**(Extra)ordinary Portraits: Self-representation, public culture and the contemporary**

**British soldier**

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**Your War Story**

We are asking you to share your experience of Operation Herrick through everyday items you used in Afghanistan – tell us your story and we'll make sure it's on record for the future. (*War Story* website, IWM, 2009)

***Our War,* BBC3, June 2011**

**Narration**: No modern conflict has been recorded like the one in Afghanistan. Young soldiers take their own cameras to the frontline and film the war as only they can see it.

**Introduction**

This article explores the contemporary image of the British soldier, especially in those forms where the opportunity for soldiers to tell their own stories is highlighted as the core justification in the presentation of co-produced materials. Specifically, we consider the particular generic affordances, constraints, and aesthetics of two recent projects, *War Story* (Imperial War Museum (hereafter IWM)) and *Our War* (BBC 3), both of which promise to offer a 'direct' insight into soldiers' experiences in Afghanistan. At the heart of the study are

the concept of *self-representation* and the idea of the *portrait*. The two projects purport to tell the stories of soldiers 'in their own words and voices' (IWM), and crucially through their own imagery, produced with their personal cameras and Ministry of Defence equipment. The central premise of both projects is to provide a platform for the soldiers to *represent themselves*; a space to convey their experiences of Afghanistan to the watching and visiting publics. Portraits of soldiers, both in the pictorial sense, and in the identification and exploration of individual, named characters, feature heavily in both projects and we also explore how the display of such portraits enacts a distinctive form of public address.

Apparently direct insight is always refracted through, or mediated by, the lenses of those media production companies or public museums that are, necessarily, presenting soldiers' experiences through particular interpretive frameworks. We investigate the particular claims to authenticity primarily through analysis of the co-produced materials – the texts. Focusing on visual narratives of contemporary conflict, as seen through the invited participation of those returning from war, we examine recurrent themes, styles of portrayal, and notable absences, asking, for example: how do processes of textual mediation constitute the soldiers as 'ordinary' and 'extraordinary'? How does analysis of the texts' produced by *War Story* and *Our War* contribute to debates on contemporary culture, society and the military? At a time of withdrawal of NATO troops from Afghanistan, we are concerned with how the use of such imagery within discourses of 'war' and 'the end of war' might work to facilitate, complicate or obstruct wider cultural and political understandings which occur both within military forces, and between them, their families and the wider public. The two projects represent key cultural efforts to address the perceived 'gulf' between the Army and 'the nation' identified by General Sir Richard Dannatt in September 2007, then head of the British Army, in a speech which also signalled the launch of the Help for Heroes charity (Dannatt 2007); at a

time when the idea of the military covenant was morphing from a piece of Army doctrine into a defining impetus for the reconciliation between the public and the forces (see further discussion below). Before turning attention to our two cases, *War Story* (IWM) and *Our War* (BBC)*,* we outline the particular historical and political contexts in which the projects are situated, bringing to the fore questions of the military's (symbolic) role in society. We contend that locating the two cases within the 'genre of self-representation' framework enables us to examine the processes of textual mediation with a sensitive ear for the explicit and implicit claims made on behalf of contributors and institutions (processes of mediation beyond the texts). As the final contextualising element for the article, we consider the ways in which portraits, specifically, similarly function as visual claims to represent an authentic self.

**Representing the British military in the early 21ˢᵗ century**

When the Royal British Legion criticized the UK Government in 2007 for failing to honour its obligations, understood as the 'military covenant', and led a campaign to enshrine the informal principles into law, they were reflecting a wider concern that two lengthy and unpopular wars had led to a disconnect or even hostility between the general public and the armed forces. The Legion's 'Time to do you bit' Twitter and Facebook campaign invited constituents to email their parliamentary candidates and MPs to pledge to do their 'bit for the whole Armed Forces family'. In 2011, the Legion claimed victory as the 'Armed Forces covenant' was published in May and its principles recognized in the Armed Forces Act 2011, receiving Royal Assent on 3 November. The covenant document is not simply about the government responding to concerns that the military faced inadequate training and equipment in military campaigns, or unsatisfactory hospital treatment, housing and schooling for their families back home – which were prominent enough criticisms at the time – it firmly placed

this moral obligation to the forces and their families with 'the whole nation'. Mentioned twice on the first main page of the document, the Armed Forces covenant states:

> The obligation involves *the whole of society*: it includes voluntary and charitable bodies, private organisations, and the actions of individuals in supporting the Armed Forces. Recognising those who have performed military duty unites the country and demonstrates the value of their contribution. This has no greater expression than in upholding this Covenant. (emphasis added, MoD, 2011: 1)

While commendable in its principles to provide better support to forces and their families, and make such commitments transparent and measurable, there is a sense in which more profound criticisms are side-lined in an effort to involve 'the whole of society' in this worthy obligation. The list of government commitments includes giving priority for NHS services, housing initiatives and access to higher education, for example. But in a national context of large-scale redundancies in the armed forces, sweeping welfare cuts and a 'crisis' in mental health care (Buchanan, 2013; Brooke-Holland and Thurley, 2014; Smith 2014), many of the commitments look like a sticking plaster, in many cases supported financially by charities such as Help for Heroes and the Royal British Legion rather than new public money. It is beyond the scope of this article to explore the covenant further, but we would agree to its importance as a 'reference point in shaping almost every debate about civil–military relations in the United Kingdom', as charted in detail by Anthony Forster (2012: p.277), and note how popular media representations play a role in the corresponding efforts to manage such perceptions. The series of initiatives mentioned above are themselves a governmental acknowledgement of serious issues in matters of public understanding and societal integration.

As a forum and instrument for shaping public opinion and culture, the diverse media landscape serves as a vital barometer for trends and preoccupations. Campaigners of various hues acknowledge the worth of engaging with diverse media forms and popular culture genres in their bid to set the agenda and define the prominent themes, issues and narratives that thread through both mainstream and niche media. But in addition to tracking intentional efforts to promote or persuade, the wider media landscape can also reveal thematic patterns which gain momentum without a purposeful or deliberate authorship. Whether a concerted endeavour or not, the figure of the contemporary soldier has become a mainstay in British mediated culture over the last decade, in fictional and factual form; as individual and archetype.

The burgeoning of programmes about soldiers and their families – whether drama, comedy or documentary, have often been based on extensive research and hope to present to the general audience the complexities of the lived experience for soldiers fighting the war in Afghanistan, their families, and those who have returned carrying visible and invisible wounds. Alongside this media interest in British soldiering, we note a concurrent burgeoning of critical and scholarly interest in military lived experience, and the role of media technologies and representations. In their study on the politics of gender and the British Army, Rachel Woodward and Trish Winter (2007: 105) concluded that with such a small proportion of the UK population having direct personal experience of the armed forces, social understanding comes increasingly through popular cultural representations: 'These mediate the military voices we hear; what we hear are the voices of those able or wanting to write, or to broadcast, or to comment'. In some cases it is the new ways of seeing war which have attracted attention, for example: the ever-improving camera technologies which allow helmet-cams to

capture combat from the perspective of the combatant and which foreground 'bodily vulnerability' (McSorley, 2012); the potential ethical and legal issues raised in the sharing of soldiers' own imagery online (Struk, 2011); or the moments of celebratory 'surprise military homecomings' shared via YouTube (Silvestri, 2013). Recent articles have addressed the role of media and popular culture in the context of General Dannatt's plea for more support for the forces, with John Kelly (2012) identifying a 'hero-fication' of British militarism particularly in sports and commemoration events. Extending the remit of representations to popular food brands, Joanna Tidy (2015) argues that the 'coupling of nostalgia and the British military' in military charity food packaging works to re-affirm and normalise a sense of virtue in military values, as part of a broader rehabilitation (see also Jenkings et al. 2012). In our examples, we focus on two projects from prominent public institutions which aim to get even closer to the military experience through their promotion of the 'direct' and personalized stories of soldiers in mediated forms.

Seen in this context, the two projects we explore in this article share an explicit desire to address a lack of public awareness about the war in Afghanistan and to give special insight into the lived experiences of those who have been fighting there (IWM 2011; Taberer 2011). Both initiatives started in 2009; the IWM recognizing that in order to update their historical collection to the present day, they needed to appeal to serving military personnel, veterans and their families to provide objects which 'told the story' of their time in Afghanistan; whilst the BBC's *Our War* was made possible by the release of footage from the MoD, filmed on both official and personal cameras (see also McSorley, 2012 for a discussion of the two projects). Led by project manager Louise Skidmore and curator Amanda Mason, IWM's *War Story* appealed to service personnel and their families to register via their website and share personal stories and objects (IWM, 2009), with interviews and workshops also

conducted with returning soldiers, and later through 'collecting expeditions' to Afghanistan (IWM, 2014). Initially approached by veteran BBC producer Roger Courtier, the MoD eventually gave their permission for executive producer Colin Barr to approach soldiers and gather their personal and regimental footage for the *Our War* project. Broadcast in June 2011, the first episode attracted an audience of 1.34 million, one of BBC3's largest ever for a factual programme (Rosser, 2011), and the two series went on to win the Factual Series BAFTA in both 2012 and 2013. The very titles of *War Story* and *Our War* immediately highlight claims to self-representation and to the personal everyday object or image as storytelling tool. Below we show how exploring the two projects through the framework of self-representation allows us to identify how each draws on recognizable conventions and claims that are manifested in the processes of textual mediation.

## A genre of self-representation

We regard media and museum displays as part of a contemporary (participatory) visual and digital culture. Museum studies have long been moving from a linear (transmission) model of pedagogy in which expert curators educate a public about a given topic, be it archaeology, art history, war or something else, to one of proactive engagement with visitors and critical self-reflection (e.g. Henning, 2006). This is particularly striking when museums are publicly funded and have had to adapt their own definitions of 'public value', along with other institutions (BBC, 2004). Similar moves towards encouraging various kinds of participation by audiences have long been taking place in media settings in general and in the outputs of public service broadcasters in particular. In sum, audience participation, including self-representation, is a commonplace of contemporary media and culture. Within a wider context of participating audiences or publics, public service broadcasters and museums have both shifted from a paternalistic position in relation to the public, to redefining their public value

objectives through creativity, participation and even citizen-led initiatives (Hooper Greenhill, 2000; Thumim, 2012).

The increased visibility of 'ordinary people' in media and cultural spaces has long been discussed. The museum exhibition and TV documentary explored in this article both construct their subjects as at once ordinary and extraordinary (Highmore, 2002). Nearly fifteen years ago Jon Dovey (2000) referred to the 'self-speaking society', Ken Plummer (2001) to the 'society of the autobiographical' and Nick Couldry (2000) to 'ordinary and media worlds'. Addressing these debates, Thumim (2006, 2012) drew on Raymond Williams' *Keywords* (1983) to suggest that the contradictory meanings held in the term 'ordinary people' afford it symbolic and rhetorical power. At the same time, recent work by Nick Couldry (2010) and Graeme Turner (2010) has drawn attention to the paradox whereby we witness a widely-acknowledged and bemoaned democratic deficit and, concurrently, a proliferation of the voice of 'ordinary people' – or people 'doing being ordinary' (Sacks, 1984). In what follows, we explore how the experiences of military personnel are being represented as at once 'ordinary' and 'extraordinary'.

Thumim (2012) has argued that we can now speak of a 'genre of self-representation' simply because particular characteristics and conventions are repeated whenever self-representations appear across diverse sites in digital culture. Considering the idea of generic conventions enables analysis of the implicit as well as explicit claims that are being made via texts – and ultimately allows us to decipher the values being espoused via a given set of generic conventions. But such a perspective also allows us to engage with the idea that genres are doing something (useful for people) in the context of contemporary, thoroughly mediated,

lives; providing a reference point, which is recognizable and whose meaning *we think we know*.

Now the genre of self-representation precisely delivers something that we think we know and that is a direct, authentic, and ultimately truthful account of an ordinary person's experience. Thumim has identified a number of elements which we expect to see (in various combinations) in examples of the genre of self-representation, including: ordinary people, emotion, experience, interior worlds, idea of a personal 'journey' (actual or metaphorical), speaking to the camera in close-up, personal artefacts (2012: see pp.166-167 for the full list). Understanding self-representation as a genre draws attention to the constructed nature of any and every instance of self-representation, highlighting the fact that mediation is always taking place whenever we encounter symbolic forms – with no exceptions. Unpacking how self-representations are mediated, then, enables us to decipher what work self-representations are actually doing – and how they are doing it.

Thumim (2012) suggests conceptualizing mediation in three dimensions: institutional, textual and cultural. That is, the institutional processes, structures and debates shaping texts; the aesthetics, tone, narrative and plot of the texts and; the ideas, expectations, emotions and assumptions of audience/participants as they go to shape the texts. These analytical distinctions are useful for exploring and foregrounding power relations and the (different) values attributed by participants, audiences and professional facilitators – which all combine to shape (the meaning of) texts. In this article, we focus on the dimension of textual mediation – although in the wider research project from which this article draws we attend to cultural and institutional dimensions of mediation process. In the current article, then, we ask,

quite simply, who gets to represent themselves in *War Story* and *Our War*, how, and with what implications (of meaning, value and politics)?

## Portraiture and individual identity

Discourses of self-representation often refer to 'voice' and 'speaking for ourselves', but the *visual* nature of the participants' appearance is also a key element in locating the aesthetic style and claims to authenticity imbued in a particular project. The final research context we consider briefly is that of portraiture and especially the public display of named individuals in photographic portraits. This is because while portraits might not be a constant characteristic of the genre of self-representation, the central role of commissioned portraits in one of our case studies led us to think further about the overlapping emphases on individual identity, interior worlds and self-constitution through posing or self-presenting. As Roland Barthes famously wrote, 'I constitute myself in the process of 'posing' […] I transform myself in advance into an image' (1982: 10; see also Cynthia Freeland, 2010: 190-1). Portraits tell us what someone looks like, but are also supposed to reveal something about the person beyond a correct 'likeness'. Richard Brilliant explores our special relationship to portraits in both private and public space, noting that the portrait artist attempts to answer three questions, albeit often with great difficulty: '*What do I (you, he, she, we, or they) look like?[…] What am I (you, he, she, etc.) like?* […] *Who am I (you, etc.)?*' (emphasis in original, 1991: 15).

Traditionally to be named and displayed in a museum or gallery confers a sense of significance as an individual. In her work on visual culture and museums Eileen Hooper-Greenhill (2000) has observed how portraits are particularly powerful 'statements' when displayed publicly. We can ask why this may be. For Hooper-Greenhill, the public display of a collection of portraits constructs a certain visual narrative of privilege and status which

naturalizes such underlying assumptions and which gives them the character of inevitability and common sense (2000: 23). Hooper-Greenhill is referring here to portrait galleries, but this also applies to photographic and digital forms of public display. One might argue that the photographic portrait does not require the time and skill of the painted portrait, and so their significance is attained through a different set of technical processes and cultural practices. The emergence of photography in the nineteenth century offered relatively reliable material resemblances of loved ones for people who would not have the money or ability for painted portraits. The later shifts toward displaying photographic portraits of 'ordinary people' in the museum or gallery space in the twentieth century, and beyond, signals an emphasis on inclusivity: both for photography as an art form and as an aspiration to be a 'site of mutuality' (Hooper Greenhill 2000, p xi) rather than of narrowly-defined authority. But from its daguerreotype beginnings to the present-day, 'the portrait photograph surreptitiously declares itself as the *trace* of the person (or personality) before the eye' (original emphasis, Clarke 1992: 1), and has strong if problematic associations with identity and authenticity. Graham Clarke also highlights the 'compulsive ambiguity' encountered in attempting to decode the meaning of a portrait photograph: 'For all its literal realism it denotes, above all, the problematics of identity, and exists within a series of cultural codes which simultaneously hide as they reveal what I have termed its enigmatic and paradoxical meaning' (Clarke, 1992: 4).

This 'series of cultural codes' recalls the contexts and mediation processes we mentioned in the previous section which become embedded in the forms of representation and self-representation we unpack in this article. The photograph that stands in for a missing loved one can hold particular resonance when it comes to soldiers' portraits (Parry, 2011; Pasternak, 2011). It is often in coverage of obituaries or commemoration that we see the

public display of a soldier's face in close-up, presented as a named individual and, more recently, in a chosen image that is informally coded (e.g. smiling, in a social setting, no beret) whilst still identified with a military vocation: 'He is remembered as a soldier with a distinctive personality which manifested itself in his professional conduct' (King, 2010: 13). Also displayed at IWM, the artist Steve McQueen's 'Queen and Country' cabinet display of postage stamps depicting British soldiers killed in the Iraq war movingly demonstrates this tension between personal loss and collective remembrance (Art Fund, 2010; also see Ritchin (2013) for analysis of other soldier-related photography projects).

### *War Story* and *Our War*: Representing the soldier's authentic self

The stated aim for both projects is to tell the story of Afghanistan from the perspective of the British service personnel, and their families. In giving a genre-defining role to the soldiers' own footage and objects, these personal mementoes become public artefacts documenting the war for future generations. The list of requested items on the *War Story* website echoes the noted characteristics of the self-representation genre (photographs, video diaries, letters, poems, aide memoires) with the objects awarded their own narrative agency: 'anything that tells your story of your experience of Operation Herrick' (IWM 2009). Similarly the opening credits for *Our War* assert the exceptional storytelling power of the soldiers' films: 'Now, the MoD and the young soldiers have allowed us to use that footage to tell their extraordinary stories'. Despite their thematic and normative resonances, we can analyse the modes of address in more detail in order to examine their specific claims to authenticity and truthfulness.

**Imperial War Museum's *War Story: Serving in Afghanistan***

This extract (and that at the start of our article) are from the original *War Story* website and appeal directly for participants:

> **You are living history**
>
> Despite dominating the headlines and being ongoing for over 10 years we still know very little about the war in Afghanistan experienced by British Service Personnel and your families. (IWM 2009)

Here we see a direct appeal to self-represent through 'everyday items' and the identification of servicemen and women as 'living history'. Related to the second point, the appeal is made through a promise to preserve such stories for the future, with the museum's role also implicitly identified as constitutor of history in the making. Public knowledge is made here through the mutual collaboration of the source community providing 'everyday' stories and the institutional role as collector and preserver. Indeed, the expertise of the curator is downplayed, with a neutral mediator role emphasized over an authoritative voice; and even an identification with the public at large ('*we* still know very little about the war...').

Moving to the exhibition itself which opened in October 2011, the main introductory panel declares: 'Everything here has a story to tell. It comes directly from the men and women who have been serving in Afghanistan, and is often described in their own words and voices'. We note the characteristics of self-representation here, with a confident statement on the storytelling power of the objects on display. This storytelling power of everyday objects also fits with a curatorial turn epitomized in the immensely successful collaboration between the BBC and British Museum for 'A History of the World in 100 Objects' in 2010, which became a multi-platform sensation and encouraged other similar projects, including those

related to the First World War commemorations in both Britain and Germany (Kettle, 2014).

Donated artefacts for *War Story* include a Taliban flag, a letter home to a daughter, Dari language book, a combat knife (used to extract survivors from a burning helicopter, we are told), a care package from home, and a report card. Each display is framed with the soldier's portrait and name, short description of the object, a quotation from the pictured donator and further background comment written by the IWM staff to provide context for the quotation (interview with curator Amanda Mason, 5 October 2012). Similarly, there are further contributions accessed through digital touch-screen displays, often selected by touching the portrait on the screen to reveal more quotations and images. The touch-screens provide a textural contrast with the display units themselves – the intersecting walls are designed to invoke the mud wall aesthetic of the Forward Operating Bases (FOBs) of Afghanistan; sand coloured, mottled and apparently weathered, the medium of the museum fixtures themselves also convey a tactile sense of the war through replicating an aspect of the environment in Afghanistan.

Crucially it is not only the objects or 'words and voices' of serving personnel on display but also their own images, both in video and still photography. One display wall in particular is dedicated to the participants' photographs and short films, with a focus on being 'on patrol', receiving parcels from home, communicating with locals and relaxing back at the base. The 'amateur aesthetic' (Atton 2002) is on display here, with some awkward posing and poor lighting in snapshot-type images, but others are more reminiscent of photojournalistic tropes (silhouetted figures in the sunset; fires raging behind a uniformed warrior). The entire exhibition is organized thematically, focusing on their 'first impressions of Afghanistan', 'communicating', 'daily life', 'on the ground', dealing with 'loss' and, finally, 'coming home'.

As mentioned above, we can note how the soldiers' portraits act as the starting point and even tactile impetus through which to access the everyday objects and the stories attached to each soldier. Nearly all of the portraits are from the series of pictures by artist Richard Ash commissioned by the IWM for the *War Story* project. In addition to their display within the main exhibition, the portraits were originally also displayed in the upper floor of the museum atrium in large-scale prints, around a metre high and much larger than life-size.

The portraits are identical in composition and form (lighting, tone, colour palette); a close-up of the subject's face, with direct gaze and only subtle markers of facial expression or emotion. There is a stillness and flatness to the images, with their repetitive even regimented style reminiscent of the impersonal passport photograph and the officially-sanctioned clear white background. The face dominates the image, with only the collar of the uniform evident, although some also choose to wear their regimental berets – a symbol of collective identity which ironically provides a personal touch and disruption to the passport style frontal pose. Portraits in this context do not merely present or represent the person depicted, they also act like a mirror returning the gaze of the museum visitor. The portraits recall Graham Clarke's point on the ambiguity and 'enigmatic' quality of portraiture, cited earlier. Formally similar, the portraits are impersonal and flat, yet this repetition of form and style asks us to seek out the differences; to notice eye colour, and even to ponder the experiences behind those eyes. The mugshot, passport style images also reveal a tension with the institutional context of the museum viewing – those subjects displayed in this space are constituted as exemplary individuals in public life and yet the images also recall the classification or categorization role of the museum. The anchoring of each artefact to a named portrait is a distinctive and visually powerful way to offer the portrait as both a study in individuality and as a process of

constituting social (and moral) identity. The soldiers' exceptionality and ordinariness is performatively rendered in their recurrent display. The participants are cast as ordinary – but the ordinariness here carries the suggestion of the unique or, indeed, extraordinary – when the 'everyday' is invited into previously privileged space. In the press release for the exhibition, photographer Richard Ash commented on the decision to shoot each participant simply and directly:

> We wanted them to be more than a record of the person, not portraits of members of the armed forces, but of people, individuals. We wanted to show that they are just like you or me. They are your brother, your dad, your sister, your best friend, your husband, your wife. (Ash, cited in IWM 2011, para 11)

Ash's comment speaks to the social connection the exhibition aims to perform and to the appeal of the soldier as ordinary ('just like you or me'), at the very same time as being honoured for their heroism, stoicism and sacrifice. Underlying this statement is the premise that this kind of knowledge and connection can be morally improving for the visitor. Where great portrait artists are said to convey something of the 'moral dimensions of a person's core self or character' (Freeland, 2010: 117), we can view these portraits as offering a manifestation of the nation's moral character and resolve.

Finally, the video interviews available as a collection of one-to-two minute clips on a loop, (visible and audible without visitor touch-screen selection), offer a form of 'talking portraits' with interviewees, who speak to an off-camera interviewer about their reasons for taking part in the exhibition. In a sense, the video interviews provide a meta-commentary on the project, with participants talking about what they hope the exhibition will achieve, rather than

recalling their experiences in Afghanistan directly. As the participants say here: 'It's about trying to log the stories of real people' (Captain Nick Keenan), and to address a 'gulf' in understanding (Captain Doug Spencer). That 'people *need* to know what's going on' is a sentiment expressed more than once, including by Corporal Andy Reid, himself injured in Afghanistan and keen that children understand when they see 'injured soldiers walking around'. Many refer to their role in making Afghanistan a better place while also reflecting on their pride at taking part in the *War Story* project, especially in recalling their own visits to the museum as a child, or imagining future visits. Trooper Byron Kirk admits that he is now a 'civvy' (although filmed wearing fatigues) and that it took him a long time to find a civilian job; he found it patronizing that potential employers did not value his experience in the Army, and hopes the *War Story* project addresses this.

The above summary offers just a glimpse into the interviews' themes and into the identifiable generic traits of self-representation. The final clip in the selection therefore is interesting due to its break with this pattern: the only voice heard directly who does not have experience as a serviceman or woman is that of Michael Kurth, managing director of Boeing Defence UK Ltd, providers of funding support for the project. Kurth highlights the sacrifice and dedication of those involved in military service and comments that in 2007 he noticed a 'breakdown' in the military covenant between the British people and the military. His inclusion in the interview film-loop brings to the fore the relationship between collaborating partner institutions: the museum, the Ministry of Defence and Boeing Defence UK, the company who supply aircraft, training and military technologies to the British forces.

Thematically Kurth's contribution chimes with one of the project's aims, but his inclusion breaks with the anticipated focus on the invited participants who identify as part of a forces

community, and arguably reveals an aspect of the institutional context which largely remains under-emphasized. In terms of delivery, he is the only interviewee to look directly at the camera, indicating a more confident media manner, the authoritative address of the CEO or politician, in contrast with the other speakers. Reflecting on this detail, curator Amanda Mason commented that it could reveal the soldiers' lack of experience in dealing with the intimidating equipment (bright light, huge microphone, camera) and hoped that their lack of eye contact did not preclude the desired one-to-one connection with members of the public (interview, 5 October 2012). These kinds of detail highlight how the unseen production and institutional processes structure the form of textual mediation we see as visitors.

The exhibition at IWM London closed in 2013, in preparation for the 2014 centenary commemorations for the First World War, but the *War Story* collection continues to be used in exhibitions (for example at the IWM North's 'Saving Lives: Frontline Medicine in a Century of Conflict', October 2012–September 2013). On re-opening in July 2014, the London IWM housed a re-launched 'War Story: Supplying Frontline Afghanistan', showing July-September 2014, followed by 'War Story: Afghanistan 2014' running until September 2015.

### BBC 3's *Our War: Life at war captured through the eyes of soldiers*

The first series of *Our War* was broadcast on BBC3 in June 2011 with three episodes ('Ambushed'; 'The Invisible Enemy'; and 'Caught in the Crossfire'), and returned for a second series in August-September 2012. The first series is of particular interest as an innovative documentary form; composed of the soldiers' own footage recorded at a time when they could not have envisaged it would eventually reach a BBC audience. Collecting footage from official training and surveillance films, personal camera phones and helmet

cameras, the production team had to deal with thousands of hours of footage of varying quality and format. But executive producer, Colin Barr, rates the value of the material through its promise of 'direct' and 'immersive' attributes: 'Their footage is direct, unmediated and utterly immersive: war as it's never been seen before on TV' (Barr, 2011: para 4). However, this appeal to authenticity through an emphasis on 'unmediated' footage arguably performs a rhetorical erosion of the processes of mediation undertaken by the production team and the MoD in making the documentary. In the context of a BBC College of Production interview with Donna Taberer this problematic point is precisely acknowledged by Barr: 'We're trying to show people an unmediated version of war but of course we're mediating it at every stage' (Taberer, 2011).

As others have observed, the self-representing photographic practices of soldiers on display in *Our War* follow a long history of documenting military endeavours for self-reflection and performance of identity (Woodward et al., 2010), and also reflect the ubiquitous sharing of the digital age (McSorley, 2012). The publicity material from Barr cited above is echoed in the programme's opening credits:

> **Soldier**: This, ladies and gentlemen, is fucking war [camera shifts to show missiles and bullets overhead].... in fact at the moment fucking Afghans are fucking all around us destroying everything we've got.
> **Narration**: The cameras the soldiers use can go anywhere, and once set recording, can easily be forgotten. [...] This war has been fought for ten years and thousands of hours of this uncensored footage has been held by the Ministry of Defence.
> **Soldier**: Yeah, motherfucker!

> **Narration**: Now, the MoD and the young soldiers have allowed us to use that footage to tell their extraordinary stories.
>
> **Soldier**: Any last words for your bird? [soldier filmed as he runs out of the compound with camera angle shifting 90 degrees onto its side]

As opposed to the voices heard in the museum space, here the language is immediately strong and the images visceral: 'This ladies and gentlemen, is fucking war'. In making this tongue-in-cheek address to an imagined audience the depicted soldier could not have known that his words would eventually address the 'ladies and gentlemen' of the BBC audience, certainly in the footage from Series One. The bullets are flying (the audio here is just as important in creating the immersive experience of danger and immediacy), but the address is one of humour and under-played bravery. The helmet and chest cameras provide the dominant aesthetic of swift disorientating movements and chaotic unconventional angles, as our point-of-view corresponds with the wearer of the camera reacting to earth-shaking bombs and missiles. As Kevin McSorley details,

> The embodied presence of the soldier is constantly felt in helmetcam footage, via the restless point-of-view, the sounds of breathing and vocalizations, the reverberations of corporeal movement, the presence of shadows cast by the body, the sight of the soldier's rifle pointing the way ahead, the sense of hands shielding the sun. (2012: 53)

The footage holds authority through its embodied and unsteady representative style but it also encourages an up-close-and-personal intimacy with the viewer. In the narration the processes of mediation are played down: 'cameras are easily forgotten' we are told. There is a tension here between the unguarded capture of intense living-in-the-moment danger and performing

for the camera during those moments that soldiers ultimately hope to achieve – engaging the enemy in combat. The evident enjoyment, barracking, swearing, joking and friendship may be performed for the camera – this does not make it inauthentic or deceptive, rather it helps the soldiers to identify as warriors in a warzone, even if only initially to themselves.

The footage of soldiers speaking directly to the camera recalls the familiar video diary style associated with the capture of personal views or a personal journey encountered in everyday life; offering insight into motivations, hopes for the future, overcoming challenges and a key characteristic of self-representation. This footage can also be read as a 'portrait' of the soldier, the day-in-the-life recording which gives special insight into the consciousness of young men at war (and they are generally men). Cameras may be 'easily forgotten' and the heavy work the BBC production team also appears to be resolutely diminished in favour of the autobiographical framing of first-person combat experience. Indeed, in addition to these self-captured video diaries, the often chaotic fragments of footage are afforded narrative coherence by the interviews with soldiers and family members conducted by the production team. Speaking of these 'down the lens' interviews, achieved by attaching a mirror box contraption to the camera tripod so that the interviewee appears to look directly at the viewers rather than the interviewer, director John Douglas remarks that 'they were like really nice *portraits of young men*, and it was all about their faces and affording them the kind of respect and weight' (Taberer, 2011, our emphasis).

The first episode, 'Ambushed', tells the story of 3 Platoon, 1 Royal Anglian Regiment led by Lieutenant Bjorn Rose, and with many still teenagers on their first tour of Afghanistan. Opening with the voice of Bjorn reading a letter he sent to the parents of Private Chris Gray, the member of his platoon killed in the ambush, the camera switches between Bjorn reading

the letter and narrow close-ups on the writing, a recurrent trope and self-representing feature in more ways than one. As the story moves to the fateful events of 13 April 2007, a clock appears on screen denoting exact times (05.04am), while the close-up interviews become extreme close-ups, adding to the sense of immediacy and proximity. On-screen text explains acronyms (GPMG = General Purpose Machine Gun), which appear and then shoot out of frame as the helmet-cam vision responds to a quick head turn. Four or five to-camera interviewees narrate each detail of the attempt to save Private Gray's life, inter-spliced with Sergeant Simon Panter's expletive-heavy footage, combining to provide an intense portrayal of shared recollection and intimate danger.

Later Chris' mother reads out her son's last letter, received on the day of the ambush. As Helen Gray reads, the camera focuses in tightly on certain words on the lined notepad paper: 'Yo-yo from Afghanistan Shitsville Middle East […] all is good here, there's no need to worry, mum, it's dead here. Fuck all happening at the minute […] everyone's dying to get some trigger time and raz some dirty enemy up'. Her emotions are clearly mixed as she deals with the ironic poignancy of the letter's reassuring tone, her evident embarrassment at his colloquial language and her additional explanations of details such as his love of banoffee pie. Voiced somewhat uncomfortably by his mother for the camera, Chris Gray's written words provide an insight into the young soldier's thoughts whilst retrospectively revealing a tragic gap between its jokey youthful tone and the loss suffered by his family. Bjorn Rose is also overwhelmed as we later return to him reading aloud his own letter to the Grays, and this almost therapeutic nature of the programme is further highlighted by those who declare they would not otherwise speak of the events or watch footage without this invitation to contribute.

In the processes of sharing this footage with the BBC, we can ask; what forms of identity and social relationships are the soldiers negotiating in the various stages of production, especially later on as the institutional framework and dissemination turn their personal films and letters into a collective narrative? Just as the object becomes an artefact through the institutional setting, the co-productive elements of Colin Barr's BBC team turn personal footage into television documentary (with embedded graphics and maps, image-freeze editing, music, narrator, etc.). But once such footage has been used in this way and the final product attracted acclaim and awards, can such portraits of lived experience in Afghanistan continue to have the same 'authentic' value? As soon as the images become imbued with traces of their own representationality, the sense of knowingness or ironic disposition can only become greater in later productions.

**<u>Conclusion</u>**

Both projects hold a clear aim to address a sense of disconnect between the fighting forces and the public. The two projects can undoubtedly be viewed under the umbrella of the Armed Forces Covenant and related initiatives of reconciliation and support led by government agencies, military leaders and charities. But this is not the only institutional context which underpins their values or ethos. In recent debates on 'public value' and publicly funded institutions the educator role is conceived through creating inclusive, enjoyable and engaging shared experiences in co-productions with communities (see BBC, 2004). Curators and producers speak of the responsibility to get the participants' stories right, especially in the challenge of presenting the words and images of those still living and where the ultimate historical narrative of the war is still evolving (Amanda Mason, interview 5 October 2012; Barr, 2011). The distinct appeal of the genre of self-representation is in the claims to

authenticity through personal narratives and individual lived experience. In foregrounding personal stories through the soldiers' own footage and objects, the projected 'portrait' of the soldier carries the symbolic weight of that which is deemed *valuable* and comprehensible about the recent wars. The genre of self-representation is built on two forms of invitation: the invitations to communities to take part, and the invitations to wider publics to know something of the participants' world through the collated letters, objects, snapshots, autobiography and reflections. In seeing the war as mediated through the eyes of young soldiers (as realised in helmet camera footage), in the personal snapshots which mirror our own familiar photographic practices and in the portraits of those who look directly at us, we are brought closer to their experience and yet also have our own distance to war re-established in their transformative stories of duty, loss and sacrifice.

And within such personal stories a master narrative undoubtedly emerges: that the service personnel are resilient, professional, heroic and exemplars for the British nation. These are ordinary men and women, 'just like you and me', but the understated aesthetic of self-representation simultaneously serves to construct their extraordinariness. Both projects deal with loss and sacrifice, but this is also about a strengthening of resolve and character (national and individual). When Trooper Byron Kirk hints at his difficulties since leaving the forces, it is to comment on the potential employers' lack of understanding for his experience, not a reflection on reasons for leaving or on the lives of others who struggle to adjust to civilian life in more extreme ways (mental health issues, homelessness, prison – issues that Combat Stress and Forces Watch warn are on the rise (e.g. Gee, 2013)).

We do not suggest that this latter kind of experience on returning from Afghanistan is more 'real', or that an essentialized dichotomy of 'heroes' and 'victims' is preferable; rather that

the vision of nation-building and purposefulness leaves little space for less acceptable or tolerable stories. We want to note that there is a danger that counter narratives are diminished and even closed down – *especially* through the claim to 'direct' personalized experience – 'this is your/our/their story'. In this way, the stated aim of avoiding politics by focusing on the sense of purpose each soldier embodies in his or her day-to-day job in effect elides the lack of understanding or agreement about the greater purpose of the war. The 'war story' of building schools and governance removes the 'war' from the 'story'.

Moreover the desire to capture the 'living history' of the Afghanistan war through the self-representation of '*our* servicemen and women' operates within a distinctly national framing which implicitly overlooks the war experiences of others, including the Afghan 'self'. Thus, self-representation serves to give voice to *some kinds of* experience and to the experience of *some* people (and not others) involved in, and affected by, the war in Afghanistan. We want to conclude this article by emphasizing that we are by no means dismissive of initiatives that aim to give voice to the experience of the selves involved in the war in Afghanistan; indeed we value them. We also note how recent iterations of both projects have adapted to the transitional period and, possibly in response to criticism that only the British military voice was given space, the IWM's latest website and museum display includes NGOs, Afghan National Forces and Embassy workers: the highlighted object in the press release is 'a beadwork lamp made by Afghan prisoners as part of training workshops to develop their skills for future employment after their release' (IWM, 2014). A final *Our War: Goodbye Afghanistan* (BBC3) episode broadcast on 9 December 2014 presented a reflective commentary which lingered for longer on the direct gaze of interviewees, apparently still optimistic that an unfathomable war might be understood through the personalized narratives of those sent to fight. The cases we have discussed still raise questions: what might a radical

use of the genre of self-representation look like in this context? Could we, for example, ever hope to hear voices from both sides of the war, and, in so doing, move beyond the national framework of the representation? Could the representation of the war in Afghanistan (or, indeed, other contemporary conflicts) hope to give voice to critical perspectives on the conflict that take into account wider, structural and political frameworks and disputes *and* that contextualize the (varied) experiences of the (multiple) selves involved? As we move into a 'post-war' phase for British armed forces leaving Afghanistan, we wait to see how public institutions elicit and embed self-representational forms into their displays and programmes on soldiering, commemoration and societal re-integration, cautiously hopeful that the appeal to the intimate and authentic does not preclude provocative, re-politicized debate in such spaces.

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