics of war and violence?

When I showed this film to my students, it produced one of the more interesting discussions we had all semester. Students were horrified at the thought that killing could be an addiction, that war could be understood

to be erotic, and this raised interested questions for us: Can war be considered an addiction? Did the soldiers really feel pleasure from the kill, or was it merely relief that they had survived the confrontation? Might Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) result from guilt and shame related to recollections of pleasure a soldier had experienced from killing? If we'd had the time, we could have spent many days discussing these questions, and I wish we had. I plan to use the film again next semester. I think it should be required viewing in Washington. Hell, it should be required viewing for us all. It will give us something to contemplate the next time we gather around the television to witness the carpet bombing of the latest Middle Eastern country we deem the enemy. As AA has taught us for many years, the first step in recovery is recognizing that we have an addiction. Schrijber offers us a mirror to do just that.

Reviewed by Brent Dean Robbins, Allegheny College