Film, narrative agency, and the politics of care in veteran Britain

Abstract

Film offers untapped potential for making critical interventions in world politics, particularly in ways that harness people's capacity to narrate stories that creatively empower their communities. Combining International Relations (IR) scholarship on visual politics with narrative theory and feminist scholarship on care, this paper presents film as a means of exploring and expressing narrative agency; that is, the power to tell stories that represent people's experiences in ways that disrupt hegemonic narratives. Dialectics of care and narrative agency are explored in the context of military-to-civilian 'transition' in Britain. We argue that the landscape of transition for military veterans is dominated by a preoccupation with employment and economic productivity, resulting in a 'care deficit' for veterans leaving the military. Through the *Stories in Transition* project, which used co-created film to explore narrative agency in the context of three veterans' charities, we argue that the act of making care visible constitutes a necessary intervention in this transitional landscape. Grounding this intervention within feminist care ethics and the related notion of care aesthetics, we highlight the potential for film to reveal in compelling audio-visual narratives an alternative project of transition which might better sustain life and hope in the aftermath of military service.

Keywords: *film, narrative, narrative agency, care, feminist care ethics, veterans, transition*

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Film, narrative agency, and the politics of care in veteran Britain

Across an entire wall of a community art studio, a mural has been painted. It's an enchanting woodland scene: flowers-in-bloom, a solid oak tree, a gentle flowing stream crossed by a bridge made of old cobbled stone. In the background are layers of dense green forest, illuminated under a blue sky. It's incredibly detailed, with light, shading, contrast, form and colour all carefully constructed, inviting the viewer to inhabit the beautiful scene. Foreground-right there is a house, a large two-storey building with big, clear windows offering a view inside. But there's nothing to see inside the windows, yet.

Today a green-screen has been draped over the mural's mid-section, covering it from floor to ceiling. A man carrying a paint brush walks in front of the screen and stops in the middle. As a camera watches on, the man mimics the action of painting up and down. Peals of laughter emerge from somewhere off-screen as the man plays up to the camera, smiling brazenly and exaggerating his brush strokes while he 'paints' the screen. Later, during the edit, figures in front of the green-screen are positioned inside the windows of the house, appearing as though they are decorating it from the inside.

There is more going on here than meets the eye, or more than what the camera sees. The moment in front of the green-screen is playful and spontaneous, but is later adopted by a more profound meaning which emerges through the creative practice of filmmaking. The mural, the film, the act of decorating the house; these are all acts of community and of ownership. The mural itself acquires meaning through the process of its creation by members of a community art group. It is the product of people who share a common identity and sense of belonging, working together. The house being 'painted' via the green-screen technique is the house in which the mural room is situated – the premises owned by the charity Veterans in Communities (VIC). The building was taken on by the charity, renovated and transformed

by the same people now leading the mural's creation and co-directing the film. The film, *Return, belong, prosper*, is their story, and an opportunity to show the world what VIC does, and why. These layers of meaning piece together like a jigsaw, slotted into place by the veterans who co-directed the film. We would later learn how the creative practice had enabled these meanings to emerge: while screening the first rough edit to the charity's trustees, one of the veterans reflected that the green-screen scene, aside from the humour it generated, "was like when we took ownership of the building", and when VIC really began.

Relational imaginations of agency and care are central to the story being told through our co-created film, as well as the story we wish to tell through this research. We have no interest in romanticising notions of agency and care nor moments of their enactment, such as the green-screen scene, which was simply one of a hundred daily moments of community, care, and belonging. Both agency and care are complex achievements, always partial, limited, and undermined in various ways in life as in research. Rather, what we hope to show, following Sophie Harman[1], is how film can function as narrative agency in international politics, and how this unfolds in ways that offer to remake the political landscape of veterans' post-military lives with a focus on care. Our core argument is that while care holds transformative possibilities in the aftermath of war and military service, the transitional spaces veterans enter into upon discharge from the military are often, curiously, care-depleted, and that the act of making care visible in care-depleted spaces thus constitutes an act of political significance[2]. In making this argument, we move beyond establishing the relevance of care in post-conflict settings – as feminist international political economy (IPE) scholarship has argued previously[3] – to examine how film as a communicative technology

[1] Harman, S. (2019). *Seeing politics: Film, visual method, and international relations*. McGill-Queens University Press.
[2] Rai, S. (2024). *Depletion: The human costs of caring*. Oxford University Press.
[3] True, J. (2019). Introduction to Special Section of Social Politics: Postconflict Care Economies. *Social Politics*, *26*(4), 535-537; Rai, S., True, J., & Tanyag, M. (2019). From Depletion to Regeneration: Addressing

can make agentic enactments of care tangible, evocative, and visually stimulating. In highlighting the potential of film to centre care in care-depleted spaces, our argument also seeks to move beyond the specific politics of military-to-civilian transition and connect with broader areas of IR scholarship including visual politics, narrative and conflict, critical military studies, and feminist IPE.

We situate our intervention in relation to three overlapping areas of feminist scholarship: 'war as experience', feminist IPE, and feminist care ethics, though with a particular grounding in care ethics. Within the feminist IR literature on 'war as experience', veterans' lives are often productively understood as war's embodied legacies; that is, the forms of violence veterans carry with them and how these violences make and unmake civilian futures[4]. Such work highlights how the violence of war transforms lives and bodies, including how these transformations become somehow ordinary and everyday[5]. While keeping these important insights about war's violence within our field of vision – our 'frame of war'[6], perhaps – we ask what additional insights might be brought to bear by allowing a

Structural and Physical Violence in Post-Conflict Economies. *Social Politics*, *26*(4), 561-585; Pereyra-Iraola, V., & Gunawardana, S. (2019). Carceral Spaces and Social Reproduction: Exploring Export Processing Zones in Sri Lanka and Prisons in Argentina. *Social Politics*, *26*(4), 538-560; Chilmeran, Y., & Pratt, N. (2019). The Geopolitics of Social Reproduction and Depletion: The Case of Iraq and Palestine. *Social Politics*, *26*(4), 586-607.

[4] Inter alia: Sylvester, C. (2011). *Experiencing war*. Routledge; Sylvester, C. (2013). *War as experience: Contributions from international relations and feminist analysis*. Routledge; McSorely, K. (2013). War and the body: Militarisation, practice and experience. Routledge; Kronsell, A., & Svedberg, E. (2012). *Making gender, making war: Violence, military and peacekeeping practices*. Routledge; Baker, C. (2020). *Making war on bodies: Militarisation, aesthetics and embodiment in international politics*. Edinburgh University Press; Wibben, A. (2011). *Feminist security studies: A narrative approach*. Routledge; Wool, Z. (2015). *After war: The weight of life at Walter Reed.* Duke University Press; Bulmer, S., & Eichler, M. (2017). 'Unmaking militarized masculinity: Veterans and the project of military-to-civilian transition'. *Critical Military Studies, 3*(2), 161-181.

[5] See, for example, Wool, *After war*; MacLeish, K. (2013). *Making war at Fort Hood: Life and uncertainty in a military community*. Princeton University Press; Parashar, S. (2013). What wars and 'war bodies' know about international relations. *Cambridge Review of International Affairs, 26*(4), 615-630; Caso, F. (2020). The political aesthetics of the body of the soldier in pain. In C. Baker (ed), *Making war on bodies: Militarisation, aesthetics and embodiment in international politics*. Edinburgh University Press; Gray, H. (2023). The power of love: how love obscures domestic labour and shuts down space for critique of militarism in the autobiographical accounts of British military wives. *Critical Military Studies, 9*(3), 346-363; Welland, J. (2013). Militarised violences, basic training, and the myths of asexuality and discipline. *Review of International Studies, 39,* 881-902; Cree, A., & Caddick, N. (2020). Unconquerable heroes: Invictus, redemption, and the cultural politics of narrative. *Journal of War and Culture Studies*, *13*(3), 258-278.

[6] Butler, J. (2010). *Frames of war: When is life grievable.* Verso.

politics of care to assume the foreground. Following recent moves within feminist IR to take "love and care seriously" in the wake of violence [7], we consider the act of making care visible through co-created film as an agentic move towards care, constituted within a wider political landscape that valorises the liberal individual or 'entrepreneurial' veteran and that routinely undermines care as a worthwhile project within military-civilian transition.

Feminist IPE has long documented the centrality of care not only to social reproduction in global economic terms, but also the functioning of everyday life[8]. In particular, Shirin Rai's recent contribution to understanding 'depletion' as the human cost of care makes clear that care-as-unremunerated-labour results in discursive, emotional, bodily, and citizenship-related harms suffered mostly by women as a result of bearing the responsibility for care at the level of both individual household and global political economy[9]. Depletion occurs at the tipping point where "the outflow of social reproductive labour exceeds the inflow of resources"[10]. Moreover, the harms of depletion, entangled as they are with "productivist regimes of capitalism"[11], are easily ignored given the chronic (and deeply gendered) under-valuing of care both as a value (the care ethics perspective) and in economic terms (the feminist IPE perspective). Drawing on the notion of depletion, we characterise as 'care-depleted' the transitional landscape that veterans enter into upon discharge from the military, in which an emphasis on 'returning' veterans to economic

[7] Krystalli, R., & Schulz, P. (2022). 'Taking love and care seriously: An emergent research agenda for remaking worlds in the wake of violence. *International Studies Review, 24*(1), viac003, https://doi.org/10.1093/isr/viac003.

[8] Elias, J., & Rai, S. (2019). Feminist everyday political economy: Space, time, and violence. *Review of International Studies, 45*(2), 201–220; Fernandez, B. (2017). Dispossession and the Depletion of Social Reproduction. *Antipode, 50*(1), 142-163; Luxton, M. (2018). The production of life itself: gender, social reproduction and IPE. In J. Elias & A. Roberts (Eds.), *Handbook on the International Political Economy of Gender.* Eglar Online (37-49). We thank an anonymous reviewer for encouraging us to integrate feminist IPE perspectives on care with care ethics scholarship.

[9] Rai, *Depletion*

[10] Ibid (p. 4)

[11] Ibid (p. 25)

productivity squeezes out care, even within charitable settings whereby care is the ostensible *raison d'etre*.

Placing care within the frame (in both a literal and theoretical sense), we reveal not only how care matters within lives transformed by violence, but also how it risks being further eroded by a dominant economic rationality of employment as the leading concern of veterans' transition journeys. Following recent contributions in this journal by Katarzyna Jezierska[12], and elsewhere by Roxani Krystalli and Philip Schulz[13], we show how a care ethics (and a related care aesthetics) perspective can help IR scholars construct new understandings of IR, with care politically positioned as a value and a practice that enriches human life, and which also enables other priorities which come into being as a result of care needs being addressed. In line with the emerging work in this area, our contribution adds to calls for care to be considered an integral component of IR scholarship which can expand our understanding of conflict and its aftermath. In our theoretical framework below, we further unpack the contribution of feminist care ethics to understanding the politics of care, within and beyond our study domain.

Our argument unfolds over two main sections. In the first, we make the theoretical case for combining feminist care ethics with a focus on film as narrative agency by weaving together several theoretical strands. We argue that narrative agency, understood as storytelling used to foreground relational identities and to articulate particular forms of belonging and need[14], is an essential quality for sustaining the hope of belonging in the midst of a socio-political environment characterised by abandonment, indifference, and isolation

[12] Jezierska, K. (2024). 'Maternalism: Care and control in diplomatic engagements with civil society'. *Review of International Studies,* doi:10.1017/S0260210524000238.
[13] Krystalli & Schulz, 'Taking love and care seriously'.
[14] Porter, E. (2016). 'Gendered narratives: Stories and silences in transitional justice'. *Human Rights Review, 17,* 35-50; Harman, *Seeing politics*; Plummer, K. (1995). *Telling Sexual Stories: Power, Change and Social Worlds*. Routledge.

from meaningful community. Here we draw from narrative theory[15] and from IR scholarship on film and visual politics[16] to pave the way for understanding 'careful' agentic narratives as an ethical and aesthetic intervention in global politics. Then, drawing on feminist care ethics[17], and in particular James Thompson's notion of 'care aesthetics'[18], we propose that narrative agency may be realised in the process of caring and of making care visible, and that this offers a comforting and necessary response to care-deficient political landscapes, both in general and in the specific context of veterans in the UK. In the second section, we put this theoretical assemblage to work by introducing the *Stories in Transition* project and examining the processes through which narrative agency – imperfect and slippery as it is – found expression through co-creating three 30-minute films with veterans situated in three UK veterans' charities. Each of these films develops a care aesthetics which emphasises attentiveness and interdependence as the fundamental values that sustain life and hope against a backdrop of strident individualism and an emphasis on employability and economic productivity. Care aesthetics also interrupts the gendered ideologies, or 'militarised masculinities'[19], which characterise military and ex-military spaces, even while it struggles to break free from these ideologies entirely. We argue that a politics of care, such as that

[15] Plummer, K. (2016). Narrative power, sexual stories and the politics of storytelling. In I. Goodson, A. Antikainen, P. Sikes and M. Andrews (eds), *The Routledge International Handbook on Narrative and Life History*. Routledge, pp. 280–92; Plummer, K. (2019). *Narrative Power*. Cambridge: Polity Press; Frank, A. (2010). *Letting stories breathe: A socio-narratology.* University of Chicago Press; Andrews, M. (2014). *Narrative Imagination and Everyday Life*. Oxford University Press; Wibben, *Feminist security studies*

[16] Bleiker, R. (2018). *Visual global politics*. Routledge; Harman, *Seeing politics*; Shapiro, M. (2009). *Cinematic geopolitics*. Routledge.

[17] Tronto, J. (2013). *Caring democracy: Markets, equality and justice*. New York University Press; Held, V. (2006). *The ethics of care: Personal, political, and global*. Oxford University Press; Robinson, F. (2011). *The ethics of care: A feminist approach to human security*. Temple University Press; Jezierska, K. (2024). 'Maternalism: Care and control in diplomatic engagements with civil society'. *Review of International Studies,* doi:10.1017/S0260210524000238.

[18] Thompson, J. (2015). Towards an aesthetics of care. *Research in Drama Education, 20*(4), 430-441; Thompson, J. (2023). *Care aesthetics: For artful care and careful art*. Routledge.

[19] Enloe, C. (2000). *Maneuvers: The international politics of militarizing women's lives*. University of California Press; Eichler, M. (2012). *Militarizing men: Gender, conscription and war in post-Soviet Russia*. Stanford University Press; Kronsell & Svedberg, *Making gender, making war*; Withworth, S. (2013). Militarized masculinity and post-traumatic stress disorder. In M. Zalewski and J.L. Parpart (eds.), *Rethinking the man question: Sex gender and violence in international relations*. Bloomsbury.

enacted through our focus on care ethics and aesthetics, creates new opportunities to reckon with the gendered legacies of war and military service in ways that lead to more hopeful, community-driven futures. Linked to our anticipated contribution, this analytical-aesthetic move shifts the focus on veterans' lives from one of (predominantly) violence and harm (as per the feminist IR literature on 'war as experience') or of employability (as per state-driven narratives of veteran transition) towards projects of care that hold the potential to transform veterans' lives and civilian futures beyond the grasp and impact of militarised violence.

Prior to embarking on this argument, it worth first reflecting on why veterans' agency matters for international studies. As Sarah Bulmer and Maya Eichler suggest, veterans occupy "the space between military and civilian life, war and peace, and the domestic and the international", and further that they are "key protagonists in the negotiation of relations between geopolitics, the state, the military, and society"[20]. As such, veterans' stories reveal much about the morality and politics of war and military life[21]. Contrary to this view, it has been argued that veterans constitute an already privileged group within society and that they represent a white, Western, militaristic voice on war[22]. Yet this is not necessarily and certainly not always the case. Veterans can also be marginalised and dismissed on the basis of their experiences. Given their service to the state, veterans are vulnerable to institutional forms of betrayal if the state fails to uphold its responsibilities in the aftermath of war and military service[23]. Such betrayals can include, for example, failure to provide adequate care for the psychological and physical consequences of war[24], withholding of compensation

[20] Bulmer & Eichler, 'Unmaking militarized masculinity' (p. 162)
[21] Caddick, N. (2024). *The cultural politics of veterans' narratives: Beyond the wire.* Edinburgh University Press.
[22] Massey, R., & Tyerman, T. (2023). 'Remaining 'in-between' the divides? Conceptual, methodological, and ethical political dilemmas of engaged research in Critical Military Studies'. *Critical Studies on Security, 11*(2), 64-82.
[23] Wadham, B., Connor, J., Hamner, K., & Lawn, S. (2023). 'Raped, beaten and bruised: Military institutional abuse, identity wounds, and veteran suicide'. *Critical Military Studies.* DOI: 10.1080/23337486.2023.2245286.
[24] Cree, A., & Caddick, N. (2019). 'Unconquerable heroes: Invictus, redemption and the cultural politics of narrative'. *Journal of War & Culture Studies,* 13:3, 258-278; MacLeish, K. (2020). 'Churn: Mobilization-

payments[25], failure to recognise and investigate cases of veteran suicide[26], and an inability to address persistent high levels of sexual violence within military institutions[27]. Furthermore, military service is embedded within masculine hierarchies which privilege strength, aggression, and heteronormativity, and which are integral to the military's overall ability to enact violence[28]. For veterans, the deep seated personal-psychological changes instigated by military training and gendered socialisation can undermine their efforts to reintegrate into their communities on discharge from the military[29], rendering deeply problematic any straightforward claims of 'transitioning' to civilian life. To claim that veterans' agency matters for international studies is therefore not to call for greater attention to already privileged voices. Rather, it is a recognition of the complicated political subjectivity that veterans occupy and of the necessity of community, solidarity, and reclaiming of agency in circumstances that fundamentally challenge veterans' ability to narrate stories that represent their lives and communities.

Theoretical framework: Narrative, film, and care ethics

This section brings together multiple theoretical perspectives to reveal their combined relevance for our proposition that making care visible through co-created filmmaking practice

demobilization and the fungibility of American military life'. *Security Dialogue, 51*(2-3), 194-210; MacLeish, K. (2021). 'Moral injury and the psyche of counterinsurgency'. *Theory, Culture & Society, 39*(6), 63-86.

[25] For example in the controversies surrounding the government body 'Veterans UK' which administers War Pensions and compensations to veterans, notable in their own poor 'customer' satisfaction survey results: DBS_Veterans_Customer_Satisfaction_Results_2021_report-O.pdf (publishing.service.gov.uk)

[26] Wadham et al. 'Raped, beaten and bruised'.

[27] Wieskamp, V. (2019). '"I'm going out there and I'm telling my story": victimhood and empowerment in narratives of military sexual violence'. *Western Journal of Communication* 83(2), 133–50; Herriott, C., Wood, A., Gillin, N., Fossey, M. and Godier-McBard, L. (2023). 'Sexual offences committed by members of the armed forces: is the service justice system fit for purpose? *Criminology & Criminal Justice*. https://doi.org/10.1177/17488958231153353; MacKenzie, M. (2023). *Good Soldiers Don't Rape: The Stories We Tell about Military Sexual Violence.* Cambridge University Press.

[28] Basham, V. (2013). *War, identity and the liberal state*. Routledge; Enloe, *Maneuvers.*

[29] Cooper, L., Caddick, N., Godier, L., Cooper, A. and Fossey, M. (2018). 'Transition from the military into civilian life: an exploration of cultural competence'. *Armed Forces and Society* 44(1), 156–77; Albertson, K. (2019). 'Relational legacies impacting on veteran transition from military to civilian life: trajectories of acquisition, loss, and reformulation of a sense of belonging'. *Illness, Crisis & Loss,* 27(4), 255–73.

constitutes an agentic act of narration with the potential to centre a politics of care within the landscape of veterans' transition, and IR more broadly. For IR scholars interested in war and its aftermath, our theoretical assemblage shows how the politics of care matters as both societal response and research praxis, as we reckon with the unruly mess created by war and military service.

Narrative agency

We begin with narrative agency, constituted as a key manifestation of power and of the ethical dimension of narrative creation and distribution. Describing narrative agency and its political importance, Plummer stated that "the power to narrate one's own story, in ways one wishes to narrate it, is an act of narrative power", and, further, that "stories live in this flow of power. The power to tell a story, or indeed to not tell a story, under the conditions of one's own choosing, is part of the political process"[30]. Narrative agency can contribute to the restoration of identity, particularly in contexts whereby violence has undermined peoples' ability to tell their stories and to advocate for their community's particular needs[31]. Creating the conditions for narrative agency to emerge thus constitutes a form of empowerment. In taking opportunities to enact narrative agency, people can represent themselves and their communities; that is, who people feel themselves to be and what the moral bearings of their lives look like[32]. In making these observations about narrative agency, however, we recognise that a crucial component of agency as a relational accomplishment is its location within wider narrative structures. Recalling the earlier structure-agency debates in IR[33], we therefore

[30] Plummer, *Telling Sexual Stories* (p. 26)
[31] Porter, 'Gendered narratives'; Nelson, H. (2001). *Damaged identities, narrative repair*. Cornell University Press.
[32] Frank, A. (2004). *The renewal of generosity: Illness, medicine, and how to live*. University of Chicago Press (p. 29)
[33] Wendt, A. (1987). The agent-structure problem in international relations. *International Organization, 41*(3), 335-370; Wight, C. (1999). They don't shoot dead horses do they? Locating agency in the agent-structure problematique. *European Journal of International Relations, 5*(1), 109-142; Davies, B. (1991). The concept of agency: A feminist poststructuralist analysis. *Social Analysis: The International Journal of Anthropology, 30,*

acknowledge that dominant cultural narratives function as linguistic manifestations of structure, in much the same way that scholars of strategic narratives conceptualise international system narratives as describing (and, importantly, reinscribing) the structure of world order[34]. Moreover, narratives themselves possess structural power, creating the impetus for a "story to unfold in anticipated ways"[35]. Positioned in this way, narratives as structural devices are the necessary conditions within which individual storytellers operate, whereas these storytellers work to reproduce, contest, and perhaps occasionally to transform, elements of the social structure through exercising narrative agency.

Working with and in response to the structural possibilities of narrative, narrative agency can therefore be about decentring or displacing the dominant narratives that claim to represent people as certain kinds of characters. Yet the power to alter the social conditions for narration never simply resides within an individual storytelling agent, and thus narrative agency, or the telling of "one's own story" – in Plummer's terms[36] – always emerges as a relational and negotiated accomplishment. At a theoretical level, narrative agency is complicated by the Bakhtinian notion of 'polyphony', explained by Frank as "emphasizing how one speaker's voice is always resonant with the voices of specific others"[37], which suggests that no story is ever completely original or individual, no matter how distinctive the teller. The notion of stories as polyphonic does not so much undermine narrative agency as it

42-53; Joseph, J. (2008). Hegemony and the structure-agency problem in international relations: A scientific realist contribution. *Review of International Studies, 34,* 109-128; Hollis, M., & Smith, S. (1994). Two stories about structure and agency. *Review of International Studies, 20,* 241-251; Jabri, V., & Chan, S. (1996). The ontologist always rings twice: Two more stories about structure and agency in reply to Hollis and Smith. *Review of International Studies, 22,* 107-110.

[34] Roselle, L., Miskimmon, A., & O'Loughlin, B. (2014). Strategic narrative: A new means to understand soft power. *Media, War & Conflict, 7*(1), 70-84; Miskimmon, A., O'Loughlin, B., & Roselle, L. (2017). *Forging the World: Strategic Narratives and International Relations*. University of Michigan Press.

[35] Holland, J., & Mathieu, X. (2023). Narratology and US foreign policy in Syria: Beyond identity binaries, toward narrative power. *International Studies Quarterly, 67*(4), https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqad078.

[36] Plummer, *Telling Sexual Stories* (p. 26)

[37] Frank, A. W. (2012). "Practicing Dialogical Narrative Analysis." In *Varieties of Narrative Analysis*, edited by J. A. Holstein and J. F. Gubrium, 33–52. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. (p. 35)

demonstrates that to enact agency is always to draw upon narrative resources that others have provided[38]. At a practical level, narrative agency is always complicated by the circumstances of telling as well as the personal resources and cultural capital available to the storyteller[39]. In the context of the film narratives we discuss in this article, such circumstances might include, for instance, the cultural privileging of certain kinds of narratives (e.g., heroic veteran narratives), the necessity of others to help create and disseminate cinematic film narratives, the agendas and priorities of the co-creators, and the responses (anticipated and actual) of audiences. Especially in relation to co-produced film, agency needs to be understood, as Sophie Harman puts it, "as fluid rather than static throughout co-production: to acknowledge the agency of research partners is not to establish methods of how they see and represent themselves, but to discern how this agency can be used to maximise self-interests over a project's life cycle"[40]. Yet even where narrative agency is incomplete and imperfect, film can still harness the power to make things visible, and to raise political questions about what visibility entails and the actions it calls for.

Film and visual politics

Film, then, can be understood as a powerful yet underutilised (in the context of IR scholarship) tool for practicing narrative agency in ways that offer to rewrite the international politics of people's lives. Harman argues this case when she suggests that "Film demonstrates the importance of showing rather than explaining politics. Film can show the shifting dynamics of informal politics and the relationship between structure and agency in ways the written word cannot"[41]. In a rare example of film production in IR (the dominant approach to

[38] Smith, B., & Sparkes, A. (2008). Contrasting perspectives on narrating selves and identities: An invitation to dialogue. *Qualitative Research, 8*(1), 5-35.
[39] Caddick, *The cultural politics of veterans' narratives*; Phoenix, A. (2012). Analysing narrative contexts. In M. Andrews, C. Squire, & M. Tamboukou (Eds.), *Doing narrative research*. Sage. (pp. 72-87)
[40] Harman, *Seeing politics* (p. 105)
[41] Ibid (p. 15)

film being analysis of popular culture[42]), Harman's co-produced film, *Pili*, shows the international politics of women in Tanzania living with HIV/AIDS, read through the compelling narration of one women's story, that of the lead character 'Pili'[43]. Recognising that African women's narratives are routinely instrumentalised, co-opted, or otherwise ignored within existing hierarchies of global politics, Harman uses feminist co-produced film "as a source and site of African agency"[44], and thus a means of shifting the dynamics of "who speaks and who sees IR"[45]. In *Pili,* the dialectic of structure and agency is made tangible and highly evocative in the ways Pili navigates both her own illness and her social surroundings in pursuit of her goals. Yet in presenting the film itself as an example of narrative agency, Harman too is aware of the structural constraints – in this case, "the international politics of film distribution and financing"[46] – which strongly favour narratives of the African continent as violent and poor. Always within limits, film thus provides a means of working through, and making visible, invisible power relations, and in so doing offers to enliven and enrich IR scholarship, not only creating new insights but making them emotionally real and vivid.

Film as a source of agency builds on a tradition of IR scholarship which emphasises the power of the visual to convey meaning, evoke emotion, and to reproduce or challenge relations of power[47]. Key to acting in, asserting, and challenging politics is the ability to make

[42] Crilley, R. (2021). Where we at? New directions for research on popular culture and world politics. *International Studies Review, 23,* 164-180; Grayson, K., Davies, M., & Philpott, S. (2009). Pop goes IR? Researching the popular culture - world politics continuum. *Politics, 29*(3), 155-163.
[43] Further examples of film production in IR can be found in the work of William Callahan, Cynthia Weber and James Der Derian. See, Callahan, W. (2015). The visual turn in IR: Documentary filmmaking as a critical method. *Millenium, 43*(3), 891-910; Weber, C. (2010). *I am an American: Filming the fear of difference*. University of Chicago Press; Der Derian, J. (2010). Now we are all avatars. *Millenium, 39*(1), 181-6.
[44] Harman, *Seeing politics* (p. 54)
[45] Ibid (p. 52)
[46] Ibid (p. 38)
[47] Bleiker, *Visual global politics*; Bleiker, R. (2001). The aesthetic turn in international political theory. *Millenium, 30*(3), 509-533; Shapiro, *Cinematic geopolitics*; Der Derian, J. (2009). *Virtuous war: Mapping the military-industrial-media-entertainment network.* Routledge; Grayson et al, 'Pop goes IR?'; Crilley, 'Where we at?'; Callahan, *The visual turn in IR*; Faux, E. (2024). Navigating nuclear narratives in contemporary television: The BBC's *Vigil*. *Review of International Studies,* doi:10.1017/S026021052300075X.

things visible[48]. As Roland Bleiker argues, visual global politics sharpens our political acuity by calling attention to what is made visible, and conversely, what is rendered or left invisible within regimes of representation and ways of knowing[49]. To make something visible is to make it known, to make it tangible, and visibility thus begets power. Mere visibility, however, is not always positive, since "visibility can also entrench existing political patterns"[50], especially if visual representation occurs on terms established by another. As Elspeth Van Veeren therefore argues, "invisibility and visibility are always intertwined"[51], such that dialectics of in/visibility are a crucial site of politics. This site can be understood as Rancière's 'distribution of the sensible', which explains how aesthetic practices shape the possibilities for apprehending and engaging in the realm of politics[52]. To shift the distribution of the sensible by rendering things or people either visible or invisible is to enact power over how the world is represented, and what actions, politics, or policies become possible as a result. Beyond the focus on violence in much visual IR research – the mapping of "violent cartographies" in Shapiro's terms[53] – our work explores how a focus on the visibility of care might alter distributions of the sensible.

Feminist care ethics

Care ethics seeks to make care, defined broadly as in Joan Tronto and Bernice Fisher's definition as "*a species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our 'world' so that we can continue to live in it as well as possible*"[54], visible as a public value and set of practices[55]. It emphasises that care – including the assignment of

[48] Harman, *Seeing politics*; Bleiker, *Visual global politics*
[49] Bleiker, *Visual global politics*
[50] Ibid (p. 22)
[51] Van Veeren, E. (2018). *Invisibility*. In R. Bleiker, *Visual global politics* (p. 196 – 200). (p. 199)
[52] Rancière, J. (2004). *The politics of aesthetics*. Bloomsbury.
[53] Shapiro, *Cinematic geopolitics* (p. 18)
[54] Tronto, *Caring democracy* (p. 19, emphasis original)
[55] Ibid.

caring responsibilities, how care is enacted and recognised, as well as the dependence of economic and political activity upon care having taken place – is necessarily a gendered political issue. Furthermore, care ethics is built on a relational ontology (and care *relations* thus the basic empirical unit of analysis) and a recognition of our mutual responsiveness to need at the interpersonal, societal, and global levels[56]. Contrary to liberal individualist conceptions of persons as self-sufficient and independent, care ethics thereby advocates a moral view of persons as interdependent, embedded, and encumbered[57]. It also makes clear that the application of liberal individualist thinking to all domains of life results in both the persistent undervaluing of care and a denial of all human life as fundamentally interdependent with human and non-human caring relations. Despite its historical marginality within the discipline, care has also been constructed as an issue of relevance and importance to IR, for example in understanding diplomatic engagements in civil society[58], transforming research agendas beyond violence and war in the quest to remake worlds[59], as a core component of peacebuilding[60], and as fundamental to the social reproduction of everyday life and post-conflict restoration[61].

Feminist care ethics anchors our framework in the sense that it provides theoretical resources that help to articulate what might be accomplished via the work of film as narrative agency. That is, situating our work as an intervention in the politics of care helps to make clear what is at stake in moves toward care as a core value, and how it might reshape other

[56] Held, *The ethics of care*; Robinson, F. (1997). Globalizing care: Ethics, feminist theory, and international relations. *Alternatives, 22*(1), 113-133.
[57] Held, *The ethics of care*
[58] Jezierska, 'Maternalism'.
[59] Krystalli & Schulz, 'Taking love and care seriously'
[60] Pettersen, T. (2021). Feminist care ethics: Contributions to peace theory. In T. Väyrynen, S. Parashar, É. Féron & C. Confortini (Eds.), *Routledge Handbook of Feminist Peace Research* (pp. 28-39); Vaittinen, T., Donahoe, A., Kunz, R., Ómarsdóttir, S., & Roohi, S. (2019). Care as everyday peacebuilding. *Peacebuilding, 7*(2), 194-209.
[61] Elias & Rai, 'Feminist everyday political economy'; Rai, *Depletion*; Rai et al., 'From Depletion to Regeneration'.

values. Moreover, the link between film, narrative agency, and care can be conceptualised using James Thompson's notion of 'care aesthetics', which builds directly on feminist care ethics scholarship[62]. Care aesthetics emphasises the sensory and affective dimensions of human relations as these are realised in the making of 'careful' art projects. As Thompson explains,

> An 'aesthetics of care' is then about a set of values realised in a relational process that emphasise engagements between individuals or groups over time. It is one that might consist of small creative encounters or large-scale exhibitions, but it is always one that notices inter-human relations in both the creation and the display of art projects.[63]

Sensitive to the political importance of care and to the necessarily interdependent character of human relations, care aesthetics thereby calls attention to the sensory-affective dimensions of creative and visual research in ways yet to be fully explored within IR. Thompson furthermore argues that "careful art projects hope to produce protective forms of sociality in an unequal world, and beautiful acts of solidarity in communities that for too long have been brutalised by an insistence that people must survive on their own"[64]. This careful art ethos resonates strongly with our research context, whereby placing care relations at the forefront of concerns constitutes both a critical intervention in the instrumentalised transitional spaces veterans pass through, and a crucial feature of the interpersonal trust and safety on which the research process was necessarily contingent. Contrary to the aim of much critical visual research in IR which aims to shock and to disrupt in order to force a distribution of the sensible[65], the negotiated project of our films became the representation of safe spaces and of making care visible through the production of care aesthetics. Through an attentiveness to the

[62] Thompson, 'Towards an aesthetics of care'; Thompson, *Care Aesthetics*
[63] Thompson, 'Towards an aesthetics of care' (p. 437)
[64] Thompson, *Care aesthetics* (p. 99)
[65] Bleiker, *Visual global politics*

unique care aesthetics being developed, careful art thus works against the general assumption that "success in artistic practice is determined by the degree to which the event or experience shocks, disrupts or forces audiences or participants from their comfort zones"[66]. Instead, Thompson argues, the artistic practice of careful art "draws people out of their *discomfort* zones"[67], creating opportunities for respite, change, and strengthening of communal ties.

In the next section, we discuss the emergence and impact of care aesthetics through our co-created filmmaking project, *Stories in Transition*. Care practices that form the focus of our analysis are twofold, encompassing both the interdependencies and relationships that helped to nurture hope and belonging amongst veterans involved in the three charities with whom we worked, together with opportunities for engaging in research practices (in particular, the creative practice of filmmaking) oriented towards responsibilities of care rather than (predominantly or only) the necessity of stories as 'data'. The latter aspect of care is embodied in the notion of care aesthetics as both a method of collaborative engagement *and* as a visual product that viewers are invited to witness.

Stories in Transition

Stories in Transition used co-created film to explore how veterans might reimagine 'transition' to civilian life in the context of arts, culture, and sport-focused activities. The notion that former military personnel transition from military to civilian life, thereby becoming 'veteran', has become popular in the decades of the Global War on Terror. In the UK, transition is primarily understood as a project of continuity of employment, such that veterans may become, in policy terms "net contributors to society"[68]. This emphasis on employment and employability centres the liberal individual veteran as the ideal subject of

[66] Thompson, *Care aesthetics* (p. 99)
[67] Ibid (p. 100, emphasis added)
[68] Ashcroft, M. (2014). *The veterans' transition review.* Online: vtrreport.pdf (veteranstransition.co.uk). (p. 8)

transition, realised through policy narratives of 'successful transition' as the aspirational norm for veterans, with aspects of struggle, brokenness, and failure cast as marginal and deviant[69]. Missing from the dominant employment-based model of transition is an understanding of the loss of community, belonging and identity which – research has demonstrated – often accompanies the move from military to civilian life[70]. It also neglects the significant degree to which transition is marked by gendered and racialised struggles for recognition, with female as well as ethnic and sexual minority veterans rarely able to claim and express a social identity *as* veterans similar to that of their white, male counterparts[71]. Research on veterans' transition thus depicts an alienated veteranhood, whereby the transition to civilian life fractures the communal relations of belonging that once formed the bedrock of institutional life in the military[72]. Alongside more clinically defined problems such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), or battlefield and other injuries, this transformation in relationality creates care needs among veterans; needs which are underserved by an emphasis on employment as the core concern of transition.

Taking a view informed by feminist care ethics and feminist IPE, we suggest that the privileging of employability over care needs results in a care deficit which characterises the transitional spaces veterans emerge into when leaving the military[73]. This care deficit can be

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[69] Policy narratives such as the UK's 'Strategy for our veterans' work to normalise the figure of the successful, entrepreneurial veterans through claims that psychological impairment and 'brokenness' in British veterans constitute "negative and incorrect stereotypes", and that "military service instils positive values such as self-discipline and loyalty", thereby casting a positive light on military service and downplaying negative consequences that can also result. See HM Government (2022). 'Veterans' strategy action plan 2022 – 2024'. Online: Veterans' Strategy Action Plan 2022-2024 (publishing.service.gov.uk). (p. 32).

[70] Cooper et al., 'Transition from the military into civilian life'; Albertson, 'Relational legacies impacting on veteran transition from military to civilian life'; MacLeish, 'Churn'; Demers, A. (2011). 'When veterans return: The role of community in reintegration'. *Journal of Loss and Trauma, 16,* 160-179.

[71] Caddick, *The cultural politics of veterans' narratives*

[72] Albertson, 'Relational legacies impacting on veteran transition from military to civilian life'; Mobbs, M., & Bonanno, G. (2018). Beyond war and PTSD: The crucial role of transition stress in the lives of military veterans. *Clinical Psychology Review, 59,* 137-144; Maringira, G., & Carrasco, L. (2015) "Once a soldier, a soldier forever": Exiled Zimbabwean soldiers in South Africa. *Medical Anthropology, 34*(4), 319-335.

[73] Cf. Rai, *Depletion.* Regarding depleted cultures of care, see also Hochschild, A. R. (2004). Love and gold. In B. Ehrenreich & A. R. Hochschild, (Eds.), *Global women: Nannies, maids, and sex workers in the new economy*. Owl Books.

expressed as the unmet need to sustain hope and a sense of belonging while envisioning civilian futures in the aftermath of military service. One of our contributors captured this overall sense of deficit when describing the unavailability of care along with the elevation of charities' internal bureaucracy over care needs. Discussing the problem of care 'waiting lists', Jimmy commented: "You end up on a waiting list . . . But if you're in that mindset of 'Things are going really, really bad', you've got *hours* to wait around, you haven't got days and weeks. And everything goes . . . Its like looking at the world through a letterbox; if all you can see is . . . you can't see any greatness or any good. And it just felt when I left the military, I was left on my own".

Responding to this care deficit with a desire for more hopeful civilian futures, *Stories in Transition* sought to examine the care work being undertaken within three small ex-service charities, and to create space for veterans to exercise narrative agency in a context whereby heavily mediated representations of their lives (e.g., the entrepreneurial veteran, the heroic veteran, the broken veteran) have come to dominate public understandings of 'veteranhood'[74]. Of the four veterans with whom we collaborated most closely (i.e., as co-directors of the films), three were male and one was female, all were white[75]. During the two-year project, we worked intensively with the three charities to co-create films documenting transition through the lens of the veterans' participation in the charities' programmes and activities[76]. We also carried out organisational case studies of the three groups to understand more about their practices and the impact of their work. The three charities took unique approaches to supporting veterans. They were: *Turn to Starboard*, a sailing charity based in

[74] On mediated representations of the veteran dominating public understanding, see MacLeish, *Making War at Fort Hood*; McCartney, H. (2011). 'Hero, victim or villain? The public image of the British soldier and its implications for defense policy'. *Defense & Security Analysis* 27(1), 43–54.

[75] Each of these veterans were beneficiaries of the charities involved in the project. Some also worked for the charities either as volunteers or in paid roles. In the following discussion, contributors are named when their words appear publicly in the films. At other times, their words are acknowledged as those of 'our co-creators' in line with standard conventions on anonymity in research practice.

[76] The films are publicly available online: Turn to the Wind; Return, Belong, Prosper; Leave No One Behind.

Cornwall (Southwest England); *Veterans in Communities*, a community arts and outreach organisation based in Lancashire (Northwest England), and; *Waterloo Uncovered*, a battlefield archaeology and veterans' welfare charity carrying out archaeological excavation of the historic Waterloo battlefield in Belgium. All share a focus on practice (i.e., sailing, arts, archaeology) as a means of supporting veterans dealing with a wide range of circumstances, including PTSD and battlefield injuries, as well as a more generalised struggle to integrate into 'civilian' communities and workplaces beyond the hyper-social, hyper-masculine military environment. Ethical approval for the research was granted by Anglia Ruskin University.

Our work with the charities was grounded in a practice-based approach to filmmaking[77], characterised by a focus on process as the most integral and impactful component of the research encounter[78]. In other words, the process of making the film, "rather than the film itself", as Neil Fox argues, *is* the research[79]. In this section, we show how this process oscillated back and forth with narrative agency as a core dynamic tension, and how it ultimately produced – and was produced through – a care aesthetic. In the very process of representing care relations and practices on film, we came to realise Thompson's claim that care itself can be an "aesthetic experience" in that it can be understood and appreciated for the qualities it embodies, with reference to the quality of social relations that

[77] Fox, N. (2022). Without the filmmaking there is no research*:* establishing the Sound/Image Cinema Lab via a REF2021 impact case study and exploring the impact of its engagement with UK film production, Media Practice and Education, 23:2, 161-173; Aquilia, P., & Kerrigan, S. (2018). Re-visioning screen production education through the lens of creative practice: An Australian film school example. *Studies in Australasian Cinema, 12*(2-3), 135-149; Batty, C., & Kerrigan, S. (2018). *Screen production research: Creative practice as a mode of enquiry*. Palgrave Macmillan.

[78] Recent work has also highlighted the potential of using filmmaking as a tool to promote community integration and encourage veterans to engage in treatment for PTSD. See Drebing, C., et al. (2023). 'Pilot outcomes of a filmmaking intervention designed to enhance treatment entry and social reintegration of veterans'. *Psychological Services, 20*(3), 585-595.

[79] Fox, N. (2022). 'Without the filmmaking there is no research: establishing the Sound/Image Cinema Lab via a REF2021 impact case study and exploring the impact of its engagement with UK film production'. *Media Practice and Education, 23*(2), 161-173 (p. 164).

become constituted by and transformed through care[80]. Just as with care relations themselves, the research process was necessarily interdependent, with reciprocity and above all, time and trust, the core values on which our co-creation depended. Contrary to the frantic pace of media production in the new digital media environment[81], as with a neoliberal academic context which similarly privileges speed and efficiency[82], this work required a slow and deliberate approach as we navigated tensions and uncertainty at each stage of our research.

Dialectics of narrative agency were a central feature of the developing care aesthetic throughout each co-created film production. The early phases of each production were given over to exploring the conditions under which the veterans' agency would emerge. A key part of this exploration involved the veteran co-creators becoming willing to take on the identity of a filmmaker, which called for a shift in their relationship to their own experience. Rather than simply 'living' transition moment-by-moment, their emerging filmmaker identities required them to stand aside and critically consider modes of representation that would enable them to communicate their experience on their own terms. Grasping the responsibility for representational choices, the veterans understood well that narrative tone was vital to the success of the project if they were to avoid the familiar sentimentalising stories which presented a sickly portrait of veterans as the 'deserving poor'; mistreated, misunderstood, but quietly heroic[83]. Our co-creators felt strongly that these were other peoples' stories about them, and that they did not represent their own experiences. In other words, they became tacitly aware of what Roland Bleiker described as the representational gap between "a form of representation and the object it seeks to represent"[84], such that they were able to resist the

[80] Thompson, *Care aesthetics* (p. 25)
[81] Cizek, K., Uricchio, W., et al. (2019). *Collective wisdom: Co-creating media within communities, across disciplines and with algorithms*. MIT Open Documentary Lab: DOI: 10.21428/ba67f642.f7c1b7e5.
[82] Vostal, F. (2016). *Accelerating academia: The changing structure of academic time*. Palgrave Macmillan.
[83] For critical analysis of veterans as mistreated and misunderstood, see for example, McLoughlin, K. (2018). *Veteran Poetics: British Literature in the Age of Mass Warfare, 1790–2015*. Cambridge University Press.
[84] Bleiker, 'The aesthetic turn in international political theory' (p. 512)

imagery and narratives associated with veteran victimhood and disenfranchisement[85]. With this understanding in place, the veterans freed themselves up to test ideas and experiment with cameras and modes of representation, gradually becoming comfortable discussing these in production meetings both online and in person. Such discussions formed part of a bi-directional exchange of knowledge and skills, with knowledge and stories of transition flowing from the veterans, and film language and techniques from the researchers.

There followed a collaborative process of learning and reflection about the experience of transition and of generating new insights about the past through creative practice. As Sonja Marzi found with her participatory film work with communities in Colombia, this reciprocal learning and the sense of empowerment and self-understanding it generated was key to the 'impact-in-process' generated throughout and beyond the project[86]. These new insights would gradually enable the veterans to cast a different light of understanding upon their past and present experiences. As one of our co-directors, Darren, reflected to camera, "You don't normally see things, right, everyday; you look but you don't see. And yet, for me, when I was looking through a camera, that's completely different".

[85] Caddick, *The cultural politics of veterans' narratives*
[86] Marzi, S. (2023). 'Co-producing impact in process with participatory audio-visual research'. *Area, 55,* 295-302.

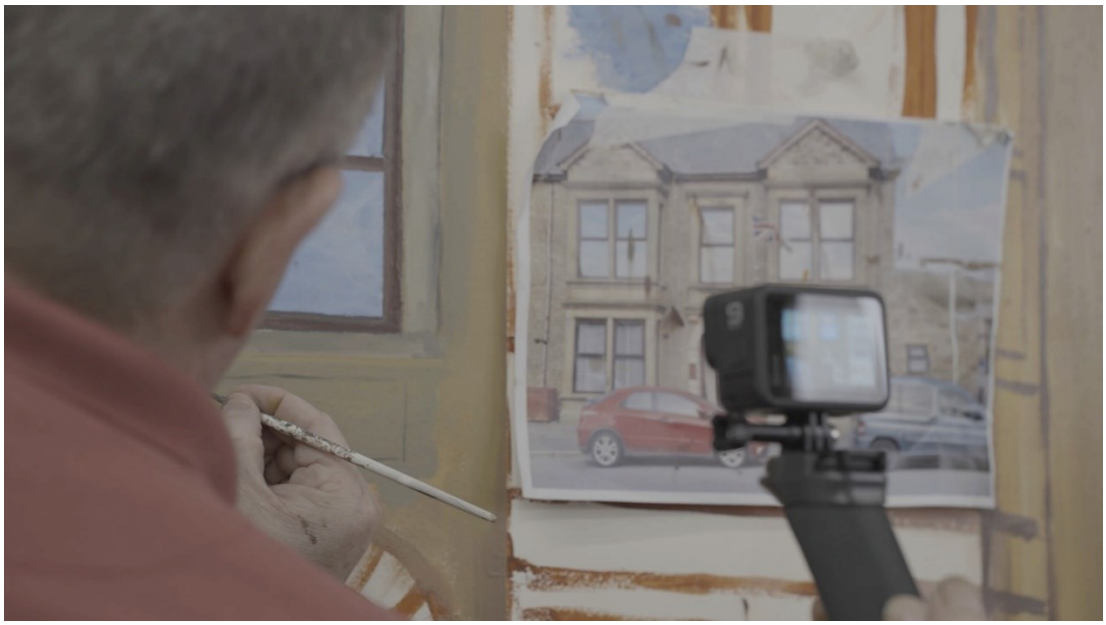

Figure one: "When I was looking through a camera, that's completely different"; Still image from the film *Return, Belong, Prosper*.

To prepare the groundwork for these new insights to occur, the early research process also demanded extensive relationship building, including discussion about what forms these relationships would take in each of the three unique organisations, and what the roles of the veterans would be. These roles varied from participant to co-director according to the veterans' interests and skills along with their capacity to commit time and ideas to the project. One of the foremost challenges we encountered was trust-building, which is integral to co-creating film in IR[87]. A key example was a three-week sea voyage which formed the basis of our film with Turn to Starboard, *Turn to the Wind*. The voyage was undertaken on a fleet of small yachts – confined spaces with close living and working arrangements – and ran from 'tip-to-tip' along the British coastline (Lands End to John O'Groats). Crewed by veterans facing diverse struggles in their transitional journey, these yachts were intense environments where the confrontation between 'veteran' and 'civilian' worlds was stark, and the chaotic aftermath of military service was being lived out. Our camera crew including lead filmmaker, Katie Davies, had to negotiate these spaces that were defined in opposition to the notion of

[87] Harman, *Seeing politics*

civilian and marked by masculine norms of interaction and language use. To focus on the care aesthetics of sailing, the team had to observe how multiply gendered expressions of care emerged within, and were sometimes undermined by, the prevailing gender dynamics on board the yachts, including how the rules around socialisation were transformed by alcohol. The key task of trust building thus rested on the team's ability to establish credibility both by learning how to sail and by deftly navigating these gendered spaces.

The particular care aesthetic of *Turn to the Wind* – captured in the slow undulations of the boats on the water, the shared tasks of crewing the boats, the changing skies overhead, and the reflective spaces these opened up for the veterans and film crew alike – was thus grounded in weeks of gendered relational work, and sailing practice, leading up to production. Our attention to the developing care aesthetic revealed that the moments when veterans harnessed the serenity of the open water for quiet reflection constituted one of Turn to Starboard's most important care practices, in clear contrast with the employment and outcomes-focused programmes run by other charities which left veterans feeling cold and 'processed'[88]. Care aesthetics and narrative agency alike are thus slow and demanding processes, calling upon IR scholars to reflect on modes of research practice that might enable the possibilities for their emergence, together with the possible risks entailed in doing so[89].

During the production phase, representational choices and the filming techniques through which they might be realised shifted clearer into focus as the careful work of preparation was drawn together in the process of narrative creation. Aware that the films would be watched by other veterans, our co-creators felt pressure not to portray their

[88] The processing of veterans through employment and outcomes-focused programmes (both state and third-sector funded) resonates with Ken MacLeish's notion of *churn* as a description of the embodied and cyclical nature of military labour into, through, and out of the military machine. See MacLeish, 'Churn'. As veterans exit the military and become indicators of success or failure in accordance with their employment status, the churn continues, reproducing as it does so the conditions for a largely care-deficient post-military reality.
[89] See, for example, Marzi, 'Co-producing impact-in-process'

experience as representative of anything other than necessarily their own, and to avoid defining what transition 'is'. Instead, they chose to use the creative process to reflect on their own journeys since leaving the military and even to understand their past differently by interrogating it together through the camera lens. This element of the process is especially illustrative of the potential for filmmaking practice to generate representation as an agentic act[90]. In using the multiple tools of filmmaking to craft their own narrative, the veterans empowered themselves as active narrative agents while foregoing the temptation to extend this power beyond the realm of their own transitional spaces and communities. This is most evident in the film *Return, Belong, Prosper*, whereby playful cinematic techniques including use of the green-screen, computer-generated animations, and time-lapse photography all formed part of the film 'toolkit' the veterans chose to convey their story of community building and the creation of safe spaces. These techniques coalesce into a "sensory schema"[91], in Thompson's terms, that brings to life the care aesthetic of *Return, Belong Prosper* with the express intention of helping other veterans to envisage themselves as part of such safe spaces. The act of imagining safe space is thus integral to the production process and the generative capacity of the film itself to arouse the narrative imagination of the viewer/veteran[92].

Production was organised to a greater or lesser extent depending on contextual factors such as time available for filming and whether or not the film was to be based around a single event (e.g., a battlefield excavation). Time and filming constraints thus set practical limits on the degree to which narrative agency could be prioritised. The process for *Return, Belong, Prosper* was most flexible, with play and experimentation central to the narrative creation.

[90] Bleiker, R. (2017). In search of thinking space: Reflections on the aesthetic turn in international political theory. *Millenium, 45*(2), 258-264; Marzi, 'Co-producing impact-in-process'
[91] Thompson, *Care aesthetics.* (p. 43)
[92] Andrews, *Narrative imagination and everyday life.*

Aesthetic decisions were driven by the veterans' ideas for how to convey their core story of community and belonging. In this way, the mural (introduced at the beginning of this paper) ended up forming a visual anchor for the film's narrative as well as being a key signifier of community and a collective safe space. The mural itself became a living care aesthetic. For example, at certain points throughout the film veterans are shown working together on the mural and at others, time-lapse photography of the mural's gradual emergence is voiced over with reflections on transition and community recorded during production meetings. As a standalone artwork, the mural forms a visual representation of safety and community. Yet the process of its creation, as it was constructed and portrayed on film, adds to the mural a further layer of relational meaning – evoking a care aesthetic in terms of the character, sensation and affect of relationships within Veterans in Communities. The mural embodies Virginia Held's notion of care as both a practice *and* a value[93]. As an agentic practice, it develops out of and responds to the need for community strength among the members of Veterans in Communities (civilian and veteran alike), with this mutual responsiveness to need a core component of Held's care-as-practice. As a value, made visible through its representation on film, it highlights the moral worth of care in a wider context whereby morality is encapsulated in the idealised figure of the autonomous, liberal individual.

In the editing phase, play and experimentation necessarily gave way to the somewhat more critical and reflective process of crafting the final edit. The collaborative dialogue with our veteran co-creators became focused on the structure and artistic underpinnings of each film. This required not only that the veterans become acquainted with the editing process, but also for many, confronting the reality of seeing themselves on screen, talking about traumatic and upsetting experiences. One of our co-creators described this as the feeling of "being punched in the stomach", such was the starkness of realising how they would soon be seen

[93] Held, *The ethics of care.* See also Krystalli & Schulz, 'Taking love and care seriously'.

through an audience's eyes. Yet when asked whether they would prefer for these difficult moments to be removed from the edit they all declined, recognising the integrity of these sequences to the story. The power of the editing process was the opportunity it offered the veterans to represent, to re-work and to re-frame time and space; to construct and reflect on their stories. Yet doing so also proved challenging and exposing, demanding further care practices such as talking with the veterans at length about their contributions and gaining individual sign-off prior to each film being considered ready.

Furthermore, editing required us to balance a sense of responsibility to the veterans and their stories with the responsibilities we held toward the three charities supporting them. In each case, this involved careful negotiation over the final film through which each of the organisations would soon become known to a wider audience. At pre-screenings, we invited their feedback and commentary, offering to clarify story, adjust tone, and re-edit where necessary. This final part of the editing process once again demanded cautious and sensitive dialogue. A key example was a discussion over criticisms that veterans had made about a well-known military charity in one of the films. Veterans we spoke to across all groups had often found their experiences with larger charities unsatisfactory; marked, that is, by the care deficit we identified earlier. Having asked for help, they felt they were casually dismissed, signposted elsewhere, and ultimately that they were processed and treated as a 'case' rather than a vulnerable human being. One of the veterans expressed such criticisms on camera, and the research team felt it was important to include this sequence since it captured something significant about relations of care in the wider charitable sector; that these criticisms shone light on the prioritisation of accounting and bureaucracy over care for the person. When we screened the rough cut, however, our partner was deeply concerned about this sequence, given the ramifications that voicing such criticisms about a larger charity could have for their own funding and reputation. In dialogue with our partner, we acknowledged and agreed that

our responsibility not to cause potential damage to our partner's standing outweighed our responsibility to 'the truth' – or at least, this particular truth – and so the sequence was removed from the final version. The experience prompted much discussion within the team over whether editing this out would constitute a further challenge to narrative agency, as it would deny those who had expressed these criticisms the opportunity to voice them publicly (at least in the film format). Yet the experience reminded us that it was not only the veterans' stories we were responsible for telling, but to a significant degree it was also the stories of the organisations supporting them.

Throughout each production, then, dialogue was essential to the relational emergence of agency. The dialogical exchange continued following completion of the films during a private screening for all three partner charities ahead of the films' release date. This was the first time all three partners had the opportunity to meet and spend time with one another. Across a two-day event, the three organisations along with the veteran co-creators and the research team watched the films and discussed them at length. This being the first time each partner had seen the other two films, the screenings stimulated insightful and impassioned responses. The screening environment (a private-hired cinema with separate meeting area) was an emotionally complex space, for the capacity of film to "capture or convey feeling and emotion"[94] was amplified for those whose own emotional experiences were being represented. Anticipating such complexity, one of our own care practices was to ensure the availability of a separate room to which our co-creators could adjourn if the emotional load became overwhelming. In this collaborative forum, we reflected in depth on representational choices including what the creative process had enabled the veterans to 'see' about transition that had hitherto been either implicit or unacknowledged. This was a co-creation of 'research impact', whereby our dialogical exchange was key to revealing the transformation and social

[94] Harman, *Seeing politics* (p. 42)

change initiated during the project[95]. An example which illustrates the role of dialogical exchange in generating meaning within creative practice was a reflection on the titling of our film with Waterloo Uncovered, *Leave No One Behind*. The centrepiece of the film's narrative is the gradual unearthing of an extremely rare find (in the case of Waterloo); an intact human skeleton. For obvious reasons, the unearthing of human remains at the site of a historic battlefield carried profound significance for the veterans involved in excavating the skeleton, as well as for those watching this discovery on film. Describing the title-inspiration, our veteran co-director of the film reflected during group discussion:

> If you remember, Ash said [in the film] "I could not imagine leaving one of my colleagues behind"; the psychological *weight* of that. And unfortunately, we were at many, many funerals of our colleagues. But we had that honour of standing up and showing their family that we keep them right to that point – *we're not leaving them behind*. War is *horrible*. It is *horrible*. And if you leave that human out, you're not telling the truth. You can't fluff it up. The politicians and people who ought to watch this, they have to realise, this is what happens. This can be a result of me failing to do my job as a politician.

In the intense and intimate screening environment, these words resonated deeply with our co-creators from the other charities, prompting collective agreement accompanied by an affective 'shift' throughout the room. As well as offering further evocative insights, these reflections seemed to deepen and extend the truths this film sought to convey. Indeed, while we sacrificed the ability to tell some truths out of obligation to our partners, other truths which carried deep emotional resonance for our co-creators found expression through both the core content and the titling of the films. Reflecting on our editing process, therefore, we

[95] Marzi, 'Co-producing impact in process'

do not believe that the requirement for dialogue in the creative process necessarily sanitised the films or blunted their critical edge. Indeed, by making care relations and safe spaces visible, the films harness the power of the medium to narrate a relational version of 'transition' substantially different from the liberal individualist conception of transition as the realisation of individual employability. Rather, at each stage of production, these films were a negotiated accomplishment in that they had to balance the veterans' own truths and stories, the partner organisations' sensitivities, the practical constraints of filming, and the ideas and interests of the research team, while seeking to retain – as far as possible – narrative agency as an organising production principle.

Conclusion

As with other narratives in IR, relational narratives which centre care and belonging make value claims (what matters) as well as truth claims (what is). What transpires is a contested terrain of narrative – a politics of storytelling[96] – whereby the stories of individuals and communities enact values and truths which relate to, respond to, and sometimes counteract the wider narratives which structure political imaginations[97]. While still underutilised as a tool of production, film in IR offers a way of making value and truth claims vivid and compelling by "showing rather than explaining" politics in people's everyday lives[98]. In the terrain of veterans' post-military storytelling that we analyse in this paper, cinematic narratives about care and the creation of safe spaces contrast with wider narratives which characterise veterans as, for example, the embodiment of war's violent and traumatic legacy, or as liberal individual subjects dutifully realising their employment potential. In terms of the latter, care and liberal individualism occupy competing domains and logics, such that an

[96] Plummer, 'Narrative power, sexual stories and the politics of storytelling'.
[97] Wibben, *Feminist security studies*
[98] Harman, *Seeing politics* (p. 15)

emphasis on employability turns veterans into economic indicators rather than recipients and providers of care.

Viewed through the politics of care (incorporating insights from both feminist care ethics and feminist IPE), this tension occurs because market logics dominate our socio-political understanding of human relations to the detriment of care. As Joan Tronto explains, "care is so thoroughly "backgrounded" as a critical part of human life that its role is hardly visible"[99]. Similarly, as Beth Goldblatt and Shirin Rai argue, care along with social reproduction more broadly is placed outside the "production boundary"[100], making it easy to neglect both its contributions to national economies and to post-war recovery and transition. Care matters politically because its invisibility too often occludes the costs of war and war-preparedness, and contributes to the depoliticisation of war itself. In this context, restoring care to the foreground constitutes a necessary intervention, one which can, at least in part, be achieved by making care visible through film as method in IR. The words of our veteran co-creators amplify and clarify the stakes involved in this intervention. In *Return, Belong, Prosper*, for instance, viewers encounter both the reality of struggle and the necessity of care in Darren's description of 'transition' in the aftermath of war:

> I was in a section of 12 on the Falklands. When we all came out, we all came out with minor injuries but nothing really traumatic. Out of those 12 now, there's only two of us left, the other ten have committed suicide. They've all died by their own hands. And that's purely because - that's how hard they find transitioning from military life into civilian life. And it's a good point as well because if there was more centres like

[99] Tronto, *Caring democracy* (p. 139). On market logics as the driving force behind state interventions on behalf of the veteran, see also Sanna Strand (2021), 'Inventing the Swedish (war) veteran'. *Critical Military Studies, 7*(1), 23-41.

[100] Goldblatt, B., & Rai, S. (2018). Recognizing the Full Costs of Care? Compensation for Families in South Africa's Silicosis Class Action. *Social & Legal Studies, 27*(6), 671-694.

> this [Veterans in Communities] set up, that wouldn't happen as much. Which is why we then have to rely on civilians for the funding.

The co-created films of the *Stories in Transition* project did not set out deliberately to undermine dominant understandings of 'transition' as employment and economic continuity. Rather, they articulate a different version of *what matters*, and in this way, they enact narrative agency by telling stories outside the narrow parameters of liberal individualism. Whereas care is marginal to transition for the liberal individual, the films all reveal that what matters to veterans struggling to transition between the military and civilian life is care for the person and a reinstating of communal relations and belonging. Belonging is what veterans lose upon separation from the communal bonds of military life[101], and it is what immersion in communities fostered around practices of art, archaeology and sailing fundamentally restores. The care aesthetic cultivated in each of our three films illustrates how care is grafted onto these practices in ways that sustain hope against the isolating experience of transition and against the callousness of economic rationalities. Making care visible, our veteran co-creators enact narrative agency by showing core aspects of their transition experience which other narratives leave out, refuse to acknowledge, or perhaps even deny. Herein lies the power of film as a communicative tool in international relations.

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[101] Albertson, 'Relational legacies impacting on veteran transition from military to civilian life'

Declaration of competing interests

No competing interests are declared by the authors.