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Be Part of the Story: A popular geopolitics of war comics aesthetics and Royal Air Force recruitment

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Abstract

This paper provides an analysis of images associated with the British Royal Air Force’s recent ‘Be Part of the Story’ war comic-styled military recruiting campaign. Set around literatures in popular geopolitics, the paper builds on the concept of comic book visualities to suggest that the ‘Be Part of the Story’ images reproduce longstanding war comics conventions, and coherently represent the complex, relational and spatially disparate battlespaces of the present. The paper, firstly, provides a detailed history of war comics as they have mediated war to publics, and argues that war comics should figure more strongly in future studies of popular geopolitics. Secondly, it argues that more than simply part of a pervasive ‘cultural condition’ of militarization, military recruitment is a vital medium through which states and militaries view, and choose to represent their role in the world. Lastly, it demonstrates that ‘Be Part of the Story’ reproduces the violent visions, metaphors and cultural designations integral to state-centric narratives of global politics, and specifically, spatial principles inherent to network-centric warfare.

Introduction

In the latter part of 2009, the British Royal Air Force (RAF) released a series of posters, magazine, TV, radio and cinema advertisements, blogs and online interactive content for a new recruiting campaign entitled ‘Be Part of the Story’ (hereafter BPotS). Designed to showcase “real experiences of RAF personnel to give the public an idea of the range of opportunities available within the RAF” [DLKWLowe, 2012: no pagination], BPotS explores RAF careers by focussing on the exploits of serving personnel and their role in UK Air-Sea Rescue, Air Traffic Control, and notably, combat operations in Iraq and Afghanistan.

BPotS would come to be associated with a swathe of the RAF’s ongoing publicity efforts [RAF, 2012], including ‘offline’ recruiting at airshows and public events. But the most visible element of the campaign has been a set of images reminiscent of boys-own, pocket-size, ‘Pocket Library’ war comics such as Commando (commandocomics.com, 2012), and the now defunct Air Ace and Action War Picture Library (Conroy, 2009; Riches, 2009). Present in publications like Men’s Health magazine, the Sunday broadsheet Observer Magazine and on poster hoardings up and down the country, images such as Sean Langrish (Fig. 1), for instance, depict the realities of Aerospace Battle Management in Helmand Province, Afghanistan, by setting photo-quality images and comics-grade illustrations of equipment, personnel and technology against an impressionistic and decidedly dramatic Afghan desert-scape of flames and combat. The heroic deeds of the RAF here — following war comic conventions (Huxley, 1990) — centre on comradeship and the overcoming adversity, superior know-how and technology as central to victory, and the sense that “the right war fought with the right weapons against the right enemy will enable us to be all that we can be” (Wittek, 1996: 44).

BPotS also makes use of the aesthetic traditions of comic art which, in the case of Sean Langrish, lend coherency to a complex military-logistical narrative happening simultaneously across space and time (a narrative which would perhaps exceed the confines of a different medium). Overall, it is clear that even on initial inspection, the BPotS images use a comics aesthetic to “promote specific discourses by geopolitical actors” (Dittmer, 2007a: 248) (the RAF and British Ministry of Defence in this case) insofar as they mediate the political legitimacy of military violence and the structure of imagined geopolitical space. They are also explicit attempts to use the compelling drama of the professional Western warrior who, in being charged with securing the West’s identity as a repository of virtue, requires as his (sic) backdrop barbaric and “dangerous spaces that need the heroic deeds of champions and defenders to keep...hazards at bay” (Dalby, 2008: 440).

The BPotS campaign is important for critical and popular geopolitics for three reasons. Firstly, whilst comics, comic art and
cartoons have provided a staple source for scholars of popular geopolitics and critical IR (e.g. Diamond, 2002; Dodds, 2010; Manzo, 2012), the genre of dedicated war comics has received little attention to date (though see Holland, 2012). Where it has been aptly demonstrated that comics mediate politics, war and international conflict — principally via the work of Dittmer (2007a, 2007b) — there remains much to be said about how war comics represent spaces, places and peoples, how war comics might be said to legitimize imaginations of war and warfare, and around the representation of war tout court via comics aesthetics. The paper, in this respect, will demonstrate how war comics have been important, both historically and more recently, to the mediation of war and, therein, to the state’s attempts at public relations and military recruitment.

Secondly, RAF and military recruiting are important because recruitment is a theme dealt with only obliquely in the literature. Whilst a small number of scholars have asked of the persuasive and inspiring qualities of popular geopolitics (amongst them Ó Tuathail, 2005; Power, 2007), the broader trend in studies of popular, war-themed media is to consider recruitment “a generalized cultural condition” of an incipient Military-Industrial-Media-Entertainment Network (MIME-NET) (Der Derian, 2001; Stahl, 2010: 48). This overlooks the oftentimes less spectacular ways that militaries persuade and enrol their personnel, and the specificities of popular media produced by and for states and militaries for the purpose of recruitment. Moreover, where much of this literature focuses on the hyper-militarized state of popular culture in the US, there is little understanding of military public-relations strategies elsewhere. The paper addresses this oversight in part, and provides an analysis of the RAF’s BPotS images as they evidence the British military’s efforts to represent itself and its role in the world.
Thirdly, a critique of RAF and military recruiting is important because it speaks to an overarching concern of critical geopolitics; that of “challenging how contexts are used to justify violence” (Dalby, 2010: 281). Though much of the literature around military-themed popular media has been concerned with how:

militaries come to be central to the production and popularizations of geographical knowledge — not only to inform cartographic representations, but to more elusive spatial principles, such as the perception that the world is a composite of hostile environments (Farish, 2010: xvii)

— the starker connection between popular media and the literal continuance of warfare (through the enrolment of military personnel) remains unexplored. Critiquing military recruitment must entail “an analysis of the global operation of militarization, and the social and political consequences of both the preparation for and the actual use of military force” (Dalby, 1996: 656). In kind, the paper demonstrates that the RAF’s BPotS images — with their particular designations of spaces, places and peoples — are highly problematic, not least because they are designed to persuade people to join the military.

The paper is in four parts and turns next to literatures around popular geopolitics, military recruitment and comics which will flesh out the provocations set out above and form the basis for an analysis of the BPotS campaign. Secondly, it provides a history of the war comic, an overview of dominant war comics conventions, and a ‘textual’ analysis of the BPotS images. Part three builds upon this analysis and provides a more detailed ‘visual’ analysis of BPotS in relation to comics aesthetics. The paper concludes with a discussion which will further make the case that critical studies of military recruitment have a place in scholarship around critical and popular geopolitics.

**Popular geopolitics, recruitment, comics**

**Popular geopolitics and the military**

A now established part of the three-fold ‘superstructure’ (Holland, 2012) of critical geopolitical critique, popular geopolitics has been concerned to expose state-centric narratives of global politics as they are manifest in popular culture and everyday life. Rooted in early work by Sharp (1993, 1996) and Dodds (1996) on the *Reader’s Digest* and the cartoons of Steve Bell, respectively, popular geopolitics has subsequently spanned the realms of newsprint (McFarlane & Hay, 2003), film (Power & Crampton, 2005), postage stamps (Raento, 2006) and video games (Power, 2007), amongst others. Though making significant contributions to themes of nationalism, geopolitical identities, and audiences (e.g. Dittmer & Dodds, 2008; Dodds, 2006), a perennial concern with the implications of ‘militarist mappings of global space’ (Dalby, 2010) has provided a range of analyses of war and popular culture. This is especially the case with film, which has been shown to reproduce Cold War mythologies via common-sense imaginaries of people and place (Dodds, 2003); to work as an “[indicator] of the ideological predicaments of our societies” (Żižek, 2012: 46) in reflecting, and providing closure for, prevailing senses of threat and danger (e.g. Saunders, 2012), and to evidence a pervasive MIME-NET which sees a marked alignment of the commercial, political and military utility of filmic narratives (Ó Tuathail, 2005).

Other work that has added “specifically military dimensions” (Dalby, 2008: 439) to popular geopolitical scholarship considers comic book hero Captain America’s erratic involvement in America’s wars since WWII (Dittmer, 2007b), the ‘playing-through’ of post-9/11 anxieties in video games (Power, 2007), popular military memoirs and the scripting of conflict in Afghanistan (Woodward & Jenkings, 2012), and the states of observance that patterned Cold War militarism (MacDonald, 2006). Where this work is, in one way or another, concerned with how popular culture builds “support amongst the...public for a variety of global political campaigns” (Power & Crampton, 2005: 194), and with how people might respond individually to global politics (Dalby, 2008; Klein, 2005), the more direct polemic around popular culture and the enrolment of civilians into militaries — i.e. recruitment — is noticeably absent from the literature.

**Military recruitment**

Though a small literature exists on recruitment in Military Sociology (Padilla & Laner, 2001, 2002), this paper concerns itself with critical appraisals of recruitment in the disciplines of IR, Political Science and Media and Communications studies. This scholarship has, notably, used video games and gaming as its empirical focus. Der Derian (2001) for example, in his important work on the MIME-NET, has set the stage for a range of studies which track the blurring of boundaries between military training simulations and commercial games and which point to this site as a logical instrument for military recruitment and consent. With a focus on popular military-themed first-person-shooters (Salter, 2011), much of this work considers the ability for such games to mirror real-world conflicts (Power, 2007) and to “cast...players themselves in [for instance] the War on Terror” (Stahl, 2006: 112), to reproduce common-sense iconographies, aesthetics, and imaginaries of cultural Others (Gieselmann, 2007; Shaw, 2010; Sisler, 2008), and to skew, on the part of the player, “understandings of war, peace and politics” (Salter, 2011: 362). This literature has also considered — much like popular geopolitical analyses of film — the collusion of state, military and commercial entities in game development (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009), and the literal presence of game-based recruiting in civil spaces such as with the ‘America’s Army Experience’ (Allen, 2009; Graham, 2010a; Lewis, 2010).

Work on games also provides useful insights into how military recruiting, and broader cultures of militarism, might be subverted (Allison & Solnit, 2007; Stahl, 2010, 2012). But it remains limited in two ways. As reflected in work by Stahl (2010: 48), the dominant stance in the ‘critical’ category of social scientific work on recruitment and militarism takes as rote a pervasive and pervading global culture of militarization, and considers recruitment to have:

Expanded beyond its normal confines to become a generalized cultural condition. While the appeal to actually join the military is one aspect of this condition, the interactive war consistently offers the civic sphere a standing invitation to become a “virtual recruit”.

The first limitation of this work is, then, a weak distinction between a ‘virtual’ and ‘actual’ recruit. This paper does not dispute that recruiting has, in many ways, become implicated in broader cultural changes in the mediation of war. But it does argue that a focussed understanding of the production of media, and media affects, specifically by and for states and militaries is essential wherever militaries use popular culture — as with the RAF and BPotS — to persuade and enrol personnel. Secondly, this ‘critical’ literature is limited in that it narrates the American experience of recruitment and militarization almost exclusively. Where there are troubling similarities between British and American cultures of recruiting — the use of ‘reality’ tropes (Stahl, 2010), for example — there remains much to be said of the less spectacular, less corporately-entwined state of popular military cultures in the UK and elsewhere.
Popular geopolitics and comic book visualities

This paper speaks to these limitations by adopting a popular geopolitical approach to comics and comics aesthetics. Comics have informed key popular geopolitical debates, particularly around nationalism and identity. Central to these debates is the contention that comics enable their readers to “come to understand their position both within a larger collective identity and within an even broader geopolitical narrative, or script” (Dittmer, 2005: 626). Much like Sharp’s (1996) suggestion that popular media foster a ‘personalization’ of geopolitical discourse, comics connect individual (reader) identities with narratives of nation by means of continuity and serialization (Dittmer, 2007a), through processes of ‘rescaling’ whereby the body politic is imaginatively connected to the body of comic heroes (Dittmer, 2005), and by identity interpellation (Dittmer & Larsen, 2007). With military recruitment and youth cultures in mind, it is argued that the “impact of comic books on (geopolitical) attitudes is heightened because they reach—...young audience[s] at the developmental moment when their sociospatial frameworks are being formulated” (Dijkink, 1996; Dittmer, 2005: 628). Furthermore, where the issue of the representation of combat and violence is undercurrent in these studies, with comic heroes often existing through narratives of historical wars, it has also been demonstrated that comics have been deployed at times by states and militaries (as part of psy-war and propaganda) to project favoured geopolitical scripts (Dittmer, 2007a).

Where the popular geopolitical literature, and work on comics in particular, will be central to this paper is where it offers an analysis of comics as both a textual and visual form. Though a matter for singly linguistic (Bramlett, 2012), narrative (Pratt, 2009), or visual (Medley, 2010) analyses in other disciplines, geography has begun to recognize comics in their ability to simultaneously characterize by means of language and representation, and spatialize by means of frame, form and non-representation. Respectively, this paper adopts an approach to war comics which builds upon Dittmer’s (2010) notion of ‘comic book visualities’. Comic book visualities is useful because it questions an interpretation of popular geopolitical cultures via a hitherto dominant ‘cinematic’ frame (Dittmer, 2010). This frame has prompted notable analyses of geopolitics in film, but also constrains how space and spatial imaginaries — as present in popular culture — are conceptualized. Comics, as Dittmer (2010) suggests, escape the structuring effect of cinematic norms (standard film speeds, framing, slow-motion, CGI), and so offer unique possibilities for narration. Comic book visualities will be important for an analysis of BPotS in two ways.

Firstly, as Dittmer (2010) suggests, the lack of an intended ‘reality effect’ in comics makes them a notably more flexible narrative medium than film. Comics, as Dittmer (2010: 226) continues:

Can be, and are, printed in a variety of different sizes and shapes and the frames within vary quite widely...[enabling] a variety of image sequences to be produced from the same images by the reader.

Specifically, comics don’t rely on stitched together, rapidly flickering frames to be projected onto a single space (as with cinema). Neither do they rely on graphical realism. Indeed, as McCloud (1993) argues, comics’ adherence to non-literalist narrative has special relevance to matters of representational realism (as opposed to graphic impressionism or abstraction). Comics theorists have often attempted to classify comic art where it exists between “points of realism and iconic abstraction...with photographs at one end and abstracted or distilled images at the other” (Medley, 2010: 55). However, used “as a means to judge the communicative and instructional potential of pictures as they become more distant from the realistic” (Medley, 2010: 55), it is clear that in comics “the most realistic image has been persistently demonstrated not to be the most communicative”. In using silhouette, caricature, and reductions of detail in texture and colour, comics eschew the representational realism of cinema and instead constitute ‘world building’ (Horrocks, 2004; Kochalka, 1999) whereby comics authors conduct “an elaborate experiment which will foment when [said ‘world’ is] replete with its own particular settings and peopled with characters” (Medley, 2010: 55).

Secondly, comic book visualities emphasizes comics’ composite nature. Comprised of panels, strips, speech balloons and captions — between which are gaps, or ‘gutters’ — comics rely on the reader to imagine a “meaningful narrative via [a] topology of images and absences” (Dittmer, 2010: 230). As Gallacher (2011: 467–8) puts it, the elements of a comics page, are, first and foremost, “discreetly packaged pictures, or combinations of pictures and words [which] share a space on the page before they enter into any other relationship”. As such, the system of comics is always primarily ‘spatial-topological’, the job of the reader being to “make connections between the words and pictures and fragmented and dispersed panels on the page [and to produce a] network of relations...which yield a (story) world” (Gallacher, 2011: 469). However, where a ‘story world’ emerges through efforts to read amidst and between the various elements on a page, comics are certainly creative of particular spatial and temporal imaginaries. For instance, as Meskin (2011: 895) notes:

The fact that images in comics are spatially juxtaposed rather than temporally juxtaposed as in film allows comics artists’ narrative possibilities (in virtue of panel and page design) that are hard to duplicate in film, and it makes the representation of simultaneous events both easy to produce and comprehend.

The easy achievement of temporal simultaneity in comics points, in this way, to the possibility of narrating simultaneity across disparate and distant (imagined) spaces. Moreover, because “a comics page offers a rich temporal map configured as much by what isn’t drawn as by what is” (Chute, 2008: 455), comics are prone to the ‘manipulation’ (Meskin, 2011) of perceived time and space for ‘artistic effect’. Indeed as Pratt (2009: 113) suggests:

The time that occurs between panels is usually much greater than the time that occurs within them, and [therefore] the total space available in the world of the story is likely to be much larger than the reader can see in the individual panel.

From a topology of graphical elements then, the task of the comics reader is to “produce a range of relations — both proximal and distal, linear and non-linear” (Gallacher, 2011: 468) — which, when they foment in the (resultantly topographical) story world, give rise to particular narrative spatiotemporalities.

Questions around spatiotemporality, topology and topography will, in this paper, provide the basis for a critical geopolitical analysis of the Raf’s BPotS images. Though framed as significant for geography more broadly, Dittmer’s (2010) ‘comic book visualities’ has particular import to the concerns of critical and popular geopolitics. Where, for example, comics “fracture both time and space, offering a jagged, staccato rhythm of disconnected moments” (McCloud, 1993: 67), and where they are “profoundly spatial in both representational and non-representational ways” (Dittmer, 2010: 223), they should be of immediate concern where imaginative ‘world building’ inheres to all geopolitical visions. The composite nature of comics, and especially the ‘gutters’ — the empty spaces which separate panels on a page — will, in this sense, be shown to pose a central problematic where the BPotS campaign might be considered geopolitical. Gallachers, as Dittmer (2010) suggests, become important as topological connectors between elements on a page. They participate, as Gallacher (2011: 486) argues...
— despite their non-representational quality — “as much in the work of conjunction and relation...as they do in the process of scattering and distribution”, and “should be thought of as...anti-optical void[s]” (Dittmer, 2010: 230), traces “only [of] a relationship to be formed in the reader’s mind” (230 my emphasis). Put differently, though the paper argues that gutters do constitute literal graphical absences, it suggests they must also be “understood as sit[es] of semantic articulation” (Gallacher, 2011: 468). Where the RAP’s engagements in the Middle East are network-centric, and are often played out simultaneously across vast and non-contiguous spaces, the comics gutter will be shown, therefore, to reveal and tell a story, in absentia, of an emergent and topological ontology of the battlespace which relies only upon relationships to be formed across networks.

To provide a context for these discussions, the following two sections of the paper provide an historical overview of war comics, a short history of the British ‘Pocket Library’, and a discussion of dominant (textual) war comic conventions. This concludes with an analysis of the BPotS images where they reproduce such conventions. The third section moves to the ‘visual’, and will consider BPotS’s narration of the complex time-spaces of the RAP’s wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and will speak to the visualization of (battle) space and time via a curious tension of realism and abstraction, and will provide thoughts on the battlespace, on spatiotemporality and topology.

**War comics: narrating conflict**

**Comic books, politics, and war**

The story of war comics is one intimately bound to the mediation of war to publics. Whether the backdrop to superhero, fantasy, or historical narratives, war comics have reflected prevailing national senses-of-self and shared fears, and especially imaginaries of the cultural and ethnic difference of enemy Others. Paralleling an explosion in children’s literature in the 19th century, for example, British titles like *The Boy’s Own Paper, Union Jack, Boys of the Empire* and *Dreadnought*, during the Boer campaigns, tapped “into a deep well of patriotic fervour [and] accounts of heroism in places etched onto the national unconscious [like] Mafeking, Ladysmith and Kimberly” (Riches, 2009: 9). Comics would also come to be important during WWII in Britain where, amidst the constant threat of aerial attack and invasion, comics like *The War of the Nations*, *Lion* and *The Modern Boy* offered strikingly racialized caricatures of German, Italian, and Japanese combatants, and *The Dandy* and *The Beano* ridiculing of figures like Mussolini (Riches, 2009).

Far from always serving appetites for conflict and retribution, however, war comics have also reflected conflicted terrains of public consent. During the Cold War, wherein many comics struggled to apply “the basic setup of war [comics], with two protagonists who naturally have opposing views” (Strömberg, 2010: 38) to a more complex reality, America’s Vietnam war comics in particular reflected growing civil hostility to overseas conflict. Foregoing comics conventions, author and veteran Doug Murray’s *The ‘Nant*, for example, dealt with subjects like “racism, framing (assassinating unpopular officers), the viewpoint of the Viet Cong, and the shabby attitude towards homecoming vets” (Conroy, 2009: 141; Daglis, 1990). Others comics, like *Vietnam Journal*, also rejected staunch patriotism — something championed in Korean war comics like GI Joe — choosing to depict war with unparalleled faithfulness to scenes of injury and death (Sahin, 1993). Comics also reflect the current spectrum of attitudes toward American militarism. Presently sharing a market with Marvel comics, which openly supported the 2003 invasion of Iraq, for instance, are underground and anti-war comics such as *Addicted To War* (Strömberg, 2010) and Vertigo’s acclaimed *Pride of Baghdad* (Conroy, 2009).

A further problematic surrounds the affinity between war comics publishers and the state’s apparatus of advocacy, especially where comics might have propagandistic value. For example, as Riches (2009: 114) notes, following the interception of:

> Wartime records of a planned German invasion [of Britain in WWII which stated that a list of prominent newspaper editors and publishers were to be captured and made answerable to Hitler for the crime of ‘gross disrespect’ [the then editor of *The Beano*] was held back from active military service due to the irreplaceable positive impact he was having on the nation’s morale.

Indeed, so important were comics to the British war effort that in various instances, publishers were saved from, or encouraged by the state to retain their print runs during, paper rationing (Riches, 2009). But the relationship between comics industry and state has also served commercial as well as political ends. During the early years of WWII in the US, the market imperative to sell comics saw publishers like Timely Comics (later Marvel Comics) and National Periodical (later DC Comics) seize upon a new landscape for, in particular, superhero such as *Superman* (Dittmer, 2005) and *The Spirit* (2007) both suggest, the appearance of the first costumed heroes (Superman, Batman, Captain Marvel and Captain America) — who found themselves battling Nazis and Japanese invaders — represented, above all, prescient commercial decisions to tap into a patriotic consciousness awoken during war mobilization. War comics authors and their publishers have been no less entwined with the US’s ‘War on Terror’, its military-industrial complex, and apparatus of consent. Comics like *Guardforce* and *The Spirit of America* (Scott, 2008; Strömberg, 2010) for example, were released — in concert with the Department of Defence — in direct support of US Forces. A perhaps more troubling complicity between state and comic cultures arose when ex editor-in-chief of the neconoservative American Enterprise Magazine, Karl Zinnmeister, complimented his work as George W. Bush’s Domestic Policy adviser and Director of the Domestic Policy Council by penning the staunchly pro-war, boots-on-the-ground, Marvel comic *Combat Zone: True Tales of GI’s in Iraq* (Conroy, 2009; McEntee, 2007).

Whist sustaining consent during wartime, inseparable as they’ve been from the state’s apparatus of advocacy, war comics also point to matters of military recruitment. As Riches (2009: 9) notes, the First and Second World Wars gave rise, in Britain, to story papers littered with tales of “war, sacrifice and heroism”. But these tales, as Laurie (1999: 116–7) suggests, often went further, “reflect[ing also] the contemporary political concern for military preparedness, both in factual accounts of training and military technology, and in fictional parables which illustrated the utility of such preparedness”. “*Papers* [such as *Boy’s Own Paper* and *Boys of England* thus] functioned as recruiting tools, with readers enamoured by tales of derring-do and encouraged to ‘do their bit’” (Riches, 2009: 9) by, amongst other things, making sure that the ARP Warden knew he had a helping hand in the war effort. With the RAP in mind, both Dunnett (2013) and Adey (2010) note, similarly, the usefulness of comics for recruitment. The fabled hero Dan Dare as he first appeared in *Eagle* in 1950, for example, embodied the “popularly revered...Churchillian notion of ‘the few’ who won the Battle of Britain in 1940” (Dunnett, 2013: 6). Replete with ‘sober Christian values’ and a ‘thrilling sense of adventure’ adherent to shared imaginaries of the WWII pilot, Dan Dare drew upon wartime advocacy of the previous decade and so functioned as ‘publicity’ for Britain’s troubled, post-war national sense-of-self. More directly, as Adey (2010: 28) suggests, comics like Dan Dare ensured that “young people [became] the susceptible clay from
which a new kind of aerial being could be moulded [thereby providing a] seedbed for a new form of aerial and political community”. Integral to the mediated ideal of the Air Scout, Boy Scout or conscientious comics reader, was, then, a sense of patriotism and nation, but only as expressed through a whole host of physical exercises, ‘action’, and ‘doing’ (Adley, 2010). Aside a ‘cultural condition’ of militarization, such cases provide evidence for the more literal enrolment of bodies into military service and ‘defence’, and for a readership imaginatively and physically suited to a future military career.

**British *Pocket Library* war books, and war comics conventions**

Where the history of war comics is most useful for an analysis of the RAF’s BPots images is where it accounts for the British *Pocket Library* war books. Born of necessity in the late 1950s, where, since 1945, an appetite for war comics was met with expensive American imports, the Pocket Library reinvented the narration of war in comics to the extent that the “general idea of what war comics are, is very much based on what can be called the British model” (Ribbens, 2010: 221). Comprising twice-weekly, 64-page, single-story (non-serial) narratives, titles like *War Picture Library* (1959), *Air War Picture Stories* (1961), and the ever-popular *Commando* (1961) (see Blair, 2007) would come to achieve circulation numbers of over 100,000 in the 1960s (Sabin, 1993), not least because of their size (13.5 × 17 cm), which “just happened to fit the side pocket of a school blazer” (Edwards, 1996: 182).

Being the first all-picture, singly war-focused comics, the Pocket Library’s popularity, as Conroy (2009: 108) notes, centred partly on the “incredible array of [colour] war imagery” on the cover of each comic. As Huxley (1990) suggests, war comics covers are usually the main selling point, standing as a super-cover of each comic. As Huxley (1990) suggests, war comics school blazer size (13.5 or Commonwealth soldier, reveals a strong emphasis on “partly on the Pocket Library cast their characters certainly as heroes, but heroes whose exploits were not more outrageous than the tales the readers might have heard from their [veteran] fathers and grandfathers” (Conroy, 2009: 108). Although many of its authors were veterans, the appeal of the Library is bound, in Britain, to a tradition of valorizing the stories of WWII, insofar as it’s comics have always been “closer to a non-participant’s imaginative fantasy than any Second World War combatant’s memory” (Edwards, 1996: 185).

The Pocket Library, in these ways, implies the importance of narrative conventions. That is, for publications like Commando to have nearly exclusively narrated the perspective of the British and/or Commonwealth soldier, reveals a strong emphasis on “the combat experiences of a single representative protagonist whose world is limited to a small unit such as a platoon, a squad, or even a single buddy” (Witek, 1996: 39). Speaking to the conventions of Vietnam comics, Huxley (1990: 108) neatly describes the basic formula of the ‘lone protagonist’ plotline.

1. It’s central character is a private [i.e. not a commissioned officer]
2. He is wary of action because of (a) an understandable fear (it is often his first time in combat), (b) a character defect (bad upbringing, undue pacifist leanings, etc.).
3. He overcomes his fear, and usually undertakes an act of great heroism. The narrative resolution of these stories (in which the character may even be killed) is not vitally important, nor is the way in which he overcomes his fear. This may be due to an accident, the help of his comrades, or a friendly Sargent. The key factor is that he does overcome his fear.

Whilst commenting on the overwhelmingly masculine nature of war comics, Clarkson (2008: 117; Laurie, 1999) notes that heroic protagonists, moreover, almost “never question the moral case for military action [but if they do] they usually change their opinions when confronted with enemy brutality”. Alternatively, characters in Commando who are so flayed as to express feelings of self-interest, fear or compassion “are usually humiliated or killed by the enemy” (Clarkson, 2008: 117). The experiences of the rank and file, in other words, “remain the thematic focus to the exclusion of any political or larger historical context” (Witek, 1996: 44), with cowardice and pacifism represented as failings of moral character.

Another key narrative convention of war comics is the near total absence of enemies, with the effect that the enemy often “does not exist or... is a shadowy figure hiding in the bushes... seen from the back or in the distance” (Huxley, 1990: 110). This absence, however, is best conceptualized via the most dominant convention; technology and the “spectacular visual depiction of war machines in action” (Witek, 1996: 37). The machinery of war — as noted in studies of American cinema (Ö Tuathail, 2005) — is lauded to the point of fetish in war comics. “Displayed as the things that will help the ordinary soldier win the war” (Huxley, 1990: 108), extravagant, experimental weapons and communications technologies also represent a “utopian dream of global harmony through firepower” (Witek, 1996: 37). This is especially the case with victory over foes, with techno-nationalist storylines often narrating an “enemy reluctant to come out and fight like a man, but when forced to [is] inevitably vanquished, usually by...hi-tech or the physical skills learned on...playing fields” (Kodosky, 2011; Willson, 1990: 115).

Most salient for a critical geopolitical analysis of BPots, however, is where war comics conventions imply the essential irrelevance of space, place and history. A common thread running through the small literature on war comics (one echoed in popular geopolitical analyses of film) is the easy transposition of British war books, and war comics conventions to any battlespace. For example, as Huxley (1990: 108) notes of Vietnam war comics, in hosting ‘conventional’ plotlines, “the actual setting [the space of battle] is irrelevant...these stories are simply a thoughtless reworking of this formula and can tell us nothing about the conflict except to display some of its surface minutiae”. Speaking of Commando, Edwards (1996: 184) suggests that the British tradition is notable in part because “any setting would be adapted to become a battlefield [with] authenticity...added by any available means”.

Related to what Crampton and Power (2005) call the ‘theatricalization’ of geopolitics, this ready use of WWII-inspired warrior-virtue and techno-triumphalism often leads — in the context of film — to the deregulation of war. This deregulation though, as Carter and McCormack (2006) note similarly, is inherently spatial, just as it is affective. The use of a ‘basic structure’ in Hollywood war films (fraternal militarism, a group of heroic men embarking on a dangerous mission), and the mobilization of the affective logics of combat leads to geopolitical naïveté and a decontextualized imagination of military intervention. The easy transposition of certain tropes of warfare also matters in terms of a (re)view of
history. Just as Auster (2002) suggests that the triumphantist mythologies of Hollywood’s classic WWII films imply, for instance, an "ahistorical refusal to acknowledge the major role that the Allies played in the downfall of fascism", so the British Pocket Library is:

Particularly flattering to the self-image of the post-war generation both by dwelling almost entirely on the military prowess of white British and Commonwealth troops between 1939 and 1945, and avoiding difficult issues such as Britain’s political and economic decline in the 1960s and the imperial basis of its Great Power status. (Clarkson, 2008: 178)

In that the RAF’s BPotS images conform notably to these narrative conventions, the remainder of this section is given to exploring how BPotS ‘textually’ narrates the violent spaces of the RAF’s recent deployments in the Middle East. It will highlight how the BPotS campaign deploys the ‘lone protagonist’, how it celebrates the fix of technology and weaponry, and questions the representation of local populations. This analysis finishes with observations around the essential irrelevance of space in BPotS, and so foregrounds a more detailed ‘visual’ analysis of comics aesthetics.

Be Part of the Story: war, conventionally

Above all, the BPotS recruiting campaign narrates stories of individual achievement and heroism, bravery and technical expertise as they unfold in the RAF’s spaces of operation. Seen Langrish (Fig. 1), for example, dramatizes the role of an Aerospace Battle Manager in Helmand Province: here, ingenuity and military training allow Langrish (the lone protagonist) to react promptly to a situation where lives are at stake. He subsequently arranges for the refuelling of Harrier fast-jets which then drop laser-guided bombs on the — absent, un-represented — ‘enemy threat’. Though not confined to the lowlier ranks (Langrish is a Flight Lieutenant), stories like Langrish’s also indulge a sense of danger; Helmand Province is, here, a space of violence, flames and conflict. However, the complex matrices of the RAF’s mid-air refuelling, communications and weaponry technologies — and Langrish’s mastery over them — allows danger to be overcome. Moreover, with a view to the narrative convention of small-group comradeship, Langrish’s victory is, in part, the winning of ‘24 new best mates’. Overall, with Langrish (and all in the BPotS series) ending with the eponymous tagline ‘Be Part of the Story’, we’re serially assured that neither the challenges faced by RAF personnel, nor the specificities of space and place, will get in the way of a victorious end.

Though dealing with a different place — this time Iraq and ‘Imam Amas’ — the lone protagonist and military technologies remain central to Mark Bowden (Fig. 2), the story of one RAF Regiment Officer’s attempt to ‘stabilize’ a fractious situation, namely the threat of ambushes to military convoys, consequent of the occupation of Iraqi by British forces. This image narrates the lengths to which Bowden has gone to win the hearts—and-minds of the population of Imam Amas, and therein, details a football match he has arranged to be held between Regiment personnel and villagers. Although this exercise in good will and benevolence leads to a modest success — a ‘few new [Iraqi] friends’ — we are left in no doubt of inherent danger: as Bowden recounts, he’d ‘never had a match so nerve-wracking’ and it is clear from the presence of military machines (Chinooks, Armoured vehicles) pitch-side, that this act of union and cooperation must exist alongside a more straightforward logic of threat, danger and lethal technological response. In concluding his narrative, Bowden details the outcome of the match: the villagers have been placated to an extent, but still harbour resentment towards the RAF and British Forces. Therefore, despite the application of the straightforward values of sportsmanship, fair-play and teamwork, the people of Imam Amas remain essentially belligerent and dangerous, living as they do according to a more duplicitous, unsportsmanlike ethic of petty violence and ambush.

When read ‘textually’, then, BPotS readily employs the tried-and-tested conventions of war comics. Both Langrish and Bowden fit the profile of the lone protagonist who undertakes an act of bravery and who is expert in the face of adversity. Following Huxley (1990) though, because each image concludes with the BPotS tagline, the means by which Langrish and Bowden’s stories are resolved is not vitally important. Rather, what is vitally important is that each story ends in success, and becomes so via the affirmation of a technological fix to the battlespace (as with Langrish), or through the triumph of common-sense and sportsmanship over the unruly and culturally exotic (as with Bowden). More problematically though, these are stories in which the protagonist is not provided an opportunity to question the moral case for military action (after Clarkson, 2008). Moreover, the reader is not provided this opportunity either, and each self-contained story in the BPotS series fails to be placed into the broader political, social and cultural context of, or relative to the arguments for and against, British military involvements in Iraq and Afghanistan. Fundamentally then, because, in following war comics conventions, BPotS leaves no doubt as to the victorious conclusion to every adventure, the specificities of space, place and culture matter little. Indeed, the human geographies of the RAF’s operations might be considered irrelevant, mattering as they do only in providing a dangerous and threatening backdrop for the (thus justifiable) projection of military power.

Comics aesthetics: spacing conflict

Whilst a textual analysis of the BPotS images tells us something about how narrative conventions are deployed in these cases to problematic ends, this section of the paper moves to the ‘visual’ and develops this critique. Specifically, building upon Dittmer’s (2010) notion of comic book visualities, it considers, firstly, realism and abstraction and the building of violent worlds. Secondly, it discussions composition and the shared topological qualities, in BPotS, of comics page and comics narrative.

Realism and abstraction

Following Mark Bowden’s escapades in Imam Amas, the story of Clayton Hudson (Fig. 3) provides another insight into the fraught task of RAF personnel in the Middle East, and here, of the Intelligence Analyst. Hudson’s role is that of the ‘eyes and ears’ of a convoy transporting equipment in ‘hostile territory’ qua Afghanistan: in ‘analysing terrain’, ‘thinking like the enemy’ and, presumably, operating as part of a Unmanned Arial Vehicle (UAV) surveillance system, Hudson is thus able to remotely escort the convoy without event. In advertising military reservist roles, Clayton Hudson concludes by making a connection between Hudson’s civilian role as an I.T. systems installer and the role of the RAF Intelligence Analyst.

Considering the preceding discussion, this image conforms ideally to war comics conventions. The challenge to be overcome is the abstract threat of ‘enemy territory’ and the literal threat of hooded figures wielding RPGs and small arms. Through ingenuity, resolve and training, Hudson meets these challenges and sees the convoy safely to its destination. However, for conventional stories like Hudson’s (and all others) to work necessitates a graphic ‘world’ which eschews the representational realism of cinema and which relies upon reductions of detail in texture and colour. Namely, Clayton Hudson’s is an impressionistic (Afghan) world awash with blue and spliced with the grid squares of the maps which are so central to his military task. Langrish and Bowden (Figs. 1 and 2), similarly, both inhabit roughly-edged worlds of desert colours,
heat, haze and movement. In all cases, the (square and circular) panels of the more sharply-rendered military narrative at the edges of the page overlay these landscapes, and in doing so, give voice to, and authenticate, otherwise indistinguishable washes of colour.

It is clear, therefore, that BPotS employs a particular combination of realism (in that they use photographs and sharply-drawn panels) and iconic abstraction (the rendering of Middle Eastern spaces as washes of colour). In speaking to the preceding arguments, there are two points of concern here. Firstly, the representation of Middle Eastern spaces in BPotS suggests that what is of least importance are the specifics of space, place and the related human complexities of (the effect of) military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. Where space is reduced to an indeterminate haze of colour and movement, comic conventions which imply the essential irrelevance of space are given visual form here through iconic abstraction. However, this does not mean that the spaces in question lack ‘communicative value’ (after Medley, 2010). Rather, and secondly, overlain by the sharper, more ‘realistic’ panels, the abstract spaces of Afghanistan and Iraq become important because they provide the (dangerous, threatening) backdrop to a military narrative. Vital though, as with Edwards’ (1996) contention that any setting might be adapted to become a battlefield, it is easy to imagine the superimposition of each panel arrangement onto innumerable abstract spaces. That is, like Hughes’ (2007: 980) suggestion that strategies of geopolitical pre-eminence rely upon a “chess-board vision of global space”, the pieces of the BPotS narrative (the panels) are what matter most here, with the ‘battlefield’ (Afghanistan, Iraq) existing as a mere, though eminently interchangeable, necessity.

Space/time, absence and imagination

A further set of concerns raised by comic book visualities relates to composite graphical form and spatio-topology. As discussed
above, all comics comprise of a number of graphic elements – panels, strips, speech balloons, captions and (anti-optical) gutters – which allow for the narration of space and time in particular ways, and which rely upon the reader’s ability to ‘stitch’ these elements together to construct a meaningful narrative. In this sense, an integral quality of comics is the easy representation simultaneity and/or temporal duration, or of connections between otherwise distant, disparate and non-contiguous events and spaces.

In Sean Langrish (Fig. 1), this composite form is used to notable effect. In the first instance, Langrish’s story happens in a range of spaces: the terrestrial space of embattled ground troops; the (unlocated) Battlespace management hub; the elevated, mobile site of mid-air refuelling; the target site for bomb strike. In the second, it also happens across time: Langrish’s ‘call’ comes in simultaneously as ‘ground troops [are] engaged by enemy fire’ and it is clear that although a period of time elapses from ‘call’ to ‘elimination’ of the enemy, the terse flow of panels tells of a quick resolution. Extending beyond the confines of the battlespace, furthermore, BPots connects battlespaces and vocational spaces of civilian work. In Clayton Hudson (Fig. 3), for example, the contiguous graphical representation of drone surveillance and a portrait of Hudson as he installs civilian computer systems allows the conflation of civilian/industrial skills ‘at home’ with those required by the military Intelligence Analysts ‘in Afghanistan’.

The comics aesthetic used in BPots is, then, markedly suited to narrating the spacing and timing of the RAF’s modern military engagements, and to recruitment. Because comics are able to coherently represent simultaneous events (Meskin, 2011), they are an ideal medium through which to narrate the disparate and relational nature of contemporary warfare, particularly where it
relies upon airpower. Where, for example, Clayton Hudson’s story coheres around distant and disparate sites of analysis and sites of surveillance (the space of the convoy, the location of the enemy) a reading of the panels suggests connection and contiguity. Moreover, in making a connection between Hudson as a civilian worker and his role as Intelligence Analyst, this image does the job of recruitment by forming a suggestive coherence between civilian and military worlds. Hudson’s is also a story about time and the methodical work of the analyst: as opposed to the fast-paced action of Langrish, the much greater time that elapses between than within the panels (after Pratt, 2009) of Hudson commotes the ever-present, necessarily sustained gaze of the UAV operator as employed to protect the slow-moving convoy. Overall, the imaginative work done in making sense of the ‘gappy’ BPotS narratives enable stories to be told which, despite their graphical similarity, might happen slowly and in sometimes un-represented spaces (as in Clayton Hudson), or quickly in specific but relational spaces (as in Sean Langrish).

The graphical elements most important for a critique of geopolitics in this context, however, are the gutters—the subtle absences which separate the panels in images like Sean Langrish. As argued, the gutters in BPotS might be thought of as simply necessary, following for the disparate spaces and flows of war in Iraq and Afghanistan (at least which they are confined to comics) to cohere. But they also betray the more fundamental role topology plays in the imaginings and prosecution of modern war, and further evidence the utility of a comics aesthetic. Sean Langrish and Clayton Hudson are stories in which time and space are compressed, and where a ‘radical non-territoriality’ (Duffield, 2002: 158), and importantly, military control over space, is prefigured by a relational ontology. The battlespace management hub in Langrish, or Hudson’s UAV operating station (both unplaced) act—in an age of network-centric warfare—as but nodes in a “dispersed and distributed apparatus, a congeries of actors, objects, practices, discourses and affects” (Gregory, 2011: 196). The dispersion and distribution of this apparatus in, and its eventual destructive effect on, space, however, is tied to the vagaries of a flat, topological network of flows (of information and communication). But absences—i.e. the gutters of BPotS—reveal this network. The comics page, drawing on Gallacher (2011) once more, is spatio-topological, and is comprised of discreetly packaged (guttered) pictures and words which appear on the—flat, non-topographical—space of the page before entering into any other relationship. Likewise, vitally, the resolution of stories like Langrish and Hudson relies, first and foremost, on the choreographed enrolment of actors and actants into the realm of a network before any meaningful spatiality emerges, or a target-in-space prosecuted. Put differently, where the comics page is spatio-topological, so the stories told by the comic can be spatio-topological. Understanding absence is integral to this critique not only because of the troubling, ageographical phenomena of network-centric warfare which, by its very nature, considers not the “spaces or terrains inhabited by...purported adversaries” (Graham, 2010b: 205). It is integral because these particular absences (the gutters) reveal elements of modern warfare (relationalities, flows) which are non-representable, unplaced and irreducible to topographical space.

Continuing with this theme, absences also reveal the selective process of storytelling. Like Clarkson’s (2008) lone protagonist who never questions the legitimacy of the cause they are fighting for, readers of the BPotS comics are unable (at least where examples like Bowden are discreet stories) to envisage the broader politics of British military endeavours in the Middle East. A theme not broached in Sean Langrish, for instance—despite it being about technological omnipotence—is the often neo-colonial global infrastructures and archipelago of bases and airstrips (Sidaway, 2010) which enable the British military to not only control modern battlespaces, but regimes of post-9/11 justice and rendition. And considering the non-space inhabited by Hudson in his role as Intelligence Analyst, the reader is, again, unable to relate this story to the murky sovereignties of modern targeted killing. Where Meskin (2011) suggest that a comics aesthetic is one often manipulated for artistic effect, the visual design of BPotS is, therefore, a comics aesthetic manipulated for political effect. More precisely, the BPotS images are exemplary uses of comics graphics which, through their very conventions of narrative and design, enable the British state and military to represent a world of enemies and dangers and, therein, responses bound to violent spatial principles.

**Conclusion: BPotS and a popular geopolitics of military recruitment**

This paper began by suggesting that the British RAF’s BPotS recruiting images are notable for critical and popular geopolitics for three reasons. Firstly, it suggested there is much to be said around how war comics represent spaces, places and peoples and how they work to legitimize imaginations of war and warfare. Insofar as the paper provided a history of war comics and their capacity to mediate war to publics, it was shown that war comics constitute a “means by which mechanisms and strategies of military control [are] explained, normalized and naturalized” (Woodward, 2005: 8). Although prompting questions, perhaps, around nationalism, identity or masculinity, war comics have been, and continue to be, a medium through which war, conflict and imaginations of the spatialities of danger and violence are mediated. This paper has been concerned with British ‘Pocket Library’ comics, and has, in turn, demonstrated the usefulness of comics not only to the imaginative sustenance of warfare (i.e. popular consent), but its material continuity through the acquisition of bodies suited to military work.

This paper does not argue, however, that war comics, at least in contemporary terms, continue to play a central role in military recruiting. Indeed, the BPotS campaign, in adopting a war comics aesthetic, is unique. It suggests, rather, that the designers of the campaign (the DLKW Lowe agency) utilize a set of longstanding cultural references tied to a national sense of self, to ideas around the cleanliness or righteousness of war, but also to nostalgia, as Kimber and Olson (2006: 562) put it, “for a past that never was”. Reporting on the release of Commando’s 4000th issue in 2007, Blair (2007: no pagination) asks whether the British public:

> Should be hailing Commando as a patriotic success story, or [asking whether] its lingering presence [is] simply one more symptom of our national reluctance to let go of the comforting simplicities of WWII.

The paper was written in the spirit of the latter line of inquiry. And where a number of comics publishers continue to produce war in comics, and continue to apply tried-and-tested conventions to both past and current conflicts, there remain important questions to ask of the perennial cultural relevance of this genre.

Secondly, the paper aimed to address a lack of work in critical geopolitics on military recruitment and to demonstrate the importance of a focussed analysis of recruiting alongside critiques of a ‘cultural condition’ of militarization. Military recruitment is, necessarily, part of popular culture and everyday life and is “a social and political [consequence] of both the preparation for and the actual use of military force” (Dalby, 1996: 656). Although a different analysis might have aligned the RAF’s BPotS images with an Anglo-American cultural condition of militarization, a failure to engage with military recruitment head on is a failure, first, to understand how states and militaries view and choose to represent themselves in the world. Different to military-themed video games, for
example, which implicate militaries in economies of cultural production, the often unspectacular media of recruitment — posters, magazine ads — are manifestations of the state’s obligation to account for itself and its role. Recruitment media thus provide excellent opportunities to try to understand the often violent visions, metaphors and templates central to state-centric narratives of global politics. Recruitment also offers, in this way, a means to understand how individual states and militaries (outside the US) choose to utilize, for example, domestic histories and mythologies of warfare (as with Britain and the Pocket Library), or how recruitment mediates, or demonstrates the negotiation of, citizenship or notions of ‘duty’, ‘honour’ or ‘patriotism’. A failure to engage with military recruitment is also to overlook its intended effect; to persuade people to join the military. As demonstrated, work on militarization and popular culture does, to some extent, consider the persuasive potential of military-themed popular cultures, but more research is needed in this regard, particularly into the means and methods of historically successful recruiting campaigns.

Lastly, the paper suggested that an analysis of the BPotS images would demonstrate the problematic designation of spaces, places and the popularization of certain spatial principles, by the British military. In this way, where the paper has been concerned to understand the ‘textual’ it has shown that BPotS reproduces narrative conventions common to the war comic. In all cases, the lone, heroic Air Force protagonist — to overcome an ‘enemy threat’ or the more effusive danger of ‘enemy territory’ — employs his expertise and training to command lethal technological response toward an assuredly successful end. By reproducing these conventions however, BPotS becomes problematic where it denudes space and place of its specificity: the space of battle, following Huxley (1990), becomes irrelevant here and provides merely the backdrop to an inevitably successful outcome. However, the paper has also been concerned to demonstrate how visual form (the aesthetic conventions of abstraction and panel arrangement) emphasizes these already problematic effects. In this sense, the abstract backdrops of Afghanistan and Iraq in images like Sean Langrish were shown to recede relative to the more important military narrative played out in detail in the foreground panels. Moreover, where comics aesthetics are particularly suited to the representation of non-contiguous times and spaces, the RAF’s actions-in-comics in and above Iraq and Afghanistan, are given particular coherence.

In applying and extending Dittmer’s (2010) notion of ‘comic book visualities’, the ‘visual’ analysis offered in this paper also revealed an emerging topological ontology of the RAF’s battle-spaces. In considering the gutters of the BPotS images as anti- optical voids, though nevertheless spaces of semantic articulation (after Gallacher, 2011), the paper revealed that absence is integral to the narration of network-centric warfare. Specifically, it demonstrated that where modern warfare (the use of UAVs and kill-chain architectures) relies on ‘constructed visibility’ which, in Gregory’s (2011) words, is as much about the techno-cultural construction of invisibility, the ‘gappy’ BPotS images tell a story of a networked, topological battle-space, the flows across and between which are unrepresentable and irreducible to topographical space. Amongst other things, this demonstrates the importance of efforts to conceptualize modern war and its representation via new geographies of time and space. Following Merriman (2012: 21; see also Thrift, 2004), the context for the RAF’s involvements in Iraq and Afghanistan is one “where a range of epistemological devices and technologies for thinking, measuring and framing movement-space have been worked into ontological assemblages and our apprehensions of the world”. Where, however, critiques of the mediation of war have been premised on space and time as primordial, foundational, ontological vectors, the counter-cinematic narratives in BPotS imply a warfare based, rather, on an “unfolding of events...characterized by a prepositioning and turbulence, and by material, experiential and relational effects of spacing, timing and movement, sensation, energy, affect, rhythm and force” (Merriman, 2012: 21). Put more straightforwardly, the BPotS campaign points to something broader about the practice and mediation of modern warfare. It prompts us to question not only how the representational strategies of militaries always entail absences and elements of stories untold, but how strategies of non-representation reveal a more fundamental shift in practices of ‘world-building’ in lieu of networked, relational, war-at-a-distance.

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