

Encountering the 'Lively' in Military Theatre

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What can theatre offer our understanding of the nuances of military power in everyday life? How might it help us to more critically approach people's engagements with military power? And, what can the spatiality of theatre's affects bring to the study of military geographies? Leavy argues that "Performance serves as a method for exposing what is otherwise impossible to reveal" (2015: 175), while theatre itself can be "a rich site for thinking about epistemologies that blur the line between context and text, and text and embodied practice" (Pratt & Kirby 2003: 14). It can offer us ways of knowing that transcend frontiers between discourse and embodiment. Dramatic subjects of theatre have the capacity to *do* anything, to *be* anything. They are at once the product of text, context, and discourse, and embodied performances of narrative and testimony. They are both suspended in time and space, and always in flux, iterative, open to interpretation and reinterpretation.

In this chapter, the question I'd like to interrogate is; *what might it mean for military studies to understand everyday encounters with military power in these terms?* Rather than understanding theatre solely as a component of the literature of war, I argue that military theatre offers a methodological and conceptual tool to examine the embodied and affective textures of militarism. This work of course contributes to burgeoning scholarship in military studies, which contends that banal and prosaic spaces are crucial sites in which militarism and military power appear. When we examine these spaces, we are acknowledging that military power is as significant and tangible at an individual level as it is as the level of social groups and collective militarised practices. Following Basham & Bulmer (2017), who argue that we must view subjects as always relational in their engagements with military power, I argue that as a methodological and conceptual lens, theatre can help us to centre the ambiguity and 'openness' of any subject in their encounters with military power. Something as simple as the opening scene from a military community theatre project can open up so many key questions regarding how military power functions in everyday spaces. In this chapter, I do this by focusing specifically on exploring what theatre can offer to our understanding firstly of militarised affects as "simultaneously obedient and deviant" (Mc Morrow 2018: 1), and

secondly of militarised subjectivities as figures of relationality. This chapter will conclude with a reflection on what theatre might offer future research agendas in military geography.

Prologue

3rd December 2015.

*Opening night of *Boots at the Door*ⁱ, the collaborative military community theatre project between Bravo 22 Companyⁱⁱ and the Theatre Royal Plymouth.*

It was early December. The British public are most open to nostalgic representations of the armed forces around this time of year; the public are invited every year to ‘remember the fallen’ via crimson poppies pinned to our chests, while just a few weeks later the reconciliatory nature of Christmas is neatly packaged and sold to consumers via ‘vintage’ tropes of past ‘wars well fought’ (Tidy 2015)ⁱⁱⁱ. So many of our encounters with the British military, or with military power more broadly, are at this time of year staged against a backdrop of nostalgia, resolution and remembrance.

“We step into the theatre foyer from the cold, and are met immediately with the smell of mulled wine which fills the air. A military brass band plays Christmas songs, and groups of people stand nearby nursing drinks, chatting to one another and listening to the music. There is a Royal British Legion stand nearby, manned by an elderly gentleman in a uniform with a red poppy pinned to his blazer. As we head towards the performance room door, another man from the Royal British Legion offers us a programme.”

(Extract from field notes, *Boots at the Door* performance)

This is a kind of recognition we are familiar with, and it is easy to be taken in by the affectively powerful nostalgia that engulfs you at these kind of events. It smothers you, intoxicates you - your skins prick, the hairs on your arms stand on end. The brass bands playing Christmas songs, the smell of mulled wine, and the temporal proximity of the performances to Remembrance Sunday and Christmas Day itself all provide conditions of visibility which leave little room for doubt as to how the performance is intended to be viewed. We are encouraged, from the outset, to spectate upon the performance through the lens of reconciliation and nostalgia, reminded of the linearity between the ‘Tommys’ of World War

One, the elderly Royal British Legion veterans selling programmes outside, and the servicemen and women performing in the play. We enter the Lyric stage room of the theatre;

[Insert Figure 1]

Figure 1 The opening scene from *Boots at the Door*

“Inside the stage room, a few people are sat down already although we are early. There is a strong, thick smell of mulled wine in the air, and what appears to be some lingering fog or smoke from the special effects. On the stage, there is a soldier in camo uniform brandishing a gun, stood on top of a large box about six or so feet tall. There are rocks littered across the stage, and on the large backdrop screen there are scenes of flashing lightning. My mother turns to ask me “Is that a real person up there?”. I pause to look for a moment, and notice that he has started pacing around the top of the box, as if on patrol. “It must be” I said to her, “he’s moving”.”

(Extract from fieldnotes, *Boots at the Door* performance)

The theatricality of the moment insists on the soldier as subject; the scenes of thunder and lightning on the backdrop give a foreboding atmosphere, a dramatic element that reminds the audience of a scene from *The Tempest*, and indeed of the noise and visual effects of explosions on the battlefield. Our attention is drawn to the figure of the hero who patrols to protect us; this initial classic image of the soldier in the violent space of warfare is one easily recognisable to audiences. The scene is theatrical, dramatic, one in which the pacing gun-wielding soldier becomes an icon, a concentrated version of himself acting as an easily recognisable sovereign subject within the schemas of the knowable (Butler 2009).

Yet, at the same time, this particular encounter with the military hero immediately throws a critical and speculative light on him; such is the prerogative of theatre, to cast doubt on the recognisability and dramatic certainty of subjects. While we are prepared for a nostalgic and sympathetic recognition of the military subject, our first confrontation with him is jarring; is he alive? Is he dead? Is he even there at all? According to Adrian Kear’s work on Rancière, the “self-evidence of the visible” (2013: 26) is destabilized in this moment of fissure and uncertainty, thus calling into question the structures through which we come to recognise the hero by bringing to light the nature of the performance as “a political staging of the conditions of visibility” (ibid). Before we can reach a settled and stable position of recognition, the lights

in the theatre go down. Voices hush. “The spectator is enveloped by silence and darkness – the conventional theatrical preface to the emergence of visibility and speech” (Kear 2013: 24). We are now implicated in the reciprocal performance and reception of theatrical narrative and testimony, and yet we are from the outset uncertain.

Performance as Politics

Boots at the Door was the culmination of a collaborative military community theatre project which brought together members of Plymouth’s military community, including servicemen and women, veterans, and their spouses. The project’s aim was to create a play which explores “the military community and [tries] to provide a deeper insight into the military way of life” (Theatre Royal 2015). At the most obvious level, *Boots at the Door* sheds light on how the literature of war can escape from between the covers of books and creep into new genres and spaces, including the stage of a community theatre project (see also Woodward & Jenkins 2018). Such traces of military cultures that we see in everyday life are of course fundamentally tied to the very practices of war. Rachel Woodward tells us that armed conflict is itself only made possible through the presence of countless “activities, processes and practices” (2005: 727; see also Kelly 2012: 726) that extend far beyond the overtly “militarised” sites of the battlefield or the base. Much has been done in military geography and critical military studies to explore these myriad sites in which military power is both enacted and brought into recognition. Scholars have explored, for example, military memoirs (Woodward 2003; Woodward & Jenkins 2018), music (Cree forthcoming; Baker in press), toys and video games (Martin & Steuter 2010; Woodyer 2012; Yarwood 2015), sport (Kelly 2012; Cree & Caddick forthcoming) and even food products (Tidy 2015), as sites in which the blending of military power, day to day life and popular culture is made visible and can therefore be brought into recognition for critical scrutiny.

More recently, we have seen growing interest in what embodied performances such as theatre and dance can tell us about how militarised cultures function (see for example Purnell & Danilova 2018; Åhäll 2018). This scholarship has begun to shed light on how military power in everyday life is at once felt, circulated, and embodied; we see this most clearly in Linda Åhäll’s conceptualisation of militarism as a “choreographed dance”, in which encounters with and recognitions of military power in everyday life are understood as contingent chimings of

subjects, objects, and affects. There is no doubt that on the one hand, artistic productions such as theatre can provide us with excellent examples through which to explore these kinds of encounters. In the opening scene from *Boots at the Door*, we can see that a particular kind of relationship with the military is claimed before the curtain has even been raised. The very notion of performance refers “emphatically not just what happened in a clearly demarcated stage space: in using the term to denote also the whole range of experiences that surround the site and duration of theatre he was opening up ‘matrixed’ to the ‘non-matrixed’ interactions that surround it” (Loxley 2007: 149, on Schechner 1988: 72). Adrian Kear (2013) similarly argues that “the conditions of the appearance of the image provide the very ground for the recognition of the politics of the image, drawing attention to the theatrical politics of spectatorship as a relational exposure of – and to – political ontology” (p20). We know therefore that every encounter from entering the theatre to leaving it at the end of the night had been carefully choreographed to tell a particular kind of story. We are immersed in affectively powerful nostalgia, conditions of visibility that evoke sympathy for the military and their families, and annihilate any real possibility for critique. Indeed, the ease with which we are co-opted is striking. That particular responses to militarised cultures and ideals become normalised in everyday life is in large part due to their affective power; Åhäll argues that it is in the everyday that “the effects of political processes are normalised”, and that these processes of normalisation are inherently bound up in emotion (2018: 3). Leila Dawney (2018) makes a similar argument in relation to the figure of the wounded soldier, who she argues has become such an affectively powerful subject that it is difficult to approach him with any critique, either towards his role in the military or the military itself. Åhäll’s argument is more nuanced, however, in that she considers the nodes of military power in prosaic spaces to be much more diffuse and discrete.

But artistic productions such as *Boots at the Door* do not only have value for considering how military cultures bleed with and into everyday life, how our attachments to militarised subjects can be changed or enhanced, or indeed how military logics and ideals can become so affectively powerful that they are difficult to challenge. Rather, they can also help us to address broader questions in critical military studies regarding the critical capacity of subjects in their encounters with military power. In her work on ‘Everyday IR’, Linda Åhäll argues that the metaphor of a “choreographed dance” helps us not only to “understand how security

operates as a logic reproducing the militarisation of the everyday” but also “identify a representational gap, and aesthetic politics, potentially useful for resistance to such practices normalising war in the everyday” (2018: 1). This call for deeper engagement with the critical potential of an aesthetic politics is my starting point for the following section of this chapter.

Affects, Subjects

The powerful affects of militarism are so often described to us as means through which militarised cultures are normalised and made difficult to contest (Åhäll 2018; Dawney 2018). And yet, when we consider the example of *Boots at the Door*, we can see that there is an inherent critical capacity to these affects; the space of the theatre lends itself to atmospheric ambiguity and speculation, always from the outset forcing us to question what it is we are seeing. Part of the prerogative of theatre at its very core is, I would argue, to cast doubt on the dramatic certainty of subjects; that *anything is possible* in theatre is central to the functioning of our critical capacity in that space. We can hold our breath, suspend our disbelief, but *still question* what it is we are seeing. We can never reach a fixed and stable point of recognition. If we think again about that opening scene from *Boots at the Door*, we can see clearly cultivated conditions of visibility which produce a particular kind of relation between the subject and military power, presenting the hero soldier as a distilled figure easily identifiable within the schemes of the knowable. And yet, there is an inherent ambiguity written into this encounter; *is he alive? Is he dead? Is he even there at all?* We are never fully sure what it is we are looking at. The affective atmosphere of speculation in the theatre helps us to approach the broader question of to what extent so-called “militarised” affects can be disobedient. In her recent paper, Mc Morrow (2018: 1) argues that affects are usually theorised as forms of control, and challenges this by asking “how exactly can we juggle uncovering the ways in which affect and emotion are always simultaneously obedient and deviant?”. According to Mc Morrow, any site of political analysis must always be approached as liminal, contested, and always open. She tells us that;

“bodies have the simultaneous ability to produce affect and also to be affected; exemplified in Wetherell’s (2012) idea of ‘affective practice’ and shown in the power of affect to racialise bodies (Ngai 2002). Thus, affect both emerges from and works upon the corporeal, all in flows with other bodies. In this manner, affect will always supersede attempts at control as engineered

affects must always contend with bodies constantly feeding into and informing the affective landscape” (Mc Morrow 2018: 3).

According to this approach, there is an imperative for us to consider sites of militarised affects as spaces in which dissent or even critique *can* (and indeed *must*) emerge. Affects are always in flux and *lively*, holding the inherent capacity to throw doubt on themselves as modes of control.

That militarised affects are lively and impossible to govern has implications not only for encounters with military power in the sites that these affects emerge, but also for our wider engagement in day to day life. As I have argued earlier, artistic productions such as art, film and theatre are not static and apolitical; they teach us “to feel in certain ways, and these feelings have politics” (Hickey-Moody 2013: 83). While dramatic performance might take place in the contained space of the theatre, we can nevertheless emerge as changed at the end. Theatre has the power to disturb, thrill, empower us. It can generate feelings in us that cannot necessarily be articulated. It has the power to transform, to take us away to some far off place for two hours and return us feeling forever altered. But while these affects are produced in the situated space of the theatre, they do not remain fixed there. Rather, we take these speculations and questions with us when we leave. These kinds of situated affective encounters with military power are therefore at once contained but also spiral out into other spaces. Of course, we cannot say how or where these embodied transformations might land, in perhaps “unexpected places” (Foucault 1997). The futurity of these affects cannot necessarily be harnessed by the state; just as there can be no sovereign speech act (Butler 1997), we cannot know where these affects will land, how they might reinforce dominant geopolitical imaginations, or how they might resist.

I'd like to return once again to my starting point, that theatre has the power to cast doubt on the dramatic certainty of subjects. Our first encounter in *Boots at the Door* with the heroic soldier subject is from the outset overshadowed with speculation and uncertainty. But why should our language of ambiguity be limited to analysis of staged performances? After all, as Leavy tells us, “Performance serves as a method for exposing what is otherwise impossible to reveal” (2015: 175). As such, *Boots at the Door* and other artistic productions of this kind have great methodological and conceptual value for us as researchers, in that they can use artistic

licence to give texture to that which we might not otherwise be able to critically approach. Basham & Bulmer (2017), in their forward-thinking chapter on critical military studies as method, contend that rather than viewing people as either 'militarised', 'non-militarised' or even 'de-militarised' subjects, "tracing people as figures of relationality rather than as sitting on one side of a fence or another is far more productive" (p67). Following this argument, it is no longer useful to think simply about how particular subjects are rendered "militarised". Rather, our challenge must be to explore people's *engagements* with military power as always fluid, in flux, situated and relational. I would argue that the ambiguity of the dramatic subject has important parallels with so-called "militarised subjects", in that they are *always at once both*. Indeed, artistic productions such as *Boots at the Door* have real value for giving substance to and critically interrogating the claim that subjects must be viewed as figures of relationality.

For example, *Boots at the Door* is an interesting example of how myriad conditions of visibility, affects, subjects, texts and contexts can come together to produce a particular type of encounter with military power. The heroic dramatic subject can only be recognised against this backdrop. Indeed, as audience members *our* engagements with military power in this contained space can only be understood as relational and contingent. We can recognise the claiming of a very particular relation with the military and the state in any given contained moment; any encounter is a snapshot of much wider politics playing out in specific conditions. Our recognition of subjects in these kinds of performances is always contingent, subjective, speculative; just as theatre is *of a time and place*, so too are its subjects. In the example of the pacing soldier in the opening scene of *Boots at the Door*, it is in the relation between him and the audience that his ambiguity emerges; there can be no stage if there is no one to spectate. In a similar way, if we understand everyday engagements with military power as staged and contingent encounters, it is the relationship between the subject and the audience that is placed as centre, as it is between them that the space for critical capacity emerges. It is a constant negotiation.

As a starting point, this opens up an interesting question about what constitutes a *militarised subject*, or, better, a subject who takes on and in part enacts military power. In the opening scene from *Boots at the Door*, there is a clear relation drawn between the subject and the audience, and as Adrian Kear (2013) tells us, "The image's moment of appearance becomes

the point at which the activity of viewing is thrown into question, and the spectator is invited to occupy a different relation to the visible and its normative construction and distribution” (p25). The moment of encounter with the image is the point at which the viewer *as viewer* is also brought into recognition. Of course, in the example of theatre this relation to the visible is even more in flux, as theatre performances do not present us with stable *images* but rather with *real people* negotiating both fictional and their own fixed subjectivities. Nevertheless, in these encounters the audience *as viewers* are implicated in the very bringing into recognition of military power, and thus the subject/object distinction becomes blurred and troubled. So, at which point and through which bodies does military power emerge and act in this scene? If the audience create the militarised subject of theatre as much as the performer does, how can we identify the locus of military power? Militarised affects and subjects are in these spaces diffuse, and refuse claims to an actor of military power/recipient of militarised ideas binary. In any banal and prosaic encounter with military power, I would argue that there is the same kind of constant negotiation. We see this for example in Linda Åhäll’s (2018) language of choreography and dance; the very notion of ‘dance’ at once implicates subjects, objects, and affects in the affirmation of particular kinds of politics. It is by its very nature a participatory act which recruits countless actors in an ebbing, flowing, fluid, yet powerful way.

As I have argued earlier, encounters with military power are transformative, taken on in new ways as they spiral out from contained spaces. Indeed, Hickey-Moody (2013) tells us that artistic productions can similarly teach us “to feel in certain ways” (p83) and indeed “change people’s attachments to subjects” (p80). Furthermore, I would argue that if subjects and audiences are equally implicated, and are in the same way taught to feel in certain ways, then these encounters are always inevitably reproduced as iterative performances that play out in different ways. And yet, we are reminded again of Judith Butler’s (1997) claim that there can be no sovereign speech act. As such, this conceptualisation not only implicates all actors as agents of military recognition and affirmation, but also necessarily ascribes them with agency and critical capacity; we can never know how these iterations will play out, or indeed where they will land.

A Research Agenda in Military Geography?

As Basham & Bulmer (2017) tell us, that “criticality can be found even in those most militarised of spaces encourages us think differently about what it means to practice critique in this context. This recognition has profound implications for feminist praxis because it compels us to ask the question: What remains hidden if we fail to get closer to that which we critique?” (p68). A key question that this chapter has sought to interrogate is, how *can* we get closer to that which we critique? In particular, what can an opening scene from a community theatre project offer our understanding of the nuances and textures of military power in everyday life? This chapter has used just one scene from *Boots at the Door* as a starting point, to open up a conversation about how we might centre the liveliness, openness and contingent nature of subjects in any engagement with military power. As a group, the cast and certain members of the production team characterised themselves as being ‘military’, part of Plymouth’s military community, either through their direct service in the armed forces or through marital or family ties. At a very basic level, these subjects can be clearly identified as *militarised*. And yet, as this chapter has argued, if we take theatre to be a valid and valuable site of research, it offers us a space in which we can begin to approach the ambiguity, and indeed critical capacity, of these subjects. Indeed, theatre as both a methodological and conceptual tool provides a means through which we can examine processes of militarisation and encounters with military power as diffuse, fluid, and reciprocal.

The challenge we face as researchers is to develop a research agenda for military geography that at once centres the subject as holding critical agency, and acknowledges the role of affect and emotion in normalising the entanglements of military power in everyday life. Existing work in critical military studies has done much to show how military power always inevitably, and from the outset, permeates day to day life. Yet, where we fall dramatically short in military geography is in our exploration of *how* ‘militarised subjects’ *engage* with military power. Alex Hyde argues that dominant analyses of militarism “often remain detached from their effects: from the lived experiences, social relations and embodied practices that make militarisation mobile, processual and transformative” (2016: 864; see also Baker *et al.*, 2016). Similarly, Basham & Bulmer (2017: 68) point to the importance of acknowledging in our research that “people engaged with military power have their own critical capacities which they use to reflect on their experiences, something which is too easily lost when we, as feminists, ‘apply’ our categories to their life worlds”. The critical agency of

so-called “militarised” subjects is something which must therefore be centred in future research agendas in military geography. In this chapter, I have tried to show that even the category of “militarised” subject is unstable, as subjects, objects, and affects are all implicated in the staging of any encounter with military power. *Boots at the Door* provides an example of how this might be revealed through performance; any dramatic production is inevitably a staged encounter between the subject and the audience.

So the question remains then, *how* can we centre the critical capacities of subjects while still attributing significance to the affective power of military ideals? I would argue first that by drawing on more diverse, creative, and artistic examples, we can give texture to our understanding of the nuances of military power in everyday life, while resisting the language of control that so often goes along with discussions of affect (Mc Morrow 2018) and militarism (Basham & Bulmer 2017). Artistic productions such as theatre have the capacity to explore the testimony of lived experiences *and* negotiate the affective and emotional/embodied aspects to military power, and as such provide an interesting methodological tool to approach the questions we ask ourselves in military studies. More than that though, in theatre we are able to speculate on subjectivities that are always transient, speculative, uncertain; this is arguably where the real power of theatre lies. As a conceptual lens, theatre can help us to conceptualise encounters with military power as relational performances between subject and audience that are temporally and spatially contained or suspended, contingent on myriad conditions and politics of visibility that so often go unmediated. The conditions of visibility present in and around the space of the theatre “demonstrate how embodied capacities are increased or decreased by sounds, lights, smells, the atmospheres of places and people” (Hickey-Moody 2013: 80). The analysis techniques we apply to dramatic productions can undeniably also help us to shed light on the myriad conditions of visibility through which military power can be brought into recognition; characterisation, stagecraft, and tropes mobilised in the performance itself, can all provide us with a more textured understanding of military power in action. Indeed, a methodological approach which interrogates these genres “allows us to understand the ways popular art such as films, games, pop music, wikis, popular dance and high art (visual art, theatre, dance), change people’s attachments to subjects” (*ibid*: 80). Basham & Bulmer (2017: 68) ask; “What remains hidden if we fail to get closer to that which we critique?”

I would argue that these kinds of artistic performances and productions can offer much in helping us to *get closer to that which we critique*.

In thinking about engagements with military power beyond the language of control, I want to propose a research agenda which centres the *liveliness* of so-called militarised subjects. To enliven the subjects of our analysis is, I would argue, to inscribe them with agency. If we imagine military theatre beyond the grammars of the “literature of war”, we can see that performance has the capacity not simply to *tell* a particular story, but also to help define *which stories can be told at all*. If one reads performances such as *Boots at the Door* through the work of Butler, Derrida, and Austin (Austin 1975; Butler 1990; Butler 1997; Butler 1999; Derrida 1988), we can see that they work in part to constitute the boundaries of what is *sayable and hearable*. Art, film and theatre are clearly not static and apolitical; rather, they teach us “to feel in certain ways, and these feelings have politics” (Hickey-Moody 2013: 83). In this way, theatre can itself be a useful object of analysis to explore, and indeed push, the *boundaries* of performative militarised cultures. On Rancière, Adrian Kear tells us;

“the aesthetic encounter’s capacity to ‘reconfigure the fabric of sensory experience’ through altering the ‘frames, scales and speeds’ of perception, destabilizing the ‘self-evidence of the visible’ and making ‘the invisible visible’, exemplifies its operation as a practice of ‘dissensus’... Experienced as ‘a singular disruption’, the aesthetic encounter takes place through the appearance of an image that ‘interrupts the smooth working’ of representation and sets into play the recognition of the fact of presentation as ‘a singular mechanism of subjectification’. As a practice of dissensus, art – like politics- consists in revealing the distance, and the difference, between a social situation and its representation; the presentational appearance of the image functions not simply as an ontological fragment of the visible but as a political staging of the conditions of visibility making manifest ‘the separation of the sensible from itself’” (Kear 2013: 26).

As such, the power of the aesthetic encounter lies in its ability to alter the frames of perception and destabilize knowledge that we take as given. As a means of understanding the nuances of military power, theatre can therefore offer military geographers a great deal.

Notes

ⁱ The plotline of *Boots at the Door* focuses on a group of members from Plymouth's military community coming together to make a play. Through different characters, the story explores several lenses through which we can examine the military experience, using Homer's *The Odyssey* as a poetic backdrop against which we can approach the idea of the military hero returning home, as a metaphor for recovery. Rather than focusing simply on the stories of warfare as told by serving men and women or veterans, it also tells such stories through parents, spouses, partners, and even a more ambiguous character (Tash) whose only claim to a military identity lies in the fact that she has "shagged so many of them". It is a story which in some ways drives towards recovery, reconciliation, and redemption, but which in others points to a possibility that there can in fact be no recovery.

ⁱⁱ The name given to the Royal British Legion's Recovery through Theatre programme.

ⁱⁱⁱ With yearly frequency we are reminded of the so-called 'Christmas truce' of 1914 between French, German, and British soldiers on the Western Front in World War One. For example, in 2014 the UK supermarket chain Sainsbury's was advertised using a dramatization of the truce to remind us that *Christmas is for sharing*.

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Figure 1: Opening scene from *Boots at the Door*.