

WHO WE ARE: The Blurring of Gendered Subjectivities in 21st-Century British Military Promotion

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Abstract

This essay is concerned with the framing and mediation of gendered soldier subjectivities in twenty-first century British military promotion. It enlists a deconstructed analysis of a 2018 army promotion film, aptly titled *Who We Are*, to propose that the visual aesthetics of blur produce a military subjectivity that is undecidable. In this short film, soldiers' bodies are often defocused, missing, or absorbed into the landscape. Such blurred aesthetics exist amid a messy discourse that accompanies US and Allied military actions carried out in the interests of the war on terror—also characterized by an ambivalence surrounding its targets, location, and timescale. In this respect, the condition of blur connotes an instability associated with the image, the body, the subject, and the conceptual framing of war. Blur in this respect diffuses the possibility of injury or death that would be central to fixed representations of the heroic military figure. The recruit is barely a subject. The soldier's body can hardly be lost, injured, or killed because they are framed as barely present in the first place.

Keywords: blur; sharp-focus; masculinity; identity; military recruitment, war

Introduction

Toward the end of the second decade of the twenty-first century, when US and UK troops were starting to withdraw from Afghanistan, a British Army YouTube channel ran a series of campaigns to recruit young men and women to join its continually diminishing ranks (“All British Armed Forces”).¹ Included on the site was a 2018 film titled *Who We Are* which offered a somewhat blurred account of “who we”—a military collective and/or military subjects—“are” as its title indicated (“Who We Are | Army Brand | The British Army”). In one section of the film, a commentary line says, “there’s people doing stuff.” This voice-over is accompanied by an image depicting unidentifiable military figures working on computers in a similarly unidentified interior. A foreground layer of the shot offers a graphic projection with words whose meaning is also ambiguous:

INFORMATION ASSURANCE

99%

PROCESS LOADING

DATA COMPRESS

Beside the words there is another graphic symbol (see fig. 1). It describes the outline of a male figure. On the inside of this shape, there is a question mark.

Figure 1 provides a screen capture of a quiet image that sits in the middle of the advert, a montage of several other military promotional films made by the British Army. Its purpose is vague and diffuse, an outline of a body in the absence of a definable value. The image forms an open question which points toward a blurring of military subjectivity, identity, gender, and the

¹ UK Ministry of Defence statistics reveal on a year-on-year shortfall average of eight thousand a year, in recruitment in the UK.

body. A visual and conceptual ambivalence characterizes *Who We Are* and thus forms the focus for my investigation into the relationship between the aesthetics of blur and the construction of gendered identities in twenty-first century military promotion. Reflecting on approaches in painting by Gerhard Richter and applying a deconstructed approach to the 2018 military recruitment film *Who We Are*, this essay argues that blur constitutes a disavowal of the vulnerable body and with this, a denial of the possibility of injury or death that may be present in a sharp-focused depiction of the heroic military figure. Conversely, blur provokes a longing in the viewer that is found in its capacity to deny access to the scene that is blurred. In this respect, the potential recruit, engaged in viewing staged scenes evocative of wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, is invited to accept the fantasy of taking part in military action without confronting the real possibility of killing or being killed.



Fig 1. A cropped detail from a window reflection contains an outline of a figure, with a question mark, which points toward a metaphorical blurring of the body, of identity, and of gendered subjectivity (“Who We Are”).

Who We Are was produced during the latter years of military operations against groups, cities, and nations carried out in the interests of the then-named war on terror, in the aftermath of attacks of September 11th. Arguably many aspects of British military recruitment during this period were characterized by unstable visual aesthetics, redolent of the narrative discourse of the war on terror. At a NATO press conference in June 2002, the then-US Secretary of State Donald Rumsfeld reinforced his justification for the proposed Allied invasion of Iraq. “Simply because you do not have evidence that something exists does not mean that you have evidence that it doesn’t exist” (Rumsfeld, “NATO”). In the same week, President George W. Bush reaffirmed the message by proclaiming that enemy threats “could” or “would” be found in shadows or they “might” be multiplying in laboratory cultures somewhere “in any dark corner of the world” (Bush). It was within this sociopolitical context that *Who We Are* imagines enemy threats *and* Allied soldier subjects less in figurative form and more as entities which could be here, there, or nowhere.

This essay directs its focus onto the blurred visual and rhetorical elements that would be overshadowed and thus suppressed in a holistic reading of *Who We Are*. A microscopic methodology, using a process of isolating frames and pixels from the sixty-seven second film, reveals that thirty-two of its fifty-two shots depict soldiers’ bodies that are blurred, hidden, or obscured. The intention here is to provoke new questions about the function of blur in the mediation of British military subjectivity. Who are these soldiers? Where are they? What are they doing? Why?

In this respect the blurring of identities in *Who We Are* may be imagined as a “trace” where suppressed or suggested elements offer new readings and possibilities for understanding the mediation of soldier subjectivity. In her preface to *Of Grammatology*, Gayatri Chakravorty

Spivak translates Jacques Derrida's conceptualization of "trace" (xxxiv) as a track or spoor to be followed ad infinitum with no endpoint or resolution. To extend Spivak's formula, an aesthetic appeal of blur would be one of desire because it is "never found in its full being" (Spivak xxxv). Rather, blur promises something else, beyond or behind what appears on the screen or in the frame, ad infinitum. In Spivak's terms the British soldier subject and the war on terror may be perceived as something that is framed as "not there" or "not that." (Spivak 2016, xxxv). Blurred bodies are unidentifiable bodies—the soldier's body that is rendered in blur could be any body irrespective of gender, ethnicity, sexuality, or social class. Similarly, the blurred body is barely present and therefore hardly recognizable as a subject, and in this equation the soldier who does not exist cannot be imagined as injured, killed, or mourned.



Fig 2. A voice over indicates that the ideal British soldier requires traits of "guts" to bring "glory." Yet its accompanying imagery uses blur to deny visual access to the heroic individual ("Who We Are").



Fig 3. I screen captured and enlarged a fragment of the scene in figure 2 as a deconstructed method for exploring the visual identification of soldier subjects in *Who We Are*.

Who Are We?

A fragmented inventory of the blurred visual material of *Who We Are* uncovers the gaps between what the image is doing and what its caption or commentary says it is doing. Its imagery is counter-positional to the first line of the voice-over which indicates that “we” possess traditionally masculinized traits, including bravery, heroism, and valor (Barrett):²

“This is the story about the guts that bring glory. As some succeed and others do poorly.”

This voice-over accompanies a shot of four soldiers on a tank as it moves in slow motion through water (see fig. 2). In the center-frame, seen in figure 2, the soldiers are situated through a gauze of foregrounded layers—sunburst on the lens, mud, and water spray. Water droplets are

² In his study of hegemonic masculinity in the US Navy, Frank Barrett observes that idealized character traits, including physical strength, resilience, and lack of emotion, have come to define the soldier as “an embodiment of traditional sex roles and behaviors,” reinforced in popular media imagery, including Hollywood stereotypes (77).

sharply focused while the figures are blurred. Here, gendered identities are unidentifiable and yet an assumption of masculine prowess is indicated by the voice-over describing “the guts that bring glory,” a gestural stance, and the phallic positioning of weapons. The water droplets bring an awareness of the presence of the camera, the imperfection of the image, and, importantly, the obscured framing of the soldier. As the tank moves through the frame, the water droplets increase in size and transform in shape to form blue-white viscous globs. The elevated positioning of the subjects in the frame, and the foreground obstruction, create a distancing effect which places viewers in the role of subordinated witnesses, where authority is suggested through the venerated positioning of the soldiers and the silhouettes of their aimed weapons (see fig. 3). Blur in this respect identifies the presence of a subject but renders the subject unrecognizable as indicated by the cropped image of figure 3. Yet environmental impacts of military warfare, symbolized by a tank rolling through water, are rendered in sharp focus and thus prioritized.

Blur offers multiple meanings and interpretations which constitute a pragmatism associated with the image that, in Hito Steyerl’s words, refuses to “make up its mind” (44). In this respect *Who We Are* provides a range of possible identities that may be a suitable fit for the potential recruit of any gender, sexuality, ethnicity, or social class. Such a condition produces for Lisa Purse a “structural ambivalence” that permits more than one viewpoint at once. Purse draws on Richard Maltby’s concern with Hollywood’s inclination to “displace responsibility” onto the viewer when addressing controversial subject matter (Purse 275; Maltby). She writes, “Such a preponderance of ambiguity has the effect of producing political ambivalence at the structural level: that is, the film itself literally becomes a container for contradictory ideas and interpretations, allowing spectators who hold contrasting views to each see their convictions reflected in the text itself” (132). In this formula, blur in association with military “guts” and

“glory” is both a source of denial and aspiration for anyone and everyone irrespective of “who” they “are.”

Blur is dirty or it is clean. On digital editing platforms there is a filter named Gaussian Blur which cleans the detritus on the image by blurring out the graininess, dirt, or wrinkles. The resulting image is perfected through manipulative digital processes. In ideological terms, blur may also be symbolically used to clean an image of injury or death or to create an undecidability around visualizations of victory or defeat. Such a concealment, in Judith Butler’s account of the framing of war, “jettisons,” excludes, or covers over its destructive realities (*Frames of War* ix). Blur then constitutes a simultaneous presence and absence within the frame. The soldier is neither there nor not there, neither represented nor unrepresentable. Blur, in its occlusion of dirt and detritus, disavows a clear visual representation of the unpalatable aspects of military action, including violence, injury, or death.

Yet paradoxically, focus-pulling techniques are deployed to draw attention away from certain aspects of the frame that are blurred, and toward those areas in sharp focus. The abstract translucent blobs in the foreground of the tank in figure 2 have the effect of controlling the gaze through the concealment of certain elements in the scene, including the subjective identity of each soldier. As Martine Beugnet and Richard Misek observe, visual blur has an augmenting effect when it is used as a “foil for high definition” such that sharp focus is further sharpened when it is juxtaposed with blur. What is strange about this formula is the idea that the “guts that bring glory” would be visually emphasized through abstracted elemental forms that are intangible, on the move, and incoherent. A blurring of trees, tanks, guns, and men makes them visually subordinate to the viscous globs that are sharply focused and closely aligned with the lens.



Fig 4. The soldier's collar and rifle stock are sharply focused using a shallow depth of field. His profile is softly focused and further obscured by foreground water droplets. Here identity and the body are rendered as less important than the supplementations in costume and weaponry that perhaps constitutes the "guts" and "glory" of British military subjectivity ("Who We Are").



Fig 5. Sharp focus and intrusively close camera work on the face equates with "doing poorly." The blurred possibilities of military success are represented in a match-framing of the preceding images that contain water droplets. Here the water is also blurred and diminished through its layering on the far side of the window behind the subject. The "unsuccessful" civilian is thus denied access to the diffused and therefore endless possibilities of military "glory" ("Who We Are").

The moving tank shot cuts to a soft-focus reverse profile of a black male soldier (see fig. 4). He is armed with his gun pointing downwards. A shallow depth of field in figure 4 emphasizes the rifle stock and sight with a similar foreground of water droplets. Blur is also conveyed through the audio where fast flowing water sounds are filtered through an echo effect to create further ambiguity. It is unclear whether the sound represents water surges, thunder, or exploding bombs. Another shot change is timed with the sound of explosions, and the music reaches a crescendo of a distant boom and a reverberation.

The next voice-over line, “as some succeed, while others do poorly,” brings a civilian character into sharp focus. Figure 5 reveals a close-up profile of a white man in a hoodie on a train that mirrors the forward expression in the previous shot. This time the camera is intrusively close. The natural backlight, from a train window, illuminates the rim of his profile and acts as a distancing filter between the subject and his environment, which is rendered in blur. Here, sharp focus accompanies the commentary line “doing poorly.” Not succeeding, and importantly *not* being present in an imagined scene of military action, equates with *inaction*, conveyed in the subject’s face and demeanor. Failure here is thus signaled and emphasized by the use of intrusive camerawork, a fixed stare, and sharp focus.

Here, a series of oppositional values are in play where the commentary line indicating success is accompanied by the image that refuses to identify the soldier subject. Sharp focus equates with a fixed representation of poor performance. The semiotics of the hoodie further indicate that “doing poorly” belongs to a civilian whose failure might be turned around on the imaginary battlefield. In this respect *Who We Are* reflects some of the tensions surrounding gender and social class in the widening of military recruitment practices, and of year-on-year falls in military recruitment during the period that the film was made.

Gender and a Blurring of Identity

In *Who We Are* women soldiers perform in frontline roles, reflecting a strategic appeal for diversification in recruitment. Since 2019 British women have been invited to take up fighting jobs for the first time. However, these aspirations appear not to have been embraced by many women, and few had taken up these roles (“Number of Personnel”).³ For cultural theorist Victoria Basham, despite a widening of recruitment practices, male heteronormative military codes continue to determine “who fights, who dies, and in defense of whom” (29). The strategic appeal for a wider demographic coincided with reports of a shortfall in military recruitment. In 2018 when *Who We Are* was made, the British Ministry of Defence (MOD) announced a deficit of over eight thousand soldiers per year over a ten-year period (House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts). The report also observed that most military campaigns operated what is known as a “base-fed” model of recruitment, targeting mainly unskilled teenage young men and occasionally women (Crown Commercial Services). The MOD announced new opportunities “for individuals from all backgrounds” so that the armed forces would become “a leading equal opportunities employer” (“All British Armed Forces”). The model is also the subject of ongoing controversy. The campaign group Child Soldiers International used a Freedom of Information request to obtain the report published by the outsourcing company Capita, which held the franchise for military recruitment advertising. The report highlighted ways that deprived, vulnerable, mostly male, young people were targeted by the campaign (Morris). Themes associated with flexibility and inclusivity were also extolled by the then-Secretary of State for Defence Gavin Williamson, who said, “I am delighted that for the first time in its history, our

³ In 2019, only 10.27 percent of the armed forces were women. The number of personnel employed in the British Army of the United Kingdom (UK) by gender was counted as 73,560 men and 7,560 women in May 2019 (“Number of Personnel”).

armed forces will be determined by ability alone and not gender. So, by opening all combat roles to women, we will maximize the talents available to our military and further make the armed forces a more modern employer” (“All British Armed Forces”). In a press release the MOD offered a more pragmatic response: “Simply put the infantry will be more effective in war if we include the best talent our country can breed—male and female” (“All British Armed Forces”). A shortfall of recruits, a need for diversity, and the encouragement of women into frontline roles is addressed through the language and ideologies associated with “breeding.” Such a formula is redolent of Michel Foucault’s analysis that the soldier may be bred, born, and then shaped “out of formless clay” (156) through British military training. In *Who We Are* soldier subjects often appear to emerge out of the elements: water, fire, gas, and earth. One scene depicts figures seeming to be delivered as if born or shaped out of the environment itself.



Fig 6. In a route march, gauze and mist turns the soldier subject into an unidentifiable component of the greater military “body of men” (“Who We Are”).

We Are: A Body of Men

A voice-over identifies the soldier subject through class-based stereotypes as the “salt of the earth” and also “the awfully grand.” Its accompanying imagery, captured in figure 6, depicts faceless soldiers who appear to be delivered out of the landscape and mist—an echo perhaps of the military breeding program described by the MOD. The surrounding landscape is also barely visible while other elements are more clearly defined, including rifles fitted with bayonets, creases in camouflage uniforms, and soft hats. The soldiers’ faces appear covered over by gauze, which exaggerates the blurring of identity. Here the physical body gives way to the social body. Basham refers to state armies and their “tactical teams” as “bodies of men” (30). Blurred bodies are transformed into a greater marching “body.” Foucault also describes the military body in natural terms: “The body, required to be docile in its minutest operations, opposes and shows the conditions of functioning proper to an organism. Disciplinary power has as its correlative an individuality that is not only analytical and ‘cellular,’ but also natural and ‘organic’” (156). The military body is made or even bred from *the salt of the earth*.



Fig 7. Gendered and ethnic identities are revealed in the studio photograph. In *Who We Are*, high definition operates on several registers. While the blurred body is synonymous military action, the fixed stare accompanies a stilling of the possibility of physical injury or death. In these conditions, safe from the turbulence of battle, the individual is celebrated (“*Who We Are*”).

Conversely, in figure 7, three photographs accompany a voice-over that describes the “awfully grand.” These images are rendered in sharp focus—much like those who “do poorly.” Common to both these examples—described through voice-over in oppositional terms—are

environments that are controlled, interior, and where subjects are inactive. This marks an abrupt change where stills depict the gendered and ethnic identities of seven proud graduates who look directly at the lens (see fig. 7). As an example of Beugnet and Misek's analysis, the blur of action where "guts bring glory" is augmented by high definition being associated with the photographic stasis of doing nothing and being "awfully grand." Similarly, "doing poorly" is indicated by the frozen gaze of the man in the hoodie, which also serves as a foil for the anxiety and desire associated with military action. In these cases, with the stilling of action, where the body is removed from the prospect of military harm, identities can safely be revealed. In many ways these photographs are redolent of the MOD's assertions that anyone and everyone, irrespective of sexuality, gender, social class, or ethnicity, can subject themselves to the "breeding" program of military recruitment. The sharp contrast in the singular depictions of racialized, gendered bodies is equally augmented by their blurred counterparts. In this reading, the blur of battle signifies a universalizing embodiment of sovereign power that is disassociated from particular men's and women's bodies. Furthermore, the negation of identity operates within a logic of unknowing; unidentified soldiers, unknown enemies, and a cover of confusion that provides ongoing sustenance for a war on terror.

In this respect, *Who We Are* operates on several contradictory levels. A blurring of the subject has the effect of displacing the body and the recruit's identity along with those aspects of military violence, which would include death, injury, and suffering. Yet for Beugnet and Misek, an imperfect image allows "a powerful way to engage our imagination, to play on our desire to see." Here blur operates a controlling mechanism which is reliant on the missing, obscured, or distorted elements within a scene, and thus *Who We Are* offers military scenes which deny access to the body and the subject, while opening up spaces for imagination. The viewer is

invited to complete the image and its associated military fantasy of adventure. This interpretation is redolent of the conception of “militainment,” defined by Roger Stahl as “state violence translated into an object of pleasurable consumption” associated with the participatory nature of the video game, where the absent presence of the blurred figure has the capacity to stand in for the viewer’s imagination (6). Using Stahl’s analysis, the technical construction of absence (of the enemy) and of agency (of the viewer) echoes the ideologies of the military action at the time. Stahl’s neologism is reminiscent of Judith Butler’s rhetorical questions in *Frames of War*: “As we watch video or see an image, what kind of solicitation is at work? Are we being invited to take aim? Or are we conscripted into the trajectory of the bullet or missile?” (xvii).

The Framing of the “Real”

The art critic Hal Foster invokes a Lacanian perspective, where the blurred, flawed, or limited image speaks to a desire in the viewer to apprehend “the real,” or those elements outside of the framing of reality. In other words, Foster’s “real” refers to those aspects of the frame that are blurred, beyond, or outside of the viewer’s field of vision. He writes, “The perfect illusion is not possible and even if it were possible, it would not answer the question of the real, which always remains, behind and beyond, to lure us. This is so because the real cannot be represented, indeed it is defined as such, as the negative of the symbolic, a missed encounter a lost object” (141).

In Foster’s formula, blur works through its potential to deliver both anxiety and desire, not through representation but through its withdrawal. It is worth turning to the painter Gerhard Richter, whose work illustrates the tension between a simultaneous presence and absence within and beyond the frame. The painting *Betty* (1988) depicts Richter’s daughter, whose body is

twisted away from the viewer (see fig. 8).⁴ Betty's posture adds movement to the painting which is further enhanced by a scraping of the canvas surface to give the effect of blur. For Achim Borchardt-Hume, it is her posture that provides a tension: "We experience an intense desire for



Fig 8. Gerhard Richter, "Betty," 1988, oil on canvas. Saint Louis Art Museum, slam.org/collection/objects/23250.



Fig 9. Gerhard Richter, "Dead," 1988, from the series 18 October 1977, oil on canvas. Gerard Richter, gerhard-richter.com/en/art/paintings/photo-paintings/baader-meinhof-56/dead-7689.

her to address us and to release us from the mystery of her appearance. The impossibility of this desire ever being fulfilled makes it all the more fervent" (163). Here, blur acts as a reminder of the impossibility of the image. The viewer desires those elements that are beyond their means. In the case of *Betty*, the elements that are blurred or missing from the frame perhaps come to symbolize parental anxiety about the loss of the child and of childhood (Borchardt-Hume 164).

⁴ Gerhard Richter, German, born 1932; *Betty*, 1988; oil on canvas; 40 1/4 x 28 1/2 inches; Saint Louis Art Museum, Funds given by Mr. and Mrs. R. Crosby Kemper Jr. through the Crosby Kemper Foundations, The Arthur and Helen Baer Charitable Foundation, Mr. and Mrs. Van-Lear Black III, Anabeth Calkins and John Weil, Mr. and Mrs. Gary Wolff, the Honorable and Mrs. Thomas F. Eagleton; Museum Purchase, Dr. and Mrs. Harold J. Joseph, and Mrs. Edward Mallinckrodt, by exchange 23:1992; © Gerhard Richter 2019

By this account, the framing devices associated with *Who We Are* create a similar anxiety and desire for those elements that are denied to the viewer through blur and foreground obstructions.

Peter Gidal writes of ways that Richter's defocused photo-paintings reject "any single form of representation even in one picture" (27). The artist borrows and repurposes images from popular culture and news reportage which he then breaks down, covers over, or rubs away. By utilizing a scraping and erasing technique, Richter draws attention away from image content and toward the materiality of its surface. With this approach subjectivity is further called into question. The 1988 painting titled *Dead*, which is part of his series of Baader-Meinhof pictures titled *18. October 1977*, explores the tensions found in a desire to see and a simultaneous refusal to confront the horrors that representation allows (see fig. 9). The painting borrows, displaces, and reimagines a newspaper image of Ulrike Meinhof, a member of the West German terrorist group the Red Army Faction, after she was hanged in her cell. She lies dead and face up on a slab against a black void with a ligature around her neck. Her image is lit by a camera flash, which serves as a reminder that the painting is a representation which limits the viewer's access to, and full understanding of, the violence associated with the event itself. Richter says of the painting, "All the pictures are dull, grey, mostly very blurred, diffuse. Their presence is the horror of the hard-to-bear refusal to answer, to explain, to give an opinion. I'm not sure whether the pictures ask anything: they provoke contradiction through their hopelessness and desolation; their lack of partisanship" (Richter 166). *Dead* perhaps offers a reminder of the limitations of representation but also its ability to filter violence and to avoid those aspects that are too difficult to confront. Richter's use of blur offers a reminder to the viewer that the subject, Ulrike Meinhof, is also a material object, a painting. Blur in this respect becomes a self-reflexive method that draws the eye to the materiality of the surface and to the frame—and the framing of

violence. Gidal writes, “Richter’s work abjures concepts of truth and the lived historical—in this vein the Baader-Meinhof pictures, 18 October 1977, are not history painting, they are the impossibility of history painting” (30). The “impossibility” of *Dead* then, as it is rendered through blur, creates a condition for the viewer where an encounter with the painting becomes a negotiated act of seeing both subject in Meinhof and object in a painting of Meinhof, and vice versa. All elements within the frame and the frame itself are made equal, “everything equally important and equally unimportant” (Richter 33).

The contradiction of blur is found in its capacity to simultaneously conceal information and to open up possibilities of looking, and of desire. Its hopeful nature lies in its avoidance of the fixity of sharp definition and thus privileges viewer perception and imagination. Yet for Richter the hopelessness of blur belies a superficiality associated with the violent image: its lack of partisanship, its refusal to fully show or name violence and horror as it occurs and is witnessed. Such a hopelessness is described in Butler’s account of the framing of twenty-first century war. Butler challenges a perceived visual and cultural erasure of corporeality in war. In this respect, what is at stake in *Who We Are* is not what is shown, but the way in which the image is constructed to either conceal or reveal how it shows what it shows. For Butler, “the ‘how’ not only organizes the image but works to organize our perceptions and thinking as well” (Frames of War 71). Furthermore, in arguing that the disavowal of the vulnerable body is an expedient aspect of the visual mediation of war, Butler offers the following reminder: “No amount of will or wealth can eliminate the possibilities of illness or accident for a living body, although both can be mobilized to service that illusion” (Frames of War 30).

Blur then, in this respect, becomes a material device for the disavowal of the vulnerable body and with this the gendered military subject. In *Who We Are* blur signifies lack of control,

of desire, and of danger. Sharp focus denotes the safety of inaction. Such constructions reflect Victoria Basham's analysis of military masculinity as she writes, "The soldier hero is a robust and highly influential form of idealized masculinity, particularly in the contemporary Western world" (30). *Who We Are* avoids depictions of muscular strength. Military power is associated with unstable images and of ambiguous identities. It is perhaps unsurprising that the viewer is denied the opportunity to identify with an embodied masculine hero that might directly represent the horror associated with the "guts that bring glory" articulated by the voice-over. Sharp images of soldiers' bodies engaged in military violence are not produced as objects of desire. Blurred bodies are constructed to operate as universal bodies, that in Williamson's new inclusive army could be any body of any gender. Indeed, if "base-fed recruitment" is preferred, they could be the vulnerable bodies of "our" children.

Conclusion: Masculinity, Identity, Blur

The visual blurring of military identities in *Who We Are* becomes a visual phenomenon and a theoretical idea, which points toward an undecidability of meaning around the image, the body, and the gendered subject. Blur also connotes the ambiguous rhetoric and visual aesthetics associated with military recruitment and the war on terror. It is my contention here that many aspects of the British military recruitment campaign were characterized by visual aesthetics and a narrative discourse redolent of Bush and Rumsfeld's ambiguous rhetoric. In addition to this, a blurring of gender and social categories equates with a military recruitment campaign whose aim is to broaden its appeal to women and minority groups. *Who We Are* then is less concerned with identity; rather the film imagines military victory as an aspirational goal that may be achieved by anyone and everyone irrespective of "who" they "are." Finally blur equates with a framing that places heroic warriors as both present and absent in imaginary scenes of military action.

Soldiers' bodies that are defocused, disavowed, or erased are barely present and, in this equation, can hardly be injured or killed.

In closing it is worth returning to the first lines of *Who We Are*: “This is the story about the guts that bring glory. As some succeed and others do poorly.” These “guts” relate to the idiom of courage, nerve, and valor, and yet the use of the word holds many contradictory and therefore blurred interpretations. They are not entrails or intestines. They are not the state of being extremely disappointed or gutted. These “guts” have nothing to do with confession—saying something you should not say. No one is spilling their guts metaphorically—or actually—within these films. Nor are guts or gutting in any way associated with serrated knives or other instruments which would be used to open the abdomen of a fish or mammal before cooking. Guts here are not related to threat. These guts are not bloody or gruesome, and *Who We Are* is not a blood and guts movie. In this film blurred courageous subjects occupy an aspirational world in which many bodies are hidden. Blur diffuses the possibility of injury or death that would be central to fixed representations of the heroic military figure. The frozen inertia of sharp focus offers a drastic contrast with the turbulence of military action. Anybody and everybody with “guts” can have “glory,” irrespective of their race, class, social status, or gender—as long as “we” the viewer, potential recruits, or their loved ones don’t know who “they” are. After all, by definition, blur is unclear and undecidable.

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