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Adkins, Kirsten ORCID logoORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9907-6691> (2019) Close With and Kill The Enemy: Investigating gender and military conflict through a deconstructed film making practice. In: IUAES 2019 Inter Congress: World Solidarities, August 27 - 31 2019, Adam Mickiewicz Univerisity Poznan, Poland. (Submitted)

EPrint URI: <https://eprints.glos.ac.uk/id/eprint/10577>

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Close with and Kill the Enemy: Investigating gender and military combat through a deconstructed film making practice.

Preamble:

The cultural construction of masculinities in British Military recruitment and promotion films and television.

The paper will include a film, using borrowed footage from a television programme, through which I explore these themes

A recent ambiguity surrounding the relationships between masculinities, male bodies and the idea of military heroism, in its television and on-line films.

Contradictory visualisations of military masculinities and a warping of ideas associated with the male body - subjectivities blurred and diffuse, under cover or under threat, avoiding the imagery of a strong male physicality, but a template which may be performed by anybody.

Notions of a stable and entrenched military masculinity are opened up for contestation by the British Military machine and its promotion of war.

My research explores the cultural construction of masculinities in British Military recruitment and promotion. In recent years there is an ambiguity surrounding the relationship between masculinities, male bodies and the idea of military heroism, in its television and on-line films.

So I start with these two quotes, which align with one another, while emerging from opposing ideological positions.

Judith Butler critiques a gendered biological determinism and by this account creates a separation between gender and the body.

Gender is the kind of imitation for which there is no original.' (Butler)

The image and the second quote comes from a reality TV show, a knock-out competition for the SAS forces. A body of men which recently, in line with the Ministry of Defence, invited women to join its ranks, in theory at least.

Butler is challenging gendered power-structures, The SAS programme is using a similar discourse to **sell** these power structures. Selling military violence through the erasure of the gendered subject... because as the show says...

The enemy doesn't care what gender you are ... they just want to kill you. Full Stop.

I adopt, to quote Butler again a methodology of 'parodic'¹ redeployment of the original, to challenge existing codes of gendered violence found in the texts I am working with. I use editing technology to break apart or 'un-build' and then to re-build new forms. And through this I consider new readings but also with an awareness of the risks associated with my intervention: enlisting the materials of violence to subvert the very violence that I am critiquing.

3 mins...

TITLE: CLOSE WITH AND KILL THE ENEMY....

(paper is read over a film which runs for its duration)

The paper includes a 12 second clip which was broadcast on British television in January this year. It depicted a staged boxing match between a man and a woman. The programme, SAS Who Dares Wins is a kind of docu-soap, reality TV knock out show in which contestants have to undergo physical and mental endurance exercises, so that they can make it in the Special Air Service.

The scene is violent but clearly illustrates an emerging discourse of gender erasure which seems to be pervading the promotion of military recruitment in Britain. I believe the imagery of SAS Who dares wins, offers a worryingly tangled message concerning gender equality and intersectionality, co-opted for the purpose of brutality as entertainment in the conquest of promoting war. A disavowal of gendered power dynamics for gratuitous pleasure.

The programme follows the format of something like 'The Apprentice'; a brutal competition in which men and women try to make it into an elite and powerful industry, in this case the business of violence, opposed to the business of making lots of money.

Repeated images of nervous contestants as they await orders from their commanders. Standing in a row, against a whitewashed brick wall in an unidentifiable location. And the slowing, stilling and repeating of these images, exaggerates the gestures of wide eyed anticipation, or contemplation, a serious and unhappy face of a woman with a tattooed tear on her left cheek. Another woman shuffles from side to side and then looks to the man on her right, friend or enemy?

¹ Butler considers a parodic practices as an effort to think through the possibility of subverting and displacing those naturalised and reified notions of gender that support masculine hegemony and heterosexist power, to make gender trouble. (Butler 83). Note further investigations through Beatrice Hanssen's account of Butler's 'mimetic re-appropriation' of hegemonic discourses. (Hanssen 216)

In the exercise, contestants will fight one another, a preparation for survival - against imaginary enemies, acted out by team members. Contestant 21 - Louise is ordered to by 'staff' as he is referred to 'Ant' to choose an opponent - and she picks number 16 Nathaniel from her fellow contestants. The programme identifies contestants by numbers: part of the assertion that in war, gender doesn't matter. Louise is the first woman to pick a man to fight.

I'll break it down by showing a 12 second clip and then repeated stills from the film.... FILM CLIP (12 seconds of the clip) followed by a frame by frame account...

2:39.....

She challenges Nathaniel to a boxing match. And there are repeated blows to her face and head dealt by Nathaniel, slowed down within the film and then further slowed and stilled by me here... and despite her attempts to defend herself, and to attack against an undeniably stronger (de-gendered) body. Despite the bloodied nose, exhaustion, after being knocked to the ground which ended the fight. It was constructed to convey a narrative in which an uncertain kind of defeat for Louise equated with a certain kind of victory for Louise. And conversely a certain victory for Nathaniel - he knocked her down and won - led to his ultimate defeat. Why?

I examine conundrum by looking at the technical apparatus associated with the construction of the scene. The original film clip relies heavily on action-replay a speeding up and slowing down of the movements within the scene. And a self-conscious use of slow motion camera work high lights ritualised performance of violence. In the clip, the filming techniques vacillate between a kind of observational approach, with hand held camera and its staged authenticity of blur.... and the artifice of action replay evocative of sport.

Is this sport?

And at the same time it has a gratuitously scopophilic aesthetic. This is entertainment in its own right, but then it is justified as an insight into the 'real' military life - men and women in the pursuit of protection and of national security..... (and similar rhetoric which is used throughout the show and the series)

In War gender doesn't matter....

And these kinds of layered aesthetics evoke a narrative suturing effect, as a means of positioning the spectator in sympathy with this bizarre ritual - a sadistic fantasy staged as a plausible training exercise. So these technical inconsistencies serve to further confound the viewers apprehension masculinity, femininity, dominance and subordination in the context of this choreographed violence. But then there is the technique of seduction through repetition - a return to the body and its

pain - the traumatic compulsion to repeat and return to painful experiences, that in Freudian terms is associated with the pursuit of pleasure - a classical cinematic pleasure.

And in this activity, we hear that gender doesn't matter'. A disavowal of the gendered body and a disavowal of a gendered history. But this scene exploits a gendered eroticisation of the body, along Mulvey's classic cinematic binarisms associated with looking and a looked-at-ness and the eroticisation of a masculine active instinct and its opposition in a female passivity.

Who is performing the masculine and the feminine? We can see Louise and Nathaniel's bodies, connecting, colliding and separating in a violent automated dance. The dramatic distortion of the neck that accompanies the final blow - just before she goes down.

The shape of her suffering.

The shape of her suffering is exaggerated further through my intervention: more stopping, stilling and slowing both imitates and exaggerates the technology used by programme makers.

It exaggerates and at the same time disrupts an eroticising gaze. And I return to the risks associated with a parodic redeployment of violence in the interests of a feminist critique. The philosopher Beatrice Hansen asks... 'is it viable to deploy such a violence as an instrument of criticism. What if any are the possible limitations of such a praxis?' (213)

Gender doesn't matter - and this imagery is a demonstration of a denial of the gendered body and a disavowal of a gendered history concerning power and subordination.

(4'39)

..... (blurred images of soldiers from army adverts)

In 2016 the cultural theorist Victoria Basham wrote, 'the relationship between armed force and masculinities is possibly the most salient and cross-culturally stable aspect of gendered politics.' and 'nowhere is the notion of war as a man's game more entrenched than in state militaries'. In the same year, in the UK women were invited to take up 'close with and kill the enemy' fighting roles, as described by the Ministry of Defence, who also said these changes demonstrated equal opportunities ... but it also gave a more pragmatic reason

'Simply put the infantry will be more effective in war if we include the best talent our country can breed - male and female'. (MOD 2018).

There is shortfall of recruits. The MOD says it embraces diversity. It encourages women into fighting front line roles. And this is timed with an advertising campaign which prioritises the military machine over the gendered subjective body. And the British Military uses television's constructions

in a variety of ways to convey this. A blurring of identities. And diffuse representations of enemy and friend. And the physical body gives way to the social body - Foucault's 'Docile Body' formed, positioned, postured, as if from clay. - A breeding machine - a template or aspiration, a training manual to be worked through. No longer is it to be taken for granted that military work is naturally man's work performed within a male domain. Anyone can adopt a military masculinity if they work hard enough - according to this programme at least.

..... (still of soldiers in a row)

So consequently the series SAS Who Dares Wins asserts that while it welcomes female recruits, and that gender doesn't matter, it also asserts that physical toughness and mental resilience does - women can try out for a military masculinity if they want to ... no concessions... and if Louise can put up with being beaten by the stronger man, then perhaps she's the better man?

Strange inconsistencies and contradictions in which competitors are also brothers and sisters, but then become combatants and then return to becoming a body of men - controlled by a military commander. Ordered to play violent games, justified as training. Men and women are equal in their subordination. That is their common status. I want to return to the beginning of the text.... Louise is pulled out of the line.. She is actually pulled as if by an invisible cord - staff ANT steps back and she steps forward. I want to direct the focus away from the action and towards violence a spatial interplay between contestants and the controlling 'staff'. A new violence found in the absence of the violent action. 'Staff' orders and instructs, set the rules and boundaries. 'Staff' says, 'the best form of defence is attack' contestant respond in unison - 'yes staff.' And the contestants - side by side, pinned against the wall, are at the mercy of 'staff's' adjudication over their suffering and release. A de-gendering of contestants is reliant on a violent dominant force who is able to compel its subordinates to carry out any violent acts it chooses - even against each-other.

..... (soldiers falling sequence from my film, Stand Up Get Down)

Through the lens of power and subordination, a ritualised, uniform sameness becomes apparent, united in fear and anticipation and an inevitable vulnerability. Side by side in humiliation and defeat. A heroic solidarity. The semiotics of Who Dares Wins can also be considered through a cinematic discourse of heroic action in the face of physical injury, hardship suffering and loss. There is a plethora of imagery associated with this scenario, which can be found in Hollywood cinema. Kaja Silverman considers ways that a dominant fiction symbolises the male body in terms of strength. But strength is countered by its reversal in a material vulnerability and a series of negations or negative cycles which lead ultimately to destruction. Narratives surrounding the material

vulnerability of the body creates what Silverman refers to as a 'textual loop' in which the body breaks down, is revived and restored, to be broken down again.- what doesn't break you makes you stronger.

Louise was knocked to the ground in three blows.

Her heroism.

Is she, by Butler's account, imitating masculinities or performing femininities, or both? Can a military masculinity be defined in terms of a masochistic ruination, in which strength equates with inevitable destruction and revival? Is there a solidarity in the oppression of all contestants, standing side by side, eyes down, hands behind their backs, dressed in grey, waiting. Is this a breeding programme which celebrates Foucault's notion that, 'the individual body becomes an element that may be placed, moved, articulated on others'. (docile bodies).

I am making an intervention in the text. To be clear, by looking at the texts I am changing the texts, and a process of looking cutting, reformulating the texts, exposes inconsistencies, but also creates an undecidability, a refusal to offer closure, but chance to step back and allow for new new critical perspectives but no one answer...

So a final question

Who wins the fight?

5 possible answers.

ONE. Louise wins because she performs a masculinity according to the cinematic codes of an eroticised masculinised body. She presents herself for inevitable destruction, only to get up and fight another day according to Silverman's eternal textual loop.

TWO. Or she is performing a femininity according to Mulvey's account of a sexual passivity. She goes down, she is submissive, she is still - her looked-at-ness cemented with her fall.

THREE. There is another alternative. Nathaniel has won the fight because he - won the fight? There is no gender, the bigger, better stronger body. Implausible.

FOUR. Or Nathaniel fails miserably in the aspirational hegemonic masculinity. Because there appears to be little or no risk to his body. The inevitability of injury is deficient and therefore in Silverman's terms the heroic male masochism is absent. Is he defeated, is he feminised? His suffering was not enough - no pain - no gain.

FIVE. Nathaniel, Louise and all the contestants in SAS who dares wins are losers, and therefore at the same time winners, subordinate to the 'Staff' who control their bodies, ordering them to twist and turn, distort and collide. Separate and together as enemies in war, but at the same time 'brothers and sisters in the same distress' (Weil).

(A man is humiliated because he willingly participates in the humiliation of a woman. A woman is successful because she attempts to go the distance against a man.... In a fight where gender doesn't matter)