# Interpreting and Reinterpreting the Political Significance of Popular Media: The Importance of Seeing from a Range of Perspectives

Studies of popular culture have elucidated important insights about the extent to which politics is constructed by entertainment media. Nevertheless, I contend that when it comes to studies of security discourses in entertainment, researchers are too preoccupied with categorizing texts as either ‘critical’ or ‘affirmative’ depending on whether they seem to support or challenge militarism. I argue that work on popular culture should be more attentive to the polysemic character of texts – i.e. their openness to multiple readings. From this perspective, studies that are directed at finding critical or affirmative meaning are valuable, but they only uncover a narrow range of the possible interpretations texts may receive. I substantiate this with examples of ostensibly critical films that have been appropriated into military culture and ostensibly affirmative videogames that include critical themes. Giving greater attention to polysemy broadens research possibilities, especially when it comes to identifying how popular media are politically meaningful.

Popular media perform a wide variety of political functions, affirming or criticizing government policies, celebrating or condemning military operations, praising or demonizing political actors, and in general constructing the experience of politics (Bleiker, 2009; Ciută, 2016; Dittmer, 2010; Grayson, Davies, and Philpott 2009; Schulzke 2014, 2015). Popular media are particularly important when they reflect on issues relating to security, as they identify potential threats, characterize enemies, invoke contested values, and reflect on the concept of security itself (Dixit, 2012; Schulzke, 2013a; Valeriano and Habel, 2016). Research in this domain has been effective in critiquing problematic conceptions of security and showing how popular culture discourses are mobilized to support real policies. For example, studies have traced the links between fictional endorsements of torture and enthusiasm for it in practice (Danzig and Salek, 2012; Tenenboim-Weinblatt, 2009; Van Veeren, 2009), or between fictional reflections on 9/11 and the Bush administration’s rhetoric throughout the War on Terror (Birkenstein, Froula, and Randell 2010; Croft, 2006; Martin and Petro, 2006).

The importance of popular media in the security domain is reinforced by the heavily speculative nature of security/insecurity. Many of the security challenges influencing politics in the ‘real world’ are ethereal and based heavily on risk calculations – probabilistic assessments of potential events that may or may not happen and that are managed without much certainty of what effect these efforts have or whether predictions are accurate (Rasmussen, 2006; Shaw, 2002; Spence, 2005). Insecurity arises from abstractions like terrorism or from largely invisible adversaries using cyberweapons, drones, and hidden bombs. Even when threats have concrete manifestations, they may be poorly understood and provoke endless speculation about why they exist and how they are manifest. Popular culture intercedes in this informational vacuum to provide some sense of certainty (real or imagined) that we have clear answers about the nature of security risks and are able to defeat them (Holland, 2011).

Research on popular culture and security has made enormous progress in theorizing the intersections between media and politics, yet I contend that the literature suffers from a fundamental limitation that must be addressed to accurately characterize popular culture’s political significance. Much of the research focuses on developing critical or affirmative readings – showing that texts support or challenge a particular understanding of security or a potential threat – without giving adequate attention to alternative interpretations.

I argue that research on popular culture and politics should give greater attention to the various different (and sometimes contradictory) interpretations that texts can sustain. This demands a greater awareness of polysemy – the possibility of reading texts in multiple different ways. It is important as an interpretive exercise in its own right, yet it becomes even more valuable when we attempt to account for the political import of popular culture. Here the salient research question is not what the *right* interpretation of a text is, especially if correctness is derived from authorial intent, but how the text imbues politics with meaning. To be clear, I am not suggesting that existing interpretations of popular media are incorrect. I assume just the opposite - that these are valid interpretations that are well-supported by the available textual evidence. My contention is not that existing interpretations are wrong but that *they are incomplete* insofar as most only identify a narrow range of potential interpretations.

By emphasizing the importance of polysemy and how this contributes to uncovering the political import of popular culture, I hope to advance the effort to develop stronger methodologies for evaluating the political dimensions of popular culture, and images more broadly. There are three advantages to giving greater weight to polysemy. First, focusing on a narrow range of interpretations of a text limits our search for the role popular media have in political life. Capturing the political significance of popular media depends heavily on understanding how media are interpreted and what drives perspectival variations. Second, acknowledging polysemy and building it into the research agenda opens the possibility of not only studying the various themes that run throughout a text but of also theorizing how audiences fit these themes into different constellations of meaning**.** Polysemy provides an opportunity for understanding what ideological orientations or interests lead to different interpretations of a given text. Finally, more directly acknowledging polysemy can help explain why the political significance of popular media cannot be accurately understood in terms of behavioralistic cause and effect models. If textual meaning is plural, then the effects of engagement in media are apt to be plural as well. With these points in mind I show that polysemy can be incorporated into political research either by giving more attention to how fan communities appropriate texts or to the various possible readings a text may support. This makes polysemy amenable to audience-based and text-based methodologies.

To demonstrate the value of emphasizing the polysemic character of popular media, I draw on examples from films and videogames. These two media types are commonly identified as having clear affirmative or critical import, making them ideal cases for demonstrating that even texts that seem to be unambiguously affirmative or critical can give rise to alternative interpretations. My central examples will be ostensibly “critical” films like *Full Metal Jacket* and *Apocalypse Now*, and the “militaristic” videogames in the *America’s Army* and *Call of Duty* franchises. These examples allow me to not only show the possibility of multiple interpretations but to also demonstrate that polysemy is characteristic of different types of media coming from different types of producers and that seem to have divergent attitudes toward issues of security and political violence.

# The Politics of Popular Culture

Over the past two decades political scientists and scholars in other disciplines have devoted considerable attention to the political significance of popular media, especially when these comment on security/insecurity. As Bleiker (2015: 872) points out, “Our understanding of terrorism, for instance, is inevitably intertwined with how images dramatically depict the events and actors in question and with how politicians and the public respond to these depictions.” Holland (2011: 103) says that political scientists must study popular culture because it can “exert considerable influence in shaping public opinion and can help to derail or to reinforce the official policies of elected officials. They are also an important gauge, driver and reflector of ‘real world’ political currents of thought.” Hoskins and O'Loughlin (2010: 5) argue that “mediatitization of war matters because perceptions are vital to war – the perceptions of a public who can offer support to a war, of government trying to justify a war, and of those in the military themselves.”

The literature covers a diverse array of media types, texts, and methodological approaches. Despite this range, researchers generally assume, first, that popular representations of security can be accurately characterized as being critical or militaristic, and second, that most entertainment falls into the latter category. That is to say, the focus is generally on how popular media promote or critique militarism or specific militaristic policies. These two frames are usually mutually exclusive, with texts being located in one category or the other. For example, Dodds (2008b:1624-5) says that popular engagements with the War on Terror are “capable of reflecting but also challenging certain norms, structures and ideologies associated with US foreign and security policies and the ongoing war on terror.” Here and elsewhere these two poles of the critical and the militaristic are presented as the two possible modes by which popular media can gain political significance.

Giroux (2004: 217) argues that popular culture has a “pedagogical force” as “a major tool used by the armed forces to educate young people about the ideology and social relations that inform military life – minus a few of the unpleasantries.” He observes that the military’s influence is evident across countless domains. “From video games to Hollywood films and children’s toys, popular culture is increasingly bombarded with militarised values, symbols, and images” (Giroux, 2004: 216). The effect of this is generally to encourage military service and celebrate violence as a solution to insecurity. Similarly, Lutz (2002: 724) argues that “Popular culture works assert that war builds character, makes men, and grants freedom to the nation and a kind of supercitizenship to those who wage it.” Here again the texts seem to uniformly lend themselves to militarism.

Militaristic media are usually charged with concealing the horrific realities of violence. Der Derian (2000, 2009) argues that the Military-Industrial-Media-Entertainment-Network perpetuates “virtuous war,” which is war without casualties or human suffering. Similarly, Stahl (2009a: 26) argues that the American preoccupation with “clean war” is directed at “eliminating the visage of death from television.” He goes on to say that “The disappearance of death represents the primary method of neutralizing the citizen’s moral culpability in the decision to unleash state violence” (Stahl, 2009a: 27). Hess (2007: 345) explores this logic of omission in a detailed study of the videogame *Medal of Honor: Rising Sun*, noting that “stories are selectively narrated and only offer a perspective of nationalistic pride, omitting details of American war aggression and atrocity.”

Texts that seem to seriously confront the horrors of war, such as violence against civilians, war crimes, and the psychological trauma of fighting, are typically treated as critical or anti-war. Robinson (2012) offers a brief overview of games from developers seeking to undermine dominant narratives about war, in which the critical import comes from the attention to the human costs of fighting, such as simulating the effects of violence on civilians. Several studies have explored the recent films that critique the War on Terror and the Iraq War (Carruthers, 2008; Dodds, 2008a; Philpott, 2010). As in the critical videogames, the emphasis is often on the corporeal suffering violence inflicts on soldiers and civilians, as well as the psychological trauma of combat. From this work we can see that research covers a range of media with divergent attitudes about war but that each individual text is nevertheless located on one side or the other of a critical/militaristic binary.

The relatively narrow range of meanings attributed to texts is especially important because these interpretations inform efforts to show how texts are politically meaningful. If a text is identified as having an anti-war message, then interpreters tend to search for how it was appropriated by anti-war activists or undermined support for violence. And if a text is characterized as affirming war or specific violent practices, the search for its political import gravitates towards how it was incorporated into discourses promoting violence. This is evident from the interpretations of the television series *24*. Scholars found instances of politicians invoking the series’ hero Jack Bauer as a model counterterrorist operative and military officers expressing fear that the series might increase soldiers’ support for torture (Tenenboim-Weinblatt, 2009; Van Veeren, 2009; Žižek, 2006). These are extremely important instances of fiction influencing the ‘real world’ of politics, but the focus is almost exclusively on how the series promotes torture without looking at whether it could offer countervailing lessons. The uniform focus on either militaristic or critical interpretations persists across the literature regardless of which text is being studied, with most commentaries focusing on a fairly narrow universe of possible readings without giving much attention to alternatives.

Inattention to the range of interpretive possibilities is partly due to the limited research on audiences. Few political scientists consider audience perspectives on popular media, thereby limiting exposure to alternative interpretations. Those who have attempted to study audience responses generally find substantial differences between audience members’ readings and scholarly interpretations. Dodds (2006) investigates audience perspectives on James Bond films by posting comments on the Internet Movie Database (IMDb) and gauging reactions. As he says “film studies scholars and other academic commentators argue that these films provide simple narrative structures, which identify the United States and US service personnel as sources of goodness and moral courage” (Dodds, 2006: 119). His message to invite audience comments raises the issue of whether the film *Die Another Day* reflects intelligence agencies’ failures during the War on Terror. The fans generally rejected this interpretation, chastising Dodds for taking the film too seriously and trying too hard to connect it to real events. He finds that “fans do converge around particular shared interests in plot development, links to real-world global politics and characters even if they also disagree over their significance and relevance” (Dodds, 2006: 120). This kind of audience research is an important means of uncovering polysemy in action, though I argue that it is also possible to appreciate polysemy when pursuing the more common textual interpretation strategy if the search for possible interpretations becomes an explicit part of the research methodology.

Although research on security and popular media has been directed at an extremely diverse body of texts representing virtually every medium available, I focus on films and videogames in the following sections. First, these stand out as receiving the most attention in recent research, with television coming in a relatively close third place, and poetry, novels, and music falling more distantly behind (Bleiker, 2009). This does not mean that these are the most important cites of political content, but the large body of existing work does provide an excellent framework for showing the value of building polysemy into the research agenda. Second, films and videogames are routinely identified as being either critical or affirmative, with seemingly little variation in the scholarly opinion of specific texts. This suggests that individual texts have a fixed and determinate character. I am specifically interested in the hard cases that are generally treated as having a clear message. Demonstrating the importance of polysemy in these instances helps to establish the value of this approach.

# Modes of Textual Interpretation

Polysemy, or the susceptibility of symbols or texts to various different meanings, is a basic precept of most contemporary theories of textual analysis. It is particularly important in post-structuralist work that denies the primacy of authorial intent and highlights the audience’s role in constituting meaning. Rose (2013: 133) observes that “The meanings of signs are. . .extraordinarily complex” and that “A sign is polysemic when it has more than one meaning.” One of the challenges is determining whether this multiplicity arises because of fan communities’ interpretations or whether it is an inherent characteristic of texts themselves.

According to the former view, texts are interpreted by different groups according to their shared interests and identities, then the fan communities develop these interpretations by incorporating the texts into group practices and even creating new content based on the original. Sandvoss (2005:130) invokes this conception of polysemy when he says that “given this role of the reader in the constructing and shaping of meaning, questions of polysemy and neutrosemy are dependent on the reception context rather than the text itself.” He expands on the concept of neutrosemy by saying that it refers to a text that permits “so many divergent readings that, intersubjectively, it does not have any meaning at all” (Sandvoss, 2005:126). Here the intersubjectivity of interpretation is a group activity to be performed by fan communities, making it extrinsic to the text itself. These communities may depend on some openness from the text, yet they do most of the work when it comes to developing a range of interpretive possibilities. Studying this type of polysemy depends on looking beyond the texts themselves to see how fan communities engage with, and sometimes transform, their content. Similarly, Jenkins (1992: xxi) says that fan communities are involved in ‘poaching’, a “process of negotiating over the meaning of the text.” As a negotiation, the process of meaning making is inherently rooted in group activities.

Fiske reflects a more textually grounded view of polysemy. He emphasizes the role the text plays in promoting various interpretations. “This polysemic potential is neither boundless nor structureless: the text delineates the terrain within which meaning may be made and proffers some meanings more vigorously than others” (Fiske, 1987:12). Moreover, the alternative readings come primarily from characteristics of individual readers, rather than from the intersubjective life of the fan community. Jenkins (1992: xiv) expresses the contrast between his own intersubjective account of textual meaning and Fiske’s by saying “Meaning-making in Fiske was often individualized, whereas in my work, meaning-making is often deeply social.” This distinction between individual meaning-making and collective meaning-making is important to bear in mind when we search for how popular media function politically, as it identifies two different approaches we can take to studying popular media: one grounded in audience research and another based on textual analysis that is attentive to the range of different possible meanings.

Literary theorists have long disagreed over whether competing interpretations of a text are equally valid or whether some are better than others. This is an intractable debate that I cannot hope to resolve here. However, it is important to be aware of this nagging issue when framing research projects that account for a range of potential interpretations and to take an explicit position on how various interpretations should be evaluated. One's stance on this issue will shape the extent to which it is possible to make normative claims about competing interpretations. I would agree with Fiske in thinking that there are better and worse readings of a text, which can be judged based on their use of the available evidence. An interpretation that can mobilize more evidence from the text will generally be more compelling. Nevertheless, even if one accepts this evaluative criterion there may be a range of different meanings that have roughly equal strength. And fan communities may become invested in a particular interpretation even if it is demonstrably weaker than alternatives.

The writers interested in the political implications of popular culture are likely aware that texts are open to multiple interpretations. After all, this is a core assumption of the constructivist and post-structuralist traditions that much of this research is grounded in. My contention is that regardless of whether those researchers agree that texts are open to various interpretations, the tendency of reading texts as being fairly uniform in their pro-war or anti-war positions, amounts to a de facto denial of polysemy. The interpretations that others offer of pro- and anti-war media are therefore correct insofar as they map out a certain range of interpretive possibilities, but they are incomplete because they leave so many alternative (and sometimes diametrically opposed) readings unexplored.

Some commentators acknowledge that popular culture may ordinarily be open to competing interpretations, yet they generally downplay the importance of the alternatives. In an analysis of how film and television support the war on terror Castonguay (2004: 106) acknowledges polysemy and denies that audiences “are passive "cultural dupes" unable to resist ideological messages.” However, he contends that “the polysemy of the ‘war on terror text’ was severely constrained or ‘managed,’” through cooperation between the government and media producers that “created a context of reception with limited possibilities for oppositional or politically progressive readings” (Castonguay, 2004: 106). Castonguay is certainly right in thinking that authorial intent shapes the textual information that can give rise to various interpretations, yet it is vital to avoid overstating authorial control over texts when even the strongly critical and militaristic works that I discuss fail to close off alternative perspectives.

In the following sections I illustrate both types of polysemy while also looking at different types of texts. First, I argue that audiences can interpret anti-war films in radically different ways depending on their interests and group life by showing that the critical films of the post-Vietnam era have a much different meaning for soldiers than they do for civilians. Second, I argue that it is possible to identify competing themes in militaristic videogames simply by looking at the texts themselves. This makes it important for scholars to account for various readings even when these are not actualized by a specific audience. Videogames are a particularly useful example, as they demonstrate that divergent meanings can arise either from various ways of understanding the evidence a text provides or from interactivity that allows audience members to participate in constructing their experiences.

# Interpretations of Anti-War Films

*Apocalypse Now* and *Full Metal Jacket* stand out as architypes of anti-war filmmaking. Each film goes beyond simply challenging the Vietnam War in particular to raise deeper concerns about the psychological, political, and moral costs of training people to kill. They call attention to the horrors of war: the trauma of combat, sexual exploitation, and lost respect for human life. Academic commentaries on the films typically highlight there critical themes. Crampton and Power (2005: 261) identify *Full Metal Jacket*, along with films like *Dr Strangelove* (1964), *Platoon* (1986), and *Three Kings* (1999) as evidence that “Film has not only supported hegemonic geopolitical representations but has also served as a medium of resistance.” Rasmussen and Downey (1991) argue that *The Deer Hunter* (1978), *Apocalypse Now*, *Platoon*, and *Full Metal Jacket* exemplify the technique of “dialectical disorientation”, which exposes the purposelessness of war. By depriving war of meaning, the films undermine romantic narratives about conflict and deny that it has any deep moral significance.

Stahl (2009b: 537) says of Vietnam War films that they “are widely considered to be antiwar because of their bleak departure from traditional war cinema.” For Stahl (2009b: 537), these films do not challenge the war by introducing any new values but rather by focusing on “a kind of moral ambiguity, a loss of compass, preferring to orbit around the personal crisis of the soldier.” The films are therefore critical not only in the sense that they explore the dark side of war but also in the sense that they do not endorse any alternative political program. They are purely focused on highlighting the horrors of violence. Philpott reaches the same conclusion, saying that “Mainstream Vietnam films typically focus on the human tragedy of war (rather than its political context) for US soldiers. The destructive effects on individuals and the corrosive effects of conflict and difficult moral choices on group identity, loyalty and morale are common themes” (Philpott, 2010: 330).

In his critique of contemporary American militarism, Bacevich identifies popular culture as a vital critical force that is capable of disrupting romantic illusions about war:

The old twentieth-century aesthetic of armed conflict as barbarism, brutality, ugliness, and sheer waste grew out of World War I, as depicted by writers such as Ernest Hemingway, Erich Maria Remarque, and Robert Graves. World War II, Korea, and Vietnam reaffirmed that aesthetic, in the latter case with films like *Apocalypse Now*, *Platoon*, and *Full Metal Jacket*. The intersection of art and war gave birth to two large truths. The first was that the modern battlefield was a slaughterhouse, and modern war an orgy of destruction that devoured guilty and innocent alike. The second, stemming from the first, was that military service was an inherently degrading experience and military institutions by their very nature repressive and inhumane. (Bacevich, 2005: 20)

Here we not only see another mention of these archetypal anti-war films that are continually referenced throughout the literature but also links between them and other types of war media. Bacevich suggests that the films participate in an intertextual critique of war, extending the significance of individual texts and elucidating ‘cultural truths’ that can inform our understanding of war.

Commentators also build on these films reputations as archetypal anti-war texts to establish the credentials of other anti-war media. Payne identifies the videogame *Spec Ops: The Line* as an example of videogames taking a critical perspective on war. The game is explicitly modeled on *Apocalypse Now*, though it replaces the Vietnam War with a fictional American intervention in Dubai and a secret mission to find a rogue American officer exercising dictatorial control over the city, just as Colonel Kurtz did over an isolated tribe in the film. Payne (2014: 15) says that “there are striking parallels between Hollywood’s response to Vietnam (in films like *Apocalypse Now*, *The Deer Hunter*, *First Blood*, *Full Metal Jacket*, *Platoon*) and *Spec Ops*’ handling of the invasion and occupation of Iraq that put these controversial texts into a historical lineage.”

Interpretations of these films are by no means simplistic or one-dimensional. They raise thoughtful issues and explore some of the various ways in which the films may be experienced, yet they do this while remaining committed to the position that the films are essentially critical. The texts certainly support this reading. There is ample evidence from the texts and audience responses to demonstrate that they contain prominent anti-war messages. Nevertheless, we can see from audience receptions of these films that their meanings are contestable and that they actually play a central role in supporting cultures of militarism.

# Audience Appropriations of War Films

*Apocalypse Now* and *Full Metal Jacket* explore the horrors of war and American soldiers’ participation in illegal attacks, but these same themes that appear so terrible from an academic’s perspective, can be profoundly attractive to those who have decided that they want to fight. In her analysis of soldiers’ memoirs, Peebles (2011: 34) describes soldiers’ “lust for identification with their beloved movie heroes,” and finds that, for many soldiers, “their knowledge of what war is like is shaped by the Vietnam movies so many of them have watched over and over” (Peebles, 2011: 4). This includes Vietnam War films that are typically read as being critical.

In his memoir of the First Gulf War, Anthony Swofford reflects on how important films about Vietnam were for giving soldiers a sense of identity and preparing them for combat.

There is talk that many Vietnam films are antiwar. . . But actually, Vietnam war films are all pro-war, no matter what the supposed message, what Kubrick or Copolla or Stone intended. Mr. and Mrs Johnson in Omaha or San Francisco or Manhattan will watch the films and weep and decide once and for all that war is inhumane and terrible, and they will tell their friends at church and their family this, but Corporal Johnson at Camp Pendleton and Sergeant Johnson at Travis Air Force Base and Seaman Johnson at Coronado Naval Station and Spec 4 Johnson at Fort Bragg and Lance Corporal Swofford at Twentynine Palms Marine Corps Base watch the same films and are excited by them, because the magic brutality of the films celebrates the terrible and despicable beauty of their fighting skills. (Swofford, 2003: 6-7)

Swofford (2003: 7) goes on to explain that “Filmic images of death and carnage are pornography for the military man. . . It doesn’t matter how many Mr. and Mrs. Johnsons are antiwar – the actual killers who know how to use the weapons are not.” Thus, he concludes that “The supposedly antiwar films have failed” and that they contribute to militarism just as effectively as films explicitly designed to do this (Swofford, 2003: 7). In fact, ostensibly critical films may be even more attractive to soldiers. Swofford explains that what he and other soldiers want is exposure to the most terrible realities of war, especially the kind of visceral destruction of bodies that is commonly described as lending credence to the anti-war perspective. Another soldier confirms this when he recalls watching “*Platoon*, *Full Metal Jacket*, [and] *Born on the Fourth of July*” after an engagement with the Taliban: “We watch them long into the morning while soldiers laugh and exclaim ‘Goddamn!’ and slap high fives as little Vietnamese villages are burned and the occupants are shot by U.S. soldiers” (Rico, 2007: 212). Thus, even scenes of atrocities that shock some audiences may appear as celebrations of American military power to others.

Veterans’ memoirs are replete with evidence to confirm Swofford’s evaluation. Soldiers routinely watch ‘anti-war’ films and have special reverence for those that appear to have the most overt critical themes. These films form part of the military culture, informing soldiers’ vocabulary and even inspiring their actions during combat. Buzzell (2006: 274) describes wearing the same “War is Hell” pin as Private Joker in *Full Metal Jacket,* and recalls that“Of course everybody who saw the pin on me before the mission today came up to me and started spitting lines out of *Full Metal Jacket.*” He also describes other soldiers as looking “a lot like Private Cowboy in the movie *Full Metal Jacket*” (Buzzell, 2006: 152-3) or “a lot like a TV movie version of the sergeant major in *We Were Soldiers*” (Buzzell, 2006: 329). Hartley (2006: 180) describes his shock when a fellow soldier did not recognize the lines he quoted from *Full Metal Jacket*, remarking that “I don’t know if I can trust a soldier who’s never seen *Full Metal Jacket*.” In the next sentence Hartley goes on to confirm this assessment by describing the soldier as profoundly unimpressive. “His personality was fairly submis­sive. He spoke in a meek voice and was endlessly polite” (Hartley 2006: 180). Familiarity with the film is a proxy for familiarity with the military itself. Someone who has not seen it and lacks the ability to quote it from memory is therefore missing out on an integral part of the military culture and failing to live up to the ideals of what a soldier should be like.

*Full Metal Jacket* is probably the most commonly referenced film in the memoirs of soldiers who have been deployed since 1990, yet no individual scene attracts as much attention as the famous air cavalry attack in *Apocalypse Now*. Soldiers routinely recreate it to build anticipation for an attack and to intimidate their enemies. O’Donnell describes hearing the music during the opening moment of the American attack on Fallujah in 2004. “As the battalion moved toward Fallujah the familiar sounds of battle were broken by a scene straight from the movie *Apocalypse Now*: Da Don Da Da Don Don. Don Da Da Don Don. The moment was electric. Many Marines got chills as Psych Ops, their Humvees equipped with massive speakers, blared ‘The Flight of the Valkyries’”(O'Donnell, 2007: 76). Shin describes hearing the same music when searching Iraqi’s homes. “Psyched up by the blaring Wagnerian "Ride of the Valkyries" of "*Apocalypse Now*" fame, hundreds of American soldiers raided the homes of suspected Iraqi guerrillas yesterday in the western city of Ramadi” (Shin, 2003). The power of this scene transcends cultures and is not unique to the US military. Harding describes seeing British soldiers reenacting it in their own way. “With Wagner's *Ride of the Valkyries* booming out over loudspeakers, paratroopers embarked on large Chinook helicopters at Kandahar airfield to fly into enemy-held territory”(Harding, 2008).

We can see from these examples that even the films that are most consistently identified as being anti-war have become integral to promoting militarism – even to the extent that they are deployed to terrorize enemies. In fact, the same textual cues that make the films seem so profoundly critical to some audiences are the same themes that allow them to celebrate war for others. The films shape military culture in many ways: providing shared reference points, influencing the vocabulary soldiers use, rousing them for battle, and terrorizing enemies during attacks. These examples also demonstrate the political import of popular media in general. The interpretations are not merely different perspectives on the texts but actually different ways of enacting their meanings in practice. One could argue that the pro-war readings of *Full Metal Jacket* and *Apocalypse Now* are wrong, or at least less compelling than interpretations recognizing the films’ critical import. However, the militaristic readings of the films are politically important if they inform soldiers' awareness of their roles and shape their attitudes toward violence to such an extent that soldiers script their attacks to resemble cinematic moments. Looking at the range of interpretations facilitates efforts to develop more nuanced accounts of the films’ political meaning.

# Militaristic Videogames

Most military videogames are read as strongly pro-military texts that glorify war. They present messages that are often characterized as either directly influencing players' attitudes towards violence, or more modestly, creating a cultural climate in which it is easier to cause attitudinal shifts. Power (2007: 271) argues that “digital war games represent a powerful medium to explore the ways in which visual culture can be used to elicit consent for the US military and to enable the expression of militaristic fantasies.” Delwiche (2007: 4) ascribes a particularly strong influence to videogames, saying that they “have the potential to shape attitudes and behavior in ways that Goebbels could never have dreamed.” Robinson (2012: 505) says of mainstream military videogames that, “persuasion works through all these games to encourage players to support militarization, both tacitly and explicitly.” Shaw (2010: 798) argues that “video games are vital in linking a brutal colonial present with the intimate spaces of the home computer, thus facilitating mass cultural participation.” And Mantello (2012: 272) argues that “The underlining subtext in many of these game narratives advocates a form of global humanitarian interventionism that justifies any breach of another country’s sovereignty, the legal justification to conduct extrajudicial killing and a narrative which brutalizes and demoralizes its faceless victims.”

As these reactions indicate, military videogames are generally read as taking an affirmative, pro-war perspective. This is embedded in the texts themselves, from their “neo-orientalist aesthetics and storylines” (Mantello, 2012: 275) to the way they “propagate an image of war as bloodless play, which consolidates an ethos of militarization” (Power, 2007: 285), to “routinizing the extermination of the enemy” and “diminishing the horrors of battle and exalting its spectacle” (Dyer-Witherford and De Peuter, 2009: 118). Thus, videogames are characterized as being objectionable because they contain clearly identifiable pro-war themes that are central to their fictional worlds and that appear to offer a fairly narrow range of possible interpretations.

A few videogames have been characterized as promoting a more reflexive attitude towards war. However, these are not only different texts but typically come from other developers. For example, Robinson (2012) describes critical games as coming from small independent developers, while contending that most of those released from major developers are militaristic. Thus, when it comes to videogames, not only are individual texts categorized into one side or the other of the critical/affirmative binary but so too are developers and their franchises.

Criticisms of military videogames become particularly harsh when they consider the US military's own videogame: *America's Army*. Since 2002 the US military has made this game freely available to players around the world and used it to simulate virtual Army training courses and multiplayer combat (Schulzke, 2013b). Power (2007: 275) says that it and other military videogames function as “virtual advertisements for the present and future glory of the US Armed Forces.” This is a fair portrayal, as the game is explicitly designed as a marketing and recruitment tool that helps the Army communicate directly with civilian gamers. Turse sees it as representing broader trend in the militarization of domestic life. “More and more toys are now poised to become clandestine combat teaching tools, and more and more simulators are designed to be tomorrow’s toys” (Turse, 2008: 140). The game is particularly threatening because it is made by the military and directly expresses military interests.

Studies of the game highlight the link between its censorship of violence and its recruitment function. Wounded and dead avatars are not dismembered or disemboweled as in so many other videogames. They are simply marked by a small red dot indicating where the bullet struck. Stahl (2006: 124) says that this is because “a game that seriously approached the horrors of battle would probably undermine the recruitment effort.” Others analyze the game as an incidence of what Der Derian (2009) characterizes as “virtuous war,” because they glorify combat by effacing its physical destructiveness (Salter, 2011). Thus, the difference between critical and affirmative games is linked back to a characteristic of the texts themselves, in this case, whether there seems to be an effort to conceal war’s corporeal effects.

The Call of Duty franchise represents another approach to military videogames. Games in the series come from civilian developers, rather than the military, and explore more controversial themes, such as nuclear weapons and torture. The series warrants attention because it has been extremely successful, selling over 250 million copies (VGChartz) and features prominently in critiques of militaristic games. Mantello (2012: 272) says that the games transform players into “patriotic crusaders whose goal is to liberate failed nations, police states of concern, protect national security interests and vanquish pre-modern evil.” Shaw (2010) identifies the games in the series as “transitional spaces” that enjoin players to see themselves as participants in the war on terror. This undermines the boundaries between soldiers’ and civilians’ identities and helps to sustain a culture obsessed with countering terrorism. Thus, the games are treated as being fairly simplistic pro-war texts that perpetuate militarism and promote player disengagement from the realities of war.

# Contrary Themes in Military Videogames

Like films, videogames have strong fan communities and can be profitably understood in terms of audience reception. However, my focus in this section will be on how the texts themselves may support multiple interpretations, aside from how they are interpreted by audiences. This illustrates polysemy as a feature of a text, rather than polysemy as a feature of the fan community’s relationship with the text. This is methodologically useful for research on politics and popular media because most studies focus on textual analysis without engaging with fan communities and could therefore benefit from an approach to polysemy that is possible without going beyond textual evidence.

Videogames are particularly important for more heavily text-based attempts to identify interpretive possibilities because of their interactivity. They are dynamic texts, changing as players navigate through the game world. This suggests that even without a fan community to intersubjectively construct a text’s meaning a text may be polysemic in two senses. First, by providing textual evidence that can support multiple interpretations (which may or may not be picked up by a fan community). Second, by offering degrees of interactivity that allow the text itself to yield different experiences. Whereas all texts are polysemic in the former sense, videogames and other interactive media are unique in their ability to present different information depending on what inputs they receive.

Mead hints at the possibility of taking different perspectives on *America’s Army* when she argues that the military’s involvement in the gaming industry can receive divergent normative valuations depending on whether the military’s influence is understood as corrupting or enriching. As she points out, “People can see what they want to see in *America’s Army*—it can properly be regarded as both teen-focused propaganda that militarizes young minds and a striking example of military innovation” (Mead, 2013: 77). This point can be pushed even further. The game’s meaning is not only open to contestation when it comes to deciding whether the military can legitimately be involved in civilian entertainment but also when looking specifically at how the game characterizes war. *America’s Army* is overtly pro-Army and includes prominent themes glorifying the United States and militaristic values. Nevertheless, one of the basic assumptions of polysemic textual analysis is that authorial intent does not exhaust a text’s meaning. Even though the US Army clearly intended its game to work as a strategic communication tool (FAQ), the information it presents can be plausibly read in different ways.

Most commentators respond harshly to *America’s Army* because they privilege the authorial intent to use the game as a strategic communication tool. Yet it is also possible to see the game undermining this mission. Looking at soldiers’ reactions to Vietnam War films, it is clear that some of the most graphic and violent films – the ones that seem to give the most authentic experience of war – tend to be especially popular. This trend continues beyond films about the Vietnam War. Many recent films linked to militarism, such as *Black Hawk Down* and *Lone Survivor*, likewise include graphic depictions of combat (Dalby, 2008). Based on this we can surmise that *America’s Army*’s sanitized violence – the absence of blood, dismemberment, civilian suffering, or other horrors of war – do not necessarily make the game militaristic. Without these features, the game lacks characteristics that are integral to romanticizing war. Players searching for a more authentic vision of war may be attracted to other games that include more graphic destruction.

Another often criticized feature of *America’s Army* is that its missions take place in dozens of diverse settings, suggesting a global orientation to war in a way that “reinforces a number of dominant geopolitical tropes about the American military role in empire” (Salter, 2011: 373). This is certainly a fair reading of the global scope of conflict, yet it seems plausible to read the same information as signaling the failure of American empire. If it is waging an endless war that is global in scope, then the US military can hardly be said to be maintaining security. On the contrary, this intimates that the United States may be powerless to do anything but constantly struggle against its enemies without producing any lasting change.

It would be impossible to briefly describe the many games in the *Call of Duty* series, as it comprises over a dozen games simulating a third world war, Cold War espionage, and a dystopian future in which the United States is under attack from Latin America. As critics rightly point out, the series routinely casts players in the role of American or British soldiers fighting against a continually changing cast of enemies from the former Soviet Union and developing countries. This basic structure gives the games a pro-Western and distinctly militaristic appearance. However, the games are far more complex than this, with individual titles including subversive themes that critique American hegemony.

To take just one story arc in the series, the Modern Warfare trilogy that simulates a third world war between Russia and the West, one can find ample evidence of critical themes. For one thing, the war that devastates Western Europe and the United States is ultimately futile, accomplishing nothing and coming at the expense of millions dead and injured in the protagonist countries. Worse still, the war is caused by a terrorist attack supported by the United States, fueled by a corrupt American general, and sustained by a global counterterrorism campaign. Players actually take part in the American plot to instigate the war by shooting unarmed civilians, then watch as the character they control is in turn murdered for his efforts – hardly a heroic image of how the US military operates.

Western forces manage to prevail in the struggle, though only because they resort to using nuclear weapons to thwart Russia’s conquest of Washington DC. Players help to bring an end to the war by killing the rogue American general, as well as dozens of other American soldiers defending him. With so much purposeless destruction and its suggestion that the United States is responsible for covert violence around the world, the games leave considerable scope for reading them as anti-war and anti-western. They even undercut some of the romantic notions of war by showing player-controlled characters dying horrific deaths from radiation or being tortured. In many instances players are left in control of these characters as they die, thereby calling attention to what it might be like to be among the countless soldiers who do not live to see the end of a war.

Still more critical overtones come in the first installment of the trilogy, which leads players through the invasion of an unnamed country in the Middle East that is clearly modeled on Iraq. The invasion is ultimately unsuccessful, with the defeated regime detonating a nuclear weapon to kill yet another player-controlled character and hundreds of American Marines. Because the game was released in 2007, at the height of the American troop surge, this could easily be read as an indictment of the war and its pretense of being launched to prevent the use of weapons of mass destruction. The game adds further support to this when the invasion fails and creates political instabilities that contribute to a world war.

# Conclusion: New Possibilities for Research on Popular Culture

The case studies I discuss show that ostensibly pro- and anti-war media can be interpreted in various ways, even to the extent that a single text may be read as having contrary attitudes towards the military and war. The characteristics that are associated with pro- and anti-war entertainment are not stable. Gruesome scenes of combat and atrocities can serve as indictments of armed conflict for those who see these as evidence that war is terrible or as enticements to those who are eager for a fight. Sanitized visions of war without casualties can be invoked to legitimize war, yet they may also deprive it of excitement and authenticity. Even authorial intent cannot provide a definitive account of what a text means, as texts may be open to appropriation by fan communities or incorporate themes that lend themselves to subversive readings.

Polysemy is important beyond the four cases I focus on here. It is a general characteristic of popular media because of the textual evidence available to support disparate interpretations and fan communities’ capacities for intersubjective meaning making. With this in mind, it is important to reevaluate how we study the political salience of popular culture. In some ways, this increases the demands on researchers by making it necessary to look at the ranges of interpretive possibilities texts offer. Nevertheless, this approach also holds some distinctive advantages. Perhaps most important of all is that recognizing polysemy and building it into research by explicitly mapping out potential interpretations facilitates the project of explaining why popular media matters politically. An ongoing controversy surrounding violent media, especially films and videogames, is how and whether they influence audiences. Cause-effect relations may exist if popular media have the kind of fairly consistent meanings that could plausibly influence audiences in deterministic ways. This is especially true if texts are strongly pro- or anti-war and are assumed to generate corresponding attitudes in audience members.

Bleiker correctly notes that the political import of popular media is best appreciated by approaching images with the right sensibilities. In particular, it is vital to discard positivistic methodological approaches that privilege the search for causal links. He says that “Images clearly play a key role in global politics. . .But images only rarely cause political events directly. Prevailing cause–effect models are thus only of limited use. Images work indirectly, across space and time” (Bleiker, 2015: 889). Their political import is most apparent when they “frame the conditions of possibility; how they influence what can and cannot be seen, thought and discussed; in short, how they delineate and shape the political” (Bleiker, 2015: 889). Acknowledging polysemy allows us to disregard the causal model of how media are politically significant. We do not have to simply search for behavioristic links between the text as a stimulus and the audience’s conditioned responses. Instead, we have a much firmer basis for considering texts and spheres of meaning that can operate in different ways depending on how their inherent possibilities are realized.

Acknowledging that texts can be interpreted in multiple different ways and that they can play much different roles depending on the audience helps to explain why it is so difficult to link popular media to causal mechanisms. Media don’t just *influence* people. Rather, they are received by people (either as individuals or as members of communities) with existing ideological biases, which shape the interpretations and determine what import media will have. The act of interpretation is inherently political – it is an act of grappling with the meaning of a text and enacting that interpretation either independently or within a fan community. Mapping the political landscape of popular media therefore requires an openness to multiple interpretations.

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