

Politics, pleasure, violence: Swedish defence propaganda in social media

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In recent years, the Swedish Armed Forces have produced and distributed highly edited video clips on YouTube that show moving images of military activity. Alongside this development, mobile phone apps have emerged as an important channel through which the user can experience and take an interactive part in the staging of contemporary armed conflict. This article examines the way in which the aesthetic and affective experience of Swedish defence and security policy is socially and (media-)culturally (co-)constructed and how the official representation of Swedish military intervention (re)produces political and economic effects when these activities are distributed through traditional and social media such as YouTube and digital apps. Based on Isabela and Norman Fairclough's thoughts on political discourse, Michel Foucault's dialectic idea of power/knowledge, and Sara Ahmed's concept of the affective, I discuss how the Swedish digital military aesthetic is part of a broader political and economic practice that has consequences beyond the digital, the semi-otic, and what might at first glance appear to be pure entertainment.

Introduction

Contemporary war can be seen and shown in multimedia presentations in real time – and not just broadcast media such as television, but also social media like YouTube and Twitter, on devices such as cell phones and digital cameras.

– W.J.T. Mitchell (2011)

Since these words were written, mobile phone apps have been developed by armed forces around the world to allow the user – taking the Swedish Armed Forces' app as a case in point – to follow the news on foreign and military affairs, play videos and/or role-playing games making explicit reference to war, and then sign up for basic military training. What we see here are modern and technological perceptual structures: affective/interactive strategies and organised aesthetic experiences that are increasingly found at the interface of digital culture and social life. The YouTube channel used by the Swedish Armed Forces operates in a similar area, specifically its audio-visual strategic resource that goes under the name of 'Combat Camera', the visual reporting of which is designed to provide "professional information material on the operations of the Armed Forces or lend itself to distribution by the news media."¹ In other words, we see the development of a computer-generated political aesthetic produced partly for Internet users and partly to enable its integration into the narrative provided by the media concerning international armed conflict (cf. the term 'embedded reporting' in Butler, 2009, p. 64, 65).

The overall aim of the article is to examine: (1) the way in which the use of the Swedish Armed Forces' apps and its own YouTube channel contribute to an affective understanding of Sweden's international policy on defence and security; (2) how these aesthetic and affective experiences can have multiple consequences in political and economic contexts; and (3) the forms of address used in the YouTube narrative and the aesthetic that ultimately manifests itself as part of the self-image of the Swedish military/policy makers.

Before going further and more specifically describing this article's approach, a brief overview of the problems of research in relation to current political and military activity should, however, be given. Sweden does not enter into international armed conflict without reason but is, in spite of its policy of military non-alignment, presently involved in countries such as Afghanistan and Kosovo and the waters off of the Somali coast with reference to the discourse of (defending) democracy:² that is, defending the democratic principles against, to quote the Swedish Ministry of Defence, "the more extreme powers."³ Within the context of these peace-promoting efforts, the Swedish government states:

Sweden's involvement in international peace-promoting efforts is ultimately aimed at helping to maintain international peace and security and thereby enable fair and sustainable global development. Sweden's participation in peace-promoting efforts is in the long run also about promoting our national security and Swedish interests ... Fundamental to this is the defence of a number of universal norms and values such as democracy, human rights, equality, human dignity, and development.

– The Swedish Ministry of Defence, 'Peace-Promoting Operations' (2008/2012).

The above passage represents a significant part of the political explanation for Sweden's military involvement overseas. With this in mind, and in view of the fact that the Swedish Armed Forces constitute an authority that comes under the Ministry of Defence (and ultimately under the government), it is relevant to examine how this official discourse strategically expresses itself in a both aesthetic and affective manner, beyond (explicit) linguistic knowledge.

Material and approach

I analyse the Swedish Armed Forces' YouTube channel and mobile apps as a combination of entertainment/strategic information. I have watched the 141 video clips produced from 2008 to 2013 that have been posted on the Armed Forces' YouTube channel (last accessed on January 21, 2013) and the two apps produced by the Armed Forces titled *Our Defence* and *Our Reality*. In examining these, I have found certain visual/affective (rhetorical) strategies and patterns of recurring (political) themes that ultimately crystallise in the form of the mobile device game and the four videos I have chosen to analyse in greater depth.

Empirically and processually, this study is interdiscursive in character. I focus on the construction of Swedish defence policy within different types of circulating data and practices in order to identify its crossing points: i.e., how each of these (defence) narratives affect and are affected by each other. As noted by Isabela and Norman Fairclough in order to gain a critical and deeper understanding of political effects, we must move focus away from the individual functions in the text to the way in which further uses (social and political practices) and evaluations of the subject matter are carried out (Fairclough & Fairclough, p. 2ff, 85; cf. Foucault's concept of 'series of discourse', 1981, p. 72). Consequently, I base my argument on a body of empirical material and contextualise this via (re)mediated public discourses: government reports, the Swedish Armed Forces' website, images distributed by photo agencies (and reproduced in traditional media), interviews, and external news articles concerning Sweden's international military operations and defence/security policies.

From a visual (culture-theoretical) perspective, I am specifically interested in how aesthetic and affective experiences actively shape and significantly enhance our understanding of reality beyond linguistic structures (cf. Ferrada Stoeihrel, 2013). For example, in one of the apps I analyse, the user is able to simulate (in a video/role-playing game) the real-life activities in which soldiers in the Swedish military engage. Just like a role-play that involves physical tasks (communicated in the virtual world but materialised and carried out in the offline world), the user acquires not just a mental but also a bodily understanding – physical, (unconscious) perceptual significances – of armed conflict and the presumed life of the soldier, which can lead to different types of political participation and effects.

The public information films produced by the Swedish Armed Forces that are based on interviews or topics such as legal regulations and the official rules regarding military training/education thus lie outside of the framework of this study. My study of the Swed-

ish Armed Forces' videos on YouTube is also confined to those films in which the Armed Forces' strategic resource Combat Camera is itself responsible for production, direction, and distribution.

Theoretical starting points and methodological implications

I will begin with a few observations. Instead of regarding the concept of power from an overall perspective of sovereignty, current thinking in the field of visual research focuses on the way in which our perception of reality allows itself to be influenced by fragmentary power relations and social practices that interact and feed off each other. It is this interplay – in terms of its movement and fusion – that brings about an affective accumulation of meaning and helps form specific perceptual states and interpretations of the constructed reality, not the visual object in and of itself (Bal, 2003; Strathausen, 1999; Tagg, 1998; Foucault, 1976/2003, *inter alios*). However, as Ahmed (2004) notes with her concept of affective economy (or to be more precise, 'sticky associations'), it is not enough to state that the (organised) aesthetic object cannot have meaning outside of cultural discourse. Rather, we need to recognise and understand the interplay between culture, agency, and matter. Ahmed's idea about what is politically and emotionally 'sticky' (metaphors and metonyms that hold – or stick – together certain political and ideological values and meanings) is thus not confined to psychological processes or visual conventions alone. Rather, the affective perception of reality is linked with the overlapping circulation of bodies, objects, signs, and a range of socio-cultural and socio-political discourses that organise, accumulate, and create through their union (Ahmed, 2004, pp. 120-121). In short, Ahmed reminds us that the emotional and socio-cultural perception of the nation (how it 'should' be maintained and nurtured) is made to come and go in a circular fashion rather than via a linear master narrative, yet the *affective intensity* of perception is nevertheless incremented by the constant and cumulative complex of political discourses, signs, bodies, and objects that surround us, and whose *cumulative character* create 'sticky' effects.

In investigating how specific institutional political-aesthetic activities are strategically organised, it is thus equally important to also study the informal process of how we ourselves are engaged in constituting and maintaining power relations by way of acceptance, consumption, and distribution (cf. Foucault, 1980, p. 119ff). As shown by Foucault's power/knowledge dialectic, it is not only institutional power that influences which order of discourse at a particular period in history can be seen as right or wrong, good or bad, true or false, etc. Rather, we ourselves are part of that process, and we revise its course and boundaries through a series of active practices (Foucault, 1982, p. 790). In this way, the aesthetics created by the Armed Forces is not developed in a social and political vacuum but is instead embedded and strategically produced to work within social and political situations. It possesses an order of visibility that can be genre-labelled (and distributed) as 'entertaining' but that comes under a larger system of political contexts that aims to directly or

indirectly regulate our visual perception of armed conflict. The observations that form the basis of this article enable us to trace the way in which the affective branding of international military activities is articulated and aesthetically organised in relation to interested parties in both the private and political sphere, where the discourse of power ultimately refers to the acceptance of a lifestyle/worldview.

In a more contemporary historical setting, however, this (audio-visual) political regulation connects to the term 'embedded journalists', which became established during the Iraq War (2003-11) when approximately 600 reporters and photographers travelled and lived alongside American and British forces (Hiebert, 2003, p. 249). Cognitive and affective perceptions were politically orchestrated and systematically structured by the regulation of access to specific means of transportation and selected scenes of action. As a result, pictures of only certain kinds of activity were produced (Butler, 2009, p. 68, 69). As an alternative to the Iraq war reporting offered by conventional media, informal video clips of military activities (some explicitly violent and others more reflective by nature) began to be posted on YouTube (Christensen, 2008; 2009). These video clips were produced not only by activists but also by American soldiers, and in response to this decentralised, visual representation of military combat operations, the United States Department of Defence (2007) developed the YouTube channel MNFIRAQ (Multi-National Force – Iraq) (Christensen, 2008). A common feature of these state representations and constructions, which can now also be seen with the Swedish Armed Forces' YouTube channel and apps, is an emphasis on combat as somewhat rational and humanitarian: a visual and emotional filter that is contrary to the sometimes raw and unauthorised images uploaded by a number of US soldiers (Andén-Papadopoulos, 2009, pp. 18-19). In this sense, YouTube and the file-sharing nature of social media appear to be a hybrid, non-homogenous platform that allows equal space for both ideological and potentially subversive texts (see also Kuntsman, 2010). But if we view this 'both/equal' approach on a broader scale, that is, in relation to historical social structures and strata of institutional practices that allow or curtail the political potential of these digital texts (in other words, their potential for challenging or reproducing the status quo), the relationship between the dominant and the potentially subversive emerges in a different way. According to Foucault, even if we can recognise the coexistence of contradictory discourses in circulation, 'any critical task' should be considered within a series of time-related power/knowledge discourses – the struggle between power/knowledge standards. In this genealogy then, the individual meanings of the texts disappear and can be viewed collectively against a group of historical practices and consequences (cf. Foucault, 1981, p. 67). The basic idea, translated into my own framework, is that the legitimisation of international military action ultimately rests upon an external strategy of accumulated knowledge production that goes beyond the specific texts as such. The political aim of network-based warfare (netwar) is thus, through a spectrum of social channels and cultural practices over time, to "win the information war and to secure 'information dominance'" (Cavelty, 2010, p. 126).⁴ Individual and decentralised – albeit potentially subversive – representations can

clearly make us aware, make us doubt the accuracy of our world views, or inspire us to take action, but they are just as clearly dependent on a more systematic and long-term 'follow-up' of organised actions if they are to pose a serious challenge to the discourses of power/knowledge currently in circulation.

In the following section, I will discuss the ways in which a sample of such power/knowledge discourses are embodied and put into practice.

Affect, cognition, and mobile games: the Swedish Armed Forces as a case study

The Nordic telephone provider TeliaSonera notes the following in its blog on the Armed Forces app *Our Reality*: "For those who haven't done national service, this app can provide a good taster. Anything to gain an insight into what a particular aspect of the Armed Forces is like – one that offers personal development and a challenge. ... This app is great fun and really opens your eyes as to what the Armed Forces involves. Fun and exciting challenges." (2011).⁵ In its mobile-based recruitment information, the Armed Forces expresses itself in a similar manner: "If you'd like to work for the Armed Forces, we can promise you one of the most exciting jobs you can imagine ... A job where you can make a difference. Do you have what it takes?"⁶

In analysing political discourses, Isabela and Norman Fairclough (2012) emphasise the significance of 'absence'. They point to the importance of drawing attention to the alternatives that are not seen in the text as such and to discussing the consequences of these absent alternatives and how that which is missing (and that which remains) is understood as a normative discourse embedded in mundane practices. The attendant linguistic information provided in the two textual statements above from TeliaSonera's blog and the Armed Forces' own discourse in its app *Our Defence* is thus a cumulative narrative of the promised reality of the soldier's life as exciting and challenging – a job where 'you' can make a difference. But, if we distance ourselves from the linguistic discourse, the narrative changes. If we analyse the use of the Armed Forces' apps as a form of social interaction, other layers of significance emerge (cf. Goffman, 1974). In developing the idea of the absent, it is then not only cognitive perception that appears to be significant but also the affective (carnal) knowledge of military reality and how this knowledge is reproduced in relation to specific processes of power. In the following, I aim to address this absence and discuss the hidden practices and implicit knowledge that are brought into being by the Armed Forces' mobile phone apps. I begin by recounting the description that the app provides for players of the Armed Forces' mobile game:

[*Our Reality*] gives you the opportunity to see what it's like to be part of the Armed Forces. You choose yourself when you wish to start, and you will then be sent different assignments. ... The nature of the assignments vary, and they are a simulation of the real life of a soldier

or seaman in the Armed Forces. Log into Facebook in order to be seen in the top list, and compare your results with your friends. The assignments take place over 7 days and begin from the moment you yourself choose to start ... Welcome to our reality.⁷

What we have here is a game that is tailored to suit young adults and provides a crossover between worlds: the video game fiction of the virtual world and the military conflict taking place in the physical world. However, it is important to note that these two worlds are – at least theoretically – a matter of two different realities. As we shall see, this is a narrow distinction that becomes blurred.

The game begins, and the mobile phone rings whenever there are new assignments to be carried out. Some of these are based on purely physical activities (“do 25 push-ups in 5 minutes”), and others are based on a graphic problem that must be solved on the device. The same pattern is observed until assignment number seven is reached: “You need to be able to keep a low profile. Assignment: Trail someone for 15 minutes without being discovered.” This is where the digital military instructions begin to change character and start to transform into a phase of mysticism and excitement, an activity in the shifting borderland between game fiction and military reality. The performance of trailing someone else without being discovered is more or less a kind of role-playing in which the underlying narrative is based on the synthesis between fun and seriousness, affect and cognition, adventure and armed conflict. By means of the physical and psychological implementation of these assignments in the ‘offline’ world, the game’s player adopts as much an affective as a cognitive reaction to conflict-oriented foreign policy.

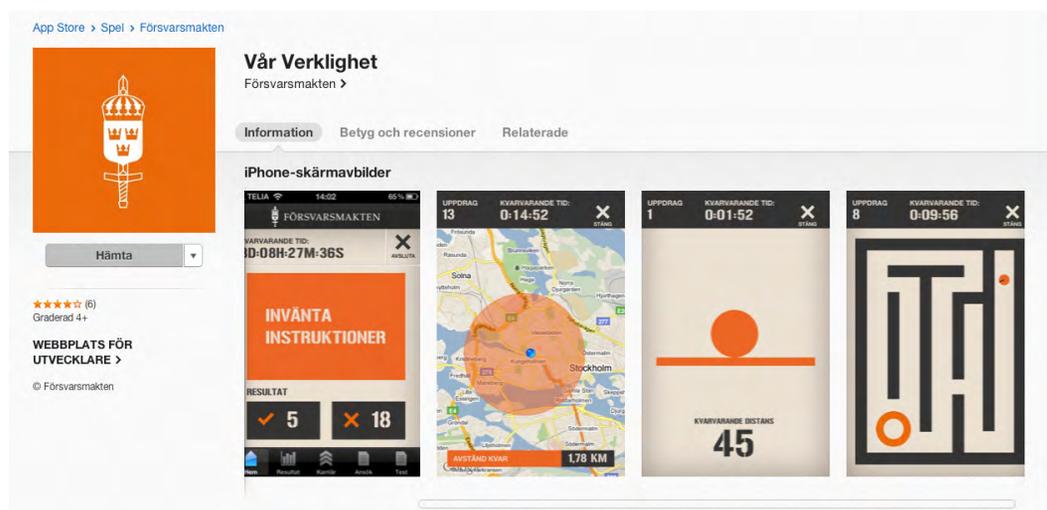


Figure 1. Screenshot from the Swedish Armed Forces' app *Our Reality*.

In a broader theoretical context, the Armed Forces' use of social media and the app game is linked to the concept of 'netwar' as discussed by Castells. In Castells' view, netwar concerns communicative strategies and institutional practices that use their technological structure

and popular culture intertextuality to influence public opinion and support or undermine a particular set of interests and values (Castells, 2010). If we ask *how* this can be done and how such strategies are implemented in social life, the Armed Forces' rhetoric of democracy as well as the social yet political form of entertainment provided by its app game appears to be one such approach to ensuring that military violence, in a collective sense, is accepted in the name of defence.⁸ It is then perhaps a question of *why* the Armed Forces make use of a role-play structure as a strategic stage in the recruitment process, apart from the motivation of winning political support. As a consequence, we can investigate the latent political/economic effects beyond the cumulative rhetoric of "the Armed Forces are safeguarding democracy in Sweden and the world."⁹

Before returning to the discussion above, however, we can state that the Swedish Armed Forces try to recruit young people to make a career in military organisations (where all full-time positions since 2011 include obligatory overseas military duty) through an entertaining narrative and the building of an interactive drama.¹⁰ The individual playing activity is thus structured, presented, and completed in the same app that allows the user to apply online, directly via the smartphone, for the Armed Forces' Basic Military Training in order to become a soldier.

Effects beyond the digital

So far, I have discussed the Swedish Armed Forces' digital self-representation of armed conflict in relation to affect, aesthetics, intertextuality, and, to some extent, a broader context of social and political practice. In the coming section, I will look at the connection between the institutionally driven discursive practice and the more macro-social political development that is implicitly affected by these practices.

'The World's Greatest Main Battle Tank – Stridsvagn 122' is the title of the Armed Forces' YouTube video that demonstrates why the "Swedish version of Leopard 2 (Stridsvagn 122) [originally produced by the German defence industry group Krauss-Maffei Wegman, KMW] was chosen as the best Main Battle Tank of all time ... by the Discovery Channel."¹¹ The clip shows the battle tank's combination of capabilities – firepower, mobility, and control system – together with music and special effects (manipulation of image speed) in a kind of performance video lasting two minutes and fourteen seconds. A piece of music associating the thrill of a chase sequence accompanies the final phase of the video where firepower explodes synchronically with a musical climax. The feature ends with the text: "It is the greatest tank ever."



Figure 2. Frame from the film 'The World's Greatest Main Battle Tank – Stridsvagn 122.'
Photo: Combat Camera, Swedish Armed Forces.

The ideological problem here is that while several of the videos published on the Armed Forces' YouTube channel purport to be strictly entertaining, they require in practice that the viewer adopt a number of emotional and political positions. To quote the comment by tehgow338: "Isn't it awesome being so advanced that no ... [one] wants to attack you?" This is a comment based on the Armed Forces' statement that "Nobody has 'attacked' or in any other way used hostile military force on Swedish ground in a ... [long] time, maybe because we have some pretty good equipment" (the Swedish Armed Forces).¹² From a critical perspective, we might therefore ask what the purpose of the video is. Is it (only) to entertain, or is it (also) to promote the idea of being a soldier as something fun and exciting and by way of an entertaining but interest-driven video to boost the mental concept of Swedish military technology as a necessity (for 'defence' in 'our' name)?¹³ If the latter, what are its consequences? The mobile phone app *Our Defence* states:

Sweden is a small country with a first-class defence system. The fact is that many other countries ask us to demonstrate our achievements [which the YouTube clip does] and to take part in their combat missions. ... What is it that we have and that others see? One thing is technology. Since we are few in number, our equipment must, quite simply, be better. Sweden is a country built on engineering and innovation. Our armed troops are in many cases the most advanced in the world.¹⁴

It is clear, however, that this 'engineering' is not only for defence but is also strategically developed for commercial purposes. For example, collaboration on the Strv 122(B+) prod-

uct featured in the YouTube video led to, in the words of BAE Systems marketing manager Håkan Karlsson, “concrete” financial benefits.¹⁵ My argument suggests that it is irrelevant in the present context whether the Strv 122(B+) and its technical solutions are exploited or continue to be exported in the form of new versions of the Leopard tank. The fact is that a number of the Armed Forces’ YouTube videos as well as Sweden’s (and the world’s) largest armaments manufacturers operate in an indirect yet reciprocal relationship. From an affective-economic perspective, the Strv 122(B+) is not explicitly being sold on the Armed Forces’ YouTube platform, but the affective experience of combat, politics, and advanced war technology is marketed (translated into a need) in an attractive way – and this potentially favour both a broader globally expanding form of industrial policy and something as solid as the defence industry.

This shows that once the discourse of advanced military technology as a tool for peace is established and embedded in the current discourse of ‘preventive defence’ against terrorism as an essential strategy for securing global economic and social stability, it is difficult to distinguish between (self-)defence and the logics of the market. If we further re-contextualise the relationship between the Armed Forces’ visual representations and the defence industry as a chain of circulating discursive practices, we can trace similar patterns in the experience economy to the media representation of the Swedish Air Force’s combat fighter aircraft, the Jas 39 Gripen designed by Saab, relative to media coverage of the Swedish military-humanitarian efforts in Libya (2011). That is, there are similarities in the articulation of the Armed Forces’ visual representations in accordance with a humanitarian discourse and with the media acting as a powerful marketing tool in connecting these representations of specific defence products and military activity into visible evidence and mythological truths. The daily newspaper *Svenska Dagbladet* (SvD, 25/5/2012) states, for example, that “the game of selling the Swedish fighter jet Gripen is continuing on several levels ... At the end of February ... a test report from 2008 was leaked to the papers in Switzerland, which said that the Gripen’s performance could not maintain its competitiveness, especially not vis-à-vis the Rafale ... There are lobbyists on all sides since there are huge amounts of money at stake” (ibid., pp. 2-3). Within the context of the experience economy, however, the Saab aircraft was used in Libya for specific humanitarian and reconnaissance missions under NATO management and thus accumulated empirical proof of its capacity to ‘do the job’ in high-pressure situations. As photographic evidence of this experience, the Armed Forces issued to the mainstream media (TV, press, web) several detailed reconnaissance photographs with reference to the Gripen’s technical proficiency, performance, effectiveness, and capability of photographing and recording detailed information at a required speed and altitude.

According to the Swedish government’s website, Sweden forms part of the “International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and is tasked with assisting in achieving and maintaining [international] security ... Here are some examples of the contributions Sweden has made: More children are able to attend school ... Women’s literacy is on the increase

... We are providing courses for trainee midwives.”¹⁶ But in practice, Sweden’s international military operations also give rise to a spin-off scenario in which political and economic contacts are forged and armaments are (field)-tested – an opportunity for defence products to be marketed as combat proven. KMW states on its website:

The Leopard 2A7 + was developed and qualified for the new tasks of the German Armed Forces. The system components, optimized to protect the crew, prove their worth, currently being in use in Afghanistan with NATO’s partner Canada.¹⁷

A similar rhetoric has, therefore, most likely been expressed by Saab in the discussions over the sale of Gripen in view of the aircraft’s reconnaissance missions under NATO management. The creation of opportunities for maximising profit are thus embedded in the economic rationale, but the fact that this is carried out via military activities – with politicians claiming a different purpose – constitutes an ethical dilemma.

The meeting between Swedish Prime Minister Fredrik Reinfeldt and Czech Prime Minister Petr Nečas provides a concluding example of this symbiosis between politics, media, and the defence industry. A press release from the news agency TT (15/3/2013) announced that Nečas spoke about “the PR value that the Czech Republic as a member of NATO contributes when deploying Sweden’s Jas 39 Gripen in missions such as the one in the Baltic region” (TT, 2013). Or to quote Nečas himself, “Our Gripen aircraft are visible within NATO, which means they act as a flagship for their export” (ibid.). The Czech Prime Minister is thus saying that political and military intervention – in collaboration with NATO – provides an affective marketing value to specific defence products beyond the official political/humanitarian aim that essentially legitimises their use.

To sum up, the role of social and traditional media is crucial in *normalising* the relationship between military operations and particular commercial interests. It is also through the accumulation of visual representations and mythologies that the effectiveness of the defence products can be shown, proven, and promoted while being described within the framework of defending democracy.

Recruitment: two different ways of appealing to the public

One essential aspect of the Swedish Armed Forces’ use of social media is, as we have seen, recruitment. This is not just in the physical sense of acquiring new soldiers but also in a broader context of shaping the social and mental prerequisites for gaining popular political support. In this last section of the analysis, I will discuss this issue by taking as a starting point two central and to some extent interrelated visual/narrative genres and ways of appealing to the public. I argue that these legitimise a political ideal (and its consequent military activities) while leaving aside other possible explanations and frameworks. I label these forms of address as ‘rational’ and ‘fantasmatic’.

The rational address appeals equally to the spectator's 'common sense' and moral judgement by showing visual 'proof' of rational actions such as Swedish soldiers behaving rationally under high-stress combat conditions. These representations of armed conflict are mainly integrated within the information flow provided by traditional media genres and institutional journalistic practices, including press and television news, press conferences, photo agencies relating to the web, etc. In this context, reasoning rests on the cognitive structure and the empirical/naturalistic aesthetics of the video(s) at the same time as certain affective interpretations are afforded space. The fantasmatic address in turn, interpellates the spectator as a potential hero and drives him/herself to associate within a pre-established political frame of Swedish collective identity: the reproduction of a 'we' that encourages collective action in which everyone can make a difference in the war on terror.¹⁸ It is a recruitment process based on a personal and emotive address: a set of idealised notions of military reality and political identity values, narrated through the strategic use of metaphors and metonyms. I take the term 'fantasmatic' from Žižek (1997) in dialogue with Glynos and Howarth (2007), who – instead of considering fantasy within a strict psychological frame or as the opposite of 'reality' – look at the imaginary against a political (unconscious) background. As Žižek explains:

Fantasy does not mean that when I desire *x* and cannot get it in reality, I fantasise about it; the problem is rather, how do I know that I desire *x* in the first place? ... The original question of desire is not directly 'what do I want?' but 'what do *others* want from me?' (1997, p. 7, 9, my translation).

Put another way, fantasy is (also) cultural and our desires are (also) part of a power structure.

The rational address

The Swedish Armed Forces hold that they do not use reporters but rather 'fully fledged soldiers with a camera' who aim to be first in the reporting of conflict (Holmkvist, 2007; Orre, 2011). The Public Information Officer for the Armed Forces, Erik Lagersten, specifically says that "This reduces the number of alternative interpretations. We report factual information and hope that that is adhered to" (Orre, 2011). One example of this visual 'factual information' is the Armed Forces' YouTube video 'Swedes Under Fire in Afghanistan' that was released to various news media outlets. The daily newspaper *Svenska Dagbladet* (SvD) (3/2/2011) explicitly states that the video represents "a small step towards greater openness about operations on the part of the authorities." Hence, by releasing a limited number of documentary images, the perception is created – at least according to the SvD statement – that the Armed Forces is not a self-contained organisation that permits certain images showing conflict while disallowing others.

'Swedes Under Fire in Afghanistan' begins with a sequence showing Afghan children and Swedish soldiers laughing together. The happy atmosphere is shattered by a sudden cut in the video montage and a soldier shouting while the subjective camera begins to shake, connoting the raw image of reality – the front. The children begin to run as the soldier shouts, "OK! Where did the firing come from?" About two minutes into the video, we hear voices shouting, "Women and children!" In referring directly to this scene, the reporter for security affairs for SvD, Mikael Holmström, (2011) notes that "The soldiers we see do not open fire because they realise there are women and children among both themselves and those doing the shooting. That is why we hear the shouted order of 'No shooting to the left!'. This is what the Armed Forces wish to show, that international law is upheld even when troops are exposed to enemy fire."

The video shows the rationality and impeccability of the Swedish Army's behaviour in a crisis situation by refraining from the use of violence even when under fire in cases in which women and children risk being hit. In other words, it is the set of rational actions that give the picture of military combat as humane and compassionate and that appeals to the mental image of the Armed Forces as an efficient decision-maker making reason-based choices that can be said to justify specific military activities. This is a sensible and at the same time emotional and empathetic action, but one cannot get away from the fact that the video clip is about selection and montage. At the same time as the Swedish soldier reacts verbally, the image is cut from the happy atmosphere with the Afghan children to a sequence showing turmoil caused by something resembling a grenade explosion. The cut thus integrates with the action triggered by the chaos of the attack and is made 'invisible' with the cries and shouts that focus our attention on what is going on.

Three cuts in total are present in a video lasting approximately five minutes and twenty-six seconds. All of these cuts are scarcely noticeable because they are inserted during movement either in close proximity to a panning camera or in relation to the turmoil at the beginning of the film. The impression given by the Armed Forces' YouTube video is, therefore, that the video is a chronological and uninterrupted account – a narrative connoting realism. However, the sequences, especially the one showing the laughing Afghan children together with the Swedish soldier at the beginning of the video, have another function besides the purely documentary. The Armed Forces choose to release to news media a video showing a display of non-violence, empathy, and rational behaviour, yet they do not distribute videos showing other unknown situations of violence. The sequence showing the Afghan children instils in the viewer the feeling of justification for Sweden's military involvement overseas when social and established media show military/political action as "modern, progressive, civil, and democratic" (cf. Clough, 2012, p. 22). The video further emphasises the fact that Swedish soldiers are *exposed* to ambush, and the image is used as proof of their ability and right to act in response to this attack. The attack from the outside justifies their defensive role and consequently Sweden's participation in the war on terrorism and more extreme forces.

The fantasmatic address

The Armed Forces' YouTube video *Apply for Service Overseas* encourages collective action through the use of directed metaphors and metonyms that compel us to adopt (or at least consider) the existence of a Swedish collective identity: The film's narrative is composed of the creation of values such as the enslaved Others, the dream of liberation, and the concept of salvation and rescue. The video begins with four black-and-white stills accompanied by a kind of metallic sound ('Threatening Behaviour' by Duncan Pittock). We see streets lying in ruins, burnt-out cars, tanks, civilians, and military personnel. The black-and-white archive pictures are transformed into moving images and show the sun rising. The onscreen text asks, "Do you want to make a difference?" This address is direct and personal. The drive of the film narrative continues with the marching of Swedish soldiers, intercut with seemingly happy native children carrying a large wooden Crucifix and other members of the population on the move. Someone – a native – waves and gives a thumbs up. An Arab places his hand over his heart in an Islamic gesture of gratitude. This scene as well as the scene in which we see children carrying a Crucifix recount the story of how Swedish soldiers are liberating the native population from fundamentalist Islamic oppression.

The closing phase of the video shows a Swedish flag flying in the wind and a low-angle shot of a Swedish soldier – an image component that makes the viewer look up at the soldier as though in worship. But why is the flag featured in the image? What does this signify? Ahmed theorises on the flag as "a sticky sign ... which gives the impression of coherence (the nation as 'sticking together')" (Ahmed, 2004, p. 130). Seen from Ahmed's perspective, if the Swedish flag is considered a 'sticky' symbol of collective national identity and patriotism, it is then an emotive distinction whereby 'we' are contrasted with those who do not aspire to the same political values. According to Ahmed, the flag in itself has no meaning, but when linked to the political context within which the Armed Forces' YouTube video operates, when seen in relation to other circulating political and official discourses, its affective value is enhanced. It seizes upon and joins – 'sticks to' – the fantasy of what is best for the collective together with the discourse on global terrorism. That is, it justifies institutional violence in the name of transnational security. To use the Swedish Prime Minister's own words:

The fight against terrorism is ... a defence of the values and the social model we call our own ... Terrorism cannot be treated with empty words ... It is a long and difficult fight we have ahead of us, but only by letting the light pass are we able to dispel darkness (Reinfeldt, 2005).¹⁹

In the following scenes, this idea is visually substantiated in the recognisable form of an action film: A helicopter is seen landing in slow motion, and 'we' can sense that something is about to happen. It is unclear what, but we understand that an assignment has been given and that the soldiers have the chance to 'make a difference'.

A final audio-visual example of this fantasmatic address is provided in the Armed Forces' YouTube video labelled 'Combat Camera,' specifically in the video's relationship to the driving force of the contemporary drama: to use a pleasurable aesthetic process to depict the direct confrontation and surmounting of obstacles that prevent the Western fantasy of the best way of life. The video 'Combat Camera' begins with a presentation of conflict: a sandstorm is blowing at high speed while people are seen running for shelter. The storm's intensity affects the central point of the picture, which consists of a Swedish maypole (shaking). Technical and dramaturgical effects provided in post-production such as a higher film speed (where the real time of 25 frames per second is increased by a specific percentage) enhances the effect of the wildly vibrating maypole, and the shaking of the Swedish maypole is seen as a presumed threat to the nation – to Swedish identity and stability – while images of intrepid Swedish soldiers are shown on their way to ward off the imminent danger.²⁰ The music switches to a faster and harder soundscape ('Velocity Curve' by Barrie Gledden) and is designed, according to the keywords used by the production company to describe the affective context of the music, to fit within moods associated with "energy, speed, power, motion, and chase."²¹ In a rapid montage, scenes of conflict showing disconnected images of fighter aircraft; battleships; battle tanks; armed soldiers preparing to shoot, as seen through a night vision camera; close-up studio shots of weapons and cameras; a soldier firing live rounds; etc. are unified by the sound of electronic music and the affective joy of an adrenaline rush. The video ends with stills of grateful children, soldiers standing in formation, and other images designed to portray the restoration of order.

It speaks for itself that the 'raw' reality of the military differs from the Armed Forces' symbolic filter and aesthetic representation of this reality. It is, however, within this intertextual process of fiction, related to specific film and video game genres and a heroic and moral discourse, that the political fantasy is presented along with an invitation to become a successful, powerful person – an acknowledged human being fighting for (and being part of) something larger than oneself. The reception and processing of fantasy functions here as a form of political force – which is necessary if we are to successfully engage in an ideological campaign – that lures through potential feelings of plenitude (by promising not only adventure but also fellowship, meaningful life experiences, and/or social recognition) available once a set of obstacles has been overcome.²² As the comments on YouTube predominantly testify:

Who cares if it's America's war ... People are in danger and we should [show compassion and] stand up for others [for justice, for democracy]; 'do you want to make a difference?' Answer: yes; children, women and men in peaceful villages really want us there, especially, us, the Swedes; when you watch this video, you simply long to get older so you can join the army!; a really awesome, good video; A really cool video!"²³

The Armed Forces' videos are, however, more than just 'cool'. The videos 'Apply for Service Overseas' and 'Combat Camera' link the soldiers' personal qualities, such as bravery, solidarity and will to fight, into an attractive and pleasurable context of combat because these attributes are always aesthetically shaped in relation to a fascinating narrative of military conflict and – more importantly – connect the Armed Forces' (and thus the Swedish government's) attitude to real acts of violence. As Rone (2012, p. 226) notes:

Seduction counts on irony, nonsense and uselessness, but that does not mean it cannot have rational goals. Seduction counts on appearances, but that does not mean it cannot have real consequences. We should no longer underestimate the role of irony, nonsense and the absurd in online media and their effect on politics. What is 'just for fun' for some people becomes deadly serious for others.

The YouTube videos 'Apply for Service Overseas' and 'Combat Camera' might be awesome or 'cool' as described in the comments, but they are also deadly serious for others, as Rone points out – and this is the outermost, absent, signifier.

Conclusion

The story of the Swedish Armed Forces' use of social media via apps and YouTube has nothing to do with whether visual rhetorics can be regarded as necessary in extreme situations. Sweden does not find itself threatened by any imminent conflict, but several of the Armed Forces' forms of visual expression are produced in order either to support military and political action or, more expressly, to encourage people – with weapon in hand – to 'make a difference' (a rhetoric also used by key actors in Swedish politics regarding the 'war on terror'; cf. Bildt & Reinfeldt, 2011). Moreover, the Armed Forces' digital aesthetic is linked to the ultimate goal of the war on terrorism – a stable global democracy – that naturally offers a global marketing opportunity. There are no surprising connections here, but what appears to be ambiguous is how this self-portrait of Swedish military operations is presented in aesthetic and affective terms. The military is shown as a defender of human rights simultaneous with an indirect engagement in (hidden) economic practices.²⁴

To sum up, it should be emphasised that:

The political communication strategies that emerge from the material analysed in this study include a kind of affective marketing that produces, in its entirety, something more than just a discourse on defence. On the one hand, concrete physical combat tends to be depicted as natural and rational (and thus even as humane and compassionate). On the other, combat is depicted via the fantasmatic address as beautiful and impassioned and as an opportunity for social and political recognition. That is, the military world represents an opportunity for the individual to feel important or, through the military experience, to become fully realised as a human being (reaching completeness/becoming a hero).

Regarding the Armed Forces' apps in particular, an aesthetic and affective shift can be found in the recruitment process as such, where the perception of military reality is now bodily and mentally associated with psychophysical (role-play) activities of military situations. Based on this observation, we can state that the aesthetic and affective perception of military activity is taking place already at the recruitment level and is close to the shifting border between fun and seriousness.

The material and technological features that make online participatory culture possible – in terms of comments and file sharing – transform the Swedish Armed Forces' YouTube channel and mobile phone apps into an accessible marketing tool with a social impact that goes beyond the visual characteristics of the video clip or mobile game.

The Armed Forces' YouTube clips and entertaining apps have a multifaceted significance in the sense that they can work visually as a pleasure-giving genre under the pretext of being part of something 'fun' – with many hits and comments – yet also become entangled with a number of emotional standpoints linked to well-established political and economic interests.

The political discourse based on Sweden's participation in international armed conflict with reference to the defence of democracy also involves in practice a spin-off scenario in which defence equipment is exposed and shown (proven) by the media to be the result of advanced 'engineering', running the risk of being mediated as essential to preventing external attacks and to succeeding in the war on terror. Put another way, there appears to be a process of mythologising both the aim (the rhetoric of defence and human rights) and the physical products 'needed' (for defence: i.e., weapons/high-tech attributes).

Notes

- 1 See 'Goals and business idea' of the Swedish Armed Forces: <http://www.forsvarsmakten.se/ledr/Combat-Camera/Mal-och-verksamhetside/> (accessed April 23, 2012).
- 2 Even though Sweden is officially free of military alliances, Sweden is by way of its entry in the EU no longer neutral: <http://www.regeringen.se/sb/d/1992> (accessed December 16, 2012).
- 3 See 'Sweden's Military Operations in Afghanistan': <http://www.regeringen.se/sb/d/11072/a/113411> (accessed April 23, 2012).
- 4 Cf. with the concept of 'cyberwar' as defined by Trendle (2002, p. 2): "[cyberwar is] information warfare waged over the Internet. It involves disseminating information via websites or email in order to raise awareness, mobilise support and create global networks of supporters. Beyond this propaganda aspect, cyberwar can also involve infiltrating and disrupting an enemy's computer networks and databases."
- 5 <http://blogg.telia.se/smartarevardag/2011/03/29/sa-har-ar-forsvarsmaktens-verklighet/> (accessed January 14, 2013).
- 6 See the app *Our Defence*: <https://itunes.apple.com/se/app/forsvarsmakten/id373307246?mt=8> (accessed January 14, 2013).
- 7 *Our Reality*: <https://itunes.apple.com/se/app/var-verklighet/id424200960?mt=8> (accessed January 14, 2013).

- 8 Cf. the 'just war' tradition as discussed by Chesterman (2001), Gray (2008), and Welch & Fox (2012).
- 9 The reference made time and again by the powers of state that defence of democracy is the motivating factor in their involvement in international conflict appears, therefore, to be most contradictory. As noted by the French-Romanian political scientist Pierre Hassner (2008, p. 232): The interventions in Zaïre, Bosnia, and Kosovo and the non-interventions in Rwanda, Darfu, and in Iraq when Saddam Hussein was supported by the West against Iran, show how imperfect the adjustment between the urgency of tragedies and the priorities of states can be."
- 10 For more detailed information on the obligation to do international work, see the Swedish Labour Court Judgement no. 67/12, Case no. A 79/11.
- 11 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xyq6s8hrl4A> (accessed April 11, 2012).
- 12 http://www.youtube.com/all_comments?v=xyq6s8hrl4A (accessed December 16, 2012).
- 13 As in the case of Strv 122(B+), this is a technology developed through an industrial collaboration between Germany (KMW), the Swedish state (FMV), and national as well as international actors in the armaments industry.
- 14 <https://itunes.apple.com/se/app/forsvarsmakten/id373307246?mt=8> (accessed January 14, 2013).
- 15 BAE Systems marketing manager Håkan Karlsson express the financial gain in the following terms: "Practically speaking, in the short term, when Hägglunds received an order for the Strv 122, we produced and delivered it and earned money. The financial gain was concrete" (private telephone interview, November 28, 2012). (The quotation is taken from a telephone interview – not recorded – and is, therefore, not given word for word.) In the long term, however, this industrial collaboration has, according to Magnus Hellgren, Product Manager for the Armed Forces Defence Materiel Administration, FMV, also meant that Sweden is at present part of an international economic and political collaboration including several countries within LEOBEN or more informally, 'the Leopard Club' (private telephone interview, November 29, 2012).
- 16 See 'Sweden's Military Operations in Afghanistan': <http://www.regeringen.se/sb/d/11072/a/113411> (accessed April 23, 2012). Within this (humanitarian) context, however, the Swedish political and military establishment uses its mottos 'to make a difference' and 'we care' as part of an official peace-promoting discourse, and it is not coincidental that the commercial from the Swedish defence industry group Saab AB (a *Top Gun*-influenced story called 'Gripen NG') begins and ends with a voiceover stating: "Why are we here? Because we make a difference. We are Gripen pilots." That is, the institutional establishment and the private defence industry construct and use the same rescue narrative and heroic discourse of conflict. See, e.g., <http://www.youtube.com/user/SaabGroup?feature=watch> (accessed April 24, 2013).
- 17 <http://www.kmweg.de/de/en/home/kettenfahrzeuge/kampfpanzerleopard-2-a7/produktinformation.html> (accessed December 16, 2012).
- 18 A heroic discourse and collective identity that can also be traced to the article 'The War on Terror: Our Common Responsibility', Bildt & Reinfeldt (2011). See Note 19.
- 19 'Letting the light pass' points, hence, to those practices that make the expansion of capitalism possible, see 'Poverty Does Not Produce Terrorism' (Reinfeldt, 2005; i.e., future Swedish Prime Minister). See also the op-ed piece by Reinfeldt together with Swedish Minister for Foreign Affairs Bildt, which states that "the 'Arab Spring'... has shown the strength of the people in several Muslim countries. New opportunities for liberation and development have opened up, which means that the extremist ideal of terror is losing its attraction. The desire of the people for democracy, freedom, and dignity has already overthrown three dictators. ... The majority of people in the Muslim world ... are driven by the same positive longing for freedom and desire for democracy that we feel ourselves ... Protection against new terrorist attacks must ... aim to get at the roots of terrorism. ... The war on terrorism can ultimately be won only in the hearts and minds of the people. That is precisely why each and every one of us can

make a contribution. Everyone has a task to do. Everyone can make a difference” (Bildt/Reinfeldt, 2011). Asking ‘everyone’ to take part in a war on terrorism that “can ultimately be won only in the hearts and minds of the people” is, then, a call for action and a call for the construction of a uniform consciousness: a normative view of ‘freedom’ in line with the political view held by the Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs. Just as in a war film, everyone can, potentially, be a hero and make a difference – even the man on the street. In other words, this is a rhetoric (the construction of a fantasy) that is used by the Swedish Armed Forces for the purpose of recruiting soldiers for international operations. The Swedish Armed Forces’ website, for instance, states “work here, make a difference everywhere” while showing a picture of two white, male Swedish soldiers bathed in sunlight and smiling together with a group of Afghans. In the middle of the picture, there is a title card with the words “They’re making a difference in Afghanistan,” followed by the words “welcome to our reality.” The message is clear. Seize the opportunity to be someone (important). Be like those you see in the picture, join the military, become a (white, male) hero. The image and wording are thus designed to get Sweden’s population to join the fight, even during peacetime. See http://www.forsvarsmakten.se/Jobba/Ansok/?gclid=CMWu0p_f_a4CFedZmA-odNw9Y3A (accessed March 28, 2012).

- 20 The sequence with the maypole can also be seen in another video on the Armed Forces’ YouTube channel (without the speed effects).
- 21 Keywords provided from Lucy McGougan, the Music Department Assistant at audionetwork.com (by mail, 2012-04-05).
- 22 Cf. Glynos & Howarth, 2007, pp. 146-147; Glynos, 2008, pp. 278-279.
- 23 http://www.youtube.com/all_comments?v=Ql9H12cNWk4;
http://www.youtube.com/all_comments?v=UETsZe9ko_s&page=1 (accessed April 24, 2013).
- 24 The Swedish Peace and Arbitration Society (SPAS) notes on its website that in 2010, Sweden exported arms worth a total of 13.7 billion Swedish kroner. See ‘Questions and Answers on Arms Exports,’ <http://www.svenskafreds.se/faq/vapenexport> (accessed May 7, 2012).

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