

# Researching Pop Culture and Militarism - **Selene Rivas**

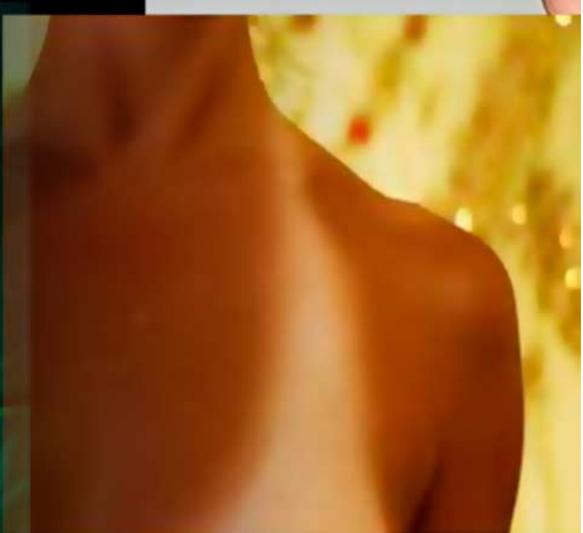




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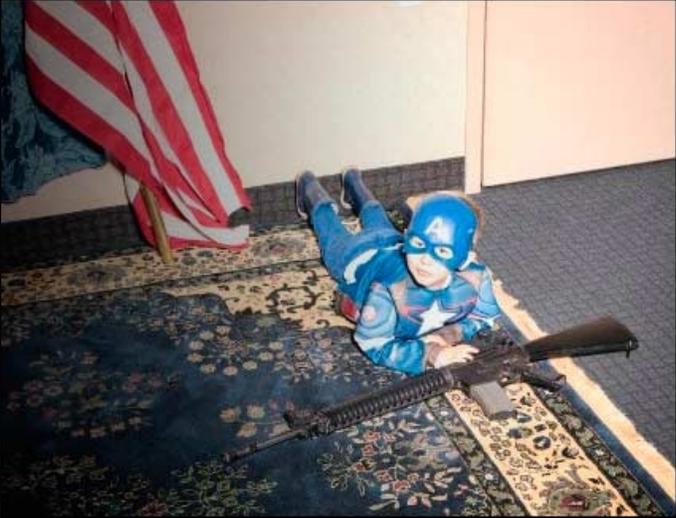
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Researching Pop Culture and Militarism -  
Selene Rivas -  
Day 1: What is normal?



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*"Human beings are consumers of vast quantities of raw materials and fuels. A tremendous amount of waste materials results from this use--individual, societal, industrial, and accidental."*<sup>1</sup>

Is this sentence a fact, or an opinion? When starting a sentence with "human beings are..." or "human nature is...", who determines whether what is being said is fact or fiction? History? One's own experiences or philosophy? Is there such a thing as normal human behavior anyway?

In the following article,

we'll discuss how **"normal" beliefs, actions, and practices are not, despite being often assumed to be so, universally defined. They are products of a specific context, and are often used to judge others outside of it.**

As a simple example, take eating with a knife and fork: for descendants of most European traditions and cultures, this might seem so normal that after childhood, most don't have to think about how to hold these utensils, coordinate them to scoop food up, or cut a particularly tenacious slab of meat. Eating with a knife and fork is normal. A person who comes from a wholly different cultural tradition, however, might disagree. The inhabitants of many Asian countries are used to handling chopsticks as their primary eating implements. While a person born and raised in the Western side of the globe might struggle to even hold them correctly, people who grew up using them don't need to think about it. Eating with chopsticks is normal.

And yet, each might look at the other and deem their habits "exotic", "unusual", and even "abnormal". **Normal is what a group of people within the same context are used to thinking as "the norm"**. "The norm" in different place, cultures, and peoples is incredibly extensive, and encompasses a very wide range of things.

Let's take colors as another basic example; it is easy to assume that colors are universal, both the ones we could call "basic" (yellow, green, blue, purple, pink, red, orange, brown, black, gray, white), and the concept of "color" in itself as a stand-alone adjective. However, anthropologists and others who study different cultures have found that neither of these conceptions are universal, nor are they constant through time. For instance: "Before around the year 1500, a word for orange did not exist in the English language."<sup>2</sup> When it was introduced, "orange" would have been exotic and strange, unlike the present, where it is so normal in our language that we include it in flashcards and educational materials aimed at toddlers.

The same goes for musical scales. Just as with eating utensils, it is not a surprise that different types of music have come from different cultural traditions and social groups, such as Jazz, the Waltz, Rock and Roll, or Salsa. Beyond these easily discernible differences, though, traditions around the globe have also come up with different musical scales used to create music. For European traditions, the scale goes:

Do, Re, Mi Fa, Sol, La, Ti/Si, Do, or C, D, E, F, G, A, B, [C]

(Audio: <https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/f/f0/ChromaticScaleUpDown.ogg> )

Musical instruments such as pianos are arranged with these notes in mind.

In the Chinese tradition, though, we find this scale:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-qPgTG51YjQ>

It sounds as though the Chinese scale was the same as the European one, with some notes missing. This is because both are being compared to the other. The Chinese used it to compose and arrange music, and luthiers created instruments arranged to play these notes. Nothing is missing, nor is it lesser and greater than the European tradition.

The exercise of studying the aspects of different groups of people's lives that they might not even think about or consider noteworthy is nothing new, and in fact has a tradition spanning hundreds if not thousands of years. Studying what people are used to, indeed, is an aspect of studying culture, what they consider normal. **The study, classification, and exposition of culture, in its different forms, can be thought of as the major goal in the discipline of anthropology.**

This short sample of customs is meant to excite the imagination. What other things are different elsewhere? There is really an astonishing variety in what "normality" is; **"normal" is socially-defined, what you're used to doing or seeing, and it doesn't come from nature.** Eating with a knife and fork isn't more normal than chopsticks for everybody, nor is it better or worse. It's just different.

Baby bottles, jeans, the banking system, coat hangers, shoes... all of these things we take for granted were not always present in human life, and even now, cultures have yet different ways to solve similar problems or even conceive the world that we can't even imagine. Studies of different cultures has

shown us that "**all understandings of reality are cultural constructions**"<sup>3</sup>, anthropology "offers alternative visions of how things could be", by first making us reflect on "the way things are"<sup>4</sup>.

Once this fact is wholly accepted, it becomes much harder to peg down the elusive (and possibly non-existent) "human nature", or "what human beings always are/or do". Sometimes what is taken to be as such comes from our experiences, our environment, or what we're told. Other times, defining what is "normal" (and, in turn, "human nature") can come from very particular interests who want to elicit specific beliefs or behaviors for their own benefit.

Is "human beings are consumers of vast quantities of raw materials and fuels" an assertion made to justify or support a society built on accelerated consumption, and in turn, wars whose aim is to gain control of more resources? Or is the society shaped this way precisely because that is what human nature is? If we were to find a group of people that historically or at present don't follow the same patterns of excessive consumption implied by the above quote, then it would ring as self-serving for those who consume "vast quantities of raw materials and fuels". **By studying cultures, we can question the assertions which have shaped our reality.**

This series of articles hopes to elicit questions regarding militarism, pop culture's role in portraying these tendencies as normal, and how these portrayals can be used to effectively militarize a society, particularly for the youth who are still trying to find where they fit inside the world. It doesn't aim to be comprehensive (it would take more than a lifetime to research on this issue if that were the case), but certainly comprehensible, thorough on the subtopics it hopes to approach, concise, and approachable for someone with no previous knowledge on the subject.

Next article, we will share some theories on how "normal" is created throughout history, and finally introduce our main topic: how the military's presence in almost all aspects of the United States' culture has become normal.

*To learn more about different musical scales and colors around the globe:*

- *Check out this interesting video on color differences in different cultures:*  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gMqZR3pqMjg>
- *Listen to some more examples of different musical scales:* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hHtDerXLNHw>

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Researching Pop Culture and Militarism -  
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Day 2: How do things become normal?



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Last article, we tried to answer the question of “what is normal?” and after a few examples, eventually settled on “normal is what a group of people are used to.” In this article, we’ll look at an example of the ‘normalization’ process, that is, getting used to something to the point where alternatives are forgotten. We’ll conclude by introducing the main topic of this series: how the presence of the United States military in a surprising amount of aspects of American culture has become so normal that it is no longer noticed or

questioned.

“Normal” changes, not just from society to society, but also through time. In a single society, what was considered normal before is not necessarily thought of as normal now, and we can't even begin to imagine what things are normal today that won't be normal in the future. **How does that happen? And does something becoming "normal" with time necessarily mean that it is "better"?**

The process by which a behavior or belief becomes normal is called "normalization". It is a very popular concept in social sciences, made so by Michel Foucault. In his book *Discipline and Punish*, he studies how this concept changes over time and the forces that motivated this shift. He entwines normalization with disciplinary power.

*"...the primary function of modern disciplinary systems: to correct deviant behavior through discipline through imposing precise norms ("normalization") is quite different from the older system of judicial punishment, which merely judges each action as allowed by the law or not allowed by the law or not allowed by the law and does not say that those judged are 'normal' or 'abnormal'."*<sup>1</sup>

In other words, **disciplinary systems** (like trials, executions, incarcerations) **defined "normal" as what was inside the "norms" or laws, and "abnormal" as what was outside of it.** This also implies that, **as laws are made by people** (individuals or groups), **it is these same people that decided what is normal or abnormal.** These laws don't have to merely be those contemplated in the legal system; accepting social norms and living by them is living "*normally*" while challenging them is "abnormal".

We'll take skin tanning in Western culture as an example to illustrate the normalization process. Right now, it is normal to see men and women laying around in beaches, directly under the sun's rays. Coming back to school or work after the summer vacation, telling our schoolmates or coworkers "you're so tan!" is almost always meant as positive remark. There was a time when this was not the case.

In the eighteenth century, upper class women sought lighter skin color by using cosmetics and wearing clothing that covered them up from the sun. "At that time tanned skin connoted humble class origins, as most unskilled workers and farmers would be tanned from protracted sun exposure during the workday."<sup>2</sup> Lighter skin, along with their clothing and hairstyles, denoted class and wealth. It meant that they didn't have to work and could spend all day indoors.

During the 1920s, however, this started to change: "As the popularity of leisurely outdoor pursuits such as lawn tennis, swimming, golf and sunbathing brought the bodies of the wealthy outside to play, the pale body began to signify confinement to indoor workplaces and lack of discretionary income."<sup>3</sup> Where before, being pale meant you had enough money not to work and spend all day indoors, now what showed off your wealth was spending time out of doors. Sunbathing, swimming, and other activities wouldn't be possible if you had to be working inside at a factory. The tan became a sign that you were wealthy enough to have a lot of leisure time.

This trend was made official by "...Coco Chanel's famous pronouncement, 'The 1929 girl must be tanned. A golden tan is the index of chic!'"<sup>4</sup>. Bikinis and the Southern California lifestyle began to become popular, and "...it was not long before Hollywood stars and fashion bodies began to show off their bronzed bodies and rave about their tans..<sup>5</sup>. The tanning bed became a product around this time.

Do societies move forward? Is all change, progress? Is what is normal now necessarily better than what was better before? The mere idea of "society moving forward" (or *evolving*) is a very problematic subject. The social sciences spent their first hundred years with this idea that societies in the present were necessarily better than societies in the past, and that the Western society was the best and most advanced society, representing the present and future (modern) of civilization, while other cultures and societies were less advanced, therefore primitive or stuck in the past. This notion was heavily debated and the notion of Social Evolutionism eventually dethroned. Now social theory mostly asserts that societies are relative to each other, neither one better or worse, just a result of their own history and conditions.

Likewise, the past is not necessarily better or worse than the present; while some ideas and practices that are harmful to people are forgotten and replaced, new ones can crop up and take their place. We can see this with society’s changing attitude: as tans, artificial and natural, became popular, medical authorities like the American Medical Association, American Association of Dermatology, American Cancer Society, Skin Cancer Foundation, National Cancer Institute, the Federal Trade Commission’s, Food and Drug Administration, Centers of Disease Control and Prevention claim that tanning can cause cancer, particularly when done through tanning beds.<sup>6</sup> Despite being a relatively recent development (unlike other known carcinogens like tobacco), the practice of skin tanning wasn’t hampered by these findings: “In the contemporary United States, tanned white skin may connote that its possessor is a healthy, relatively affluent, sociable, physically fit, and attractive person...”<sup>7</sup>

In the normalization of skin tanning, we can see two aspects of the process:

1. **One of aspect of society changing can affect the whole.** In this case, most of the labor force moved from toiling in the fields to doing so inside factories, changing how tanned, white skin was regarded.
2. **Celebrities, popular, and powerful people have powerful influence in mirroring, setting, and deciding new norms, often to their own benefit.** Coco Chanel only got tanned accidentally when on board a Mediterranean cruise, yet, through her fame as a fashion icon, she managed to turn the accident into a trend that has outlived her.

The normalization process has happened an infinitude of times throughout our history. Times changed, though not by chance, or on their own; the events that shape history are many, and incredibly varied. **It would be a mistake to think of the tide of history as part of nature, uncontrollable and inevitable.** That would mean ignoring the very real effects of people in history and in their society, as well as the equally real presence of individuals and groups who manipulate and normalize certain conducts for their own benefit.

Keeping that in mind, we can start talking about militarism. Previously, we referred to it as “how the presence of the military in many aspects of our culture has become normal”. This presence does not merely mean the uniformed soldiers, but also includes values, ideals, aesthetics, and just the general sense that having a strong military power is not just necessary, but the best policy for a nation.

Militarization is the effort to build up a military force, whether through arms or people.

It is NNOMY’s belief (substantiated by copious evidence) that militarism in both the United States and Western culture at large and its emphasis on martial values is not coincidental; it is in the interests of some that this is so. Even beyond those interests, militarism is pervasively embedded in Western pop culture, its presence largely unexamined by the casual consumer.

*In the next installment, we will give talk more in depth about the definition of militarism, as well as talk about Japanese militarism, and how it was shaped by a wide variety of forces before World War II.*

*To read more on the history of tanning:*

<http://www.skincancer.org/prevention/tanning/tale-of-tanning>

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/feb/19/history-of-tanning>

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Researching Pop Culture and Militarism -  
Selene Rivas -  
Day 3: What is Militarism?  
What is Militarization?



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*In the previous articles, we talked about how normal is defined differently in both space and time; just as Japan and Argentina might have two different ideas of what constitutes as “normal”, so does 18th century and 21st century United States. We also talked about normalization, or how things become more (or less) socially accepted over time. Finally, we introduced the concept of “militarism”. In this article, we’ll attempt to define it as concisely as possible, as well as give examples of militarism in Japan.*

The following statement is found in page 92 of the 1996 edition of *Naval Science 1*, a textbook used for High School JROTC courses.

*“Our history has shown us that strength has a meaning of its own. Being right is not enough when there are countries that understand only strength. It takes might to preserve the right where nations are concerned. The power of our Navy reflects the power of the way of life it must defend, and that includes all nations that join with us in common need. If we are not a strong people with adequate naval and military forces, other countries with more strength will become the world leaders. This would end our way of life.”*

Keep this statement in mind as we discuss the concepts of militarism and militarization.

Attempting to find a wholly agreed upon single definition of militarism and how it is different from militarization is complicated. Often they’re used interchangeably, or delineated differently by different authors. This stems from the fact that to define either, a frame of reference is necessary:

*“...a universal definition of militarism is likely to be meaningless. No brief sentence could cover all the different consequences of military thought and action which possibly could be called militarism while effectively excluding those things which should not be given that name. There are important differences in time and place. Militarism in industrialized countries is different from that in traditional societies. Soviet militarism is significantly different from French militarism, etc. In addition, there are of course ideological discussions about the definitions and understanding of militarism at a particular time and at a particular place. “1*

Why go through all the trouble of looking to define it, yet again, if, universally, it might prove to be too broad to too narrow? If a concept or idea will be used again and again, definitions save time, simplifying explanations. With that in mind, throughout this series we will use **militarism** to mean a **philosophy, way of thinking, or attitude** taken by governments and peoples where “**...military capability is the most meaningful and effective instrument for achieving any and all national goals, and that soldiers, weapons and wars are the most necessary and noble tools for national protection and advancement**”<sup>2</sup> **Militarization**, on the other hand, is a process, accruing the tools for making war--weapons built, soldiers trained, people roused.

Is the statement which opens this article an example of militarism, or of militarization? There are two aspects to keep in mind: the ideas which it seeks to peddle (“*It takes might to preserve the right where nations are concerned*”), which place military strength as a goal of utmost importance and are therefore militaristic; and where this information is placed: a high school textbook in a course sponsored by the military. This points towards the process of militarization, the normalization of these ideas through the authority of a textbook, of a classroom setting. It primes the students, if not to enlist, at least to see the increase of military power and its violence as justifiable.

To further understand **militarism as both the result of a historical and social process, and the driving force that can determine the future**, we will try to examine it in the socio-historical context of pre-World War II Japan. As explained previously, there are boundless amounts of data, analysis, and interpretations which span long tomes and series of articles. For brevity’s sake, this exploration will be simplified to a degree. Our biggest concern is to look at an indisputably large aspect of Japanese society at that time (the belief in military might, above all) and the philosophic, ideological, historical, social and cultural which not only supported it, but that also advanced its growth and justified it.

*Fukoku kyôhei*, or “**Rich Country, Strong Military**”, a Japanese national policy from the Meiji Restoration era points to a very obvious centrality of military interests as part of the government’s goals for the nation. The Meiji Restoration was what came about after Japan’s door were forced open by Commodore Perry and his fleet in 1854, when rebels overthrew the feudal system and ended the shogunate, the warrior class government that ran parallel to the emperor’s rule. This restoration was purportedly that of the emperor, returning him to the sole ruling position inside the government. However, what really happened was that the power migrated from the shogunate to the rebels, making

them the new ruling class, and the emperor remained a mostly a symbolic figure.

This restoration meant a whole restructuring of Japan’s political, economical, and social systems. The government focused all of its efforts to the Westernization of Japan, that is, the adoption of Western values and practices, hoping to catch up to, and eventually surpass western imperial powers at the time (Britain, Germany, America, France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Russia, and Italy)<sup>4</sup>. The Meiji ruling class (the oligarchy) “...desired to join the Western powers in demands for rights and privileges in other Asian countries. However, the oligarchs realized that the country needed to modernize and strengthen its military before it attempted to assert its demands to the Western powers.”<sup>3</sup> By the end of World War I, they had achieved this objective, finding a place as one of the “Big Five” in 1919 Versailles, where the nations that had emerged victorious attempted “...to dictate peace terms and form the League of Nations.”<sup>4</sup>

Japan achieved this by intense industrialization. As can be seen in the following prints from this time, western fashion and concepts of industry were in vogue at the time.





The prints themselves, done with techniques heavily associated with Japanese tradition and yet depicting foreign ideas intermingling with Japanese society, are reminders of the role of the arts in furthering an agenda. Important intellectuals, too, such as Fukuzawa Yukichi (who was offered a seat in the government on several occasions) traveled to these occidental nations and wrote about the customs and ways of life he observed. The philosophy which gained a lot of traction at that time was that of Social Darwinism, which was not out of place for the nineteenth century world and can be summed up by this 1880's Japanese popular song:

*In the West there is England,  
In the North, Russia.  
My countrymen, be careful!  
Outwardly they make treaties,  
But you cannot tell  
What is at the bottom of their hearts.  
There is a Law of Nations, it is true,  
But when the moment comes, remember,  
**The Strong eat up the Weak.** 5*

Social Darwinism, in fact, is the idea of “survival of the fittest” applied to a social, as opposed to natural, context. It is the idea that those who prevail have done so out of their own strength, and are thus the best or most advanced. It no surprise that this idea could lead towards militarization; if survival, strength, and the thought that competitiveness is the natural state of things are the imperatives in a society, then it makes sense that this society would develop in ways that it fulfilled these imperatives.

In the case of Japan, many of its leaders “...came to believe that their country had a ‘manifest destiny’ to free other Asian countries from western imperialist powers and to lead these countries to collective strength and prosperity.”<sup>6</sup> Ultranationalist groups believed in the purity of their race, and out of some supposed sense of brotherhood, wanted to lead other nations in their vicinity to what they considered was a more advanced state of civilization. (More on this can be read on Ruth Benedict’s germinal and very influential work about World War II Japan: *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*). They involved themselves and started armed struggles in both Korea and China, and even emerged victorious against Russia in 1904-5, which made them confident in their own strength.

As was demonstrated by the popular song quoted above, just as they were gaining confidence in their military prowess, they feared being invaded by foreign powers as other Asian nations had been. This was not helped by other nations’ attitudes and affronts towards Japan. Prejudice towards Japanese at an

international policy level, segregation towards Chinese and Japanese-Americans in the United States, and eventually the prohibition of Japanese immigration only fueled anti-foreigner sentiment in Japan.

Lastly, imperialism and gain or defense sought through military conflict were also motivated by economic reasons. Expanding their territory, the Japanese were also expanding their markets and supply chains. Eventually, the United States deciding to put up an oil embargo in the forties led to the Japanese to attack Pearl Harbor.

Seen from the perspective of historical events, the militarization of Japan can be understood as a result of many forces and pressures both from within and without its society. When analyzing Japanese society both at that time and previous to it, one could also find the fertile ground in the glorification of martial values, the *Bushi* code, the concept of *Yamato Damashii*, etc. Again, an excellent starting point for understanding Japanese society, how Americans conceive it, and how these conceptions shaped the end of the war, is Ruth Benedict's book *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*.

Using our previously defined concepts, militarism can be seen in the “rich country, strong military” slogan, as well as the many benefits and justifications that the Japanese oligarchy saw in engaging in armed conflicts. Militarization is the process in which they built up the military strength that eventually propelled them to be included as a world superpower, and be seen by others as a very real threat.

This series will contemplate these concepts not precisely from a historical perspective, but through the analysis of culture, particularly, popular culture. Popular culture is a field in which the intentions of the creators and how they are received and interpreted by vast amounts of people intermingle. As will be explained in the next article, by studying popular culture we're not merely studying a reflection of the social context it comes from, but a *creation* of a social reality, of symbols and a *common sense* which people both inhabit and modify. Although an object of popular culture, such as a movie, TV series, comic strip, etc. seems static, its relationship with society is constantly changing. By studying both the object and people's interpretations of it we can get a clearer picture of the underlying forces that are at work in a collective context.

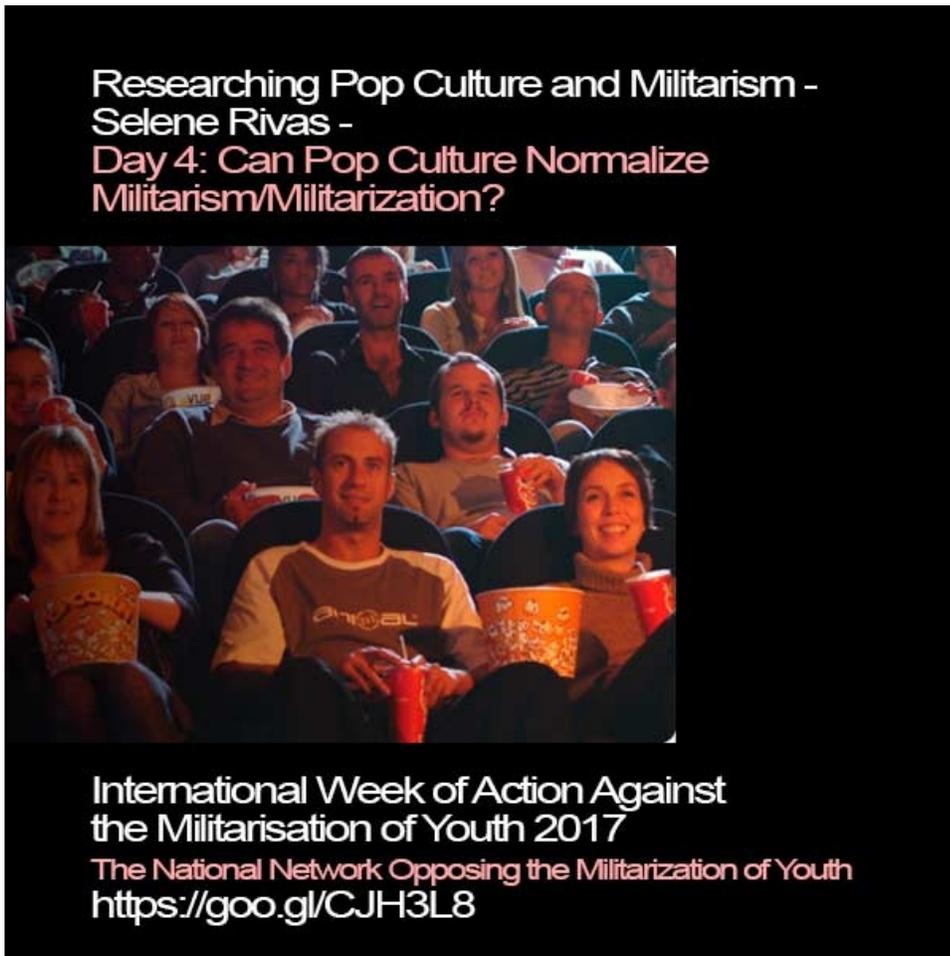
The quote we saw in the beginning of the article is, likewise, the result of historical and social processes, but also justifies and drives the actions of those who believe in its veracity. Militarism is both a result and a cause. In pop culture, we see those who drive the narrative towards this conclusion on purpose, as well as how and what society accepts, appropriates, interprets and eventually furthers these ideas. War doesn't begin when they're making the guns or training the soldiers, but instead it starts much earlier, when a society generally agrees that armed, legal violence is the only solution to certain conflicts.

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Can seemingly innocuous activities such as playing video games, watching movies, or binging on TV shows affect your ways to see the world or how you behave? Could it affect social norms? Is one able to “turn one’s brain off”, and not be affected beyond the most superficial level, by what one is consuming? Much has been written about violence in the media and how it might affect people’s behavior, and indeed, positive correlations with violence can be found<sup>1</sup>. But beyond these oft-discussed subject, the question is: what role

does mass media and pop culture play in normalization? And, more related to this series of articles, what is the relationship between pop culture, militarism/militarization, and normalization? This article will attempt to approximate us to an answer..

First, let’s start by defining the term “popular culture”. In his article titled “On Captain America and ‘Doing’ Popular Culture in the Social Sciences”, Jason Dittimer explains the difficulties he ran into when attempting to write a book exploring the relationship between Captain America and world politics:

"It seems so petty. How could Captain America be really responsible for anything, good or bad, in global politics? In truth, I agree. The problem lies in our conceptualisation of popular culture as a thing: an object that can be grasped, considered and analysed... Rather, **popular culture is a doing. It is what we do, in common, with others.** This liveliness is what is lost when popular culture is reduced to a thing. Captain America is not just the comics with his name on them, rather, he is **the multiplicity of forms that proliferate around that signifier as people read, write, draw, talk about, think about, and generally live with** Captain America in their world..."<sup>2</sup>

(emphasis added here) For the rest of the series, we will consider popular culture as not only **the films, video games, and other objects created for widespread consumption and enjoyment**, but as **the re-significations and appropriation people have given these objects**, as well as **the spaces of discussion and creation which they facilitate**. These objects become symbols in the same way words are, abstractions that people, through their continued use of them, ultimately give one or many meanings and connotations to.

So, is there any causal link between pop culture and normalization? Recent MacArthur Grant winner, psychologist Betsy Levy Paluck states that “mass media and popular culture “ can change and set social norms at times, as can government policies.<sup>3</sup> She conducted a study on 2009, trying to measure the effects a radio soap opera would have in Rwandan society. It was in 1994 Rwanda where a massacre against the Tutsi ethnic group was carried out by the ruling Hutu majority. As Paluck describes in her study, the media had a major, unquestionable role in the massacre:

"The case for the radio's culpability in Rwanda's 1994 genocide is well documented... RTLM was launched in 1993 as a talk radio station and progressively worked in anti-Tutsi jokes and commentary until it was considered an arm of the extremist Hutu government. In a landmark case, the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda convicted the radio station's founders for crimes of genocide, arguing that radio 'set the state' for genocide."<sup>4</sup>

The soap opera was specifically written by “La Benevolencija, which 10 years after the genocide produced a yearlong ‘education entertainment’ radio soap opera designed to promote reconciliation in Rwanda”<sup>5</sup> The conclusions she reached after her study were that, rather than change their beliefs, Rwandans who listened to the show changed their perception of social norms, which in turn affected their behavior. As she explains:

....in some instances, reconciliation listeners endorsed norms in opposition to their stated beliefs—for example, they rejected proscriptions for intergroup marriage even though they believed that marriage between groups often causes tension. These results also support the pessimistic view that beliefs are difficult to change (Bem, 1970; W. G. McGuire, 1986; Wood, 2000) and that media do not effectively tell people what to think but instead communicate social norms, or what other people think (Kinder, 1998; Mutz, 1998)<sup>6</sup>

She addresses the concerns at how valid these conclusions would be for Western societies in her conclusion, saying that “there is nothing uniquely Rwandan about the pattern of social norm perception and norm consistent behavior they reveal.”<sup>7</sup> and that Western media, despite having a wide variety of outlets and forms, “do not necessarily represent a diversity of informational and normative influence”<sup>8</sup>.

Although there have been woefully few academic field studies done on the media’s influence on the public, this does not mean that many haven’t been laboring under that assumption already; in an

interview published in the NPR website, Paluck is asked whether her work could be used for “evil purposes”. She replies: “They're already doing that. There's negative media, there's propaganda. There are people advocating for really negative causes.”<sup>9</sup>

And that brings us to the intersection of popular culture and militarism/militarization: on one hand, it can reflect militaristic thought in a society, and on the other, it can be a tool for its militarization. Often, these two can go hand in hand.

Although the term “propaganda” largely has negative connotations, it’s still in the toolbox of many governments. The United States government and the deep pockets of its armed forces play a large role in the film industry past and present; in turn, the film industry has played a large role in what armed conflict and the parts which make it up look like and signifies to a wide audience. For instance, General MacArthur commends John Wayne “...before the American Legion Convention by affirming ‘You represent the American serviceman better than the American serviceman himself’”<sup>10</sup> for his role in the film, *Sands of Iwo Jima*.

Even unintentionally, the way a message or idea is presented can undercut or directly contradict the creator’s intentions. While many filmmakers claim their movies are anti-war, they end up glorifying or admiring it in their visual language. A video that explores this claim can be found here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3ChJ1pdWlQ>

The relationship between Hollywood and the military, as well as the question as to what could be considered an anti-war movie, will be discussed in the following article.

Aside from this, additional and unintended messages can crop up when considering the implications of any one scene. And, most importantly, **all messages result from a series of assumptions about the world, conscious or unconscious, on the part of the creator(s)**. It is in that sense that we say **all creations and actions are political, whether that was the creator or perpetrator’s original purpose**. In this regard, video games are particularly fascinating, because these assumptions manifest not only in the explicit narrative and its implicit meaning, and not only, as in film, in the visual language weaved into it, **but also in the mechanics which make it possible for players to interact with the world**. The interactions made available by the developers of these games are, on one hand, built upon the limitations of gaming systems, and on the other, reflections of their own embedded and unconscious assumptions about the world. These ideas will be explored with more depth on an upcoming article, but the following are some recommended videos which explore the last point made regarding game mechanics:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xBlEscMLjy0>

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7\\_tdzHiyiE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7_tdzHiyiE)

To conclude, pop culture is an effective normalization device: not only does it serve to inform people

about social norms (what other people’s attitudes towards certain topics is), but, as a space where, through their interactions, people reinforce these conceptions and construct upon and around them. We can look at militarism in popular culture as a reflection of a society, and militarization as the utilization of it as a tool to advance certain individuals and group’s interests. We’ll be looking at these when we analyze Hollywood movies, video games, in the future installments of this series.

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Researching Pop Culture and Militarism -  
Selene Rivas -  
Day 5: What exactly is an 'anti-war' film?



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<https://goo.gl/CJH3L8>

“A true war story is never moral. It does not instruct, nor encourage virtue, nor suggest models of proper human behavior, nor restrain men from doing the things men have always done. If a story seems moral, do not believe it. If at the end of a war story you feel uplifted, or if you feel that some small bit of rectitude has been salvaged from the larger waste, then you have been made the victim of a very old and terrible lie. There is no rectitude whatsoever. There is no virtue. As a first rule of thumb, therefore, you can tell a

true war story by its absolute and uncompromising allegiance to obscenity and evil... You can tell a true war story if it embarrasses you. If you don't care for obscenity, you don't care for the truth; if you don't care for the truth, watch how you vote. Send guys to war, they come home talking dirty.” - Tim O'Brien (*The Thing They Carried*)

In a 2005 issue of the academic journal "*Film & History: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Film and Television Studies*", two men had a public spat, recorded in three published pieces. One man was Lawrence Suid, a film historian who's written several important works on the historical relationship of the Pentagon and Hollywood, one of the most famous titled *Guts and Glory*. The other, David L. Robb, freelance journalist, and three-time Pulitzer prize nominee. The argument started from Lawrence Suid's review of David L. Robb's book: *Operation Hollywood: How the Pentagon Shapes and Censors the Movies*. He dismissed the claims found in the book that the Pentagon exercises a form of censorship in films by leveraging their vast amount of resources (both monetary and in equipment) to change and modify movie scripts. For Suid, it isn't censorship but rather common sense: "...the military has no

obligation to support any film. The refusal to do so simply does not constitute censorship."1. ([Claims similar to Robb's can be found in the following by Tom Secker and Matthew Alford.](#))

Whether what the Pentagon is doing is nefarious enough to be called censorship or not, it is true that they wield enormous amount of influence through their resources. Although Suid is correct in saying that a filmmaker can still produce something without these resources, it'd be hard to match a film aided by the military in terms of reach and production value. It's not that the military should give the same access to the resources to everyone, but instead that their participation skews the narrative too much in their favor. As producer Duncan Berg, of the film *Battleship*, said:

"You couldn't make *Battleship* without the help of the military. It would have cost tens of millions if you could even make it work at all...To take any one of these ships out to sea the fuel costs alone would be astronomical. But they're going out already — you pay for costs that are over and above what they're doing."2

So in what ways exactly can the Pentagon help Hollywood moviemakers?

- Lend expensive army equipment, such as jets, ships, tanks, and other items in their arsenal for free, or at incredibly cheap rates. For instance, in the first film of the latest Superman movie series, *Man of Steel*, the U.S Army lent the production team "one Chinook helicopter, two Black Hawk helicopters, two Abrams tanks, two Bradley Fighting Vehicles, two Stryker Vehicles, and six Humvees" for free.3 Other branches of the armed forces, such as the Air Force, also helped by lending them "a C-130 transporter for \$25,239.70, including personnel" and "helicopters and operators for \$253,628.41".4 All in all, these expenses totalled less than 1\$ million dollar of the 200\$ million dollar budget.5
- Waving location fees, or offering them at cheap rates. This was the case of Peter Berg's *Lone Survivor*, filmed at an Airforce base in New Mexico, as well as *Man of Steel*, shot in Edwards Air Force Base.6
- Providing cheap or even free personnel for films. Soo Youn from Fortune Magazine writes: "With the use of active duty military personnel who are currently training, filmmakers are also able to skirt the Screen Actors Guild (SAG) daily minimum rates (\$153 for eight hours plus overtime) for unionized actors. Then they save again by not having to pay residuals."7

In return, what's the price they pay? To quote Duncan Henderson again: "It's a world of finite resources: manpower, time-wise, jet-wise, they're going to give it to whoever they think can help their cause and basically put the military in a good light."8 Some scripts require revisions and changes done by people in the Pentagon. As one of them, Captain Russell Coons, explains regarding the film *Captain Phillip* (that required no script change), it was "an opportunity to highlight our capabilities and showcase Navy's anti-piracy and maritime security operations to a worldwide audience."8

Taking into consideration the previous article in which we discussed how media and popular culture

can be used to normalize certain ideas and behaviors, and now we understand how the power to do so is wielded consciously. Understanding the effects and ways in which this influence manifests is an incredibly extensive subject of study; there are many different ways in which this problem could be approached, different questions that can start us in our approximations. For instance, what is or isn't a war film? Can a film not about the war be militarized? What behaviors or thoughts do these films propagate?

An example of an approach that could be taken is, for instance, the following one, suggested by Jason Dittimer, (who was quoted on a previous installment of this series):

*“...popular culture does not determine who we think we are, who we think the enemy is, or how we will react in a crisis. Rather, popular culture provides many different sets of resources that may be activated under appropriate circumstances. It is a set of capabilities, or lines of flight, that are powerfully world-shaping, but not powerful in the traditional sense ”<sup>9</sup>*

In this point of view, popular culture can define, rather than concrete thoughts and actions, what is possible or not, this way shaping the world. So for instance, it can define violence as a solution for certain situations or a necessary evil that certain individuals or societies have to undertake.

Having understood the strong influence the military exerts on many widely-consumed Hollywood films, the question is then: can what is essentially propaganda for those whose sole purpose is war and war-making depict the unflattering, contradictory, and gruesome realities, not just of war, but of the institution that sustains it (i.e, the military)? In other words, can we expect a film supported by the armed forces to make any sort of anti-war statement? Ultimately, **how can a film inform us about war, and what does an anti-war stance look like on film?** This article will instead try to understand war films as one of the primary ways in which a general audience learns about the experience of war, how this informs their reality, and what are ways in which pro and anti-war stances can be explored in film.

While we might get a lot of images and stories about war in television news or newspapers, in film we find an immersive, sensory facsimile of reality. It is no longer about the factual, who attacked whom or where, with what weapons or what purpose; instead, we get a sense of what war could seemingly look, sound, or feel like. The media pretends to be objective; the camera doesn't pretend to represent an individual point of view, but is instead dispassionately attempting to capture “reality”. Film, however, is a subjective experience. The camera shakes, moves, falls. It can represent the confusing experience of the battlefield, and this, paired with other narrative and visual devices, can create an immersive experience. The effectiveness of these devices has made it so the lines between films and reality are increasingly blurred:

*“The frequently heard refrain from the 11 September 2001 attacks, that ‘it was like watching a movie,’ illustrates how the human body, and its cognitive sense-making abilities, are shaped by ongoing engagements with particular ways of seeing/knowing embedded in popular cultural forms and with the generic forms of narration that accompany those forms...”<sup>10</sup>*

Thanks to a vast historical catalogue of films (in this case war and disaster films), and the general ways these films tend to depict certain events, sometimes we understand reality through that lense, and in turn hold certain expectations about what certain things should or shouldn't look like, or what response would be appropriate. In other words, movies doesn't merely inform us of a factual reality, but instead it presents to us a way of interpreting the world and what to expect from it. This is consciously used by media and other important political figures, “... such as ex-Hollywood actor Ronald Reagan, [who] appeared to understand that Cold War geopolitics could be assembled and reproduced in filmic terms.”<sup>11</sup> For instance:



*When President Reagan described the Soviet Union as the ‘evil empire’ in 1983, commentators were swift to detect thinly disguised parallels with the Star Wars franchise....Reagan’s dress, speech and demeanor were attuned and attentive to popular cultural references. He dressed and acted the part of statesman, cowboy, commander in chief and folksy everyday man. He quoted lines from Clint Eastwood movies and other films, including Rambo: First Blood (1982).<sup>12</sup>*

This in turn can be a powerful tool for defining war for an entire generation. General MacArthur, for instance, praised John Wayne's interpretation of Sergeant Stryker in *Sands of Iwo Jima* “...before the American Legion Convention by affirming ‘You represent the American serviceman better than the American serviceman himself.’”<sup>13</sup> And indeed, when attempting to make another war movie, this time about the Vietnam War, called *Green Berets*, “...Wayne promised President Johnson that The Green Berets would ‘tell the story of our fighting men in Vietnam with reason, emotion, characterization and action. We want to do it in a manner that will inspire a patriotic attitude on the part of our fellow Americans.’”<sup>14</sup> However, something went awry in how the American public perceived the film, which was critically panned.<sup>15</sup>

Indeed, something had changed within the public; no longer was the unabashed militarism present in pre-Vietnam, World War II cinema, celebrated. Works of fiction written by Vietnam war veterans, as well as the general toll the war had taken on the American population made gung-ho, patriotic propaganda such as *Sands of Iwo Jima* and *Green Berets*, less palatable. Where Hollywood could easily turn the Axis and Allies, the atrocities committed by the first and the heroism displayed by the second, into sensational stories with clear enemies and moral lessons, the Vietnam war posed a challenge. World War II films make grand statements about moralities, values, and the justification of all the individual and collective turmoil that war might imply, while “...Vietnam films and fiction attack military and political authority: there is no legitimate higher authority, and nobody can determine absolute right and wrong, make moral judgments, or find meaning in the war.”<sup>16</sup>

Let’s take compare two similar characters, one from *Sands of Iwo Jima*, and another from *Full Metal Jacket*. In essence, both films are showing us the same thing: tough commanding officers who profess to whip the group of marines into shape.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SXyouaMGOzo>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wlcuPNv8Od8>

Although they both end in tragedy for these characters, each film portrays the final result of their “tough love”; for the men in *Sands of Iwo Jima*, Stryker’s death is regrettable, but part of a larger mission. “Alright, saddle up, let’s get back in the war!” one exclaims, after the flag has been planted, an objective has been won. His influence is ultimately positive, making boys into men, and the film ends on a high note, with a hymn being sung as the heroes dissolve into the mist, presumably to continue their teacher’s legacy.



In *Full Metal Jacket*, Sergeant Hartman dies at the hands of his own creation, the tormented Private Pyle, who then goes on to kill himself. It is not painted heroically, necessary, borne out of duty. It is, however, a direct result of Hartman’s teachings, and he dies proud of the killer he created. Ultimately, “rather than being moulded into an efficient and noble group of all-American boys by a harsh but decent sergeant, the recruits have their

humanity stripped away in horrifying fashion.”<sup>17</sup>

This movie, based on a book called *Short Timers* by Gustav Hasford (who also helped with the screenplay), is directly informed by World World II era myths, such as *Sands of Iwo Jima*. The first line spoken by the protagonist, Private Joker, directly references John Wayne (“Is that you John wayne? Is this me?”), and in the book, soldiers laugh at a screening of *The Green Berets*, saying “This is the

funniest film we have seen in a long time.”<sup>18</sup>

Where did this disconnect come from? This intense image of grief and horror at the war, not being redeemed, justified, glorified, or sensationalized beyond the sheer spectacle of carnage? And, most importantly, can we find any such example today of war not being depicted as noble nor even necessary, but instead a terrible enterprise where people are ordered to kill other people? Any questioning of authority, military force and the necessity to use it?

It was during the Reagan era that war movies returned to their propagandistic purposes. As the article quoted several times above states when talking about the Rambo franchise, Hollywood repurposed the Vietnam war so that “...American soldiers did not lose but were betrayed.”<sup>19</sup> A new war was being waged, if not in any battlefield, through popular culture. Soviets and communists were the new enemy. It might be a stretch to consider Rocky IV being a war film, but Sylvester Stalone, just like in Rambo, represented America, ready to make a stand against the “Russian menace”.

While an argument could be made that film mainly serves as an escape from an already grim reality, they also inform large groups of people about what war looks, feel, sounds like, and means. By neglecting to represent certain, well-documented realities about veteran PTSD, suicide rates, sexual violence, they are deceitful. Whenever we are presented with the image of a soldier or the military in film, we should ask ourselves, who is benefiting from this depiction? What is being left out?

For some highly recommended video essays on war films, militarism, and propaganda, please look at these links:

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3ChJ1pdWlQ>
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sWxCBZ2xFGw>
- [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=teTOkGXa\\_W8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=teTOkGXa_W8)
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xLUvR8zKbh0>
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZxzYeDnZKFY>

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Researching Pop Culture and Militarism -  
Selene Rivas -  
Day 6: Can video games be anti-violence?



International Week of Action Against  
the Militarisation of Youth 2017  
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<https://goo.gl/CJH3L8>

*For this installment in the series about Pop Culture and Militarism, we'll discuss video games. Instead of looking at them from the narrow focus of the militarism present in games, or the militarization that they can cause, we'll explore violence in video games. Similar to the end of the last article, where we explored the question of what an "anti-war" film would look like, this article will attempt to figure out what an "anti-violence" video game would be like. This is an attempt to give options to people who are against*

*the normalization of violence and war, if they or their children wish to play video games. The approach taken in this article will be to explore game mechanics, and how they might be used as persuasive devices to propagate certain ideas and world views. After this, the subject of violence and nonviolence in video games will be broached, specifically how the mechanics can contradict narratives which intend to be anti-violence.*

When talking about the militarization of a society, we are also talking about the normalization of institutional violence. There are many dimensions in video games that can be analyzed; their potential effects on players, explored; their embedded messages, whether intentional or not, deconstructed. Many scholars and researchers have attempted to settle the debate of whether or not playing video games has a positive correlation to aggressive behavior, hostility, or violence. Given that the debate is still a point of contention for many, and that there is already a copious amount of arguments done by experienced investigators on both sides, this will not be discussed on the article. Likewise, much has been written using representational approaches to the narrative of games, that is, how certain characters and events

in-game represent larger concepts in the real world. This is related to the approach we used in the previous article: how Hollywood representations of war have affected and been affected by the sociopolitical events and interests which surrounded them. Instead, it might be more interesting to explore the relationship between affect (a concept that will be defined presently) and representation inside of game mechanics.

The prevalence of games in homes around the world makes them, along with television, movies, and the internet important arenas where certain ideas are bought, sold, or transmuted. Unlike television or movies, however, there is an added dimension: the length of a game often requires a player to invest a significant amount of hours. Additionally, the ability to interact with the game world through game-play makes them much more immersive experiences, and give players more agency when shaping the narrative. Communities are often parts of the game instead of peripheral to it as well. As stated above, there are copious amounts of articles, books, papers written that address the way representation is handled in games. These representations are "...how they are rooted in, and in turn project, social, sexual, and political norms."<sup>1</sup> Just like other media, games are vehicles for the normalization of certain thoughts and ideas. For instance, much has already been said about the role of women in video game narratives, or how their traits (physical and in personality) are not as varied as those of male heroes. Enemies, too, have often been criticized, both their racial and geographical depictions.

The problem many see with this representational approach is that there is still a lot left to study empirically regarding how these representations are parsed by players. As discussed in a previous article, popular culture is not just the object in itself, but how people resignify these objects, and live with them in their world.

Some have argued that another form of studying video games is through their effect, or pre-cognitive emotions such as fear, joy, disgust, anger, or sadness that games seek to elicit. This approach, however, does not preclude representations, but instead both are intimately interconnected, and, as Shaw and Warf put it: "...the spaces in video games possess an effective excess, with virtual worlds increasingly 'spilling out' of the screen to affect the player in banal, exciting, or unexpected ways."<sup>3</sup> Affects are the responses and reactions that are elicited by games, either representationally (voluptuous woman with suggestive animations could incite arousal in a player, for instance), narratively (feeling saddened at the death of a character), or through game mechanics (feeling joy when being rewarded, either in-game or through sounds and visuals, for performing certain actions correctly). Because of their interactive nature, affect is being consciously elicited by game designers to signal for the player the correct and incorrect ways to play and enjoy a game.

However, just as representational logics can be found inside of narrative and visuals, game mechanics can also be thought of as representational of real world processes. An excellent example of what this would look like is discussed by [YouTube user Errant Signal](#), when reviewing the game Civilization V. He enjoyed the game as a child and found it educational, but now sees "...the underlying rhetoric at

play here, the assumptions baked into its metaphors and the arguments being put forth by its mechanics."4 He goes on to say that the game does not show "...the actual patterns of history, but patterns of a specific lens through which it views history."5

He lays out his arguments in the following video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xBlEscMLjy0>

The idea of "game mechanics as metaphors" is certainly quite interesting, and has been explored and intentionally put to use in several games. This is a list of a few:

<http://currentlab.art.vcu.edu/module-mechanics-as-metaphor/>

So, can the representations found and effects elicited by the narrative be contradicted by the game mechanics? Or, close to what concerns us, can games that condemn violence and war narratively be contradicted by the game mechanics? This would be similar to the argument made in the previous article, where filmic language is intrinsic to, not set apart from, the messages the movie is trying to convey. The similarity of these two cases comes from how every work of art or culture has multiple levels which must be considered when analyzing what it is trying to say. More often than not, *how* it is said is as or even *more* important than *what* is being said. Video games pose an exciting challenge to the analyst precisely because it has added layers which complicate the puzzle: "Unlike static visual media, such as film and comics, the interpretable content of a video game is generated by the interaction between its rules and players."6

Some have called this *ludonarrative dissonance*, or the way that game mechanics directly contradict the intended message put forth by the narrative. In the following video, ludonarrative dissonance is explained by YouTube user Folding Ideas:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=04zaTjuV60A>

When it comes to war games, "...Spec Ops: The Line is a prime example of a critical military video game because it questions the legitimacy of US interventions in the Middle East and disrupts the conventions of military gaming."7 This game, though having violent, fairly generic shooter mechanics, addresses these mechanics and their implications inside the narrative. In the following video, Errant Signal makes the case for the game:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wIBrenhzMZI>

Whether this game is an example of ludonarrative dissonance or assonance is debatable. As others have pointed out, there is no option available within the game to avoid committing the atrocities it condemns. Here we see once again, the multidimensionality of games rearing its head: when discussing *Full Metal Jacket* and *Apocalypse Now*, we talked about how the horrors of war are depicted in their whole confusing, unjustifiable messiness, and how these contrast with movies that glorify war, whether aesthetically or in its ultimate intent. They're anti war stories because war is depicted in itself as the

only justification for all the horrors it produces, instead of being for a greater good. The audience exist as bystanders, and no matter how immersive these fictions are, we can't make a choice that will change the course of the narrative.

The interactive aspects of games enable this option. However, are games like Spec Ops, that ultimately condemn violence but give you no option within the game to not engage in it, really anti-violent video games? It's an interesting question

*Even if you don't agree that video games can cause violent behavior, please consider that by buying a war game, you might be directly contributing to the arms market:*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jeIHH0XEs6E>

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Researching Pop Culture and Militarism -  
Selene Rivas -  
Day 7: If we oppose militarism and  
militarization, what should our relationship  
with pop culture be?



International Week of Action Against  
the Militarisation of Youth 2017  
The National Network Opposing the Militarization of Youth  
<https://goo.gl/CJH3L8>

Over the course of this series, we have explored several concepts which are building blocks for the social sciences (“normal”, “normalization”), which in turn have helped us understand and define “militarism” and “militarization”. After this, we dove into the transformative potential found within popular culture: how can it affect the people who consume it? Linking this very powerful influence to previously defined concepts was both the justification and launching point for the two articles that

followed. In them, we tried to build upon what had been said previously, and provide some examples of what could be accomplished through this approach.

All forms of art and media are political, that is to say, they contain and work off of a series of assumptions about the world, whether intended or not by the creator. That is because all media and art originates in the mind of a person, which is in turn shaped by their worldview; we all have opinions and make assumptions, consider certain things normal or not. Like it or not, these influence our creations, makes them products of our time and place. Even in academic or scientific discourse, such as the one attempted by this series, the “I” is relegated to mouthing silently as the impersonal language of authority imposes itself. Being aware that there is no such thing as objectivity or non-political discourse is the first step towards having a critical mind.

Passivity, that is, uncritical consumption of media, is complicity. If we choose to not question the messages, hidden or obvious, in what we consume, or the motives and interests which knowingly or otherwise construct them, then we are letting others define our world. Fact or opinion, human nature or fancy, what is or isn’t possible, normal or abnormal, all of these are socially constructed. The first step

towards active participation in defining better terms and, consequently, better worlds, is by being critical of the terms and worlds others have long defined for us. It is waking up and realizing the subtext that is present in everything, whether intentionally or otherwise. Even if we end up choosing to continue consuming the same as before, at least it was a choice.

This series has hoped to lay some groundwork for exploring these questions. As peace activists or just people who oppose the war, we must begin our effort by asking ourselves about ourselves: what are some assumptions under which I operate that others have established for their benefit? Activism and concern are not just reserved for the streets or schools, but begins within ourselves, as an “ironing out” of contradictory behavior. These contradictions do not lie in watching violent or militarized media, but instead in being so critical of the explicit militarization efforts of certain governments, and yet uncritical when it comes to the personal and immediate.

The question we must keep asking ourselves, which we must continue to struggle with, is what place do these media preferences have within our own internal value systems? Can we reconcile the fact we’re supporting, whether with our money or our attention, certain organizations and ideas that support that which we’re struggling against? Instead of advocating against certain types of media, this is a plea for you to answer these questions truthfully for yourself; if popular culture is a space of significations, of meanings we construct that go beyond the intended meaning of the creators, then as part of our own peace efforts we must re-signify for ourselves and inside the peace community the media that has been co-opted for war.

## About this document



Selene Rivas presented Researching Pop Culture and Militarism for the [International Week of Action Against the Militarisation of Youth](#) for 2017 with this series of brief articles exploring how the U.S. citizenry has been normalized to accept a

permanent state of militarism through popular culture: Movies, video games and comic books.

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*Find out more about the International Week Of Action at [War Resisters' International](#).*

The Researching Pop Culture and Militarism Series is viewable online at: <https://goo.gl/CJH3L8>

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