War, trauma and the militarized body

Florentina C. Andreescu

International Studies, University of North Carolina Wilmington, 601 S.

College Road, Wilmington, NC 28403, USA.

E-mail: andreescuf@uncw.edu

Abstract This article investigates how the contemporary war *dispositif* in cinematic representations captures and integrates bodies, gestures, space and desire. It focuses on two analytic aspects of this process, suture and interpassivity, and shows how soldiers, in cinematic space, confront trauma that results from an incompatibility between the accelerated speed of military *dispositif* and the slower rhythms of everyday life. It analyzes the clash between life speeds through three cinematic texts – *The Hurt Locker*, *American Sniper* and *Good Kill* – and clarifies how such disruptions motivate attempts to manage and renegotiate realities fractured by traumatic war experiences. More generally, it analyzes the ways in which war disfigures the phenomenology of bodies and the life world.

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Introduction

Two recent cinematic representations of war, *The Hurt Locker* (2008) and *American Sniper* (2014), invite viewers to experience a unique, exhilarating kind of enjoyment generated by representations of the military *dispositif*. Two features of late capitalism make this experience possible. On the one hand, capitalism compresses time into a chronoscopic and electronic instantaneity, and, on the other, it shifts society from one structured by language to one in which images are central.¹ Society's accelerated speed combined with an orientation around images reshapes the world into one that resembles cinema, see, for example, Virilio and Lotringer (2008). In other words, the world increasingly reveals itself through a kind of cinematism that involves esthetics of disappearance. The world is made present, because it is unstable and it

vanishes quickly (Virilio and Lotringer, 2008, p. 98). These changes, Beller (2006) insists, are fundamental, as cinema² becomes the paradigm that exemplifies the total reorganization of society (p. 13).

What is specific to the military *dispositif*³ in present global capitalism is its widespread trans-planetary presence and its expansion into civilian social space. While many still think of it as connected to nation-states, the military *dispositif*, which includes flows of weapons, soldiers, commodities, refugees and technologies, is a manifestation of global interconnections (Ferguson, 2009, p. 477). As a result of this deterritorialization, Ferguson (2009) notes, it erases what were once clearly established distinctions between civilians and enemies, weapons and civilian technologies, domestic and foreign, war and peace, creating a permanent in-between space (p. 476).

The cinema *dispositif* emerges in close connection to the military one. Cultural and media theorists such as Virilio (1989), Virilio and Lotringer (2008) and Kittler (1999) highlight a genealogy of media in which war functions as generator of all technical things. They both claim that the essence of war and the essence of cinema are closely related. The intimate connection between cinema and the military *dispositif* is further expressed in different war memoirs, for example, Kyle *et al* (2012), Swofford (2005) and Buzzell (2014). These memoirs inform us about the important role that war cinema plays in how soldiers experience war and integrate militarized experience into everyday life. The thrill of the violent cinematic spectacle frequently gives soldiers a sense of agency and create specific expectations regarding the actual war experience (Peebles, 2009, p. 1663). This is the case because film as phantasy can organize the soldier's desire. It does so by providing a schema according to which certain objects or etiquettes (in the military reality) can function as objects of desire (Žižek, 1997, p. 7). War cinema as phantasy plausibly plays two different roles that stand in tension with one another. One covers over gaps in ideology. The other involves exposing those gaps. For example, the first role offers a scenario in which the soldier satisfies desire within the structure imposed by the military *dispositif* (McGowan, 2012). In its other role, cinema as phantasy constitutes an experience of otherness that makes visible aspects of the social world, which ordinarily remain hidden in everyday life. In other words, the cinematic space does not merely depict the world, but it also allows the audience to reimagine the social order, and to remap social spaces (Galt, 2006, p. 89). This could lead to an awareness of inconsistencies within what is initially perceived as a homogenous and coherent space of the military *dispositif*.

Much of what follows enlists two dramatic and controversial cinematic texts, both of which display protagonists that have exhilarating war experiences: Bigelow's *The Hurt Locker* (2008) and Clint Eastwood's *American Sniper* (2014). It juxtaposes these two films with Andrew Niccol's *Good Kill* (2014). Unlike the former two films that portray war in an exhilarating fashion, the latter renders the experience of war as pain, boredom, degeneration and destruction.

Through this juxtaposition, I examine the way soldiers confront a fractured scopic field – ruptures taking place within the military’s imposed reality. Using a politically inflected psychoanalytic approach, I explore both the visible and official esthetics of the military *dispositif* and its hidden, unofficial side. The military *dispositif* names, symbolizes and shapes human bodies, their form, appearance and enjoyment as it captures and integrates bodies, gestures, space and desire. The focus here is directed especially toward two analytic aspects of this process organized around the concepts of suture and interpassivity.

Suture: Seeing the World Through a Weapon

As stated before, the focus of this article is on the way the military *dispositif* in cinematic representations assimilates desire and bodies, while at the same time it captures and orients gestures, behaviors and the discourses of soldiers (Agamben, 2009, p. 14). This assimilation is possible as one’s image and understanding of one’s self and body originates in the outer world. Both are constructed in an alienating process, involving images and language, and do not correspond to one’s actual being. The body becomes a surface to be written upon, and in the symbolic register it functions similarly to what Sigmund Freud has famously figured as a writing pad (Verhaeghe, 1999, pp. 2–3). The militarized body is the surface upon which the military *dispositif* has been writing, in this manner reshaping the social imaginary of the body, further altering one’s experience of what it feels like to be an embodied being. The military *dispositif*’s writing constitutes a form of alienation as it tends to render the body a complex collection of interacting parts and systems. The body as it is experienced in everyday life disappears and finds itself reduced to a machine-like entity, which is named and categorized in quasi-mechanistic terms, acquiring a different rhythm and being rewired in terms of capabilities of enjoyment. Bodily phenomena become measurable and controllable and interconnected with and part of the bigger mechanism of the military *dispositif* (Zwart, 1998, p. 107). This theme is explored in detail by Armitage (2003), who argues that the concept of the militarized body indicates an assortment of practices consisting of the conversion of social imaginary of bodies to military use and the inculcation into such bodies of military principles. It is his and Virilio’s (1989) view that present-day cyborg warriors and weapon systems seek the militarization of human perception itself (Armitage, 2003, pp. 1–3). Reflecting a crucial aspect of this assimilation, the military discourse, instead of referring individually to ‘humans’ or ‘machines’ refers to ‘systems’. Specifically, war technology renders human bodies increasingly vulnerable while integrating them into cyborgian (human–machine) weapon systems (Gray, 2003, p. 216). The militarized technology is intimately linked to human bodies as wired uniforms are capable of monitoring heart and

respiration rates, and as vision techniques display real-time information on the retina (Armitage, 2003, p. 4).

Both *American Sniper* (2014) and *The Hurt Locker* (2008) give the viewer a sense of how the world is experienced through a militarized body, as they are filmed in a way that often locates the viewer within the military's weaponized gaze. *The Hurt Locker* (2008) starts with a view of Bagdad's streets through the camera of a robot searching for bombs. When Sergeant James puts on the bomb suit, several shots place us inside his helmet showing us the view through his visor (Bennett and Diken, 2011, p. 170). Furthermore, in *American Sniper* (2014) the viewer encounters the streets and people of Fallujah through Kyle's rifle's scope. As the new technologies allow the soldier to see through the weapon, the soldier (and the viewer) is lured into the weapon's specific representation of space through a process that hides the author of the new space (the entire military *dispositif*) from view. The soldiers are induced to forget that the world they see through the weapon or the helmet is constructed according to somebody else's world-making vision (Sarup, 1992, p. 153). Instead of children, men and women engaged in everyday life activities, they see targets or potential sources of danger. To appreciate that way of seeing, we need to remember the relation existing between blindness and sight, for we are inevitably blind to certain things and blind to our blindness. These twin blindnesses are necessary for ordinary seeing: the condition of possibility for perception is loss of information; we need to be continuously partly blind in order to see (Elkins, 1996, p. 13). That perceptual economy of blindness and sight is significantly altered when one looks through a weapon. The soldier, sutured to the militarized, weapon-implemented gaze, sees the rendered space as natural rather than constructed. The name given to the techniques that enable the military *dispositif* to confer a human-weapon subject is *suture*. The event of suture is that moment when the subject inserts itself into the symbolic register in the guise of a signifier, and in so doing gains meaning at the expense of being (Miller, 1978). Put in everyday language, the subject enters the newly encountered space and accepts it as part of reality. The subject/soldier assumes the weapon's (and through it the one of the *dispositif*) point of view as her/his own. For this process to occur the weapon's perceptual effect must be conjured away, so that the soldier can operate under the illusion that what is seen has an autonomous existence independent of any technological or ideological interference (Sarup, 1992, p. 154).

The actual moment of suture is marked in Kyle's memoir through his description of the initial resistance to accepting the *dispositif's* point of view:

The first time you shoot someone, you get a little nervous. You think, can I really shoot this guy? Is it really okay? But after you kill your enemy, you see it's okay. You say, Great. You do it again. And again. You do it so the enemy won't kill you or your countrymen. You do it until there's no one left for you to kill. That's what war is. I loved what I did.

Once Kyle adopts the point of view of the weapon, what appeared initially as a 'guy' is referred to later as 'enemy'. His statement also signals the satisfaction and sense of control that acting through the *dispositif* generates. Similarly, in *The Hurt Locker* (2008) the sergeant wearing the confining bomb suit and helmet becomes addicted to viewing the world through it. This is made evident in a scene in which, after an exhausting day ending in an aggressive drinking session, Sergeant James slumps onto his bunk and dons his helmet on top of his head, closing the visor before falling asleep. Thereby he disconnects from his interpersonal environment (Bennett and Diken, 2011, p. 174), while maintaining his connection with the world that is constituted by the military *dispositif*.

The Militarized Body: Interpassivity

As Sergeant James and Kyle, in *The Hurt Locker* (2008) and *American Sniper* (2014), achieve enjoyment through the implementation of the military's mission, they are caught in a dynamic called interpassivity. This refers to a way in which affective transference is experienced through the *dispositif*. The term was coined by Pfaller (2000) and Žižek (1997). According to Pfaller (2000), interpassivity refers to people's desire to enjoy not in the sense of actively having fun, but in the sense of enjoying the protection they get from the machine/*dispositif* to which they have attached themselves. This is envisioned as the machine of the dromenon, 'a machine that runs of itself' and that 'stands in' for one's own subjectivity (Van Oenen, 2010). It perversely makes subjects enjoy their own unhappiness. In this case, oppression is not only accepted but even welcomed and desired (Van Oenen, 2010). One's intimate inclusion within the war machine can be illustrated through a scene from *American Sniper* (2014). It shows Kyle recently returned home from 9 months of combat experience, Kyle is in his living room staring intensely at what the viewer assumes to be a television set showing war scenes, as we hear gunshots and explosions. His two children run across the living room but Kyle does not notice them, his gaze remains fixed. The frame moves and allows us to see that the television is turned off and in fact Kyle is staring into the void, while the sounds of war are playing in his head. When his wife Taya enters the room and calls his name, he does not respond. Indeed, as the scene shows, the military *dispositif* provides a cover for the subject's retreat into self-forgetfulness (Van Oenen, 2010). Disconnected from his everyday life, Kyle appears to be trapped in the intensity of the rhythm of war.

Furthermore, the viewer has the sense that, similarly to the case with porno stars, wrestlers and avatars, Sergeant James and Kyle, wearing protective suits and interacting with the world through the rifle's scope, become surrogates part

of the military machine. As surrogates they are freed from strictures of bodily commitment. It is through the very exaggeration of these surrogates, in their excesses, that emotional transferences takes place. One can experience through them, while one's own body becomes absent (Jagodzinski, 2004, p. 57). The two films encourage the viewer to experience through the military *dispositif*, which is fraught with dangerous and intense emotions such as living in close proximity to death. Otherwise put, one enjoys a sanitized war experience, while the process of giving up (one's mundane experience) leads to one simply 'vanishing' into the Symbolic universe (Jagodzinski, 2004, pp. 57–58).

The Hurt Locker (2008) opens with a quotation 'War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning. The rush of battle is often a potent and lethal addiction, for war is a drug'. The first part of the quotation fades out, leaving the phrase 'War is a Drug' visible. This message is materialized in the cinematic story through the representation of Sergeant James's exhilarating experience of war. James attempts to locate the hidden triggers, find secret connections, live life in a threshold state where discovery is instantly counterpointed by the threat of annihilation. The almost erotic charge of defusing bombs yields the experience of war as an intense bodily excitement⁴ (Burgoyne, 2012, p. 13). *The Hurt Locker* (2008) and *American Sniper* (2014) depict war through a focus on soldier's ability to find an exhilarating enjoyment in the military machine, which machine inflicts severe bodily abuse and pain. This theme is not new. It represents, for example, a key point in the work of the German militarist writer Jünger, especially in his book entitled *On Pain*. Here Jünger celebrates the capacity of men to withstand pain for a higher cause (Durst, 2008, p. xxix). By proving oneself to be equal or superior to pain, one gains access to power. Jünger writes, 'Tell me your relation to pain, and I will tell you who you are!' (Durst, 2008, p. 1). As the experience of Kyle⁵ shows, the body accepts these painful interventions as responses to its longing for pleasure and for a sense of security. The body becomes estranged from a pleasure principle, and responds instead to a pain principle: 'what is nice is what hurts' (Theweleit, 1987, p. 150).

Further, relevant here is the work of German sociologist Theweleit, more specifically his book entitled *Male Fantasies* (1987) that engages in a complex study of the fascist warrior psychology. He is especially interested in how the fascist soldiers' bodies were included and re-wired in terms of enjoyment within the fascist military *dispositif*. The soldier's identity, in Theweleit's opinion, was constituted as an avoidance of a constant fear of dissolution. The soldier, by withstanding repetitive painful interventions, developed a hard protective shell that provided a sense of safe existence (Theweleit, 1987, p. 160). In this context, warfare became an important event, which was experienced as the fulfillment of both longing for fusion with the military *dispositif* and the explosion, in the moment of battle, of long-stored tensions (Theweleit, 1987, p. xvii).

As discussed in the above-mentioned cinematic texts, the military *dispositif* is able to capture and redirect desire, and the experience of war through the human–weapon relationship is rendered with strong erotic undertones. This is made evident not only through Sergeant James’s heightened form of enjoyment but also in other representations of war, for example, in Swofford’s (2005) war memoir *Jarhead*, which mentions that the violent cinematic images of war are lusted for by soldiers:

Fight, rape, war, pillage, burn. Filmic images of death and carnage are pornography for the military man; with film you are stroking his cock, tickling his balls with the pink feather of history, getting him ready for his real First Fuck.

(Swofford, 2005, p. 7 quoted in Peebles, 2009)

As Peebles (2009) mentions, what is referred to as the ‘First Fuck’ is the first real battle experience. Furthermore, erotic undertones are also part of *Good Kill* (2014), where Tom’s female colleague Vera Suarez expresses disgust at the fact that the act of killing mediated through a drone gives her male colleagues a ‘hard on’.

The association of sexuality with the military *dispositif*, of the fascist one in this case, is the focus of the previously mentioned work authored by Theweleit (1987). He highlights the fact that a crucial element of fascism is indeed its explicit sexual language. The fascist symbolization creates a particular psychic economy that places sexuality in the service of destruction. What Theweleit (1987) interestingly observes is that despite its sexual charged politics, fascism is anti-eros as it celebrates pain, renunciation and asceticism. As he puts it: ‘the core of all fascist propaganda is a battle against everything that constitutes enjoyment and pleasure’ (Theweleit, 1987, p. 8).

Directing our attention to *The Hurt Locker* (2008), we notice that the addiction to the rush that Sergeant James enjoys in war leaves him unable to take pleasure in the ‘real’ life back home, where the everyday activities such as shopping, cooking and caring for children seem to lack the intensity that would make them Real. Once sutured to and adjusted to enjoy through the military machine, everyday life becomes something Sergeant James wants to flee. He wants to escape into the kinetic intensity of the war *dispositif*, a desire made evident in the scene in which James talks to his son about how pleasurable and innocent it is to love the many things in his life, like his toys and his mommy and daddy. He confesses to his child that he only loves two things, or maybe just one thing. Thus, the next scene in which he is headed back to the war front clarifies what it is that James was referring to, as we see him walking in his protective suit on the streets of Iraq. He is back into the rush of war after he lands in Iraq from a troop-carrying helicopter and is shown returning to war’s excitement, where he once again wears his protective suit and can recapture the danger and excitement of the battle scenes (Figure 1).

Figure 1: In *The Hurt Locker* (2008) Sergeant James in protective suit.

Accelerated Rhythm of War

As the war in Iraq is rendered through a quick-paced, disorienting cinematography and tough dialog in *The Hurt Locker* (2008) (Beck, 2010, p. 214), the viewer gets a good sense of how extraordinary is the accelerated mechanical rhythm of the *dispositif*. This is primarily accomplished through the way the film contrasts the lives of the Iraqis, who are shown living on the margins of the militarized space. Their relative calm and slow tempo, as they stare back, from balconies and from the shops along the streets, or try to connect through civilities and gestures unrecognized by the military etiquette, threatens the order imposed by the military *dispositif*.

In both *The Hurt Locker* (2008) and *American Sniper* (2014), war is depicted as producing an acceleration of speed that interrupts the life rhythm necessary to create a sense of flow and continuity essential for routinized human life. Through these two film, we have the sense of entering what Virilio calls a speed space, a new temporality effected through electronic transmission and high-tech weapon machines. In this modality of time, humans are present, Virilio argues, not in their usual physical sense but via programming. It is a condensed, ultra-fast, digitally determined temporality that is a 'hyper-intensification' of the Newtonian clock-time of chronologic duration (Hassan, 2003, p. 90). Chronoscopic time signals an intense compression. The extensive time of history, chronology and narrative sequence implodes into a concern and fixation with the real-time instant (Purser, 2011, p. 5). Linear, narrative time, through which we gain a sense of past, present and possible futures are all compressed into instantaneity (Hassan, 2003, p. 102). Crucially for purposes of our analysis is the fact that the speed/power of complex technology of the war machine generates trauma. As a result, the individual soldier, unable to process the situation on the basis of her/his usual temporal expectations, becomes traumatized as she/he struggles to cope. The accelerated speed allows the new weapons to create immense psychic disruption to human bodies familiar habitus.

Figure 2: In *The Hurt Locker* (2008) Sergeant James in the cereal aisle.

Figure 3: In *The Hurt Locker* (2008) the row of cereals.

The incompatibility between the rhythm the soldier encounters in war and the rhythm back home is well illustrated in a scene, taking place near the end of *The Hurt Locker* (2008). Sergeant William James (Jeremy Renner), recently back home from Iraq, is in a supermarket where he encounters his wife with a fully loaded shopping cart. When she asks him to get some cereal and meet her at the checkout, he begins to ask where he can find it. Because she is out of earshot by then, he scouts around feeling confused until he finds himself in the cereal aisle. That aisle, full of an overwhelming assortment, makes him so confused that he stands momentarily transfixed in front of the brightly colored cereal boxes (Figure 2; Figure 3).

He arbitrarily grabs a box, throws it into his empty cart and heads off, expressing his irritation by taking a couple of swipes with his fist at the cereal boxes. He seems to react to being trapped in a boring, domestic task. In sharp contrast with his experience in the Iraq war, there is no danger to which he must be alert. In the next scene, he is back in the family kitchen, telling his wife about a moment when a fellow soldier passes out free candy to Iraqi kids. His wife washes mushrooms and pays no attention to what he says. He utters another line about a

fellow soldier who died, and all the camera shows is her peeling carrots. He says something else, and she responds with something irrelevant, as if she has not heard a single word he says. These scenes are quite static, albeit highlighted with zoom and framing shots, which sharply contrast the frenetic panning and tracking shots in the Iraq scenes.

A similar incompatibility in life rhythms is present in *American Sniper* (2014), for example, in a scene showing Navy Seal Kyle after he has recently returned home from the war in Iraq. At a family party in a backyard, his wife Taya talks to him about their two children. Kyle, however, is inappropriately tense. He carefully surveys the yard, crowded with people and children. At a certain point a dog wrestles with a boy, becomes rougher and pushes the boy on the grass. Kyle thinks that the dog is attacking: He runs over, pins the dog with his hand, pulls off his belt and prepares to hit the dog with his fist. Taya calls out his name and makes Kyle aware of the inappropriate nature of his overreaction. This scene shows to what extent Kyle had his senses militarized and reframed in terms of issues of life and death (Hockey, 2012). Both in *American Sniper* (2014) and in *The Hurt Locker* (2008), the viewer thus must make sense of a venue organized according to a different logic, belonging to a different mode of experience that is incompatible with the one back home.

The clash between war and everyday life is strongly stressed in the third film analyzed, *Good Kill* (2014). The cinematic story emphasizes the disruption of habitus generated by the two incompatible rhythms of life. It focuses on how enjoyment derived from a life mediated through (military) technology, when taken to an extreme, undermines its own grip on the subject. As such, the freedom the subject has to give up while engaging with the military machine becomes visible as a stubborn sense of lack, boredom and impotence. This particular cinematic text exposes the inconsistencies of the outwardly homogenous and coherent space of the military *dispositif*. Major Thomas Egan, formerly a pilot who flew F-16 planes in Iraq, now fights the Taliban from a military station in Las Vegas, remotely by use of drones. After completing his work for the day, Tom usually returns to his family, to his wife Molly and to his two children. The film begins with an image from the Afghan desert transmitted by a drone to Tom's monitor. Tom identifies his target, a group of six terrorists, sends an order to the missile, and in 10 seconds the group of six people located 7000 miles away turn into dust. Tom clearly observes the people living in Afghanistan, Pakistan or Yemen, and literally plugs into everyone's 'intimate duration', to use Virilio and Lotringer (2008) term. Together with his team he witness, for example, an Afghan woman's strenuous days of work and the abuse she suffers as she gets raped repeatedly. The condensation of time and space is symbolized by Las Vegas itself that brings together, as one of Tom's colleagues points out, the symbols of the entire human civilization: Cesar's Palace, New York, Paris, The Venetian, Monte Carlo and the pyramid Luxor. Tom's field of freedom shrinks with speed, as Virilio and Lotringer (2008, p. 83) argues. For example, the audiovisual

capacities of the drone allow for a kind of visual hallucination, one that strips Tom of his own (everyday) consciousness. The military *dispositif* offers: 'I see for you' or 'I kill for you'. This situation instead of empowerment creates for Tom a sense of alienation. Tom's sense of impotence becomes a stubborn presence. His relationship with Molly falls apart and his trust in the validity of his uniform, status and military *dispositif* weathers down, creating confusion and psychological turmoil for Tom.

Spaces of Trauma: Ruptures and Disruptions

The military *dispositif*, as it is articulated in cinematic representations of the battle front, makes space appear homogenous, as uniform throughout, organized accordingly to an advanced technology that allows the *dispositif* to introduce its presence, control and surveillance into the most isolated corners (Lefebvre *et al*, 2009, p. 227). The *dispositif* projects a normalizing military gaze, a 'panopticon' that surveys all social space and enforces conventionality (Foucault, 1995, p. 184). There is an illusion of transparency that goes hand in hand with a view of space and the body as innocent, free of traps or secret places, where everything can be taken in by a single glance from the mental eye that illuminates whatever it contemplates (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 28). As we saw above, the sutured soldier comes to view the world through the lens of military technology and view ordinary citizens as dangerous enemies. This militarized gaze leads to various ruptures and disruption, which I would like to address in this section, through a focus on the returned gaze, and further show how it disrupts the asymmetry required by cohesive suturing.

Both *American Sniper* (2014) and *The Hurt Locker* (2008) articulate the military gaze through the soldiers' weapons. For example, *American Sniper* (2014) opens up with a scene in which Kyle observes a woman and her son, the first people who he ever kills, on the streets of Fallujah through the scope of his rifle (Figure 4). Similarly, in the *The Hurt Locker* (2008), during an episode of bomb defusing, the viewer sees the streets in Baghdad through a robotic point of view and the Iraqis through a telescopic rifle sight.

What is observed in *The Hurt Locker* (2008) with respect to the different soldier bodies is not a homogeneous suturing to the military *dispositif*. Throughout the film tensions develop, especially between Sergeant James, his immediate commander and others in his unit, primarily because of their reactions to gaze returned by Iraqis. Although Sergeant James remains steadfastly sutured to the military *dispositif*, others, for example, Specialist Owen Eldridge, are disconcerted by the Iraqis' return of the gaze. Owen Eldridge is unable to remain blind to the death and danger of war, while the military psychologist encourages him to see war as a unique opportunity that should be enjoyed.

Figure 4: Kyle's Weapon's eye view in *American Sniper* (2014).

Figure 5: In *The Hurt Locker* (2008) Sergeant Sanborne: 'There's lots of eyes on us'.

As it turns human beings into targets, the weapons-mediated gaze captures, controls, objectifies and denigrates (Elkins, 1996, p. 27). In this way of seeing, there is a need to believe that vision is not reciprocal and that people and objects are just the passive recipients of the military gaze. This belief reinforces the conviction that one is in control of one's vision and oneself (Elkins, 1996, p. 74). When the gaze is perceived to be reciprocated, one's sense of security and control is disturbed. Seemingly, the looks that are returned disrupt the scopic field organized by the military gaze, disconcerting soldiers (for example, *The Hurt Locker's* Sergeant Sanborne) whose resulting traumas weaken their suturing to the military *dispositif* and in some cases create psychic wounds that articulate themselves in the form of posttraumatic stress disorders (Figure 5). The vulnerability experienced when the gaze is returned is illustrated in *American Sniper* (2014) through the

Figure 6: In *American Sniper* (2014) Mustafa returns the Gaze.

character Mustafa an Iraqi sniper who the cinematic story depicts as a serious threat, especially because of him having his ‘eyes’ on the American soldiers, and hence becomes the only Iraqi character to be granted any cinematic depth (Figure 6).

As for the importance of the return of the gaze, Lacan reminds us that while one can see only from one point, the look back comes from all sides (Lacan and Miller, 1988, p. 72). Laing insists that one’s field of experience is filled not only by one’s view of oneself and of the other, but of one’s view of the other’s view of him/her (Laing *et al*, 1966). Sartre (1992) explores the existential consequences of the awareness that one possesses a ‘self’ that exists for the Other and of which one will always know very little. This ‘self’ manifests as an absence at the heart of our perception of the world (Sartre, 1992, p. 344). In this sense, self-identity is constructed not only by one looking at oneself, but also by one looking at others looking at him/her and one’s attempt to reconstitute and alter these views of others. These meta-perspectives are extended by Lacan to one’s relations to things. Lacan argues that seeing is a reciprocal process: as I look at someone or something, it looks back and our gazes cross each other. Vision becomes a kind of cat’s cradle of crossing lines of sight, and Lacan thinks of the whole scene as a kind of trap: we are ‘caught’, he says, ‘manipulated, captured, in the field of vision’ (Elkins, 1996, p. 70).

The concept of the gaze becomes imperative in understanding the conflicts developed in *Good Kill* (2014). One of Tom’s team members, Vera Suarez, confesses during surveillance: ‘I always think they can see us’. She refers to the people on whom they are spying, and who, she is assured, could not see them even if they looked straight at the drone as it flies far above. Suarez here is not referring to their eyes being able to discern or not the presence of the drone, as she expresses that she feels ‘looked at’ and hence vulnerable. In other words she feels under the other’s gaze. Sartre (1992) clearly distinguishes between the eyes and the gaze. He writes: ‘my apprehension of a look turned toward me appears on the ground of destruction of the eyes which “look at me.” If I apprehend the look, I cease to perceive the eyes ... they are neutralized’ (Sartre, 1992, p. 347).

Figure 7: In *Good Kill* (2014) Tom stares at the sky.

He continues: ‘The other’s look hides the eyes; he seems to *go in front of them*’ (ibid.). The gaze returned by the people whom they spy on and kill creates consequences within the cinematic space. It affects Tom’s sense of self-identity as it distorts his perception of reality, and further problematizes the distinction between war and everyday life. Tom keeps staring at the sky while disengaging from his relationship with his wife Molly and their two children (Figure 7). While physically present in the house he appears to be miles away, in Afghanistan together with the people who he monitors. Tom shares with Molly that those people who remain many miles away look beautifully clear. It would not be clearer even if he were there. Unlike our ordinary perspective that gives one viewpoint, he is able to see everything, including *the look* on their faces. The surveillance technology gives an initial sense of empowerment, a kind of quasi-omniscience, as one can see without being seen and can kill with the mere touch of a button. What *Good Kill* (2014) suggests, nevertheless, is that even when Tom sees (on the monitor) a complete image of the Afghan desert, something remains obscure, namely a lacuna disrupting his ability to maintain what Metz (1982) calls the ‘all-perceiving’ and ‘absent as perceived’ perspectives (McGowan, 2012, p. 19). The image involves Tom’s desire, reminding him of his own impotence and mortality (McGowan, 2012, p. 20). It reminds Tom that similarly to the people in Afghanistan he is also watched and directed by the military *dispositif*, that he is not free. ‘I miss the fear’, Tom says. He refers to the fear and risk he used to experience as a pilot. Fear made things real. Now, during the long boring hours of surveillance, he feels like a coward inflicting death and destruction while risking nothing in return. The military *dispositif* itself appears to Tom as an absolute center of reference, which manifests the gaze without being in turn looked at. In this sense, Tom perceives himself along with others forming the object of the gaze of an absolute Other, hence creating a sense of community and a sense of bonding with the people he kills (Barnes, 1992, p. xxxviii). While becoming aware of Afghani people’s returned look, and of the military

dispositif's controlling gaze, Tom's reality slides in the direction of these two centers (Sartre, 1992, p. 343). Tom's life goes through a deterritorialization process, as he apprehends it from new perspectives. These perspectives bring questions about the validity of his personal world and identity. This happens to the extent that even the young man selling alcohol to Tom, asks him if the flight jacket he uses is a real uniform or instead a costume he sometimes uses to have success with women. Initially he responds that indeed it is a real uniform as that very day he killed six Taliban in Afghanistan. The second time he is asked the same question, he expresses his frustration by smashing the bottle of vodka he just bought. Tom himself starts questioning if what he is wearing is indeed a real uniform. As such, *Good Kill* (2014), quite differently from the other two films, through a focus on the accelerated speed of the military machine, instead of providing the viewer with an exhilarating experience of war, it renders the experience of war as pain, boredom, degeneration and destruction.

Conclusions

This article employed a politically inflected psychoanalytic approach to a particular case of embodiment – the cinematic depiction of the body in war – and traced the traumatic effects of the esthetic nature of the military *dispositif*, with an emphasis on how it articulates itself through soldiers' bodies both during combat and in post-war conditions. Specifically, bringing concepts to bear, for example, interpassivity and suture as they pertain to the dynamics of subjectivity, in the films *The Hurt Locker* (2008), *American Sniper* (2014) and *Good Kill* (2014), the article contrasted an exhilarating cinematic depiction of the experience of war, which enables a heightened enjoyment with a depiction of war as boredom, degeneration and destruction of lives, bodies and minds. It argued that recent cinematic depictions of the military *dispositif* shape a social imaginary that regards human bodies as combined with machines into assembles of improved 'systems'. This process radically transforms the viewer's understanding of the human body, as it becomes a component integrated into cyborgian (human-machine) weapon system (Gray, 2003, p. 216). The cinematic representation of military *dispositif* not only alters our understanding of the body and its appearance, but it also alters our experience and understanding of enjoyment. The soldiers' bodies acquire a different rhythm. They are 'rewired' in terms of their capabilities of enjoyment. They are further showed as entering the military *dispositif's* space and imaginary, and accepting it as part of reality. The soldiers assume the weapon's point of view as their own through a process called suture, referring to the moment when the subject inserts itself into the symbolic register in the guise of a signifier (Miller, 1978). As the subject is sutured to the *dispositif*, the lived body retreats from direct experience, becomes absent and 'disappears' in

war through machine-like assemblages. In these conditions, the subject is able to enjoy through a process called interpassivity. The body at war becomes trained to enjoy the enjoyment and the protection of the machine it has attached itself to, while becoming unable to readjust to the slower rhythm of civilian life from which it consequently becomes detached and alienated. While the first two of the films discussed showed soldiers able to embody the rupturing rhythms of wartime, thus finding civilian life strange and uncomfortable, still in the third film investigated, war was showed as disfiguring the life world. Through this discussion of bodies assimilated by the military *dispositif* and ruptured, traumatized bodies and minds in war, this article illustrated the complexity of understanding the concept of embodiment. It explored embodiment by linking it to a variety of key concepts such as: phantasy, subjectivity, enjoyment and trauma. Given that there are anticipated continual changes in the military *dispositif*, which will continue to reposition bodies, there is a need for future research on the militarized body, both on the battlefield and in everyday life.

About the Author

Florentina C. Andreescu is an Assistant Professor in International Studies at the University of North Carolina Wilmington. She has published in a variety of scholarly journals, and is the author of *From Communism to Capitalism: Nation and State in Romanian Cultural Production* (2013) and the co-editor of *Genre and the (Post-) Communist Woman: Analyzing Transformations of the Central and Eastern European Female Ideal* (2014).

Notes

- 1 For more information on this societal change, see McGowan (2004).
- 2 Cinema, which Beller (2006) defines from the perspective of political economy, is the manner in which production generally becomes organized in such a way that one of its moments necessarily passes through the visual. More specifically it creates an image that is essential to the movement of economy (Beller, 2006, p. 10).
- 3 The word *dispositif*, or *apparatus*, is a term frequently encountered in Foucault's writings. Foucault (1972) defines the concept in this manner:

What I'm trying to single out with this term is, firstly, a thoroughly heterogeneous set consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions – in short, the said as much as the unsaid. Such are the elements of the apparatus. The apparatus itself is the network that can be established between these elements ...

In an attempt to clarify the term, Agamben (2009) stresses that *dispositif* concerns the relations between individuals, as living beings, and 'the historical element', or 'the set of institutions, of processes of subjectification, and of rules in which power relations become concrete' (p. 6). As such,

when discussing the military *dispositif* we ought to acknowledge historical changes in its form and structure. Thus, there are a variety of historically distinct military *dispositif*(s). Furthermore, while the *dispositif* can be thought of as a machine of governance that produces mainly subjectification (Agamben, 2009, p. 20), current global capitalism presents us with bodies going solely through massive processes of desubjectification (Agamben, 2009, pp. 20–22). What we are presently witnessing is the recomposition of a new subject only in larval or spectral form (Agamben, 2009, p. 21). In this article, I am exploring this process through the concepts of interpassivity and suture.

4 Similarly, in his war memoir, Kyle describes the enjoyment he experiences in war with these words:

The planes kept coming ... You'd hear the rounds coming past you in the air – errrrrrrrrr – then you'd hear the echo – erhrhrhrh, followed closely by secondary explosions and whatever other havoc the bullets caused. Fuck, I thought to myself, this is great. I fucking love this. It's nerve-racking and exciting and I fucking love it.

(Kyle *et al*, 2012, p. 89)

5 Kyle describes in his war memoir aspects of his military training with these words:

Essentially, the instructors beat you down, then beat you down some more. When that's done, they kick your ass, and beat what's left down again. You get the idea. I loved it. Hated it, loathed it, cursed it ... but loved it.

(Kyle *et al*, 2012, p. 33)

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