

**SIXTYNINE:
JOURNALING THE SCARS OF WAR**

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Abstract

My uncle, Mike “Dog” Davidson, was stationed in Saigon, 1969-70. When I was younger, I would always be afraid to ask him about his service in the U.S. army. Perhaps the subject is too personal, I thought, or rude of me to pry about such dark memories. My curiosities eclipsed those considerations after Dog let slip that he and his unit buddies kept a journal during their deployment (a mistake on his part after four very potent cosmopolitans). Following that, I’d ask for the journal each chance I’d get over the next *five years*. It must have been Dog’s threshold for pestering, because the journal turned up in my mailbox. In hindsight I feel naive about nagging him to let me see the book, but I hold no regrets after what I found inside.

The book can only be described as a stream-of-consciousness narrative. Its thick cardboard cover is draped in an army-green canvas, which is in a sorry condition at this point. On the front, in marker, it reads, “Recording Room 629.” Room 629 was the unit’s Saigon lodging in “The Plaza Hotel,” I deduced from an untitled poem glued to one of the pages. To be sure, there is no lack of anti-war expression in the book, through its drug-infused scrawlings, quips, doodles and the shaky script of journaling, it serves as a platform for well-deserved venting. Between some of the pages there are loose inserts that tell a story of the times, like a flier advertising a John and Yoko short film screening or a political cartoon depicting the Pentagon building as a peace sign.

I quickly realized that the book in my possession was a time capsule of American culture and an heirloom. I had come upon a uniquely atmospheric, poetically-expressed, true story that deserved to be told. Between November 2015 and March 2016, I produced a film based on elements found within “Room 629.” The film hinges on stop-motion animations in order to heighten the writing of its source material and to reflect the homemade quality of the book itself. These animated images are woven between interview footage of Dog speaking about Vietnam.

In the accompanying paper, written in a personal narrative style, I breakdown the film on technical and thematic levels. The paper is also reacting to the cultural paradigm shifts that resulted in the wake of the Vietnam War, the effects of which have shaped my own experience as a post-9/11 citizen. Leaning greatly on cinematic texts of war and coping like *Marwencol* (2010) and *In Country* (2014), this research collates my film with the conditions of veteran identity, especially related to Millennial identity in the 21st century.

My film, *Six Twenty Nine*, is viewable at the following url:
<https://vimeo.com/159877570/ab41df246d>

How it all began...

Ripping off packing tape with your bare hands can be a damned satisfying experience, especially if the contents of the parcel before you are decades old and emotionally irreplaceable. On a sun-drenched afternoon in late September, 2015, I received such a parcel from my Uncle Dog. The box was overstuffed with cushiony paper which exploded from its cardboard flaps. Inside that boxy fortress lay *the journal*, Dog's journal, which he and his unit kept during their tour in the Vietnam War, 1969-70. For some years in my teens, Dog assured me that he would open up to me about the war someday, even hinting at the journal's existence, but that day of satisfaction never came. I figured these were empty, drunken assurances. Still, I was eager to know about his military past, especially in that contested space of *Vietnam*.

Eventually I did get my hands on the journal. In response, I designed my film, *Six Twenty Nine*, as a visual exploration of Dog's warring psyche by unlocking and activating the journal through animation. Through the journal, the film reflects on Dog's experiences and ponders ways of coping with the scars of war. The film lies somewhere between documentary and video essay; visual and aural echoes formulate kinds of homage to the 1960s, as if to "quote" and cite its influences. The journal is perpetually concentrated inside the visual space of the film, while voice-over and interview footage invoke generational tensions and Freudian theory.

During the filmmaking process, I was endlessly reminded by family on Dog's side that he generally does not talk about Vietnam and that my opportunity to interview him about his experiences was unbelievable. I am told those are deeply felt memories and relating to a blip of U.S. history. I, too, had difficulties approaching the subject, thinking initially that *perhaps it is too personal, perhaps too gruesome*. Needless to say, my curiosity eventually cast out my

politeness when the “long-lost” journal was delivered to me. Once I laid eyes on its ragged, beautifully decomposed binding, I could no longer accept leaving Dog’s story to Dog alone. My first glance at the journal led to a moment of spirited imagination in which I decided on two things. First, I decided this journal is one that deserves to be seen and heard. Second, I decided I was the most well-equipped to craft it. Not only that, I would craft it to be my thesis. A film that culminates my college career thus far. I am embedded within *Six Twenty Nine*, even if the story belongs to Dog, the film is as much about myself as it is the journaling of Vietnam.

I describe the journal as “long-lost” because Dog’s go-to scheme for thwarting my interest was to tell me the thing was—*poof*—gone! Or maybe, he suggested the journal was in the care of a friend or old army buddy. Wherever it was, I was not about to get my hands on it soon. Until my early college years, I regularly pestered Dog for an update on the journal’s whereabouts. *Have you found it? Where did you look for it already? Where will you look next?* When these questions wore on Dog, I would reverse course and give him a break, but I was nonetheless persistent. It turns out, according to Dog (speaking candidly during an interview for the film) the journal “never was lost.” This white lie did not strike me as a betrayal. Rather, I understood it is a coping mechanism rooted in his unwillingness to revisit unpleasant memories or perhaps he did not feel I was prepared to apprehend something as tragic and knotty as Vietnam. Dog’s disclosure is a sign to me of the agency he still keeps over the story of *Six Twenty Nine*—his story... but also mine. I present this contradiction in the film through its structure. In the opening, I am heard in voice-over saying Dog “allowed *me* to tell the story.” Yet, I would argue that no story follows. Instead an atmosphere takes its place. The film is atmosphere and relic inexorably tied together; or, time and perspective. The personal reason for this choice is

to bridge Dog's perspective with mine despite our respective stories being in mighty contrast. To the viewer, this open-ended structure invites related experiences into the theater.

When he is not beach-hopping, Dog owns and markets his own custom cap business; for this reason I consider him a natural advertiser. He would occasionally offer some obscure, tantalizing detail about the journal and its history, then tout it as movie material. He would jokingly say that it was up to *me* or Oliver Stone to turn the journal into a film someday. Now the journal *is* a film. In this essay, I address the technical and theoretical development of *Six Twenty Nine* and discuss my personal relationship to the film along with my reading of its message from a generational standpoint and drawing from Freudian concepts of psychological coping.

The journal as artifact...

I saw it there, the journal, unleashed from its post-office coffin and resurrected in my hands. "Recording Room 629" is inscribed on the front of the journal's festering, army-green canvas cover. "6 → 2 → 9" encircles the image of a keyhole (I consider this an important detail and thus its likeness is also important in the film). The word "ROOM" is composed of hollow letters of disproportionate size and alignment, certainly the work of scribblers as opposed to trained artists. "Recording" appears to be imprinted on the canvas; for some reason, it is printed off-center. I suppose the canvas has stretched over the years and warped the cover's perspective. In further harmony with the journal's handmadeness, the letter "o" in "Recording" has been fashioned into a peace symbol: "RecⓄrding." In a crimson red paint at the top left corner, the word "BIBLE" is written as if to declare the journal a religious text—sacred to the boys in room 629. Rogue splatters of red and orange speckle the journal's front-cover like blood leaking

through clothes. On the back, streaks of neon green form into a lop-sided, egg-shaped peace sign. Thanks to the surrounding red streaks, which have traveled from “BIBLE” to the back-cover, that peace sign looks as if it were burning. In the film, this drawing makes a short cameo appearance.

The meat of the experience starts between the journal’s yellowed pages. The book is occupied by all kinds and colors of penmanship, poetry, and drug-infused doodles. Intermittently you’ll come across a ragged peace sign, coffee stains, homemade puzzles and tongue-twisters, and pot burns. Loose pamphlets and pictures and memories are stuck between some of the pages. Even after spending months with the journal, I find more nooks and crannies each day. The journal’s pages are tattered, falling apart, and stuck together due to years of dusty, moist abandon and so hidden treasures are buried within its chaos.

One day I stumbled upon a letter, tucked in the pages, that my mother wrote to Dog in November, 1970. She was 9 years old. She wrote about the first snowfall of that year and how “pretty” the trees looked. She noted the evergreen trees especially because of how their green needles shone through from beneath their frozen blanket. The first thing I noticed about my mother’s sweet letter is the handwriting: legible, clean, and the same as it is today. Some things, like handwriting, do not fundamentally change. I have often wondered if Dog’s handwriting has stayed the same, too; I know the person behind the pen has unquestionably changed.

The journal is a historical artifact, a family heirloom, a spellbinding page-turner. Even the act of reading the journal is visceral. The unsticking of its pages creaks with a satisfying din. Through beams of light, I notice the flakes of papery particles that shake off the journal at each turn of the page. I am literally breathing the journal as I read it. My desk is covered with a patina

of the journal's grungy residue each time it is opened. I feel personally close to this relic and as such, the journal is threaded into every facet of *Six Twenty Nine*. It amazes me to know that Dog's opinion of the journal is decidedly understated. Like he says in the beginning of my film: "[The journal is] just a bunch of 18 and 19 year old sons of bitches writing in a book." Even if the journal does not mean so much to Dog presently, it has a significance to me.

24th November 2015...

My socially-lubricated Uncle Dog is opening up for the first time about Vietnam. He begins simply with an explanation of the journal: "So I had [the journal] and it was in room 629. Anybody that visited—and I had lots of visitors—could write in the book." This being our first interview together, I am struck by how uncharacteristically at ease Dog appears on the subject. I try to focus the conversation on the artifact of the journal itself, but Dog has other plans. After quickly explaining the namesake of his journal (named after his Saigon hotel room number), Dog commences with rattling off story after story. For him, I presume this interview is some kind of catharsis; an emotional-purging more than four decades in waiting. At these circumstances, I find myself mulling over Freud. His work useful here to describe the means by which Dog is coming to grips with his Vietnam memories. The psychoanalytic concept of *sublimation* is applicable.

According to Freud, sublimation is an ego defense mechanism, "a process that concerns object-libido and consists in the instinct directing itself towards an aim other than, and remote from, that of sexual satisfaction" (qtd. in Gemes 38). Sublimation is mucky territory in psychoanalysis as nobody can quite agree on a single definition or theoretical application. But for Ken Gemes, sublimation boils down to "the redirecting of a drive from a sexual to a nonsexual aim" (Gemes 39). A *sexual aim*, for the purpose of this paper, is in reference to any

potentially socially intolerable thoughts, practices, or ideas. In Dog's case, I distinguish the journal as a catalyst to the forces of Freudian sublimation. The journal provided a channel through which Dog and his fellows in room 629 could vent the emotions they must have felt during their stay in Saigon. Many of these emotions remain suppressed today and my interviews only scratch the surface.

Dog tells me one of his cheekier stories is about his father (my grandfather) driving him to the airport on the way to Vietnam. His father fought in Korea and felt as though he were about to pass the proverbial military torch to his son. In his passion, he got a speeding ticket en route. Dog laments: "I ain't in that big a hurry, Dad!" As I listen to Dog tell his stories, the more I relate to his steely sense of humor. His anecdote is funny but real and honest. He demonstrates, maybe without knowing it, the lineage of war that survives generation after generation. Even today, though I am at no personal risk of being drafted, nor do I have any intention of enlisting, war besieges my peers and I. We "Millennials," born between 1980 and 1997*, have not lived a day of our lives without some massive global conflict. As Thrall and Goepner put it, Millennials have "few, if any, adult memories of a time before 9/11 and the wars in the Middle East" (2). In spite of our familiarity with war, Millennials are reluctant to engage in military conflict if at all possible. Also, Millennials are predisposed to more welcoming economic policies, as in regard to trade with China, a state that previous cohorts remember (with malice) as being aggressively

* This figure is according to Thrall and Goepner's study, which is a main source supporting this research. It is important to note, however, that exact dates of intergenerational change are not universally agreed upon. Consider that an "early" Millennial born in 1980 may differ in standpoint to a "late" Millennial such as myself, born in the mid-1990s. As the culture rapidly changes (especially in today's ubiquitously internet-connected society), keep in mind that drawing rigid generational boundaries is often too generalizing.

communist. Thrall and Goepner sum up this shift in thinking with consummate relevance to Dog's perspective: "Many analysts have speculated that the negative reaction to the war in Iraq has produced an Iraq Syndrome akin to the Vietnam Syndrome: that is, a pervasive reluctance to support the use of force abroad" (13). In other words, Millennials tend to be more diplomatically-minded than the cohorts that preceded them. On this metric, Dog is an honorary Millennial.

25th November 2015...

On the afternoon of the 25th, Dog and I lounged around the pool of our hotel lodgings in Cozumel, Mexico—just as we did the night before. Unfortunately, most of the day's footage and audio recording plagued with technical issues. When I heard the first snap-crackle of broken audio in the nearly 45-minute clip, I fell to my knees, astonished and crushed. Nearly the entire talk was unusable. However, one moment does stand out, not just for its clean, functional audio, but for its rawness. Towards the end of the interview, Dog was a bit fragile and he let himself be emotional on camera. As it was happening before me, I knew that this moment could be my first breakthrough of the project.

I asked Dog to think about the most important lesson he learned during his service. He fired back: "stay in college," through some teary laughs. Then, without prompt, he said this: "the whole thing (Vietnam) was bullshit... I can get still hostile about it and I say prayers every morning for our troops deployed around the world." Somewhere in that phrase his smile disappeared. "Even Afghanistan and Iraq is bullshit. Vietnam was definitely bullshit. 56,000 people didn't come back." You can see in his face that he wears the pain of loss for these poor boys every day. And if you count deaths among allied militaries plus Viet Cong/North

Vietnamese armies plus civilian casualties, Dog's statistic is exceedingly low. The levy of death is estimated to be greater than 1.3 million lives (Guenter 442-453); the figure is even higher if you count the deaths in Cambodia and Laos. At this point Dog was actively choking back his emotions, but he never lost his edge. "I've got more stories," he said before we called it quits for the day.

Dog's emotional release is surely a revelation and something of an outburst. In a few ways he reminds me of the quintessential Vietnam veteran, a stereotype that represents these men as psychologically ruined, drug-dependent, and sometimes homeless. I think of John Goodman's brilliant, seething turn as Walter Sobchak in *The Big Lebowski* (1998) and I see traits in my Uncle Dog if he were not as repressed or restrained as he is. The recent documentary *In Country* (Mike Attie, Meghan O'Hara; 2014) compensates for the stereotypical caricature of the scarred veteran by listening to their experiences in a modern context and representing their humanity. I see traits of my uncle in that film also, which follows PTSD-suffering veterans of current U.S. conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan as they try to heal through war games. These men are transported back to the mosquito-poppy-fields of the 1960s in search of a gritty experience that proffers them an outlet to relive and cope with their trauma on their own terms. The film tangibly reconstructs the contested space of Vietnam and updates the perspectives for their contemporary relevance. The film achieves this with aesthetic cues. For instance, the murky, digital texture of its camerawork—a conscious decision by the filmmaker to shoot in a format strikingly different to the soft sprinkles of 16mm archive footage.

The thematic heft of this contrast works in two ways. First, it dates the archival footage, splitting the modern-day characters from the past they seek to emulate. Second, the film is

entitled to comment on contemporary foreign conflicts through historical lessons. The use of medium is not limited to camera choice, either. Some points in the film leverage cinematic technique to unify its periods. One such moment features a beautiful night-vision shot of starry Afghani skies. The shot desaturates and archival audio commandeers the soundtrack. These moments are key inspirations for *Six Twenty Nine*, while also framing my understanding of Dog's emotionality and informing my relationship to the story of the journal. Interviewing Dog, much like first experiencing the journal, feels like opening a time capsule. Owing to his storytelling talents, Dog transports his listener to the leaden, humid azure of Saigon, 1969.

Reading Six Twenty Nine...

My film opens on the dark, contrasty ridges of a suspended door-lock. The aural space is squealing and fumbling noises of a lock unjamming. At the final shrill of sliding metal, the black and white picture *inverts*, a groundwork which sets the entire film's aesthetic mold. This synch event also commences the plot: in its most basic form, it is an examination of Dog and his journal. Throughout the film, Dog speaks in soundbites about his experience of being drafted, meeting his good friend George W. Keller III from "*Hickory North Carolina*," and how "*bullshit*" the war is, how "*bullshit*" any war is.

"*It wasn't surreal*," Dog says of his experience in Vietnam. On second thought: "*I think the whole 15 months, 3 days, and 8 hours were sort of, I guess you could today describe it as surreal.*" I chose to introduce the character of my uncle with this line for to its divulging nature, not just about Dog himself but about the proceeding film as well. What is *not* surreal has become surreal over time. In 1969, Vietnam was very real to Dog. Now the argument is that Vietnam, in distant memory, is something of a nightmarish dream. The line originates from the final

interview I conducted with Dog on the 27th of December, 2015. That interview is a summation of our foregoing talks. For the both of us, it helped to organize the ideas and experiences only briefly touched upon before. Also in this interview, I coaxed a broader explanation of Dog's attitudes about war and compared those with my own feelings. We found ourselves on common ground as well as at clear-cut odds with each other. The decades between us became apparent, but Dog was able to articulate his ideological, apolitical perspective with more grace than ever. As I expected (and completely understand), he is still struggling to fully comprehend the Vietnam War. His early avoidance of the term surreal illustrates this struggle. For him, the war is still very real. To me, the war is a distant nightmare, but one that echoes throughout Westernized culture.

As for the film, Dog's inaugural line predicates of the style of animation: disjointed, shadow-like, *surreal*. The film utilizes the journal's frenetically-activated pages into and out of visual metaphors, painted-text, and even Dog's murky talking-heads. In fact, there are few moments in the film where the journal's white canvas and black handwriting is not visible.

The next sequence of images tease the journal from different angles. The jarring shift between single-frame time-lapse, slow motion, and freeze-frame shots acquaints the spectator with the character of the journal while also "unlocking" the journal's visual potential. In a sense, the sequence is designed for spectacle. At one point my finger brushes across the pages of the journal, settling on keywords (and hi-lighted by another color inversion) before suddenly the pages are tailspinning into the black oblivion of the background. The spectator is encouraged to *fall into* the journal, beckoned by its movie-like flicker. The process is complete when the journal's back-cover thuds shut. The title appears: "*six twenty nine.*"

The following image establishes one of the film's major aesthetic contrivances: the words spoken by Dog are matched in the visual track by handwritten lettering stenciled over the journal's flipping pages. This is the first of two primary uses of text in the film. Later seen is a computer-generated font, comparably stenciled, but purposefully more legible. These paragraphs contain my explicit commentary relating to Dog's ongoing aural track. In some instances, either of these texts evolve with the imagery on-screen, to increase legibility or (in the case of Dog's words) increase their instability.

Text alone is not the only tool used to translate Dog's words. In some cases, metaphorical imagery replaces the written language. Some of these images include a rose (surrogate for "love"), a skull (surrogate for "mind"), and a peace sign (modeled after the painted-peace sign on the back cover of the journal). The pattern between these different visual tricks of representing Dog's words is purposefully erratic and not all of these moments are necessarily meant to be interpreted during the first viewing. Take the moment when Dog passionately decries "fuckin' war man." The lettering seemingly melts into the background. The visual track on its own would be tremendously difficult to read; instead, the visual track is centered on the emotional representation of Dog's story while the aural track frames the necessary context. The exception to this dynamic is the appearance of written commentary that seeks to "fill in the gaps" where elements of Dog's interview are not clear and to provide additional context that is otherwise impractical to convey. These systems add up to a film that feels very much like documentary, yet disturbs the trends of established documentary styles.

With regard to style, *Marwencol* (Jeff Malmberg, 2010) is an inspiration. Mark Hogancamp is the star of this fascinating documentary about coping through art. When I was

first exploring ways to approach the post-production of *Six Twenty Nine*, Malmberg's film offered a template for designing the character development of Dog. At the risk of spoiling *Marwencol's* third-act twist, I will say that Hogancamp suffered a terrible beating because of his perceived queerness and cross-dressing habit. Unable to afford physical therapy, Hogancamp channeled his suffering into crafting the film's titular fictional town, populated by barbie dolls, in his backyard. This enabled him to practice fine motor skills, re-write his personal history before the accident, and reclaim his individuality.

After his discovery, Hogancamp was offered the chance to debut his distinctive work at a New York City gallery. Before agreeing to show his work, Hogancamp confesses that he does not see himself as an artist and the NYC art scene made him nervous. Eventually, Hogancamp overcomes his worry and more: he bravely wore stockings to the show. Dog's story is similar in that the journal provided an outlet through which he could channel his negative energies. In a compacted form, my film traces the character development of Hogancamp to apply that formula to Dog. This is especially apparent in the transition from Dog's retelling of the first time he met George W. Keller III to his criticism of U.S. military command. I consider this point towards the end of my film as analogous to Hogancamp's decision to install his art (and like Hogancamp, Dog does not consider the journal "art," despite my protests that it indeed *is*). And likewise to Hogancamp, Dog is permitted a moment of rare individual expression, through which he expresses his political outrage. "*I don't do politics,*" says Dog, it is a term he profusely avoids association with, so I tend to believe his outrage is authentic.

Before the credits roll, Dog (and spectating family members) applaud Vietnam veterans for their service the film restates its opening shot in reverse. The inverted lock returns to its

normal color tones. In the soundtrack, another rambling of rusty metal signifies the “re-locking” of Dog’s memory banks, which may never again revisit the war.

How it all sums up...

Six Twenty Nine is the most ambitious project I have yet undertaken. The subject matter is heavy and personally close, as I imagine the film conveys. Throughout its runtime, I have incorporated the totality of my research into Vietnam, coping and defense mechanisms, and generational identity. The film itself operates similarly to an essay, quoting meta-textually (often through visual analogy) and inter-textually with the inspirations I have outlined. My original vision for the film represents the character of my Uncle Dog as coming to terms with his defining war-experiences. At this, I feel as though my film succeeds.

Throughout the process of building this film I happened to also gain substantial insight about myself and my own Millennial identity. My experience of U.S. foreign policy is surely different, but I can point to the relatable through-lines that separate Dog’s perspective from my own. To my benefit I now share a greater empathy about the warring plights of generations before me. My fieldwork—the interviews, textual research—indicate some common ground between Baby Boomer veterans and Millennials in terms of viewpoint on war. My personal discoveries throughout this process cause me to anticipate gaps in the body of generational literature relating to the Millennial “future” of U.S. foreign policy. Relatedly, *Six Twenty Nine* meditates on what is to come—the film is subtly interested in what lies beyond the singular experience portrayed. Bigger questions about the past and future rattle my mind. What do Millennials like myself ascertain from wars past? How can this hindsight be useful in protecting the people that suffered most from those wars? People like Mike “Dog” Davidson.

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