

The Incredible Disappearing Soldier and Other Adventures in British Military Recruitment:

*How is masculine identity constructed by British military
recruitment films in the decades 2000 – 2020?*

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Declaration

This work or any part thereof has not previously been presented in any form to the University or to any other body whether for the purposes of assessment, publication or for any other purpose (unless stated otherwise). Save for any express acknowledgments, references and/or bibliographies cited in the work, I confirm that the intellectual content of the work is the result of my own efforts and of no other person.

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Abstract

The *Incredible Disappearing Soldier* is a practice-led enquiry which explores the visual and discursive construction of masculinities in British military recruitment and promotional films produced during the first two decades of this century. Its title alludes to the 1957 US film *The Incredible Shrinking Man*, in which the subject becomes smaller and smaller and eventually disappears from view. The study engages theoretical and practice-led applications to open up aesthetic and conceptual questions surrounding the body, identity and the gendered military subject. It explores a phenomenon where soldiers and enemy targets are often defocused, or they are absented from staged scenes of military action. Attention is often directed away from the heroic individual, away from representations of the sentient body and towards abstract themes of belonging where the self gives way to a collective identity. Heroic endeavour is sometimes visualised through the technologies of war and a destruction of landscapes, often replacing visual representations of the soldier subject. On the surface the films' direct appeal to women, minority ethnic and sexual minority groups preclude traditional representations of heteronormative male stereotypes associated with a hegemonic military ideal. Yet in many respects such narratives are counter-positional to the realities of a soldier's life: at the time of writing this study the British military remains an overwhelmingly homosocial institution. This study therefore proposes that beneath the surface of the ambiguous visual language of these promotional films, traditional hegemonic ideals associated with a gendered military identity are still present.

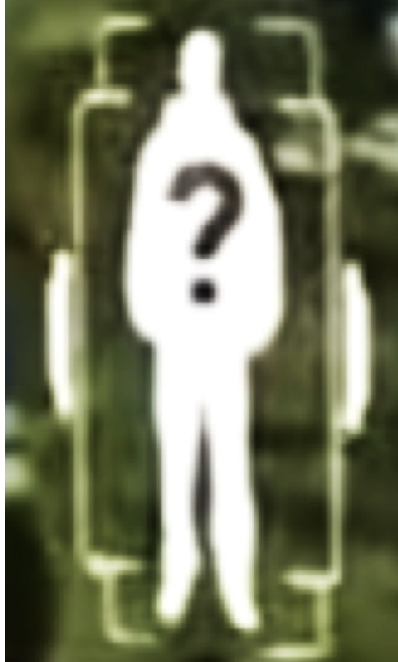


Fig. 1

The *Incredible Disappearing Soldier* takes an interdisciplinary approach in the examination of thirty short promotional films made across a twenty-year period. This coincided with the so-called 'war on terror', the US and Allied military campaign started after 9/11 in the United States. The study utilises deconstructed filmmaking practice combined with critical approaches including gender studies, post-structuralism and film theory to develop an enquiry into how British military masculinities are constructed, interpreted and understood. It is concerned with ethical and political implications associated with a visual blurring of the gendered subject in the mediated framing of state-controlled violence. It also asks why military recruitment in the UK is increasingly framed through a disavowal of the individual and the vulnerable body.

Film analysis and practical responses are facilitated by a methodology which is conceptualised as *blur*. This concept relates to an undecidability surrounding meaning, the image and subjectivity and builds on work around deconstruction, particularly in respect of the writing by Judith Butler, Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault. Deconstruction here includes the material breaking of film texts and establishes a synthesis between making and interpreting, practice and theory. Blur also facilitates discussions around a visual and conceptual blurring of the gendered subject. Centrally, Butler's considerations of gender construction, a relationship with the body and subjectivity are explored through practice in performance and film. Post-production methods are also used to engage and examine themes of continuity and discontinuity, coherence and incoherence. A deconstructed methodology is interpreted as a provocation, whose aim is to open up critical and reflective spaces when examining the visual construction of gender subjectivity and the framing of war.

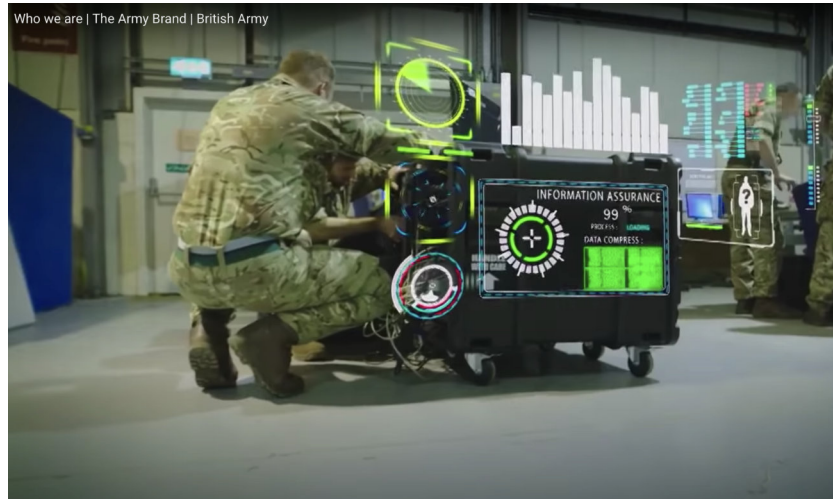


Fig 2. Still from the military recruitment film *Who We Are*. Fig 1 is a screen capture from this image.

INTRODUCTION: Who We Are

In one section of the army promotion film, *Who We Are* (2018)¹ a commentary line says ‘there’s people doing stuff’. This commentary line is accompanied by an image depicting unidentifiable military figures working on computers in a similarly unidentified interior. A foreground layer of the shot offers a graphic projection with words whose meaning is ambiguous.

INFORMATION ASSURANCE

99%

PROCESS LOADING

DATA COMPRESS

Beside the words there is another graphic symbol. It describes the outline of a male figure. On the inside of this shape there is a question mark.

?

This quiet image sits in the middle of a ninety-second advertisement; a composite arrangement of several military promotional films made by the British Army (Fig 2). The montage includes scenes of explosions, passing out ceremonies, sniper activity, displays of technological warfare and the destruction of landscapes. The shot of the outline with the question mark is barely noticeable amid the noisy scenes that surround it. It lasts for less than a second. Its purpose within the premise of the film is unclear; ostensibly failing to identify ‘who we’ – a military collective and/or military subjects – ‘are’ as indicated by its title. Instead, it offers something vague and diffuse, an outline of a body in the absence of a definable value. The image forms an open question which points towards a visual ambiguity concerning military subjectivity, identity, gender and the body. A visual and conceptual ambivalence, exemplified by this figure, lies at the centre of my investigation.

¹ British Army, “Who We Are | The British Army | Army Brand.” British Army. Published February 9, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sxO9duW2guE>

The Incredible Disappearing Soldier is an interdisciplinary enquiry into the construction of masculinities, which draws on British military recruitment and promotional films produced during the first two decades of this century. It investigates aesthetic and conceptual themes surrounding the body, a military identity and the gendered military subject. A deconstructed filmmaking practice combined with critical approaches including gender studies, post-structuralism and film theory, centred on the formal and technical aspects of image construction, is used to examine how British military masculinities are constructed, interpreted and understood within the chosen texts. It also questions the relationships between visualisations of a military masculinity, masculine subjectivities and the male body.

The study is concerned with the technical mediation of imagery surrounding the soldier subject. It approaches these questions through an examination of formal visual and cinematic values, divided and structured around categories titled Blur, Space, Frame and Body, which I will summarise at the end of this introductory chapter.

Thirty films provide the main inspiration for my investigation. They have been broadcast on television and shown on cinema and streamed services, including a British Army YouTube site. The films offer a broad and eclectic perspective on military subjectivities; masculinised machines, female masculinities, subordinate gender subjectivities, blurred identities, a uniform ritualised sameness. Some of the texts celebrate the heroic soldier figure but these are not typical of films during this period. Hedonism combined with dominant masculine representations features in films made around 2010; male soldiers parachute into night clubs, and they rescue babies from destroyed buildings. In other film texts the psychological self is prioritised over physical strength, where soldiers are envisioned as invariably passive,

distracted or homesick. Sometimes the body is supplanted by technology; power is conveyed not through muscularity but through heavy weapons. In other examples there is a distancing of violence through cinematic and lens technologies; military action takes place over there, far away and at a safe distance. Subordinate or repressed masculinities, *the small, the weak, the lazy and the naughty*, are featured in fictions towards the end of the second decade, where military service provides an escape, a route to something better. In the latest constructions, more abstract themes of fraternal bonding converge with narratives of inclusion, irrespective of gender, sexuality, ethnicity or faith. On the surface these appear to challenge heteronormative male stereotypes and traditional hegemonic ideals. The military representation of minority ethnic, sexual and gender minorities as well as issues of social class is pertinent to this investigation. However, it would be impossible to address these complexities in one study. Therefore this study reflects intersectional issues, but its primary focus concerns the gendering of the military subject.

Masculine military subjectivities are variable and erratic across the corpus of films under consideration. A concept that the gendered self is either stable or knowable, or that masculinities and indeed femininities should be reduced to male and female bodies, is something that has been called into question by gender theorists. I approach these instabilities through an idea that I have conceptualised as 'blur', used here to facilitate discussions around the blurring of the gendered subject. My definition of blur also connotes an instability associated with the image in its formal construction and representation: there is no single version of masculinity that can be known, understood or maintained in any fixed representation across the selection of films studied. The concept of blur feeds into a methodological approach, underpinned by

philosophies associated with Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault, concerning an 'undecidability'² of the image and language as this study will discuss later.³ I also draw on these scholars to explore ambiguities concerning themes of identity, subjectivity and the body. Relatedly, concerns surrounding a blurring of gender subjectivity and its relationship with the body are examined through Judith Butler and Raewyn Connell. These scholars' respective positions on gendered identity as something that is constructed and performed, also resonates with much of the imagery and narratives contained within the military films themselves as I will discuss next.

Doing the Body: Gender Theory and Social Construction

Gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original; in fact, it is a kind of imitation that produces the very notion of the original as an effect and consequence of the imitation itself.

Judith Butler 1991⁴

To imagine military masculinities as ambivalent, multiple and separate from biological or reproductive difference, requires a thinking that goes beyond the fixed values that representational models assume. Identity formation is defined here as something generated as a corollary to regulatory powers that determine a social and political order that is constructed, reproduced and repeated in governments, culture and institutions, including the military. Judith Butler writes that the gendered subject is established through discursive and ritualised behaviours. By this account, to be masculine or feminine is a concern of gestural habits; ways of acting, walking and speaking that are

² See Jacques Derrida, "Linguistics and Grammatology" in *Of Grammatology* (1974) 40th Anniversary ed (Maryland: JHU, 2016) 29 -79.

³ See also Michel Foucault, "Truth and Power" in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon, 1984) 51-76.

⁴ Judith Butler, "Imitation and Gender Insubordination." In *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, ed. Diana Fuss (New York and London: Routledge, 1991), 13.

imitated and repeated from the moment of birth. Butler distinguishes the idea of performance, as a conscious or theatrical act, from a concept of performativities, that are assimilated, innate and repeated in everyday situations. These repetitions become fixed over time 'to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being.'⁵ Invariably, for Butler, heteronormative masculinities would therefore be dependent on the suppression of other, marginalised forms of gender identification – including homosexual, non-binary identities and women. This account resonates with and builds upon Foucault's contention that the soldier subject can be considered as socially and discursively constructed. Foucault distinguishes fixed representations of 'the ideal figure' in 17th Century heroism, from his description of the Docile Body, where heroic representations give way to the concept of social construction.⁶ He describes a patrimony in which the 'individual' soldier undergoes 'a calculated manipulation of its elements, its gestures and behaviours.'⁷ In this account, the soldier's body is broken down, and reconstructed or rearranged, by the machinery of military power. Here, representation is reliant on regulatory parameters through which the subject is constructed, formed or made. Butler extends this idea further when she writes 'the qualification for being a subject must first be met before representation can be extended'.⁸ For Butler gender is less crafted or formed, in a Foucauldian sense. It is guided by processes of power, rather than determined by its structures. She writes, 'One is not simply a body, but in some very keen sense, one does one's body and indeed, one does one's body differently from one's contemporaries and from one's embodied predecessors as well.'⁹

In numerous films, a British military masculinity may be conceived as something in production – that is aimed for or strived towards, rather than

⁵ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble, Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge 1999), 45.

⁶ Foucault, "Docile Bodies," in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (London: Penguin, 1975), 135-169.

⁷ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, 138.

⁸ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 2.

⁹ Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory" in *Performing feminisms: Feminist critical theory and theatre*, ed. Sue-Ellen Case (Maryland and London: JHU, 1990), 272.

embodied or represented. In the aesthetics of the military recruitment films, gender subjectivity is successfully done or not done and equally can be undone for some of the would be recruits at least. The concept of the 'ideal' masculine hero appears to be challenged by several military films under discussion. Raewyn Connell is arguably most associated with theorisations around a hierarchical social order that underpins such gender practices. Her conceptualisation of hegemonic masculinities reflects ways in which gendered social relations are defined and sustained through expressions of power in institutions such as the military.¹⁰ Yet in Connell's description, such practices are also fluid, unstable and subject to continual redefinition. The theoretical foundations of this concept lie in the notion that there is a hierarchical apparatus through which class and power relations are established, shared and understood. In accordance with this formula, hegemonic masculinity is not something that the subject can be, possess or maintain. Hegemonic masculinity does not equate with total control of others. Nor does it exist as a pure state of being. Masculinity here gains its identity only in its relationship with other subjects, things and contexts which are invariably dependent on the ebb and flow of societal change. As such it may be conceived of as fluid, unstable - or blurred.

In 1995 Butler joined key cultural and gender theorists to discuss the social and discursive construction of gendered identities.¹¹ A conference and subsequent anthology, *Constructing Masculinities*, determined that the condition of masculinity would be 'always ambivalent and always complicated'.¹² Its editors asked, 'Can a univalent notion of masculinity be replaced by the idea of multiple masculinities in which rigid boundaries of sexual and gender representations are blurred or even redrawn?'¹³ More than two decades later, a simple answer might be, yes, they can, and they have

¹⁰ R.W Connell, *Masculinities* (Cambridge: Polity, 1995), 77.

¹¹ John Berger, Simon Willis and Simon Watson, *Constructing Masculinity*, (New York: Routledge 1995), 3.

¹² Berger, Willis, Watson, *Constructing Masculinity*, 3

¹³ Berger, Willis, Watson, *Constructing Masculinity*, 3

been — by British forces in their recruitment campaigns, where masculinities are often framed as multiple, blurred and whose boundaries are subject to continual redefinition. However, a British military appeal to the 'middle ranges of agency'¹⁴ in relation to dynamics of hegemonic power and subordination is counter-positional to contemporaneous data which points towards an entrenched and homosocial institution.¹⁵ In 2016 the cultural theorist Victoria Basham wrote of *The Importance of Military Masculinities for the Conduct of State Sanctioned Violence* where she asserted that the relationship between armed forces and masculinities is 'possibly the most salient and cross-culturally stable aspect of gendered politics and nowhere is the notion of war as a man's game more entrenched than in state militaries'.¹⁶ Basham's paper raises important question regarding a discrepancy between a perceived notion of how masculinities are embodied and performed in state militaries, and how they are imagined in its promotional material. In many respects my practice-led enquiries are concerned with exploring the spaces between what the military says in its recruitment campaigns, and what it is doing, during the period under investigation. Foundational to this enquiry is the historical context of post 9/11 military actions, named by Allied forces as 'the war on terror', which corresponds to the timing of the production of the British military films.

The Context of 'The War on Terror'

Across the corpus of films under investigation subjectivity is fluid, undecided and mutable. Such ambiguous representations exist in the midst of the hazy discourse that accompanies military operations, led by US, UK and Allied forces, against groups, cities and nations in the aftermath of attacks of September 11th, 2001. Within weeks of the attacks President George W Bush

¹⁴ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Melanie Klein and the Difference Affect Makes." *South Atlantic Quarterly* 106:3 (Summer 2007): 632.

¹⁵ Around ninety percent of ranks in the UK comprise men during the time that the advertisements were made, discussed in chapter 1 and 2.

¹⁶ Victoria Basham, "Gender and Militaries: The Importance of Military Masculinities for State Sanctioned Violence," in *Handbook on Gender and War*, ed. Simona Sharoni, Julia Welland, Linda Steiner and Jennifer Pedersen (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2016), 29.

addressed a joint session of Congress in which he first articulated the retaliatory terms that he described as ‘our war on terror’.¹⁷ His phrasing of ‘our’ rather than ‘mine’ or ‘theirs’ was designed to enlist public support of a military response. The term established a particular kind of undecidability that offered limitless potential. Pre-emptive attacks could be mounted but without specific targets and at unspecified times and locations, carried out over an indeterminate period. Brian Massumi refers to a perceived heightened sense of insecurity which emerged after 9/11 when he writes ‘There was simply nothing to identify with or to imitate. The alerts presented no form, ideological or ideational and, remaining vague as to the source, nature, and location of the threat, bore precious little content.’¹⁸ Using Massumi’s account, ‘the war on terror’ like other ideological constructions, including a ‘military masculinity’, or masculine hegemonies – and indeed an outline of a male figure and a question mark – is formless, unidentifiable and vague. Massumi refers to a visualised absent presence of the enemy target in ‘the war on terror’. However, in many respects similar visual aesthetics surrounds an absent presence of the soldier subject. I consider ‘the war on terror’ then in its blurred and euphemistic framing.¹⁹ Massumi’s description of the threat that has no form, echoes the disjuncture between the realities of how gender is performed in state militaries, and its promotional material, where the body of the soldier is often missing. To investigate such ambiguities I turn to a practice methodology, which enlists filmmaking and editing as a means of exploring these questions concerning military gender subjectivities. My methodology draws on Butler’s and Connell’s theorisations concerning gender and subject formation, to propose that a military masculinity may be conceived of as something that is a continuous and ongoing process that is to a greater or lesser extent successfully done or undone.²⁰ Such a premise allows me to

¹⁷ George W. Bush, “Address Before A Joint Session of the Congress of the United States Response to the Terrorist Attacks of September 11.” Transcript of speech delivered on September 20 2001, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/WCPD-2001-09-24/pdf/WCPD-2001-09-24-Pg1347.pdf>.

¹⁸ Brian Massumi, *Ontopower, War, Power and the State of Perception* (USA: Duke, 2015), 174.

¹⁹ For this study I have borrowed and repurposed the term *war on terror* in full recognition of its contentious and politically charged origins.

engage in a process of undoing, breaking, deconstructing through the lens and in the editing platform.

Constructive Disruption (methodology)

This investigation is carried out using a process of cutting, reorganising, selecting and displacing. It includes close interpretive interventions into the microscopic, barely-noticed elements within the imagery. In the written elements of the thesis, military films are textually broken down into fragments, comprising a scene, a shot, a frame or a series of pixels: the outline of the figure with the question mark, which opens the project is barely noticeable, forming a tiny element of a single frame (Fig 2). In my practice, filmmaking and editing techniques are used to displace and reimagine works in material forms, in the gallery, the screen or on digital platforms. Processes including screen capture become a methodology through which I both make, displace and interpret imagery contained within film texts. Practice in this context becomes an investigative tool which opens up spaces for reflection. Diverse readings and ideas depend on the film, frame, fragment or pixel that is selected. Other materials are gathered from diverse locations and situations; the British military films, television news, dance performance, drawings, storyboards and digital surfaces – in many ways this approach parallels the cacophony of visual imagery that surrounds the military films themselves. Separating, extracting, reformulating and repositioning sound and film is facilitated through digital technology and becomes a provocative act that constitutes, in Mulvey’s words, ‘an act of violence against the cohesion of a story, the aesthetic integrity that holds it together, and the vision of its creator’.²¹ The purpose of such ‘violence’ is to provoke questions around the

²⁰ Butler writes of a condition where gender is ‘done’, within a normative restriction that can simultaneously, ‘undo’ one’s identity. Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York and Oxon: Routledge, 2004).

ideologies behind the construction of gender, the soldier subject and the recruitment to war.

As stated above, this methodology builds on works by the key theorists Butler, Foucault and Derrida,²² whose thinking underpins this introductory chapter and the study as a whole. Michel Foucault's formula for 'permanent provocation'²³ is a motivating force behind my disruptive film investigations as well as being instrumental in informing my conceptualisation of blur as a critical challenge to representation, language, gender and a military identity. I also return to Judith Butler's later works, where she applies critical interventions into those aspects that are jettisoned or excluded in the framing of the subject and of military violence. In response to Butler's approach, I look to the corners and edges of the frame, towards areas that are barely noticed, the elements that are discarded in the safe mediation of military action. These concerns intersect with Jacques Derrida's theorisations concerning an 'undecidability'²⁴ in language, identity and the image, which in turn, informs my deconstructed approach to practice and analysis. Deconstruction here, including the material breaking of film texts, establishes a synthesis between making and interpreting. Practice becomes a tool for analysis, analysis consequently informs practice. This approach emerged out of exploratory investigations in editing at the early stages of the project. It is worth offering a more detailed account of how and why this formula first emerged, through an example: one of my film provocations comprises a technical deconstruction through drawing and editing into an existing military advert titled *FlatTyre* that will be examined in detail in Chapter 3 titled Frame.

²¹ Laura Mulvey, *Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image* (London: Reaktion, 2006), 171.

²² I examine a range of works by Judith Butler, Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault which are referenced throughout this study. See bibliography for a list of relevant works relating to these scholars.

²³ Beatrice Hanssen borrows the phrase from Foucault to facilitate a reflexive theoretical approach. Michel Foucault, "The Subject and Power," *Critical Enquiry* 8, No 4 (Summer 1982), 790.

²⁴ Jacques Derrida, "Linguistics and Grammatology" in *Of Grammatology* (1974) 40th Anniversary ed (Maryland: JHU, 2016) 29 -79.

Undoing the military fraternities – *Flat Tyre*²⁵

A twenty-second military recruitment film, titled for the purpose of this study *Flat Tyre*²⁶ is central to my discussions on the framing of absence and presence, and of the visual construction of a homosocial 'us' against a hostile otherness. The short film tells a story of the military fraternity on a mission to vanquish an unknown enemy. The majority of the film is shot from a soldier's point of view, from the top of a tank in a convoy as it crosses open landscapes. The second part of the film presents a dilemma with three choices, when a potential enemy has been spotted. The closing shot of the film depicts the launching of a missile against the never identified target. *Flat Tyre* typically uses a blurred aesthetic at the beginning of the film, defocused imagery, camera turbulence, fast erratic editing and auditory rupture. Conversely, the violent climax, where threat is averted and order restored, is visualised through conventionally stable shots and dialogue sequences. The film operates a contradictory aesthetic, where the subject (soldier) and object (enemy) are simultaneously absent; neither are seen or identified, but are present, represented through camera movement, audible breaths and objects on the horizon. I borrowed and reworked this film, importing the original into an editing platform. Here constituent elements were separated from the unified whole and arranged as colour-coded bricks on a timeline (Fig 3). I then analysed and manipulated the structure of the text, its classical formal qualities and its repeated imagery. Through the process of undoing each shot within the film, I discovered a structural coherence based on a geometric composition of spheres and triangles, found in objects and landscape formations (Fig 4). My intervention exaggerated the formal elements of space, shape, time and rhythm and through this process I was able to consider the subtle ways that ideological themes of subjectivity, gender, and violence

²⁵ Viewers are directed to my website to view my film and stills *Flat Tyre* (last modified, 2021) <https://www.kirstenadkins.co.uk/flat-tyre>

²⁶ British Army, "Start Thinking Soldier what would you do." yosan rai. Published February 22, 2013 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=419QFompreU>. I have also titled the original advert , *Flat Tyre* for the purpose of my intervention.

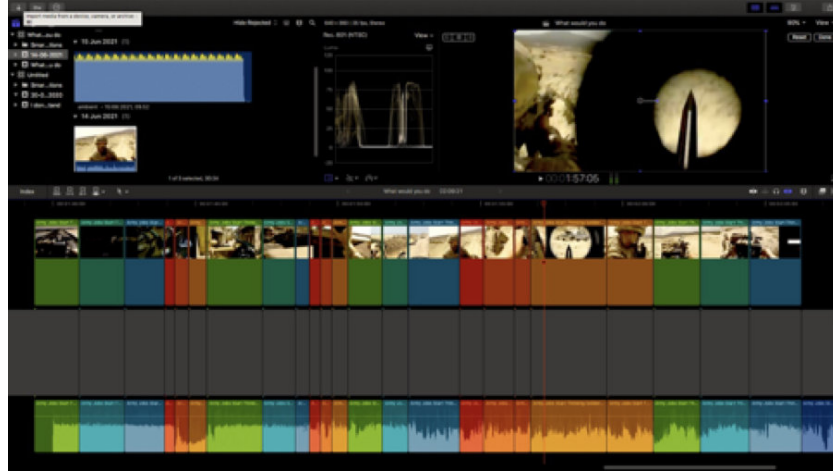


Fig 3. Colour-coded bricks in the timeline indicate circles in red or triangles in blue.

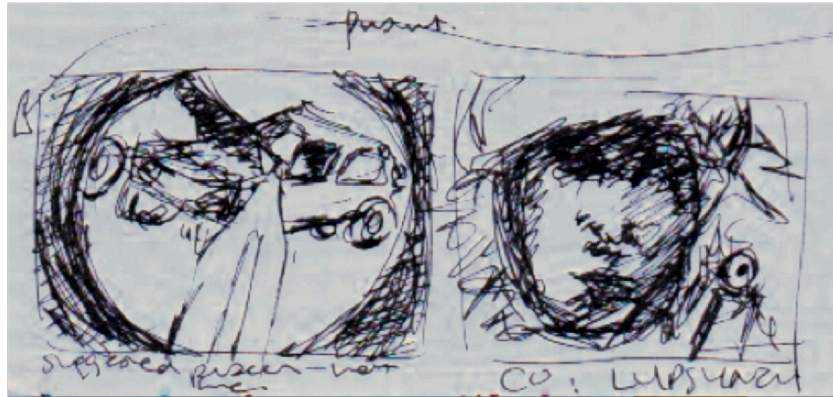


Fig 4. A process of reverse storyboarding (unstoryboarding) established a visual pattern of circles and triangles which applied to the formal construction of the original film.

against the other were formally and technically constructed.

My interventions which correspond with Chapter 3, Frame can be viewed at <https://www.kirstenadkins.co.uk/flat-tyre>

A Deconstructed Formula – Jacques Derrida

My intervention into *Flat Tyre* interrupts its chronology and, in this process prevents its violent denouement. A re-imagined version, by me, exaggerates its structural components as a tool for practical and analytical investigation. It corresponds with a deconstructed methodology, grounded in Derrida's philosophical challenges to 'truths' surrounding language, nature and the subject. Derrida questions the notion of 'phonocentrism', the hierarchy of speech over writing, and logocentrism, which relates to the notion of pure meaning, the 'truth' or a natural order of things.²⁷ Essentialist ideological positions, a fixity of representation or a unitary coherence in a military film text (where pyrotechnics are used to vanquish threats and restore security as seen in *Flat Tyre*) would always be contested in Derrida's formula. A thing, an idea or a belief is reliant on a rejection of those things that it is not, that are not seen or do not happen. For example, the concept of what it is to be masculine is predicated on its being differentiated from the feminine, but also other versions of masculinity. My own subject identity is founded on its difference to other identities that are not mine. Derrida writes that integral to every concept or thing is an echo or 'trace' of its rejected elements. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak articulates this approach to deconstruction in her preface to Derrida's 1967 work, *Of Grammatology*, when she writes, 'Derrida suggests that what opens the possibility of thought is not merely the question of being, but also

²⁷ Jacques Derrida, "Linguistics and Grammatology" in *Of Grammatology* (1974) 40th Anniversary ed (Maryland: JHU, 2016) 29 -79.

the never annulled difference from the “completely other”. Such is the strange “being” of the sign: half of it always “not there” and the other half always “not that”.²⁸ In a deconstructed formula the concept of day is given coherence through the fact that ‘it is not’ night – it is interesting that in *Flat Tyre* day and night seem to converge.²⁹ A theoretical rejection of essentialist criteria for gendered identity can also be interpreted through a Derridean lens. Social theorist Michael Kimmel writes of the category of ‘manhood’ as a suppression of other possible biological and subjective qualities, ‘We come to know what it means to be a man in our culture by setting our definition in opposition to a set of ‘others’ – racial minorities, sexual minorities, and above all, women.’³⁰ In this sense, deconstruction is utilised also as a methodology where identity formation, the naming of a subject or thing, is considered through the elements that it distinguishes itself against. A consideration of the ‘trace’ elements, the missing, occluded and inconsistent, may be suppressed in my initial reading of *Flat Tyre*’s original unitary wholeness. My intervention gives primacy to those elements that are blocked in the original film and foregrounds the material structure, shapes, space, editing, sound breaks and framing. Here deconstruction precludes the chaotic but ultimately linear narrative and its restorative closure by breaking up the unitary whole and thus giving space to the film’s trace elements. With this process it is my intention to prioritise the undecidable, the unanswered and the blurred. Who are the soldiers? What are they doing? Where are they? Why are they there? What do they want? Whom are they searching for? Why?

Permanent Provocation – Michel Foucault.

These questions are foundational to my enquiry and yet it is not the intention

²⁸ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Translators Preface” in *Of Grammatology: Fortieth Anniversary Edition*. (Baltimore JHU 2016 (1974) xxxv

²⁹ Peter Brunette and David Wills, *Screen/Play Derrida and Film Theory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 7.

³⁰ Michael Kimmel, “Masculinity as Homophobia: Fear, Shame and Silence in the Construction of Gender Identity,” in *The Masculinities Studies Reader*, eds. Stephen M. Whitehead and Frank J. Barrett (Malden: Polity, 2001), 267.

of this investigation to uncover an equivocal truth, to offer vindication or find evidence that would arm the unsuspecting recruit with a clear account of ‘what’s really going on’. It is the intention of this study to open up a dialogue concerning issues of gender identities and cultural contexts within which these identities are constructed and performed. I approach this idea through ‘permanent provocation’, a term derived by Beatrice Hanssen from Foucault as an application that is critical, reflexive and open.³¹

For the political theorist Beatrice Hanssen, to provoke is to place an emphasis on dialogue, which allows the researcher to challenge assumptions, to defy classification and to raise questions about identity, language and representation.³² Hanssen refers to Foucault’s account of ‘truth’ and with this his rejection of the idea that there is such a thing as objective or ahistorical fact. Instead, truths are subject to challenge or modification, depending on cultural ideologies belonging to a specific time or historical context. Foucault’s challenge to ‘regimes’ of truth³³ are dependent on cultural and political systems established, ‘for the production, regulation, distribution, circulation, and operation of statements’³⁴ which are consequently given to be true. Provocation becomes a creative method that challenges what is framed as normal or real. In Beatrice Hanssen’s interpretation it ‘signals the creation of a space of possibility, an interval, a moment of respite, the possibility of reaching altogether innovative decisions or choices.’³⁵

A process of breaking down elements that make up the coherent whole amounts to a provocation in as much as it problematises imagery and challenges meaning. My deconstructed intervention into *Flat Tyre* enabled me to consider questions about an interdependency between aesthetics associated with absence and presence, discord and harmony. These tensions may be further articulated through Alexander Galloway’s aesthetic formulation

³¹ Beatrice Hanssen borrows the phrase from Foucault to facilitate a reflexive theoretical approach. Michel Foucault, “The Subject and Power,” *Critical Enquiry* 8, No 4 (Summer 1982), 790. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1343197>

³² Beatrice Hanssen, *Critique of Violence: Between Poststructuralism and Critical Theory* (London: Routledge, 2000) 13-14.

³³ Michel Foucault, “Truth and Power” in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon, 1984) 74.

³⁴ Foucault, “Truth and Power” 74.

³⁵ Hanssen, *Critique of Violence*, 14.

based on the dialectics of 'coherence' and 'incoherence'.³⁶ In Galloway's definition, coherent imagery 'works' in as much as it makes sense; it conforms to habits of narrative cinema, imagery or storytelling. However, for Galloway incoherence is not understood in oppositional terms as an aesthetic that 'does not work' or does not make sense. Galloway describes incoherence more in terms of a dispersal of meaning, the opening up of possible readings, or interpretations, which thereby challenge 'a fixity of the aesthetic and the fixity of the political desire contained therein.'³⁷ Galloway's aesthetic may be considered in its relationship with a concept of deconstruction and trace, where both coherence and incoherence are mutually exclusive, one relying on the other for its validity. In *Flat Tyre* a coherence is found in the narrative arc and violent resolution. But this coherence is predicated on incoherence, visualised in the disrupted imagery and absent presences within its visual framing (Fig 5).

Subject, Object and Frame – Judith Butler

In *Flat Tyre* the enemy threat is suggested through empty horizons that contain nothing but hold a potential for something. I turn to Butler's works that critique the visual and discursive framing of the subject, of vulnerable bodies and the precarity of life in the reportage of 21st Century war. Butler's response to state violence and the framing of populations, whose lives are rendered 'ungrievable', is critically challenging, but does not claim to offer solutions or to uncover truths. She writes, 'There is no single argument here, but rather a series of forays into thinking about the ways in which visual and discursive fields are part of war recruitment and war waging.'³⁸ Her critical openness is facilitated by her approach to the mediation of violence.³⁹ She writes of the

³⁶ Alexander Galloway, "The Unworkable Interface" in *The Interface Effect* (Cambridge: Polity, 2012) 25 – 53.

³⁷ Galloway, *The Interface Effect*, 47.

³⁸ Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (London and Brooklyn: Polity, 2010, 2016), ix.

³⁹ Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* ix.



Fig 5. I screen captured the final frame of a shot just before the edit, that reveals the blurred presence of the soldier in the foreground of an empty horizon. This image could only be seen through the slowing and stilling process.

structuring elements in the framing of military aggression and the disavowal of the vulnerable body. Under consideration are the limits or boundaries of the image, the way that realities are interpreted and how interpretation is governed not only by the contents of the image, but by the elements that are jettisoned, missing or concealed. Butler writes, 'Something exceeds the frame that troubles our sense of reality; in other words, something occurs that does not conform to our established understanding of things.'⁴⁰ She describes the 'rubbish heap'; elements of war waging that exist outside of the mediated regulation of violence that frame war as good or clean 'or even a source of moral satisfaction'.⁴¹ Butler writes 'to call the frame into question is to show that the frame never quite contained the scene it was meant to limn, that something was already outside, which made the very sense of the inside possible, recognizable'.⁴²

As part of this analysis, Butler turns to Trinh T Minh-ha who enlists a reflexive filmmaking practice which invokes the idea that the framer (the filmmaker) is framed (in as much as the process of filmmaking is deconstructed and scrutinised).⁴³ In much of her work, Trinh explores a blurred territory between themes of subjectivity and national identity. What is at stake here is a tension between authenticity – a homogenised version of culture and identity, and a privileged framing associated with film production. Trinh makes a critical intervention into archive film texts, and 'the operation of suture', defined here as fastening or sticking together of images, audio, commentary and dialogue, to convey the illusion of a coherent narrative whole. She is concerned with a naturalisation of dominant ideology that has been authenticated through documentary film that she describes as 'sophisticated devices of fiction'.⁴⁴ She then describes a process of

⁴⁰ Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* 9.

⁴¹ Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* 111.

⁴² Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* 9.

⁴³ Trinh T. Minh-Ha, *Framer Framed* (New York and London: Routledge 1992).

⁴⁴ Trinh, "Who is Speaking?" in *Framer Framed*, 193

unsewing.⁴⁵ Constituent elements associated with seeing the image, hearing commentary, and reading text on the screen are contested when they are separated, displaced and reassembled.⁴⁶ With this intervention, the illusion of unified wholeness within narrative or documentary film may be called into question.

I return to Mulvey's account of the 'possessive spectator' who commits acts of violence through their interventions into cinematic texts. Mulvey is referring to the viewer's ability to control film narrative using digital and desktop technologies and posits a metaphorical scenario in which the viewer controls, masters and manipulates, and through this intervention is able to possess the film text.⁴⁷ Described here is a provocative and destructive act of looking, which is facilitated by domestic technologies that allow the viewer to stop, slow, still, reverse. She looks to Raymond Bellour and his early works in the artifice of cinema to suggest that a provocative act of digital 'wounding' is caused by violence associated with repetition, return and fragmentation.⁴⁸ However, Mulvey embraces the potentiality found in these destructive acts, particularly in the context of Bellour's early experimentations into film fragmentation.⁴⁹ She writes "this process "unlocks" the film fragment and opens it up to new kinds of relations and revelations".⁵⁰ I am not sure that my deconstructive interventions into *Flat Tyre*, or the other military texts, are effective in this regard. However, they are intended as a 'positive technique for making trouble', which describes a provocative intervention that foregrounds the unsharpness, instability, missing or occluded within film texts, and ultimately refuses visual or narrative closure.⁵¹

⁴⁵ Trinh, "Who is Speaking?" in *Framer Framed*, 207

⁴⁶ Trinh, "Who is Speaking?" in *Framer Framed*, 207

⁴⁷ Mulvey, "The Possessive Spectator" in *Death 24x a Second*, 161-180

⁴⁸ Mulvey, "The Possessive Spectator" in *Death 24x a Second*, 179

⁴⁹ Raymond Bellour, "...rait" Signe d'utopies' in Roland Barthes D'après Roland Barthes' Rue Descartes 34, in Mulvey, "The Possessive Spectator" in *Death 24x a Second*, 179

⁵⁰ Mulvey, "The Possessive Spectator" in *Death 24x a Second*, 179

⁵¹ Christopher Norris, *Deconstruction: Theory and Practice* (London: Meuthen, 1982), x.

Introduction to the Chapters.

As previously outlined, a military masculinity is conceptualised as something that is continually being redefined and redrawn by gender theorists and activist groups, but also by the forces of capital, including military advertisers across the twenty-year period that encompasses 'the war on terror'. Blur in this context amounts to a perpetual feedback loop where ideas and practices for the purpose of resistance are recirculated by a state military force; the institution being resisted. Masculinities are conveyed as heroic, marginalised, hegemonic, supplemented or replaced, or virtually obsolete, depending on the different and diverse advertising methods being enlisted.

This document comprises a set of stills of my artworks, links to my film provocations and the written thesis. The elements are interspersed and interconnected with one another – each is equally important in the configuration of the whole. Sometimes artworks will directly relate to theoretical discussions (see *Knife Drawings*, *Truck* and *Flat Tyre*). Others parallel and complement the overarching themes and questions integral to the thesis and as such sit alongside and between each of the chapters (*Napoleon Dynamite By Me*, *Force* and *Army Photographer Captures her own Death*). The reader is guided through the practice via links to the website kirstenadkins.co.uk at various points throughout the study. The chapters may be summarised as follows.

Blur: Chapter One is concerned with the construction of blur through lens technology. It examines cinematographic devices associated with a blurring of the body – where the figure is diffused, disavowed, erased or absent from the scene of war. Blur is often characterised here by a visual restlessness,

illustrated in noisy, unsettled imagery; camera glare, diffusion and turbulence. It equates with an aesthetic value found in visual error, discussed through works by artists and photographers. Conversely, blurred bodies are unidentifiable bodies. The soldier subject cannot be harmed because they are rendered in blur, therefore hardly recognisable as a subject. Central to this idea the chapter directs its attention to the aesthetic qualities of blur through Hal Foster's consideration of a Lacanian 'real' where the blurred flawed or limited image reflects a desire to apprehend those elements that are diffused or filtered out of the image. It also looks to a blurring of the subject as a 'self-reflexive' phenomenon where the eye is drawn simultaneously to the materiality of the image and to the objects of the image, characterised by the blurred representations of soldiers. How the viewer encounters the image rendered in blur is described as a negotiated act of seeing the subject and object within the scene.

The short film and performed paper, *Army Photographer Captures her own Death* that follows this chapter, similarly examines ambiguities surrounding subjectivity, the object and meaning. It is concerned with absences and presences in the frame, and an undecidability between what images say and what they do. In line with much of the imagery discussed in Chapter 1 *Army Photographer Captures her own Death* gains its coherence through the absence of the subject from a tragic scene of military violence.

Space: Chapter 2 builds on the ambiguities surrounding the soldier subject and the military body by examining the geographical location of bodies within the scenes. It draws a correlation between a spatial composition and a

disavowal of the individual 'idealised' soldier. Here, narratives convey a sense of belonging; the subjective 'I' gives way to the collective 'we'. As previously discussed, blur in its broad definition is used as a methodological tool which articulates an instability surrounding concepts of selfhood and solidarity, war and the framing of violence. Here blur describes ways in which the individual is adapted and absorbed into the military body. The chapter considers ways that homosocial stereotypes underpin narratives concerning the masculinised military unit. To do this I draw on Michael Shapiro's conceptualisation of cartographic violence to describe geopolitical power dynamics between states and state subjects.⁵² Blur in this instance also refers to a fragile sense of belonging essential to the 'fraternal social contract'.⁵³ I contend that this is dependent on a deep-seated misogyny and the fear and mistrust of the female other. Here blur relates to the fragile dialectic involved in the visual construction of belonging and with this, a prospect of exile. A military masculinity in this context, I argue, has no body and thus it belongs to nobody. The chapter and associated practice is facilitated by the concept of a horseshoe cartography, which describes a co-dependency between safety and threat as it is spatially organised within the *mise en scène*.

A series of *Knife Drawings* provides an illustrative exploration of the cartography of belonging as discussed in Chapter 2. Ten drawings are created in direct response to the film stills discussed in this chapter. In the same vein, the film *Truck* undoes and re-imagines one of the military films utilising a similar cutting technique, but this time with digital tools. These provocations are integral to the ideas behind the chapter and the viewer is directed at certain points within the section towards the relevant works on the website.

⁵² Michael Shapiro, *Violent Cartographies: Mapping Cultures of War* (Minneapolis and London: Minnesota, 1997)

⁵³ Carole Pateman, "The Fraternal Social Contract" in *The Masculinity Studies Reader*, eds Adams, Savran, (Malden and Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 119-134.

Frame: Noël Burch's taxonomy of 'Two Kinds of Space' provides a good articulation of the visual and technical construction of absence and presence of bodies within the frame.⁵⁴ This chapter focuses on a corporeal absence found in a series of films produced during the height of wars fought in Afghanistan and Iraq. A presence is conveyed through the point of view of the camera and empty landscapes. I invoke Roger Stahl's neologism of 'Militainment' to discuss how point-of-view cinematography, typically seen in military games design, serves to reinforce ideologies of 'us against them' in the recruitment to war.⁵⁵ My approach to these concerns is underpinned by Judith Butler's *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable*.⁵⁶ As discussed earlier, Butler questions the visual and discursive framing of the subject and of vulnerable bodies.⁵⁷ The chapter considers a condition in which the enemy is framed as absent, is therefore denied subjectivity and their lives cease to matter. The visual construction of absence and presence is considered in its relationship to a blurring of the language of war - where threats are framed by Allied forces as both present and absent, without a specific location and with no particular time frame or end point.

Deconstruction as exploration is facilitated by film fragments from the military recruitment campaign *What Would You Do* – reconstructed as *Flat Tyre*, already discussed in this chapter. Here, practice becomes a tool for analysis and in this equation critical analysis informs practice. At the end of the chapter the reader is also directed to *Napoleon Dynamite by Me*. The film and installation concern masculinities and femininities as they are embodied and performed. It also opens up questions surrounding spectatorship, surveillance and the absent presence of the viewer as discussed in Chapter 3.

⁵⁴ Noël Burch, "Nana, or Two Kinds of Space" in *Theory of Film Practice* (London: Martin Secker and Warburg Limited, 1969, 1973), 17-31.

⁵⁵ Roger Stahl, *Militainment Inc: War, Media and Popular Culture* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010)

⁵⁶ Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* ix

⁵⁷ Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* xix

Body: Chapter 4 focuses on the subject and the body. It reintroduces ideas behind the 1957 US film *The Incredible Shrinking Man*, borrowed for the title of this study to explore relationships between the body, subject and machines of war. A military masculinity is considered in its relationship to technology, prosthesis and landscape. It is visualised as something that is copied, worn, carried or operated. This chapter turns to Bernard Stiegler to propose the idea that subjective identity is dependent on elements that exist outside of and beyond the body.⁵⁸ The soldier subject is visualised therefore as a product of technology and environment and as such is dependent on the supplements of the material world. By this account, what it is to be human is shaped by the non-human. I look to Joanna Bourke in her concept of a post-human military subject. Bourke describes virtual wars, where there are few or no spatial or temporal limits. Weapons are operated from a safe distance.⁵⁹ Flesh gives way to the machine and thus is visually constructed in terms of the interrelation between organic and inorganic elements. The image is blurred, diffused or absent and the body is extended by weapons, cameras and technology.

Force is the title of a collection of drawings, films and dance performances that culminated in a gallery installation in Birmingham. The works were influenced by Simone Weil's *Poem of Force* written shortly after the fall of France in 1941, as a consideration of the blurred dynamics between themes of power and subordination, identity and sameness. In Weil's essay force causes the eventual ruination of the military masculinity and a disavowal of the body. She writes, 'The true hero, the true subject, the centre of the Iliad, is force. Force employed by man, force that enslaves man, force before which man's flesh shrinks away. In this work at all times, the human spirit is shown as modified by its relation to force, as swept away.'⁶⁰ In this way military

⁵⁸ Bernard Stiegler, *Technics and Time, 1: The Fault of Epimetheus* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

⁵⁹ Joanna Bourke, "Killing in a posthuman world: the philosophy and practice of critical military history." In *The Subject of Rosa Braidotti: Politics and Concepts*, eds. Bolette Blaagaard and Iris Van Der Tun (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 29-37.

⁶⁰ Simone Weil, "The Iliad, or Poem of Force." In *On Violence: A Reader* Eds., Bruce B. Lawrence and Aisha Karim (USA: Duke, 2017), 378.

masculinity is envisioned as an external biopolitical force, rather than an internalised, embodied sense of being that belongs to the individual subject.

Conclusion: Creative Provocations

Before I close, I return to the outline of a male figure with a question mark and with this a masculine subjectivity holds an aesthetic that is unstable and uncertain. The aesthetics of blur encompasses a gendered subjectivity that is undecidable; the body is extended by or absorbed into the military body, and 'the war on terror' has no target, location or endpoint. Blur is also envisioned as a tool for creative provocation, where I open up texts, and consider new ways of looking. I am aware that my provocations exist in a blurred territory, that neither accepts nor rejects any one position. As I write this, I question my own purpose and rationale. Why would I be asking a question without offering an answer? Then I return to Judith Butler, whose writing on gender, the body and subjectivity is the main influence and foundation for this work. She says in her 1999 preface to *Gender Trouble*, 'One might wonder what the use "opening up possibilities" finally is, but no one who has understood what it is to live in the social world as what is "impossible," illegible, unrealisable, unreal and illegitimate is likely to pose that question.'⁶¹

This project does not uncover *a truth* that is hidden by blur. It does however seek to expose the viewer to the ideological implications of a blurring of the image, of gendered subjectivity, of the body and of death. It directs attention towards the absent presences of women and men, soldiers and civilians, allies and threats. Butler's words describe the social conditions within which I make my interventions; in this study, 'the war on terror', the soldier subject and the framing of military recruitment is also imagined as 'illegible', 'unreal' and 'illegitimate'.⁶¹ The aims of this project therefore extend beyond my observations

⁶¹ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, viii

⁶² Butler, *Gender Trouble*, viii

of the ‘impossibly’ blurred military rhetoric against which I make my interventions. To tackle this I enlist a back-and-forth process of borrowing, breaking, dispersal and redistribution which takes place through gallery interventions, artist workshops and through online forums. A perpetual feedback loop is in action, where ideas and practices for the purpose of resistance, originally appropriated by institutions such as the Ministry of Defence and its advertisers, are borrowed back by me and reframed in online, studio or gallery spaces. My aim here is to provoke a dialogue with audiences whose range includes scholars, artists, students and potential military recruits. This work also offers a challenge their recruiters, concerning their framing of the soldier subject, the body and of military violence.

My practice can be described in terms of a cyclical journey that starts with a process of capturing materials from virtual platforms including YouTube and British military websites. The online materials are converted into desktop media files which are then broken down into their component pieces before being reconfigured in the studio and gallery. My reconfigurations are then returned to *virtual* platforms, where they may be re-captured, re-versioned and re-presented by others who engage with my work online. In this way a contribution to knowledge is facilitated through a cycle of provocations that offer unlimited disruptive potential in actual and virtual spaces.

My aim is to establish and maintain a critical dialogue which would otherwise be closed off in the aesthetic construction of the original adverts. As I argue in Chapter 3 a deconstructed formula of *undoing* is enlisted as a method through which I challenge an illusion of viewer agency in the framing of the original recruitment films. In many such cases a first-person subjective alignment with the lens creates an illusion of interactivity while simultaneously controlling the gaze – thus consigning the viewer to the role of passive consumer in a ‘militainment’ spectacle.⁶³ In this respect blur operates a pacifying desire to apprehend those visual elements that are beyond reach or outside viewer control. Deconstruction in studio and gallery spaces is deployed as a means of redirecting the viewer’s gaze away from illusory spectacle and

towards the framing devices through which such fantasies are constructed.

My first such provocation took place in 2019 when I invited artists and gallery audiences to consider new critical perspectives brought about by a deconstructed formula. A residency, project-space and exhibition titled *Element* captured fragments of military films and photographs from online platforms.⁶⁴ These elements were broken up, separated and rearranged through digital manipulation and through reconstructions in dance. The short film fragments were repositioned above or below, side by side, behind and in front of one another within two gallery rooms. Linearity gave way to concurrent and cyclical repetitions: fragmentary breaths, clicks, gestural movements and blurred or incomplete images were given equal priority: no single element was more important than another. The aim of this exercise was to allow the viewer to make their own critical choices and connections as they navigated their way through or around the deconstructed fragmentary elements.

In the virtual space, through online screenings and discussion forums I am able to broaden the potential reach of my work and open up spaces for challenge and critique with new audiences. An online commission titled *Peep* included a series of workshops that explored deconstructed methodologies of screen capture, montage editing and *knife drawing* techniques.⁶⁵ Here virtual audiences were invited to actively engage with artworks by breaking and reforming materials to create their own visual responses. I have since applied a similar formula to my work as an art educator and in teaching film production. This work offers an extensive and long-term potential reach as new critical practices emerge in my students’ professional filmmaking. They are then able to pass on ideas and new articulations to subsequent viewers and makers.⁶⁶

The methodology used in *Element* and *Peep* provokes new opportunities in critical audience engagement and continues beyond the time-frame of *The Incredible Disappearing Soldier*. In 2022 a gallery exhibition and conference at The Hardwick Gallery in Cheltenham will explore themes of space, place and

⁶³ See Roger Stahl, *Militainment, Inc. War, Media, and Popular Culture*, (New York, Oxon: Routledge, 2010).

⁶⁴ *Element* was a dual exhibition and project-space at Stryx Gallery in Birmingham, May 2019.

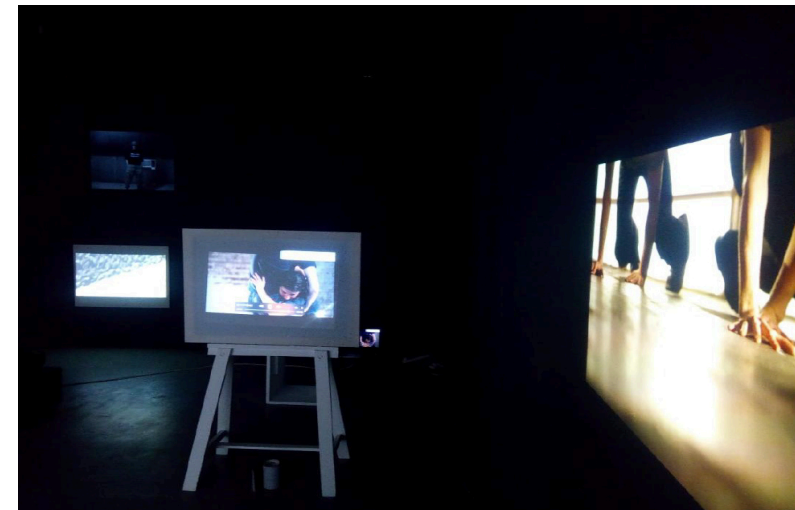
⁶⁵ *Peep* was an online residency and community education programme, September 2020.

⁶⁶ A forthcoming paper at the Media Communications and Cultural Studies Association conference discusses deconstructed pedagogical approaches,

belonging. The project is developed in collaboration with a photographer and documentary film maker. Permanent provocation in this respect becomes an ongoing visual dialogue between our respective lens-based responses to the themes of Chapter 2, *Space*. The associated conference further engages audiences in the critical dialogue surrounding concepts introduced by *The Incredible Disappearing Soldier*. These themes may be disseminated through peer reviewed academic papers including an article on 'horseshoe cartographies', also discussed in Chapter 2.⁶⁷ The potential impact of this study has been tested in conferences and screenings, which triggered debates on themes spanning national identity, gender construction and methodologies in practice as research. Such events provoke a continuing dialogue with artists, museums and activist groups; including emerging research concerning the politics of safeguarding, care-giving and issues of national security.

Through the combination of gallery interventions, published works and online presence *The Incredible Disappearing Soldier* extends a methodology whose impact and potential may be found in the generation of active and participatory conversations between the artist and a broad range of potential audiences. Online platforms open up questions concerning soldier and enemy subjectivities, corporeal absence and presence and the framing of military action. Here I challenge the Ministry of Defence and its advertisers on their unstable and inconsistent framing of the subject, of the body, of gender and of war. I open up new reflections on the construction of military masculinity where the potential recruit may be given the opportunity to look outside of the 'militainment' fantasy, and to consider those elements that are jettisoned or missing or blurred in the framing of their recruitment. To start these provocations I now direct the readers attention to Chapter 1 and insights into the technical construction of blur, and its relationship with gendered subjectivity in the context of British military recruitment.

⁶⁷ Kirsten Adkins, "Zero Dark Thirty and The Myth of the Caledonian Boar" in *New Review of Film and Television Studies: Kathryn Bigelow, A Visionary Director*. Issue 3, Volume 19 (Taylor & Francis, 02 September 2021) <https://doi.org/10.1080/17400309.2021.1949205>



Residency and project space *Element* 2019



Chapter 1:

BLUR:

Masculinity, Subjectivity, Ambiguity.

I blur to make everything equal,
everything equally important
and equally unimportant.

Gerhard Richter¹

The project, *The Incredible Disappearing Soldier*, opened with an image of a male outline with a question mark. This was a fragment of a frame extracted from the recruitment advert *Who We Are*. The image provided an illustration of the project's central enquiry concerning the ambiguities associated with the framing of the gendered military subject. Chapter 1 returns to the same film text, with a more detailed discussion of the ideological forces that underpin the technical use of blur in the visual construction of the British soldier. I start this exploration by looking at the language of its opening commentary, which takes the form of a rhyme. Its first line indicates that 'we' possess traditionally masculinised traits, including bravery, heroism, and valour.² One of my central concerns here surrounds the blurred spaces between the image is doing and what its caption or commentary says it is doing.

This is the story about the guts that bring glory. As some succeed and others do poorly.

These words voiced in commentary accompany a shot that imagines the figure of the soldier as diffuse and defocused, and through this process the individual is made anonymous (Fig 6). In this shot, the camera is positioned at a low angle at the edge of water. A tank or boat moves in slow-motion, through the frame from right to left. The lower right-hand foreground layer is distorted by water spray. The centre frame is dominated by the profiles of four soldiers who are standing on the boat. While many of the water droplets are in sharp focus, the figures are blurred, so the viewer

¹Gerhard Richter in Dietmar Elger and Hans Obrist eds, *Gerhard Richter: text: writings, interviews and letters* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2019), 33.

²See Frank Barrett, "The Organisational Construction of Masculinity. the Case of the US Navy" in *The Masculinities Studies Reader*, eds. Stephen J Whitehead and Frank J Barrett (Cambridge, Oxon: Polity, 2001), 77 -99.



Fig 6. Who we are: The British Army Brand

cannot identify genders, ethnic background or age. An assumption of masculine prowess is indicated by the commentary, a gestural stance and the phallic positioning of weapons. The water droplets bring an awareness of the presence of the camera, the imperfection of the image and, importantly, the obscured framing of the soldier. The middle distance where the soldiers are situated is seen through a gauze with foregrounded layers, technicolour filters, sunburst on the lens, mud and water. As the tank moves through the frame the water droplets increase in size and transform in shape. They form thick and blue-white, viscous globs. The harsh sunlight glints off these shapes and obscures the subjects further. A blue-white slow-moving spray dominates the foreground. This has an effect of further enhancing the movement within the frame, so that the viewer's attention is simultaneously directed towards the soldier, who is framed as the object of the scene, and the water spray which draws attention to the materiality of the image. Sharp focus accentuates the abstract forms that make up the water droplets; the dominant element of the constructed image, whose commentary speaks of heroic victory, but whose imagery is blurred.

This chapter is concerned with the material conditions of blur as it occurs through the lens or in digital post-production. Its aim is to unpick the ambiguities that accompany the technical production of blur in its relationship with ideologies surrounding gender, military identity and the vulnerability of bodies in war. I tackle this through a close examination of the ways that focusing and defocusing techniques are used during filming or in editing platforms exploring the multiple and often contradictory functions of technical blur, as I will outline now.

As alluded to in Richter's opening quote, the defocused image avoids the clear prioritisation of any one thing in an image. Blur can be considered in this

formula as a trace where suppressed or suggested elements within the frame offer a potentiality in the imagination of the viewer. In her preface to *Of Grammatology*, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak translates Derrida's conceptualisation of trace as a track or spoor to be followed ad-infinitum with no end point or resolution.³ To follow Spivak's formula an aesthetic appeal of blur would be one of desire, because it is 'never found in its full being'.⁴ Rather, it promises something else, beyond or behind what appears on the screen or in the frame, ad-infinitum.

The inaccessibility of detail brought about by a blurring of the image opens up multiple meanings and interpretations. Visual error produces a pragmatism associated with the image that in Hito Steyerl's words, refuses to make up its mind. Steyerl refers of the appropriation and continual reproduction of 'poor images' on digital platforms. She examines a relationship between low and high definition image production contending that the poor image equates with a formal pragmatism where its lack of clarity is associated with a blurring of meaning. Such a description resonates with the way defocusing techniques are utilised in a number of the military recruitment films under investigation. She writes, "They express all the contradictions of the contemporary crowd: its opportunism, narcissism, desire for autonomy in creation, its inability to focus or make up its mind, its constant readiness for transgression and simultaneous submission."⁵

Steyer's description highlights the endless potentialities associated with blur. Similarly Fig 6 offers a myriad of possible identities that may provide a suitable fit for the potential recruit of any gender, sexuality, ethnicity or faith. Such a condition constitutes in Lisa Purse's formula a 'structural ambivalence' that permits more than one viewpoint at once. Purse is concerned with

³ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Translators Preface" in *Of Grammatology: Fortieth Anniversary Edition*. (Baltimore: JHU 2016 (1974) xxxv

⁴ Spivak, "Preface" in *Of Grammatology*, xxxv

⁵ Hito Steyerl, "In Defence of the Poor Image" in *The Wretched of the Screen* (Berlin: Sternberg 2017), 41.

⁶ Lisa Purse cites Richard Maltby, *Hollywood Cinema* (1995) 2nd ed (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), 275. 6

Hollywood's inclination to 'displace responsibility' onto the viewer when addressing controversial subject matter.⁶ She writes, 'Such a preponderance of ambiguity has the effect of producing political ambivalence at the structural level: that is, the film itself literally becomes a container for contradictory ideas and interpretations, allowing spectators who hold contrasting views to each see their convictions reflected in the text itself.'⁷ By this formula a kind of pragmatism is at play where controversial aspects of war can be alluded to, but without alienating potential soldiers, the target of the military recruitment films. There is also an intersectional potentiality that comes with blur; military guts and glory could be accessible to anyone and everyone irrespective of who they are.

On digital editing platforms there is a filter named 'Gaussian Blur'. This is also referred to as a 'noise-reduction' filter which cleans the detritus on the image by blurring out the graininess, dirt or wrinkles. The image is perfected through manipulative digital processes. In ideological terms these may also be used to clean an image of injury or death or to create an undecidability around visualisations of victory or defeat. Such a concealment, in Judith Butler's account of the framing of war, jettisons, excludes or covers over violent and destructive realities.⁸ Blur then constitutes a simultaneous presence and absence within the frame. The soldier is neither there nor not there, neither represented nor unrepresentable. Blur then occludes dirt and detritus. It disavows a clear visual representation of bodies, of heroic action, violence, injury or death.

Yet paradoxically, focus-pulling techniques are deployed to draw attention away from certain aspects of the frame, that are blurred, and towards those areas in sharp focus. The abstract translucent blobs in the foreground of the tank in Fig 6, have the effect of controlling the gaze by drawing attention away

⁷ Lisa Purse, "Ambiguity, ambivalence and absence in Zero Dark Thirty" in *Disappearing War Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Cinema and Erasure in the Post-9/11 World*, eds. Christina Hellmich and Lisa Purse (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 132.

⁸ Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (London and Brooklyn: Polity, 2010, 2016), xiii.

⁹ Martine Beugnet and Richard Misek, "In Praise of Blur," [In]Transition: A MediaCommons Project with the Journal of Videographic Film & Moving Image Studies, 4.2b, 2017, accessed August 24, 2021, <http://mediacommons.org/intransition/2017/07/11/praise-blur>, 2017.

from certain elements in the scene, including the subjective identity of each soldier. As Martine Beugnet and Richard Misek observe, visual blur has an augmenting effect when it is used as a ‘foil for high definition’ such that sharp focus is further sharpened when it is juxtaposed with blur.⁹ What is strange about this formula is the idea that the guts that bring glory would be visually emphasised through abstracted elemental forms that are intangible, on the move and incoherent. A blurring of trees, tanks, guns and men makes them visually subordinate to the viscous globs of water that are sharply focused and closely aligned with the lens.

Subject Object Blur

Blur creates a separation between the soldier subject and the viewer. In Fig 6, the camera adopts a position that looks on, rather than aligns with the figures in the scene. The soldier’s point of view is obscured by the lens or post-production filters and he is thus framed as the object placed at a distance from the viewer’s gaze. Butler speaks from a critical position when she equates subjective identity with difference. Here the concept of ‘me’ or ‘we’ only becomes possible through its separateness from ‘you’ or ‘them’, and in Butler’s terms a whole host of other possible ‘not me’s’.¹⁰ By this account, subject and object positions become fluid and unstable, depending on the perspective alignment with different points of view as conveyed through the lens. For example, the viewer places the subject of the narrative – in this case the soldiers on the tank/boat – as objects within the scene, seen from the perspective of the camera. Edward Brannigan’s work takes in the technical processes through which roles of subject and object are continually renegotiated through the apparatus of the lens.¹¹ He describes a hierarchy in

which the controlling gaze is perpetually interchangeable through technical devices including the establishing wide shot and a series of subjective point of view shots. Brannigan’s account is pertinent to the condition of blur in its capacity to destabilise subject/object positions within the image frame.

The predominant concern of this chapter is the diverse application of blur and its possible implications for gendered military identity. To develop ideas in this respect I will continue my examination of *Who We Are*¹² exploring ways that identities are concealed in the promotion of heroic subjectivity. I will also look at another film that was produced during the same period, titled *This is Belonging Two*¹³ where blur is facilitated by a technique that I refer to as controlled error as it is conveyed through lens distortion, camera shake and environmentally turbulent conditions. Here the technical production of blur is juxtaposed with sharper focus as a method of conveying narratives where soldiers are overwhelmed by elemental forces, but then through determination are able to overcome their hostile environmental conditions. In both case studies masculine and occasionally feminine identities are at different times, made ambiguous through controlled error or identity concealment. The films’ share many characteristics associated with blur that are found across a range of media and throughout history. With this in mind I will establish contextual foundations, interspersing my interventions into these military films with examples from news reportage, photography and traditions in Western canonical painting. So before I return to *Who We Are* it is worth outlining ways that blur was used in a television news programme that I happened to come across in the early stages of my research. This triggered my interest in blur as a visual and conceptual device. In many ways its use in news reportage resonated with the aesthetics of military recruitment.

⁹ See Chapter 4, Butler, “Non thinking and the Normative” in *Frames of War*, 137 – 163

¹⁰ Chapter 3 develops the idea of a reciprocity between subject and object positions within the scene, through Ed11-ward Brannigan’s account of the point-of-view shot. See Edward Brannigan, *Point of View in the Cinema: A Theory of Narration and Subjectivity in Classical Film*, (Germany: Mouton, 1984), 2.

¹² British Army, “Who We Are”, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sxO9duW2guE>

¹³ British Army, “This is Belonging Part 2,” Army Jobs. Published January 7, 2017 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cpZyFLUXI>

¹⁴ BBC News, 17 April 2019. Accessed 18 April, 2019. BBC 1.

¹⁵ For further context of the BBC story on the Windrush deportations see, Windrush Generation: “Who are they and why are they facing problems” BBC News UK. Published July 31, 2020 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-43782241>



Fig 7.

Concealing Identities: Who are we?

Several items in one BBC News at Ten programme employed blur for specific narrative effects.¹⁴ There was a story about non-disclosure agreements associated with harassment and bullying in universities. The commentary for the story included a visual overlay of shots of bookshelves in an academic library. The foreground depicted blurred images of different groups of people. Subjects were anonymised on this occasion for legal reasons. Blur was used to conceal their identities.

The next item covered the anniversary of the Windrush scandal. Many British people of Caribbean descent, who had been living and working in the UK for decades, faced deportation because of administration errors.¹⁵ The feature opened with a close-up of an interviewee who had been targeted for deportation. The camera pulled focus within the shot so that the image of the interviewee became blurred. This process established a metaphor for subject erasure – a symbol of the disavowal of citizenship which was central to the story.

In a third item, blur was used to conceal the identity of an alleged victim of sexual assault, by utilising shallow focus to direct attention towards a large vase of chrysanthemums in the foreground of the shot. Subject identity, experience and the body were symbolically represented through natural forms. In this case a shallow focal length was used to maintain anonymity for legal reasons. Similar to the case of the Windrush story, blur diminished identity by prioritising the symbolic white flowers. The floral arrangement as object and focal point came to symbolise the suffering of all women in her position (Fig 7).

Blur identifies the presence of a subject but renders the subject unrecognisable at the same time. The loss of individual subjectivity is replaced

As previously discussed in Barretti, *The Organisational Construction of Hegemonic Masculinity*, 77-99

by symbolic social identification, which depends on the story being told. In one half-hour news programme, individuals came to represent a wide range of identity groups through a defocused lens: men, women, victims, attackers, stateless British subjects, students, whistle-blowers, academic bullies. In a similar way Fig 6 of *Who We Are* denies subjectivity through the blurring of the body, while environmental impacts of military warfare, symbolised by a tank/boat rolling through water, are rendered in sharp focus and thus prioritised.

Who we Are, is a sixty-seven second advertisement which comprises a reconfiguration of existing army recruitment films. There are fifty-two shots in the film. In thirty-two of these the body is blurred, hidden, or obscured through framing. In contrast to this, imagery of powerful vehicles with big guns are mostly rendered in high definition. As its title suggests *Who we Are* is concerned with establishing a military identity. However, for much of the film soldier subjectivities, when they perform in active combat, are concealed, distorted or defocused. Conversely subjects appear in sharp focus when they are placed in controlled environments, such as the military parade or the officers' mess, when they are away from military action and presumably the potential for injury. The film's accompanying nursery rhyme style commentary, voiced in a male north-east English accent celebrates traditional masculine traits including endurance, glory, success and valour.¹⁶ Yet the structure of the film and the commentary are fraught with discontinuities. Forms and rhythms are established and then intermittently change direction or pace, with abrupt punctuations brought about by explosions, chemical destruction and displays of technology, which for much of the film become its central focus. The remix aesthetic in editing leads to regular diegetic collisions between commentary and image. With this an abstracted vision of masculine heroism displaces the visual representation of the male subject. This aesthetic is repeated across

¹⁶ As previously discussed in Frank Barrett, *The Organisational Construction of Hegemonic Masculinity*, 77.



Fig 8. I distorted Fig 6, by capturing and enlarging a fragment of the scene as a means of exploring visual identification of soldier subjects in the military training scenarios depicted in *Who We Are*.

many of the films discussed in this project as I will outline in later chapters.

To return to its start, the elevated positioning of the subjects in the frame, and the foreground obstruction, creates a distancing effect which places viewers in the role of subordinated witness. Gendered identities are obscured, yet a military masculinity is suggested through the venerated positioning of the soldiers, the silhouettes of their aimed weapons and the water spray. The commentary line 'guts that bring glory' resonates with a particular kind of muscular heroism belonging to more traditional constructions of Hollywood valour. Yet the dominant feature of this composition is the blurred surface of the image which hides identities. Blur here disavows the individual, producing a collective visualisation of the heroic soldier subject. I have cropped the image and zoomed in, to reveal blurred blobby faces. The abstracted idea of guts and glory is not given a recognizable face or identity (Fig 8).

A cut to a reverse profile shot reveals another blurred image, which is identified as a black male soldier (Fig 9). He is armed with his gun pointing downwards. A shallow depth of field emphasises the rifle stock and sight. Foreground water droplets are softly focused. Blur is also conveyed through the audio so that sounds of fast flowing water are filtered through an echo effect which creates further ambiguity. It is unclear whether the sound represents water surges, thunder or exploding bombs. Another shot change is timed with the sound of explosions and the music reaches a crescendo of a distant boom and a reverberation. The next line of commentary, 'as some succeed, while others do poorly' brings characters into sharp focus. The image also becomes still and stable.



Fig 9 and 10.

The blurring of the soldier and the environment, and the use of slow motion, create a dream-like effect. The boom suggests an echo of a memory, as if being shaken out of a dream. A close-up profile of a white man in a hoody, in a different location and facing right to left (Fig 10), mirrors the forward expression in the previous shot (Fig 9). This time the camera is intrusively close. It almost touches the subject, picking up the pores on his face and the grey-blue colour of his eyes. The natural backlight, from a train window, illuminates the rim of his profile. The nearside of his face is in shadow. The window acts as a distancing filter between the subject and his environment. The world of military action is behind and beyond the window and the subject. Here, sharp focus accompanies the commentary line 'doing poorly'. Not succeeding, and importantly not being present in a staged scene of military action, equates with inaction conveyed in the subject's face and demeanour. His inertia is signalled and emphasised by the use of intrusive camerawork, a fixed stare and sharp focus.

Here a series of oppositional values are in play where the commentary line indicating success is accompanied by the image that refuses to identify the soldier subject. The sharp focus on the man with a hoody offers a fixed representation of poor performance, signalled by the doing poorly commentary line. The semiotics of the hoody indicates that doing poorly belongs to a civilian whose failure might be turned around on the imaginary battlefield. In later scenes, women soldiers throw grenades and jump walls with guns held high. Yet faces and bodies are often obscured while weapons and costume dominate the scenes and further blur the viewer's reading of the obvious gender signifiers (Fig 11). Here it is worth considering ways in which *Who We Are* perhaps reflects tensions involved in the widening of military recruitment practices, that coincided with the timing of the film's production.

Contextual Foundations: *Gender and a Blurring of Identity*

In a number of military recruitment films, women soldiers perform in front-line roles (Fig 12). Such imagery coincides with a strategic appeal for diversification in recruitment. Since 2019 British women have been invited to take up fighting jobs for the first time. However, these aspirations appear not to have been embraced by many women; at the time of writing few had taken up these roles.¹⁷ As Raewyn Connell writes, 'It is overwhelmingly the dominant gender who holds the means of violence. Men are armed far more than women.' Connell also says, 'violence becomes important in gender politics among men. Most episodes of major violence (counting military combat, homicide and armed assault) are transactions among men'.¹⁸ Despite a widening of recruitment practices male heteronormative military codes continue to determine 'who fights, who dies and in defence of whom'.¹⁹

However, the strategic appeal for a wider demographic coincided with reports of a shortfall in military recruitment. In 2018 the Ministry of Defence announced a deficit of around eight thousand soldiers per year over a ten-year period.²⁰ The report also observed that most military campaigns operated what is known as a 'base-fed' model of recruitment, targeting mainly unskilled teenage young men and occasionally women.²¹ The Ministry of Defence announced new opportunities 'for individuals from all backgrounds' so that the armed forces would become 'a leading equal opportunities employer'. The model is also the subject of on-going controversy. The campaign group Child Soldiers International used a Freedom of Information request to obtain the report published by the outsourcing company Capita, which held the franchise for military recruitment advertising. The report highlighted ways that deprived,

¹⁷ In 2019 only 10.27 percent of the armed forces were women. The number of personnel employed in the British Army 17 of the United Kingdom (UK) in 2018 by Gender was counted as 73560 males and 7560 in May 2019. Published by Statista. com. Accessed April 18, 2019, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/579732/strength-of-uk-armed-forces-by-gender/>

¹⁸ R.W Connell, *Masculinities* (Cambridge: Polity, 1995),83.

¹⁹ Victoria Basham, "Gender and Militaries: The Importance of Military Masculinities for State Sanctioned Violence," in Handbook on Gender and War, ed. Simona Sharoni, Julia Welland, Linda Steiner and Jennifer Pedersen (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2016), 29.

²⁰ House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts, 'Skill Shortages in the Armed Forces' Published July 18, 2018, 20 <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmpublicacc/1027/1027.pdf>

²¹ The Crown Commercial Services has published a redacted media buying briefing by the Outsourcing company 21 'Capita which promotes the 'this is belonging' series of army recruitment films which it says targets 'Regular 16-24 C2DE'. Accessed July 4, 2019, http://data.parliament.uk/DepositedPapers/Files/DEP2018-0801/20180716-REDACTED_Version_ArmyCapita_Campaign.pdf



Fig 11–12

vulnerable, mostly male, young people were targeted by the campaign.²² Themes associated with flexibility and inclusivity were also extolled by the then Secretary of State for Defence, Gavin Williamson, who said, 'I am delighted that for the first time in its history, our armed forces will be determined by ability alone and not gender. So by opening all combat roles to women, we will maximise the talents available to our military and further make the armed forces a more modern employer.'²³ In a press release the MOD offered a more pragmatic response, 'Simply put the infantry will be more effective in war if we include the best talent our country can breed - male and female.'²⁴

A shortfall of recruits, a need for diversity and the encouragement of women into front-line roles is addressed through the language and ideologies associated with breeding. In this formula the soldier may be bred, born and then shaped, in Foucault's analysis, 'out of formless clay',²⁵ through British military training. In *Who We Are* soldier subjects often appear to emerge out of the elements: water, fire, gas and earth. To continue this analogy one scene depicts figures seeming to be delivered as if born or shaped out of the environment itself (Fig 13).

We Are: A Body of Men

A commentary line identifies the soldier subject as the 'salt of the earth' and also 'the awfully grand'. A scene depicts a route march in twilight or dark mist (Fig 13). The shot has a grey-blue palette. The surrounding landscape is barely visible while other elements are more clearly defined, including rifles fitted with bayonets, creases in camouflage uniforms, and soft hats. The

²² See Stephen Morris, "British Army is Targeting Young People Report Shows," Published July 9 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2017/jul/09/british-army-is-targeting-working-class-young-people-report-shows>

²³ Army MOD. Gavin Williamson announces recruitment changes. See "All British Armed Forces roles now open to women," published 25 October, 2018 <https://www.army.mod.uk/news-and-events/news/2018/10/women-in-ground-closecombat-roles/>

²⁴ Commander Field Army, Lieutenant General Patrick Sanders CBE DSO comments on the MOD announcement. "All British Armed Forces roles now open to women," <https://www.army.mod.uk/news-and-events/news/2018/10/women-in-ground-close-combat-roles/>

²⁵ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 135.



Fig 13.

soldiers' faces appear covered over by gauze, which exaggerates the blurring of identity. The imagery reflects the commentary, where faceless soldiers appear to be delivered out of the landscape and mist – an echo perhaps of the military breeding programme as expressed by the Ministry of Defence. The physical body gives way to the social body: identities are diffuse, and the ritualised march is performed as if it were a dance. The cultural theorist Victoria Basham refers to state armies and their 'tactical teams' as 'bodies of men'.²⁶ Here, idealised masculinity is determined by its relationship with the greater 'body'. In *Who We Are*, individual bodies, particularly on the march or in action are blurred, blobbed, disembodied or incomplete within the scene.

This imagery raises questions reminiscent of Foucault's 'Docile Body' of the soldier subject. Foucault's text describes the classification, manipulation and correction of the soldier's body. He writes, 'The body, required to be docile in its minutest operations, opposes and shows the conditions of functioning proper to an organism. Disciplinary power has as its correlative an individuality that is not only analytical and 'cellular', but also natural and 'organic'.²⁷ The military body is made or even bred from the salt of the earth.

In following shots the awfully grand as described in the commentary line, are rendered in sharp focus – much like those who do poorly. Common to both these scenes – described in oppositional terms – are environments that are controlled, interior and inactive. The contrast between the sharp focus associated with safe interiority and blur, as it relates to military acts of destruction, is reinforced towards the end of the film when there is an abrupt change in aesthetics to reveal ten studio photographs depicting the gendered and ethnic identities of three women and seven men (Fig 14). The photographs show proud graduates who look directly at the lens, displayed as objects for the mantelpiece at home. As an indication of Beugnet and Misek's

²⁶ Basham "The importance of military masculinities for the conduct of state sanctioned violence," 30.

²⁷ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (London: Penguin, 1975), 156.

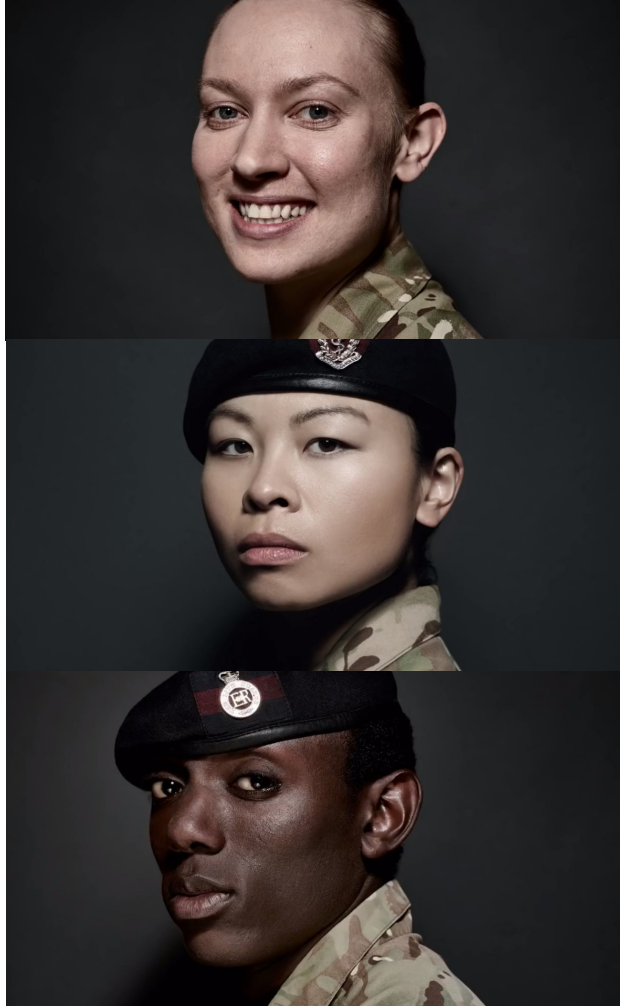


Fig 14.

analysis the blur of action serves as a foil that augments the high definition associated the photographic stasis of doing nothing and being awfully grand. Similarly 'doing poorly' is indicted by the frozen gaze of the man in the hood. In these cases, with the stilling of action and in the absence of military destruction, identities can be revealed.

Who We Are operates on a number of contradictory levels. In much the same vein as the examples from the News at Ten, a blurring of the subject has the effect of displacing the body and the subjective identity, and in this context also displacing aspects of these simulations of war that in reality would include violence, death, injury and suffering. To explore this idea further I turn to the second concept of controlled error, where I draw a connection between the camerawork in *This is Belonging 2*, Robert Capa's Second World War photography and Gerhard Richter's signature use of blur in painting. Through these examples I will discuss ways that blur operates a controlling mechanism which is reliant on the missing, obscured or distorted elements within a scene. I start with Robert Capa whose 1944 photographs arguably set a precedent for an aesthetic associated with violence through the manipulation of visual error.

Controlled Error – Omaha Beach Landings

In his analysis of documentary photography, the former Times newspaper editor Harold Evans draws a parallel between blur and narrative manipulation. For Evans the process 'indicates turbulence, a disturbance of the status quo. It is therefore very usefully deployed where anxiety has to be suggested'.²⁸ He writes, 'What we mostly seek, of course, is controlled blur of elements of the picture, or directional unsharpness as it is sometimes called, rather than

²⁸ Evans, Harold, *Pictures on a Page: Photojournalism, Graphics and Picture Editing* (Hampshire: Book Club Associates. 1979), 83.

uncontrolled, undifferentiated blur associated with camera shake.²⁹ In Robert Capa's Omaha Beach landings on D-Day, June 6, 1944, such a photographic turbulence was achieved through genuine and uncontrolled error.³⁰ According to Evans, Capa photographed from behind a burnt-out amphibious tank, but without raising his head (Figs 15 - 17). These pictures have come to symbolise an uncontrolled violence associated with war, death and heroism. As I will discuss later through *This is Belonging 2*, controlled error is utilised to convey an illusion of turbulence and anxiety associated with a route march in hostile conditions. Capa's photographs have the effect of denying visual access to the individual soldier subject, but with this the image opens up spaces for imagination. The viewer is invited to complete the image and its associated military fantasy of adventure or comradeship. The soldier could be you or me, valiant or defeated.

The images of the Omaha beach landings demonstrate the reflexivity that comes with imperfection. For Beugnet and Misek an imperfect image allows 'a powerful way to engage our imagination, to play on our desire to see'.³¹ The viewer is drawn to those elements that are suggested but can never be fully understood. Hal Foster invokes a Lacanian perspective, where the blurred, flawed or limited image speaks to a desire in the viewer to apprehend 'the real', or those elements outside consciousness and a framing of reality. In other words, Foster's 'real' refers to those elements that are beyond, behind or outside a visual experience. It may also be applied to those elements that are covered over, distorted or concealed from the viewer's field of vision.



Fig 15–17.

²⁹ Evans, *Pictures on a Page: Photojournalism, Graphics and Picture Editing*, 83.

³⁰ Robert Capa, "US troops' first assault on Omaha Beach during the D-Day landings." Normandy, France. Robert Capa © International Center of Photography US troops' first assault on Omaha Beach during the D-Day landings. Normandy, France, June 6, 1944. © Robert Capa © International Center of Photography | Magnum Photos.

³¹ Beugnet and Misek, *In Praise of Blur*, 2017.



Fig 18. Gerhard Richter, *Betty*



Fig 19. Gerhard Richter, *Dead*

The perfect illusion is not possible and even if it were possible it would not answer the question of the real, which always remains, behind and beyond, to lure us. This is so because the real cannot be represented, indeed it is defined as such, as the negative of the symbolic, a missed encounter a lost object.³²

In this formula blur works through its potential to deliver both anxiety and desire, not through representation but through its withdrawal. It is worth returning to Gerhard Richter whose work illustrates the tension between a simultaneous presence and absence within and beyond the frame. The painting *Betty* (1988) depicts Richter's daughter, whose body is twisted away from the viewer (Fig 18). *Betty's* posture adds movement to the painting which is further enhanced by a scraping of the canvas surface to give the effect of blur. For Achim Borchardt-Hume it is her posture that provides a tension, 'We experience an intense desire for her to address us and to release us from the mystery of her appearance. The impossibility of this desire ever being fulfilled makes it all the more fervent.'³³ Here blur acts as a reminder of the impossibility of the image. The viewer desires those elements that are beyond their means. In the case of *Betty*, the elements that are blurred or missing from the frame perhaps come to symbolise parental anxiety about the loss of the child and of childhood.³⁴

Richter borrows and repurposes images from popular culture and news reportage which he then breaks down, covers over or rubs away. By utilising a scraping and erasing technique, Richter draws attention away from image content and towards the materiality of its surface. With this approach subjectivity is further called into question. Peter Gidal writes of ways that Richter's defocused photo-paintings reject, 'any single form of representation

³² Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real* (Massachusetts: October, 1995, 2001), 141.

³³ Borchardt-Hume "Dreh Dich Nicht Um": Don't Turn Around. Richter's Paintings of the Late 1980s" in *Gerhard Richter: Panorama. A Retrospective* (London: Tate, 2001), 163.

³⁴ Borchardt-Hume "Dreh Dich Nicht Um": Don't Turn Around. Richter's Paintings of the Late 1980s" in *Gerhard Richter: Panorama. A Retrospective*, 164.

even in one picture.' (writer's italics)³⁵ The 1988 painting titled *Dead* which is part of his series of Baader-Meinhof pictures titled *18. October 1977, 1988*, explores the tensions found in a desire to see and a simultaneous refusal to confront the horrors that representation allows (Fig 19). The painting borrows, displaces and re-imagines a newspaper image of Ulrike Meinhof, a member of the West German terrorist group the Red Army Faction, after she was hanged in her cell. She lies dead and face up on a slab against a black void with a ligature around her neck. Her image is lit by a camera flash which serves as a reminder that the painting is a copy from a newspaper photograph and not an original. This detail draws attention to the absences brought about by reproduction. Richter says of the painting, 'All the pictures are dull, grey, mostly very blurred, diffuse. Their presence is the horror of the hard-to-bear refusal to answer, to explain, to give an opinion. I'm not sure whether the pictures ask anything: they provoke contradiction through their hopelessness and desolation; their lack of partisanship.'³⁶ *Dead* perhaps offers a reminder of the limitations of representation but also its ability to filter violence, and to avoid those aspects that are too difficult to confront. In its material layering, the subject is rendered as a shadowy blurred profile. Attention is drawn instead to the interface between viewer and the materiality of the image surface. Typically then, with Richter's *Dead* the subject of the painting is also the object of the subjective gaze of the viewer. Richter's use of blur offers a reminder to the viewer that the subject, Ulrike Meinhof, is also a material object, a painting. Richter's use of blur then is self-reflexive in the way that it draws the eye to the materiality of the surface and to the frame – and the framing of violence. Gidal writes, 'Richter's work abjures concepts of truth and the lived historical – in this vein the Baader-Meinhof pictures, *18. October 1977, 1988*, are not history painting, they are the impossibility of history

³⁵ Peter Gidal, 'The Polemics of Paint' in *Gerhard Richter: Painting in the Nineties* (London: Anthony d'Offay Gallery, 1995), 27.

³⁶ Richter, 'Notes for a press conference', November-December 1988 (Museum Haus Esters, Krefeld, February 1989), reprinted in Richter 2009, 203 in Borchardt-Hume "'Dreh Dich Nicht Um': Don't Turn Around. Richter's Paintings of the Late 1980s", in *Gerhard Richter: Panorama. A Retrospective*, 166.

painting.'³⁷ The 'impossibility' of *Dead* then as it is rendered through blur, creates a condition for the viewer where an encounter with the painting becomes a negotiated act of seeing both subject in Meinhof and object in a painting of Meinhof and vice versa. All elements within the frame and the frame itself are made equal, 'everything equally important and equally unimportant'.³⁸

The contradiction of blur is found in its capacity to simultaneously conceal information and to open up possibilities of looking, interpreting and making. Its hopeful nature lies in its avoidance of the fixity of sharp definition and thus privileges viewer perception and imagination. Yet for Richter the hopelessness of the blurred image belies a superficiality associated with reportage: its lack of partisanship, its refusal to fully show or name violence and horror as it occurs and is witnessed. Such a hopelessness is described in Judith Butler's account of the framing of 21st Century war. Butler challenges a perceived visual and cultural erasure of corporeality in war. What is at stake here is not what is shown, but the way in which the image is constructed to either conceal or reveal 'how it shows what it shows. The "how" not only organises the image but works to organise our perceptions and thinking as well'.³⁹ Furthermore, in arguing that the disavowal of the vulnerable body is an expedient aspect of the visual mediation of war, Butler offers the following reminder, 'No amount of will or wealth can eliminate the possibilities of illness or accident for a living body, although both can be mobilized to service that illusion.'⁴⁰

In Butler's account and as illustrated by Richter's *Dead*, blur may be interpreted as something that is produced as a material apparatus for the mediation, aestheticisation and disavowal of the vulnerable body and with this the gendered subject. Such a use of controlled error is worth considering in

³⁷ Gidal, "The Polemics of Paint", 30.

³⁸ Gerhard Richter, *Text, Writings, Interviews and Letters 1961-2007*, eds Dietmar Elger and Hans Ulrich Obrist (London: Thames and Hudson 2009), 33.

³⁹ Butler, *Frames of War*, 71.

⁴⁰ Butler, *Frames of War*, 30.

the interpretation of the British military film *This is Belonging 2*, where subjective identity is challenged by the material construction of camera turbulence and blur.

Controlling Error: *This is Belonging 2*

This is Belonging 2 deploys the controlled turbulence that is resonant with Harold Evans' account of the D-Day landings (Fig 20). Washed out lighting, blurred subjectivities silhouetted against the skyline and camera shake challenge and celebrate dominant fictions associated with empowered masculinities. The thirty-second film describes the route march of a 'body of men'⁴¹, on a mountain ridge in snow and wind. They overcome the hardships of their environment through comradeship, ironic humour, cohesion in their movement, which is performed almost as a dance, and through song. There is little dialogue to guide the viewer through this narrative. An intricate sound-mix blends wind noise with the whistling of a popular cinema tune. This accompanies a controlled use of blur, realised through hand-held cinematography. Towards the end of the advertisement, there is a shift in focus from landscape to subject, so that incoherence in blur gives way to coherence in sharp focus, where a sense of achievement, and a controlling mastery over the environment, offers narrative closure. This is predominantly conveyed through lens technology and sound design. Cinematic and sound techniques emphasise some aspects of the scene through the de-emphasis of others.

Seven silhouettes form a queue along a snow-covered scree on a mountain ridge. Another distant range occupies the horizon. The figures are costumed in camouflage uniforms with helmets, packs and rifles. The

foreground is defocused. Mist and snowflakes further obscure the shot. Wind noise indicates that the terrain and conditions are physically challenging. Several shots capture figures from different angles, laden down and in blur. Identities are obscured through misted grainy imagery. A handheld camera and discontinuous editing add to the sense of confusion. There is a closeup of a foot slipping on icy snow. A soldier falls to his knees. Another lifts him back onto to his feet. The wind whistles, and in a call and response instinct a soldier mimics its sound. The steady, slow and purposeful footfall of the men develops into a slow dance which coincides with the soldiers singing in barely audible voices 'Time of My Life', from the film *Dirty Dancing* (1987). Other soldiers fall into step, their bodies gently pulsing, and they echo the same movement. As the men near the ridge of the mountain the snow appears to subside and the soldiers come into focus. It is at this point in the closing shots that dialogue is heard with a payoff that introduces for the first and last time the symbolic idea of soldiers as if they are cattle, and of the prospects of death, 'You sound like a dying cow'.

Blur and sharp focus are deployed as a dialectical tool in *This is Belonging 2*. Blur signifies lack of control, turbulence and unsteadiness. Sharp focus equals safety, fraternity, and mastery over the environment. This formula resonates with the aesthetics of *Who We Are* where sharpness signals inaction and safety. Blur indicates the heroic turbulence of military action. An account of this may be offered by utilising a deconstructed formula that prioritises the trace elements that are suppressed in the imagery and narrative of *This is Belonging 2*. Imagine that the soldiers do not overcome the environment, they do not fall into step and they do not achieve their goals. Imagine the notion of success and heroic valour in terms of its trace or blurred elements, failure – doing poorly. Imagine this as a narrative that sustains

⁴¹ Basham, "The importance of military masculinities for the conduct of state sanctioned violence", 30.



Fig 20

those moments of physical injury, hardship and suffering and refuses closure as it is conveyed through imagery associated with comradeship, cohesion and conquest, that is offered in sharp focus at the end of the film.

There is a plethora of imagery associated with this scenario in Hollywood cinema. Elisabeth Krimmer and Suzanne Kord examine Hollywood representations during the 1990s where empowered masculine bodies represented empowered national identity.⁴² The authors look to Sally Robinson who notes that Hollywood examples 'frame the male body in a narrative that moves from objectification/eroticisation, through to a temporary destruction that 'masochises' the male body, and ends in a regeneration of that body and a re-emergence of phallic masculinity'.⁴³ It is within this context that Kaja Silverman considers ways in which a dominant fiction symbolises the male body in terms of strength. For Silverman strength is defined by material vulnerability and a series of negations or negative cycles which lead to inevitable destruction.⁴⁴ Similarly, Susan Jeffords looks to the Rambo franchise where the idealised masculine body is appropriated for political ends. According to Jeffords, *First Blood* (1982) reflects an unstable political ideology so that 'Although definitions of the masculine body were key to the formation of national and popular cultures throughout the 1980s, those bodies and definitions were neither stable nor consistent.'⁴⁵ Furthermore, Hollywood cinematic constructions reflect Basham's research into the mediated fantasy whose foundations can be found in Hollywood and that informs a predominantly homosocial and exclusive culture, 'The soldier hero is a robust and highly influential form of idealised masculinity, particularly in the contemporary Western world.'⁴⁶ Yet in *This is Belonging 2* and *Who We Are*, masculine strength and endurance are often unstable. It is perhaps unsurprising that the viewer is denied the opportunity to identify with an

⁴² Elisabeth Krimmer and Kord, Suzanne, *Contemporary Hollywood Masculinities: Gender, Genre and Politics* (New York, Hampshire: Palgrave McMillan, 2011), 6.

⁴³ Sally Robinson, *Marked Men: White Masculinity in Crisis* (New York: Columbia University, 2000), 136.

⁴⁴ Silverman, *Male Subjectivity at the Margins* (London: Routledge, 1992), 216.

⁴⁵ Jeffords, *Hard Bodies* (New Jersey and New Brunswick: Rutgers, 2004), 13.

⁴⁶ Basham 'The importance of military masculinities for the conduct of state sanctioned violence', 30.

embodied muscular hero that might represent the guts that bring glory. The bodies of the British soldiers are not presented to be desired or eroticised through bodily ruination and possible restoration in Silverman's terms. They are constructed and thus 'operate' as universal bodies, that in the new inclusive army could be ours. Indeed, if 'base-fed recruitment' is preferred, they could be the bodies of our precious vulnerable children.

Conclusion: Masculinity, Identity, Blur

In closing it is worth returning to the first lines of *Who We Are*: 'This is the story about the guts that bring glory. As some succeed and others do poorly. These 'guts' relate to the idiom of courage, nerve and valour, and yet the use of the word holds many contradictory and therefore blurred interpretations. They are not entrails or intestines. They are not the state of being extremely disappointed. These guts have nothing to do with confession; saying something you should not. No-one is spilling their guts metaphorically or actually within these films. Nor are guts or gutting in any way associated with serrated knives or other instruments which would be used to open up the abdomen of a fish or mammal before cooking. Guts here are not related to threat. These guts are not bloody or gruesome. The films *Who We Are* and *This is Belonging Part 2* are not blood and guts movies. In these films blurred courageous soldiers occupy an aspirational world in which many of its individual subjects are hidden. Blur diffuses the possibility of injury or death, that would be central to fixed representations of the heroic military figure.

My provocations into the two texts *This is Belonging 2* and *Who We Are* identify the multiple interpretations that can be read through the instabilities surrounding the material construction of blur. As the examples in the military

films, television news, photographs and painting show, blur precludes any single or fixed account what is happening in a given scene or image. The material construction of blur then is pertinent to the diverse and often contradictory techniques employed in the construction of gendered military subjectivities in the military films under discussion. Therefore, my investigation does not reveal a definitive explanation or 'truth' concealed through lens technology. Rather it asks questions concerning the purpose and meaning behind ambiguous visualisations of the gendered body in the appeal for new military recruits. After all, by definition, blur is unclear and undecidable.

The next chapter builds on the ambiguities surrounding subjectivity, the body and the idea of masculine military cohesion. It directly addresses the fraught relationships between homosocial bonding, military identity and a patrimonial legacy founded on a deep-seated misogyny and a fear and mistrust of others. First I direct the reader to a series of works titled, *Army Photographer Captures Her Own Death* (2020) which take the form of a four-minute film, ten captioned photographs and the script for a performed paper that I delivered at a festival and conference in 2020. Its starting point is a news image which was taken during US operations in the Afghan war of 2012.⁴⁷ The work parallels rather than illustrate the concerns of this chapter including the interrelation between subjects and objects in the framing of military violence. It concerns the blurred spaces between what the image does and what it says it is doing and addresses the visual absence of military identity. The work also applies a deconstructed formula which is central to the project's methodology.

⁴⁷ Fox New Channel, "Army Photographer Captures her own Death in Mortar Explosion," Fox News Channel and Associated Press, last updated 23 May 2017 <https://www.foxnews.com/us/army-photographer-captures-her-own-death-in-mortar-explosion>

Army Photographer Captures Her Own Death is viewed at:

<https://www.kirstenadkins.co.uk/>

I have included here the transcript of my notes for the performed paper which accompanies the film. Following on from this are ten captioned stills which are included in the work. These can also be accessed on the website.

Army Photographer Captures Her Own Death (script notes for film and performance)

“The primary inspiration for my short film *Army Photographer Captures her Own Death*, is a photograph of a violent accident that happened during the war in Afghanistan in 2013. The film also includes audio recordings of a blackbird in spring. There is wind noise, microphone hiss and cable rattle. The microphone also picks up distant cars and occasional plane sounds. I filmed close-up footage of blossom on a blue spring day . This was then juxtaposed with two borrowed clips of exploding buildings from a Hollywood film. The outcome, *Army Photographer Captures Her Own Death*, makes connections and creates collisions between dissonant elements. It fastens one element to another and in so doing, creates a kind of exaggerated, artificial unity. Through editing, a harmony is created, that is built on an imaginary logic where desert explosions are fastened to birdsong and springtime blossom. By focusing on the formal elements of colour and shape, a desert explosion becomes reminiscent of springtime blossom against a blue sky.

On May 3rd 2017, the journal of the US army, *Military Review* published an image which had been taken five years earlier. A mortar tube accidentally exploded during an Afghan national army training exercise in Lagham province in Afghanistan. The accident killed four Afghan soldiers and a US

military photographer, 22 year old Hilda Clayton. The Afghan soldiers were un-named in the press release that came out five years after the event. I searched archives and press reports for their names but could not find them. *Military Review* titled its article,⁴⁸

“Spc. (specialist) Hilda I. Clayton”

The photograph had been taken by Hilda Clayton, the photographer who was killed in the attack. In the article, *Military Review* stated that they do not usually publish military photographs. But this edition of the journal was focused on promoting the concepts of gender equality. Therefore the image was released as an illustration of the dangers that military women face in training and combat. The photograph operated as a testimony to inclusivity in the US military – so the article claimed.

As a reader, I am told that the image illustrates gender equality. It is a representation of gender equality, because the accompanying article tells me that it is.

The released image was published by Western news media. The BBC said, ‘US photographer captures the moment of her own death.’⁴⁹ The use of the word, “moment” is significant. The image operates as evidence that a photograph was taken. The moment of a shutter click is more important than the contents of its frame.

Fox News wrote, ‘Army Photographer Captures her Own Death in Mortar Explosion.’⁵⁰

The implication of this headline is that she photographed her own death and not that she was taking a photograph at the moment she died, as described in the BBC article. In the Fox News caption the thing that is imagined (her death) is detached from the imagery contained within the limits

⁴⁸ Military Review, “Spc. Hilda I. Clayton. May 21, 1991 to July 2, 2013.” Army University Press. published, May – June 2017, <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/Military-Review/English-Edition-Archives/May-June-2017/Clayton-cover-3/>

⁴⁹ BBC News, “US Photographer Captured Moment of her Death in Afghanistan, BBC News World | US, Canada, published May 3, 2017.” US <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-39798988>

⁵⁰ Fox New Channel, “Army Photographer Captures her own Death in Mortar Explosion,” Fox News Channel and Associated Press, last updated 23 May 2017 <https://www.foxnews.com/us/army-photographer-captures-her-own-death-in-mortar-explosion>

of the frame (the death of other male Afghan soldiers). What is visualised within the limits of the frame does not behave according to its description. In a way the image is liberated from words. The image is what I, you or Fox News says it is.

My intervention investigates the blurred spaces between what this image does and what it says it is doing — a testimony to gender equality, a spontaneous moment, a woman capturing her own death. In my initial reading of the image, I would have said she was capturing the death of someone else. But I was also intrigued by the image because of the formal conventions, dominant and recessive colours, and the pyramid shape, that was reminiscent of a familiar and pleasing aesthetic. The image reminded me of the explosion scene at the end of the 1970 Antonioni film, *Zabriskie Point*. And the spring blossom in 2020, reminded me of the photograph taken by Hilda Clayton.

Images are changed by words. They are also changed by the viewer's experience and history. The picture represents one thing, it says another. The way it is seen is dependent on many other factors.

It was spring this year in lockdown (2020), My city garden was unusually quiet and during the month of April the sky was blue and mostly cloudless. I lay on my back in the garden of my house in the very early morning because I couldn't sleep. A blackbird was singing in the early morning. Its song was loud and drifted in and out, layered with the occasional car or gust of wind.

When I started working on the film, I associated Hilda Clayton's photograph with an unfolding spring, and blackbird song and blossom against a blue sky. The composite elements included bullets, shrapnel, camouflage, helmet, fire.

And colours in the photograph are process colours — process blue,

lemon yellow, magenta. Dominant reds and oranges against a recessive sky.

In his book *Iconology*, William Mitchell writes about the things people say about image and the way they talk about images.⁵¹ For me this image is cinematic. It is composed in a pyramid formation. It contains movement from right to left. It reminds me of the Hollywood obsession with pyrotechnics, beautiful destruction for aesthetic pleasure.

For me the image follows a cinematic patrimony that echoes something seen before, in mainstream and cult cinema. I imagine *Zabriskie Point*, with its exploding, wardrobes, bookcases and fridges with slow motion chickens and apples hurtling through space against a blue Californian sky, accompanied by a Pink Floyd soundtrack.

I split the screen as a signal to the infinite possible combinations of shape, space, colour, light, blur, pixels and objects. The use of blackbird song also indicates the blurring of meaning. I am reminded of the 90's reality TV show Big Brother, where contestants' defamatory conversations were redacted with the use of birdsong. Big Brother also favoured the colour blue — a colour of fantasy and escape.

In her essay "Medya: Autonomy of Images", Hito Steyerl describes 'unintelligible' criteria; shapes, colours, lines of random code and intermittent pulses of light when she asks if a situation will arise in which images are multiplied and reproduced to the point beyond representation.⁵² Desktop reproduction, amounts to a continual shifting in meaning, such that the content of the image gradually breaks down to the point of being unintelligible.

This, we are told is an image of a military training exercise
Of teamwork and heroic bravery
This is an image that won a photography competition

⁵¹ W.J.T Mitchell, *Iconology, Image, Text Ideology* (Chicago and London: Chicago University Press Ltd, 1986) 1.

⁵² Hito Steyerl, "Medya: Autonomy of Images," in *Duty Free Art: Art in the Age of Planetary Civil War* (London: Verso, 2017) 63 – 73.

This is an image of a woman who kept on 'snapping' right up to the moment of her death according to one news report.

This is an image of equal gender opportunities in Western state militaries

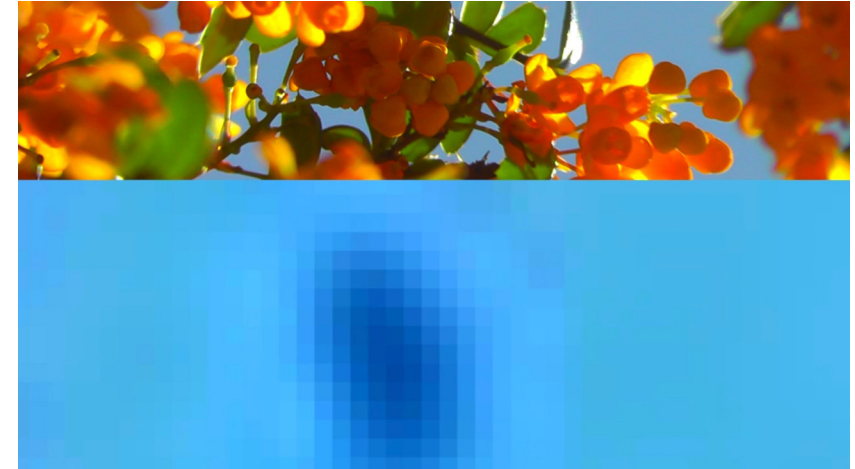
This is an image of a sunny day.

Shrapnel is flying through the air.

This is an image in which what is represented within the limits of the frame is all but abandoned, so that new meaning may be ascribed to each new reproduction.

This is an image in which bodies are either absent from the frame, or if they are represented they are necessarily unidentified. The face and head is occluded in the frame. This is an image of four soldiers who died, un-named and I cannot find their names. A framing that to quote Judith Butler, 'silences the question of who counts as a who'.⁵³

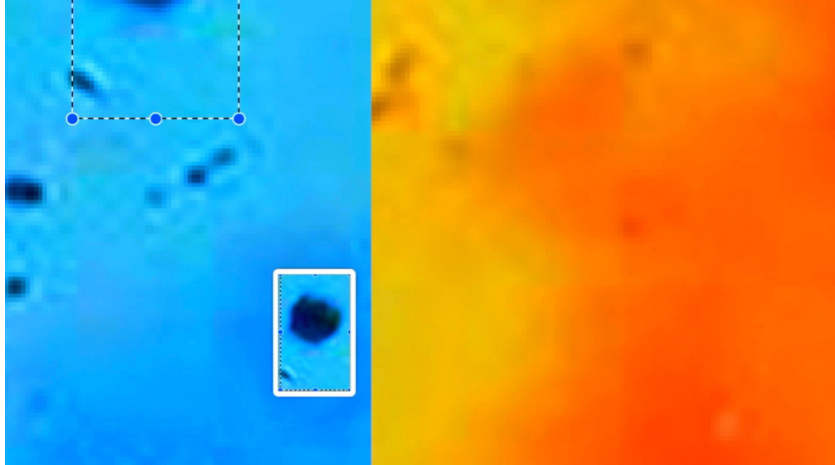
⁵³ Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable* (London:Verso, 2016) 163.



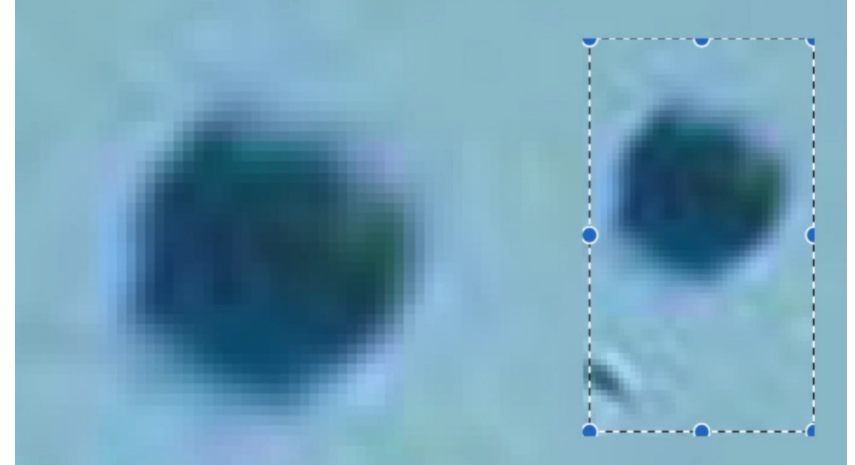
Army Photographer Captures Her Own Death (Film, stills and performance text, 2020)



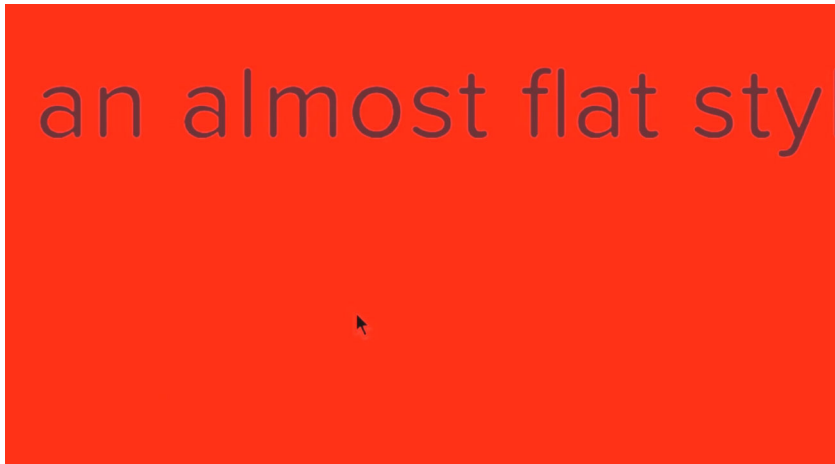
This is a picture of a military training exercise



This is an image of teamwork



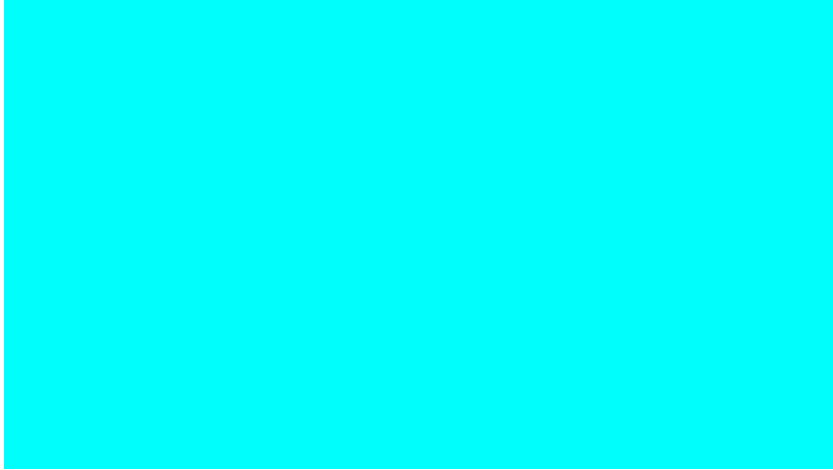
This is an image of heroic bravery



This picture won a photography competition



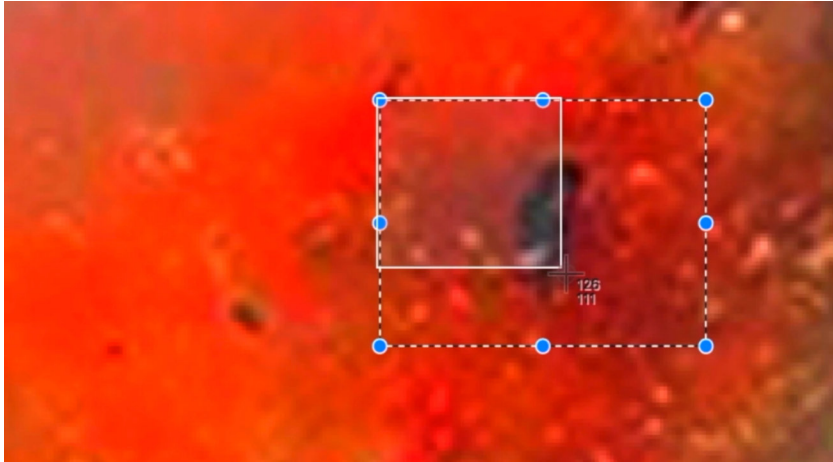
This is a picture of a woman who kept on filming according to one news report



This is an image of equal opportunities in the US military



This is an explosion and a body that is unidentifiable, as is the shrapnel and ammunition that is flying through the air



This is a picture of a sunny day



In this picture the face, head and body are missing from the frame



Chapter 2:

SPACE:

Shapes and the Cartography of Belonging.

How we have the world is a matter of the shape we impose on it.

Michael Shapiro

The military recruitment film *Keeping my Faith*¹ avoids traditional masculinist stereotypes in its appeal to civilians to join the army, irrespective of their race, gender, faith or sexuality.² The advert forms one aspect of the larger campaign series *This is Belonging*, which directs its focus away from war and weaponry and towards themes of care, shelter and military solidarity. In the film a British Muslim soldier performs the prayer ritual Salah on a mountainside while his troop sit in a semi-circular horseshoe shaped formation around him (Fig 21).

A wide shot establishes the man in a clearing of boggy scrubland. He is encircled by his military unit as he makes his preparations. The troop has just marched up the shoulder of a mountain and is stopping by a stream to rest. The soldier faces towards an expansive landscape in the far distance. An armed and camouflaged troop of men and women look on as they eat sandwiches. What follows is a series of elliptical close-ups as he removes his rifle; his helmet is replaced with a crochet prayer cap;³ he takes off his boots and places them on the sodden undergrowth; he then rolls out his prayer mat and washes in a stream. A moment of chatter behind him is silenced with a hand gesture by a female member of the group as the prayer starts. In the foreground another soldier lifts a rifle. Movement in the background and to his left reveals four more soldiers, also assuming a sniper position. As the scene unfolds, it becomes apparent that the praying man is surrounded on three sides by soldiers, armed with rifles aimed in different directions. These details are almost imperceptible on first viewing. It is only after several reviews, and through the process of

¹ British Army, "Keeping my Faith" British Army. Published January 13, 2018 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sxO9duW2guE> https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QQ4OoPNY_YM

² Advertisers Karmarama write of the *This is Belonging* campaign, "We tackled stereotypes of what it meant to be a soldier showing you didn't have to be a straight, white man, and even if you were, you didn't have to be a robot or superhero." Accessed May 21, 2018. Karmarama. <https://karmarama.com/work/this-is-belonging/>

³ I refer to a taqiyah or topi as a crochet prayer cap, typically worn by Muslim men during prayer.



Fig 21. Still from *Keeping my Faith – This is Belonging* 2018

slowing and stilling the sequence that I became fully aware of the ambiguities surrounding the praying man's status within the unit. The beginning and end of the film establishes his position as *belonging*, and therefore there is an assumption that he is protected by the others. But in this middle section, his separation from the group and the activities of the armed soldiers who surround him is unclear. The geographic spatial arrangement of characters in the scene establishes an ambivalence concerning who belongs, who is an outsider, who is being protected, who is framed as a threat and who is being threatened by the raised weapons of the soldiers who hide in the scrubland in the fore and background of the shot.

I continue my investigation into *The Incredible Disappearing Soldier*, by directing attention away from the lens, and towards a consideration of the spatial and geographic orientation of characters in military scenes. If previous interventions addressed the visual and narrative implications of focus, where subjectivity is distorted through optical manipulation or through a blurred relationship between images and language, *Space* concerns the framing methods through which the individual soldier is located in their proximity to other subjects. The *Disappearing Soldier* is imagined here in terms of a relationship between the subject and the military group where the individual 'I' gives way to the collective 'we'. Similar to the previous chapter, blur in this respect expresses a porosity between concepts of selfhood, military solidarity and otherness, which is also conveyed through juxtapositions between interior and exterior shapes and spaces through which stories of fraternal belonging are visually mapped. This spatial interplay will be explored in this chapter

The opening paragraph alludes to the idea of a horseshoe cartography. My phrase describes the geographical staging of military scenes where individual soldiers are spatially arranged in a horseshoe formation. The closed

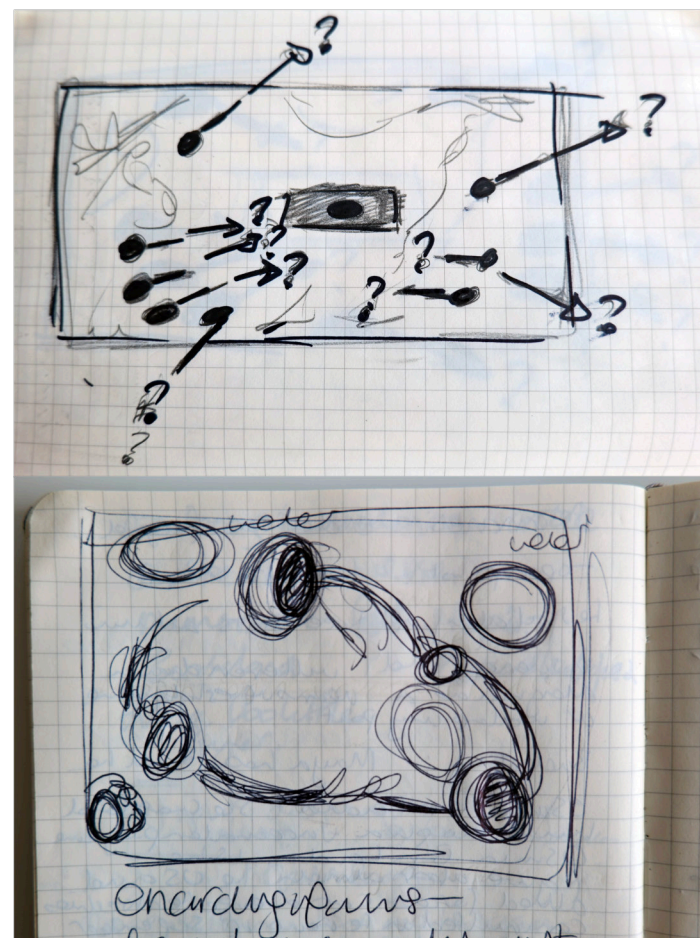
semi-circular section of the horseshoe is indicative of bonded unity between men (and occasionally women). The gap or open space, in the semi-circle suggests a vulnerability to outside threats. The horseshoe here connotes a bringing together of contradictory themes of openness and closure. Relatedly, there is an ambivalence around concepts of security and the inevitable prospect of danger that accompanies military action.

The idea of a horseshoe cartography emerged out of a methodological approach that comprised a simple diagrammatic storyboarding technique which reveals the encircled arrangement, common to a significant number of films across the series (Figs 22 and 23). In considering the spatial cartography of *Keeping my Faith*, I created a series of drawings which imagined a bird's-eye view of the praying soldier as he stands and kneels at the open end of the horseshoe formation, with his back to the armed troop that surrounds him. It was this drawing process that led me to the speculative enquiry regarding the praying man's ambivalent position. The simple shapes of lines, arrows, circles and curves led me to interpret the idea of a horseshoe cartography; a space whose blurred aesthetic is found in an unstable relationship between safety, protection and outsider threat (Fig 24).

I enlisted a similar intervention in a film and performed paper titled *Truck*, where I re-edited a film *This is Belonging part 4*.⁴ My intention here was to interrupt the narrative closure contained in the original film. Here a looping and repetition process is used to give attention to the suppressed trace elements which indicate hostile exteriority and exile, within a playful scene of military cohesion. My aim here is to consider the geographical shape of belonging and its ideological contexts and implications.

I borrow the phrase *horseshoe cartography* from the political theorist Michael Shapiro whose conceptualisation of *violent cartographies* describes

⁴ Kirsten Adkins, *Truck* (2019) Viewers are directed to view *Truck* at the end of the chapter as well. <https://www.kirstenadkins.co.uk/truck>



Figs 22 and 23. A series of quick diagrams in my notebook describe the geographical orientation of scenes discussed above as if they had been shot from aerial perspectives. The effect establishes the horseshoe thematic that guides this chapter.

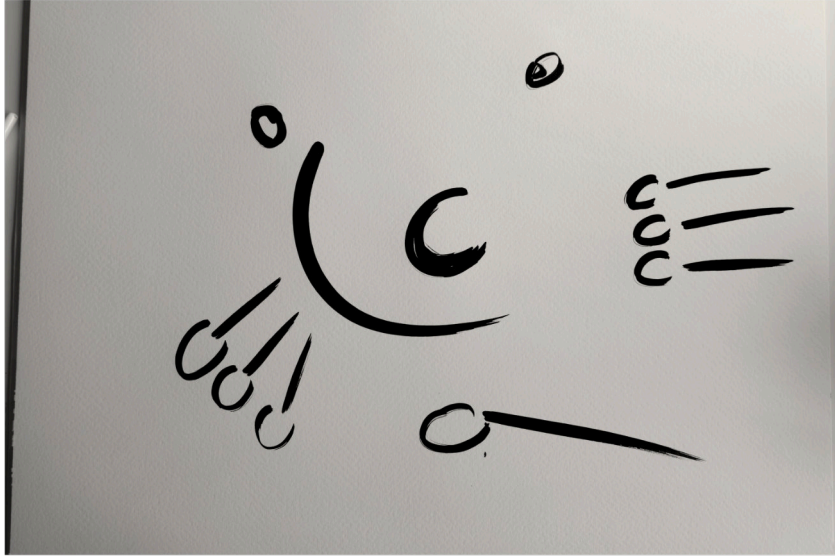


Fig 24. A cartography of belonging in *Keeping My Faith* is imagined from an aerial perspective. Lines are coded as weapons while circles denote military subjects. Curves indicate the spatial arrangement of bodies in the scene.

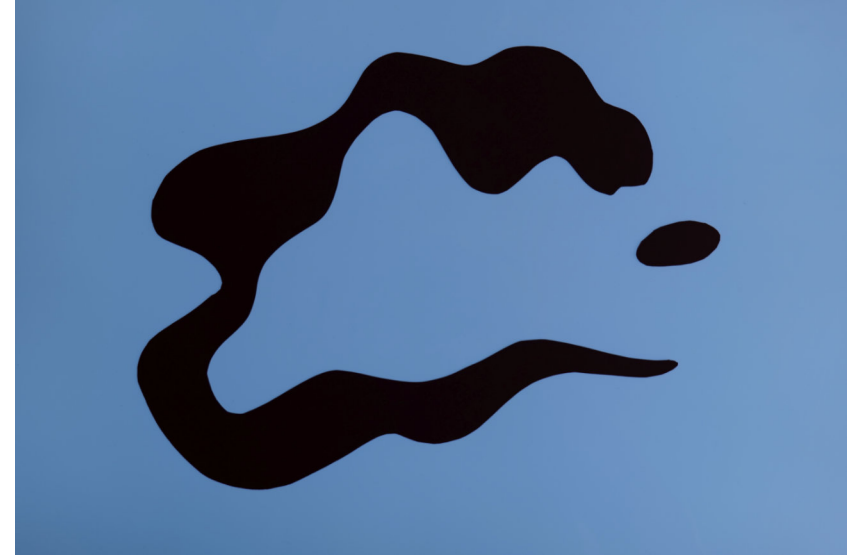


Fig 25. This image forms one aspect of a series of ten knife drawings that can be viewed as a body of work at the end of this chapter. Here, the cartography of *Keeping my Faith* is visually described using a scalpel and card drawing methods.

the political and cultural mapping of Western military aggression. For Shapiro articulations of allied self and enemy other are generated by ‘geographic imaginaries and antagonisms, based on models of identity difference’.⁵ Shapiro maps these antagonisms through diverse examples from American popular culture and news media, including contemporary embedded reportage and photography. He also explores ways that Hollywood westerns map themes of security and enmity in the landscapes of frontier America.⁶ My appropriation here is used as a method through which I consider the ideological forces that underpin the framing and mapping of homosocial military unity.⁷ It is worth noting that I describe the military unit as institutionally masculine and fraternal, and this may be irrespective of the individual gendered subjectivities in a number of the films. It is my contention that embedded hegemonic values predicated on hostility towards women cartographically shape the arrangement of male and female bodies in the scene.

Shapiro writes, ‘How we have the world is a matter of the shape we impose on it.’⁸ As part of this argument he extends the idea of an ‘aesthetic Patrimony’⁹: a template or heritage through which cultural hierarchies are established, embedded and naturalised over time. For Shapiro, this idea relates to geopolitical power dynamics between states and state subjects in times of war. He draws on Foucault’s theorisations on the relationships between the subject, governmentality and militarism referred to as biopolitics. In Foucault’s words these are, ‘The mechanism through which the basic biological features of the human species become the object of a political strategy, of a general strategy of power’.¹⁰ In such an analysis, an aesthetic patrimony operates as a cultural palimpsest which has its genealogy in mythologies, including Homeric narratives of Odysseus and the Sirens, as I

⁵ Michael Shapiro, “The New Violent Cartography” in *Security Dialogue* 38(3) (Sage Publishing, 2007), 291.

⁶ Shapiro draws on John Ford’s 1953 classic film *The Searchers* to map the frontier legacy that he claims underpins US and allied aggression. See “The New Violent Cartography”.

will discuss later, that are repeated over time until they become an established normative position. Heroes and villains — and visual cartographies — interior and exterior spaces — are appropriated in ways that reflect particular state ideologies at a specific given time. In other words, the economies of belonging and exile are dependent on the instabilities associated with social and political change. Yet, as this chapter asserts, the horseshoe cartography prevails. The characters may have changed, but the visual mapping of military cohesion reinforces homosocial stereotypes, which on the surface may appear to be contested in many of the adverts.

I approach this task from a chronological perspective, taking in a period of a hundred years starting with an example from World War One propaganda: a staged photograph titled *Shelling out in a Shell Hole*¹¹ spatially arranges troops to form semi-circular, inward-facing huddles, turning their backs on the external dangers of trench warfare. I also look to comparable imagery in two adverts from a series produced almost a century later between 2006 and 2008 titled *Forward as One*. Of this series, the films *Armoured Infantry*¹² and *Aircraft Assault Force*¹³ also convey a horseshoe thematic, where all-male units indulge in the combined pursuit of hedonistic pleasure and military action. Finally, I look to geographic orientations in the 2017 and 2018 recruitment campaign *This is Belonging*, where such themes are suppressed in favour of the quiet contemplation of military togetherness. Here I respond to the two films, *Keeping my Faith* and *This is Belonging part 4*¹⁴. It is in this context that women and minority ethnic and sexual minority groups are depicted as welcome inclusions to the fraternal pack. However, their spatial cartographies take on a similar horseshoe thematic, seen in previous examples spanning a century of military promotion and which traditionally are coded as exclusively male spaces.

⁷ Homosocial in this definition draws on Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s original description of ‘male homosocial desire’, as it applies to activities including male bonding, friendship, mentorship as well as erotic desire coupled with intense homophobia, fear, hatred and rivalry. See Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 1.

⁸ Shapiro, “The New Violent Cartography,” 294.

⁹ Shapiro, “The New Violent Cartography,” 293.

¹⁰ Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France 1977-78* (Hampshire: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004) 1.

In this respect, the chapter considers ways that the horseshoe cartography may be conceived as an articulation of heteronormative and hegemonic masculine traits. This is notwithstanding the diverse gendered and ethnic characterisations in some of the military scenes that will be discussed. I look to contemporary debates concerning womens' and minority groups' roles in armed combat that were ongoing during the production of the adverts.¹⁵ The chapter extends theorisations by Carole Pateman to define the fraternal unit as 'a patriarchal pact'¹⁶ that establishes and reinforces hegemonic rights over women and other groups that are not us. Military and government reports produced in the US and UK highlighted an almost exclusively heterosexual masculine culture predicated on a fear and mistrust of women and other identity groups.¹⁷ This is an ongoing reality that is counter-positional to the narrative visualisations in many British military recruitment films made towards the end of the second decade of this century. With this contention in mind I consider a cultural palimpsest, or in Shapiros' words 'patrimony', that underpins the shape of belonging across the corpus of films under examination. I start at the beginning of the 20th Century, and a photographic scene of military cohesion amid an unspecified but devastated war zone of continental Europe.

1915: *Shelling Out in a Hell-Hole*: Cartography, Belonging and Horseshoes

*'With characteristic placidity the officers of a certain regiment on the western front utilised a shell-hole as the local branch of their pay department, and, comfortably installed at the bottom, "shelled out" their pay to the men on the presentation of their pay-books.'*¹⁸ (Fig 26)

¹¹ "Shelling Out in a Shell Hole" in *The War Illustrated* vol 5 No. 117, (London: Amalgamated Press Limited, November 11 1916) 302.

¹² British Army, "Armoured Infantry," *asteroid_miké*. Published July 8, 2006 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lp-jqJB81U>

¹³ British Army, "Air Assault Infantry," *asteroid_miké*. Published July 8, 2006 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=weudbL9XCQ>

¹⁴ British Army, "This is Belonging part 4," *Army Jobs*. Published February 2, 2017 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G5onVRzmDD8>



Fig 26. 1915: *Shelling Out in a Hell-Hole*: Cartography, Belonging and Horseshoes

The understated tones of *This is Belonging* and the cheerful camaraderie of *Forward as One* owe their quintessentially British legacy to propaganda imagery of the First World War. Tea and a kickabout, gentle teasing and stoical resolve in the face of violence and adversity exemplify the visual rhetoric shared across all three campaigns. With this a patrimony is shaped and repeated throughout a century of British war. The photograph *Shelling Out in a Shell-Hole* illustrates the quiet, pragmatic heroics in a British regiment. A bomb crater is redesigned as a shelter and an office for troops. Violence is recognised and interrupted through the pun on the word 'shell'. This 'joke' has an effect of shifting focus away from the realities of enemy attack and toward the mundane activities of paying salaries. In relation to this, its visual cartography is typical of the patrimonial template that would be repeated in later military scenes.

Eight soldiers gather in a muddy crater formed out of the landscape, to collect their wage packets. The men are standing, grouped together as a bonded unit. The shell-hole, a site of violent destruction, forms a natural circular bunker. In the foreground there is a makeshift table, where three seated figures shell out wages to the standing assembly that encircles them. This is an intimate and ordinary moment of sharing and settlement. A pathos perhaps lies in the juxtaposition of the benign grouping of subjects, with the carnage of the battlefield outside and beyond the frame. The eye is drawn to two outstretched hands. At a crucial moment of the exchange fingers touch in a gesture of giving and receiving. A momentary bond across the makeshift table allows for a brief completion of the scene and with this a precarious solidarity is established. On first viewing, *Shelling Out in a Shell Hole* offers a reassuring message of calm, order and familiar ordinariness. Subjective anonymity is established through the elevated positioning of the camera,

which captures the tops of tin helmets and obscures faces. From this viewpoint the hole is somewhat redolent of an open grave, which perhaps offers a reminder that these wages are being paid for the job of killing and dying in the defence of the nation.

Here a British First World War cartography emerges out of the incomplete circle, with soldiers turning in on themselves. Their backs form a barrier of sorts to external forces. Such propaganda may be interpreted as the promotion of a national identity, so sure of its imminent victory, that it is able to turn away from the enemy, get on with mundane tasks, and even find time for humour. The horseshoe composition of *Shelling Out in a Shell Hole* matches later constructions including the gendered mapping of unity in recruitment films produced after 9/11. Shapiro writes of violent cartography as a phenomenon that is subject to reification, achieved through biopolitical patterns that are repeated over time 'the dominant geopolitical map has been imposed on the world by power rather than simply emerging as an evolutionary historical inevitability'.¹⁹ Military unity as a homogenised male domain is similarly reified as 'a place in which the self can be realised or perfected'.²⁰ However, military 'selfhood' in this analysis includes behaviours such as strength and self-control, as well as a shared bonding, primarily exemplified as masculine in its cultural construction. Masculinity is thus associated with rituals of behaviour and performance and by this account may be dissociated from the biological condition of being male or female.

In this respect I will now draw a comparison between *Shelling Out in a Shell Hole* and two examples from the military recruitment series, *Forward as One*, produced in 2006. In a similar vein these military adverts combine imagery which conveys masculine warrior stoicism, with playful humour. It also maps masculine military cohesion through a horseshoe cartography that

¹⁵ Ministry of Defence, Report On the Review of the Exclusion of Women from Ground Close-Combat Roles, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/27403/Report_review_excl_woman_combat_pr.pdf

¹⁶ Carole Pateman, "The Fraternal Social Contract" in *The Masculinity Studies Reader*, 131.

¹⁷ Thomas Szayna et al. 2016 Considerations for Integrating Women into Closed Occupations in US Special Operations Forces. Rand Corporation, Accessed 13 May, 2021, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1058.html

¹⁸ "Shelling Out in a Shell Hole" in *The War Illustrated* vol 5 No. 117, 302.

¹⁹ Shapiro, *Violent Cartographies: Mapping Cultures of War* 15.

²⁰ Shapiro, "The New Violent Cartography," 107.

reinforces the dominance of the fraternal pack against hostilities which are visualised in this series as occupying the symbolic form of women. Scenes of military cohesion indicate a cultural patrimony which resonates with mythologies that date as far back as Homer's *Odyssey*.

2006 Forward as One: Cohesion, Compassion, Courage and the Enemy Within

*Your next encounter will be with the Sirens, who bewitch everybody who approaches them. There is no homecoming for the man who draws near them unawares and hears the Sirens' voices; no welcome from his wife, no little children brightening at their father's return. For with their high clear song the Sirens bewitch him, as they sit there in a meadow piled high with the mouldering skeletons of men, whose withered skin hangs on their bones.*²¹

*'For the rush. For the Challenge. For the Action. To help. To protect. To serve. For the places. For the people. For the laughs. For the compassion. With courage. With Confidence. As a unit.'*²²

In *Shelling Out in a Shell Hole*, a British military masculinity is imagined as irreverent. It avoids representations of danger and the soldiers gain status in their relationship with other men. This patrimony is spatially mapped in a circular maternal enfolding that constitutes safety but with the potential of vulnerability through the open and closed spaces in the scenes. It is worth noting that in 2006, when British military action was at its most violent, themes of masculine bonding, redolent of the 1915 imagery, were thematically

²¹ Homer: *The Odyssey* Revised translation by D.C.H Rieu, (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 158.

striking.²³ The *Forward as One* campaign comprised five adverts where the homosocial pact belonged exclusively to men. These adverts were made when British troops were fighting Taliban forces in Helmand province; a war that would ultimately kill four hundred and fifty-seven British soldiers.²⁴

The recruitment campaign combines active combat with hedonistic pleasure (Fig 27). This is realized in a cartography that establishes a separation between the fraternal all-male unit, which undertakes dangerous missions, and civilian women whose presence is connoted for erotic value, and therefore a threat to masculine prowess - women distract men from the important duties of soldiering. Watching the films I was reminded of Odysseus and his crew's encounter with the Sirens. The campaign simultaneously promotes brotherhood, humanitarianism, bombs, grenades and female temptation. The films are characterised by match-framing in editing, which has the effect of compressing time and space. The men journey through places and time zones in thirty-second bursts, working together to rescue children and to destroy landscapes; women appear in swimwear or as pleasurable temptation. Such scenes are constructed in line with the horseshoe thematic as I will outline in two examples from the series.

The advert *Forward as One: Armoured Infantry*²⁵ introduces a military troop of four men who carry a stretcher across a battlefield and towards a medical tent. On the stretcher lies a shrouded body, whose exposed feet occupy the foreground of the frame. A visual match-cut creates the transition from war zone to a beach paradise as the soldiers pass in and out of the tent. The new scene is orientated in a horseshoe cartography: while the spatial composition of bodies is the same, the gendered characters are transformed. The four heroic male soldiers of the previous shot are transposed by four women in bikinis, running in the same formation, this time encircling and

²² I refer to the opening commentary for "Forward as One: Armoured Infantry," <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lfp-jqJB81U23> See Ministry of Defence, "British Fatalities: Operations in Afghanistan" Accessed 4 August, 2021, <https://www.gov.uk/government/fields-of-operation/afghanistan?text=British%20fatalities%20in%20Afghanistan&text=As%20at%2023%20July%202015.a%20result%20of%20hostile%20action>.



Fig 27. Film stills from *Forward As One* campaign

carrying one of the male soldiers, featured in the preceding scene. In a similar positioning to the injured man on the stretcher of the previous shot, the soldier is positioned as recumbent and submissive. His feet also dominate the foreground as he is carried by the laughing women towards the sea. The soldier's comrades join in, running alongside the women. The reclined victim appears to submit and to resist at the same time as his body wriggles in protest. Here the strong military body is not challenged by the enemy in war, but by women, disrupting military purpose. The match-cutting of the scene connects the realities of injury with the heroics of masculine soldiering, and the playful subordination to women when the soldiers are at rest and unguarded. In the next shot the camera adopts the 'victim's' point of view, as he is thrown into the sea. The screen is blurred by water, and the soldier's body disappears into its void. An invisible match-cut restores masculine military heroism with the rescue of a baby from a devastated flood scene and into the safe hands of the British soldier. Notably, in line with *Keeping my Faith* and many other films in the series discussed here, this short film follows a three-act structure, where military cohesion is established, disrupted and then restored at the end. Military masculinity is firmly reinforced in the battle zone, challenged by women, and restored through the rescue scene at the end of the advert.

The recumbent soldier in *Light Infantry*, serves as an allegorical reminder that he is an instrument of war: an erotic trace element of vulnerability, delivered through his momentary submission, enfolded and carried by women and delivered into the sea, in a echo of the Legend of Odysseus and the sirens. As Homeric legend established the fragility of the warrior hero is determined by an inevitable prospect of injury or death that comes not only with military action, but with the desire associated with pursuit. Narratives

²⁴ Many more civilians and enemy fighters lost their lives. However as the next chapter will discuss, these lives were not counted by Allied forces. See also BBC report <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-35159951> which offers a timeline of British conflict in Afghanistan against Taliban fighters between 2001 and 2015.

²⁵ In "Forward as One: Armoured Infantry," <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lfp-jqJB81U>

surrounding the material vulnerability of the body creates a 'textual loop' in which the body breaks down, is revived and restored, to be broken down again.²⁶ Here the strong military body is not challenged by war, but by women, who serve as metaphor for the danger posed to a military unity.

The second film in the series, *Forward as One, Air Assault Infantry*, follows a similar trajectory and features a group of four soldiers whose cartography also echoes a mythological encounter with women.²⁷ An abseiling sequence visualises a descent through a jungle floor and into a watery landscape in which distorted limbs appear to writhe and flail. Another invisible cut depicts an aerial shot which looks down on an encircled group of airmen in a nightclub. The watery limbs of the preceding shot are transposed into dancing women and men. In the next shot one of the men pulls his comrade out from the throng of writhing dancers, and through the doors of the club, into another battle scene. However, just before the soldiers leave the club, they momentarily pass a single woman positioned in the foreground of the shot and partially blocking the doorway. Her gaze is directed downwards away from the men. In this moment she is framed as a distracting temptation away from military action and this poses a threat to masculine cohesion. In line with the three-act structure, the men are able to resist her temptations and continue with the masculine pursuit of defending their nation.²⁸ The men pass through the nightclub and into an aircraft carrier that will transport them to an imaginary desert war-zone.

The *Forward as One* series reflects a masculinity that concurs with research into UK and US military attitudes. In a 1996 study of the US Navy, Frank Barrett observes that behaviours are largely constructed through 'associations of difference' and emerge through 'collective practices' and 'organisational patterns'²⁹ including uniformity, cleanliness and obedience.

²⁶ Silverman - repeated from introduction and chapter 1 more research

²⁷ British Army. "Forward as One: Air Assault Infantry" 2006 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=weudbl9tXCQ>

²⁸ The thematics of *Forward as One* echo Laura Mulvey's 1975 essay "Visual Pleasures and Narrative Cinema" where she observed the visual codes in Hollywood cinema which associated masculinity with activity and looking, while the female protagonist is connoted for her to-be-looked-at-ness, thus stilling the action. See Mulvey, Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in *The Sexual Subject: A Screen Reader in Sexuality*, edited by M. Merck (London: Routledge, 1975, 1992), 22-34.

²⁹ Barrett, "The Organizational Construction of Hegemonic Masculinity," 78

Barrett notes that US recruits are assimilated into almost exclusively male groups cut off from their communities and from cultural norms and behaviours. These disciplines and their associated assumptions of heterosexuality, aggression, lack of emotion, physical endurance and self-care are by no means taken for granted. Instead, they are continually tested within the military trials that the men undertake on a routine basis. Inclusion in the group is dependent on those who pass these trials. Self-control in the face of distractions by outside elements, including women, may constitute failure. A threat to this cohesion would therefore occur through loss of control; disobedience, disorder, distraction and dirt.

Bodies, Blood, Filth, Water, and Holes.

Victoria Basham writes of the role that women play in military cohesion. 'Women's bodies fulfil a symbolic and integral role in male military bonding [...] but their actual presence is a different matter. Women's bodies are often regarded as weak, leaky and reproductively problematic.'³⁰ Basham's observations point towards an entrenched cultural mythology which positions women as a disruption to fraternal military bonding, indicated in the *Forward as One* series. I turn to Klaus Theweleit's analysis of letters and writings of the Freikorps, a fascist volunteer army in post-Weimar Germany. Theweleit's work provides an account of the 'fantasies' in which women's bodies and blood are framed a metaphor for enemy threats, including the 'red tide' of communism. The Freikorps refers here to the laws and commandments of the bible. The fall of Adam when seduced by Eve offers a reminder that sexual restraint equates with power and hierarchical control.³¹ As Barbara Ehrenreich describes in her foreword to Theweleit, 'Women's bodies are the holes,

³⁰ Victoria Basham, "Gender and Militaries: The Importance of Military Masculinities for State Sanctioned Violence," in *Handbook on Gender and War*, ed. Simona Sharoni, Julia Welland, Linda Steiner and Jennifer Pedersen (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2016), 29. 36.

³¹ Klaus Theweleit, *Male Fantasies 1: Women, Floods, Bodies*, History (Cambridge: Polity, 1987) 408.

swamps, pits of muck that can engulf.’³² In Theweleit’s fantasies, women’s bodies symbolize, for the military male body, a loss of control, a breakdown, a contamination of the military group and subsequently a danger to national security. Similarly, Carole Pateman theorises that ‘women are “opposite” to and “outside” the fraternal social contract’,³³ which has been ‘constructed in opposition to women and all that our bodies symbolise’.³⁴ This is reflected in the simple and repeated cartography of *Forward as One* where men form circles, break circles or are encircled. Male soldiers are immersed in water by swimwear-clad women; they are enfolded in sweaty arms and legs on the nightclub floor. A century before that, masculine stoicism is arguably threatened by the symbolically feminine cartography of the filth and muck in a shell hole. However, such constructions are based on a nostalgia for a collective heroism, which would come to be challenged in British military policies on the inclusion of women and minority groups into all areas of military combat in the second decade of this century.

2010: Close With and Kill the Enemy

During the first decade after 9/11, with battles fought in Iraq and Afghanistan, Western Allied governments were also debating the exclusion of women from fighting combat roles. The British Government undertook a series of exercises to evaluate the preservation of all-male combat troops. The Ministry of Defence (MOD) profiled eighteen nations, including countries in Europe, the US, Canada and Australia. In 2010 the MOD reported that it had found no evidence that women would fail to meet the standards required for performing in ‘close with and kill the enemy’ ground combat teams.³⁵ Their exclusion prevailed however and this was hinged on the report’s definition of cohesion,

³² Barbara Ehrenreich, “Foreword” in *Male Fantasies 1: Women, Floods, Bodies, History*, xii.

³³ Pateman, *The Fraternal Social Contract*, 126.

³⁴ Pateman, *The Fraternal Social Contract*, 131.

³⁵ Ministry of Defence UK. 2010. *Report On the Review of the Exclusion of Women from Ground Close-Combat Roles*, 2.

‘A source of moral fortitude to fight and keep on fighting [...] Moral cohesion depends on cultural solidarity, shared experience, a common sense of worth [...] It embodied genuine and deep comradeship that endured notwithstanding violence and fear of death and injury.’³⁶ The report concluded that because there was no evidence that women would either enhance or undermine cohesion, the status quo of all male units would be upheld for six more years.³⁷

Three years later a similar report emerged from the United States. The global policy think-tank RAND³⁸ conducted an impact review into the inclusion of women in close combat teams or special operations forces (SOFs). Integral to the report was a survey and focus group made up of SOFs. The research uncovered a ‘strong, deep seated and intensely felt opposition’³⁹ to a proposed integration of women into all-male SOFs. Personnel also raised concerns about women’s health, the impact of menstruation on performance and the risk of pregnancy to ‘unit readiness’.⁴⁰ All these factors provided a perceived threat to cohesion, based not on discernible facts but on existing mythologies concerning a mistrust of women, their sexuality and on reproductive differences.

In 2016 a High Court ruling and two UK Government white papers finally welcomed sexual minorities and women to the military. This overturned a gender culture which dated back to the inception of the modern state forces.⁴¹ It was during this period that two high-profile campaigns, both titled *This is Belonging*, framed stories of love and warmth through a unitary identity found in military togetherness. However, in many cases a horseshoe cartography points towards an ambiguity surrounding the messages of inclusivity. Furthermore, such rhetoric does not reflect the realities of military recruitment

³⁶ Ministry of Defence UK. 2010. *Report On the Review of the Exclusion of Women from Ground Close-Combat Roles*, 6.

³⁷ Ministry of Defence UK. 2010. *Report On the Review of the Exclusion of Women from Ground Close-Combat Roles*, 9.

³⁸ The US global policy think tank RAND conducts research and analysis to US Armed Forces. Source <https://www.rand.org/about/glance.html>

³⁹ Szayna and Larson et al. *Considerations for Integrating Women into Closed Occupations in US Special Operations Forces*, (California:Rand Corporation, 2016), xi.

⁴⁰ Szayna and Larson et al. *Considerations for Integrating Women into Closed Occupations in US Special Operations Forces*, 10.

⁴¹ Cromwell’s English ‘New Model Army’ dates back to 1645 and the Civil War. See Encyclopedia Britannica, British Army <https://www.britannica.com/topic/British-Army>

which, during the time that I am writing, still almost exclusively favours male heteronormativity. Twenty years previously a policy which excluded sexual minority groups was challenged and overturned by the European Court of Human Rights.⁴² Prior to this the Ministry of Defence had strongly defended this exclusion on the grounds that homosexuality was ‘incompatible with service’ based on its potential to ‘cause offence, polarise relationships, induce ill-discipline and as a consequence, damage morale’.⁴³ The government department has since apologised to all service men and women who had faced persecution and discrimination before the ban on homosexuals serving in the armed forces was lifted.⁴⁴ Still, according to contemporaneous research into the bonded practices of the British Army, conducted by social theorists Rachel Woodward and Trish Winter, a culture of the ‘bonded male team’ that excludes sexual and minority groups prevails. The researchers also observed that uniform sameness and shared repeated rituals equated with a homosocial group identity. Military sameness was expressed as a key to military cohesion. This was generated through specific body practices, including shared physical hardships, and the encouragement of male group nakedness within the military unit which served ‘as an insistent reminder that the group are “one body”’.⁴⁵ Here a heteronormative ritual occurs where male bodies, that are the same as other male bodies, are distinguished against different male bodies and of course female bodies.⁴⁶

An almost exclusively male heterosexual demographic in ranks, described in Woodward and Winter’s research, challenges the aspiration of military diversity. *This is Belonging* seeks to transform the dream of inclusivity into a demographic reality: Can I be gay, emotional, physically weak, belonging to a

⁴² Fred Attewill and agencies, “Defence ministry apologises for gay discrimination” Guardian Online. Accessed 31 May, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2007/jun/28/gayrights.military>

⁴³ See Basham who quotes the Ministry of Defence UK, 1996 “Report of the Homosexuality Assessment Team”, in *Gender and Militaries: the importance of military masculinities for the conduct of state sanctioned violence*, 37. See also BBC News, “Military Gay Ban Illegal” BBC News UK. Published September 27, 1999. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/458625.stm>

⁴⁴ Fred Attewill and agencies, “Defence ministry apologises for gay discrimination” <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2007/jun/28/gayrights.military>

⁴⁵ Rachel Woodward and Trish Winter, *Sexing the Soldier: The politics of gender and the contemporary British army* (Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2007), 68.

⁴⁶ See Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985)

minority ethnic group or a woman and still join the army? A narrative theme is repeated throughout the campaign. Firstly, it addresses social, physical and health problems: yes you can be emotional, your mental health will be supported, you do not have to be physically strong to enter the army – we will train you up. In addition to this, the campaign has a similar message for different minority and identity groups, also framed as a problem: yes you can be gay, religious and women are welcome into military units. It is notable that belonging to a minority identity or being a woman is framed as a deficiency that may be overcome through military unity. In this account military masculinities are, to follow Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s thinking, transactional in nature and may conceivably be consumed or rejected by anyone irrespective of race, gender or sexuality.⁴⁷ In a series of short animations that form one aspect of the campaign, a voiceover provides a description of how potential heroes confront societal aggression, competitiveness, greed, bigotry and sexism, outside of and before they enter the army.⁴⁸ The films directly avoid scenes of action, or heroics or violence, focusing on the quieter moments of down time. Yet the horseshoe cartography prevails. To illustrate this I now return to the advert *Keeping My Faith*, which opens this chapter before I turn to *This is Belonging 4* and my edited version *Truck* where narrative closure is interrupted in the editing platform. In both examples from the series, establishment, disruption and subsequent re-affirmation of military cohesion, is cartographically realised in a horseshoe formation.

This is Belonging - Keeping My Faith⁴⁹

When I first viewed the quiet scenes of *Keeping my Faith* it appeared to offer an authentic glimpse into the ordinary habitual experience of an inclusive

⁴⁷ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “Gosh Boy George, You Must Be Awfully Secure In Your Masculinity” in *Constructing Masculinities*, 11-20.

⁴⁸ British Army. “*This is Belonging 2018*,” Triuneself. Published January 10, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q1VCe3BANws>

⁴⁹ Keeping my Faith - *This is Belonging - Army Jobs* Published Jan 13 2018. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OQ4OoPNY_YM



military family. Yet after repeated interventions of slowing, freezing and reversing the film, a narrative of belonging and its ideological message of inclusion appear to be challenged within the diegesis of the film itself. As discussed at the beginning of the chapter, the advert offers a thematic of intersectionality, care and intimacy, while simultaneously illuminating difference, otherness and threat through geographical arrangements of soldiers' bodies and gestural behaviours within the scene. Such a 'structural ambivalence',⁵⁰ displaces narrative certainty to allow for often contradictory viewpoints which reflect diverse convictions or prejudices of the target audience.

The Moslem soldier is established as isolated and alone from the beginning of the film. A hand-held camera follows the back of his helmeted head as he walks through a boggy landscape, past three soldiers who are already seated and together on a small rocky outcrop. His ambivalent status is created through a visual cartography that exaggerates the spaces between him and other characters in the scene. This is established in the uncertain terrain of mountain, swamp and grassland that makes up the location where the troop stops to rest. For the most part he is turned away from the camera and the assembled troop that encircles him and so eye contact between him and the others is denied. Similarly the viewer is often denied full access to his character through the lens. Later in the film a series of tight close-ups further reinforces his isolation from his group, and his vulnerability is completed by a lack of awareness as he appears to be deep in prayer. In the wide shot the camera pulls focus to reveal the encircling snipers and this further reinforces his oblivion and his vulnerability. Guns are pointed in different directions – some of them towards him and others away. I was able to map these ambiguities through drawings and later paper cuts, where I re-imagined the

⁵⁰ Lisa Purse cites the introduction to Richard Maltby, *Hollywood Cinema* (1995) 2nd ed (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), 275.

mise en scène from an aerial perspective. My diagrams offered a possible narrative in which the scene becomes dangerously ambiguous. A narrative of care has a distinctive sense of threat.

2018 Fraternity into Exile - This is Belonging 4

*'A sense of belonging may sound like a small thing. Yet it fuels you as much as food and water, because it doesn't just feed your body, if feeds your mind and soul.'*⁵¹

A similar cartography in which inclusion is reinforced through the prospect of otherness as seen in *Keeping my Faith* can be mapped through drawing in *This is Belonging 4*. The film also plays on a narrative of hostile threat and the violence of exile that is performed as an innocent joke (fig 28). The scene starts with an ordinary tyre blow-out in a desert landscape. A soldier, Dan, gets out of the back of the truck and fixes the wheel. Much of the film visualises him as alone in a vast and hostile desert, filmed through a wide-angle lens to further exaggerate his diminution in the landscape. His isolation is counterposed with a close interiority of the crowded Land Rover truck with canvas sides and an open back. On fixing the wheel, Dan tries to jump into the truck. At a critical moment it moves off, leaving him behind. The truck stops, he tries again and it moves off once more. Dan's teasing comrades form a semi-circular positioning in the warm interior of the truck. Their arm gestures seen looking back through the interior to Dan in the desert behind, and repeated encouragement with 'Come on Dan' appears to invite him in. The scene develops into one which prioritises a sense of physical proximity,



Fig 28. Film still from *This is Belonging 4*, which has been reappropriated and revised by me as *Truck*

⁵¹ I refer here to the caption that accompanies *This is Belonging 4*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G5onVRzmDDE>

warmth and comradeship - which is denied to Dan who is left on the outside, alone in the vast and hostile desert. Military unity is shaped by a horseshoe cartography inside the truck, comprising male and female soldiers. Dan fulfils the role of playful male soldier in line with previous examples, yet here he is framed as an outsider separated from the military unit.

A moment of gentle cruelty is resolved in the original thirty second advertisement and with this a narrative of belonging is re-established and reinforced. Applying my deconstructed formula, I borrowed the film, placed it into the editing timeline and extended the middle section through a blended process of repetition and continuity editing. My purpose was to open up the film's violent trace elements that were suppressed by the narrative of playful teasing and unitary care in the original film. My intervention accentuates Dan's magnanimity, performed through a small gestural shake of the head and the wave of the tyre iron and I am reminded of the mundane ordinariness of *Shell Hole*. By extending the middle section of the sequence, Dan's vulnerable predicament, and by association the vulnerable potential for all soldiers, is enhanced. The importance of shelter and belonging, growth and stability is reinforced through an extended glimpse at the alternative.⁵² Dan should be under the tarpaulin where his physical and psychological well-being can be restored. In this cartography, the open section of the truck constitutes the gap in the horseshoe as a location of a narrative tension, found in the hostile environments for those jettisoned from the fraternal military unit. Conversely, the enfolded and closed off semi-circular section of the truck reflects a restoration of narrative stability. This is further signified by the inward-facing cartography of subjects as Dan finally jumps onto the tailgate, pulled into caring arms; a ruffle of his hair and all is safe and well.

⁵² A version of *Truck* extends the middle section of "This is Belonging 4" for seventeen minutes for a performed paper, audiences reported uncomfortable viewing. *Truck* <https://www.kirstenadkins.co.uk/truck>

Conclusion

A visual cartography of belonging is found inside the arc that forms the horseshoe. A semi-circular formation of men, and sometimes women, offers protection but always with the possibility of danger. A horseshoe cartography is repeated through a narrative patrimony associated with mythologies surrounding fraternity, military training and controlled violence. Those who are forbidden, those who cannot sustain the ongoing performance of control, cleanliness, discipline and sameness risk the prospect of exile. I am reminded of the film *Who We Are* in Chapter 1, where the man who is marked as symbol of doing poorly is brought into sharp focus, presumably jettisoned from the homosocial ranks of military action, conversely diffused by a dreamlike, 'Gaussian blur'.⁵³ Such a patrimony is strong and firmly embedded in the continuing ideologies surrounding a British military masculinity and perpetually reinforced through cinematographic means: blur and sharp focus, or the geographic arrangement of bodies in the scene.

This chapter concludes that both series *This is Belonging* and *Forward as One* spatially compose scenes whose cartography is based on a patrimony which excludes women and other minority groups. Unlike *Forward as One*, *This is Belonging* rejects obvious displays of dominant male heterosexuality, preferring more progressive and inclusive representations. Yet much of its imagery spatially positions the subjects in a semi-enclosed circular formation - strength is achieved not through the physical strengthening of the individual, the strong man with muscles and physical might, but when it is bonded with other bodies in a group. *This is Belonging* appears on first viewing to sensitively acknowledge the politics of intersectionality, recognising multiple social hierarchies including gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality and social class. In much the same way as in *Shelling Out in a Shell-Hole* the realities of killing

⁵³ "Who We Are," <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sxO9duW2guE> as discussed in Chapter 1.

⁵⁴ Butler, *Frames of War*, 142.

and dying are supplanted by themes of group identity, care and acceptance.⁵⁴ However, an imagined sense of belonging is also reliant on the trace elements that exists outside and beyond its boundaries. Belonging gains its coherence through the possibilities of exile, exclusion or infiltration by others who do not belong. The idea that the army has a place for everyone amounts to an impossibility. War needs enemies, and in the framing of the war on terror, enemies are like potential military recruits: they could be anyone or everyone. I conclude then that irrespective of the gender, sexuality and ethnicities of the characters, the shape of belonging is homosocial in its cartography.

The next chapter continues the discussion of military belonging and enemy threat, by guiding its focus towards the technical and ideological framing of subjectivity and hostile otherness. Chapter 3, titled *Frame*, explores the conception of absent presences where the bodies of soldiers and their enemies are missing from scenes of violence. Before the reader turns to Chapter 3 they are directed towards my deconstructed film intervention *Truck* (2018) and the series of captioned images titled *Knife Drawings* (2021), where a cartography of belonging and exile is separated and isolated from other aspects within scenes of homosocial bonding. In *Knife Drawings* this cartography is visually mapped using a scalpel and card. In *Truck* the three-act structure of an existing recruitment is cut-up, and reformed so that narrative closure is disavowed. The cutting of the film, perhaps constitutes an intervention which is in Mulvey's words, an act of violence, against narrative cohesion and against the intentions of the authors of the original film.⁵⁵ Both practice interventions are accessed through <https://www.kirstenadkins.co.uk/> and *Knife Drawings* is also integrated into this study as follows.

⁵⁵ Mulvey, "The Possessive Spectator" in *Death 24x a Second*, 161 – 180. See also my introductory chapter.



A British Soldier makes Salah on a mountainside as his troop encircle him in a horseshoe formation



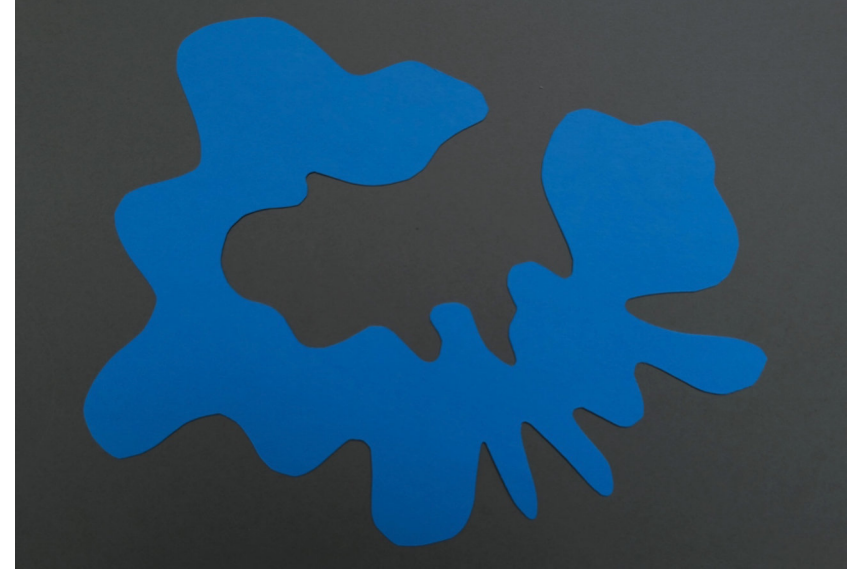
Officers on the Western Front utilised a shell-hole as a wages office and “shelled-out” pay to soldiers on presentation of their pay books 33



On a tropical beach four women carry a soldier to the sea



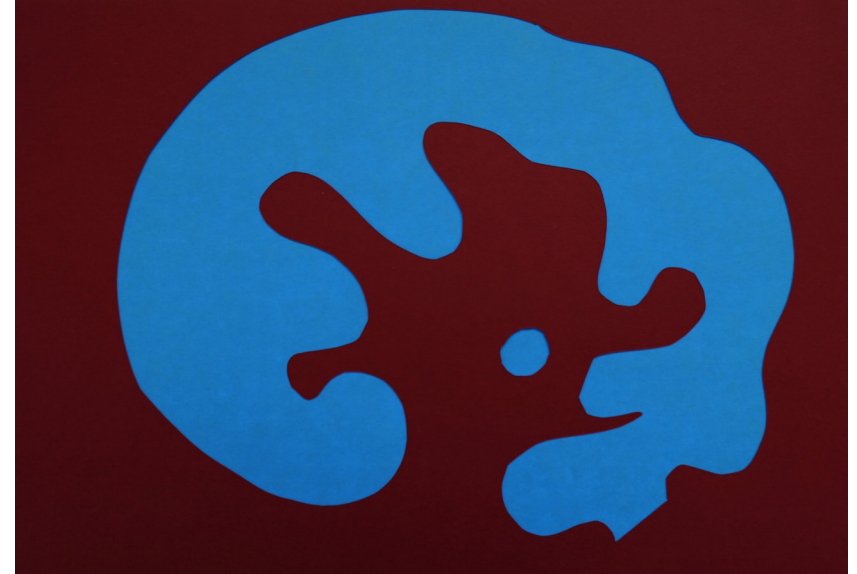
A blow out in the desert leads to an innocent joke where Dan is left behind



A parachute regiment land in a semi-circular formation on a nightclub dancefloor



A group of soldiers take shelter under a tarpaulin in a jungle monsoon, where they drink tea, clean their weapons and stare at something outside the frame



By day a military unit scouts landscapes and horizons with big weapons of war. By night they eat, drink and recuperate. In the morning they attend to rituals of cleanliness and grooming



Soldiers eat, sleep, clean weapons, shave and eat peaches in their barracks



In a bunker, a group of men load and fire mortar bombs at an unknown enemy, somewhere over there beyond the horizon



Chapter 3:

FRAME:

Invisible Bodies, Absent Threats.

A threat is only a threat if it retains an indeterminacy. If it has a form, it is not a substantial form, but a time form: a futurity. The threat is as such nothing yet - just a looming.¹

Brian Massumi

A foreshortened triangle shape of a gun directs the gaze towards its apex and then beyond to an indistinct point on a blurred horizon. A helmet-cam point-of-view shot simulates the operator's field of vision. This is accompanied by layered sounds – engine roar, machinery clicks and the crackle of radio interference, further layered with urgent but incomprehensible voices. The shot judders with the movements of the vehicle. The tank traverses a watery causeway when there is a match-cut so that dusk becomes day in a new location. A convoy of six other vehicles moves in a triangular formation towards, and then parallel to the skyline. The third travelling shot offers a rear-facing view, as this time the convoy moves away from the horizon. Three opening shots of the 2008 film *Start Thinking Soldier, What Would You Do?*² offers a 360° framing of the desert landscape. Machines and guns appear to both dominate and to be dominated by the surroundings; watery, to dry, to verdant. There are no people in these three shots. Their presence is characterised by an absent presence. Unidentified British male soldiers search for something unspecified in a vast, unknown landscape and across a protracted period of time.

My previous explorations, *Truck and Knife Drawings*, which accompany the chapter *Space* aimed to produce insights into themes of belonging, contextualised through an imaginary prospect of outsider threat. To achieve this, I identified a horseshoe cartography which relates to patterns in the spatial positioning of homosocial unity. I contend that the cartography of military cohesion is heteronormative and masculine in *shape*,

¹ Brian Massumi, *Ontopower, War, Power and the State of Perception* (USA: Duke, 2015), 175.

² British Army, "Start Thinking Soldier what would you do." (2008) yosan rai. Last Modified February 22, 2013 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4I9QFompreU>



Fig 29. Still from *Start Thinking Soldier, What Would You Do?*

irrespective of the broad intersectional characterisations within many of the films under investigation. This chapter develops these ideas by directing attention away from the geographic arrangement of bodies and toward the controlling gaze of the lens. Here gendered hierarchies are considered in their relationship with cinematography or through the camera's eye. I approach this through the technical construction of framing devices that are titled here as 'first-person' and 'point-of-view' shots. I make a distinction between the two very similar technical methods through formal theorisations by film scholar Edward Brannigan who describes the reciprocity between subjects as they are conveyed through the point-of-view or POV shot.³ In contrast to this, I also draw on works in semiotics by philosopher and media theorist Eugeni Ruggerto to discuss the how subjective experience is conveyed through the first-person shot and in the absence of physical representations of soldier subjects.⁴ Unlike the POV shot the first-person-shot does not spatially position the camera/subject in the *mise en scène* or in its relationship with other characters.

I offer a proposal that in different ways both first-person and POV shots convey the subjective views of soldiers, civilians and adversaries, so that an absence of the corporeal form becomes symbolic of a universalising hegemonic subjectivity, especially when it is conveyed through the lens. Chapter 1 introduced Brannigan's work on the hierarchical status of subject and object positions of characters in scenes, which are imagined as fluid, interchangeable and thus continually renegotiated through the apparatus of the lens. This chapter develops Brannigan's formal analysis utilising the filmmaker and theorist Noël Burch's insights into the spatial presences and absences in cinematographic framing, placing emphasis on unseen elements outside of or beyond the camera's gaze. Political articulations by feminist and

³ Edward Brannigan, *Point of View in the Cinema: A Theory of Narration and Subjectivity in Classical Film* (New York, Berlin, Amsterdam: Mouton, 1984)

⁴ Eugeni Ruggerto "First Person Shot. New forms of subjectivity between cinema and intermedia networks." In *Anàlisi: quaderns de comunicació i cultura* (2012), 19-31.

post-colonial theorists including Homi K. Bhabha and Monique Wittig intersect with ideas surrounding the universalising positioning of a surveillant camera, perceived as masculine, in its relationship with the subordinated and thus feminised object of the gaze.

My investigations are historically positioned within the rhetoric of ‘the war on terror’ during the period when key army adverts were made. Speeches by Donald Rumsfeld and George W Bush highlight ways that ideologies associated with power and enemy threat was discursively framed as shadowy, blurred and disembodied. Integral to my approach here is Judith Butler’s work on the ideological implications of the framing of violence where both the soldier and the enemy target are invariably blurred, ambivalent or missing from the scene.

These ideas are developed through interventions into two short recruitment films that belong to a six part series titled *Start Thinking Soldier: What Would You Do?*⁵ Neither of these films was individually named so I have titled them *Water* and *Flat Tyre* as they will be referred to for the duration of this chapter.⁶ The films were released during the period of the British-led operations in Helmand, Afghanistan. At this time more than three thousand British soldiers were stationed in Camp Bastion in the southern part of the province. As discussed in the previous chapter, the fighting in Helmand, carried out during the *war on terror*, led to more civilian and military deaths than in any other part of Afghanistan.⁷ The adverts formed one aspect of a wider campaign in which viewers were able to test military ‘skills’ by playing online virtual-reality *simulations* of war in a context where the *reality* of war was at its most violent and most destructive. Each film includes a dilemma and a choice; attack, intervene or run away? A common theme within the adverts is the blurring of spectatorship and participation, and this is achieved

⁵ British Army, “Start Thinking Soldier what would you do.” yosan rai. Published February 22, 2013 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4i9QFompreU>

⁶ British Army. *Start Thinking Soldier what would you do?* Accessed August 11 2021. This ‘Squaddie Edit’ is a corrupted version and the original is currently not available on the British Army Website or on YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bWylalCOZQo&t=2s>.

⁷ Ministry of Defence. “British Fatalities: Operations in Afghanistan” Gov.uk. Accessed 22 October, 2021, <https://www.gov.uk/government/fields-of-operation/afghanistan>.

through the camera lens. I extend Noël Burch’s taxonomical definition of off-screen spaces as a means of exploring the aesthetics of absence and presence in the films being scrutinised.

Absent Presences

Flat Tyre and *Water* typify a number of British military recruitment films made in the first two decades of the 21st Century where enemy threats are symbolically imagined through landscapes and horizons, often in the absence of the body. Similarly, the subjective view of the soldier is expressed through the technical simulation of what they see and hear, often in scenes which also avoid their physical represented form. Burch’s taxonomy relating to on and off-screen space provides a good starting point to articulate the absences and presences in the framing of gendered bodies and of military violence. The theorist and film maker considers cinematic framing as ‘two different kinds of space’.⁸ The first kind includes the contents of the frame; everything that is seen on screen. The second kind of space describes those elements that are necessarily absent from the frame. In the essay, Burch outlines his concept of an absent presence, categorised in six subsections or segments. The first four absences are found at the edges and beyond the limits of the four sides of the frame. The fifth segment describes the absent presence of the camera and its operator. This category includes the spaces behind or around the periphery of the lens. The sixth category describes elements that are beyond or behind the image; the other side of a door, round a corner or *over there* in the distance.⁹ Burch considers a spatiotemporal and dialectical tension between the imaginary elements outside the frame and the visual articulations within the scene. For Burch a powerful contextual resonance is found in the trace elements which have been excluded from the image. He describes this

⁸ Noël Burch, “Nana, or The Two Kinds of Space” in *Theory of Film Practice* (London: Martin Secker and Warburg Ltd, 1969) 17 – 31.

⁹ Burch, “Nana, or The Two Kinds of Space”, 17.

process through his analysis of Yasujiro Ozu's *The Only Son* (1938), in which an extended wide shot of an empty space is juxtaposed with off-screen audio, 'The longer the screen remains empty, the greater the resulting tension between screen space and off-screen space and the greater the attention concentrated on off-screen space as against screen space.'¹⁰

Burch's formula *off-screen space six* is enlisted for the purposes of this chapter to examine the absent presence of enemies, outsiders or threats. This category denotes the empty frame as it appears in the films 'over there' at the border of the visible and invisible where the outer limit 'of space is just beyond the horizon'.¹¹ As previously outlined off-screen space also relates to the area behind the camera or through the technical cinematic function where the viewer is implicated in what the camera sees. Before I continue my interventions into the film texts, it is worth further explaining my distinction between existing cinematic terms where the POV shot and the first-person shot are given different interpretations.

Point of View

The POV shot typically establishes a spatial relationship between the subjective and objective positions within the scene. It does this through a combination of establishing shots and different reversals between the subject and object of the gaze. Here, fluid and interchangeable points of view are conveyed through the lens. Brannigan describes the formal aspects of the POV shot in terms of the interaction between spectator, character, and narrative. He writes, 'The text is, then, a hierarchical series of pairs of (nominal) subjects and objects, in which a subject/object pair may at any time become an object for a higher level of subject. It is a set of Chinese boxes, one inside the other, with each successive box or level introducing a new

relation of subject/object.'¹² In Brannigan's definition, subjectivity exists in abstract terms as a visual construction through which structures of looking and identification are established. As the chapter will discuss, the POV shot is considered through feminist theory in its capacity to 'mark' the object of the gaze as feminine, and this is achieved through the subordinate, object position of the character in the scene as they are viewed through the powerful surveillant lens. The film *Water* establishes, locates and marks its female officer within a hostile scene, facilitated through a sequence of interchangeable POV shots, where consequently the viewer's subjective alignment is determined by the framing of the objects which are often other characters.

First Person Shot

Conversely, the first-person shot spatially dislocates the subject from the body. *His* point of view is established through the lens. In addition to this, an aesthetic of video gaming accurately describes the simulated narrative of *Flat Tyre*. The subject is never seen and the viewer only sees what he sees. For Ruggerto, the first-person shot is distinct from Brannigan's definition of the POV, having emerged as a consequence of historical technical developments including Steadicam, portable cameras and militarised digital devices such as the lapel, body and helmet cameras. *Flat Tyre* offers a typical first-person shot narrative, that concurs with Ruggerto's description, where the camera settles on 'neither entities or place'¹³ but offers hybridity of views through a gunsight, binoculars or the helmet. What is interesting about a number of films in the series *What Would You Do?* is the way that a sense of dislocation provided by the camera echoes a narrative dislocation characteristic of the series as a whole. The viewer is invited to see what the soldier sees, hear what the

¹⁰ Burch, "Nana, or The Two Kinds of Space", 25.

¹¹ Burch, "Nana, or The Two Kinds of Space", 17.

¹² Brannigan, *Point of View in the Cinema*, 2.

¹³ Ruggerto, "First person shot. New Forms of Subjectivity between Cinema and Intermedia Networks", 21.

soldier hears and almost feel what the soldier feels. But the viewer is never provided with an account or understanding of where the soldier is, what he is doing or why he is there.

Militainment

In *Flat Tyre* the first-person-shot aligns the subjective view of the spectator with that of the imaginary soldier. They are thus partisan and implicated in how the soldier controls their environment.¹⁴ As I will argue later, through the film *Water*, when the soldier is seen and identified they are diminished by the objectifying gaze of the lens.¹⁵ When the enemy or outsider is present, but not seen, occupying in Burch's formula off-screen space six, over there on the horizon, they are conceived as a threat to the subject, to status and to hegemonic power. These aesthetics are discussed through the conception of *militainment*, defined by Roger Stahl as 'state violence translated into an object of pleasurable consumption'.¹⁶ For Stahl, the technical construction of absence (of the enemy) and of agency (of the viewer) echoes the ideologies of the military action at the time. Stahl's neologism is reminiscent of Judith Butler's rhetorical questions in *Frames of War*, 'As we watch video or see an image, what kind of solicitation is at work? Are we being invited to take aim? Or are we conscripted into the trajectory of the bullet or missile?'¹⁷

My drawings, text and digital editing combine as a methodological tool to unpick these complexities that surround the framing of subjects and objects, presences and absences in the recruitment campaign *What Would You Do?* By separating and isolating single shots and frames I am able to examine the patterns and fluctuations within the film texts. The introductory chapter to the thesis directed the viewer to my manipulation of *Flat Tyre* as an example of this methodological approach. The ideas behind this chapter were initiated

through the practice of isolating, displacing and reconfiguring elements of the original film (Fig 30). Butler's theorisations concerning the framing of war are central to these provocations; if the soldier's body is not identified as a subject, its absence makes space for the subjective desires of the viewer. For this fantasy to work effectively the body is disavowed. In other words, if the body is excluded from the framing of violence then life hardly matters.

If certain populations ... do not count as living beings, if their bodies are construed as instruments of war or pure vessels of attack, then they are already deprived of life before they are killed, transformed into inert matter or destructive instrumentalities, and so buried before they have had a chance to live, or to become worthy of destruction, paradoxically in the name of life... So by the time we seek to apply the norm, "thou shall not kill", we have already lost sight of what and who is alive.¹⁸

In essence, the investigation into the framing of *What Would You Do?* reflects the broad concerns of the project surrounding themes of hierarchy, masculinity, subjectivity and national identity, conveyed through visual constructions of blur, uniformity, obscured and absent identities, or a *militainment* found in the first-person shot. It is within this context that I isolate and separate technical elements of *What Would You Do?* as a means of opening up reflections on the socio-political conditions through which both enemy and Allied bodies, masculine and feminine, are absent, and yet their presence is felt within the scene. Later I will discuss the framing of the female soldier subject in *Water*, but I start with a discussion of the film *Flat Tyre* where military masculinity is established through the first-person shot.

¹⁴ Paul Magrs discusses a subjective position where the reader is implicated and therefore partisan into the embodied perspective of the narrator in a story. See Magrs, "Point Of View" in *The Creative Writers Coursebook*, eds Julia Bell and Paul Magrs (London: Pan Macmillan, 2019), 130.

¹⁵ See also Mulvey, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, 1975.

¹⁶ Roger Stahl, *Militainment, Inc. War, Media, and Popular Culture*, (New York, Oxon: Routledge, 2010), 6.

¹⁷ Butler, *Frames of War*, xvii

¹⁸ Butler, *Frames of War*, xxix

Flat Tyre: What would you do?

Flat Tyre exclusively utilises the first-person shot to align the viewer's perspective with that of the soldier subject. In structural terms, this is conveyed through formal, technical considerations of space, shapes and lines and in editing terms it mostly, but not exclusively observes a rule of threes.¹⁹ As my opening description illustrates, compositional geometry in the form of spheres and triangles establishes a contrast between narratives of 'us', symbolised through inclusive circular formations, and 'them over there', compositionally constructed through triangles and single-point perspective. Leading lines guide the viewer towards the apex of the triangle. The vanishing point is found on dusty or blurred horizons. The forms within the scene are geometric *articulations* of form. They exist in the absence of substantial physical forms, including soldiers' bodies or their enemies' bodies. Through editing, the shapes of triangles and spheres lend themselves to the technical grammar of the graphic match; scene transitions are established according to matching geometric shapes. In line with Burch's formula, audio of domestic and military activity interspersed with inaudible speech and urgent breaths simultaneously evokes an absent presence of the soldier subject. The graphic match-cut also allows for the movement between different time periods. Night matches day, causeway matches desert. So in narrative terms, days, weeks or months are compressed into seconds (Fig 31). Utilising a similar aesthetic to *Forward as One*, discussed in the previous chapter, the soldier/camera traverses vast landscapes in a few moments. The editing is also fluid and fast paced; three 'exterior' triangles denoting a search for the enemy are followed by three 'interior' circles which symbolise rest and recuperation with the unit. There is little dialogue, but fragmented, unstable and repetitive imagery; searching landscapes, resting, eating, cleaning, shaving, regrouping, problem

¹⁹ British Army. "Start Thinking Soldier what would you do?" (Flat Tyre) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4l9QFompreU>



Fig 30. Exploratory drawings reveal triangular and circular formations. Here machines and landscapes dominate the frame, notably in the absence of the body.

Fig 31. Flat Tyre. Stills demonstrate the match-framing between triangular formations of the subjective view of the soldier on a mission searching for threats on dusty or blurred horizons.

solving, searching again and finally facing a life and death dilemma in which a car with a flat tyre appears near the horizon. The thirty-second advert contains twenty-three shots, some of which have a duration of less than a second. Some shots are only ten frames long, which at a frame rate of twenty-five per second, would make them almost impossible to see. A deconstructed intervention allows me to interrogate the patterns, shapes and absent presences in the visual construction of scenes²⁰ (Figs 32 - 35).

The geometry of *Flat Tyre*, immediately sets up a sense of lack in its visualisation of something that cannot be reached. The horizon will always be in retreat however fast the tank hurtles towards it. In this way militainment is found in the perpetual search, which can be analysed in Lacanian terms through the concept of sublimation.²¹ For Todd McGowan sublimation occurs when the goal or object is made unobtainable or unachievable. He writes, 'If we did not have an object that we could not obtain, we would cease to be active subjects because we would find ourselves with no incentive to act. Everything would be attainable, and nothing would be worth attaining. Sublimation provides a way for the subject to fail, and the subject satisfies itself by repeating a necessary failure. It produces satisfaction for the subject, but this satisfaction is never that of obtaining the object.'²²

Flat Tyre gives an account of such failure.²³ It would be impossible to close the gap between the subject, conveyed through the first-person shot, and the missing object on the horizon, which is always present and always renewed. Here sublimation relates to the insufficient satisfaction found in the impossibility of finding the thing that the subject is looking for because the thing is unknown; the object that is being pursued does not exist as a material form. Instead, it is framed by the camera as a hazy diffusion blown out by the glare of sunlight or dust (Fig 36). The horizon, because it is a horizon, will

never be reached. The subject is not a body but gains its identity only in its relationship with its surroundings and with other bodies, as the next three shots, which take on a circular geometry illustrate (Fig 37). A circular geometry, resonates with the horseshoe cartography of Chapter 2 through images of the paraphernalia of nourishment, comradeship and masculine self-care as a symbol of unitary cohesion

A day and night of searching is intercut with three shots composed around circles, and with this an interior focus of warmth and nourishment (Fig 37). These shots are claustrophobically framed, with a restricted field of vision, as a stark contrast to the landscape shots. A focal point is provided by a small round stove, encircled by the booted feet of several soldiers. While faces and identities are not revealed, the tight framing offers a strong sense of close interiority. This is further exaggerated through close recordings of igniting flames, breath, slurps and clinks. A third invisible match-cut offers a time shift from night to day. Masculine subjectivity is conveyed through props and paraphernalia when a razor is dropped into a tin cup and the sun glints off a tiny mirror. The narrative is established in six shots; by day soldiers aggressively scout the landscape with big weapons of war, in the evening they eat, drink and recuperate, and in the morning they attend to rituals of cleanliness and grooming.

²⁰ The introductory chapter also includes my intervention, <https://www.kirstenadkins.co.uk/flat-tyre>

²¹ I refer also to Oliver Hewitson, "What does Lacan Say about ...Jouissance?" Lacanonline.com. Published July 3, 2015, <https://www.lacanonline.com/2015/07/what-does-lacan-say-about-jouissance/>

²² McGowan, *Capitalism and Desire: the psychic cost of free markets* (New York: Columbia, 2016), 215.

²³ A series of dance films titled *Force* explore ideas surrounding themes of failure and restoration. These films can be viewed on my website and are also discussed in Chapter 4 titled *Body*: <https://www.kirstenadkins.co.uk/force-1>

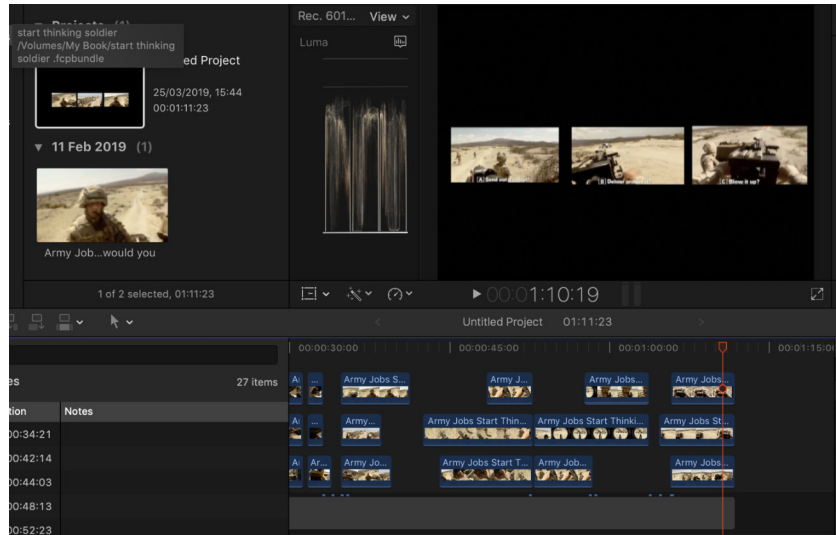


Fig 32. I first identified a rule of threes by separating out and rearranging each shot into similar geometric articulations of form using Final Cut 10 editing. Through this process I was able to deconstruct the patterns and shapes of the film.

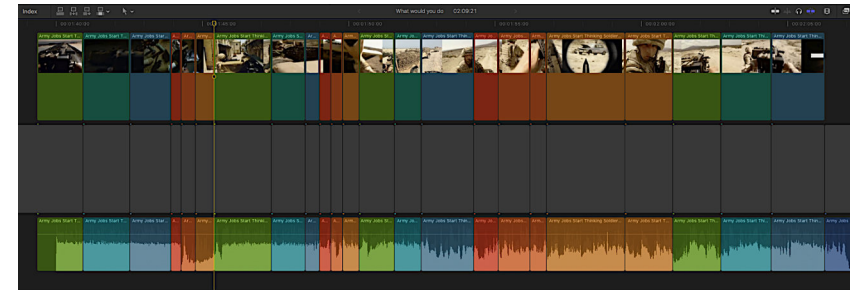


Fig 33. I colour coded each shot; triangles = cool greens; spheres = warm reds. Here I was able to establish a rule of threes, indicative of narrative stability. The rule is broken as indicated by the positioning of the cursor on the time-line where five shots denote a circular formation and this corresponds with the narrative tension that occurs with the looming threat on the horizon. However at the end of the film, as indicated by its timeline, the rule of threes is restored and with this so is the hegemonic military identity.

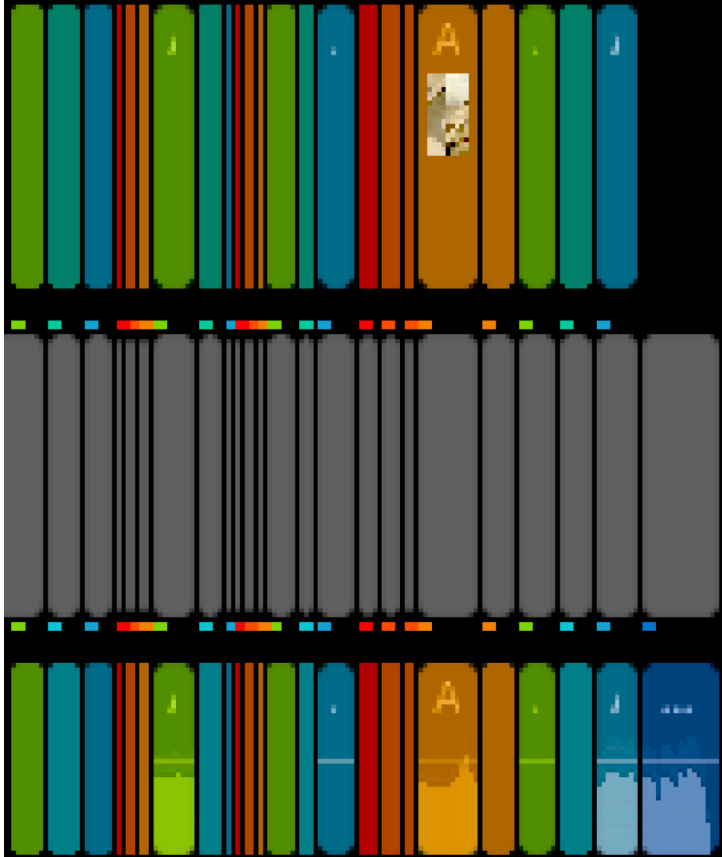


Fig 34. Further manipulations of *Flat Tyre*'s geometric articulation exaggerates the formal construction of the sequential rhythms based on the rule of threes. The stretched blocks arranged as layered ranks of figures, are imagined as substitutes for the absence of discernible subjects and objects in the original film.



Fig 35. I re-edited and re-imagined *Flat Tyre* based on colour coded articulations of the geometry of as its guide. I also manipulated and exaggerated the audio signposts that were instrumental in conveying absent presences in the original film. See <https://www.kirstenackins.co.uk/flat-tyre>



Fig 36. Digital screen-capture functions allow me explore the horizons within the film. Using the cursor to move in and across the represented skyline enabled me to consider the implications of absences and presences, and of a military search for something that in visual terms is not seen but in auditory terms it is suggested. My microscopic intervention reveals there is nobody there.



Fig 37. A circular geometry, resonates with the *horseshoe cartography* of Chapter 2 through images of the paraphernalia of nourishment, comradeship and masculine self-care as a symbol of unitary cohesion

Fig 38. A first-person shot through a gunsight

Masculine Aptitude

Flat Tyre operates a presumption of masculinity in the absence of the body. Clues are also found in the machines, the technology of the film, the tropes of speed, aggression, and in the paraphernalia of male self-care. The first-person shot replaces the represented male body. Indeed, it may be argued that the missing or absent body of the soldier amounts to a disavowal of physical vulnerabilities associated with war. *Flat Tyre* indicates a Foucauldian dissociation where discipline 'dissociates power from the body; on the one hand, it turns it into an "aptitude", a "capacity"'.²⁴ In this logic, to eliminate the body from the scene is to eliminate the risk of destruction. Heroic bodies are transposed by an abstract ideal. If the soldier's body is not identified as a subject, its absence may be occupied by the subjective imagination of the viewer.

At the end of the film unitary cohesion and hegemonic order is challenged and with this the geometric structuring of circles and triangles and the rule of threes is also disrupted. A commanding officer is identified and briefly addresses the camera, 'Stop the vehicles. This one looks dodgy. Let's dismount and get better eyes on.' A match-cut reveals the circular framing of a rifle sight which shows a solitary white car on the desert horizon (Fig 38). The car is empty, but is also mid tyre change with the bonnet raised and the front wheel propped up on a rock. The commanding soldier says, 'This could be a roadside bomb, so *what would you do?*' (Fig 7)

A) SEND OUT A PATROL? A pyramid formation of soldiers seen through a round gunsight, run towards the car.

B) DETOUR AROUND IT? The tank/gun first-person shot, circles around the target.

C) BLOW IT UP? In this shot the mounted gun, huge in the foreground,

²⁴ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 138

aims and fires. A golden explosion and a plume of smoke closes the film.

The film abruptly ends with a caption which is accompanied by the audio of machine-gun fire.

From Spectacle to Participation

Roger Stahl examines Hollywood cinema, news material, and advertising to explore the ideologies behind what he describes as a 'love affair between war and the screen'.²⁵ His theorisations on 'militainment' describes a conceptual turn away from the idea of the passive spectator towards the interactive participant in screen-based consumption. For Stahl this change is timed around the military operations after 9/11 that allowed the citizen spectator to, 'plug in to the military publicity machine, not only through new mediated technologies but also through rhetoric that portrays war as a "battlefield playground"'.²⁶ *Flat Tyre* combines spectacle with an illusion of interactive fantasy. The viewer engages in the illusion that they are participating in war, yet they simultaneously occupy a passive role. They will not kill or be killed, nor are they being enlisted into a persuasive discourse beyond a simple hypothetical decision; investigate, run away or destroy. Nevertheless, the first-person shot is instrumental in the militainment associated with this army recruitment campaign. Here, the first-person shot facilitates the illusion of viewer agency.

The dilemma of whether to shoot, stay or run away is visually constructed through spaces that are over there on the horizon. This phenomenon concurs with Burch's *off-screen space six*, which describes the spatiotemporal relationship between what is seen within the frame and the elements that are beyond or behind the image: the other side of a door, round a corner, or, in

²⁵ Stahl *R Militainment, Inc*, 39

²⁶ Stahl, *Militainment, Inc*, 16.

the case of *Flat Tyre*, 'over there' in the distance.²⁷ Burch finds a resonance in the elements which have been excluded from the image and the auditory signposts that convey a specific presence in the absence of the visual articulations of form. Here the absent presence of threats is achieved in two ways. Firstly, they are symbolised by an empty frame that 'focuses our attention on what is occurring off-screen'.²⁸ A tension is created by the imaginary threats that are outside the frame. Secondly, the empty frame is accompanied by disconnected sounds of breaths, thumps, clatters and echoes across a valley floor, which result in an increasing tension between screen-space and off-screen space. Burch writes that the use of off-screen sound 'always brings off-screen space into play'²⁹ and thus, by implication, the potential is made more salient because it fails to materialise. Such imagery is illustrative of a conceptual blurring of the subject and of military violence, a foundational concern for this study. These aesthetics are also made more pertinent by the timing with the war in Afghanistan and by speeches made by Bush and Rumsfeld, days apart in 2002, which established and articulated the abstract rhetoric of 'the war on terror' based around concepts of presence and absence.

Absent Enemies

Deterrence – the promise of massive retaliation against nations – means nothing against shadowy terrorist networks with no nation or citizens to defend.

George W Bush 2002

It sounds like a riddle. It isn't a riddle. It is a very serious important matter.

Donald Rumsfeld 2002

²⁷ Burch, "Nana, or The Two Kinds of Space", 17.

²⁸ Burch, "Nana, or The Two Kinds of Space", 19

²⁹ Burch, "Nana, or The Two Kinds of Space", 26

In his address to the graduating class of the US military academy in West Point in June 2002, George Bush Jr said that after 9/11, deterrence in the form of cold war nuclear proliferation would need to be replaced by aggressive military action, which could be carried out against Iraq or any other country in the world. Bush declared that the world had changed and 'threats' belonged not to people but instead to 'shadowy networks' who he said, defended no one person or people and belonged in no one location. He said, 'Our security will require the best intelligence, to reveal threats hidden in caves and growing in laboratories.'³⁰ Bush said threats would be 'uncovered' by a western military force 'prepared to strike at a moment's notice in any dark corner of the world'. Pro-active, pre-emptive force would be required whenever and wherever and for whatever duration it took to ensure that threats did not 'materialise'.³¹ In Brian Massumi's critical analysis, the pre-emptive nature of the war means that 'You move like the enemy, in order to make the enemy move [...] in other words you go on the offensive to make the enemy emerge from its state of potential and to take actual shape [...] the most effective way to fight an unspecified threat is to actively contribute to producing it.'³² In *Flat Tyre* threats appear as vague as they are ubiquitous. Yet they are actively sought even if they are not present. When they are found in the form of the car, the advert quickly ends, almost mid shot. The three choices that close the film also suggests that the mission is not complete. The narrative is left open and presumably, so are the threats.

A few days after the West Point speech, at a NATO press conference, Donald Rumsfeld re-articulated his now famous triad of known knowns, known unknowns and unknown unknowns, as a means of reinforcing a justification for the then proposed Allied invasion of Iraq.

³⁰ The White House, "President Bush Delivers a Graduation Speech at West Point United States Military Academy." Press release issued June 1st 2002, 09:13 am <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2002/06/20020601-3.html>

³¹ "President Bush Delivers a Graduation Speech at West Point United States Military Academy," 2002.

³² Massumi, *Ontopower: War, Powers, and the State of Perception*, 12.

Simply because you do not have evidence that something exists does not mean that you have evidence that it doesn't exist. And yet almost always, when we make our threat assessments, when we look at the world, we end up basing it on the first two pieces of the puzzle rather than all three.³³

Rumsfeld's puzzle requires some complex thinking. By his account a threat at its most pernicious would constitute an 'unknown, unknown' and with this an impossible goal to be endlessly sought. In *Flat Tyre*, threats do not take form, but they are here, there and everywhere — and nowhere. By this account, in *Flat Tyre*, the ethereal shadows on the horizons operate something promised that will sustain the sublime experience of the pursuit. But threats will always remain ambiguous, and a searching for something 'dodgy' as articulated in the dialogue of *Flat Tyre* may continue, ad-infinity.

The spectral absence of bodies in *Flat Tyre* has another ideological function. As I have argued earlier, absence sustains desire as part of a militainment project which commodifies war for ongoing pleasurable consumption. The first-person shot sustains the illusion of a virtual citizen war, to be consumed and played at home by the citizen warrior. The absent presence of the soldier represents neither entity nor place. In this construction, neither does the enemy target, or threat, which also appears dislocated. Participation is morally facilitated by the absence of the enemy - if they are not identified as human their lives cannot matter and playing at war is nothing more than harmless fun. In this account, bodies that are not ours, bodies that we cannot see or identify, cannot be considered as subjects. The first-person shot, in its militainment capacity, is able to enlist the viewer into a system of disavowal where the gap that is left by the absent presence of the

³³ Donald Rumsfeld "Nato Press Conference, by US Secretary of State, Donald Rumsfeld, Brussels." Delivered on June 6, 2002. Nato Hq. Accessed August 24 2021 <https://www.nato.int/docu/speech/2002/s020606g.htm>

soldier and of their enemy has the potential to fulfil a myriad of desires depending on the viewer's experience and perspective.

It is at this point that I turn to the next film in the *Start Thinking Soldier, What Would You Do?* series. *Water* deploys a similar three choice dilemma, but in this case the soldier protagonist is framed, identified, named and gendered as female. As I will now discuss, the film illustrates Brannigan's account of the ways that hierarchical and interchangeable subject and object positions are conveyed through the point-of-view or POV shot.

Water: Masculinity, Femininity, The Universal and The Particular

As previous chapters have stated, Butler and Connell explore the relationship between military masculinity, power, and hegemony where gender is considered in ways that it is socially constructed and performed. By this account a military masculinity, and femininity for that matter, is dependent on factors that are external to the biological condition of being a man or a woman. I propose that the first-person and the POV shot have, in different ways, a capacity to frame the subject along gendered lines, as I will examine through a comparison between *Flat Tyre* and *Water*. To support this idea I approach theorisations concerning a feminist notion of 'universality' connected with patriarchal social order. Simone de Beauvoir writes that man 'thinks of his body as a direct and normal connection with the world, which he believes he apprehends objectively [...] thus humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him'.³⁴ Monique Wittig extends Beauvoir's argument to consider that the 'faculty for the universal' is not something that men are born into. Neither are women 'reduced at birth to the particular... It

³⁴ Simone De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (London: Vintage, 1949, 1997), 15-16

³⁵ Monique Wittig, "The Mark of Gender" in *The Straight Mind and Other Essays* (Boston: Beacon, 1992), 80.

does not happen by magic, it must be done'.³⁵ In the visual framing of *Flat Tyre*, a universal masculine subjectivity is present in the absence of the male body but conveyed through the visual diegesis of the film. 'His' subjectivity is realised through the first-person shot and its assumed masculinised gaze. Wittig's rejection of gender binarism gives further context to this idea. She imagines gender not in terms of multiplicity or intersectionality but as existing in its singular form when she writes 'there are the general and the feminine, or rather, the general and the mark of the feminine'.³⁶ In this account, the soldier who is not marked (because he is not seen) would, in a universalising diagnosis, be gendered as masculine. Therefore, the female soldier must be 'marked' as such because she fulfils a role that is different to or other than the universal masculine soldier subject. Arguably in this context, the POV shot operates a function where the subject, male or female, may adopt or be co-opted by varying degrees into relative positions that are either feminised and therefore marked as 'particular' or masculinised as representative of the hegemonic 'universal' social order.³⁷ In *Flat Tyre*, when the commanding officer recognises a potential roadside bomb he is identified and marked as 'particular'. The camera articulates a narrative vulnerability in the objectification of the commanding officer. He bears the mark of his identity and is therefore 'feminised' because his hegemonic authority is in question, for that brief moment. When danger is averted, he abruptly disappears. A similar scenario occurs in *Water* when the female soldier is marked as both subject and object in various POV shots, but so are a number of men within the film depending on fluctuating hierarchies and power dynamics in its diegesis. Furthermore, the subjective view of the camera appears to be instrumental in this marking process.

Water is a story of mistrust, negotiation and power. In this film, threats are

³⁵ Wittig, "The Point of View" in *The Straight Mind and Other Essays*, 60.

³⁷ See also Butler who writes in response to Wittig's theorisations, that a notion of singularity has the effect of 'defining women in terms of their sex and extolling men as the bearers of a body transcendent universal personhood'. Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, 13.

also unknown; as described by Bush and Rumsfeld they may exist or they may not, they might be contained in liquids that could be poisons. The viewer is presented with a dilemma and three choices, this time in a hostile exchange between soldiers and male civilians, described in the film as 'locals' in an occupied desert town. Unlike *Flat Tyre*, *Water* utilises the POV shot to identify the female soldier and her relationship with other players in the scene. She is seen, named, and given a voice. She encounters 'threats' and she is marked, as I will explain through the following narrative summary.

The film concerns a negotiation and a conflict when a man offers a soldier a drink of water. It typifies Brannigan's interplay between subject and object, with shifting hierarchies from soldier to civilian, to female captain and to a general view, where 'each successive level of narration implicates a new subject – a fictional or hypothetical perceiver – in an activity of seeing'.³⁸ Brannigan's account describes the technical reciprocity between subject, that occupies the point of view of the camera, and object, captured in the gaze of the camera. Importantly the relationships between subject and object are fluid, interchangeable and continually renegotiated through the apparatus of the lens. Brannigan's account describes a hierarchy, in which the controlling gaze perpetually shifts in accordance with the shifting tensions between characters in the scene. A stark tension is established with the opening wide shot, which includes an occupied and cordoned street and large tanks. Here the POV shot offers a visual diegesis of control and division portrayed through a complex and sometimes chaotic sequence (Fig 39)

The hand-held wide shot reveals three soldiers who guard a street which has been cordoned off with red tape. This red tape stands out against the dusty, sand-coloured townscape and forms a symbolic barrier between groups throughout the film. The shot changes to a POV which prioritises the soldier's

³⁸ Edward Branigan, "The Spectator and Film Space - Two Theories," In *Screen*, Volume 22, Issue 1, May 1981, Pages 55–78, <https://academic.oup.com/screen/article-abstract/22/1/55/1602599?redirectedFrom=fulltext>



Fig 39. A hand-held general view (GV) establishes her position in relation to locals in front of a red cordon in an occupied, unspecified town

Fig 40. Reverse close up's indicate interchangeable subject and object hierarchies between occupying soldiers and 'locals'.

perspective. The object of the soldier's point-of-view is a man, described as a 'local', who walks towards the camera offering a bottle of water. The soldier says 'no thank you'. The shot changes to the 'local's' POV, and the soldier subject becomes the object of suggested threat as he refuses the drink. From here on, POVs prioritising the soldier, 'local' and absent viewer/witness are intercut with increasing speed and tension. A gathering of 'locals' close in on the cordon and insist that a soldier drinks from their water bottle. The soldier insists, with matching aggression, on refusing the drink. A female soldier steps into the crowd and shouts, 'Get back, get back.' The image cuts to a close-up of a water bottle and a caption appears, 'IT COULD BE POLLUTED OR POISONED. RISK DRINKING IT?' 'You have some first,' says the female soldier. The hand-held wide shot aims its gaze towards the profile of the female soldier as she faces the man, who drinks the water. He then hands the bottle to her and she lifts it to her mouth (Fig 40). The image cuts to an interior military location. A caption appears, 'CAPT ANNA KNIGHT', before a close-up of a woman in a helmet talks directly to camera to explain how she diffused a difficult situation.

In *Water*, the female soldier is marked because she does not conform to the masculine military stereotype. Her adversaries are also marked as different and subordinate to the 'universal' masculine subjectivity. Threat is symbolically and literally contained in the water and not embodied by the 'locals' who are marked in their subordination to the military weaponry that surrounds them. Likewise, the male soldiers are momentarily marked in their defensive actions through the POV shot of the 'locals' who for that moment are framed as threats to the hegemonic order. When the POV shot is changed and the gaze directed back at them, they become 'particular' during that moment in their subordination to the hostile gestures of the 'locals', until their

authority is restored, as it is visualised in the controlling gaze of the camera. Homi K. Bhabha writes that 'universal' masculinity is invisible; a presumed white, heteronormative ideal opposed to the feminine and to oppressed or subordinated masculinities, conveyed here through the objectification of the 'locals' through the lens. In his essay *Are You A Man or a Mouse?* Bhabha equates invisibility with a perceived discourse of 'patrilineal perpetuity' through which a hegemonic order maintains its hold. He writes, "He," that ubiquitous male member, is the masculinist signature writ large – the pronoun of the invisible man: the subject of the surveillant, sexual order; the object of humanity personified.³⁹ Bhabha's description resonates with a cinematography that constructs hierarchies based on those who are marked, therefore feminized, and a masculine social order that is conveyed through the surveillant gaze of the camera. *Water* establishes and then dismantles hierarchies depending on different points of view; witness, soldier, 'local', female captain. When Captain Knight speaks to camera, her ability and authority is reassuringly asserted, but not assumed. She will always bear the mark of the feminine in a militarised 'man's world'⁴⁰. In the final shot, her authority and the subjective identity of the locals is undermined by the hand-held camera, at the edge of the scene, operated by an unnamed, unmarked, invisible, and therefore masculinised first person. The lens pulls out and with this brings into the frame the subordinated and pacified 'locals'. They are diminished and hegemonic order is restored through the presence of the armed soldiers, the camera's surveillant gaze and the heavy tanks that surround them (Fig 41).



Fig 41. Hierarchies between 'locals' and occupying forces are caught in the surveillant gaze of the masculinised universal camera.

³⁹ Homi K. Bhabha, "Are You a Man or a Mouse?" In *Constructing Masculinity*, edited by Berger, Maurice, Brian Wallis and Simon Watson (New York: Routledge 1995), 55.

⁴⁰ See Basham, "The Importance of Military Masculinities for the Conduct of State Sanctioned Violence", 29.

Conclusion

Common to the series *What Would You Do?* is a particular framing of the subject that establishes and reinforces a masculinist hegemonic order. The first-person shot allows the viewer to see what the soldier sees and hear what the soldier hears. They are thus implicated in what the soldier does.⁴¹ When the soldier is seen and identified, through the POV, the subject of the narrative becomes object in the scene and thus they are diminished and feminised by the objectifying gaze of the other. When the enemy or outsider is present, but not seen, occupying Burch's *off-screen space six* 'just beyond the horizon',⁴² they are conceived as a threat to the body, to status and to hegemonic power. In military terms, gender binarism is constructed in such a way that it applies not to the biological condition of being a man or a woman but instead are drawn in terms of the universal or the particular. An inclusive, progressive military message invites anyone and everyone to appropriate a universal masculine subjectivity in the absence of the body.⁴³

This chapter has explored absences and presences within the frame. The first-person shot presumes a normative culture described by Frank Barrett as 'being a man has no other definition than not being a woman'.⁴⁴ Judith Butler writes that identity is reliant on difference so the subject 'gains its specificity by defining itself against what is outside itself'.⁴⁵ Otherness, in the form of the female or vulnerable soldier, or 'locals' under occupation, would be marked as such. Hegemonic 'masculinity writ large', in Homi K Bhabha's terms, would be found in invisibility. The first-person shot and the POV are reliant on a conception borrowed by Burch and identified as *off-screen space six*, where militainment is found in the disavowal of the enemy body, replaced by virtualised searches for unspecified threats in unlocatable environments, for a purpose which is unknown. Not a riddle, says Donald Rumsfeld, but a

⁴¹ Magrs, "Point of View" in *The Creative Writers Course-book*, 135.

⁴² Burch, *Theory of Film Practice*, 17.

⁴³ Bhabha, *Are You a Man or a Mouse?*

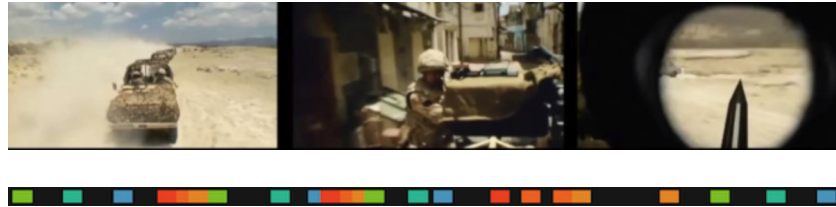
⁴⁴ Barrett, "The Organisational Construction of Hegemonic Masculinity," 96.

⁴⁵ Butler, *Frames of War*, 142.

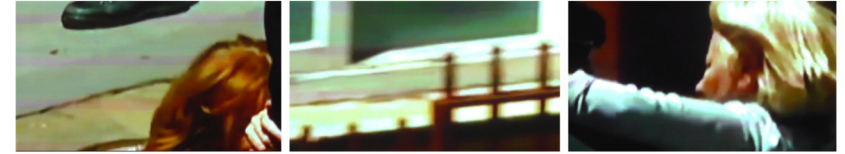
very serious and important matter.

The reader is now invited to continue reflecting on the framing of the subject, the absent presences conveyed beyond and behind the lens and in off-screen spaces, and through conceptions surrounding the objectifying gaze and Wittig's mark of the feminine. *Napoleon Dynamite By Me* (2009) is an installation and performed paper. It problematises subject and object relationships, the universalising gaze, and viewer alignment with the subjective view of the lens. In a dual film screening, military masculinities are blurred, and fraught with inconsistencies. As previously outlined, masculine hegemony is a precarious project, where soldiers are represented as simultaneously strong, vulnerable, empowered, disenfranchised and obedient, often at the same time. *Napoleon Dynamite by Me* offers a commentary on Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's idea that a military masculinity is something that can be participatory, performative and transactional in nature.⁴⁶ In this performance actors in performed scenes either adopt or reject hegemonic gender roles as they wish. The installation is also accompanied by a performed paper, the transcript of which is also found on the website.

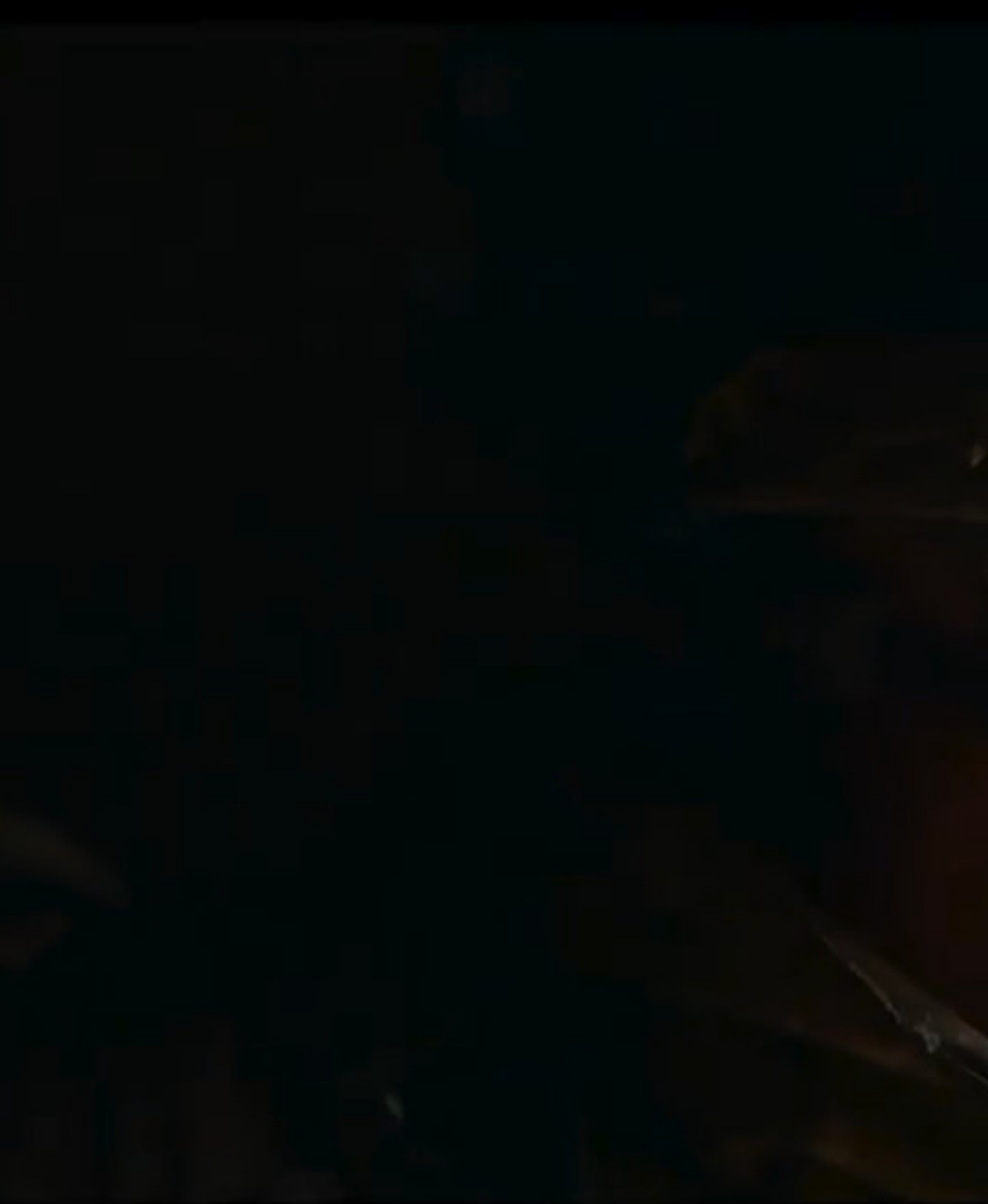
⁴⁶ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Gosh Boy George, You Must Be Awfully Secure in your Masculinity," in *Constructing Masculinity*, eds Maurice Berger, Brian Wallis and Simon Watson (New York: Routledge 1995)13.



Flat Tyre can be viewed at <https://www.kirstenadkins.co.uk/flat-tyre>



Napoleon Dynamite by Me can be viewed at <https://www.kirstenadkins.co.uk/napoleon-dynamite-by-me>



Chapter 4:

BODY:

The Incredible Dissapearing Soldier

I am never simply formed, nor
am I ever fully
self-forming.

Judith Butler¹

A sustained note indicates the sound of a drone, but it could be orchestral strings. The ambiguity of the opening audio for the recruitment advert *Army Confidence*² sets up a blurred aesthetic that is maintained throughout the rest of the short film (Fig 42). The sound peaks in time with a long fade into a close-up profile of a soldier whose sparsely lit silhouette occupies the right-hand side of the frame. There is the sliver of a window that he gazes towards. The darkness of the left-frame implies an absence; a metaphorical past that the soldier turns away from, perhaps rejects. The right-frame suggests potential, visualised by the hard lighting from the window that heats his nose and cheek. A trace of his right eye is barely visible behind his visor. The rest of his face, head and his shoulders are immersed in the black shadows of the room behind him. This split composition offers 'two kinds of absence', as described by Noël Burch in the previous Chapter.³ The left-frame is so dark that the body is absorbed by the room. In the right frame, an emerging subject pushes forwards towards the white light beyond it. The left-to-right composition of this shot gives a visual and narrative effect of splitting a military subject illuminated as a future promise, from the physical form which is hidden in the shadows.

This chapter is concerned with relationships between the body, military identity and technology. Previous chapters discuss blurred aesthetics, abstract themes surrounding homosocial military bonding, and the framing of a military *us* against a *hostile* other. Here I consider a separation, or splitting, between concepts of a military masculinity and the body the soldier. I approach this by enlisting the microscopic methodology discussed previously, where

¹ Judith Butler, *Senses of the Subject* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), 7.

² British Army, "Army Confidence | This is Belonging | British Army," British Army. Published January 8, 2020 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6mhq1kXD4gs>

³ Noël Burch. "Nana, or Two Kinds of Space" in *Theory of Film Practice*, (London: Martin Secker and Warburg Ltd, 1969), 17-32.

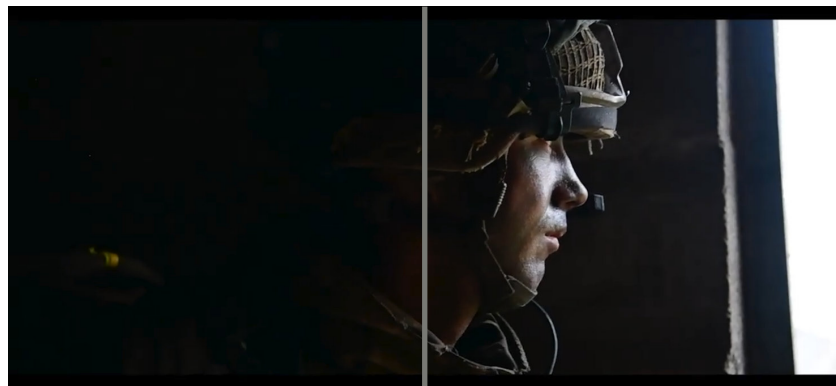


Fig 42. An added grey line illustrates the left-right composition of the shot

single frames and fragments are lifted, isolated and scrutinised from two military recruitment films. The opening paragraph examines the first frame of *Army Confidence* (2020)⁴ which establishes a thematic in which the bodies of mostly male soldiers are obscured, covered over or supplemented by weapons and machines. Through this film I reflect on Butler's consideration of subject formation to discuss ways that military identity is shaped as an ongoing project and dependent on external elements. In this way the subject is *never simply formed, or self-forming*, as the opening quote states. In its initial stages, my second film for reflection, *Unique and United* (2017),⁵ directly tackles themes of subjectivity, intersectionality and identity politics. Individuals categorised by gender, sexuality, race and class are transformed into a collective unit, and thus assimilated into the 'military body' – but through the prosthesis of clothing, as the chapter will explore later.⁶ Themes relating to a disconnection between forces of military power and the mutability of the body are also tackled through a selection of practice explorations in filmmaking, performance and dance. These interventions are collectively titled *Force* and can viewed at the end of the chapter.

The title of the project, *The Incredible Disappearing Soldier*, is inspired by Jack Arnold's 1957 US film *The Incredible Shrinking Man*,⁷ in which the male subject becomes smaller and smaller and eventually disappears from view. This imagery echoes my reflections concerning a diminution of the male figure as symbol of national strength and security, in the promotion of British military force. Arnold's dystopian vision, based on Richard Matheson's novel,⁸ concerns the physical shrinking of the male subject and may be interpreted as a commentary on the unstable aesthetics surrounding Hollywood's representations of 1950s' American patriarchy. A commonality between this work and, as I will argue, many of the British military recruitment films is a

⁴ British Army, "Unique and United | British Army" British Army. Published September 25, 2017 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OCdfSISnPE>

⁶ Butler, *Frames of War*, 141.

⁷ Arnold, Jack, *The Incredible Shrinking Man* (USA: Universal International Pictures, 1957)

⁸ Richard Matheson, *The Shrinking Man* (New York: Bantam (1956) 1969)

thematic which separates the idea of hegemonic power from the male body, albeit from different ideological positions. Such an aesthetic is counter-positional to traditional Hollywood representations, where masculine power is reliant on physical hardship. Pat Kirkham and Janet Thumin look to the Tarzan franchise, from the same period as Arnold's work, in their analysis of a dialectical tension between strength and vulnerability. Here, the epic hero 'demonstrates his control over his body through his ability to give it up'.⁹ Similarly, Chapter 1 addresses Kaja Silverman's analyses where an eroticisation of the male body is reliant on a narrative 'textual loop' where muscular strength gives way to physical ruination and subsequent restoration.¹⁰ Arguably, displacing the concept of epic heroics from the physical body and towards machines and landscapes, as seen in *Army Confidence*, has the effect of maintaining masculinised hegemonic authority while bypassing the fantasy of physical ruination celebrated in Hollywood narratives from Tarzan to Rambo to Bond.¹¹ There is a difference between the reality of military action, promoted as a viable career choice for young men and women, and the Hollywood fantasy where action heroes' bodies are broken and then remade. In this way, military violence can be imagined as play – echoing the militainment of the *Start Thinking Soldier* franchise discussed in the previous chapter.

Hito Steyerl writes, 'Imagine if war was a video game: people would push buttons in Nevada or Moscow and those in Afghanistan or Syria might fall over. But at the end of the round, they would get up again, dust off their pants and go on their way.'¹² In contrast to Steyerl's imaginary game, Connell offers a salient reminder that masculinity has multiple and varying rather than singular or fixed identity traits, and that male bodies feel pleasure and pain, get injured, age and die. Connell writes, 'Bodily experience is often central in memories of our own

lives, and thus in our understanding of who and what we are.'¹³ In many ways the celebration of violent, controlled destruction in *Army Confidence* precludes bodily effects; no-one is injured or killed, because in scenes of violent destruction soldiers are barely present.

Following this narrative conundrum, my practice interventions, collectively titled *Force* (2020), use durational performance, drawing and improvised dance vignettes to explore undecidabilities surrounding care and harm, strength and vulnerability, ruination and restoration in imagined combat training scenarios. The work is also influenced by Simone Weill's 1940 essay *The Iliad or Poem of Force* where, 'To define force—it is that x that turns anybody who is subjected to it into a thing'¹⁴. For Weil, force is unequivocal and indiscriminate in its impact on the body. Importantly, force is also imagined here as outside, and separate from the body – a central concern of this chapter. In this respect my practice interventions have influenced to the themes contained within this chapter. However *Force* as a series of films and gallery installations follow their own trajectory and consequently exists as separate but related artworks.

Army Confidence and *Unique and United* avoid stereotypes associated with embodied male power found in physical strength – perhaps indicative of the intersectional appeal to new recruits.¹⁵ Instead, a military masculinity is abstracted and disembodied. Such masculinity may be copied, worn, carried or learned, rather than experienced, identified, named or felt. Military identity in this conception exists outside and beyond the inevitable shortcomings that accompanies representations of heroic muscularity. However, many of its concepts are reminiscent of Homi K Bhabha's consideration of masculinity as a social construction that constitutes 'a prosthetic reality – a "prefixing" of the rules of gender and sexuality'.¹⁶ Here, prosthesis equates with a hegemonic

⁹ Pat Kirkham and Janet Thumin, *Me Jane: Masculinity, Movies and Women* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1995), 26.

¹⁰ See Kaja Silverman, *Male Subjectivity at the Margins*, as discussed in Chapter 1.

¹¹ Stella Bruzzi, "Introduction," *Men's Cinema: Masculinity and Mise en Scène in Hollywood* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013) 1-29

¹² Hito Steyerl, *Why Games, Or, Can Art Workers Think?* in *Duty Free Art* (London: Verso 2017), 154.

¹³ Connell, *Masculinities*, 53.

¹⁴ Simone Weil, "The Iliad, or Poem of Force." In *On Violence: A Reader*, (USA: Duke, 2007) 378.

¹⁵ See Chapter two one which outlines then Ministry of Defence, Gavin Williams appeal to 'the best talent our country can breed', irrespective of gender, race or social class.

¹⁶ Bhabha, "Are You a Man or A Mouse" in *Constructing Masculinity*, 57.

order that supplements an illusion of masculinity as a universal surveillant authority and yet it is separated from and external to the male human subject. This chapter thus imagines ways in which military masculinity is fluid in its visual construction, conveyed through machines, the destruction of landscapes, or the surveillant objectifying gaze of the camera and the covering over of individual bodies with the same khaki fabric. In *Army Confidence* human/machine hybridity is imagined as a source of power and domination. This occurs through its celebration of the many destructive possibilities to be found in military technology. Vulnerable bodies are often diminished or lost in many such scenes, an echo of Arnold's 1957 sci-fi film. In this way the chapter envisions a military masculinity as an external biopolitical force, rather than an internalised self-assuredness belonging to the individual soldier. To have *Army Confidence* or to be *Unique and United* is reliant on things outside, and extended from, the body. In Chapter 3 I discuss the function of the camera as a stand-in for a military subjectivity. This concept establishes a hierarchical subject/object dialectic; subjectivity is conveyed through lens while the 'object' of the image is captured by its surveillant subjective gaze. To develop ideas surrounding the interplay between subject and object in the framing of a military masculinity I make a connection between Butler's theorisations concerning the 'self' and 'other' with Bernard Stiegler's challenges to the concept of 'being' human and its relationship with technology. Butler's thoughts on selfhood and its interdependency on the non-human parallels Stiegler's definition of 'technics' where the concept of being human is only possible through the prosthesis of technology. For both thinkers, whose work does not directly refer to each others, to be 'I' is dependent on all those elements that are 'other'. Stiegler states that 'the *who* is nothing without the *what*'.¹⁷ In a similar vein for Butler a conception of 'self'

¹⁷ Bernard Stiegler, *Technics and Time, 1: the Fault of Epimetheus* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994, 1998), 141.

is impossible without other 'selves', identities and things. She writes, "'I' am nowhere without the non-human."¹⁸ Stiegler discusses a cyclical conundrum, which rejects the conceit that there is such a thing as a humanist primacy over nature and technology. Furthermore he rejects the presumption that humans are able to control the technical world that they inhabit. When Stiegler asks 'what if the "who" were the technical? and the "what" the human? [sic]',¹⁹ he is proposing a correlative 'binding' where technology perpetually redefines human identity.²⁰ To be a human subject is imagined as an ongoing project that is culturally and technologically driven. For example, in many of the films under examination the weapon, invented by the human, becomes the thing that holds the potential to destroy other humans. By the same argument a camera becomes the subjective eye that makes the human an object in its frame. Such 'objects' may equally include the enemy, symbolised by the car with a flat tyre as discussed in the previous chapter, or the British soldier hiding in the shadows at the start of this chapter. Importantly, Stiegler's question suggests that a blurring of the who and the what equates with a blurring of control: does the human use the weapon or does the weapon come to define what it is to be human? The gun defines the human soldier subject as one who may shoot or be shot. Without a gun, such a dilemma becomes impossible. In this continuum, the camera defines the soldier as the object in the scene and the viewer as passive witness to the scene. I am reminded of *Flat Tyre* where the illusion of viewer agency and of military control is constructed through the first person shot. Yet in military warfare and in cinematic processes, a militainment associated with the idea of human agency is an illusion, in this interpretation of Stiegler's work.

To provide a range of insights associated with the relationships between the gendered subject, the lens and weapons of destruction I have divided this

¹⁸ Butler, *Senses of the Subject*, 7.

¹⁹ Stiegler, "Who? What? The Invention of the Human" *Technics and Time, 1: The Fault of Epimetheus*, 134.

²⁰ Stiegler, *Technics and Time*, 134.

section into three components. Later in the chapter I discuss the film *Unique and United*, after which the reader is directed to the films and drawings titled *Force*. I start my investigation into the gradual disappearance of the soldier through the promotion film and its accompanying campaign titled *Army Confidence*, where self-esteem is visually expressed through the framing of controlled, weaponised violence.

Posthuman Nonhumans – *Army Confidence*

The advert *Army Confidence* is one element of an online and poster campaign, similarly named *#armyconfidence*, which targets young people in the search of new adventure and a sense of direction.²¹ Its overarching premise is to reject the vain concerns of social media, branded products, hedonism and gym culture. Notably it ridicules obsessions such as bodybuilding. The message that narcissistic gratification will always fall short when it comes to lasting self-fulfilment runs through the campaign. The implication of this message is that the individual body is unreliable. Similarly, muscular strength is temporal and without guarantees. However, machines get results that last. They can also be fixed and replaced.

The posters take the form of photographic 'joiners' made up of male and female body parts. In the male poster, images of biceps, pectorals and a 'six-pack', formed out of sections of different men's bodies, are arranged as a crude torso. Its monstrous form has no head or lower half (Fig 43). Flesh and muscles are arranged on a flat ground, denied context or meaning. The imagery is reminiscent of Laura Mulvey's 1975 essay *Visual Pleasures and Narrative Cinema*, where the controlling masculine gaze of the camera marks and dissects the body connoted for nothing more than its capacity to be

²¹ British Army, *Army Confidence*.

controlled and determined by the gaze of the spectator.²² In the poster, five fragmented cuts are presented as jokey reminders of the pointlessness of self-love. Armpits, nipples, navels, sweat, folds and creases, taut vessels; hairy, shaved or buffed and oversexualized fragments are dissected, decapitated and dismembered through cut-and-paste collage. Through this process they are rendered as absurdly grotesque. The bodies have no purpose in their deconstructed form; they have no history or perspective in their placement on the flat grey/white ground. The lack of context echoes Stiegler's formulation where 'the body of the living individual is no longer a body: it can only function with its tools'.²³ In this equation, the objectification of the body, voided in the poster's design, renders it functionless and therefore pointless. This imagery sets up the idea that the military body gains coherence and presumes confidence when it is bound to the technologies associated with war. This is a territory where military technology, rather than heroic bodies are imagined as primary facilitators of violent action, as I will discuss now.

Lone Soldier: Vulnerable Body

An internal monologue, voiced in commentary, introduces the two-minute advert, *Army Confidence*.

Army confidence.

Now that's different.

It takes time to earn.

Coming from somewhere deep.

But when you find it, it lasts a lifetime.

²² Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" in *The Sexual Subject: A Screen Reader in Sexuality*, ed Merck M (London: Routledge, 1992)

²³ Stiegler, *Technics and Time 1: The Fault of Epimetheus*, 148.



Fig 43–45.

The initial shots of the film introduce soldiers who are often alone and hiding (Fig 44). There are eighty-five shots in the film in its wholeness, many of them too short to see without the apparatus of stopping, stilling and isolating, a methodological focus of this project. Women only feature twice in the film and only male soldiers participate in active combat. As described at the beginning of the chapter, the opening shot includes a profile silhouette of a young male soldier as he emerges from the shadows. Here the camera briefly loses focus and there is the momentary high-pitched whirr of optical auto-adjustment. This punctuation cuts across the smooth audio and sets a tone of surveillance, not by people but machines. In the film the camera appears to have a presence and agency of its own, achieved through an electronic reframing technique. Strange angles, movements and distorting optics suggest a technological domination by the camera over bodies. The latter hide behind walls, razor wire or in trenches (Fig 45). The music soundtrack also supports the unstable narrative of the early scenes. The second shot utilises visual distortion facilitated by wide-angle technology which gives prominence not to the subject, but to his gun, propped up in the foreground on a window ledge. The weapon is curved by the lens into an arching phallic shape. Here for the first time, and repeated throughout the advert, machines supplement bodies, offering *confidence*, visualised as phallic mastery and symbolised by oversized weapons. The following shot re-asserts subordination of the soldier, conveyed through the camera's framing; an extreme-close-up of a downcast eye is shielded by a helmet and camouflage. The music builds to a loud, single bass note, timed to the sudden opening of the eye with a distinctively yellow-brown iris. The telephoto cinematography is suggestive of wildlife photography where the cowering soldier is figured as a sleeping animal that might suddenly be awoken by the sound of prey. A commentary line, 'army

confidence', is delivered in a menacing tone, while gestures and camera movement signal a decided lack of confidence on the part of the soldiers in the scene. As an echo of the previous chapter, soldiers can be conceived of here as 'marked' in their objectification by the surveillant camera/eye, that is both universalist, masculine and, importantly, invisible.

I return to Bhabha's challenge to hegemonic masculine subjectivities, which constitutes a rejection of a humanist discourse to propose that "He" [...] the pronoun of the invisible man²⁴ is imagined through the camera lens. The universal, masculinist subject is a concept and not a body, realised here through microscopic reframing mechanisms, accompanied by an almost imperceptible whirr of auto-focus. Confidence might be redefined here as a surveillant social order that is *imposed upon* the body from *outside* the body, rather than coming from somewhere deep within the soldier's consciousness as the commentary line suggests. The idea that strength is found in muscular gym culture has already been mocked by the poster campaign. Similarly, in the opening shots of the film soldiers are arranged in their passivity, as objects that are looked on by the determining optical gaze of the camera.

Butler's quote that opens this chapter, 'I am never simply formed, nor am I ever fully self-forming'²⁵ is used in recognition of the external elements that act upon the body. In this sense, subject formation is imagined as an ongoing and negotiated project which is shaped and limited by social, historical and material conditions of power. Butler writes that subjectivity exists only in its relationship with the non-human, 'I am not only already in the hands of *someone* else before I start to work with my own hands but I am also, as it were, in the "hands" of institutions, discourses, environments, including technologies and life processes, handled by an organic and inorganic object field that exceeds the human [Author's italics].'²⁵ Butler's concept of subjective

²⁴ Bhabha, "Are You a Man or A Mouse" in *Constructing Masculinity*, 57.

²⁵ Butler, *Senses of the Subject*, 7.

embodiment in this respect echoes Stiegler's consideration of a fluid, historical and continually evolving subject formation, which is always dependent on the technology that is used. In this formula, the 'human' attribute of 'confidence' can only be found in the technical materials through which the submissive soldiers in these early scenes are able to gain identity status, as the next section of *Army Confidence* illustrates.

This Is Confidence

In visual terms *Army Confidence* foregoes the subtleties of other films in the *This is Belonging* franchise, as discussed in Chapter 2, where individuals might engage in activities such as drinking tea and contemplating their military lot. Instead the second section of the film is constructed as a noisy and often incoherent montage of different activities in different training locations and times. This section of the film may be interpreted through Foucault's description of the 'political anatomy' of the 'mechanised body', as military activities are compiled as random cuts through the editing process.²⁷ Soldiers, weapons and vehicles are organised into various permutations of doing, making, fixing, operating, occupying and destroying.

Towards the middle section of the film, individuals are strategically formed into groups as they stake out and appear to occupy territories, including winter forests, deserts and desolated towns that are makeshift in construction and thus suggestive of military training environments. In these scenes a distorting lens gives a curvilinear effect, exaggerating the relative size of objects, so that guns appear huge when they are centre-frame and humans operators are invisible in the scene (Fig 46) The lens also increases the depth of field, flattening the image and allowing both foreground and background to merge.

²⁷ Foucault, "Docile Bodies" in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of Prisons*, 138.

With the blur of shallow focus, as discussed in Chapter 1, narrow-angle lenses operate a function where the eye is directed towards one aspect of the image by denying access to the other blurred elements of the shot. Conversely, a flattening of the image, through deep focus techniques, operates a refusal to prioritise any one aspect of the scene. Each element, including bodies, puddles, buildings, formations, guns and horizons is equally important and unimportant. In one shot, ground troops enact a stake out in a desolate townscape, which appears to be located in an army training camp. This is viewed via an overhead crane using a wide-angle lens (Fig 47). The spatial relationship between bodies as they move in pyramid formation is exaggerated. However, muddy puddles, empty desolate barns, and the edges a rough road converging towards the horizon, are given equal priority in the scene. Invariably each subject becomes just one element of the whole event. Individual soldiers, alert and with guns ready, form a collective group whose purpose is far greater than the activity of each individual. The wide-angle lens has a contradictory effect; it demonstrates the soldiers' domination of their surroundings. At the same time the troops are overwhelmed and consequently subordinated by the camera. In this respect soldiers are diminished by biopolitical forces which Foucault describes as 'the mechanism through which the basic biological features of the human species become the object of a political strategy, of a general strategy of power'.²⁸ In this middle section of *Army Confidence*, soldier's bodies are present, but are increasingly framed as unimportant in the scene.



Fig 46 and 47.

²⁸ Foucault, "Security, Territory, Population." *Lectures at the Collège de France (1977-78)*, ed Michel Senellart, translated by Graham Burchell. Accessed May 10, 2020 <https://www.atlasofplaces.com/essays/security-territory-population/>

Bridges, Bombs, Dentistry and other Metaphors

The decisive moment arrives with the commentary line '*...but when it [confidence] comes, it lasts a lifetime*'. This line is punctuated by the thud of the bass percussion which is layered with loud explosions. The music changes from urgent strings to triumphant horns, accompanied by a wide establishing shot featuring a large stone house (Fig 48). Two male soldiers are visualised as tiny in the lower centre-right of the frame. They face the camera, which momentarily reframes in another simulated auto-adjustment of surveillance. A dramatic explosion blows out the three upstairs windows as the two tiny figures fall to the ground. The frame fills with black and orange smoke and the men are lost in the vapour. The camera asserts its position as surveillant witness to the forces of violent biopolitical domination.

The rest of the film is noisy, exuberant and chaotic with a deluge of bombs and missiles. The mise en scène constructs numerous scenes of domination which juxtapose weapons and destroyed landscapes with building construction and humanitarian care. In the middle of the triumphant destructive crescendo there is an incongruous sequence which juxtaposes fragmentary shots of bridge building, dentistry, injured soldiers and exploding horizons (Fig 49).

A transition from an angle grinder slicing into a steel joist leads to a wide establishing shot of a white male dentist hovering over a black woman in a dentist's chair. The glint of a torch shines into her mouth as his thumb presses down onto her molars. She strains her head upwards. The camera is unstable, surveying the scene from behind a curtain, the edge of which makes up the foreground and follows the film's surveillant aesthetic where subjects become objects of the camera's gaze. The next shot depicts a female dentist, with blue-gloved hands in a child's mouth (Fig 50). A headtorch lights up the

front incisors. The scene conveys a tension between care and control, especially when sandwiched between scenes of heavy labour and destructive carnage. On one level the dental sequence drives a narrative of diverse military opportunities, including caring responsibilities. However, its surveillant visual framing also suggests a narrative of hegemonic domination, with the patient lying prone and subordinate to the dentist (Fig 50). The image cuts from a flash of light on a tooth to a momentary, almost imperceptible, glimpse of a soldier lying, perhaps injured, on the ground. This fragmentary shot is followed by the explosive white light of an aerial bomb which burns out the image, and another landscape is decimated.

In the dentistry sequence civilian bodies are arranged and displayed as objects that are coded as inferior not only to the surveillant gaze of the lens but also to that of the military dentist. Camera angles and framing reinforces a visual hierarchy which aligns the viewer with the soldier's controlling status. In this respect a hierarchy emerges where non-military bodies, civilian bodies that are 'not our' bodies, are framed in their subordination to the British military soldier. Such imagery typifies an ideology where confidence is imagined in terms of domination by a universalised masculinised 'us', over other lands and people. This aesthetic is further enhanced through the utilisation of wide-angle lenses, camera movement and sound bridges. However, in later scenes soldiers' bodies are reconstituted as components, and diminished by weapons, buildings, places and vehicles in the construction of the military machine. A hierarchical layering emerges which places civilians as subordinate to soldiers, and soldiers are diminished by machines, their environment and by the camera.



Fig 48–50.

Prosthesis and a Militarised Masculine Me

In its concluding section, *Army Confidence* is found through non-human supplements including robotic weapons and unmanned vehicles that traverse and obliterate numerous landscapes. In the film's diegesis *Army Confidence* reflects and extends Stiegler's symbiosis between the human and technology and the soldier subject is framed as object in violent scenes. In such an analysis the 'who' and the 'what' are visualised respectively: the technologies of war variously supplement and supplant the soldier's body, which at the beginning of the film, when framed in isolation, is invariably cornered, overwhelmed and watched by the surveillant and ubiquitous gaze of the camera. It is worth further considering the framing of *Army Confidence* through Rosi Braidotti's interpretation of post-humanism, which 'does not assume a human, individualized self as the deciding factor of the main subject. It rather envisages [...] a transversal inter-connection or an assemblage of human and non-human actors'.²⁹ In this analysis, post-humanism does not emerge as a consequence of a colonial humanist tradition or of technological invention. For Braidotti a concept of humanism is contested as a conceit belonging to European Enlightenment politics which she describes in terms of 'species hierarchy and human exceptionalism'.³⁰ Joanna Bourke draws on Braidotti's work in her analysis of 21st Century advances in weapons development in the US. Here she observes a 'decentering of the human, made possible through technology'.³¹ Bourke describes ways in which the soldier's body is enhanced through prosthetics, add-ons and modifications. Bourke describes how the US military has embraced the creative potential of the posthuman, not as an emancipatory concept where technology is utilised to iron out structural hegemonies associated with the humanist project, but as a tool through which US forces can, to quote the US Naval college,

²⁹ Rosi Braidotti, *The Post-Human* (Cambridge: Polity, 2013), 45.

³⁰ Rosi Braidotti, "A Theoretical Framework for the Critical Posthumanities." *Theory, Culture & Society* 36, no. 6 (November 2019): 31–61. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0263276418771486>

³¹ Bourke, "Killing in a Posthuman World: The Philosophy and Practice of Critical Military History." In *The Subject of Rosi Braidotti: Politics and Concepts*. (United Kingdom: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2014). 30.

'maintain a technical edge over potential adversaries'.³² Confidence, then, equates with biopolitical force, which is achieved not through the individual soldier subject, or through the body of men, but the technologies associated with violent attack that in this film dominates many of its scenes.

The Sound of Confidence

Within the sometimes chaotic and contradictory juxtapositions that make up *Army Confidence* a three-act narrative arc is indicated by the music. The montage is edited to a score which builds from tense anxiety, described through ominous strings, through to an intermezzo, and is followed by a triumphant crescendo in horns. This is accompanied by a 'call-to-arms' bass percussion timed with exploding landscapes. The music score and diegetic sound punctuations are integral to the narrative trajectory of the film as a whole. It first establishes anxiety of the individual soldier; to be a body without a machine is visually imagined in its vulnerability. In the next section, confidence is sought in territorial manoeuvres, military planning, making and fixing, and taking control with machines; activities which dominate the framing of the film. The latter part of the montage offers a triumphant spectacle of all things destructive, including bombs, more phallic rocket launchers, many tanks and explosions. It is at this stage that, as the title of the chapter and the project as a whole signals, the soldier gradually disappears from the scenes of technological destruction.

The Incredible Disappearing Body

The thesis as a whole is concerned with a blurring of the image, and the

³² Bourke quotes Michael N. Schmitt and Jeffrey S. Thurnher, "Out of the Loop": Autonomous Weapon Systems and the law of Armed Conflict", *Harvard National Security Journal*, 4 (2012-13), 232 in "Killing in a Posthuman World: The Philosophy and Practice of Critical Military History", 30.



Fig 51 and 52.

subject. In *Army Confidence* there are scenes where soldiers are almost completely enveloped in a chemical vapour or mist (Fig 51) Such imagery is evocative of *The Incredible Shrinking Man* (Fig 52). Its narrative concerns Scott Carey, a young, married, white, suburban man who is inexplicably covered in a strange radioactive mist which leads him to shrink in size over a period of time; eventually to a granular and then atomic size before he disappears altogether. According to film theorist Nate Brennan, the mist acts as a metaphor for Scott's loss of identity as he struggles to conform to the social and economic forces of post-war capitalism.³³ Scott is emasculated and diminished by the biopolitical forces that surround every aspect of his life. These intangible forces pervade like a mist or a gas that drifts in from the sea as a silent omnipresence that he can neither control nor avoid.

Army Confidence avoids imagery that celebrates the military strength, ruination and indeed restoration of the muscular male body. Instead confidence is achieved *by* the machine and often *in the absence* of soldiers' bodies. Similarly a humanist notion of a universalised, masculinised exceptionalism is replaced by exceptional machines which include the surveillant camera. As described in Stott Carey's dilemma, soldiers are diminished in their landscapes, covered by strange chemical mists, stunned by grenades, and they often undergo a shrinking process in the wide-angled framing of the camera. In its concluding section, *Army Confidence* is reliant of an interplay between soldiers, operators and weapons as catalysts for destruction. Yet where *Army Confidence* separates the body from action, in *Unique and United*, the next film for analysis, subjective identities are covered over and reformed through the prosthesis of military dress. Here military identity is gained not through the operation of guns and bombs, but through the simple act of putting on a uniform.

³³ Brennan, "To God There is no Zero", *The Incredible Shrinking Man and Allegories of Male Anxiety in Post War America* in *Film and Sexual Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2006) 60 – 73.

The Means of Correct Dressing – Unique and United

Vain trifles as they seem, clothes have, they say, more important offices than to merely keep us warm. They change our view of the world and the world's view of us.³⁴

Virginia Wolff (1928)

In *Unique and United* difference is recognized and celebrated but then transformed into uniform sameness. This film appears to forgo the masculinised aggression found in the battle scenes of *Army Confidence* for a quieter narrative involving team-building exercises. However, in both films real and ethical challenges associated with the possibility of killing and dying are ameliorated through a decentering of the body and the undoing of the gendered identity. This allusion is reminiscent of Žižek's impossible contradictions, 'virtual sex without sex, war without casualties. The soldier without an identity or a body echoes a society where 'we find a series of products deprived of their malignant properties'. The degendered and decentred soldier supports the militainment project in which war 'does not hurt anyone and never requires us [the viewer] to commit ourselves'.³⁵

Unique and United opens with a high-angle drone shot, which establishes an inward facing semi-circular '*horseshoe cartography*'; identified in Chapter 2. It is interesting to note that despite their stylistic differences both films establish a dominant surveillant overview of activities through universalising surveillant framing. *Unique and United* opens with music and a commentary overlay, '*The saying goes that we should never judge a book by its cover. For what really matters isn't the appearance of the book but the story inside. The truth is that when it comes to people, we often ignore this advice.*'

³⁴ Virginia Woolf, *Orlando* (London: Vintage Classics, 1928, 2016), 132.

³⁵ Slavoj Žižek, "Passion: Regular or Decaf?" (2004) In *These Times*. Published February 27, 2004 <https://www.lacan.com/zizek-passion.htm>



Fig 53 and 54.

The film is predominantly concerned with themes of inclusion and this is achieved from the outset by naming identity groups according to established codes of race, gender and sexuality. A marker and whiteboard exercise identifies social groups: white young men, older men and women, mixed ethnic groups, white women, black women and black men are arranged in a semi-circular horseshoe cartography and are seated in clusters on bales of straw (Fig 53 - 54). Each group elects someone to write on a board and hold the board up to the camera: 'Mature', 'Religion', 'Bame', 'LGBT+'. A group of six smiling white men hold up their board with the word 'White' written on it. Another group of young black men self-identify as 'Males'. Each socio-demographic unit is identified through group shots, which are taken from a slightly low-angled position. This creates an effect which foregrounds the importance of subjective diversity. The commentary continues.

*The truth is that when it comes to people, we often ignore this advice.
There are some who are viewed solely for their religion and not as a
personality
There are those who are seen by the colours of their skin rather than
their abilities
And there are times when sexual orientation is suppressed through
fear and judgement
But once those labels are stripped away, we'll soon find that maybe
we aren't so different at all
Who knows what you might discover when you break down those
walls between us.*

A bold caption appears in the lower left-hand corner of the frame, WHO

LOVES KARAOKE? A black man and a white woman, both young, walk into the centre of the room, face the camera and look into the lens. They appear slightly nervous together, surprised that they have this particular passion in common. The next question is also captioned, WHO IS A PARENT? Half of the group stand up and walk to the centre of the room. Again they look at the lens. There is a cut to feet revealing a pair of boots, canvas pink pumps and trainers – parents are both different and yet they are the same. Another caption, WE LOVE TO DANCE (Fig 55) accompanies five men and women balling their fists and pumping the air as they nervously wiggle their hips and laugh self-consciously. Two young black women in the background shift from side to side, not wishing to take part. Further captions include, WE SPEAK MORE THAN ONE LANGUAGE, followed closely by, WE WORRY WHAT OTHERS THINK OF US. At this point almost all participants stand, look at the camera and then at each other (Fig 56). There are smiles of recognition and empathy, an allusion to the vulnerabilities of the individual. The commentary concludes, 'When we stop labelling the person, we start to uncover their story.'

The music stops. A series of tight close-ups include military boots being laced (Fig 57). Army shirtsleeves are rolled. A badge is placed on a lapel (Fig 58). A hair bun is netted and a beret is placed on top (Fig 59). A badge is placed on the front of a turban. Anonymised ritualised dressing in uniform fragments bodies and obscures identities. Identity difference is hinted at through close-ups of a wedding ring and a tattoo. However, as soon as these are revealed they are covered over again. There is a close-up of a black woman adjusting her beret and looking into the camera. She is unique but she is wearing a beret like everyone else. The commentary continues, 'It's our individual stories that give us our collective strength.' The film ends with a



Fig 55 and 56.



Fig 57 and 58.

wide-angle aerial shot of the soldiers walking in step through the barracks of an army base. This shot echoes earlier scenes in *Army Confidence* in which an armed unit moves through a military barracks, where unity and equality are found in a collective subordination of the soldiers who march purposefully forward under the surveillant gaze of the high-angle of the camera that hovers overhead. I am reminded of Bhabha's words quoted in the previous chapter, but pertinent here so I will repeat the quote in full. The surveillant camera conceivably occupies the role where, "He," that ubiquitous male member, is the masculinist signature writ large – the pronoun of the invisible man; the subject of the surveillant, sexual order; the object of humanity personified.³⁶ In this sense military masculinity is invisible and is thus split from the body of the male soldier subject, through cinematic and narrative means.

In *Unique and United* gender and social identities are envisioned as sitting side by side, as if in Connell's words 'on a smorgasbord'³⁷ of equality and diversity. How is the British Army so proficient at ironing out social power imbalances that continue to prevail in the rest of society? In similar respects to *Army Confidence* a clue perhaps lies in framing. Soldiers are, as the closing commentary states, *Unique and United* in their inferiority to the watchful gaze of the camera. In addition to this the sequence of tight shots follows a similar aesthetic to the #armyconfidence posters in its dissection and objectification of the body. Their undressing sequence is shot in extreme close-up, thus rendering the individual as unrecognisable and unimportant. Their bodies are fragmented through the lens, and with this difference is erased or covered over. In Stiegler's formulation military dress supplements the body and it is through this supplementation that the military subject takes form and individual subjective identity disappears.

Butler asserts that gender may be done and undone – performed or

³⁶ Bhabha, *Are You a Man or a Mouse?* 57.

³⁷ Connell, *The Men and The Boys*, 10.

unperformed 'within a scene of constraint'.³⁸ In *Unique and United* this process appears to have happened in reverse. The diverse subjects challenge the stereotype of a military masculine identity at the beginning of the film. When the soldiers put on their uniforms diversity is *undone*. Here military masculinity is something that is worn. An act of becoming is characterised by a felt beret – slightly tilted on the head (Fig 60).

When the participants have undergone their transformation, the shots return to full frame and bodies are made whole again. Through the prosthesis of clothes, civilian subjects are transformed into a unitary body. In the early part of the film diversity is recognised and played with (am I male or do I love to dance?), but then made uniform through another game. Gender and social hierarchies are united in their subordination to the rules of correct dressing, and differences are covered over with neatly pressed khaki fabric.

Conclusion:

In *Unique and United* and *Army Confidence* military masculinity establishes itself through its relationship with objects that surround it; uniforms, machines, weapons, landscapes, other bodies. Here it is imagined, in Monique Wittig's analysis, as a 'universal' embodiment of sovereign power that is disassociated from 'particular' men's and women's bodies.³⁹ It is also worth noting that a negation of gendered military bodies operates within a logic of unknowing; unidentified allies, shadowy protectors, unknown enemies, and a cover of confusion that provides ongoing sustenance for an ongoing *war on terror*.

The iconography of the hard, masculine body contains a potential for suffering and sacrifice – a deterrent to young people who are seeking escape and adventure, a sense of belonging or lasting fulfilment. Yet to gain *army*

³⁸ Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York and Oxon: Routledge, 2004), 2.

³⁹ In the previous chapter I refer to Monique Wittig's binary categories of the universal general masculinity against the particular mark of femininity.



Fig 59 and 60.

confidence is to lose an embodied sense of self. In Stiegler's words, the 'who' is nothing without the 'what' and as this chapter contends, a military masculinity is promoted as impossible without the technologies that supplement or supplant the corporeal self. In this way military masculinity can be conceived of as an intangible biopolitical force, metaphorically visualised as a mist that overwhelms, or a surveillant camera that observes and objectifies, or a uniform that transforms the subject into military component.

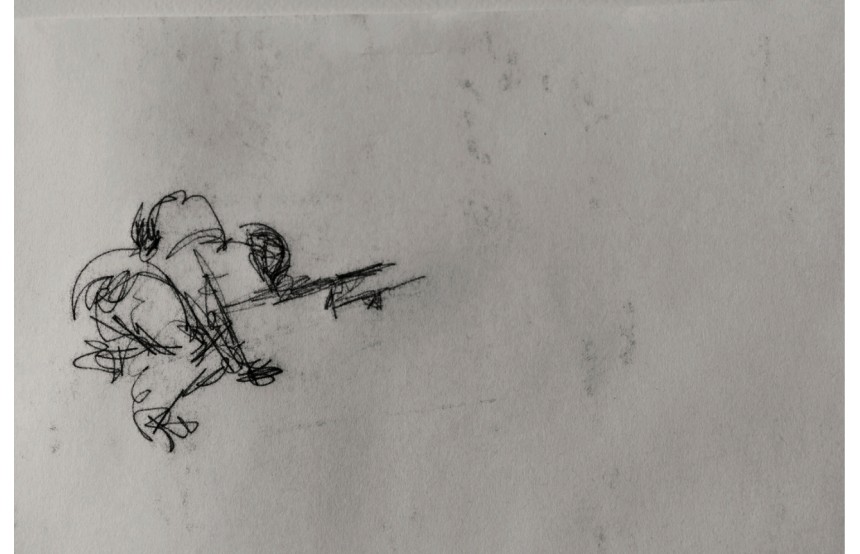
It is at this point that I introduce my practice explorations that connect ideas concerning subjective identity, the body and themes of violent force that is external to and separated from the military body. A series of compositions of dance performances and film fragments that I have collectively titled *Force*, were made in the early and middle stages of this project and provided initial inspiration for my research ideas. I worked with performers and dancers to explore the cyclical nature of violence and an inevitable sense of destruction that accompanies heroic actions. This work was influenced and informed by Simone Weil's *Iliad or Poem of Force* where she describes war and weaponry in terms of 'a continual game of seesaw'.⁴⁰ In this respect the film visually expresses a deconstructed formula where themes of care and harm are coexistent, each relying on the trace element of the other for its validity: strength is dependent on the inevitable vulnerability; beating your opponent requires your opponent to submit themselves to beating. A series of reflective and investigational drawings and mono-prints provided a starting point for choreography of *Force* and for the investigation as a whole. Throughout the project I have continued to make these gestural drawings and so they provide a consistent practice thread throughout the process of formulating my ideas and works, especially during periods of global pandemic isolation at home. I have titled these works collectively as *I Am Not a Gun* and they were

instrumental in generating my initial and developing ideas concerning the relationships between the body, the subject, weapons and the framing of war, as well as thinking through the works of Bernard Stiegler. It is the important process of spontaneous mark-making (I set myself the challenge of drawing a man with a gun in two seconds) that was instrumental in my ideas surrounding a separation of the gendered body from the concept of military masculinity – a crucial thread through the written elements of the study. In this way both *I Am Not a Gun* and *Force* provides both a starting point, a reflective thread through and a conclusion to the project. The collection of films and drawings can be viewed at <https://www.kirstenadkins.co.uk/kirstenadkins/>

⁴⁰ Simone Weil, "The Iliad, or Poem of Force." In *On Violence: A Reader* Eds., Bruce B. Lawrence and Aisha Karim (USA: Duke, 2017), 381.



Stills from Stand Up Get Down (2018)



Mono-print drawing from military recruitment films

A silhouette of a person wearing a hard hat and safety glasses, holding a tool, against a warm, orange background. The person is shown in profile, facing right. The background is a soft, glowing orange light, possibly from a lamp or a window. The overall mood is professional and focused.

CONFIDENCE THAT LASTS A LIFETIME

Conclusion:

A Looking Glass Logic

If it was so it might be; and if it were so, it would be:
but as it isn't it ain't. That's logic

Lewis Carroll¹

A rotating banner on the homepage of the British Army recruitment website includes short fragmented clips depicting moments in various combat scenarios and introduces the *Army Confidence campaign*.¹ One such film loop depicts a heavily protected platoon as it moves on foot through an urban landscape (Fig 61). The image is underexposed and without audio. The action has been slowed to create a dreamlike, unreal effect. Figures are silhouetted against the flare of backlighting so that its yellow filter combined with camera noise renders details barely visible. The hand-held shot gently judders as it closes in on one helmeted soldier, carrying a baton and a shield, who half-turns towards the camera. The soldier's body is encased in heavy armour with a thick visor around his face. The image is constructed in such a way that technical prosthesis overwhelms, rather than supplements, the human form. It is unclear who or what is inside the synthetic exoskeleton as it makes its burdensome journey from left to right of frame.

The 'who' is transformed into a 'what'.²

A caption, CONFIDENCE THAT LASTS A LIFETIME, is positioned in the middle of the image, adding another layer and blotting out the form. As the figure pushes forwards it is immersed in the gloom until it disappears from sight. Here, British military recruitment constructs an *Incredible Disappearing Soldier* who is overburdened by prosthesis and overcome by toxic mist. It hardly matters that the soldier cannot be seen. He is not there.

This study has comprised a series of interventions into ways that military masculinities have been constructed, mediated and

¹ British Army Jobs website <https://apply.army.mod.uk/> (accessed 17 May 2020) Note that this home page is regularly updated and its content has changed since first writing the thesis. However, at the time of writing subsequent banners followed a similar aesthetic as concluding three sentences of the chapter will illuminate.

² Stiegler, "Who? What? The Invention of the Human" *Technics and Time, 1: The Fault of Epimetheus*, 134.



promoted during the period of military actions carried out in the interests of an ongoing 'war on terror' – a war whose purpose, location, target and endpoint was characterised by ambiguity; articulated in this project through the conceptualisation of blur. At the inception of the war, Donald Rumsfeld justified military action in terms of the 'known knowns' and 'known unknowns' and 'unknown unknowns'.³ His speech was reminiscent of Lewis Carroll's Looking Glass logic where circular 'contrariwise' wordplay inflected the imaginary conversations, arguments and battles that Alice encountered on her adventures. In Rumsfeld's logic hostile forces may, might or would be out there, somewhere, on the horizon – but they may not be.⁴ Bush reaffirmed the message by proclaiming that enemy threats could or would be found in shadows or they might be multiplying in laboratory cultures somewhere 'in any dark corner of the world'.⁵ It was within this socio-political context that the British military advertised for new recruits to its continually diminishing ranks.⁶ While the intention of this investigation has always been to offer insights rather than expose equivocal truths, I offer a concluding, but perhaps not closing, proposal.

Many aspects of the British military recruitment campaign, concurrent with the twenty-year 'war on terror', were characterised by visual aesthetics and narrative discourses redolent of Bush and Rumsfeld's ambiguous rhetoric.

In this respect I refer to visual blur, empty horizons, ambiguities and contradictions that placed heroic warriors as both present and absent in staged scenes of military action. Through *Army Confidence* I described ways the body was often obliterated by gasses, mists and shadows. Such imagery

³ See Chapter 3 *Frame*, where I refer to Rumsfeld's Nato Press Conference in June 2002.

⁴ Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass and What Alice Found There* (London: Macmillan Children's Books, 1872, 2014), 59.

⁵ See Chapter 3 *Frame* where I refer to Bush's speech at West Point Military Academy in June 2002.

⁶ See Chapter 1 *Blur*, where I discuss MOD statistics on a year on year shortfall average eight thousand a year, in recruitment in the UK.

also included the supplementation, or even replacement, of flesh and blood with a masculine hegemonic force symbolised in powerful weapons. In the series titled *This is Belonging* subjective difference was marked but then universalised through a spatial cartographic arrangement of bodies in the mise en scène. Diversity and themes of intersectionality were acknowledged and even celebrated, but then they were covered over with the prosthesis of uniform, or they were made the same through performed and ritualised military tasks. Across the selection of films I observed that there was no singular or fixed representation of a heroic figure or of the homogenous military unit. Imagery associated with muscular male bodies was avoided, or sometimes ridiculed. Instead the films offered broad and eclectic perspectives on multiple military subjectivities. In this respect, blur became not only a visual phenomenon but a theoretical idea, which pointed towards an undecidability surrounding images, military rhetoric and gender subjectivity.

I appropriated and repurposed these ambiguities into a concept of blur, which I used as a methodological tool for theoretical and practical investigations. In this respect blur operated a dual function. It became a tool for critical reflection through my writing and practice. It also described the ambiguous rhetoric and aesthetics associated with military recruitment and 'the war on terror'. Blur thus constituted a borrowing back and forth of ideas where a discourse of resistance is appropriated and repurposed by the state systems being resisted;⁷ my critical reflections utilised the same imagery and ideas of the British Military whose visual material was often being challenged.

Each chapter started with a visual intervention triggered by a selected fragments from one of the thirty films, which provided a stimulus for creative enquiry. Screen-captured shots, frames or pixels offered a starting point that would open up spaces for critical insights, reflections and ideas. My diverse

⁷ Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Hampshire: Zero Books, 2009)

outcomes in the form of written content or visual practice exist both in dialogue with one another or as separate and isolated entities. Some of my practical interventions work in parallel with the ideas expressed in the written part of the project, others diverge from their source material. However, all elements, including the written sections, drawings, films and performances, had as their starting points the fundamental questions surrounding the construction and mediation of the gendered military subject in the context of state-controlled violence. I isolated and reimagined military gestural manoeuvres in dance performance and drawing. I downloaded, unpicked and rearranged elements of news imagery, reports and military YouTube adverts. Through this process I was able to foreground those trace elements that at first were hidden or unnoticed but which were essential to the construction of a cohesive logic when the films were viewed in their wholeness. I approached the concept of 'trace' through Spivak's interpretation of Derrida's 'différance' in language and meaning, where an imprint of the word or thing exists as 'the mark of an absence of a presence'.⁸ Trace in the context of this study, facilitated an interrogation of all the elements that are suppressed or covered over in the framing of a military masculinity and the recruitment to war.⁹ For example, my short film *Truck* imagined a gendered spatial cartography of belonging which conceptually gained its coherence against the prospect of hostile otherness. Through a process of cutting and reassembling in the editing platform I developed ideas surrounding *horseshoe cartography* as it shapes environments which are simultaneously open and closed, inviting and hostile. In *Truck* a cartography of belonging is exaggerated through a process where emphasis is given to its trace elements – or the elements that *belonging* is defined as not being; exile, difference, threat, otherness, hostility and so forth.¹⁰ I also utilised a concept of trace to isolate the formal elements

⁸ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Translators Preface" in *Of Grammatology: Fortieth Anniversary Edition*. (Baltimore JHU 2016 (1974) xxxvi

⁹ Spivak Preface to *Of Grammatology* xxxv

¹⁰ A horseshoe cartography is conceptualised in Chapter 2 *Space*.

of a photograph depicting a tragic military accident in *Army Photographer Captures her own Death*. Drawing on works by artists Hito Steyerl and Rabbih Mroue¹¹, I imagined the image as it operates purely through shape – a pyramid formation, and colours – dominant reds and recessive blues.¹² This task enabled me to open up reflections surrounding a gap between representation and meaning. A series of screen-captured stills from *Army Photographer Captures her own Death* further explored the trace elements that occupied the spaces between what the image *does*, and what the news caption *says it is doing*. Here a myriad of interpretations, dependent on the viewer's perspective, experience or desires, was captured in the blurring of meaning and of logic. In another example, *Napoleon Dynamite by Me* utilised a process of slowing, stilling and repeating, to draw attention to the limits of the frame and to the instabilities of subject and object positions in two choreographed performances. One element of the installation featured a borrowed YouTube posting of a dancing soldier in Iraq. A process of slowing his movements drew attention to the co-dependence and interchangeability between subject and object positions in the framing of his performance. The soldier subject was framed as the object of the viewer's gaze, but he also directly addressed the camera and consequently the viewer, became the object of his reciprocal gaze. As Foucault observes of such a phenomenon, 'subject and object, the spectator and model reverse their roles to infinity'.¹³ The installation also drew attention to ways that gendered hegemonies occupy the relative spaces between male and female bodies and as such are not conceived of as *embodied*: the absent presences found in the empty spaces between the edge of a uniformed male shoe, which is positioned above the cowering head of a diminished woman exaggerated a patrimonial hierarchy that existed through the framing of the subjects in their relationship



Fig 62.

¹¹ Hito Steyerl, *Medya: Autonomy of Images in Duty Free Art: Art in the Age of Planetary Civil War* (London: Verso 2019) See also appendix 1 *Army Photographer Captures her Own Death*.

¹² *Army Photographer Captures her Own Death*, <https://www.kirstenadkins.co.uk/>

¹³ Michel Foucault, "Las Meninas" in *The Order of Things* (New York and Oxon: Routledge Classics, 1966, 2002), 5.

to one another (Fig 62). The film series *Force* also used dance performance to explore ways that masculine power is located outside and separate to male and female bodies. Here hegemonic power is inflicted on, rather than done by or to, aggressors and defendants. Military masculinity is imagined here as a trace element that is not found in the embodied performance of male or female military characters. Instead it exists as a porosity between bodies. Military masculinity is also found in the absent presences, in Noël Burch's formula as discussed in chapter 3, outside the frame or behind the camera. Or it exists in the heightened surveillant gaze of the lens.

As I developed my investigation I became aware of the contradictions surrounding the concept of military masculinity. If soldiers' identities are obscured, lost, or missing, how can they be conceived of as masculine? The issue at stake here was interrogated through a consideration of subjectivity, selfhood and the body. The conundrum once again equates with a *Looking Glass logic*: how can no body be a gendered body? A clear and simple answer to this question is impossible. Equally it has been impossible to define 21st Century British military masculinity. However, common themes which emerged from my practical and analytical interventions led me to reach my second conclusive proposal.

In its aesthetic construction and mediation, military masculinity exists as a force which is external to and separate from the gendered body of the soldier subject.

It is worth reinforcing that this conclusive proposal refers to the technical, aesthetic and discursive construction of military masculinity in the context of the thirty recruitment films under investigation and does not take in the material conditions of what it is like to be a British soldier. To explain how I

arrived at this proposal, I will reintroduce the formal structural elements *Blur*, *Space*, *Frame* and *Body* that informed the shape of my investigation into the *Incredible Disappearing Soldier*.

The Technologies of Blur

In Chapter 1 I introduced the technical construction of blur as it is realised through the lens and in post-production. I also set out to establish the ideological implications of the blurring of imagery associated with military subjectivity. The concept of blur emerged out of my observations of the military film *Who we Are* where many of the images of the soldiers were defocused, or technically unstable, the consequence of which made it difficult to visually ascertain the gendered subjectivity of the British soldier. I also observed that aesthetics surrounding masculine military force were directed away from a fixity of representation where embodied male heroes might be produced as mascots for strong and stable nationhood. Instead I focused my attention on ways that masculine subjectivity was implied through commentary, images of weapons and landscapes, the paraphernalia of male self-care, or through the surveillant lens. In this way military identity was visually constructed in the disavowal of the heroic individual, and away from representations of the gendered sentient body, whilst at the same time containing the language and rhetoric associated with hegemonic masculinity – an abstract thematic concerned issues of endeavour, bravery, and collective identity.

In one example a commentary line described the *guts and glory* associated with military *success*, yet much of its accompanying imagery was visualised in unstable camera work, lens flare and soft focus. A gap between

what the image does and what its associated commentary says, was key to a blurred aesthetic that characterised the film *Who We Are*. In many ways such imagery reflected ideas offered by gender theorists, albeit coming from a very different ideological perspective. Gender studies scholars seem to be united in observing the paradoxes and inconsistencies that come with trying to define masculinities, masculine hegemonies and subordinate or subversive masculine forms. Concepts surrounding masculinity as separate from biological or reproductive difference, has been extended by thinkers such as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, for whom masculinity is perceived of as transactional.¹⁴ For Raewyn Connell hegemonic masculinity is an aspiration and does not belong to any body, male or female.¹⁵ Judith Butler refers to gender performativities where masculinity is something that is done by the subject, and equally may be undone.¹⁶ There is also a consensus that the hegemonic project is a precarious one and so it follows, as Frank Barrett observes, that soldiers appear strong and vulnerable, empowered, disenfranchised and obedient – often at the same time.¹⁷ My analysis of a number of examples within the selected films concurred with this. Male and female soldiers were constructed as blurred and diffuse, under cover or under threat, existing at or outside the margins of the frame.

The initial stages of my investigations were undertaken with the intention to sharpen the focus on the blurred aesthetics that were repeated throughout my selection of films. It was also my intention to sharpen up my understanding of the concepts and patterns surrounding the technical and discursive construction of a military masculinity. Yet as a filmmaker and editor, I already knew that while it is possible to *add* blur to a sharply focused clean image, such a technical formula cannot be reversed. An image that in its inception is blurred cannot be sharpened up or refocused. In a similar continuum, if the

¹⁴ Sedgwick, "Gosh Boy George, You Must Be Awfully Secure In Your Masculinity"

¹⁵ Connell, *Masculinities*.

¹⁶ Butler, *Undoing Gender*.

¹⁷ Barrett, "The Organisational Construction of Hegemonic Masculinity"

soldier subject is never clearly seen or represented, they can never be known or fully identified with by the viewer. In a further development of this idea, if an enemy threat is unknown and unidentified, then it can never be revealed or vanquished and so war continues ad-infinitum. After the 2001 al-Qaida attacks, Bush declared that that 'our war on terror' would continue until the day that 'every terrorist group of global reach has been found, stopped and defeated'.¹⁸ What followed was an Allied military campaign that by design would, should or could never end – with this the potential loss of life would be limitless.

Blur then opens up spaces for speculation about who or what the soldier subject might be or do. The controversial realities of heroic endeavour, are visualised in blurred scenes of imaginary military activities. Blur then constitutes a pragmatism where military violence is both alluded to and avoided. Such an ambiguity offers the would-be recruit the simultaneous thrill of adventure, with the avoidance of its potential consequences. In other words, British military recruitment constructs an ambivalence surrounding concepts of who the soldier is, what they are doing, and whether they are really present in the imaginary violence that is being staged.

Space

My investigations concerning a cartography of homosocial belonging charted a patrimonial heritage that was geographically visualised through open and closed spaces. In this respect I examined film stills, drawings and photographs across a century of British military promotion and observed a common theme found in the geographic orientation of soldiers' bodies within the framing of military unity. A visual template, I named as a *horseshoe*

¹⁸ George W. Bush. <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010920-8.html>

cartography, was discovered through a series of diagrammatic drawing exercises that mapped the spaces and shapes of military belonging. Using a scalpel, I cut shapes out of card to reflect the geographic orientations of the scenes under investigation. In many ways *Knife Drawings* resonated with the conceptual ideas developed by theorists including Barbara Ehrenreich, to imagine ways that misogyny, like masculinity and femininity, is conceived of as an external force that does not belong to either male or female subjects. Nor is it conceived of as being embodied by characters in the military recruitment films, but perhaps exists as a trace element of the culture and aesthetics of filmmaking itself. This idea conforms to Michael Shapiro's conception of a cultural palimpsest or template that is repeated in social and institutional patterns of behaviour.¹⁹ My drawings were undertaken with the intention to investigate ways that the *mise en scène* cartographically mapped masculine military cohesion. In several of these scenes, a semi-circular horseshoe cartography shaped a sense of opening and closure, through the lens. In my diagrammatic responses to these scenes, shapes of belonging, visually described as simultaneously open and closed, took on an organic, sometimes uterine (and in other ways phallic) appearance. This was an unintentional consequence of my responses to a rather dry and technical investigation into the geography of film production. However, the unintended association with sexual organs resonated with a feminist discourse surrounding militarism, homosocial bonding and a patrimonial heritage which is based on a fascination and fear of female otherness.²⁰ This phenomenon is perhaps most strongly expressed in the foreword to Klaus Theweleit's *Male Fantasies*, where Ehrenreich also describes the blurred and contradictory nature of misogyny as it was articulated by the Freikorps, a fascist volunteer army in post-Weimar Germany. In these accounts the imagery of female

¹⁹ Shapiro, *Violent Cartographies*.

²⁰ See Chapter 2 *Space* where I discuss homosocial belonging as it is spatially organised in staged military scenarios throughout the corpus of films.

bodies, blood, swamps and pits metaphorically describes the communist enemy threat as imagined by these fascists. However, Ehrenreich writes that such misogyny emerges out of a historical patrimony which is embedded in the social condition of 'normal' life and 'normal' behaviour, which I imagine as reinforced through state and cultural institutions including cinema production and military force. Ehrenreich writes, 'I think here of the man who feels a "normal" level of violence towards women (as in, "I'd like to fuck her to death") ... and the man who has a "normal" distaste for sticky, unseen "feminine functions" ... and the man who loves women, as "normal" men do, but sees the castrating horror in every expression of female anger... or that entirely normal, middle-class citizen who simply prefers that women be *absent* from the public life of work, decisions, war.'²¹ In Ehrenreich's account femininity is perceived of as dissociated from the female subject in the same way that 'normal' misogynies, and indeed fascism, is separated from the identities of 'normal' men. She questions '*which* men we are talking about and *whose* fantasies these are'.²² In my interpretation of such imagery, misogyny, power, fear and gender identity exist in the spaces between bodies, or exist outside the body in terms of biopolitics and through cultural and historical patrimonies.

Frame

I developed my considerations of the aesthetic and ideological mapping of gendered subjects in staged military scenes by focusing my attention on the technical construction of the soldier's point of view as it is imagined through the lens. I drew on theorisations by film scholars Noël Burch and Edward Brannigan in conjunction with the feminist theory of Monique Wittig to develop ideas concerning the gendering of subject and object positions as they were

²¹ Ehrenreich, preface to *Male Fantasies*, xv

²² Ehrenreich, preface to *Male Fantasies*, xv

framed by the camera. Ideas concerning the gendered gaze were underpinned by Wittig's notion of universality which, she argues, is connected to a patriarchal social order where masculinity is associated with the condition of all that it is to be human. Conversely, for Wittig, women are framed as the 'particular', and thus 'marked' as 'female'.²³ Homi K Bhabha's theorisations concerning the humanist masculinist subject 'writ large' also resonated with my argument that military masculinity is conceptualised as something constructed through the surveillant camera in the absence of the soldier subject. In this respect military masculinity was conceived of in terms of a power dynamic that exists in the absence of male bodies but through the male gaze.

If enemy or civilian bodies are not embodied – if war frames subjects as blurred or if they are hidden, cowering or lost in the scene – a question arises as to how they can be understood as fully-formed subjects. In the *militainment*²⁴ of such imagery soldier and civilian lives cannot be lost because they were never really quite there in the first place. In respect of this question Butler's articulations concerning the frame, the subject, the body and ungrievable lives has been central to my interventions, providing a thread through this research enquiry. In *Frames of War* she writes of a similar conundrum in relation to the mediated framing of populations as objects and targets of war, but her account is also pertinent to that of *The Incredible Disappearing Soldier* in British military recruitment films.

Ungrievable lives are those that cannot be lost, and cannot be destroyed, because they already inhabit a lost and destroyed zone; they are, ontologically, and from the start, already lost and destroyed, which means that when they are destroyed in war, nothing is destroyed.²⁵

²³ Wittig 'The Mark of Gender. *Feminist Issues* 5, 3–12 (1985).

²⁴ Stahl, *Militainment Inc.*

²⁵ Butler, *Frames of War*, xix

The absent soldier subject is barely a subject, to apply Butler's description, and can hardly be lost because he was barely present in the first place.

Body

In a contrariwise logic, my gendered identity is as much dependent on masculinity as it is on other femininities that are not me. I as a subject only exist through my relationship between other possible subjects and other objects that are external my body. Through writing about the body, the subject and the self – I was able to formulate and articulate ideas around military masculinity as an external force. Drawing on Butler and Stiegler, I examined the interrelationship between bodies, objects and other bodies. In this formula a military masculinity was perceived of as dependent on other subjects and technologies through which it established its identity. In Butler's account, subjectivity is conceived of as impossible when it is dissociated from other subjects and things that it is differentiated from. Butler expresses these ideas in terms of porosity between bodies, identities and things. However, her aim is counter-positional to the related aesthetics associated with the construction of military subjectivity in the adverts. For Butler the concept of porosity expresses an interconnectedness and solidarity as a means of resisting ongoing military violence that frames some lives as less grievable than others.

Singularity and distinctness exist, as do boundaries, but they constitute differentiating characteristics of beings who are defined and sustained by virtue of their interrelationality. Without that overarching sense of the interrelational, we take the body boundary to be the end rather than the threshold of the person, the site of

passage and porosity, the evidence of an openness to alterity that is definitional to the body itself. The threshold of the body, the body as a threshold, undermines the idea of the body as a unit.²⁶

A common theme in relation to all four chapters Blur, Space, Frame and Body, emerges where military masculinity in different ways is constructed as separate from and external to the male soldier. Instead I proposed that it was congruent with a concept of biopower and was visually conveyed through the lens, or through the choreography of solidarity between bodies in scenes. Military masculinity was imagined as something that was found in the bonding processes between subjects or seen through the surveillant camera, which turned subjects into objects framed by its hegemonic gaze. It was symbolised by weapons that destroyed landscapes in its staged pursuit of unknown and unidentified threats. Military masculinity was imagined as something shaped by a patrimony founded on a fear and mistrust of others who are not like us. In the framing of military recruitment, soldier's bodies were sometimes de-emphasised, or disappeared, through the use of blurred, diffuse or unstable camerawork. Themes of gender neutrality, intersectionality and a celebration of 'the middle ranges of agency' were interspersed with dichotomous power balances and hegemonic values.²⁷ I also contended through works by Roger Stahl that the absence of military bodies acted as an invitation to the viewer to step up and take part in the disavowal of violence that forms the militainment recruitment project. No soldiers' bodies will be injured and no enemy bodies matter, because there are no soldiers' bodies and there are no enemy bodies. These invisible visualisations existed in the midst of the messy discourse that accompanied the war on terror.

²⁶ Butler, *The Force of Non-violence*, 16.

²⁷ Sedgwick "Melanie Klein and the Difference Affect Makes." In *South Atlantic Quarterly*.

Final Thoughts

My deconstructed investigative approaches allowed me to examine what was being framed, how it was being framed, what was covered over, unstable or discarded in the imagery associated with British military recruitment during the period of military attacks in Iraq, Afghanistan and beyond, justified in the interests of 'the war on terror'. It was my intention to challenge these aesthetics and offer spaces for critique surrounding issues of gender, subjectivity, power and the framing of state-controlled violence.

I am finalising this project as US and UK troops withdraw from Afghanistan after two decades of Allied military presence in the country.²⁸ By the twentieth anniversary of the attacks of 9/11 the last of the troops will have left and the Taliban will have gained control of the country.²⁹ The homepage of the British Army recruitment website has now changed its slogan from 'CONFIDENCE LASTS A LIFETIME' to 'RECRUITING NOW AND ALWAYS'.³⁰ Behind the caption a series of blurred and discontinuous clips suggest a narrative where soldiers are running or being chased through a dark forest – it is unclear. Extreme close-ups depict soldiers falling into bogland; their faces and weapons sink into the swamp. Central to this sequence is a young, black female soldier, who is also framed in a series of extreme close-ups. A blurred silhouette appears to show her crouching on the forest floor, simultaneously

²⁸ I read and listen to the extensive analysis of the 20 year Allied war and the end of the Afghan campaign: Emma Graham-Harrison and Peter Beaumont, "Afghan anger over US's sudden silent Bagram departure," *The Guardian*, published 6 July 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jul/06/afghan-anger-over-uss-sudden-silent-bagram-departure>

²⁹ Michael Safin, "Conflicts since start of US 'war on terror' have displaced 37 m people", *The Guardian*, published September 9, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/sep/09/conflicts-us-war-on-terror-displaced-37-million-people-report>

³⁰ This war never officially declared over but increasingly political leaders have distanced themselves from its rhetoric. See Oliver Burkeman "Obama administration says goodbye to 'War on Terror'," *The Guardian*, published March 25, 2009 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2009/mar/25/obama-war-terror-overseas-contingency-operations>

³⁰ British Army website, "Recruiting Now and Always" British Army, accessed August 12, 2021 https://apply.army.mod.uk/?gclid=CjwKCAjwjdOIBhA_EiwAHz8xm-fSDgXeCgOVmqrOfEYOt0m5GBONtyMjioxsvmYgGW4JR0Ovi_tthoCBREQAvD_BwE&cid=semp4009274683&ef_id=CjwKCAjwjdOIBhA_EiwAHz8xm-fSDgXeCgOVmqrOfEYOt0m5GBONtyMjioxsvmYgGW4JR0Ovi_tthoCBREQAvD_BwE:G:s&s_kwid=AL18141131323097709085le!g!l!british%20army%20recruitment

absorbed into the mud and emerging out of it – this is also unclear (Fig 63). The blurred imagery questions whether she is protected by her troop, pursued or defeated. These questions provide the foundation for a developing enquiry whose working title would be similar to this one, *The Incredible Disappearing Soldier. How Does British Military Recruitment Construct Femininity in the Aftermath of the War on Terror?*

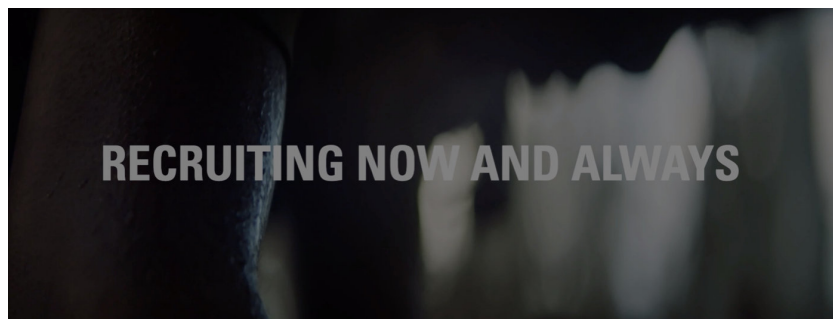


Fig 63. Banner for British Army recruitment August 2021

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Filmography

The following thirty films formed the initial stimulus for this investigation. They have been captured from online platforms including the MOD website and British Army YouTube platform. A number of the films have since been reposted by independent users of YouTube. During the period of investigation websites were regularly updated and thus content changed. The films were last accessed on September 16 2021.

Army, British, *Recruiting Now and Always*. 2021. https://apply.army.mod.uk/?qclid=CjwKCAjwidOIBhA_EiwAHz8xm-fSDgXeCgOVmqrOfEYOt0m5GBONtyMjioxvsvmYgGW4JR0Ovi_tihoCBREQAvD_BwE&cid=semp4009274683&ef_id=CjwKCAjwidOIBhA_EiwAHz8xm-fSDgXeCgOVmqrOfEYOt0m5GBONtyMjioxvsvmYgGW4JR0Ovi_tihoCBREQAvD_BwE:G:s&s_kwcid=AL18141!3!323097709085!e!g!!british%20army%20recruitment

Army, British, *Army Confidence*. 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6mhq1kXD4gs>

Army, British, *Who We Are I Army Brand I The British Army*. 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sxO9duW2guE>

Army, British, *This is Belonging*. 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q1vCe3BANws>

Includes the following titles

Will I Be Listened to in the Army?

Can I be Gay in the Army?

Can I practice my Faith in the Army?

Do I have to be a Superhero to Join the Army?

What if I get Emotional in the Army?

Army, British, *This is Belonging*. 2018. *Expressing my Emotions*.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gTqgS5OrLGU> -

Having My Voice Heard. 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Jj2Fm8pRBI>

Facing my Kryptonite. 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YVf76dveKU4>

Still Playing the Joker. 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9RLHAWf6NKA>

Keeping my Faith. 2018. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OQ4OoPNY_YM

Army, British, *Unique and United*. 2017. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OCdfsSI5nPE>

Army, British, *This is Belonging Part 1*. 2017. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IMd4RrT7SS4>

This is Belonging Part 2. 2017 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_cpPzYFIJXI

This is Belonging Part 3. 2017. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WeuFCHlvutI>

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This is Belonging Part 6. 2017. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wt1L_UP0uYA

Army, British, *Start thinking Soldier*. Online British Army recruitment campaign game. 2008 - 2009. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vbtZtlVelqc>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bWylaLCOZQo>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n4zbTBcNUhw>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4I9QFompreU>

Army, British. *Forward As One: Armoured Infantry*. 2006. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lfp-jqJB81U>

Air Assault Infantry. 2006. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=weudbL9tXCQ>

Light Royal Infantry. 2006. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BvgZU6UwoWY>

Mechanised Infantry. 2006. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jUxYXX7pFp4>

Air Assault Infantry. 2006 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=weudbL9tXCQ>

List of Works

Military Photographer Captures her Own Death.

2020 (4'00"). The work includes ten captioned photographs and a performed text.

<https://www.kirstenadkins.co.uk/>

Force: Multi Channel Installation incorporating the following films.

Stand Up Get Down, (07'02")

Grab First Grip Firmly, (02'31" loop)

Chancery Against Low Frontal Attack, (03'08")

Force, (57")

See <https://www.kirstenadkins.co.uk/force-1>

Chancery Against Low Frontal Attack was also filmed and screened as durational dance performance at Centrala Gallery in Birmingham (17'07"). See <https://player.vimeo.com/video/298232029>

Napoleon Dynamite by Me 2020, dual channel projection (6'45") <https://www.kirstenadkins.co.uk/napoleon-dynamite-by-me>

Knife Drawings, 2021 <https://www.kirstenadkins.co.uk/knife-drawings> *Flat Tyre*,

2018 - 2021 (3'00") <https://www.kirstenadkins.co.uk/flat-tyre> *Truck*, 2018, (3'20")

<https://www.kirstenadkins.co.uk/truck>

I am Not a Gun, 2018 – 2021. Mono-prints and drawings

<https://www.kirstenadkins.co.uk/i-am-not-a-gun>

Selected Screenings, Performances and Exhibitions

Army Photographer Shoots Her Own Death. Film and Screening at Desktop Cinema, the Alternative research forum as part of the Alternative Film and Video Festival in Belgrade. December 2020.

Napoleon Dynamite by Me. Film screening and artists talk. Masculinity and National Identity. AHRC Masculinities Network. Berlin.

IIElementII. Dual exhibition at Stryx Gallery, Birmingham. A six-week film installation which opened with Digbeth First Friday and was supported by New Art West Midlands.

Peep. Online residency and community education programme, September 2020.

Stand Up Get Down. The Lighthouse Arts Centre Wolverhampton.

Chancery Against Low Frontal Attack, and Grab First Grip Firmly. Seeing in the Age of Big Data, international conference of the Image in Manchester, 2019. Also screened at Hong Kong Baptist University 2018.

Force, Stryx Gallery, Minerva works in collaboration with Digbeth First Friday.