

## “I WAS A SOLDIER IN KOSOVO”

### Discourses of war in James Blunt’s early musical career

Wars affect and have been affecting a vast number of people’s lives in the world. One of the recent European conflicts was the war in the Serbian province of Kosovo that started in February 1998 involving high levels of ethnic cleansing against the Kosovar Albanians. After unsuccessful peace talks and Milosevic’s refusal to stop the violence in March 1999 NATO intervened. NATO troops took control of Kosovo after the ceasefire in June 1999. (Arkin 2001; Clark 2002.) Stationed with KFOR NATO forces James Hillier Blount was amongst the first troops to arrive in Kosovo and was deployed as a commander of a tank crew in the Serbian border region. Having served in the Household Cavalry Mounted Regiment in London, and in Queen Elizabeth’s personal guards he resigned in 2002 after six years of service. (Barnes 2006; Hardy 2010: 4, 93; Sisario 2007.)

Following this, Blount created a stage name as James Blunt and went on to pursue a music career as a singer-songwriter. With the support of his pop rock band set up, his military experiences were often reflected in the music. His music can be seen as mainstream popular music and falls in-between folk or pop rock. The genre of his music is somewhat contradictory as Blunt’s visual image. His band seems to imply folk rock influences, and has been described as “highly emotional male singer-songwriter” (Ramaswamy 2008), which is not normal for the genre, but rather common in mainstream popular music. Critics have defined his music as “a throwback to the 1970s soft-rock golden age” (Sisario 2007). In 2004 his debut album *Back to Bedlam* was released. From the album, the

song *You're Beautiful* reached number one in numerous charts around the world<sup>1</sup> despite being loathed by critics. (Hardy 2010: 4–6; Sisario 2007.) As the album received more attention, the inclusion of the last track, *No Bravery* led to more inquiry into the experiences of war by Blunt. (BBC 2005; Tranter 2006; Williams 2005). The song received radio play but was never released as a single in the US.

The theme of war appear in Blunt's early musical career generating an interesting topic for music research. Within our article the related themes covered in the media between 2005–2008 are explored through discourse analysis of the culture that is near and penetrates our everyday lives. Throughout this article, we will be contributing to the scholarly discussion of the "dark side" of popular music, referencing violence and war. (Johnson & Cloonan 2009: 1–12; Rice 2012.)

## Ethnomusicological research on war

The ethnomusicological research addressing music in relation to war emerged after the 1990's and has since been growing steadily. A notable example on music and violence is *Music and Conflict* (O'Connell & Castelo-Branco 2010), where a wide range of articles from Brazil to Azerbaijan were included. It is nonetheless evident that most of this ethnographic research looks at music, war and violence outside the western world (i.e. Burkhalter 2011; O'Connell & Castelo-Branco 2010; Kartomi 2010; McDonald 2010). However, there are few studies on war within ethnomusicology for two basic reasons: the difficulty to obtain permission to do fieldwork in war zones: and, the dangerous circumstances of conducting research in such situations (Kartomi 2010: 453–56). In our study, we provide an alternative way of conducting safe and ethical ethnomusicological research through the examination of secondary material.

War's impact on music in the former Yugoslavia has been researched within ethnomusicology. Jane Sugarman (2010) studied the Kosovo conflict and the significance of music in the media in incitement to war and as an advocate for peace. Svanibor Pettan (1996 & 2010) conducted research on Bosnian refugees' music making in Norway, and the Roma's musical transactions in Kosovo during and

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<sup>1</sup> Blunt's first album has gone down in history as the biggest-selling album in the United Kingdom between 2000 and 2009. By 2010, it had sold over 18 million copies. (Hardy 2010: 4–6; Sisario 2007.)

after the war. Naila Ceribašić (1995 & 2000) studied gender roles in Croatian and Serbian popular music during the war.

War and music have also been studied in the broader context of musicology and popular music studies for example in relation to the conflicts involving the U.S.A, such as Vietnam war (Andresen 2003), Iraq war (Pieslak 2009), and the 9/11 terrorist acts and the following musical reactions, compositions and performances in and out of US (Fisher & Flota 2011; Ritter & Daughtry 2013). Recently, research has been carried out by Susanna Välimäki (2015) on musical representations of trauma caused by war and genocide. Her aim was to demonstrate how music can aid people in collective traumas and burdens through three musical pieces. One related, rather large research area focuses on violence (Johnson & Cloonan 2009; Cusick's (2006 & 2008; Richardson 2011; Armstrong 1993; Smith & Boyson 2002). However in this article we do not use the aspects of violence, instead focus on war in relation to the music of mainstream 'white' popular musicians, a topic that is still overlooked by ethnomusicologists.

Ethnomusicological literature has in recent years highlighted a 'historical juncture', that has seen to shift the research away from the 'automatic identification with the exotic'. The ethnomusicological research has branches in new areas, not just 'the other' and orientalism. (Stobart 2008: 1.) There has been a paradigm shift where the focus has been turned on the researcher's own cultural and musical environment. Yet, this shift in conducting research is rarely accepted within ethnomusicology, the exceptions to this can be found in Nordic countries that have a long tradition of combining popular music studies with ethnomusicology.

Our aims are to show how ethnomusicologically questions and discussions are presented in popular music and media. Throughout this article we want to raise awareness on how war can be part of the Western popular music making and mainstream pop. Academic discussions have generally avoided artists such as Blunt and others whose mainstream repertoire sells millions. We demonstrate how, in popular music, the artist's own experiences has influenced music making; the "real life" can be relevant in all kinds of music and cultures. Our main research question is to study what kind of war related discourses can be found in James Blunt's music making and its media representations in the years 2004–2008.

## Methods and research material

Our approach can be located at the cross-section of ethnomusicology, cultural musicology and media anthropology. Cultural practices and their meanings are studied through a variety of forms of cultural texts (Childs 2006). Our analysis was comprised of cultural texts that consist of written and audio-visual materials. We applied ethnographic methods to media texts that focused on the particular artist in this study. In the case of our material, ethnography is partly virtual (Hine 2008) that focused on a phenomenon dependent on media and digital production. Through this, we followed the current conceptions of the changes in the ways to carry out fieldwork in the last decades, and include electronic forms (Wood 2008). Following the examples of virtual ethnography we used heterogeneous data (text, audio-visual data, etc.) in the analysis and combined research from what is known as "in front of the screen and in the virtual field". (Domínguez et al. 2007.) However, we did not investigate online communities but used the Internet as an archival resource. The analysis also includes audio-visual ethnography (cf. visual ethnography by Pink 2008) used as a research tool engaging with online print and audio-visual media. The aim is to engage with the symbolic meaning construction and critical analysis of cultural texts.

Even though our analysis is not critical discourse analysis in its purest form, we have adopted Norman Fairclough's main ideas that included the linking of textual analysis with the social analysis of practices, organisation and institutions. Textual analysis involves interdiscursive analysis (analysis of discourses, genres and styles are drawn upon in a text and how they are articulated together) and analysis of different semiotic modes (language, visual images, music etc.) (Fairclough 2010: 7). Here, *discourse analysis* refers to the analysis of the relationships between concrete language use (through any communicative system) and the wider social and cultural structures. (Fairclough 1995: 56). In other words, the analysis focuses on the ways the world is *represented* in the events and relations of the text, and how they constitute socially produced meanings as discourses. Discourses are constitutive of social practices and processes, and are essential in the meaning making process. Culturally produced meanings are not fixed, stable or 'pure', they are produced under certain conditions and within a context. It is part of the analysis to critically pay attention to values and power relations, that

is, the ideological setting of the “good” and the “right”, and the various related position. (Fairclough 1995: 104; 2010: 7–8.)

The research material used in this study comprises of Blunt’s first two albums, *Back to Bedlam* (2004) and *All the Lost Souls* (2007), the documentary film *Return to Kosovo* released at the time Blunt’s second album came out in 2007, two music videos and media texts collected from 14 online music reviews and magazine articles written between 2004 and 2008 (table 1). Materials from both conservative and liberal broadsheet British and American newspapers were used.

Form of research material	Name	Year of release	Source	Journalist
Albums				
	Back to Bedlam	2004		
	All the Lost Souls	2007		
Music videos				
	High <sup>1</sup>	2004		
	No Bravery	2006		
Documentary				
	Return to Kosovo	2007		
Articles				
	James Blunt interview	2005	<i>BBC Norfolk</i>	Williams, Sarah
	James Blunt: Back to Bedlam	2005	<i>Slant Magazine</i>	Cinquemani, Sal
	Turning up the charm and the eye contact	2005	<i>The New York Times</i>	Sinagra, Laura
	James Blunt Interview	2005	<i>Female First</i>	
	James Blunt & Carrie Fisher: The odd couple.”	2006	<i>The Independent</i>	Barnes, Anthony
	Q&A; James Blunt	2006	<i>Rolling Stone</i>	Scaggs, Austin
	Slightly Bigger: Interview with James Blunt	2006	<i>PopMatters</i>	Tranter, Nikki
	Blunty’s back. Oh yes he is. . .	2007	<i>BBC</i>	Blakeney, Jerome
	Album: James Blunt	2007	<i>The Independent</i>	Gill, Andy
	James Blunt: All the Lost Souls	2007	<i>Rolling Stone</i>	Hoard, Christian
	James Blunt, All the Lost Souls	2007	<i>The Guardian</i>	Petridis, Alexis
	Making a Career After a Monster Hit	2007	<i>The New York Times</i>	Sisario, Ben
	James Blunt Interview: Blunt and too the point	2008	<i>Scotland on Sunday</i>	Ramaswamy, Chitra

Table 1: Research material.

<sup>1</sup> There are two version of the music video for the single High. The first one was released in 2004 and another version for the re-released in 2005. In this article used only the video released in 2004.

Even though our research data includes Blunt's two albums, we avoided comprehensive analysis of the lyrics. After 2008, the themes of war and death no longer appear in quantity from the media texts and therefore works produced later were not included in this study. The texts generated symbolic meaning of the constructions of war and three particular discourses related to the artist James Blunt; the soldier; the saviour and the traitor. These three discourses gain different weight in the analysed material and even contradict each other in some ways.

### Soldier (saviour)

The discourse of the soldier reflects upon Blunt's experiences of the war. The soldier can be found in his music making, in the album art and in the documentary *Return to Kosovo*. We have also identified a subdiscourse closely related to the soldier, however it appears as a specific way of representing certain aspects of soldierhood. As a whole, this discourse is the strongest one in our research material, and was heavily constructed in the media materials produced by the artists.

The soldier discourse can be found from journal articles that frequently highlighted Blunt as different to other musicians because he has a history of military honour. In the interviews in the British media done in the beginning of his musical career, Blunt was presented as a military officer, and that gave him a status that was used to highlight the special nature of his career. This was evident from the perspective of reviews about the quality of Blunt's music as a form of self-expression. There was a tendency where the media would introduce Blunt's military career as a way to establish a narrative of a soldier realizing his dream rather than a musician at the beginning of his career. The journal articles pointed out his music possesses a special depth and insight; after all, he wrote songs while being an officer. (BBC 2005; Williams 2005.)

The journalists often implied that Blunt's former career was a strength of character he was able to draw upon. Blunt's experiences as a soldier in war might have carried both personal and painful memories. In an interview for a British celebrity and lifestyle magazine, *Female First*, Blunt's life as a musician was portrayed as an interruption to his more 'respectable' career as a soldier (Williams

2005). BBC Norfolk, on the other hand, posed Blunt's song-writing as a way to helped him during his time in Kosovo inferring that music was his primary interest (BBC 2005). It could be seen that these interviews extended the perception of Blunt's musical career as a way to come into terms with his past experiences of a soldier.

Blunt's responses to the journalist's questions brought out different aspects of his career and the soldier discussion. In the *Female First* interview Blunt emphasized the personal meaning and experiences behind the songs, it created a strong divide between his current life as a musician and the time in the army. Blunt himself stated that the soldier's had a different 'frame of mind' on the field suggesting that a form of detachment took place. He also emphasized that through his military training he was better prepared to face different types of audiences and to deal with the media. His responses implies that his past is no longer present in his life. He has presented himself as an image of a strong independent man accustomed to abuse and resistance. (Williams 2005.)

us based Slant's review on Blunt's debut album offers Americans an opportunity to "go gaga over this able British bloke" based on his military past. (Cinquemani 2005.) This seems to be one major reason for his success in the us, a country so many popular British acts have struggled to break through into. His success could be emphasised through the history of the alliance between the UK and American troops in the forming of the NATO alliance, something that Blunt was part of.

The events in the *Return to Kosovo* documentary construct heavily the soldier discourse, and the film assumably represents the artists' voice. It consist of three types of material: a visit to the capital of Kosovo, Pristina and its surroundings five years after Blunt's service, concert performances at the NATO base, and video diary clips from 1999. The self-recorded video diary provides a second time layer onto the film. Even though he gives a concert for the troops, his past career as a captain was the main focus as evidenced by the black and white concert performances and other documentary materials in colour. This provides a striking contrast between the reality of life in Kosovo and the special conditions that the peace keepers live at the base. The 'real' life is in colour, whereas the stagnant life at the camp appears in the shades of grey.

The captions of the life at the camp and the concert represent Blunt, who as a tough soldier was seen male bonding with the troops. During his performance, he addressed the soldiers with respect and a friendly attitude, so that it could reinforce the image that he was one of them. The documentary also shows us how Blunt keeps up the high spirits and the motivation of the troops by thanking the soldiers for important work they were doing. Through these actions he is perceived to step back into the soldier discourse and his old role of an officer, and because his success as a musician was used to follow the old traditions of the military by providing entertaining to soldiers in the war zone.<sup>2</sup> Yet, the border of performer and soldier seem to blur as there were elements of male bonding, often a sense of insider jokes could be observed, through his return to the army culture and the normative army behaviour.

The most direct reference to the soldier discourse and Blunt's experiences in Kosovo could be found from the last song of his debut album, called *No Bravery*. In the interviews, it has been assumed that Blunt's song and song-writing in general helped him to cope with the war (BBC 2005; Williams 2005). In an article by *Female First* stated in the beginning of the interview that writing "songs, a form of expression that helped him [Blunt] make sense of the senseless world around him" (Williams 2005).

In the documentary film *Return to Kosovo*, Blunt explained that he composed *No Bravery* while he was stationed in Kosovo:

I wrote it besides my tank [in Kosovo]. And I've just come back of [sic] the border and we had our own moments. It took about 10 minutes to write really. There were so many things to visualize. Just needed to describe what we were seeing. Erm... And yeah it is, you know, it's a really heartfelt song that captures the experiences of the time. (Blunt 2007b.)

Blunt constructs a narrative of transferring primary experiential images of a soldier into the lyrics of the song. The rationale behind such descriptions seems to provide a selected dialogue presented by his publicity machinery to validate his authenticity. By drawing on the soldier discourse and repeating the story over and over again in the media it became a normative description of the authentic

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<sup>2</sup> For more details on the USO scheme see USO 2015.



song-writing. The experience of the individual's voice in their music making is seen to dominate this song. Blunt's claim to have written this song in 10 minutes points out the expressive visuals he experienced were documented within a few minutes into a meaningful song that he shares with the world. Unbeknown to him, this song would later be sung to people all around the world. The performance of such altruistic acts and describing these acts in the song lyrics can be seen as the dark side of popular music whereas the song can also be taken as a narrative of historical events in a particular war zone.

The constructed truth value is also recognised in the media, for example the magazine *Pop Matters* mentioned that *No Bravery* presented a picture of war only a soldier can have (Tranter 2006). *The New York Times* live performance review stated that the song as a 'grisly reportage' that 'lends weight to' Blunt's other songs (Sinagra 2005) suggesting that *No Bravery* made Blunt a musician to be taken seriously despite his other songs. Soldierhood and war experiences as neither the truth value nor the pathos of the song were questioned, as in the case of Blunt's other songs. These true accounts of a soldier were presented also visually in the documentary film *Return to Kosovo*, and the same video footage is also used in the official music video to *No Bravery* (2007). *No Bravery* had received radio play in the US, but was never released as a single, and the reasons for this remain unknown.

Another soldier discourse is related to ranks and orders. Ranks relate to the way soldiers are acknowledged for their work. On the album slip of *No Bravery*, the musicians are identified by first initial and full surname as well as a military rank. With reference to the musicians as soldiers it illuminates powerfully the identities of soldiers, tightening the contextual web. Naming the band members by military rank synthesized commonalities and shared effort that has gone into the album. This way Blunt's past status as the leader of a group is highlighted by presenting the band as his "troops." When he left the army, he held the status of Captain. The same rank of Captain was noted in the album credits for the song *No Bravery*, illustrating a singer-songwriter who led his group into "battle". This was all under the watchful eye of the song producer and bass guitarist Linda Perry who was credited as "Col. L. Perry". Colonel is the highest possible military rank, and there has been no proof that Perry has any experience of the army, let alone

reached the accolades of a Colonel. Even though her gender is hidden behind the initials, she as a woman is now written into the normative masculine discourse.

The heteronormative and masculine soldier behaviour is part of the soldier discourse. In the documentary, Blunt makes a live appearance on stage and while talking to the audience, he made sexual references of women, clearly addressed to the men:

Two reasons why I sing it one is 'cause some of you have girlfriends who are home, so this will make you miserable. And the second reason is that there are some girls here and hopefully this will make them cry, and so I make them cry, and then you can score them. (Blunt 2007b.)

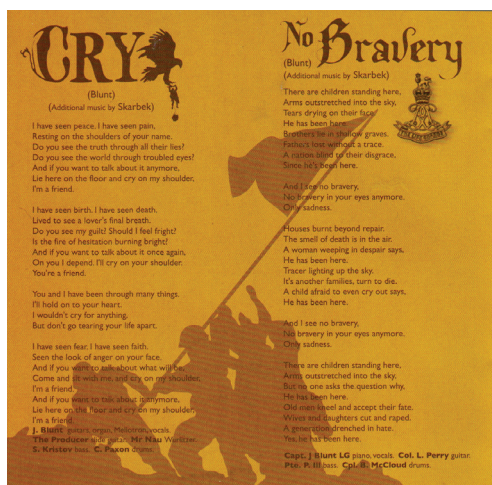
It can be seen from the film that the audience mostly consists of men, but there are few female soldiers. In addition, some female civilians were in the audience. By this comment Blunt referred to the local women as companions or escorts, whose functions at the camp were to relieve the soldiers' longing for their partners. It is a sexist remark and an objectification of Kosovar women. The soldiers are amused; they laugh and applaud while the women's reactions are not represented. Blunt appears to be one of the blokes, stepping into their culture and the normative army behaviour. Other footage from *High* featured Uncle Sam dragging a man on the ground who had been dreaming of a woman, hence illustrates the male dominated environment of the military. War can be seen as a liminal space of ambivalence and ambiguity, that takes place in-between the normative life, breaking social barriers. (Turner 1977, 94–96.)

Visual assertion of the associations between the song *No Bravery* and the soldier theme can be found in the background image used in the album slip (see picture 1). Behind the song lyrics and the credits for the song is the widely recognised "Flag Raising over Iwo Jima" photograph taken by Joe Rosental in 1945<sup>3</sup> and received the Pulitzer Prize in the same year. Although the origins of this image came from the end of WWII, and *No Bravery* contained experiences from the Kosovo War, there are universal generalisations in the visuals of a soldier. Its ubiquity in the context of wars continues. Death is also a risk that soldiers encounter regularly. This part of each soldier's life is represented in the album

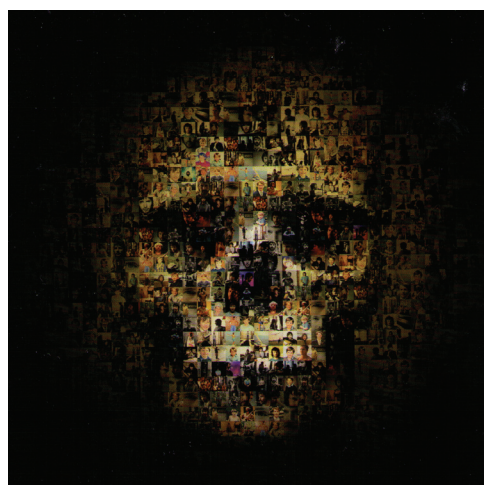
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<sup>3</sup> For the picture see <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/520748>.

cover for the second album, *All the Lost Souls*, where a photomosaic image of Blunt's face made up of small photographs (see picture 2). The illustration uses pictures that seem to portray Blunt himself, from childhood to adulthood, representing the whole cycle of his life. Within the inner pages of the album slip is a similar photomosaic image of a skull. The skull is placed on the flip side of his own face. Through this, Blunt coalesces with death, highlighting the other side of all human life, and particularly the life of a soldier.



Picture 1: Album slip for the lyrics of  
*No Bravery*.



Picture 2: Picture in the album slip of  
*All the Lost Souls*.

The saviour subdiscourse, apparent in the texts published in the beginning of his career, appears first in the song lyrics as referrals to saving others. The personal experience of war strongly invested his character and conferred approval of his military operations in conflict areas. During the beginning of his musical career, the British press constructed the image of Blunt as the good soldier through an association with honour, and characterised by bravery (BBC 2005; Williams 2005). One possible explanation for this admiring tone in the media was that other stories in the British media were, at that time, linked with the Iraq war. The official music video of Blunt's opening single *High* was set in a desert, much like the

landscape of Iraq. Towards the end of the video, while Blunt lies of the ground, his arm is dragged by the Patriotic symbol and image of army recruitment, Uncle Sam. The dragging movement was in a similar fashion that a wounded soldier is taken out from the battle zone to receive medical attention. It is possible the media wanted to sustain the positive image the British army's action abroad, whereby Blunt was used as a role model that underlined the good work carried out through the military, even though Blunts involvement was through NATO troops in Kosovo. This could also explain why the media in the United States seemed to have maintained their positive statements about Blunt until 2007 (Sisario 2007; Scaggs 2006). Using the military discourse as part of Blunt's image also emphasized his masculinity, strengthening his otherwise rather feminine character. Blunt draws upon the saviour discourse himself by constructing an image of a strong and independent man used to harsh conditions.

The strongest source of the saviour discourse came from the film *Return to Kosovo*. It was built on the reminiscences of the good deeds performed to bring peace. In these cases, Blunt was depicted as a saviour, an empathetic soldier that helped Kosovars in the midst of the war. This setup is exemplified by the music video and clips of Blunt's video diaries of the British troops in the documentary. In this, the troops were driving through villages with their cars and tanks, and local people standing at the sides of the streets were greeting them with their arms in the air. The documentary follows Blunt going to a graveyard, as he explained the mass of graves were in the process of being exhumed. Remembering the sight of bodies he stated a "lot of people died and have been buried in shallow graves here" (video diary), and the same phrase can also be found in the lyrics of the song *No Bravery* – "Brothers lie in shallow graves." Though Blunt's music making, he found a way to distance oneself from traumatic experiences.

The saviour theme can also be found in the photos in the second album's slip. The pictures towards the end of the album slip represent a dove and a butterfly. The dove refers to purity and peace, is often used to represent freedom, whereas the butterfly is a symbol of transformation, death and new life, as well as also a symbol of the soul (Becker 2000: 50). This is reflected through the picture on the cover of the slip where there is the picture of Blunt's face and a skull. As the pages of the slip get turned, it can be interpreted that the order of the pictures bears a story line representing the idea of life after death, as well as spiritual free-

dom followed by death. As an alternative reading is that this metamorphosis is reached along and through music. The butterfly is also representative of Blunt's career trajectory from an ordinary soldier to internationally recognised musician.

Although the soldier discourse is covered through the materials, it is not supported in Blunt's music. For instances, there is a distortion between the masculine soldier discourse and Blunt's music that is considered feminine. He sings mellow songs with a soft voice. His music, use of falsetto and high pitched voice associates him more closely with pop styles. Voice is always gendered, pitch being significant in this, where a slow voices most often associated with masculine power. (Johnson & Cloonan 2009: 19–20; see also Biddle 2007: 126; Goldin-Perschbacher 2007: 213; Johnson 2000: 96–97).

## Traitor (feman)

The second discourse, *a traitor* can be viewed as an opposite to the soldier/saviour discourse discussed above. This is a negative aspect that was casted over the music career in reflection to Blunt's action as a soldier by journalists. Two different levels that the traitor is portrayed in. Firstly, there is the actual traitor that was seen post military career, through his behaviours and actions that defame the army honours. Secondly, there is also the traitor that moved away from the army as a soldier and desired to progress with his musical career. In the traitor discourse there is also one subdiscourse that was identified in the media material, that of *feman*. As a whole the traitor is a negative representation of Blunt's relation to war and his military career, and it is constructed in the journal articles.

The change in the approach by the media was very clear as it turned against Blunt during the transition from a debuting musician to the release of his second album. British media texts after 2007 seem to have highlighted how Blunt become a traitor to his army identity. He was called as the "posh ex-Army tyke" by The BBC's rock critic (Blakeney 2007) and Blunt's past career as a soldier was briefly mentioned also in *The Guardian* to explain or highlight his behaviour (Petridis 2007). This was also detected within the newspaper *Scotland on Sunday*:

He entered the forces for six years, rising to captain, serving in Kosovo – where he strapped his guitar to a tank – and standing guard at the Queen Mother's cof-

fin. From there, it has been a fast, steep ascent to international pop stardom --, the villa in Ibiza, the entertaining bikini-clad supermodels on yachts, the "ship-load" of drugs --. (Ramaswamy 2008.)

Contrasting his past and present, the article created a picture of a man who, from the side of the 'Queen Mother's coffin', entered the world of supermodels and drug abuse. The construction of stark contrasts seems consciously made to highlight Blunt's inappropriate behaviour. Similar but with softer means are also used in *The New York Times* article a year earlier by referring to his military background before describing his tabloid celebrity and 'playboy' reputation (Sisario 2007).

The use of such discourses can be interpreted as a description of Blunt as a traitor to the army and betraying his country. Such rock and roll antics are hardly portrayed as suitable for military men preparing for battle. He lost his statue of being a man of honour, the idealised army-officer. By drawing negative images in relation to his behaviour during his musical career, the journalists emphasised Blunt's inauthentic nature and the traitor discourse. His relationships with celebrities were seen to manifest his lowered standards. By 2007 he was pictured as a man who had abandoned a respectable career and his past as a soldier was used as a stick to beat a man. Topics such as scandalous sybarite represented in the quote above, mentioned only in order to emphasise his decadence. Blunt had become a traitor, someone to be despised both because of the way he lived and also because of the sound of his voice.

This leads us into the subcategory of *feman*, visible in the journal articles, that portrayed Blunt as, "a heterosexual male with feminine characteristics" (Urban Dictionary 2014). We use the term *feman* as most of the other existing terms are inadequate to describe Blunt's character. His identity does not seem to conform to transgender (transman/transsexual), homosexuality, effeminacy or third gender. His visual image does not obey to metrosexual definitions either, that is described as a fashion-conscious and well-groomed urban male to the point of feminization (Macnamara 2006: 132; Merriam-Webster 2014).

Blunt used his falsetto voice in what seemed like a very conscious choice for the title of the first song in *Back to Bedlam, High*. His vocal cords reach to the higher ends of the falsetto range while singing 'high'. Blunt breaks the association of masculinity and low voice whereas his songs and performances contribute to this new type of masculinity. The video of *High* depicts a story of a man

in the desert chasing after what starts off to be a beautiful woman, who ends up through various transfigurations of a dancing woman, a figure of a long haired person, old woman in a wig, and Elvis (see picture 3). It remains unclear if the long haired person was a drag, and this questions the intentions of the feman. Blunt's vulnerable masculine image collides with the aspects of his persona presented in the media and film. His soldier-masculine past and stud-masculine jet set lifestyle contrasts with the 'pretty boy' image and the singing of romantic songs with a soft voice. His appearance as a tough soldier with his peers was strikingly contradictory to the nice boy and the pop star image.

The feman discourse appears in the contradiction to Blunt's physical appearance and high-pitched voice. This was picked up by the media and used to question his masculine identity. Blunt's voice and his singing style and his singing style has been described by the journalists as 'an androgynous warble' (Blakeney 2007), 'tremulous warble' (Petridis 2007), 'tremulous warble' (Petridis 2007) and as 'thin' and 'reedy' (Ramaswamy 2008). A critic in *The Guardian* paid attention in his album review to Blunt's feminine aspects too when considering his voice in relation to the themes he sings about. It is apparent that Blunt's trembling voice makes his work sound insincere.

If you sing about killing a man, as Blunt does on *I Really Want You*, in precisely the same voice you use to sing about fellatio, it's bound to have an emotionally levelling effect: you're going to come across as if you don't mean any of it. And perhaps that, rather than his class or his looks or his success, is the reason so many people dislike James Blunt. There's something weirdly insincere about what he does. (Petridis 2007.)

The reviews suggests Blunt's vocal androgyny to be inconsistent with an army-masculine image. These characteristics were seen to compromise Blunt's authenticity and credibility, whereas the masculine discourse was used against him.

Through Blunt's singing voice the feman subdiscourse is present in songs such as *No Bravery* that represented stern behaviours by troops in war and contradicts the song's theme. Many critics, for example *The Guardian* (Petridis 2007) and *The Independent*, have expressed their annoyance with the noticeable contradiction. *The Independent's* critic introduces Blunt as a "plummy former army captain with an

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Picture 3: Screen captures from the music video *High*.



odd falsetto" (Barnes 2006). Through his feman voice Blunt seems both vulnerable and tough, the sombre words create a sense only a masculine soldier could present. In the critics' eyes this incongruity seems to create an implausible character, someone to be suspicious about, referring back to the traitor discourse.

## Conclusion

Since the early 20th century popular music has served as a vehicle for political rebellion, opposition to war, humanitarian aid projects, nation building, patriotism, mourning, healing, and as a soundtrack of the war for soldiers in war (Garofalo 2007: 3–4). As Välimäki has pointed out cultural representations can help us to deal with traumas and transferred burdens and help us to "act for a better today and tomorrow only if we are able and allowed to deal freely with our collective past, the traumas and transferred burdens therein in cultural representations" (Välimäki 2015).

The post 9/11 situation in the US resulted in musical support for the grieving nation that was presented in music, particularly in lyrics, but was manifested also in other music related activities and events. However, as the terror attacks resulted in "suppression and marginalisation of voices resistant to dominant ideologies" (Garofalo 2007: 24), the political climate became conservative that influenced cultural industry and cultural production. In the analysis of James Blunt's music making in relation to war, the ideology has varied. What is "good" and "right" has been seen in different light in different positions. For Blunt, his side of the soldierhood was to serve the country that was represented by nationalism and as a cathartic tool for healing from the pain from war. His music had become part of the soldier's soundtrack through a performing visit upon a return to Kosovo after his active service.

Through this study, the artist James Blunt appeared as a contradictory public figure and a musician. The two main discourse categories were identified, the soldier with a subdiscourse saviour, and the traitor with a subdiscourse feman. These discourses appeared in numerous ways in these texts. The discourses have been positioned differently. The discourse of the soldier is one that explains the role of the soldier in the music making and appeared most prominently in the

analysis. The material that supports this has been constructed through an image that Blunt has portrayed himself. In this context, war is seen as a cause of destruction and grief for individual people but at the same time being a soldier is represented with a glory and honour. Blunt's success came at a time where conflict in Iraq was a topical debate in NATO countries, and media were able to put a positive spin of the work of the military through music.

These discourses appeared also later on in 2010 when Blunt again drew on the soldier and saviour discourses in his interview titled "James Blunt: How I prevented a third world war" (Michaels 2010) and sparked *The Guardian's* critic response "James Blunt saves the world", with the same to questioning of his truth value as well as and contributing to the traitor talk (Petridis 2010). The recurrence of these discourses outside our data collection phase would seem to validate our findings. The saviour discourse is something that gets given to a person as recognition of their good acts and honour, and it can be drawn from the person when necessary. Meanwhile, the soldier discourse is something one cannot shake off as easily as one would want to. The soldier discourse is something the person carries with him for a long time, and it might take years to overcome.

All in all, the traitor discourse has been constructed by the journalists. Although some audiences have responded positively to Blunt's music, some critics have detested him. In Blunt's music making, the trend is clear. The media initially respond to his past with interest, but by the time the second album came out, the media turned against the artist and his dark themes. This turn could have influenced the exclusion of these themes in the later albums, but the exclusion could also be explained by the distance from the Kosovo events. It is also possible that after the initial interest on Blunt and the rock critic's opinion having been heard, other journalists begun to take influences from the critics and by avoiding to appear to have bad taste in music. Furthermore, it seemed that some particular journalists produced the traitor discourse consistently. *Scotsman's* journalists points out that "being middle class is a heinous crime in pop music" and that makes so many people and critics hate Blunt. (Ramaswamy 2008.)

This study of Blunt's music making reveals several various aspects concerning the treatment of the themes of war and death in the popular culture. The broader cultural context of mainstream popular music in Anglo-American influenced world has been undergoing a strong mediatization process in the last

decades. Media has enormous power in relation to the public's conception of popular music and musicians. Furthermore, this study reveals how the themes of war and death are dealt superficially with the construction of the narrative of an artist, rather than serious and difficult issues that call for a critical and ethical discussion. It is the representation of a person as a soldier that was brought to the forefront, whereas the war itself was taken for granted and not questioned in the media texts at all. Blunt avoided a political stand and kept quiet his personal views about the war. By doing so, this could have negatively influenced his musical career. As such, the ways of dealing with the negative and horrific aspects of war and related issues are scarce and personal, rather than open and shared.

For Blunt himself it seems likely that music making has acted as a cathartic tool. Blunt's past has been well covered in the media in connection to the lyrics and the mood of *No Bravery*. Music seemed to have acted as a medium from where to discuss the acts of war he witnessed. Musical expression could be considered as a way to overcome and converse with the past. This is consistent with Peter Hardy's commentary of Blunt's experiences of war and had continued to shape his life (Hardy 2010: 71).

The treatment of his soldierhood has two faces; on one side, he is an officer, higher rank soldier, who through the narratives turns into a brave, heroic saviour, and the other side, a traitor who turns his back to the respectable life. However, he seemed to express the personal experiences of war through his music, with newer material lacking war related content. These albums could have also been justified as the general opinion about the British troops in Iraq turned negative. To maintain his iconic identity as a pop star, his representation of being part of the British troops had to diminish.

The subcategory of the feman appears in relation to Blunt's visual image and the discussions about his voice. His image combines both feminine and masculine characteristics. He appears relatively soft and vulnerable in his music. The songs deal with love and disappointment in relationships although his voice is effeminately soft and high pitched. This is incongruent with the soldier discourse that Blunt himself tries to construct. The contradiction is then used by the critics to question the truth value and authenticity of Blunt as an artist. Furthermore, the presentation of men and masculinity has changed. In general, it has become increasingly common to portray men negatively in the media. The most favour-

able presentations are a family man, gentleman, and buddy, whereas the representation of metrosexuals, which the feman can be assimilated, is mostly unfavourable. (Macnamara 2006: 90, 132.) This result is consistent with the turn in Blunt's media coverage as his public view changed from a soldier to a traitor. It seems that even though the representations of male social behaviour are widely varied, the favoured models are rather narrow. As the media both mirrors and constructs social attitudes, its role is substantial in construction of the image of individual musicians. The military past seemed to be the most unfit piece to the otherwise neat pop star puzzle.

To conclude, we would like to point out two issues. Firstly, it should be remembered that the James Blunt discussed in this article is partly a fictional character, who lives through the publicity and the products circulated around him. Therefore, the discussions presented here do not necessarily reflect the private personality, but the discourses are attached to his public persona. The 'real' James Hillies Blount, as his surname is originally written, is hardly revealed in these discourses. As Burkhalter states, musicians are both "public personae and private personalities, and the two do not always run in the same direction" (2011: 57). The question of how consciously Blunt has exploited the imagery of his past in his image remains partly unanswered. But he is certainly aware of the realms of public character and image building: his undergraduate thesis in sociology at the University of Bristol was titled "The Commodification of Image – Production of a Pop Idol" (1996).

While contributing to the academic discussion about music and death, war and violence, we have wanted to demonstrate that it is important to explore the music making of widely popular artists often ignored by researchers. These themes are important and instructive in their own right, and should not be excluded from scholarly research simply because the artists sell millions and receive controversial publicity. The contradictions in their public persona and messages underlying their work should make these topics more appealing for research. As this article has demonstrated, findings can be made by looking into artists the researchers are not the biggest fans of. Our personal taste is irrelevant when we investigate the contributions artists make into our popular music culture.

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