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The ‘distant war’ up, close and personal: Approximating Afghanistan at the Danish Arsenal Museum

Mads Daughjerg

Abstract:

This paper discusses the crafting of trustworthy knowledge about war as tensioned between ideals of distance and proximity. I draw on field material assembled at the Danish Arsenal Museum in Copenhagen over the spring and summer of 2013. In an exhibition entitled *The Distant War*, set up in close cooperation with the Danish armed forces and actual involvement of Afghanistan veterans, the museum immersed visitors in a three-dimensional, hands-on experience of ‘being there’ in the midst of the ongoing conflict in the troubled Helmand Province, the main area of the Danish military engagement. This ‘approximated Afghanistan’ clearly appealed to visitors and involved them in ways that more conventional exhibitions often fail to do. At the same time, it relied on certain and, I argue, reconfigured renderings of authority, side-lining or even actively hiding academic (‘distanced’) expertise, instead relying on the first-hand accounts and experiences of the war witnesses themselves. Its gripping cinematic communication styles served to underpin particular knowledges and specific kinds of expertise that depend on getting ‘as close’ as possible to the ‘distant war’. The article contextualizes and scrutinizes the crafting of war knowledge in Copenhagen, including its experiential foundation. I argue that in the celebration of (particular forms of) proximity, cultural mediations such as this one may also serve to install new distances and cement a number of existing ones.

Key words: war museums; distance; proximity; experience; witnessing; Denmark

This article deals with the production of authoritative war knowledge as it depends on shifting ideals of distance and proximity. I begin from the observation that historically, analytical ‘distance’ has been regarded, almost by default, as a prerequisite for proper and unbiased knowledge. Although some scientific schools – including postcolonial studies, feminism and parts of the ethnographic-reflexive tradition on which my own analysis rests – have critiqued such an unreserved embracement of ‘distance’ as an indisputable criterion, it is safe to say that it still constitutes a cornerstone of Western epistemology. This fundamental belief also permeates many of the structures and institutions set up to organize and disseminate knowledge, including the public museum. While this is the case, what I will discuss here is how such deep-seated conventions coexist with a set of recently emerging and seemingly contrasting tendencies, a preoccupation with experiential closeness and corporeal ‘witnessing’ as emerging criteria for gaining proper knowledge. This is the case, not least, when it comes to questions regarding the comprehension of modern war.

I probe these theoretical issues in dialogue with empirical material deriving from field studies at the Royal Danish Arsenal Museum (*Tøjhusmuseet*) in Copenhagen – now part of the Danish National Museum – conducted over the spring and summer of 2013, as part of my broader engagement with the cultural impacts and consequences of Denmark’s ongoing involvement in the war in Afghanistan.

In an exhibition entitled *The Distant War: Danish Soldier in Afghanistan*, organized and set up in close cooperation with the Danish armed forces and with the direct involvement of recently returned veterans from Helmand Province, the museum immersed visitors in a three-dimensional setting of recreated full-size milieus from the front line and Danish army camps. This was backed up by an ambitious arrangement of light and sound effects, emulating the sensorial impressions of the war's landscapes. This 'approximated Afghanistan', as we may call it, clearly appealed to many visitors and engaged them in ways that more conventional museum displays often fail to do. At the same time, I will argue, it relied on a fundamental reconfiguration of authority. The attempts at constructing physical intimacy were connected to an explicit ambition to shift epistemological weight to the warfighters themselves – to the 'flesh witnesses' of war, to adopt historian Yuval Harari's (2009, 2010) vivid term – in contrast to the ('distanced') expertise of museum scholars. In the words of one of its creators, the staff 'concentrated almost all our energy at deliberately removing the museum's curatorial "voice of authority" from the exhibition' (Tinning 2013, 20). As I shall discuss, these attempted erasures formed part of a striving for a more 'direct' and 'honest' contact between visitors and the far-away Afghan fields of war.

In the following, I chart these makings of war knowledge, focusing especially on the imagined relationship between distance and proximity as preconditions of proper knowing. I contextualize the current slide towards closeness and immersion, at the Arsenal Museum and elsewhere, in a broader cultural landscape in which direct 'experience' is accorded novel and transformative purpose. I then proceed to scrutinize the specifics of the Copenhagen exhibition. Heeding Rodney Harrison's call for attending to the 'frictions' and 'flows' coming together in and through museums, I am concerned with 'exploring how different forms of knowledge and expertise have been involved in the process of assembling' the Afghanistan war at the Danish museum (Harrison 2013, 27). This includes a critical reflection of perspectives and positions offered – and of those not offered – and of the exhibition's immersive qualities and implied claims.¹ I will argue, ultimately, that in the cultivation of (particular kinds of) proximity, cultural mediations such as this one also serve to install new distances and cement a number of existing ones.

Distance, proximity, and experience

Analytical distance is a scientific ideal so ingrained in conventions surrounding the pursuit of knowledge that it is often simply taken for granted or regarded as beyond

¹ This article does not include a detailed analysis of visitor movements, perceptions and appropriations. While the ethnographic fieldwork on which it builds included joining, following and interviewing visitors and school groups, I restrict myself here to discussing the institutional and contextual forces at play in the making of the exhibition.

discussion. Literary scholar Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, aiming to highlight such understandings and critique this widespread lack of reflexivity, has noted that

we (...) normally presuppose that the quality of observations and interpretations depends on the “adequate distance” that an observer is able to take in relation to the phenomenon on which he focuses. Therefore, we must make a specific intellectual effort to realize how problematic it is to speak constantly of “the world” or of “the society” as if “world” and “society” were objects at a distance – in relation to which we can (or even must) occupy a position of remoteness. (2004, 21-22)

Such ideals are perhaps particularly strong in the field of professional history, where they are most often understood as a need for *temporal* or *historical* distance to the object of study. According to historian Mark Salber Phillips, distance is ‘the name we have given to the ambition to master the past’ (2013, 1). Temporal distance, it has conventionally been assumed, ‘loosens the grip of prejudice and endows our judgment with a maturity that is impossible to the immediate observer’ (ibid.; see also Phillips 2011; den Hollander et al. 2011; Grever et al. 2012). Such principles date back to the early modern foundation of history as an intellectual craft. ‘Every great occurrence’, eighteenth-century clergyman G.J. Planck wrote, ‘is, for the contemporaries upon which it directly acts, wrapped in a fog, and this fog clears away very gradually, often taking more than a few generations’ (Planck 1795, quoted in Koselleck 2004, 139). As a tool of detachment and impartiality, the very notion of distance has come to hold a powerful claim to authority in itself. Even so, as both Gumbrecht and Phillips point out, we would do well to remember that such virtues are not naturally or divinely given.

The axioms of distance and distancing have, over the years, manifested themselves in countless different forms, norms and conventions, across scientific disciplines and institutions. In the modern museum, organized around the physical encounter between visitor and object, the quest for enlightenment has relied for generations on physically and visually organized distances – between exhibits and observer, between spaces of vision and touch, as well as between experts and amateurs (Daugbjerg 2014, 47-76; and see Hetherington 2002; Bennett 2004, 160-89). Anthropologist Sharon Macdonald has argued that the nineteenth-century museum suggested ‘ways of seeing’ which supported the cultivation of an idea of what she calls ‘the world as exhibition’,² entailing a detachment of the viewer – ‘thinking of themselves as outside or above that which was represented’ – and a belief that ‘it was possible to find external viewing positions from which the world would appear as ordered and complete’ (Macdonald 2003, 3-4). At the museum, doctrines of analytical distance have been translated materially, we may say, into concretely measured and upheld distinctions. Museum conventions and archetypes such as the glass case, the rope and the museum attendant – all emblems of the modern custodian museum – have served historically to secure such separations and thus underpin dominant beliefs about truth, objectivity and expertise as dependent on various kinds of distance.

² Macdonald adopts this term, which is originally Martin Heidegger’s, from Timothy Mitchell (1988).

Such a paradigmatic (if also stereotypical) view of museums and knowledge serves as an important subtext for the analysis to follow, as the Arsenal Museum attempted in its Afghanistan war exhibition to actively *break away* from these archetypes. Doing so, it aligned itself with a current of popular heritage communication aspiring, so to speak, to distance itself from previous ideas of distance. This is very often done in the name of ‘experience’, a term invoked extensively across the cultural and leisure industries, and prominently so in the museum and heritage sector (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998; Macdonald 2005; Hall 2006; Daugbjerg 2011). These heritage axioms form part of a much broader set of thoughts identifying a wider experiential turn or even viewing the Western present as an ‘experience society’ (Schulze 1992). The assumed yearnings for experience are sometimes theorized as inevitable facts of late-modern life, but are also often lauded as a sphere of new commercial potential and enterprise (O’Dell & Billing 2005; Boswijk et al. 2007; Lorentzen and Hansen 2009; Knudsen et al. 2014). Indeed, in the so-called ‘experience economy’, a concept coined by marketing professors Joseph Pine and James Gilmore, companies allegedly ‘no longer offers goods or services alone but the resulting experience, rich with sensations, created within the customer. All prior economic offerings remain at arms-length, outside the buyer, while experiences are inherently personal’ (1999, 12). Such arguments thus also imply an increasing need for immersion and proximity, as opposed to previous distanced (e.g. ‘arms-length’) approaches.

Taking us back to the museum, and to war, cultural historian Alison Landsberg has suggested we distinguish between ‘cognitive’ and ‘experiential’ kinds of knowledge, identifying ‘a larger trend in American mass culture toward the experiential as a mode of knowledge’ (2004, 130). The context is her study of the affective qualities of the exhibitions at the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C. While ‘certainly not advocating that such an experiential mode of knowledge replace[s] the cognitive’, Landsberg urges analysts to ‘take seriously Americans’ widespread desire to live history and that we recognize the importance of this experiential mode to the acquisition of particular kinds of knowledge’ (ibid.; see also Hetherington 2002, 2003; and see Handler 1994 for a less positive assessment of the Holocaust Museum).

Such various ideas on the relationship between knowledge, experience, distance and proximity, although never theorised as such by my interlocutors at the Danish museum, nevertheless figured as implicit cultural currents supporting the construction of the *Distant War* exhibition. One curator described it to me in an interview as ‘a more sensory exhibition, more experience-based’, something that ‘moves, affects your senses’. He also stressed that ‘the dream was to target groups who normally don’t go to museums, and who feel intimidated by traditional exhibitions’ because of the intellectual abilities that such exhibitions typically presuppose.³

³ All interview quotes are my translations from Danish. I conducted nine recorded interviews with staff and former staff members (of between 30 minutes’ and two hours’ duration) on top of numerous

The Danish Arsenal Museum: between ‘military’ and ‘cultural’ trajectories

I will now proceed to contextualize the Arsenal Museum, focusing on its position between what I term ‘military’ and ‘cultural’ trajectories and agendas. These terms, vague as they may seem, are intended to characterise the relationships and obligations – often presented to me by staff members as uncomfortable or complex – towards the institution’s diverse political hinterlands and stakeholders. Some of these belong to the military sphere, while others are connected to the cultural sector. This ‘in-betweenness’ thus also captures a continuous concern at the museum with whether it was ‘too close’ or ‘too far’ from such external powers, i.e. a question of adequate distancing. Importantly, as I will demonstrate, these were not just lofty, abstract concerns but issues and problems that mattered directly, materially and corporeally on the museum floor.

The Afghanistan exhibition differed markedly from the museum’s conventional ways of going about exhibiting warfare. For generations, its main exhibition had revolved around the display of exhaustingly long lines of weapons, organized chronologically and side-by-side, in its huge, 160-metre-long main hall. Before being transformed into a museum, the old Copenhagen waterfront building *was* the arsenal, serving as the Danish kings’ main armoury for more than four hundred years and well into the 20th century. The museum was created in 1928 as a unit under the Danish Ministry of War (renamed in 1950 as the Ministry of Defence) but then transferred, in 1961, to the newly established Ministry of Culture. Until 1966, its directors were military officers. Still at the time of my stay, several staff members were affiliated formally or informally with the Danish army. The museum’s political-departmental anchoring had been subject to internal debate regularly, with recent considerations probing a formal ‘return’ to the Ministry of Defence, from whom the museum’s management had often felt able to count on closer political and financial support than from its official superiors at the Ministry of Culture. As I was told by its director in 2013, ‘this is still an institution in which there is a clear expectation that you are loyal to the Danish army and also, actually, that you see things somehow from the perspective of the army’.

Not everyone agreed that this was or should be the case. A former long-term employee voiced a critical view when I interviewed him, telling me that the museum had always ‘done a lot to please the Danish armed forces (*Forsvaret*), and also to keep [its activities] within the framework and the self image of the armed forces’. In his understanding, this closeness – or this lack of ‘a healthy distance’ to its subject, as he phrased it – was a key factor in the museum’s awkward relationship with its formal management at the Ministry of Culture. The museum’s caretakers, he argued, ‘have not seen the museum as a distanced cultural institution’ but as closely associated with the armed forces. In such a perspective, closeness becomes problematic, an

informal talks, meetings and guided tours documented via field notes. I also conducted twenty-five recorded visitor interviews, each with 1-4 visitors. This was supplemented with material from planning documents, minutes from meetings, media and web material as well as other files and sources.

obstruction for the creation of trustworthy knowledge. Few of the museum's current staff expressed similar critiques during my talks with them. Some instead pointed to what they saw as a peculiar pattern of double standards in the Danish museum sector, in which being a military museum was understood as suspicious by default. One curator asked me:

Why is it never a problem for, say, the Workers' Museum, whether they uphold a critical distance to their subject? Why is it never [a problem] for the Women's Museum whether they uphold a critical distance to their subject? (...) It seems there are cases in which it is perfectly legit to be in this kind of very close symbiotic relationship. And then there are places where it is seemingly incredibly suspect to be in such a symbiotic relationship.⁴

Whether its association with the Danish armed forces was regarded as a potential problem or a fruitful symbiosis, the museum's lack of perceived departmental 'fit' and bureaucratic backing was a local concern during my fieldwork, in terms of both immediate financial and logistical issues, but also, and more fundamentally, related to questions of institutional identity and belonging. The ambiguous relationships and tensions regarding the museum's identity as a 'cultural' and/or 'military' institution thus constitute an important context for my studies. But they also mattered on the museum floor. In the case of the *Distant War* exhibition and its coming-into-being, the abstract questions of perspectives and of analytical distance became physically manifest. For example, the museum director's words, quoted above, on the implicit expectation to 'see things somehow from the perspective of the army' were mirrored in the exhibition's perspectival layout, as visitors were invited, quite literally, to 'share' the view from the Danish camp. Likewise, the issue of proximity versus distance to the army must be understood not merely as an abstract or philosophical matter, but as a relationship that was materially translated, so to speak, into physical and bodily engagements in the exhibition space. 'Proximity' became not just a metaphoric ambition, but a supremely tangible concern.

In fact, the *Distant War* exhibition can be seen as the outcome of a concrete encounter between these two spheres: it was shaped, in the main, by two key individuals, one a soldier, the other a museum academic. War met culture in person, so to speak. In 2010, one of them, Nikolaj, then a soldier and press officer serving the Danish contingent of the *International Security Assistance Force* (ISAF), was approached by the Arsenal Museum. His contact was a young historian, Morten,⁵ who had been tasked by the museum's management with preparing a special exhibition on the ongoing war in Afghanistan. Coming, so to speak, from each side – an academic civilian and a trained military man – the duo struck up a partnership and set up a small, devoted team that came to operate relatively independently from the rest of the

⁴ The interviewee's references regard two particular Danish institutions, the Workers' Museum (*Arbejdermuseet*) in Copenhagen and the Women's Museum (*Kvindemuseet*) in Aarhus.

⁵ I am particularly grateful to these two key discussion partners for their time, reflections and interest during my fieldwork. I have striven to represent and analyse their roles, views and positions in a nuanced and fair manner. The selections and interpretations made in this paper are, obviously, my own.

museum over the next few years. Doing so, they each had to move closer towards and come to terms with initially incomprehensible logics from the ‘other side’. Thus, Morten had spent a brief spell of time ‘embedded’ with the Danish forces in Afghanistan, supervising the collection of objects and gear for the exhibition, including joining outbound patrols. Conversely, Nikolaj had begun the project as a representative of the Danish army having to oversee its cooperation with the museum. He explained to me:

I was appended [at the museum] by the Danish army at the time, to be the one who – from the perspective of the army – had to make sure that there was a validity to things (...) and that it was not some long-haired academics who just sat around making up a whole lot of things.

In this way, Nikolaj came to serve, and to view himself, as a guardian of military ‘truth’. Soon, he was hired full-time by the museum. Thus, when I conducted my studies in 2013, with Morten no longer at the museum, Nikolaj had become the main caretaker of the *Distant War* exhibition and the activities connected to it – although he had not been ‘provided with a fancy academic title’, as he explained to me with a grin. He also described how, upon his arrival there in 2010, he had found it impossible to comprehend the academic working culture and the long-winded discussions with ‘no results’, the corridor whispers from which he felt excluded, and the opaque decision-making processes among his new colleagues. From his unique and ‘reversely embedded’ position at the museum, we could say that Nikolaj found himself engaged in a hazy field of ‘culture’, as foreign as the military frontline to which Morten had been temporarily exposed. When explaining his early insecurities as an outsider at the museum, Nikolaj said to me: ‘I am not an academic, I am not a historian, I am not a curator, and I am not a museum inspector. I am just someone who came in from the cold’ (*der er kommet ind fra højre*).

In the intense process of exhibition crafting that followed, the duo struck up a productive relationship and a mutual understanding. Morten remained formally in charge of curatorial decisions until the exhibition’s opening in the autumn of 2011, but found himself heavily dependent on Nikolaj’s expertise. This was most saliently the case in the coordination of a team of recently returned Afghanistan veterans assigned to take part in the actual construction of the exhibition. This allocation was unplanned from the outset, but emerged as an opportunity which was welcomed on both pragmatic and principal grounds. The veterans were part of a newly formed non-combatant or ‘combat pause’ (*kamppause*) company composed of injured, fragile or otherwise incapable soldiers deemed to be in need of a temporary break from the front. In this way, the exhibition was also – or, more precisely, *came to be*, through incidental and unforeseen developments along the way – circumscribed by broader societal calls for the ‘recognition’ and reintegration of former servicemen in Danish society, and for attending to the risk of post-traumatic disorders (Sørensen 2015).

Nikolaj, who had himself been deployed in Afghanistan, explained to me about what he called the ‘win-win’ situation of being, unexpectedly, given the chance to work with recently returned, often mentally fragile, veterans:

All of a sudden they could be part of this, with their own personal Afghanistan story, and contribute something that could live on. They could come in at nine in the morning and be a little bit in Afghanistan, get back to the girlfriend at three, and come back the next morning. So they could, so to speak, open their psyches – me being neither psychologist or anything – but, sort of, open onto a mental space that had something to do with Afghanistan in [the shape of] some lesser, not so dangerous, threatening experiences (...). At least that was the feedback I got.

I will return to these possibly ‘therapeutic’ qualities of the setting. For now, I want to stress the involvement of the veterans as an example of the concreteness of the cultural-military encounter fundamental to the assembling of the exhibition. Morten described to me how, in managing the process, his own academic and consensus-seeking approach had often met with blank eyes and confusion from the veterans:

Regarding the exhibition – the purely practical and project management part of it – it very quickly became evident that I was not an officer and was not trained in that way. And I simply had to bring in Nikolaj to [manage] those going about constructing, managing that process, because my way of commanding was not useful to them. I would say, ‘I have this drawing, guys, you have to build this wall, these are the measurements and so on, you’ll work it out, right’. (...) They couldn’t handle that at all. Nikolaj had to step in and say, ‘all right, guys, listen up: you take these battens, and then you do this and this. (...) My way of handling it simply did not fit, but it worked when Nikolaj translated what I wanted into military language, if you will.

Sometimes, like here, such military-civilian differences, clashes and translations were described to me in terms seemingly bordering on stereotypes and prejudice. But they were clearly felt by the participants. From managers and curators to museum attendants and administrators, working in a house of culture which is also a house of war meant having to negotiate distinctly different logics, languages or even belief systems as part of one’s day-to-day job. In the melting pot of activity leading up to the 2011 opening of the exhibition, one can trace such different routines and rationales characteristic not just of Morten and Nikolaj as individuals and working partners, but of the two larger ‘systems’ and ways of thinking, deciding and knowing by which they had each been formed. The coming together, the continued negotiations, and the collegial crafting of some sort of common ground between these two men on a micro level can thus be said to hold and express, in condensed form, many of the struggles and difficulties of the much larger encounter between two enormous institutional systems, even cultures: on the one hand, the museum machinery – and, behind that, civil society in the shape of the Danish Ministry of Culture – and, on the other, the Danish army and its military logics and parameters.

Almost there: the exhibition setting

The Distant War: Danish Soldier in Afghanistan rested on the idea of submerging visitors in fragments of a series of full-size settings and zones from Helmand Province, the turbulent and dangerous region in which the Danish army had operated under British command since 2006, and to let the audience ‘explore’ alongside, and in effect share perspectives with, the Danish troops. As signified by the exhibition subtitle, the national focus was explicitly prioritized. The exhibition space, occupying a rectangular fenced-off area of the museum’s ground floor, consisted of a number of structures, milieus and objects brought back from the field of war and rearranged in Copenhagen. A key element in this atmospheric landscape was the large amount of sand and dust surrounding visitors here, constituting a dramatic contrast to the orderly, safe and ‘sealed’ museum space outside of the special exhibit area. The military ‘sensescape’ (Classen and Howes 2006), composed with scenographic assistance from filmmakers and set designers, utilized sound, light and even smell for immersive purposes. A key idea was to let visitors get close to and handle objects, many of which were ‘ordinary’ and mundane in contrast to the glass-protected and aesthetically organized museum masterpieces still dominating the vitrines in the museum’s permanent exhibition.

The involvement of collaborators from the creative industries resulted in a stage-like exhibition structure in which visitors were guided through eight separate sections, following a specific narrative and itinerary ‘in the footsteps’ of a Danish soldier. Thus, the first room visitors entered was a reconstructed Danish teenage boy’s room, ‘pre-deployment’ so to speak, with uniform and gear lying around, just before he (and we as visitors) embarked on the Afghanistan mission. ‘We’ were then flown out to Helmand Province, progressing physically through three different Danish camp settings before venturing out on patrol in the recreated desert surroundings. Here, visitors saw action in the shape of an exploded *Eagle IV* armoured vehicle – a wreck from an actual roadside bomb incident in 2010 in which several soldiers were injured, but none killed – constituting the dramatic climax of the exhibition’s suspense curve. A recreated Afghan farmhouse and a small section of a market street portraying the provincial capital, Gereshk, provided other ‘local’ settings through which visitors trailed the Danish patrols. Finally, everyone returned to Denmark, and to safety, with the exhibition’s last room/stage meant to represent Tune airport, close to Roskilde, Denmark (Figure 1).

To match the full-size reconstructions, instead of conventional labelling and text, the museum relied on information from uniformed Danish soldiers, speaking to the public ‘from the front’ in video clips from iPads. This was a key ingredient in the already-mentioned alleged elimination of the museum’s curatorial ‘voice of authority’ which was devised to put visitors face-to-face with the war participants themselves, ‘removing anything that could interfere with the direct communication between the Afghan “film set” and the audience’, as summed up by Morten in a short English-language article he penned on the ideas behind the exhibition (Tinning 2013, 20). He continued:

We thus worked very hard at un-curating the exhibition as much as possible. The soldiers would “design” the physical interior and appearance of the exhibition; museum texts and photos would be hidden from view unless they related directly to the diorama setting and most importantly, the individual stories would be told by the protagonists themselves using video displayed by video projectors or on iPads. (ibid.)

The exhibition team worked deliberately on staging a compelling narrative flow, inviting visitors to join the Danish ‘protagonists’ and generally working within a ‘storytelling’ framework. These cinematic rationales framed the visitors’ encounter with the Afghanistan war as a suspenseful ‘story’ in which they took on the role of extras, so to speak, assisting the (Danish) main characters on their perilous mission. Nikolaj, who had a background in the film industry before his military career, emphasized Homer’s *Odyssey* as an iconic template inspiring the exhibition’s plotline and stressed the basic urge and curiosity towards ‘the unknown’ as a key factor. He outlined a narrative need for confrontations and choices facing the ‘heroes’ along the way, as in a Homeric epic. ‘We need a conflict for it to become interesting’, as he put it to me.

The *Distant War* exhibition, in short, utilized the power of 3D reconstructions and the potential of material, multisensory and narrative design to immerse and engage visitors emotionally. This of course resonates fully with the trend towards increasingly experiential forms of heritage communication and learning outlined above. It was very much a story of a *Danish* journey, and of the external and internal challenges facing the Danish main characters. The ‘others’ of the story – including British, American or Afghan alliance partners, but also the local population and the various factions constituting the enemy forces – were registered and filtered through the mediations of the Danish war witnesses. Thus, for instance, the Danish iPad soldier-storytellers provided their views on the Afghan National Army and their perspectives on encounters with locals. Evaluations and predictions pertaining to the conflict, or to ‘the future of Afghanistan’, as one iPad heading ran, were also left to the young Danish troopers. This provided visitors with impressions and reports ‘directly’ from the field, with powerful authority vested in these accounts of personal experience (Figure 2).

Knowing war ‘honestly’: witnessing, first-hand experience, and authority

What struck me as particularly interesting in the *Distant War* exhibition was the determination to actively ‘hide’ the curator – to ‘un-curate’ the exhibition, as it was phrased by Morten – and insert, in his/her place, the personified and named soldiers to speak ‘for themselves’. The underlying rationales derived partly from the museum’s own concerns to escape the somewhat ‘dusty’ and ‘geeky’ technology-oriented exhibitionary paradigm of its past. More fundamentally, I would argue, they relied on particular assumptions about the linkages between knowledge, expertise and

experience, and about the tangled relationships between war participants, academics and home audiences.

Among those involved in its construction, one found a strong conviction that the Afghanistan exhibition offered a more ‘direct’ and ‘honest’ kind of communication than conventional museum initiatives. ‘We (...) aimed at removing the visitor from the museum “space”, taking them as close as we could to an Afghan context, before unlocking the exhibition’s full storytelling potential’, Morten wrote (Tinning 2013: 20). He also stated that the museum should ‘try to interfere as little as possible with the direct exchange between the visitor and subject’ and ‘don’t try to influence the visitor’s interpretation of his or her experience’ (ibid.). In this view of museum communication, getting as close as possible meant avoiding ‘interfering’ or ‘influencing’ visitors. Interestingly, the elaborate perspectival and national positioning of visitors, as well as the strict narrative and scenographic staging of the ‘Afghan film set’, as it was called, were not understood as interference. Instead, the kinds of interference that were to be avoided were of a conventional-curatorial kind. ‘Academic’ mediation was deemed suspect, an intermediate layer of communicative friction or scholarly obstruction that could and should be expelled by facilitating a more ‘direct’ line of dialogue between visitors and exhibits. Getting rid of the curator as a middleman was thus viewed as a route to a purer, less contaminated ‘radio signal’, one could say.

In a short PR video originally released on the museum’s website for the exhibition opening in 2011, Nikolaj explained on camera: ‘What I find very exciting about this is that this is an honest platform – a room you can walk around in, with concrete objects, so that you can show and tell your relatives what it is like to be deployed’.⁶ Here, honesty and concreteness, associated with a lack of abstract academic intervention, becomes coupled with the immersive possibilities at hand: the physical facilities of the three-dimensional installations and dioramas offering a certain kind of intimate and corporeal, and therefore allegedly particularly trustworthy, war knowledge.

Indeed, these immersive and experiential qualities arguably ‘worked’ in many respects. Most visitors I followed and spoke to applauded the unusual format, many being clearly moved in ways they were not used to in museum settings, and largely seemed to share the view that this kind of communication was more engaging, honest or even more ‘real’, as some would tell me, than more orthodox exhibition formats. The video invitation, although found on the museum’s website, was clearly addressed not so much to the general public as to Danish veterans as a particular interest group. Veterans were specifically encouraged to utilize *The Distant War* as a framework for visiting with their families and showing them the realities of deployment. ‘Given that they can be here with their relatives’, Nikolaj proposed further in the video clip, ‘they will be able to obtain a more sensorial, a more natural explanation of what it’s like [to be deployed]. And in that way I think it can assist in opening the dialogue.’

⁶ Video available on <http://natmus.dk/museerne/toejhusmuseet/udstillinger/den-fjerne-krig/>. Accessed 15 January 2016.

As it turned out, in some cases the exhibition did function as a semi-therapeutic, post-mission space for veterans, both for those involved in its actual construction and for those visiting later on. I have already quoted Nikolaj on the benefits he saw in the exhibition for those with traumas or injuries from Afghanistan – those who, working on the construction, ‘could come in at nine in the morning and be a little bit in Afghanistan, get back to the girlfriend at three, and come back the next morning’, using the approximated Afghanistan in Copenhagen as a safe site for both material and personal rebuilding. These alleged qualities were not part of the original plan; nor were they explored psychologically or documented during my time at the museum. Nevertheless, it was evident that for some people at least the exhibition actually *did* have such a ‘therapeutic’ role and *had* played a positive role for several troubled veterans. It must also be said that in a few cases, both during the construction of the exhibition and for veterans visiting later on, the multisensory simulations triggered negative reactions, unwelcome flashbacks and even breakdowns, as they elicited specific overpowering and involuntary memories. As a consequence, the museum subsequently posted a warning sign at the exhibition entrance: ‘Warning to veterans! The exhibition reproduces everyday life in Afghanistan very realistically and may cause emotional distress or trigger violent, invasive memories from your own deployment’ (my translation)(Figure 3).

Despite these risks, the ‘reality effect’ of the exhibition was primarily viewed, by museum staff and visitors alike, as a distinct plus and a special quality of the exhibition format. It can be seen as an example of a set of mental and collective computational processes that this kind of viscerally oriented ‘knowing’ or ‘processing’ of previous war experience may allow.⁷ At the same time, the inclination to view the experientially based exhibition choices and stagings as constituting a particularly ‘honest’, ‘direct’ and ‘natural’ approach must be questioned. Such assumptions were coupled, at the museum, with a widespread insistence that the Afghanistan exhibition was completely impartial and devoid of political standpoints. On the back of the wooden partition walls that fenced off the special exhibition area, the museum had attached statements from all political parties eligible for the Danish parliament (as of August 2011) regarding the nation’s engagement in the Afghanistan war, thus literally and materially keeping politics ‘out of’ the exhibition space itself. All the staff members I spoke to during my time at the museum were adamant that neither museum nor exhibition were ‘for or against’ the Danish intervention in Afghanistan. Instead, they described the exhibition as an attempt to provide detailed facts and information to a Danish public characterized by strong ‘opinions’ on the war but very little ‘concrete knowledge’, as one curator phrased it in an interview. The museum’s ambition, as he saw it, was to qualify such opinions and make visitors reflect on their conceptions and prejudices regarding the war and the Danish mission.

This professional insistence on the museum’s impartial and apolitical stance surprised me. The very idea that a museum can portray the world ‘as it is’ and present ‘honest’ facts by getting rid of academic ‘interference’ seemed curious, especially

⁷ For wider discussions of the museum as a ‘therapeutic’ space, see Wood 2008; Nightingale 2009.

given the elaborate staging and positioning of visitors that actually occurred. The privileging of soldier ‘protagonists’ as authentic voices from the field over classic curatorial knowledge that should be ‘hidden’ is clearly a scenographic and curatorial choice in itself, celebrating a particular kind of knowledge dependent on closeness and ‘having been there’. In doing so, the museum heralded the war participant as a *witness* and as a privileged purveyor of truth. In thinking about the witness as a key figure, I am inspired by Harari’s (2008, 2009, 2010) identification of different styles of ‘witnessing’ in soldiers’ written memoirs from the Middle Ages onwards. He describes a movement from an earlier belief in ‘eye-witnessing’ to a new kind of authority vested in what he terms ‘flesh-witnessing’. Eye-witnessing, as the term implies, relies on observation, on seeing war, and is importantly *transferable*: eye witnesses can report on what the war ‘looked like’ from particular positions, and others (who did not observe the action first-hand) may subsequently access and combine such viewpoints. Flesh-witnessing, on the other hand – emerging as a rhetorical tool, in Harari’s analysis, around the mid-nineteenth-century – depends on an embodied, multisensorial kind of authority. ‘This experiential knowledge’, he contends, ‘cannot be translated into words, and therefore cannot be transferred to other people, except if they too undergo a similar experience’ (2010, 67).

As a case in point, the iPad accounts at the museum provided visitors with impressions and testimonies ‘directly’ from the field as witnessed by the participants themselves. As Joan Scott (1991, 777) has rhetorically asked, ‘when the evidence offered is the evidence of “experience,” the claim for referentiality is further buttressed – what could be truer, after all, than a subject’s own account of what he or she has lived through?’ The iPad reports and the knowledge they afforded were, in a sense, exempt from discussion or critique, being anchored in the minds, memories and voices of individual war participants. Yet, the sum of these voices and experiences – drawing, generally, a hopeful image of the Afghanistan mission and the difference that Danes have made there – came across, in this context, as the view of the nation’s armed forces, and, moreover, as authorized by the museum institution that framed them. Thus, while the personified statements were undoubtedly true to the individual’s understandings and memories, such experientially based accounts cannot escape the larger framing apparatuses in which they are placed. Scott proposes further:

When experience is taken as the origin of knowledge, the vision of the individual subject (the person who had the experience or the historian who recounts it) becomes the bedrock of evidence on which explanation is built. Questions about the constructed nature of experience, about how subjects are constituted as different in the first place, about how one’s vision is structured – about language (or discourse) and history – are left aside. (ibid.)

The purported realism of the Copenhagen exhibition calls for further discussion. In-house, the exhibition was routinely viewed and described as real and realistic, as evidenced, for instance, by the warning sign mentioned above. Understandably so, as it was in some respects unusually rich on sensations, emotional resonance and

intricate detail and nuance, for example when visitors were invited inside an actual wreck of a damaged vehicle and learned of the dramatic event through the stories of participants as well as the story told by the girlfriend of one of the injured soldiers, who described the shocking phone call she received while at the gym back in Denmark.

In other ways, however, the captivating communication format did not seem to allow any chance of nuance – indeed, in some cases it arguably sabotaged any such opportunity. This was especially salient in the images drawn of Afghanistan and the Afghans. One key installation was a reconstructed farmhouse, encountered as part of the visitors’ emulated ‘patrol’ with Danish foot soldiers. Outside the mud walls of the tiny house, an old bicycle was parked. On a table next to it, visitors found a suspicious-looking, rectangular item fitted with cables and held together by black tape: an improvised explosive device (IED), commonly known as a ‘roadside bomb’. On the accompanying iPad, the central question facing the Danish patrols was posed, ‘Friend or enemy?’, with soldiers explaining on video how they had trained for respectful engagement and communication with the local population, and for the assessment of potential threats and the ability to distinguish harmless locals from enemy insurgents. Given the exhibition’s first-hand communication principles, and given that visitors followed in the footsteps of the Danish soldiers, this focus was quite logical, even inescapable: the ‘friend or enemy’ question constituted a key dilemma for our ‘protagonists’ as they entered a potentially life-threatening situation (Figure 4).

At the same time, however, letting this type of what we may call a ‘risk assessment’ gaze frame the image of the local landscape and its inhabitants has problematic consequences, especially when coupled with claims to realism and objectivity. The leaving of a roadside bomb outside the exhibition’s (single copy of a) rural farmhouse is particularly remarkable, an act of representation carrying major negative connotations and inviting stereotypifications about the local population as a dangerous, secretive and suspicious oriental ‘other’. This kind of ‘risk assessment’ outlook was utterly dominant, and necessarily so, given the profound interpellation of the audience with the Danish troops. In one camp setting, visitors could climb a *sangar* (watch tower) and thus literally take the elevated Danish perspective on the landscape and its threats, as well as manning the accompanying machine gun. Elsewhere, the wrecked *Eagle IV* vehicle served as a reminder of the dire and very real threat posed by IEDs and the perils of the Afghan landscape.

Amidst this dominant gaze characterized by risk, threat and suspicion, a single exception offering alternative portrayals and nuance must be mentioned: a set of film clips, playing in loops inside the darkness of the little farmhouse, with footage and voices of Afghan children and their families, hiding from the war raging outside their doors, and offering their (mostly negative) views on the presence of the foreign troops. The excerpts derived from a 2012 documentary, *My Afghanistan – Life in the forbidden zone*, made by journalist Nagieb Khaja, which the museum had been allowed to include. In it, the filmmaker had circulated 30 mobile cameras to civilian

Afghans, asking them to document their lives and perils in the conflict zone.⁸ In the exhibition, these powerful images and voices were meant to create a degree of counterbalance, Morten told me, although he also said it was ‘pure luck’ that the museum had stumbled upon and been able to draw on the film; this had not been part of the original design. However, despite frequent technical fallouts, and despite the failure of many visitors to find their way into the farmhouse, the footage indeed formed a profound contrast to the dominant Danish gaze.

If the privileging of the soldiers’ voices was indeed a curatorial choice, so was the decision to embed visitors firmly with the Danish troops and let them see and sense the Afghanistan action through their (national) eyes, ears and fingers. The structural choice to employ classical narratological and storytelling techniques, plotlines and climax curves was also a curatorial choice. The *Distant War* was thus hardly un-curated but, if anything, curated in the extreme. Furthermore, taking politics ‘out of it’ by nailing the political parties’ statements on the back of the exhibition wall amounted to an ‘un-politicizing’ policy which was as debatable as the museum’s ‘un-curating’ policy: the facts and perspectives offered, the positions afforded, and the choices made for visitors were not unbiased. Anthropologist Richard Handler has critiqued what he calls the ‘stubborn neutrality’ of many American history museums, ‘a neutrality that is, needless to say, anything but apolitical’ (1994, 677; see also Luke 2002; Conn 2006). He continues:

Museum professionals know that exhibitions are never value-free. Yet to tackle tough political issues, many American history museums rely on a rhetoric of just-the-facts combined with that of free choice. The museum, they say, will present visitors with facts; visitors can then “make up their own minds” about how those facts are to be evaluated.

A similar critique could be levelled at the Danish Arsenal Museum. Yet, as noted above, the museum’s visceral-experiential approach clearly *did* enable certain identifications that served specific, positive ends, such as supporting the reintegration of homecoming veterans. But regarding the status of first-hand accounts and testimonies, we may do well to heed the reminder from theatre scholar Scott Magelssen (2011, 195) that

though some of us may tend to privilege performative acts of knowledge production (...) over textual ones (...) as more authentic or more adequate in expressing voices and experiences, especially those of the disenfranchised, this does not mean that such performative acts of witness are uncontestable, free of political charges, or unfraught with contradictions.

Conclusion: Collapsing and confirming distance at the Arsenal Museum

Historian Jay Winter has called for museum managers to admit ‘the magnitude of the problems inherent in trying to represent war, and through it, trying to represent the

⁸ See <http://www.dfi.dk/faktaomfilm/film/en/76460.aspx?id=76460> (accessed 26 July 2016).

pain of others' (2012, 150). He warns that

the most serious pitfall in this cultural domain is what might be termed *pseudo-realism*, the false claim of those who write about war or design museums about it that they can bring the visitor into something approximating the experience of combat. (ibid., 161, italics in original).

In some areas, the *Distant War* exhibition seemed to celebrate experience and thrill in such a 'pseudo-real' fashion. Prioritizing closeness and immersion, and seeking in the process to confront conventional 'distant' curatorial knowledge, the Arsenal Museum crafted a captivating narrative flow for the visiting public, following on the heels of the Danish troops out to 'make a difference' in the world. In seeking to actively hide the curator while lauding the soldiers' first-hand experiences, the museum supported a view of 'the privileged authority that physical presence provides' (Woodward and Jenkins 2013, 153).

The urge to provide under-represented or un-recognized groups, in this case Danish war veterans, with a voice is politically understandable. As I was told on several occasions, a crucial success criterion for the museum was that visiting Afghanistan veterans must not be able to say afterwards, 'It wasn't like that at all'. That would have signified the gravest failure, the aim being to ensure that individuals who had actually served in Afghanistan felt adequately represented. However, the way in which this challenge was handled had other representational consequences, especially relating to the image of Afghanistan and its inhabitants. I never heard anyone discuss whether or not potential Afghan visitors or war refugees would need to feel represented or 'recognized'.

Paradoxically, the yearnings for proximity in Copenhagen, and the heralding of the Danish soldier as the ultimate transmitter of (bodily earned and therefore trustworthy) knowledge, in some ways worked to *deepen* trenches between outsiders and insiders and reinforce rather than dismantle stereotypes. The exhibition addressed and, if anything, supported in-group solidarity among Danish soldiers and veterans. It 'enrolled' home audiences, although the distinction between military insiders and civilian outsiders – including allegedly distanced and 'long-haired' academics – was not really broken down. Getting rid of the mediating curator meant that this became largely a military self-representation. Regarding the images drawn of Afghanistan and the Afghans, they remained at a distance due to the privileging of the Danish 'flesh witness' and his security-focused outlook.

In Harari's discussion of soldiers' memoirs, he warns of a communicative breakdown if proper 'understanding' comes to be regarded as the privilege of only those who have themselves experienced war:

If the essential knowledge of war is experiential and therefore nontransferable, then soldiers are important as flesh witnesses, and their authority seems to trump that of anyone who was not there. The implications (...) are far-reaching. It threatens to shut down the public sphere of knowledge, at least as far as war is concerned. (2010, 77).

At the Arsenal Museum, stories, interpretations and emotions were profoundly one-

sided. The exhibition offered very little room, either literal or abstract, for grasping the complex local contexts of the conflict or the lives and deaths of the Afghan others – whether civilians, allied local forces or enemy combatants – or for incorporating their points of view in the discussion. Indeed, the cost of war in a larger, not-exclusively-Danish framework remained almost entirely unaddressed. As a consequence, the display, fractured through the military optics of the Danish warfighter, did not challenge existing stereotypes or allow much identification with the conflict's diverse human actors and their hopes, fears or sufferings.

It is, one may argue, a legitimate exhibition strategy to favour experiential and multisensory communication forms, to privilege a national perspective and the view from 'the ground', and to follow a narrative template modelled on ancient heroic epics. But when these positionings, models and points of view are not recognized as precisely that – when, instead, the immersive and narrative formats are coupled with claims to fuller, more objective or more trustworthy kinds of knowledge – the museum's dispositions must be critiqued. The approximated Afghanistan in Copenhagen was certainly engaging and thought provoking, but it was not un-curated and nor was it apolitical. While it offered insights that relied on bringing visitors 'closer' to the field of war, it also confirmed or even expanded other supposed distances – such as those between Danish war participants and home audiences, or those between Danes and Afghans. Coming closer to 'our boys' in Afghanistan, physically and emotionally, unfortunately also involved reiterating orthodox images and alleged distances between 'our' worlds and 'theirs'.

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