**War art and the formation of community**

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*This article examines the relationship between war art and community formation. Building on Hutchison (2016), Callahan (2020), Edkins (2003) and others, we are concerned with how the subject position of the war artist, and their traumatic encounter with war, might disrupt understandings of community that underpin liberal war making. Focusing on Mark Neville’s* Battle Against Stigma*, we show that making visible the embedded constraint and complicity and the traumatic experiences of the war artist can constitute a form of imminent critique; both rendering intelligible and destabilising the martial gaze and liberal military meaning making. This offers contributions to IR by interrogating the processes through which war visuals both make and unmake communities in relation to war trauma.*

**Introduction**

Within International Relations (IR), critical security and military studies, scholars have firmly established the importance of visuals for understanding global politics. This work has: explored the role of the visual in shaping conflict and security environments and practices (Hansen 2011; Campbell 2003b; Shepherd 2008), constituting community (Hutchinson 2016; Callahan 2020), and challenging the terms on which scholars imagine and understand the political (Adesokan 2011; Bleiker 2009; Shapiro 2013). Drawing inspiration from this work, in this article we focus on a particular aesthetic assemblage linked both to war trauma and the visual production of community.

This assemblage pivots around an official British[[1]](#footnote-1) ‘war artist’, Mark Neville, who was imbedded with British forces in Helmand, Afghanistan between 2010-11. Neville’s images, mostly taken in Afghanistan, became part of a wider project*,* *Battle Against Stigma* (*BAS*) (see Neville n.d.), where he highlighted the impact of war trauma on those communities participating in, and affected by, the war in Afghanistan. Neville himself experienced adjustment disorder after returning from Afghanistan, and with this, war trauma became the central facet through which a semblance of community emerged. Building on the insights of Callahan (2020) and Hutchison (2016) in relation to the aesthetic formation of affective communities, and Edkins’ (2003) focus on trauma’s political potential, what intrigues us here is how the centring of trauma in the very *production* of images shapes what types of communities are constituted and imagined through Neville’s work (see Bourke 2020). We argue that centring trauma within the work, and aestheticizing Neville’s own embedded subject position, both makes and *un*makes forms of community central to liberal war making;[[2]](#footnote-2) ultimately deploying an interplay between visibility and invisibility. Neville allows the viewer to *see* his own sense of complicity in the work of liberal militarism and to *imagine* the possibilities of war trauma beyond the limitations of a medicalised response (where a medicalised, individualising drive to delineate the bounds of the traumatic can be understood as biopolitical governance and the search for closure, depoliticization and the rehabilitation of the medicalised or ‘resilient’ martial subject; the attempted restoration of their politically productive subjectivity [see Edkins 2003; Howell 2012; Terry 2009]). Taken together, these two features produce a mode of ambiguity and messiness - long of interest to visual scholars in IR - and allow for the possibility that the trauma (to both self and Other) rendered via embedded complicity can constitute a form of imminent critique (see Jabri 2007, 725), which renders intelligible *and* destabilises the martial gaze and liberal military meaning making. In this article we make contributions to debates in IR on the role of trauma via representational practices in producing and bounding ideas of community. As well as to thinking around the ethical tension surrounding the ‘performativity of picture taking’ (Callahan 2020, 51) in war as complicit in the construction and maintenance of a hegemonic, power-imbued and policed imaginary of conflict.

***War art: producing, contesting and curating affective communities***

In the context of war, the importance of visuals have received particular attention in relation to how these shape societal understand of violence, and as such what responses to violence or threats of insecurity are deemed legitimate (Campbell 2003; Cloud 2004; Der Derian 2001; Hansen 2011). Mirroring Ranciere’s (2004) idea of the ‘distribution of the sensible’, Callahan describes these mechanisms that shape the visual world as ‘regimes of visibility,’ as the social world is filtered in particular ways (Callahan 2020, 1-2; Deleuze 1988, 56 -60). The emphasis is often on how these regimes limit societal understanding; concealing acts of violence and obscuring particular subjectivities (Campbell 2003, 63; Butler 2005; Hutchison 2019, 295). The position of the ‘embedded reporter’ is seen as particularly complicit in producing limited visions of war (Butler 2005, 822). For example, Griffin (2004) argues that during the most recent war in Afghanistan, photojournalists frequently refrained from showing the destruction wrought on local Afghan communities, instead focusing on the technical prowess of the international coalition forces (see Manchanda 2020 for a detailed exploration of representational regimes around Afghanistan). This produced a sense of war as a technological endeavour, relatively free of human casualties (see also Campbell 2011).

As this suggests, visuals do not simply reflectbut also constitutethe social world (Campbell 2007, 361). Edwards (2012) argues that scholars should not only analyse the hermeneutics of the image but move towards thinking about what visuals *do* (see also Callahan 2020, 8-12). One way in which the ‘doing’ of visuals has been explored is by reflecting on how visuals constitute communities of sense (Callahan 2020), or affective communities (Hutchison 2016). Both Callahan and Hutchison’s works have transformed scholarly understanding of the formation and governance of communities; theoretically and empirically demonstrating the productive role that affect plays in uniting communities and the centrality of visuals in this process (see also Ahmed 2004). As spectators engage with visuals they respond on an affective level, which has the potential to bound a community together (Callahan 2020, 121-36; Hutchison 2016, 18-20).

The first contribution that this article offers, is to further examine this question of how images produce particular types of community. For the most part, when IR considers the political effect of images, analysis begins with the finished image or images (e.g. Hansen 2011; Shapiro 2009). However, building on Callahan (2016, 2020), what interests us here is how the production of images and the ‘performativity of picture-taking’ (Callahan 2020, 51), as a felt, embodied activity, is central to this process of community formation.[[3]](#footnote-3) The importance of this is implied in Butler (2005) and Campbell’s (2011) concerns with how embedded war-reporting produces a limited vision of war which, arguably, contributes towards maintaining it as a central aspect of statehood. What we are interested in exploring here is how this process of producing images from an embedded position – such as the war artist in this context - affects *which* communities are formed through the production of the visual, and why.

The second contribution is to think more closely about trauma’s role in this process of community formation. One of Hutchison’s central contributions is highlighting the constituting nature of trauma and representations of trauma. Whilst trauma is often considered as destructive - inflicting deep wounds on both the individual and collective - Hutchison (2016, 1-2; 2010, 66-8) demonstrates that it can also act as a unifying force within a community that can, under certain conditions, produce a transformative sense of what being a part of that community entails. Hutchison (2016, 211-67) argues, in this sense, that the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s (SATRC) mode of representation helped the nation to work through its past trauma as a post-apartheid South African community was formed. Whereas responses to trauma are often seen as silencing victims’ experiences, in this case Hutchinson argues that the SATRC offered a mode of representation which meaningfully engaged with trauma in a transformative way. This centres a Freudian understanding of trauma in Hutchison’s work, as trauma needs to be confronted, worked through and overcome to avoid it continuing to harm an individual or collective (Meiches 2019, 246).

However, there is now a deep-seated scepticism surrounding the SATRC’s supposed success. Indeed, many argue that the SATRC resulted in the same silencing that Hutchison is so critical of elsewhere; silences which allowed many of the structures of apartheid to reproduce themselves (Gready 2010; Zahir 2018). In this respect, drawing on Fanon, Agathangelou (2019, 249 - 62) has suggested that Hutchison is perhaps too quick to point to the solidarities formed *within* these affective communities, and neglects the exclusionary and hierarchical forms of relationships (specifically here focusing on race) that frequently emerge.[[4]](#footnote-4)

More generally, this notion of working through trauma to ‘draw a line’ is often seen as preventing more radical social transformation from emerging (Kerr and Redwood, *Forthcoming*). Whilst Edkin’s (2003) aligns with much of Hutchison’s ideas about the problematic ways in which trauma is often dealt with as communities respond to violence, for Edkins (2003, 14-5) the productive disruptive potential of trauma lies less in a community’s ability to ‘overcome’ trauma than in what Edkin’s terms as ‘encircling trauma’. This is when the linear time that underpins the idea of closure is replaced with an emphasis of trauma’s rupturing potential as the systems of power that led to trauma are called out and opposed. Trauma is not addressed only to be forgotten – as Edkins argues commonly underpins memorialisation and commemoration. Rather, trauma is placed ‘at the heart of [the] social and symbolic order’ in a way that reveals the contingency of a community, allowing for its order to be contested (*Ibid*., 16-9; see also Mirzoeff 2011).

This disruptive potential of trauma is pointed to elsewhere in IR, especially in research on embodiment. Sylvester (2013) has convincingly shown that focusing on war as embodied experience highlights war’s often concealed purpose: to destroy bodies. Applying this to the visual realm, Parashar (2013, 621) points to public reaction to images of tortured bodies in Guantanamo bay and Abu Ghraib as evidence of the potential of images to disrupt. But what happens when the visuals themselves are shaped by a traumatic encounter? How does the traumatic production of the visual affect which types of community are formed and on which terms? How is this compounded by the ‘embedded’ positionality of subjects such as the war artist? After briefly outlining our methodology and offering a few short comments on the visual landscape in which Neville’s work is situated, the rest of the article engages with these questions.

***Methodology***

In this article we are interested in the interaction between experiential and artistic output; in particular how Neville’s experience of war trauma echoes through, and helps to shape and enable, his aesthetic products and the narratives that circulated around them. To engage with this sensory artefact of war we incorporated multiple elements of Neville’s work and story into our research. As a visual project, we considered his images within the photobook *Battle against Stigma* and accompanying text, and several films created as part of the same project (*Bolan Market*,which is publicly exhibited at the Imperial War Museum,and other short segments of filming that Neville shared with us, including footage of his creative process). To understand how the imagining of community formed within *BAS* permeated beyond the project’s border, we examined critical reviews, media coverage of the work, online comments from members of the public in response to the work (such as in *The Guardian*), public displays of the work and emails to the artist from members of the public moved by his story. We also conducted a semi-structured interview with Neville. Following wider trends in visual research methods, we see ‘images as tools with which communicative work is done,’ (Rose 2014, 27) but drawing on Hutchison and Callahan in particular, we are interested in reading how image production, from a technical *and* experiential perspective, produces socio-political resonances which tell us something about community formation. Given the combination of images and text that define *BAS* as a project – both in the artbook, but also in discursive responses to the project – we draw on the idea of ‘intervisuality’ as a way of reading the intertextuality of images (see Callahan 2020, 94) and the concept of ‘image-text’ whereby image and text ‘are distinct but connected’ (Mitchell 1994, 231; see also Choi 2018).

The notion of atmosphere, a concept from cultural geography (Stephens 2016), has also informed our methodological approach to *BAS*. This approach draws from the work of Ahmed (see 2015, 2010) and others who engage with affect as embodied and productive, and from Ben Anderson’s (2009, 78) work on atmosphere which recognises it in part as ‘an aesthetic concept’, something through which ‘a represented object will be apprehended and will take on a certain meaning’. We pay attention to atmosphere in *BAS*, as a visual (and sonic) artefact, as ‘the felt space, shaped by the co-presence of subject and object,’ with an understanding that ‘aspects of material culture are…atmospheric generators,’ (Bille 2019, 245) (where material culture in war can refer to objects like weapons for instance). We recognise that discourse, when affect-laden, can also play a role in shaping atmosphere and solidifying atmospheric meaning (Griffero 2019, 41). In our readings we also draw on the idea that elements such a light – ‘level, glow, glare, shadow and quality of light’ (Bille 2019, 245) - are generative of atmospheric resonance, and that atmosphere, though phenomenologically diffuse, is nonetheless real, can be recognised and has socio-political consequences, including in relation to the production of nationalism (Stephens 2016), (in)security (Adey 2014) and violence (Gregory 2019).

It is important to note that as white, British and Irish researchers, our analysis is framed by a wider population and academic complicity (see Zehfuss 2012) in producing and consuming Afghanistan as a site of war and the possibilities for our aesthetic engagement are bounded by our privilege and positionality (Henry, Higate, and Sanghera 2009). Moreover and finally, as researchers we have ourselves participated in image-making linked to conflict-affected spaces in the course of our work, though not as artists, (in Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia) and this drives and shapes our wider interest in the intersections between military violence, visual production, productive complicity and war experience in the analysis which follows.

**Visual imaginaries of war**

Before providing our reading of BAS, we briefly situate Neville’s work both within the broader legacies of war art, and the role that visuals have played in the depiction and governance of Afghanistan.

We suggest that war artists and their experiences offer a means to reflect on questions of identity, community and meaning-making in relation to war. War artists are part of the grammar of militarism and make war representational, perpetuating certain visions of it as a facet of human experience (McCloskey 2005; Sanders 1975). British artists and photographers who depict war do so within the martial legacies of British colonial brutality and Britain’s near-constant participation in war in recent times (see Basham 2016). War art has unquestionably been a propaganda tool, often precisely because aesthetic forms offer an avenue for restrained and subtle messaging, but this has manifested in complex ways, at times centring on, or contested by, the experience and voice of the artist (e.g. Foss 1991; Sanders 1975; Malvern 2001, 2000). British war art, through initiatives such as the War Artist’s Advisory Committee (first created during World War II), is explicitly linked to the formation of Britishness, national community and particular understandings of war making. We read *BAS* as situated within this lineage of aesthetic practice that implies complicity in the British martial project and modes of imperial violence, and also think about Neville’s work in light of the work of other British war artists such as Linda Kitson, Simon Norfolk, Paul Nash and John Burke - though discussion of them falls largely outside the scope of this article (there is however a significant literature that does engage with these and other artists of war, see for example Bourke 2020; Danchev 2011; Lisle 2011).

Additionally, visual modes are particularly significant in the recent history of, and community production within and around, Afghanistan. The Taliban banned images of the human form, famously destroying the Bamiyan buddhas in 2001 (Alami 2011, 5), while the Soviet occupation preceding Taliban governance supposedly burned pre-revolutionary photographs, viewing them as ‘remnants of a bourgeois past’ (Schurer-Ries, n.d.). Lee (2018, 305) argues that two paintings depicting the First Anglo-Afghan War fuelled the British imaginary of Afghanistan as a barbaric, uncivilized land to facilitate the political production of British military action there as a glorious, noble sacrifice. Edwards (2006) suggests that the visual, especially photography, had a crucial role in producing violence, security and legitimacy in Afghanistan during the rule of King Amanullah delineating community-making boundaries between ideas of tradition and reform and drawing out gendered and racialised tropes. Equally the global circulation of regimes of gendered and racialised visuality helped to justify the 2001 US-led war in Afghanistan. As Kearns articulates ‘media images represented Afghan women in accordance with orientalist tropes, which visualized the need for western intervention’ (Kearns 2017, 492). The burka-clad Afghan woman came to signal a particular symbolic regime; a visual sign that indicated Taliban oppression (Hanifi 2018), the “average third world woman” as victim (Mohanty 1984), as well as, in the context of elections for instance, the possibilities of ‘progress’ understood within a liberal mode (see Billaud 2012). This visual iconography chimes with wider representational logics that Orientalise and Other Afghanistan via gendered tropes, which ultimately help to legitimise ideational echoes of the ‘*mission civilisatrice’* and, by extension, the liberal self (see Manchanda 2020, 143-80). Crucial to visual imaginaries that perpetuate and uphold liberal militarism and interventionary practices in Afghanistan (as with other contexts) are binary logics - self/Other, barbaric/civilized, war/peace, hero/enemy -often presented as neutral representations of reality rather than political interpretations (see Butler 2005; Welland 2017).

Images, in other words, have been key in perpetuating the ideas about Afghanistan which made liberal war-making possible and constituted community-making through important dyads such as of East and West (Callahan 2020; Hanifi 2018). Yet, the visual has also offered *multiple* and diversely political ways of viewing Afghanistan as a space and site of (in)security and community (see Danchev 2011; Lisle 2011). John Burke, an artist and photographer accompanying the British military to Afghanistan during the 1870s for the Second Anglo-Afghan War, has been noted for (visually) positioning ‘local people as equals’ even though, paradoxically, he did so from deep within an ‘imperial encounter’ (Khan and Norfolk cited in MacDonald 2011). While aesthetic modes like political cartoons (Bezhan 2013) and street art (Geranpayeh 2019) have fostered space to contest hegemonic-power and violence within Afghanistan.

As we discuss below, whilst Neville’s work, as he himself explicitly recognises, cannot be detached from an imperial and violent visual legacy of imagining Afghanistan as a space through which the liberal west can intervene, in rendering the logics of community visible, and offering a haunting imaginary of war trauma, a productive confrontation with some of these ideas takes place.

***Trauma communities?***

The centrality of trauma in *BAS* as an aesthetic artefact of conflict, carries multiple consequences. Neville’s experience of trauma, and his subsequent representation of this, allowed him to reach out and connect to a wider community bound together by traumatic encounter with war. Neville’s article in *The Independent* (2015) about *BAS* and his own experience of adjustment disorder, prompted hundreds of emailed responses (a large sample of which were seen by the authors) from members of the public who had experienced war trauma directly as soldiers/veterans, or indirectly through a family member’s or friend’s suffering. Neville sent free copies of *BAS* to those who reached out to him, many of whom specifically requested the book, linking it to their own experiences of trauma. The book project acts as a tribute to the trauma-affected community in which Neville found himself immersed, and to an extent constituted. In a correspondence publicly available on Neville’s website (n.d.), the father of a veteran writes in reference to his son: ‘I hope that if we give him the book (via my wife) that he might identify with it and gain some insight which might help him. What you are doing is important. Thank-you.’ This tone of gratitude, recognition and shared trauma is evidenced throughout the emails, highlighting the mode of community fostered by Neville’s work.

Situated within Neville’s experience of war trauma and circulated primarily to veterans and their families, as well as to military charities, prisons, homeless centres/charities, and government representatives, this emergent affective community results in a particular social ordering; one specifically generated through *participating* in the activities of liberal military violence. With its narratives of veteran PTSD in volume two of the book project and specific appeal to a diagnostic form of war trauma, a community is invoked that may make political claims (such as the demand for recognition and support) but is politically limited by the history of trauma as a medicalised regime of control and boundary making (between the resilient and the traumatised) (see Edkins 2003, 51-4). Pathologizing those traumatized by war without questioning its wider parameters is a ‘foregrounding of trauma’ that can ‘blind us to the landscape of violence against which it takes place’ (Hutchison 2016, 51).

Yet, looking to *BAS* as an aesthetic project, beyond this overtly connected community, the idea of shared trauma *spills* into Neville’s Helmand work in other ways that offers a different reading of community – and one which asks questions about the insecurities produced by liberal militarism and the medicalised vision of trauma set out above. Three key tropes of *BAS* that work in this way are: atmospheric insecurity; vulnerability and youth; and the dyadic interplay between visibility and invisibility.

The images are atmospherically and affectively marked by the sensory experiences that constitute the locus of the artist’s trauma; just as ‘security produces atmospheres and it even becomes atmospherically distributed and immersive’ (Adey 2014, 835), *insecurity* holds atmospheric significance. The *BAS* images at the moment of their production are intimately entangled with and amplify the traumatic experience of the artist and the atmospheric environment he worked within and perceived (see Anderson 2009). As Terracciano (2015) articulates of Neville’s work the ‘visual landscape on offer is clearly shaped by the physical and affective constraints undergone by the photographer’ most especially, by ‘the fear on patrol’. This air of visual constraint contributes to the sensation of dislocation and unease in the images whereby subjects emerge from the landscape like ‘phantoms’ (*The Guardian* 2014). An atmospheric sense of insecurity manifests via material signifiers within these images too. For instance, the shadow of the tank gun visible in the film *Bolan Market* appears ominous - ‘more as a symbol of violence than one of protection’ (Vandenbrouck 2014)(Figure 1); a small girl in *On Patrol in Gereshk* (Figure 2), is illuminated and stark, appearing particularly vulnerable and alienated against a harsh, colourless and unknowable background landscape; in another image the shadowy, twisted metal pictured on a patrol base appears to signal the imprint and ephemera of powerful violence.

[INSERT FIGURES 1. and 2.]

This sense of insecurity is compounded in *BAS* by the iconography of the child. In *Firing Range* (Figure 3), which forms the centrefold of the *BAS* book and is the photograph used on Neville’s website to represent the project, the two figures in military uniform are so young that they present almost as children, and youth is a theme that runs throughout *BAS*. Afghanistan appears as a child’s warzone, populated by very young Afghan civilians and British soldiers. Neville is explicit about this idea. Neville comments that ‘over 60% of the population in Afghanistan is under-25 and some of the British soldiers serving are undoubtedly still in their late teens’(*The Guardian* 2014). Youth or childhood are often associated through collective imaginaries with innocence, and their appearance in war-fighting sites signals injustice and outrage (see Berents 2018; Hutchison 2016); in the context of Afghanistan the vulnerable child might also indicate a liberal/illiberal dichotomy, the need for rescue and projection (Lee-Koo 2018, 50).

[INSERT FIGURE 3.]

Side-stepping this dichotomy, Neville highlights the *bridging* work of youth (*held* by his subjects but also *lost* in war), that connects the British military to the Afghan population: ‘young Afghanis have obviously taken on adult responsibilities very early in life, mirroring the teenage troops they are engaging with’ (*The Guardian* 2014). The dominance of youth in *BAS* signals vulnerability to war’s traumatic nature and connects the subjects of the images to the idea of a traumatic encounter. This signals moral rupture and the ‘wrongness’ of war, as highlighted by Neville’s expression of moral condemnation:

I just was shocked to my boots at how young people seemed, and not just young, but innocent, you know?... These are kids, they’re not meant to be shot at, I don’t care what you say, this is wrong, you know (Interview, May 2018).

It also, arguably, crafts a community of vulnerability that encompasses *both* the British soldiers and civilian children, which is then potentially formulated as a community of trauma anchored by Neville’s experiential identification with the vulnerability of youth in war and his own unpreparedness for war’s horrors. Thus, the subjects’ youth and vulnerability become *his*:

…. they look so young they could be standing on Brighton beach, and yet there’s guns being fired behind them, and everything about their pose is gentile and innocent and that for me summed up this enormous sense of dislocation between myself and reality when I came back. And in a sense, there was, a sense, those kids *are me*, their portraits are me being there like “what the hell is this all about?”, you know, I’m this innocent . . . I wasn’t innocent or young, you know, in terms of visiting a war zone I was. (Interview, May 2018)

As such, Afghan civilians and British soldiers are connected by a shocking youth, and this youth is connected to the artist’s own traumatic experience so that ‘Neville’s continuous focus becomes the gap between innocence and experience, childhood and the exile of adulthood as the result of war and trauma’ (Terracciano 2015). The youth of some soldiers in particular undermines any clear or consistent sense of warrior masculinity (see for example Welland 2017), asserting instead the vulnerability of the violent. Reacting online to a selection of Neville’s images and experiences in *The Guardian* (2014) a member of the public commented, ‘Child soldiers no doubt about it’ - an invocation that brings with it a troubling destabilisation of the liberal way of war (Lee-Koo 2018, 50 – 52). In this way, as a journalist writing about an exhibition of Neville’s work in the IWM argued, ‘photographs of desperately youthful British soldiers’, become ‘quietly subversive’ (Moss 2014).

The project also draws upon a dyadic interaction between visibility/invisibility in its exploration of the military subject. Neville, not a visual subject of the work, is nonetheless very much present representationally, through his editorial and curational choices and the centrality of his narrative and experience of trauma. War trauma is essentially invisible in the work – ‘[b]loodless, the mutilation and graphic violence of war go unrecorded’ (Terracciano 2015) - yet, when Neville frames the visuals within the *BAS* project and his personal traumatic experience of war, each image becomes undercut by, haunted by, the *possibility* of trauma. As Angus Boulton (2009, 879) writes about the photographs of Suzanne Opton: ‘[w]ith this textual information, a secondary reading of the different facial expressions implies another perspective, a reassessment of their thought’. In this way ‘the image-text combination produces something that exceeds the sum of its parts’ (Choi 2018, 35). When situated within *BAS*, a relatively innocuous image of a solider staring into the distance potentially becomes something that signals a world of internal turmoil.[[5]](#footnote-5) It becomes possible (though not necessarily automatic) to see *all* the images in the work as images of *potential* war trauma. In many respects – and especially given that the book’s key audience was those who experienced war themselves – the *invisibility* of trauma produces an impetus to look for it throughout. This provokes a pensive imaginary of what war does to people, more questioning and ontologically open-ended than an image with shows the viewer war’s impacts directly.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Building on Hutchinson then, we suggest that the tension between the representation and non-representation of trauma in a single encounter has political possibilities. This undercurrent of *invisible* trauma might offer up the entanglement of a secondary potential community together then – comprising of *all* these (mostly) young people in a warzone - thus doing work that is not social-ordering and community-making as such but gaining significance from being *potentially* so. Though the idea of trauma as spilling across the aesthetic landscape, a potentiality for populations and martial actors alike, risks the pathologizing of entire societies (see Howell 2012), it is also this diffuse atmospheric imprint of trauma in the images, the instability and excess of the traumatic subject(s), that resists medicalised governance driven to individualise, to resolve and to categorise PTSD and war trauma in different ways. In this imaginary the diagnostic drive of military mental health frameworks is denied, and the biopolitical control and disaggregating possibilities of PTSD (between resilient and susceptible, traumatised and not) is made messy (see Edkins 2003, 51- 4; Howell 2012; Terry 2009).

***The limits of community: visualising embeddedness***

There are further consequences to thinking about the relationship between the community-making and haunting capacity of trauma, and the dyadic interplay between visibility and invisibility in *BAS*. Butler (2005, 822) writes that the phenomenon of the ‘embedded reporter’ has grown especially significant in the context of recent wars and attempts by military and political powers to control the story and the visual possibilities of war. This embedded actor travels ‘only on certain trucks, looked only at certain scenes and relayed home only images and narratives of certain kinds of action’. Importantly, ‘embedded reporting implies that this mandated perspective *would not itself* *become the topic*’to be conveyed (emphasis added) (*Ibid.*, 822). In this sense, the embedded reporter - just as with the medicalisation of trauma - performs an important role in producing particular binary imaginaries of community through insider and outsider, self and (enemy/victim) Other visualisations and presents them as somehow neutral. Yet, what we *see* in *BAS* is precisely the constrained position of the embedded war artist; the bounded materiality of the military experience and military gaze becomes part of the subject and politics of the work. This also makes visible the borders of community and the complicity of the artistic positionality in the violent social orderings attached to liberal militarism as a dichotomising force and as a *framing* power. This is important since, as Butler (2005, 826) suggests, ‘if there is a critical role for visual culture during times of war, it is to thematize the forcible frame [which is]. . . aligned with the war effort’.

Neville makes visible this embeddedness in particular ways. This is done in part through the violence-oriented materiality of the martial frame – via filming a tank gun passing over the faces of watching civilians or the photographing of a helicopter gun trained on the Afghan landscape from the position of the gunner (Figure 1.), and especially through the regular usage of the subject line ‘On Patrol’ to contextualise images and highlight that these photographs are taken physically from *within* the military subject position, looking out (Figures 1 and 2.). This martial materiality explicitly disrupts the possibilities for community formation across the British soldier-Afghan civilian divide and Neville makes his complicity in this divide clear. In the *BAS* book, images of Afghans and soldiers - almost never pictured together - are often paired opposite each other, in a manner that highlights their separation. Neville affiliates himself directly with the military gaze, comparing his camera to a gun at one point in the *BAS* narrative, and noting that, in the case of the *Bolan Market*, filmed from a tank, he was capturing reactions to ‘the presence of *both* [his] camera and the tank’ (emphasis added) (BBC Newsnight 2014).

Another important aspect of making his constrained subject position both visible and a part of how audiences experience *BAS* as an aesthetic artefact is the returned gaze; a subject looking directly out of the frame, powerfully captured in multiple images and in *Bolan Market*[[7]](#footnote-7) (see Neville 2014). This echoes aspects of the ‘right to look’ which ‘claims autonomy, not individualism or voyeurism, but the claim to a political subjectivity’ (Mirzoeff 2011, 473). The aesthetics of the *BAS* film/images do disquieting work here - the directness of the gaze, the expression and demand of the face (see Danchev 2011), the starkness of the visual in some cases – all work to generate again an affective, atmospheric sensation of unease, a feeling of being an intrusion upon someone else’s life (Shapiro 2009, 83; Eileraas 2003).

This sensation is something that is also reflected in Neville’s experiential narrative. In our interview, discussing the film *Bolan Market*, Neville said:

[Y]ou can really see, in slow motion, the reaction of locals to a tank passing through a local market, … and you really get a very powerful feeling about the returned gaze, about what the returned gaze means and how, you know, *we’re the Other* - me and the people in the tank - we’re the Other, not these people in Helmand Afghanistan …somehow always on British TV during that time, I always felt like the locals were represented as somehow Other, and we were somehow flown in as their benefactors (Interview, May 2018).

In seeing the reaction to Neville and his camera in the tank, or on patrol, the audience does certainly see Afghanistan from within the embedded subject position that Butler (2005) describes – traveling in certain vehicles, walking in a straight line on patrol with a group of soldiers, seeing certain scenes as seen by or delineated by the military. But making visible and centring of this embedding also complicates it. The project makes the artists’ production of a militarized gaze from within an embedded viewpoint and the subsequent crafting of the borders between self/Other, occupier/local, deliberately impossible to separate from the work. In the text that accompanies the images, with reference to *On Patrol in Gereshk*, Neville says:

[a]lthough ostensibly they could be kids from anywhere, you can see in their eyes that there are other things going on, their contact with me and the camera is informed by the fact that I am surrounded by men with machine guns (2014, 87).

In making visible the embedded position though image, text, materiality and sensation, Neville also destabilises the power of the embedded frame to depict any sense of *neutral* vision*.* The viewer is asked to *see* this frame and to do so within the context of understanding that it is also this embedding which produced the trauma through which the narrative of the work is told and from which Neville himself cannot escape: ‘I have had to somehow remain embedded in the experience’ (BBC Newsnight 2014).

At the start of our interview Neville told us that his art would usually ‘end up with a kind of book project of some description which involved [him] really integrating with a certain community and making a book in response to the needs of those people’ (Interview, May 2018). Neville becomes a part of a community bound by shared war experience, war trauma and participation in liberal war-making. Interviewed on *Newsnight* (2014) he explained that his ‘desire to make work’ that engaged with the Afghan people and their voices was ‘frustrated on every level’. In making *Bolan Market* he was told it was impossible for him to get out of the tank and engage with people if he wanted to stay alive, and so he uses silence (and slow motion) in the film to highlight the atmospheric alienation of embeddedness: ‘I left the film mute in an attempt to communicate the feeling I had of being trapped in a silent nightmare’ (BBC Newsnight 2014). So, part of what happened with *BAS*, what delineated the ‘performativity of picture-taking’ in this case and what it demonstrates aesthetically, was that ‘integrating with a certain community’ - the military - also makes visible to artist and audience the vivid impossibility of really engaging with another community – Afghan civilians. Perhaps ironically, in this way – and pointing to the bounded and yet always separate communities of the Afghan population and the British military - *BAS* also pushes back against the military’s strategic *collapsing* of these two spaces in their ‘counter-insurgency’ approach, which is directed at the ‘hearts and minds’ of the population (see Khalili 2011), and marks an evolution of warfare, Mirzoeff (2011, 486-96) argues, as it becomes a never-ending activity, where the boundaries between war/ peace, military/ civilian dissolve.

As we point to above, Neville’s practice as an official war artist cannot ever be fully disentangled from the imperial legacy of war art, and representations of Afghanistan complicit with martial violence. However, again this constraint is made explicit in *BAS* via the use of staged backdrops against which subjects are visualised. These backdrops were ‘based upon images from previous conflicts’(BBC Newsnight), including those taken by John Burke during the Second Anglo-Afghan War and Paul Nash’s bleak painting of First World War no man’s land, titled *We are Making a New World* (1918) (salient, perhaps, to misguided statebuilding ventures in Afghanistan and the perpetual nature of war). These backdrops – along with other visual tropes, such as pairing an image of a military mural depicting the crusades with the ‘returned gaze’ of a ‘village elder’ - evokes questions about the Britain’s long imperial history of war (not least in Afghanistan), and how this is remembered and re-enacted. Called to action here is also a history whereby *representing* the spaces and subjects of imperial violence, has long been a way to fix a performative production of the Other, and in so doing, stabilise the selfhood of the generic, imperial, intervening, militarily sophisticated ‘white man’ (Butler 2010; Fanon 1986, 111; Said 1979). Agathangelou (2019, 260) draws attention to a ‘global raciality matrix’, which, in part via representation, ‘produces those subjects whose life the forces of the state and the law protect and those subjects whose bodies and territories turn into the sites used by the state for its “self-preservation”’. In *BAS* the emotional and material elements of this moment of production - and the corollary power-relations that are activated - are made part of the aesthetic frame, and thus part of how we are asked to understand, but more importantly think about the (traumatic?) *labour* involved in producing martial vision, the performativity of picture-taking and the limits of community formation.

**Conclusion**

Making visible the traumatised and embedded subject position materially and emotionally in *BAS* provokes a destabilisation of the Otherness so central to liberal war-making and a gesturing towards the inclusion of Afghan civilians as part of the traumatised community produced by war. Yet even as this potentiality is offered it is explicitly limited by a lack of voice given to civilian trauma and by the militarised gaze of the artist. The specific focus of the project is ultimately the trauma faced by British forces in Afghanistan, as emphasised in the second volume of *BAS* (Neville 2014), which focuses on narratives of trauma fromthe UK veteran community, and on (UK) institutional responses to that trauma. The circulation of *BAS* amongst veteran communities in the UK, through which Neville spoke to *a particular* affective community, also highlights modes of exclusion (of Afghan trauma) and the privileging of the vulnerability of particular (violent) bodies (and communities).

However, what we have also shown here is that Neville’s choices and aesthetic work exceeded the binary logics of the embedded frame in politically important ways. Writing on the contested ethics of embedded work Terracciano (2015) states:

enjoying the protection of troops operating in dangerous situations, photographers gain uncensored access to conflict zones while strongly identifying with soldiers. This intimate exposure comes at a cost: it produces a positive view of the war, one that promotes consensus and panders to the media.

The ethicality of visualising embeddedness in *BAS*, we argue, contests this ‘cost’, though it does not disengage from it. This is especially because Neville’s identification with soldiers is both inseparable from his trauma, and key to the only *stable* community formation in the work – the community formed between him and the soldiers who identify with his experience of war trauma. Callahan (2020) is particularly interested in exploring what images ‘do’ as a key point of enquiry in aesthetic politics, but in Neville’s work we suggest it is vital to pay attention to the productive alignment of doing and *un*doing. Individual trauma becomes a social ordering emotion through representation, and there is, we suggest above, *potential* for this to reach the Afghan population pictured in the project, to indicate that the atmosphere of trauma that threads through the project is profoundly, unjustly exposing Afghan children in particular to a world of violence and vulnerability they should not know; to ‘“give” others meaning and value in the very moment of apparent separation’ (Ahmed 2004, 30), but this is also impossible. In doing, there is undoing. The work’s invocation of war trauma is above all, bound to the liberal war-making subject, the going to war from a military perspective is inseparable from the source of trauma and the source of community. Neville’s work shows us the consequences of embeddedness in ways that we suggest go beyond any clear-cut debate on the framing of the war-image from within the military gaze and offers new ways of understanding embedded image taking as a site of trauma, politics and power.

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1. See Bourke (2020) for a discussion of the limitations of focusing on British war artists and for specific delineations around the role and aesthetic parameters of *official* war artists. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Liberal war making captures the practice of liberal democratic states using violent force, often via legitimising claims based on security or humanitarian discourses. This violence is often directed at so-called ‘illiberal’ communities – or those that threaten to the liberal world order - frequently located in the global south. This is also tightly bound up with the broader militarisation of liberal democracies, which maintains war-making as a central function of statehood (see Basham 2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. This also, then, resonates with the recent work by Sophie Harman (2018), which focuses on film as method in IR. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Here it’s important to note that Hutchison (2016, 211) *does* reflect on how these produce hierarchies of feelings in the production of an inside/ outside binary, which effects the ethical obligation to the Other. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See ‘Checkpoint Perkha’ 2001 (Neville 2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. In this way, following Callahan (2020, 9), *BAS* encourages a form of ‘ethical witnessing,’ which is central to the productive disruption made possible by aesthetic responses to trauma and community. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The fact that this piece is exhibited at the IWM opens up questions about ‘slow looking’ (Shapiro 2008) in the public domain and the wider significance of the IWM as a site (Winter 2012) though these fall outside the scope of our discussion. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)