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HELMETCAMS, MILITARIZED SENSATION AND 'SOMATIC WAR'

Kevin McSorley

Abstract

In stark contrast to the abstraction and radical disembodiment of hi-tech virtual war, the mediascape of contemporary counterinsurgency is increasingly dominated by material that is lo-fi, intimate, multi-sensory and decisively linked to the embodied experiences and risks of soldiering. In this article, I explore the visual grammar and affective logics of two recent prominent public mediations of the war in Afghanistan, both dominated by the use of video footage recorded from camcorders mounted on soldiers' helmets. Epitomized in this helmetcam footage, I suggest that it is through an emerging aesthetic regime of 'somatic war' – that foregrounds sensory immersion and real feeling, vital living and bodily vulnerability - that the endless war in Afghanistan is currently being made perceptible and palpable.

Keywords: Helmetcam, somatic, militarization, sensation, embodiment, affect, Afghanistan, war, body

Introduction

The entanglements between wars and particular ways of seeing have long been the subject of scholarly attention. Virilio (1986), for example, has explored the intimate historical intertwining between modes of perception and modes of destruction, 'the deadly harmony that always establishes itself between the functions of eye and weapon' (p.69). The technological and network-centred revolutions of late twentieth century war in particular involved important convergences between particular regimes of vision and violence. Notoriously, the signature motif of much Western television reportage of emergent 'virtual war' in the 1990s was footage from pilots' display-screens of so-called 'smart' bombing raids (Ignatieff 2001). The dominant narrative framing such military-supplied imagery was a largely celebratory account of surgical strikes that accurately targeted and precisely destroyed enemy locations, without obvious casualties. Writing of the First Gulf War, Margot Norris argued that the effect of this militarisation of audience perception, a cultural enrolment into a stunningly martial but highly sanitised point of view, was 'to make Operation Desert Storm murderously destructive yet simultaneously corpseless' (2000: 230). Exacerbated by the fact that no body counts were publicised by the US military, the dead and injured completely failed to become figures of phenomenology in the mediascape of the war. Wounding and killing seemed not to exist in this abstract visual register where targeting grids and nebulous pixelated forms flared and vanished on pilots' monitors and viewers' television screens alike. For Norris, 'the war passed through the public imagination and memory like a video phantom' (p.240), the almost total disappearance of victims' bodies from such accounts ultimately signalling 'the human body's derealisation by technological media under military control at the end of the twentieth century' (p.231). For James Der Derian (2009), this hi-tech convergence of the modes of representation and destruction, and the seeming disappearance of corporeal violence and risk, was central to the increased legitimisation of virtual war, indeed its ironic elevation to a *virtuous* plane: 'Fought in the same manner as they are represented .. virtuous wars promote a vision of bloodless, humanitarian, hygienic wars' (p.xxxi). For Judith Butler similarly, there was now 'no way to separate, under present historical conditions, the material reality of war from those representational regimes through which it operates and which rationalize its own operation' (2009: 29). The key visual, legitimating grammar of late twentieth and early 21st century virtual war was thus techno-fetishistic, detached, and surgically precise. Above all it was radically disembodied.

In stark contrast to this, the visual grammar that increasingly dominates the contemporary mediascape of the Afghanistan war is lo-fi, intimate, and messy. Most significantly, it is decisively linked to the body and, in particular, to embodied experiences of soldiering. This emerging perceptual regime is significantly constituted through, and epitomized in, the increased salience of video footage recorded from camcorders mounted on soldiers' helmets, circulated widely and reintegrated into mainstream discourses. Rather than an abstracted view from above, this footage offers a boots on the ground sensory immersion: into the rhythmic kinaesthetics of patrolling through the unforgiving landscape of Afghanistan; into the domestic routines of mundane embodied life on base; and into the breathless, visceral dramas and bodily risks of 'contact'. In what follows, my discussion is threefold. The next section traces a short history of the use of helmetcams, in the military and beyond, and briefly considers soldiers' photographic and videographic practices more widely. The following section grounds the discussion in two recent major public mediations of the war in Afghanistan, which both centre on helmetcam footage - the BBC documentary series *Our War* and the Imperial War Museum exhibition *War Story* - in order to delineate some of the key elements of their visual grammar and affective logic. The final section explores the construction and the seductions of helmetcam footage in terms of an emerging aesthetic regime of 'somatic war'. The paper concludes by considering the political implications of the emergence of this aesthetic regime at this particular historical juncture.

Helmetcam Recording

Helmetcam recording began in mountain biking communities in the late 1980s, initially by connecting video camera technology to separate backpack-carried analog videotape recorders. The idea behind the helmetcam was to attempt to record video and audio footage from the point of view of the wearer whilst he or she was in motion, crucially allowing the hands to be kept free to ride. The helmetcam wearer does not actively film an event as they would with a handheld camera. Rather, once it is set recording, the helmetcam will record the wearer's experiences as they unfold from a particular but mobile 'point of view' for a set duration of time (Brown et al. 2008). Helmetcam footage of particular trails and rides rapidly became an established feature of the mountain biking subculture, circulated initially in videotape form for both entertainment and training purposes. As with most video recording systems, helmetcam

technology has developed rapidly over recent decades, with integrated, tapeless digital camera-recorders becoming appreciably lighter and smaller (often 'lipstick' or 'bullet' shaped), much more affordable and, with improved battery life and memory card capacity, capable of recording for much longer periods of time. The associated development of cheap and powerful software to replicate and manipulate footage, and the emergence of social networking and video file-sharing internet sites such as YouTube, has also been crucial to the development of new forms of circulation, editing and audience interaction with helmetcam footage.

Helmetcam footage is now a prominent feature in the television broadcasting of sports such as motor racing and downhill skiing, and has also been particularly important in the emergence and commercialization of new 'extreme sports' that have formed around particular risky recreational activities such as BASE jumping, ice climbing and kitesurfing. In an ethnographic analysis of the media practices of BASE jumpers, Ferrell et al. (2001) argue that the documentation of jumps via helmetcams, and the subsequent circulation of the footage served multiple purposes. It allowed jumpers to negotiate status and accrue subcultural capital; to earn money, exposure and wider legitimation for their activity when their videos got re-presented in mainstream television programs; and, crucially, it allowed them to elongate the meaning of their fundamentally 'ephemeral moments of edgework and adrenalin' (p.196). Although jumpers were sometimes ambivalent in their endorsement of this documentation, arguing that a reality, a surfeit of feeling and aliveness that defied any representation was key to the appeal of their activity, Ferrell et al. argue that such recording was central to the meaning and constitution of their subcultural practice: 'mediated dynamics saturate the BASE jumping process, from planning and execution to aftermath and audience' (p.195).

Of note, Stahl (2010) argues that there is an increasingly intimate relationship between the discourse of extreme sports and the comprehension of war in the videogames, reality TV and movies of 21st century 'militainment' - a commercially very successful strand of U.S. popular culture. Here, war and terrorism increasingly function as the backdrop for extreme adventure, with the military seen as an arena where the individual pleasures of risk-taking can be played out. For Stahl, the discourse of extreme sports - with its emphasis on the individual thrills of edgework and self-exploration - has become a central idiom through which war is being understood and, crucially, integrated into consumerist practice. He argues that first person interactive video games in

particular are an increasingly important medium and metaphor by which war is being understood. For Stahl, in the pleasure economy of contemporary consumer capitalism, the extreme sports discourse has become one of the key entry points for the consumption of war, where the citizen is invited to play virtual soldier: 'Extreme sports provide a storyline and purpose that enables the interactive consumption of state violence' (p72). Furthermore, he argues that the emergence of 'militainment' culture ultimately reflects an overall shift in how war is authorized, 'a shift from propaganda *per se* to the integration of war into existent practices of consumption' (p.138).

Helmetcam technology and footage is being developed and deployed within the military in numerous ways. These include surveillance, risk assessment, and the delivery of in-situ, real-time video feeds to support command and control level visualization and decision-making on the delivery of force. Such developments are in line with wider network-centric shifts in military practice whereby situational awareness and the collective military sensorium is increasingly being reimagined and reshaped in terms of widely distributed sensors, sophisticated information and communication networks, and panoptic data processing (Crandall 2005, Dillon 2002). Helmetcams have been issued to individual soldiers and officers so that recordings of activity can later be used in reflective learning sessions.¹ They are one of the many tools being used by Human Terrain Teams engaged in the gathering of 'sociocultural intelligence' to support counterinsurgent operations, and by specific Combat Camera Units that deploy with troops and document their activities for the purposes of planning, pedagogy, and particularly Media Operations. For example, helmetcam and night vision footage features prominently in military recruitment advertisements, where soldiering is also increasingly sold as an 'experience' - borrowing the extreme sport rhetoric of adventure, adrenalin, and testing oneself to the limit - rather than as a career.

As well as such official uses, individual soldiers are increasingly taking helmetcams on tours of duty for personal use. The self-documenting impulse that is a pervasive and constitutive reflex of the digital age is certainly not absent, or even significantly restricted, in many military cultures and soldiers' working lives. As Woodward et al (2010) note in an analysis of British soldiers' photography, for many soldiers the camera is just another piece of kit, and taking photos is a ubiquitous feature of their working lives, even an increasingly important performative aspect of what it means to 'do' soldiering, for example by recording shared accomplishments.² Woodward et al. also argue that

soldiers' photographic practices, from initial composition through to later showing, can be understood as a key idiom for identity work: 'in their construction and their circulation, [photographs] are about the performance of identity: they are communicative devices for sharing what it means personally to be a soldier, often with those outside the military .. the function of photographs [also] extends to the self: pictures are taken to remind a future self of what military experience was like at the time and are used in subsequent lives as reminders of times past' (p157). For the soldiers in their study, personal photographic practices enabled the articulation of a set of ideas around their work – including pride in their professional expertise, the physical demands of soldiering, a personal involvement in global political events – that variously supported, complicated, and even contested hegemonic public narratives about the military engagements in question.

In a related vein, scholars such as Tait (2008) and Anden-Papadopoulos (2009) who have analyzed the phenomenon of personal video footage - sometimes of horrific destruction, injury and death - being uploaded by US soldiers to file-sharing sites such as YouTube, military discussion sites, and 'shock sites' such as the (now defunct) Nowthatsfuckedup.com and Ogrish.com, have argued that the recording, publication and spectatorship of such footage cannot adequately be understood in terms of simple explanatory frameworks such as glorification, patriotism, voyeurism or - the term favoured by much reportage of the phenomenon - 'war pornography'. A heterogeneous and complex variety of motivations and identifications are articulated and enacted by the communities sharing, viewing, and expressing their thoughts and feelings about such footage online. While this includes highly aggressive posturing, celebrations of enemy death, and confrontational demands to identify allegiances, some users also understood their activity in terms such as the bearing of witness, the potentially therapeutic authentication of traumatic events, and public enlightenment as to the actual realities of war. This is thus a highly plural and contested new media ecology, constituted by various desires, including to express and publicise things that were felt to be denied in hegemonic framings of war.³

Helmetcams In Afghanistan: *Our War* And *War Story*

War-related helmetcam footage may thus stem from various sources, including military-issue and personally owned equipment, and be embedded within, and travel across, a wide range of mediated practices: from real-time visualizations of enmity to later reviews of tactics; from morale-building screenings of successful engagements whilst on tour to integration into subsequent combat training videos; from private showings for friends and family back home to anonymised and decontextualised posting on social media sites such as YouTube. In this particular article, I focus upon two specific examples of the documentary and curatorial remediation of helmetcam footage recorded by British forces serving in Afghanistan. The footage used in these projects came from various sources: personal helmetcams owned and operated by individuals; helmetcams owned by the Ministry of Defence and operated by service personnel; helmetcams given to service personnel by the BBC (Colin Barr, Executive Producer of *Our War*, personal communication).

The continuation of the current war in Afghanistan into a second decade has recently been an occasion for renewed meaning-making around the conflict. In the UK, several prominent exhibitions and broadcasts marked the tenth anniversary of British involvement in the fighting. These included the Imperial War Museum's (IWM) exhibition *War Story: Serving in Afghanistan* and the BBC's major three-part documentary series *Our War: 10 Years in Afghanistan*. Particularly in late modern, post-conscription states where direct experience of war is limited, such flagship cultural events are important practices through which wider public understandings of war - and subjectivities in relation to military matters - are shaped and negotiated. Helmetcam footage occupies a central place in both the IWM's *War Story* and the BBC's *Our War*, as well as in other recent cultural engagements with the Afghanistan war⁴.

The IWM's *War Story* is a rolling programme of contemporaneous collation, curation and exhibition of material from Afghanistan. Serving soldiers can register online - over 600 British personnel have signed up to date - and contribute material to the project via uploading video, photographs, blog entries and emails to a Facebook-style personal scrapbook on a private extranet, as well as via participation in collecting workshops and interviews held after their deployments. The project is partly funded by Boeing and is supported by the Ministry of Defence, which 'clears' everything that is made available for public display. The initial public exhibition of material from the *War Story* project in

the Great Hall of the IWM, London began in October 2011. It opens with a display-board exploring the ways in which soldiers are recording their experiences in Afghanistan, entitled *Communicating*, and then continues with further displays organized around the following themes: *First Impressions*, *Daily Life*, *On the Ground*, *Coming Home*, *Loss*. Visitors are encouraged to engage with a range of audio and video material, including talking heads interviews and helmetcam footage, on these themes via listening posts and interactive touchscreens. Many exhibits are accompanied by a large, named photograph of the face of the associated serviceman or servicewoman. As well as being available via particular touchscreens, helmetcam footage, principally of patrol and engagement in firefights, plays on loop on one prominent display wall.

The BBC documentary series *Our War* was designed to 'mark the 10-year anniversary of the war in Afghanistan by telling the history .. of the ongoing conflict in a brand new way. Powerful, unmediated and utterly unique' (BBC 2010). At the heart of the documentary series is soldiers' personal helmetcam footage, similarly cleared for use in the series by the Ministry of Defence. This footage is intercut with direct-to-camera talking heads interviews with individual soldiers involved in some of the key incidents presented, principally discussing how they felt at the time and their later emotional reactions to these experiences. Although there is some attempt within individual episodes to define an identifiable cast of characters from a specific regimental tour of duty, there is little overarching narrative to the series. Rather, the conflict is portrayed as a montage of dramatic incidents, challenging experiences and personal emotional journeys. This discontinuous narration of the conflict is exemplified in the accompanying *Our War* microsite on the BBC website, where viewers can select from a further menu of 35 short clips of footage on topics ranging from 'My First Kill' to 'Missing Home'. In the cases of both *War Story* and *Our War*, the key experiences of the conflict that are portrayed are very similar, including patrol, 'contact', and mundane life on base, which are all discussed in more detail below.

The portrayals of *Our War* and *War Story* principally render the Afghanistan conflict in terms of private, disaggregated experiences, that occur beyond the wider framing of any salient national, political or historical metanarrative. In both cases, there is little introduction or wider narrative exposition provided, beyond stating that the war is being extensively recorded by its participants.⁵ Indeed, it is this personal mediation that is highlighted as the unique feature of the conflict rather than any other ideological or strategic dimension. Thus in

War Story, the exhibition opens with an exploration of the new ways of 'Communicating'. Similarly, the documentary broadcast of *Our War* begins with the viewer simply thrown straight into a disorienting montage of highly dramatic explosions and firefights, a voiceover stating that 'No modern conflict has been recorded as much as Afghanistan', and the visceral opening salvo punctuated by the breathless voice of one of the participants proclaiming that, "This, ladies and gentlemen, is fucking war".

War is thus rendered predominantly as a visceral first-person experience, and as an emotional experience, in these mediations. During the individual talking heads interviews in *War Story*, the mode of address is confessional, the questions asked intimate and therapeutic: 'When were you most afraid?', 'Do you think you made a difference?', 'Did Afghanistan change you?', 'Have you told your friends and family everything about your time there?'. In *Our War* similarly, the later talking heads interviews that expand upon the key incidents shown are predominantly portrayals of the personal emotional journeys of those involved, from the halting pathos of loss that accompanies a colleague's death, to the gratified acknowledgement that, 'I was at my best in Afghanistan'. However, most importantly, and foregrounded via helmetcam footage, war is explicitly rendered as a fundamentally embodied experience.

The embodied presence of the soldier is constantly felt in helmetcam footage, via the restless point-of-view, the sounds of breathing and vocalizations, the reverberations of corporeal movement, the presence of shadows cast by the body, the sight of the soldier's rifle pointing the way ahead, the sense of hands shielding the sun. Helmetcam footage also emphasizes the choreography of martial embodiment, as in patrol, where the shared rhythms of bodily movement and the collective grammars of bodily spacing and formation are foregrounded as the means through which territory in Afghanistan is apprehended and occupied. Footage of patrol is a mainstay of both *Our War* and *War Story*, showing the constant flick of the careful gaze to where the feet will next be landing, and foregrounding the intersection of specific emotional states with distinctive kinaesthetic rhythms and sensory impressions: in particular the reassuring calm that accompanies the felt vibrations of steady footfall, regular bodily spacing, and the metronomic arc of a rifle sweeping in and out of view.

Such footage also highlights the sensory modalities through which threat becomes palpable, for example the unnerving sensation of there being too little background noise, and thereafter how the dull grounded monotony of regular

patrol may all too rapidly flip into other affective and embodied states. In particular, patrol may be halted by the suspicion of Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs), arrested by a sudden flicker of the Vallon IED detector that is now the leading edge of the sensorium of contemporary patrol in Afghanistan. Heightened watchfulness and an intense escalation in tension accompany this shift from bodily movement to exposed stillness, from regular attentive calm to a taut and jittery affective intensity. Helmetcam footage recorded by those tasked with actually disarming IEDs captures an even more suffocating embodied charge. Here, the footage has a singular, unwavering focus: the hands engaged in a deadly archaeology of delicately brushing away dirt and removing stones to reveal the invisible explosive traps, with an accompanying soundtrack of overpowering silence save for very deliberate breathing. Embodiment is here foregrounded in a way that is almost uncanny and liminal, the extreme edgework of the body at risk.

The central experience in the portfolio of embodied experiences that are portrayed in *Our War* and *War Story* is combat, principally engagement in defensive firefights both on patrol and back at base. A unique feature of helmetcam recording is that it carries on when both hands are being used to engage with weapons, and first-person footage of combat, or 'contact', is thus one of the most distinctive contributions of the helmetcam to the overall visual and sensory grammar of the Afghanistan war.⁶ Footage of firefights is often radically indistinct and chaotic, a ragged fusion of rapid panning, shuddering reverberations, and clamorous noise. Such discord is initially hardly legible, almost impossible to parse as representation. Rather contact is initially felt as sensory overload and embodied disorientation, the mayhem of initial engagement only potentially given shape as drilled corporeal memories and militarized reflexes re-assert themselves. Enemies are never visible in *Our War* or *War Story*. Rather, the dramas of combat that helmetcam footage reveal are personal battles between various embodied states: the susceptibilities of the individual human body to panic, the assertion of prior training and martial corporeality, and the addictive pleasures of bodily risk and adrenalized exhilaration. In footage of contact then, war is rendered in a particularly visceral, uncompromising and vital manner: as embodied vulnerability, corporeal memory, intense bodily excitement, and ultimately embodied violence.

Finally, and in stark contrast to the extraordinary sensory immersion, emotional volatility and relentless embodied dramas in footage of contact, another type of

footage portrayed in *Our War* and *War Story* captures the grain of the much more mundane bodily routines where soldiers prepare, and repair, for war at the 'home away from home' forward operating base. While the ostensible content of this footage is diverse – lookout duties, cleaning weapons, cooking, exercising in makeshift gyms – the emotional tone is relaxed and domestic, full of banter and bonding. Ultimately, it is in the collection and juxtaposition of this portfolio of footage – of patrol, contact, and life on base - with its variations of temporal and kinaesthetic rhythm, of sensory feel and affective intensity, but with its consistent intimacy and foregrounding of embodied experience, risk and vulnerability, that the Afghanistan war is rendered in *Our War* and *War Story*.

Discussion: A Way of Feeling

My aim so far in this paper has been to outline the key contours of a particular rendering of the Afghanistan war whereby, in stark contrast to the abstraction and radical disembodiment of hi-tech virtual war, the dominant regime of perception is increasingly intimate, immersive and foregrounds an understanding of war as fundamentally embodied. It is important to note that this is not yet a perception of war as a wide-ranging medium of embodied experience, for it is still decisively linked to the embodied experiences and vulnerabilities of Western soldiers, rather than to other combatants, civilians, victims or others touched by war.

As with any way of seeing, it is crucial to note that helmetcam footage is fundamentally constructed, and multiple decisions, practices, and filters, through which various power relations are articulated, will shape this regime of perception at numerous points during the processes of recording, editing, circulation and remediation.⁷ However, there are reasons to suggest that, at this particular historical juncture, the overall genre of helmetcam footage, with its extreme sports lineage, may be understood more as a particular form of realism, an objective record of a raw, experiential reality, rather than as a fundamentally constructed idiom. Firstly, in addition to the more general cultural association of the moving image with realism (Rose 2007), the 'on the head'-ness of helmetcam footage makes it seem less obviously 'filmed' than other footage (Brown et al. 2008)⁸. As such, with helmetcam footage, it may be even easier to disregard the existence of any potentially attendant processes of selection, editing, redaction and so on, and to rather treat the footage as unmediated, a direct and gritty window into an experiential world. As a genre

then, helmetcam footage may currently be particularly effective at 'obscuring the frames that narrow its perspective' (Campbell 2011: 7). Secondly, the foregrounding of the embodied, multi-sensual qualities of experience via helmetcam footage may in itself appear authentic. In an exploration of the potential of helmetcams for social research, and while carefully couching their arguments beyond a positivist approach that would treat such footage as visual fact or record of objective reality, Brown et al. (2008) argue that "We found that headcam footage brought us closer to capturing and evoking the affective, multi-sensual, and often taken-for granted realms of human experience'. Of course, evocation does not preclude construction, but such multi-sensual evocation may feel seductively 'real'. As an example, and although one should obviously be extremely cautious about treating such material as anything other than vaguely suggestive of one mode of engagement by a limited constituency, newspaper reviews and online discussion surrounding *Our War* have been remarkably consistent in suggesting that the documentary series did not simply present a faithful depiction of the Afghanistan war, but was emotionally true to the experience of what it *felt* like⁹. I would suggest that this vocabulary of feeling is potentially significant - helmetcam footage may be legible and being experienced by some not just as a way of seeing, but as a *way of feeling*.

Various scholars (e.g. Carter and McCormack 2010, Grusin 2010, Shapiro 2008) have recently argued that the analysis of visual culture needs to consider the image not simply in terms of representation, ideological or otherwise, but crucially in terms of its affective logics. In their exploration of the affective processes accompanying particular cinematic images of war, Carter and McCormack (2010: 118) suggest that 'the participation of images in processes of contagion, amplification and resonance does not necessarily involve the transmission of anything like a "message" .. images participate in geopolitical cultures in ways that are excessive of .. representational and discursive logics .. as blocs of affective intensity with differential speeds, durations and capacities to affect other kinds of bodies'. I do not want to suggest here that analytic engagement with helmetcam footage should forego examination of any ideological messages, narratives or exclusions that it contains. For example, there is a clear narrative patrimony at work in the framing of the war stories analysed here, one that renders Afghanistan itself as simply the latest in a series of inhospitable backdrops against which timeless Western experiential dramas – coming of age, heroic struggle – are played out.¹⁰ Any particular geopolitical context largely disappears from such a mythological narrative framing, the deployment of state violence particularly decontextualised and

depoliticized, portrayed as essentially a defensive and inevitable act. Furthermore, and even as a clearly one-sided account of a conflict, there are still glaring omissions in the story of combat that is presented via this boots on the ground perspective – principally in the minimal role that air power appears to play.¹¹ However, beyond (and perhaps underpinning) all of this, we need to think about how helmetcam footage may principally be ‘working’, at this historical juncture, in terms of a seductive enrolment into the wider militarized sensorium, an invitation to ‘switch on’ to a particular mode of sensation (Hockey 2012)¹², and in terms of the emotional resonances of its rhythmic kinaesthetics, its foregrounding of embodiment, its intimate touch. Indeed, the power of such affective logics may outmaneuver any attempt at a ‘ritual’ exposure of what remains unrepresented in the scene (Mirzeoff 2004).

Conclusions

I have suggested that soldiers’ helmetcam footage - with its seductions of sensory immersion and real feeling, its first-person guidance and fraternal embrace, its focus on bodily risk and vital living - epitomizes a key aesthetic idiom through which the endless war in Afghanistan is currently being made perceptible and palpable.¹³ This regime is in many ways a more multi-dimensional, multi-sensory extension of what Stahl, emphasizing a radical visual identification with the body at its limits, called the ‘extreme war gaze’ (2010: 63). After 10 years, the conflict in Afghanistan is no longer enacted via a spectacular visual regime of de-corporealized detachment, or even via the traumatic repetition of the symbolic markers of 9/11 (Zelizer 2004), but is principally apprehended as a medium of intense embodied experiences. The helmet-cammed Western soldier has become a key assemblage in the emergence of this regime of ‘somatic war’, through which Afghanistan is currently being rendered and felt.

This is not to say that the affective charge of ‘somatic war’ automatically determines any particular politics with regard to matters of military might – it may resonate in numerous ways. Certainly it is true that a focus upon the body of the soldier at risk may act as a legitimation for the continuation of war, as in narratives of the ‘new patriotism’ (Wetta and Novelli 2003) where the purpose of war becomes increasingly existential or self-referential, redefined as a fight to save one’s own soldiers – either rescuing the left behind, supporting the besieged, or salvaging honour for the fallen.¹⁴ ‘Somatic war’ may be another

idiom through which warfare is being re-enchanted, 'given a moral or expressive meaning beyond the merely instrumental' (Behnke, 2006: 938, Coker 2004). When bodies are not seen or felt to be put on the line, warfare may be exposed to accusations of inauthenticity and moral hypocrisy (Ignatieff 2001, Shaw 2005), which may be particularly important in cases when the war is protracted and the war aims are confused and contested. However, the exposure of the soldier's body to risk may resonate and be taken up in many other ways, for example as the emotional vehicle through which militaries articulate their own claims for more resources from the state. Most importantly, it may be felt in certain constituencies as an underlying symptom of the wider degeneracy, exhaustion or futility of a continuing war. Far from a legitimation then, such intense exposure may be laying down the emotional sediments of eventual withdrawal from a protracted campaign.

However it is felt, I suggest that it is here, in the affective resonances and intensities of this regime of 'somatic war', that the meaning of the conflict in Afghanistan is currently being experienced. These feelings may be complex, contradictory and, at times, sober – far removed from the constant ecstasies of interactive militainment's 'battlefield playground' and its complete abandonment of wider critical engagement¹⁵ - but I suggest that it is through this regime of sensory engagement and affective labour that the war is increasingly felt, and potentially undermined or sustained. I have outlined one particularly salient aesthetic idiom at a notable historical juncture of the war but clearly there is no guarantee that this regime of 'somatic war' is sustainable or will be longlasting – the emotional covenants of protracted war are inherently unstable, and all sorts of dissonances, instabilities and excesses of feeling accompany heightened intimacy. This regime may become incapable of bearing the intensive affective burden it is now carrying, or it may assume an implicitness, become mundane and routinely felt, attenuate with the banality of saturation (Mirzeoff 2004). Whatever the case, the passing of the war in Afghanistan into its second decade makes it even more crucial that we continue to thoroughly and critically examine all the modalities through which it is felt and modulated.

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Notes

1 Simon Wren, MoD Director of Communications, speaking at 'Reporting War: The Military and the Media', Imperial War Museum, London, 1st Feb 2012.

2 Soldiering is in many ways a thoroughly citational practice, drawing upon established narratives, identities and images – of duty, heroism, machismo and so on. Multiple spirals of mediated reflexivity enter into this iteration in many intricate ways. Helmetcam recording may similarly be becoming imbricated into the 'doing' of soldiering, subtly reshaping military subjectivities and soldiering as citational practice, such as via the increased resonance of a discourse of exhilaration and extreme sport.

3 As Hoskins and O'Loughlin (2010) note, contemporary media ecologies of war are also marked by counter-attempts to 'contain the uncontainable' (p.29). For example, Christensen (2008) highlights how, partly as a strategic response to potential disruptions to the official war narrative from such unofficial footage, the US Department of Defence set up its own YouTube Channel, MNF-Iraq (Multi National Force Iraq), designed to 'give viewers around the world a "boots on the ground" perspective of Operation Iraqi Freedom from those who are most closely involved' (<http://www.youtube.com/user/MNFIRAQ/>).

4 For example, the online version of the contemporary dance production '5 Soldiers: The Body is the Frontline' (2010, Rosie Kay Dance Company) allows the viewer to watch the performance from the headcam of any one of the five soldiers/performers.

5 The vocabularies of motive expressed by those soldiers who recorded the helmetcam footage used in both *Our War* and *War Story* centre on keeping a form of war diary or journal, for friends and family to see back home and/or for the personal use of a future self. Indeed, the audiences are sometimes imaginatively present in the activities filmed, such as the 'show and tell' tours around the base camp. One of the common hopes articulated is that such footage may help their audiences better understand 'what it was like / what we went through', a prospect that is often hardened to the status of a truism in the promotional framing of both *Our War* and *War Story*. A complicating expression in the contributors' accounts - that some of their most important experiences of war inevitably lie beyond any attempt at representation or civilian comprehension - becomes a minor discourse in this wider framing.

6 Combat footage occupied a key place in the way that *Our War* in particular was promoted. Promotion of the series was largely based around one particular firefight where helmetcam footage filmed by Sergeant Simon Panter records his frantic reactions to the call of 'Man Down', and subsequent attempts to help the wounded soldier, Private Chris Gray, culminating in his being stretchered away for Medical

Evacuation by helicopter. In a later BBC documentary series on officer training entitled *Sandhurst* (2011), trainee officers were themselves filmed watching this particular piece of footage from *Our War* to gain some insight into the sort of situations that they may have to cope with in Afghanistan.

7 For the footage discussed in this article, these frames of construction include: formal MoD guidelines governing the media activities of serving soldiers; informal military cultures of loyalty, confidentiality and regimental reputation; relationships of reciprocity between broadcasters and the MoD; issues of economics, safety and provenance that trouble the gathering of alternative sources of documentary footage from Afghanistan; 'taste and decency' considerations; generic conventions of curatorial and documentary work, such as storytelling via the 'personal code' (Shapiro, 1988).

8 Indeed, the relatively lo-fi, grainy quality of helmetcam footage is also taken as an index of its realness. Describing the soldiers' footage used in *Our War*, the executive producer, Colin Barr, notes how 'the more the resolution of the footage went up, the more it was a struggle to believe that it was actually shot by them' (BBC College of Production, 2011).

9 For example, one comment posted on the BBC TV blog stated that the series was: 'as close to the frontline as you will get without being there; it made me feel like an insider, experiencing the anxiety, pain, fear, joy and sadness. This was REAL.' (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/tv/2011/06/our-war-afghanistan.shtml>)

10 David Campbell (2009) relatedly notes how photojournalistic practice in Afghanistan, shaped by constraints including the concentration of embedded reporters in particular locations such as the Korengal Valley, has ultimately produced a particularly homogenous visual rendering of the war, with a focus on US forces in remote outcrops engaged in desperate military struggles.

11 As Gregory (2010) similarly notes, the way that the shift to counterinsurgency was initially presented to the American public was via a reassuring visual ecology where the 'iconic figures are gentle soldiers and grateful recipients' (p165). Such a mediation ignored the continuing centrality of air power, kinetic force and physical violence to actual counterinsurgency practices.

12 In an ethnographic analysis of military training, Hockey (2012) argues that the subcultural military utterance 'switch on' encapsulates an entire 'somatic mode of attention' and the particular kinds of sensory conduct needed to survive in risky environments: 'This single utterance invokes the embodied world particular to infantry'.

13 Following Ranciere (2006), I use the term aesthetics broadly: 'Aesthetics is not a discipline dealing with art and artworks, but a kind of, what I call, distribution of the sensible'.

14 The narratives articulated in the soldiers' talking heads interviews in *Our War* and *War Story*, perhaps unsurprisingly, often emphasise related personal and embodied explanations of the micro-dynamics of conflict: honouring or avenging the memory of

lost comrades, experiencing shared exposure to bodily risk, the satisfaction of a body doing what it has been professionally trained to do, feelings of duty.

15 In Stahl's (2010) analysis of the discourse of interactive 'militainment', he argues that the fantasies, projections and pleasures of the immersive first-person 'battlefield playground' ultimately come at the expense of abandoning any capacities for critical engagement with war. The consumption of what he calls 'interactive war' is thus seen as ultimately a more sophisticated and immersive regime of social control than spectacular, spectator-sport militarism.