

# Retoryka ciała i umysłu w XXI wieku

## Rhetoric of body and mind in the 21st century

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**Make love not war: imperial democracy and the gendered soldiered body in fashion**  
**Miłość zamiast wojny: imperialna demokracja a ciało i płęć żołnierza w świecie mody**

### Abstract

In recognizing the symbolic potential of the body, fashion photography is a logical but critically underexplored area for the study of militarism in popular culture. Using the conception of imperial democracy as a theoretical framework, a semiotic analysis of Steven Meisel's editorial "Make Love Not War" published in "Vogue Italia" identifies how gender and uniform are used to replicate imperialist narratives in a luxury fashion context. These visuals uphold the tenets of new militarism by fetishizing military aesthetics.

Uznając symboliczny potencjał ciała, fotografia mody stanowi logicznie uzasadniony, ale niedostatecznie zbadany obszar badań nad militarystem w kulturze popularnej. Wykorzystując koncepcję demokracji imperialnej jako ramy teoretycznej, semiotyczna analiza fotograficznego edytorialu Stevena Meisela „Make Love Not War” w „Vogue Italia” pozwala zidentyfikować sposoby wykorzystania płęci i munduru do replikowania imperialistycznych narracji w kontekście mody luksusowej. Omawiane fotografie potwierdzają założenia nowego militarystu, fetyszyzującego estetykę wojskową.

### Key words

global war on terror, fashion photography, militarism, soldiers, gender  
globalna wojna z terroryzmem, fotografia mody, militarystm, żołnierze, płęć

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## **Make love not war: imperial democracy and the gendered soldiered body in fashion**

### **Introduction**

The September 2007 edition of “Vogue Italia” included a photo shoot of 14 double-page spreads entitled “Make Love Not War”. It was shot by American fashion photographer Steven Meisel, who had a longstanding working relationship with the publication. Meisel is one of the most significant Western fashion photographers of the past fifty years, boasting an impressive portfolio and prolific record. However, journalistic and academic criticisms of his work intensified when he moved beyond conventional fashion themes and into more politically charged subjects such as surveillance, climate concerns, eating disorders, mental illness and terrorism (Horyn 1992; Douglas 2007; Poyner 2006). “Make Love Not War” continues this foray into new areas of thematic concern by using military conflict as subject matter. The shoot includes uniformed male “soldiers” alongside female models dressed in designer clothing in a luxury fashion context. This case study was chosen for analysis because it consciously mimics the type of soldier-produced imagery which was emerging from the Global War on Terror during the mid-aughts (Silvestri 2014). It adopts a soldiers-eye perspective to induct the viewer into the masculinized culture existing within military institutions. Unusually, it recontextualized these visuals into the typically female-oriented fashion magazine format. The representation of soldiered bodies in “Make Love Not War” as predatory, hypermasculine and disorderly diverges from conventional, accepted media tropes and is therefore worthy of further symbolic interrogation.

A semiotic analysis of the text informed by Roland Barthes’ (1999) conception of image rhetoric will argue that this case study presents military themes as desirable. This is despite their digression from representational norms of Western soldiers who are often depicted as disciplined and morally upstanding. The images achieve this by distancing the uniform from acts of violence and presenting militarized masculinity as threatening but attractive. “Make Love Not War” is ambiguous; on the one hand, it celebrates militarized masculinities by positioning

them as eroticized objects of desire. However, it also exposes the soldiered body as potentially chaotic and predatory. Whilst ‘all images are polysemous’ (Barthes 1999, 156), examining the rhetoric of an image can assist in identifying dominant readings. This involves bringing together ‘different kinds of knowledge—practical, national, cultural, aesthetic’ (Barthes 1999, 106) and combining them into a more defined typology. Therefore, some background on the emergence of “New Militarism” and the soldier’s eye perspective as a media phenomenon will foreground the discussion of the chosen case study.

Analyzing a fashion editorial offers us new insights because it is a consciously constructed visual product; Barthes (1999, 152) reminds us that advertising images are ‘undoubtedly intentional’ in their use of symbolism. “Make Love Not War” arranges these militarized masculine models alongside vulnerable female ones, materializing an ongoing power imbalance between the two. This is indicative of ‘broader tension[s] between popular ideas of femininity and women’s agency in violence’ (Sjoberg 2007, 83). This paper argues that the editorial continues the project of glorifying the Anglo-American military assemblage in three ways: by fetishizing the military aesthetic, by upholding existing gender binaries presenting women as vulnerable and men as hypermasculine and predatory, and finally by presenting the uniformed body as a fashionable ideal.

### **New Militarism in popular consumer culture**

A broader understanding of how “New Militarism” has proliferated across popular consumer culture will assist in better decoding these images. To contextualize how these formats, of which the fashion magazine is just one example, have continued to perpetuate ‘gendered ideologies’ (Mohanty 2011, 76), some background on the contemporary framing of militarism is beneficial. A shift from official military messaging tactics via embedded journalists and institutional communications towards soldier-produced content has challenges strategic representations of conflict. Historian Andrew Bacevich (2013) coined the term “New Militarism” which describes how militarized rhetoric is increasingly absorbed into all aspects of popular culture, entertainment, and mass communication. The primary aim of this “New Militarism” serves to reinforce the view of Anglo-American military actors as heroic, trustworthy, honourable, and awe-inspiring. There are numerous examples of how warfare has been curated into aesthetically conscious cultural products under this paradigm, most notably in areas such as film (Boggs and Pollard 2017), reportage photography (Shields 2019) and video games (Shaw 2010).

The recent fragmentation of war reporting means that freelance journalists are less reliant on the military establishment than before. However, war photographers have not always been able to operate outside the official remit of the conflicts they were covering. These embedded photographers relied on the military for protection and privileged access to operations. For example, the Gulf War in 1990 was the subject of close media censorship, and military escorts accompanied all American on-site reporters. Some have argued that the use of embedded war journalists helps to perpetuate the regime of cultural dominance (Mirzoeff 2006) aiming to control the popular narrative surrounding conflicts. Whether this is a conscious and strategic form of censorship, a means of better ensuring the safety of non-combatants in conflict zones or maintaining secrecy around sensitive military operations remains contested (Keith, Schwalbe, and Silcock 2006; Kennedy 2008, 2015; Levett 2017).

The introduction of embedded reporters was partly because, by the 1990s, the American army had learned some lessons from the brutal and now iconic imagery of the Vietnam War. It was understood that the camera could be an effective tool in helping to turn popular opinion against intervention as much as it could help to catalyze support for one (Keith, Schwalbe, and Silcock 2006). Subsequent military interventions in South America during the 1970s and 1980s banned media access entirely for this reason (Kennedy 2008). It was not until satellite television became an unavoidable terrain for political discourse that the U.S. military was forced to re-evaluate and restructure its relationship with the press. At that point, it adopted a proactive approach that fed into its full spectrum dominance stratagem (Smith 2010). It recognized that to maintain control of the narrative of militarism, it would have to engage in a concerted effort to disseminate desirable rhetorical representations of military institutions, personnel, and technologies.

This incubated a symbolic ‘language of American statecraft [which is] bold, ambitious, and confident’ (Bacevich 2013, 2) – that of “New Militarism”. This discursive phenomenon uses rhetorical devices such as hyperbole and metaphor to inspire patriotic and pro-military sentiments in citizens. Although this practice is not unique to the American military, the cultural impact of the U.S. on globalized forms of media production has amplified its brand of military bravado across the Global North. This is most noticeable in the form of the Hollywood Blockbuster which has ‘echo[ed]... glittering new image[s] of warfare especially suited to America’s strengths’ (Bacevich 2013, 113) the world over. Michael Sherry (1997, 10) describes how over the 20th century, a process of relentless militarization “reshaped every realm of American life – politics and foreign policy, economics and technology, [even] culture and social relations...”. Mass communication and entertainment channels were therefore fertile ground for this effort towards discursive transformation. In “Make Love Not War”, a more politicized fashion

photography realm combines with “New Militarism” (Bacevich 2013) to multiply rhetoric that celebrates masculine military strength in accessible but aspirational forms. Rhetoric refers to a style of persuasive discourse, and militarized rhetoric aims to promote military themes and often employs affective devices such as metaphor to create emotional impact (Achter 2019; Flusberg, Matlock, and Thibodeau 2018).

It is significant that this editorial was published in “Vogue Italia” specifically. It should be noted that although “Vogue Italia” is a European publication, its large circulation numbers (Audit Bureau of Circulations 2022) and reputation as a vanguard of global fashion ensure that these images contribute to the perception of Western militarism across multiple geographies. Additionally, “Vogue Italia” has a history of being a more provocative and politicized publication than its British and American counterparts, particularly when late editor-in-chief Franca Sozzani was at the helm (Walsh 2013). Tellingly, “Make Love Not War” was displayed a decade after its initial publication in the 2007 September issue of “Vogue Italia” during the second edition of the Photo Vogue Festival in Milan in 2017 (Glaviano 2017). This lent the editorial a renewed relevance considering the exhibition’s explicitly provocative content. Indeed, much of the press coverage focused on the contentious reception of the imagery itself, with the headlines it generated including ‘Vogue Italia to exhibit its most controversial images’ (Condé Nast 2017), ‘its most political’ or ‘politically charged fashion images,’ (Peoples 2017). In this context, the images are framed as affronting and potentially offensive. The objections of critics and online commentators lay not only in the use of military motifs within a fashion context but also in the specifically gendered and sexualized nature of its staging (Douglas 2007; Ma 2013; Saner 2007). This politicization of fashion images, promoted as an extension of the Condé Nast brand via the Photo Vogue Milan festival, could be seen as an inevitable symptom of a more progressive and politically engaged consumer base. A semiotic analysis of this fashion text will illuminate how discourses of “New Militarism” can proliferate in popular culture even if they do not espouse the overtly patriotic themes that initially characterised the phenomenon.

### **The fetishization of the military aesthetic**

Although the rhetoric of “New Militarism” has proved culturally pervasive, it is not immune to challenges arising from the proliferation of affordable participatory technologies, the fragmentation of the media industry and whistle-blowers. The army has historically represented the engine of visual “truths” in times of conflict as it is bolstered by all the instruments of power at its disposal. This includes

financial resources, political capital, and privileged access to mainstream media outlets with large circulations and viewership. However, the torture image leaks of Abu Ghraib in 2004 proved that with participatory digital technologies, a more volatile visual sphere was emerging in which those on the front line could record and disseminate their experience of war (Silvestri 2014). This modern technology meant visuals could be shared whether they echoed the acceptable “party line” or not. The photographic and videographic vernacular cultures fostered in the Iraq and Afghanistan barracks helped create a more colloquial and less predictable visual documentation of contemporary warfare (Smith and McDonald 2011). This imagery ranged from the mundane – images that mimic touristic poses and record everyday experiences – to the shocking, in which torture practices were immortalized via digital capture. Even more grotesque was where these photographic conventions merged, and soldiers posed smiling next to abused prisoners (Silvestri 2014).

This first-person, behind-the-scenes perspective has been subsequently reinterpreted across other popular culture formats. The fact that this soldier’s eye view had, by 2007, made its way into the fashion media demonstrates the continued expansion of military motifs in contemporary consumer culture predicted by Bacevich (2013). The soldier’s eye view has the capacity to undermine “New Militarism’s” directive that the soldiered body must always be represented as single-minded, disciplined, and upstanding. This is because soldiers could just as easily capture images of their downtime, leisure activities and abuses that would not have been previously visible beyond personal photographic collections. “Make Love Not War” represents a conscious stylization of these soldier-produced vernacular visuals. This point of view also reinforces the gendered power dynamics of coed spaces in military contexts. Mohanty (2011, 77) outlines how imperial democracies use gendered practices to uphold power structures and how ‘civilians are subjected to militarized violence anchored in the production of reactionary gender identities and dominant... masculinities’. Mohanty (2011, 77) also states that ‘militarization always involves masculinization’; understanding the two processes as inextricably linked and tied to an established gender binary.

Paul Achter (2018) notes how representations of soldiered bodies reinforce or reorient the audience’s relationship with the military-industrial complex. How these representations achieve this repositioning depends heavily on context, style, and tone. Whether the military bodies depicted replicate or diverge from “acceptable” representations will influence audience interpretations. The dramatization of the soldier’s eye view in “Make Love Not War” makes it a relevant case study as this viewpoint was made possible through the unique technological and discursive shifts affecting militarist themes in popular culture at the time. The soldier’s perspective succeeds in fetishizing the military aesthetic by involving the viewer

in erotically charged and intensely physical scenes across the spread. In this sense, the visual rhetoric of “New Militarism” is upheld, not challenged, despite a conscious divergence from culturally acceptable representations of the soldiered body. The soldier’s eye perspective has effectively become a theme like any other for fashion designers, photographers, and creative directors to explore and exploit for commercial gain (Godbold and McDowell 2016).

The male Western soldiered body is a potent and recurring visual vehicle for “New Militarism” in popular culture. The muscular, uniformed body symbolizes masculinity, power, and national pride. This body is frequently presented as an object of desire and employed as an allegorical tool for propagandist war efforts. In war, the body ‘becomes a site for political ideals, truths and imaginings’ (Maltby and Thornham 2012, 33). In the context of “New Militarism”, this glorious personification of patriotic sentiment and admirable virtues promotes the view that the strength of the body metaphorically equates to the strength of the state. When that muscular soldiered body is absorbed into a fashion context, those primarily political ideas take on additional connotations of luxury, consumerism, and desirability.

The cover image of the 2007 “Vogue Italia” September Issue, typically the most important title of the year for any fashion publication, was also a still from “Make Love Not War”. It features androgynous Dutch model Agyness Deyn in a glittery black jacket with khaki face paint, flanked by soldiers in combat gear. The spread features hyper-muscular and clean-shaven male models parading as American infantry soldiers alongside female models dressed in revealing high-end fashion. The location is staged as an army base; it is a hot, sepia-tinted dusty environment that implies the Middle Eastern desert (although no obvious reference points are given regarding the geographic location). Multiple images show the models outdoors in beige-brown mud, as they wrestle and play sports with their peers. Five separate shots all feature dust as an element of styling and makeup, with both male and female models covered in dirt. The female models may be wearing expensive designer garments, but they are still muddied and bedraggled. The male models are in uniform, a more utilitarian costuming for the setting, which speaks to the barracks’ unpretentious and hands-on atmosphere. This is an environment in which everyone is expected to ‘muck in’ and not let cleanliness or comfort get in the way of their enjoyment. This attitude also emphasizes the virile nature of the male bodies in the scenes, whereas the female bodies seem more out of place because they have been consciously styled to be at odds with their surroundings. In this way, the editorial’s hypermasculine and muscular soldiered bodies become ‘invit[ing] symbols of eroticism’ (Craik 2003, 135) that civilians can appreciate and partake in by purchasing the magazine.

Multiple images show the male uniformed models in phases of undress from their army garb. Undressing the soldiered body invites the pornographic gaze by flirting with the limits of power and vulnerability. It does this by exposing ‘weak’ flesh, usually hidden beneath the suggestive fabric armour of fatigues. Of course, this flesh is ‘weak’ only metaphorically – as Smith and Gehrmann (2014) argue that the tendency for the body of the soldier to be both “hypermuscular” and “muscular” also constitutes a type of contemporary uniform. Not only do soldiers build up muscle mass by working out to assuage boredom between patrols, but this body shape is further emphasized by padded protective outerwear.

If the ‘uniform is the clothing of modern disciplinary society’ (Black 2014, 102) it comes loaded with connotations of codified behaviour and the observance of hierarchy. Tension is therefore created when soldiers are shown with their uniforms partially or entirely removed (Sokołowska-Paryż 2012). Whilst their muscular bodies maintain associations of strength and militarized masculine power, any lapse in dress code hints at a break from authority. It suggests that soldiers can act unpredictably or “go rogue.” In one image, a male model is shown with his standard-issue cargo pants around his ankles. His buttocks are exposed, and a female model dressed in a black lace mini dress straddles him with a tattoo gun as she inks a banner reading ‘USA’ on his bare behind. Of the 53 times male models are pictured across the editorial, only three are fully dressed in their vests, jackets, and cargo pants. This suggests a considerable deviation from the usual strict standard of presentation required from military personnel, whose dress is extensively codified in declassified official documentation (Headquarters Department of the Army 2021). In another shot, a shirtless soldier is faced with a topless female model who is in the doorway of their tent. His hands are lifted to his face as though in contemplation. It suggests the male soldier is considering how to react to this woman, who is seductively positioning herself in front of him, one hip pushed out and arms raised above her head, so her bustier dress has fallen to expose her. Again, we observe the soldiered body at odds with the rigid code of honour and expectations of its military environment. The repetition of this type of representation throughout the editorial makes the powerful masculine bodies seem even more threatening, as these figures that usually stand for “law and order” are shown succumbing to their libidinal temptations. The partial or full removal of the uniform, then, emphasizes noncompliance with regulations without the need to fully sacrifice the sex appeal of military garb. This emphasizes the extent to which ‘militarization and sexuality are mutually implicated’ (Crane-Seeber 2016, 49) and continues the project of fetishizing the military aesthetic.

In addition to a rejection of standardized uniform practices, the soldiered bodies are shown “behaving badly”. Mohanty suggests that the cultures of impunity



fostered by democratic imperialist superpowers have created conditions where authoritative figures in military regimes are rarely held accountable for their transgressions. A culture of impunity is defined as the ability of imperial military powers to act with limited accountability on the world stage and ‘deploy multiple forms of intimidation and violence in the name of... the “security and protection” of the nation’ (Mohanty 2011, 76). It suggests an unruliness and arrogance on behalf of the Anglo-American armies positioning themselves as virtuous in an apparently ‘just war’ on Terror. The metonymic use of the American soldier as Time Magazines’ 2003 ‘Person of the Year’ is a salient example of this Manichean and reductive juxtaposition of coalition forces and their opponents (The Associated Press 2003). The choice made by Meisel to represent soldiers removed from their primary military activities and instead indulging in an array of vices hints at this sense of freedom from responsibility. The scenes in the editorial recall the imagery recorded in Iraq and Afghanistan by soldiers who were the first to have handheld digital cameras or mobile phones that could record images and short videos. Andén-Papadopoulos (2009, 20) points out that the Global War on Terror was

Fought by... the first PlayStation Generation, raised on Hollywood War Films, graphic video games and internet pornography. When this generation of soldiers now documents and... communicates their experiences of actual warfare, they fall back on contemporary popular culture and its broad repertoire of war as entertainment.

The content soldiers choose to capture in the barracks is convivial, often showing soldiers at play, at rest and with humorous tones that starkly contrast the potential for danger that the setting betrays (Silvestri 2014). This is mimicked in the fashion shoot. For example, one shot shows the models engaging in some sort of drinking game; one male soldier appears blindfolded by an American flag while the female model wearing a satin Louis Vuitton cocktail dress pours Jack Daniels whiskey directly into his mouth. Another shows the group playing touch rugby, with the men holding up the female models to capture a ball just out of shot. One photograph combines the drinking and sporting activities in one shot; half-naked female models appear to playfight among cans of Budweiser strewn about on the floor while a male soldier does push-ups between one of their legs. Another shot shows a male and female model wrestling in the mud. The muscular male soldiered bodies shown are at play – gambling, drinking, fraternizing with women, and playing sports. 6 of the total 20 images show models engaged in physical activity – including arm wrestling, mudwrestling, and touch rugby. None of these images explicitly reference the wartime setting beyond the prominent military motifs of the camouflage dress and the setup of the barrack space. They echo the soldier-produced visuals created to document the moments between combat and,

as such, appear more like photographs taken at house parties or on holidays than ones in war zones. They show soldiers letting off steam and taking advantage of their female company in, at times, dishonourable ways.

In this manner, the Meisel shoot blends the dramatic staging of a traditional high-production value fashion editorial with the sweaty, fraternal and, at times, morally questionable subject matter of amateur soldier-produced photography. Its presentation of the soldiered male body as playful and chaotic differs considerably from mainstream representational stereotypes. Ramazani (2022, 2) explains that much of America's exceptionalism has been driven by a romantic notion of war that positions the USA (and its Western allies) as a virtuous civilizing force. In this narrative framing frequently deployed by popular entertainment forms, 'military superiority is self-evidently cognate with the moral and political superiority of [their] uniquely blessed nation.' If wartime, then, is exposed as being banal or immoral, this narrative promoted by "New Militarism" is undermined. Traditional depictions of the soldier were vehicles for inspiring patriotism and embodying a sense of national pride in which they were strong, noble, and glorious (Jarvis 2010). On the other hand, Meisel shows us a chaotic representation of the soldiered body to reveal the fallibility. These men are just as, or perhaps even more, vulnerable to the temptations of womanizing and unhealthy habits such as gambling, smoking, and drinking as anyone else.

The fetishization of the military aesthetic is also obvious through more explicitly sexualized motifs. Some of these uncomfortable images even imply sexual assault – an issue that unfortunately remains rampant within military contexts (Protect Our Defenders 2022). The most overt example of this is a shot with a female model lying beside a male model in bed. She is distressed and turns away from him, frowning and biting her hands. She is dressed in a beaded strapless evening dress, but her hair is matted, and her face is visibly sweaty. There are also more ambiguous insinuations, for example in the image, where a female model stands in an empty room with an unmade camp bed. She clutches a khaki silk slip dress to her naked body as though trying to cover herself. Her hair is knotted and tangled, and she is barefoot. These images suggest the omnipresence of issues such as rape, sexual harassment, and revenge pornography within the military. They also serve as a metonym for conservative cultural discourses which represent female bodies as "unruly". This positions women within the military as a potential threat to the established order (Mirzoeff 2006; Achter 2010). According to this logic, the militarized masculinities must overpower the vulnerable femininities both physically and sexually, so they are not tempted astray.

Mohanty (2011) notes that cultures of impunity allow militarized regimes to continue their projects in earnest without a sense of accountability or moral

responsibility. The editorial hints at the chaotic environment in the barracks, suggesting a lack of authority, contrasting with the public image of order and precision that the military prefers to project. These images throw the assumed morality and discipline of the male soldiered body into question, representing them as subject to primitive instincts. Firstly, this staging undermines “New Militarism’s” project to unflinchingly mythologize the soldier figure by humanizing them and representing them as potentially immature, irresponsible, and distracted. This takes on a new dimension of provocation where the exposure of human rights abuses by coalition troops in this conflict is concerned. Mohanty’s conceptualization of imperial democracy is perpetuated through the bad treatment and subjugation of “enemy bodies.” During the Global War on Terror, prisoners were tortured, sexually assaulted, and publicly humiliated – their bodies degrading into indistinct ‘piles of flesh’ or ‘human ziggurats’ (Mirzoeff 2006, 25). Visual evidence of this torture had been made public by 2007 when the editorial was published. The editorial instrumentalizes the concept of the “unruly body” and turns it back on the West. However, I would argue that these representations fail to definitively challenge the rhetoric of “New Militarism” because the men remain dominant in relation to the women pictured. Furthermore, the sexually aggressive imagery goes so far as to vilify the male soldier and presents them as variously predatory, reckless, and opportunistic. This may reflect the exposure of Western soldiers as being unprofessional at best or ‘tormentors’ and ‘sadists’ at worst with the Abu Ghraib leaks that caused ‘untold damage to the image of competence and probity that the post-Vietnam generation of soldiers had worked so long and so hard to establish’ (Bacevich 2013, 67).

### **Militarized masculinities and vulnerable femininities**

In addition to its fetishistic presentation, the gendering of the models in the editorial should be discussed further as it exposes the ‘heterosexist cis-gendered social norms’ (Crane-Seeber 2016, 44) that characterise the militarized discourse of the 2000s. Considering the role of the female body in the scaffolding of these assumptions is necessary because the “liberation” of female bodies overseas and the protection of female bodies at home are often invoked in politics to help justify military interventions. The absorption of the uniformed body into fashion media is notable because most fashion publications focus on womenswear as their primary market (Ipsos 2013), while the prevailing image of the soldiered body tends to be male or masculine-coded. However, in “Make Love Not War” there is a marked difference in the styling of male and female models throughout the editorial. Women’s bodies are primarily represented as playthings for the infantry

soldiers. Suggesting that the female bodies pictured are no longer protected from the whims and wants of the militarized masculinities disparages the protectionist messaging of “New Militarism” as simplistic and naive. Although both male and female models are pictured as dust-covered and dishevelled, there are some clear distinctions in their representation. Ultimately, the dynamic of Western imperial democracy is upheld by depicting the male uniformed body as dominant and the half-dressed feminine bodies as either willing playthings or coerced victims.

Firstly, it is worth noting that twice as many men are shown in these images as women; women appear 27 times throughout the editorial, and men appear 53 times. The women are outnumbered, but not by an overwhelming margin. This is an interesting stylistic choice as the primary market of the publication is women who must be advertised to. After all, the editorial format remains primarily a sales mechanism and must maintain a visible display of styled female bodies throughout. Although 1 in 7 members of the U.S. military deployed in Iraq was female, women – both civilian and serving – were depicted in less than 1/5th of the ‘480 war-related photographs’ in Keith and Schwalbe’s (2010) study. The gender ratio of the editorial artificially augments the visibility of women in a militarized setting. However, the images are still understood as being male dominated, with many criticisms of the shoot in the media and fashion blogs arising from the perceived vulnerability of the female models (Blackcigarette 2007; Glitter Hive 2014; Ma 2013; Saner 2007). The female models in this shoot are in-amongst the action but displayed as props to be admired, handled, and used with little agency of their own. They are frequently partially disrobed, mostly exposing their bare chests. When dressed, they are in high fashion finery, and the clothing has been consciously damaged or stained to resemble rags. In the fourth image, Model Agyness Deyn is carried by a baying group of shirtless male models. The tone is irreverent, as though they are completing a dare or challenge. Here, the female model could easily be a willing participant and does not seem distressed, but she is still being held up as a form of trophy. This renders her a passive object in the still. The dynamic uniformed male bodies overpower the subservient fashioned female bodies in these images, upholding the gender binary of militarized masculinity/vulnerable femininity. Mohanty (2011, 78) describes ‘a masculinist securitized ideology based... on coercion that requires neither participation or consent’ which resonates with the passivity of the female models as they are staged at the mercy of the men in the shoot.

In the second image of the editorial, a couple is shown reclining on the hood of an armored vehicle. The woman is bare breasted with the top button of her cargo trousers undone. Significantly, her wet t-shirt has been pulled behind her head and over her shoulders, suggestive of a head-covering that has been partially removed

which resembles the robes of Madonna and the child. This could be interpreted as a less “threatening” Christian alternative to the Muslim niqab, which is often depicted as an oppressive, rather than emancipatory, garment. This is significant because media depictions of middle eastern women were a crucial aspect of mainstream Western discourse relating to the Global War on Terror. In this contextual framing, the Muslim female body symbolizes vulnerability that must be protected in the now-justifiable act of war (Sjoberg 2007). The religious veil and its removal were used as a metonym for women’s liberation across Western press outlets in the run-up to and during the conflict (Stabile and Kumar 2005). This visual metaphor was invoked extensively prior to the invasion to encourage popular support for American intervention by presenting the conflict as a moral exercise in freeing vulnerable women from oppressive cultural codes. This image becomes even more powerful when the religious symbolism of the Abu Ghraib images is recalled, with the ‘hooded man’ positioned as though he is being crucified (Lauststen, 2008). However, they hold different stylistic qualities; the “Vogue Italia” interpretation is almost baroque in its composition and coloring whereas the point-and-shoot flash lit imagery of Abu Ghraib is explicit, harsh, and unforgiving.

The exposed female body here requires the “correct” form of imperial feminist protection. Covering the body is implied to be potentially undemocratic, whereas nonchalant nudity in the company of men is presented as proof of emancipation. This echoes the imperial feminist rhetoric of liberation that Mohanty (2011) defines as the extension of neoliberal logic as it is enacted by the military-industrial complex. The nudity of the female models might initially be read as pointing to their “freedom” however the staging of the shoot invites the viewer to question the nature of this freedom. Does it leave them vulnerable to exploitation in other ways? The confident nudity of the models in some images is interspersed with uneasy shots that suggest a lack of bodily agency, prostitution and sexual violence. This tension evidences the uneasy integration and continuing exploitation of women in contemporary military contexts, even as the demographic makeup of the military tends towards more female representation. Cynthia Enloe (2000) points out that the military environment still caters by default to male behavioral norms, citing the example of heterosexual pornographic films being shown before missions to boost soldier’s adrenaline levels. Women in the barracks might be a contemporary reality of warfare but they remain a minority. Therefore, they continue to have a limited influence on its governing culture and top-down imposition of masculine norms. They are a marginal group, and the shoot directly confronts these themes of sexual exploitation and the uses and abuses that female bodies can be subjected to intra-institutionally. Meisel chooses to show this power imbalance occurring within the setting of the military base itself, suggesting even “familiar” white female bodies are at risk in the Global War on Terror’s hegemonic agenda.

The editorial communicates the uneven power structures between imperialist American military masculinity and vulnerable white femininity. The way the female models have been staged is a metonym for the grander narrative of militarized masculinity that is supposed to protect, but can just as easily exploit, vulnerable female bodies. Moon (2007) reminds us that women often serve to heal or entertain men – as healthcare workers or prostitutes. The same is true for the images of the female form in male-dominated militarized spaces. The most evident example of this is the World War II pin-up girl. In the same vein, pornographic materials are often reported to be shared around barrack environments from peer to peer to improve morale. This illustrates how the female body takes on expanded meanings and functions in a military setting; even as official narratives insist on improved gender equality within ranks (Garamone 2022).

Casting solely Caucasian female models for the shoots also affects its potential meaning. Casting middle eastern models in this editorial would undoubtedly cross the bounds of acceptability, perhaps because it would too closely imitate the then ongoing reality of the war. To summarize, the fashioned white femininities are pictured throughout in non-military clothing. They are presented as non-combatants who are nonetheless subjected to militarized masculinities with varying outcomes; in some images, they express joy and excitement. In others, visible distress. This metaphorically suggests that the unpredictable ‘militarized forms of control’ (Mohanty 2011, 83) employed in fragile states by imperial democracies are now extended to unlikely civilian subjects, even white western femininities. Despite “Make Love Not War’s” satirical tone, the radical potential of portraying militarized masculinities that diverge from the remit of “New Militarism” is not achieved. The images ultimately demonstrate an inability to symbolically reverse the gender imbalance upon which imperial democracies are predicated, perpetuated, and legitimated.

### **Military chic: The soldier as fashion icon**

As previously mentioned, “Vogue” is a popular fashion title with a total circulation of circa 190,000 globally per issue (Audit Bureau of Circulations 2022) making it a mainstream and accessible publication. “Make Love Not War” was also selected as the cover image for the September 2007 issue, an edition traditionally ‘devoted to the latest autumn/winter collections shown in London, New York, Paris and Milan’ (Moeran 2006, 728). The implication is that the military theme is vital to what is on-trend and encapsulates something significant and desirable in the zeitgeist. It has taken the vernacular visual culture of military members and created its stylized version which could be seen to extend “New Militarism”

as a communicative tactic into the commercial sector. The military uniformed body is to be admired, aspired to, and something civilians can easily buy into through fashion consumption practices.

To understand how the rhetoric of imperial democracy is extended into the fashion media space via these images, Achter's (2018) definition of 'military chic' will be discussed. He suggests that the inclusion of soldiered bodies in the context of a high-end fashion publication affects the symbolic meaning of the uniform as a garment. This influence of military styles on contemporary fashion has been described as "mil-chic" (Achter 2018). Mil-chic often refers to designs that incorporate elements inspired by military regalia and practical features, which are present both in high-end and high-street fashion. Unlike the reappropriation of military garments used to demonstrate against military intervention (such as the hippies altering M65 jackets with pro-peace slogans), mil-chic presents the militarized body as desirable. The enduring popularity of mil-chic is evident from its persistence on the Western catwalks, even in recent collections launched in 2022/23, when one might assume the ongoing Ukrainian conflict would dissuade designers from using such contentious motifs. Mil-chic relies on maintaining a symbolic distance from the realities of warfare to stay marketable and appealing to consumers.

Achter (2018, 271) believes that within a military context, the uniform aims to 'collapse the distance between a service member and the uniform' whilst fashionable interpretations of the uniform aim to do the opposite. The fashion sector downplays, or denies, the connotations of violence and political symbolism of mil-chic because this excuses them from difficult conversations whilst enabling them to capitalize on the commercial appeal of these designs unchecked. Most representations of mil-chic fashion are largely free from 'patriotism... dirt... and trauma' (Achter 2018, 272) placing these designs in an anodyne aesthetic that insists instead on coolness and urbanity. This positioning is partially responsible for emptying fashionable interpretations of traditional military styles of their radical anti-establishment potential. Although "Make Love Not War" does not shy away from the literal dirt and metaphorical patriotism of the conflict it is mimicking, the fact that all the images are staged in a purgatorial army base setting with no referent to a geographic location conveniently avoids picturing any material destruction or anchoring the shoot to an ongoing real-world conflict. Achter (2018, 275) summarizes the tensions of military dress as it crosses over from the institutional context to the fashion market. Firstly, the institutional interpretation tends towards conservative and de-individualized appearances, whereas fashion 'is defined by provocation and the search for novelty'. Although the soldiers in the editorial are all pictured wearing the same uniform, its partial removal provides novelty and

shock value. Secondly, the army relies on a literal and concrete codification of uniformed dress. On the other hand, the fashion industry exploits the metaphorical potential of mil-chic, playing instead with its ambiguities. Finally, the military must uphold the gravitas of the uniformed body, but fashion has a license to explore a ‘campy, fun, ironic tone’ (Achter 2018, 275) in its appropriation of the styles. The cover image of the case study, with its rainbow American flag and its hypermasculine-but-hairless male soldiered bodies, certainly flirts with a camp, queer aesthetic (albeit less explicitly than, for example, Diesel’s “Make Love Not Walls” campaign from 2017).

The Meisel shoot includes male models in a uniform similar to the standard-issue Gulf War-era camouflage and positions them next to female models dressed in garments from high-end womenswear brands such as Chanel, Givenchy, and Roberto Cavalli. This arresting juxtaposition implies that both styles of dress represent aspirational ideals. Although the color palette of the designer clothing is suitably neutral alongside the Desert Storm camouflage print, the female models are not dressed in military clothing throughout the editorial. Therefore mil-chic in this context does not explicitly refer to the womenswear fashions on show but to the symbolic elevation of the military aesthetic overall, which it achieves by the mixture of male models in fatigues with female models in designer garments. This creates an equivalence between them: the male soldiered and fashioned female bodies are displayed as objects of desire to be coveted.

## Conclusion

This paper has argued that ‘Make Love Not War’ does not present a challenge to the representational tropes of “New Militarism”, despite its controversial and parodic staging. This representational reinforcement is achieved in three ways. Firstly, the images fetishize the military aesthetic by adopting a soldiers-eye view, implicating the viewer in the physically and sexually charged atmosphere of the constructed barracks. The editorial achieves a dual function in deploying the vernacular of soldier-produced imagery to attempt to create a counter-narrative to politicized and sanitized Army-produced representations. In the first instance by modifying the vernacular form for a high fashion context the editorial defies existing representations of binary moralities seen in mainstream media narratives. However, the imagery continues to indulge in the fetishization of the military aesthetic by adopting erotic overtones that flirt with the boundary between taboo-but-welcomed sexual advances and non-consensual encounters.

Secondly, the juxtaposition of the models replicates stereotypical gendered power imbalances in military discourses between women who are perceived



as vulnerable and exposed and men who are perceived as hypermasculine and potentially predatory. Its preservation of this ‘masculinist... ideology’ (Mohanty 2011, 78) and motifs of sexual conquest echoes imperialist narratives of overpowering populations and territories by force and exploiting vulnerable femininities in a conflict context. The fluctuation of the images between positive and playful scenes and violent distressing ones underlines the fraught relationship between ‘the shared norms of manliness and war, and [its] gendered myths and images’ (Stavrianakis and Stern 2017, 12).

Finally, using the soldiered body in the context of a prestigious fashion publication presents it as aspirational and desirable, as a “look” that can be achieved through consumption practices. By presenting the soldiered body as a possible fashion commodity, mil-chic depoliticizes it by rendering it a form of entertainment like any other (Kellner 2005). This struck a chord with fashion journalists and cultural critics, who felt that by publishing these images, “Vogue Italia” was overstepping its authority by glamorizing and fetishizing warfare. They contended that the intermingling of luxury consumerism and uniformed bodies served to create a rhetorical distance between the seductive symbolism of war and its grim realities. In summation, how the soldiered body is positioned as an object of desire reflects what Mohanty (2011, 83) calls ‘militarized and masculinized forms of control’. The editorial exposes the uniformed masculine body in a controversial light by presenting it as both chaotic and potentially exploitative. This challenges the prescribed acceptable popular culture representation of the soldier within the paradigm of “New Militarism”. While we might therefore expect “Make Love Not War” to defy dominant narratives, the shoot fails to reverse the dominating gender binary of militarized masculinities/vulnerable femininities, limiting its capacity for transgression as the supremacy of the male soldiered body’s supremacy is sustained. Including military motifs in a title such as “Vogue Italia” represents the definitive absorption of the soldiered body into the aspirational lexicon of high fashion. By presenting the soldiered body within this context, the editorial team suggests that there is still much for the public to admire in militarized Western masculinities. This deployment of militarized themes in fashion could benefit from being more thoroughly critiqued. If we are to accept that ‘fashion comes to be defined as what is... consumed as fashion’ (Moeran 2006, 733) then the soldiered body risks being emptied of political symbolic capital and instead conceived as nothing more than fashionable attire for civilians to covet and consume.

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