Simor Kamilla

The documentary representation of late modern warfare and the perceptual context of video-selfies

Absztrakt

The paper analyzes the visual and personalised implications of late modern warfare and its representation in documentary film. In the first half of my paper, I'm analyzing the cinematic representation of late modern war and its relationship to film and vision primarily from a media-historical perspective: what does the access to information mean in this context and what kind of media and mediatisation specificities has the war after the 2000s. In the second half of my study I'm focusing on the video-selfie-scenes of *Nine Months of War* (László Csuja, 2018) from a phenomenological and reception-theoretical perspective: what are the implications of the use of video-selfies in this documentary and what kind of new functions could this film add to these in warfare. I classify the functions of video-selfies into a three-tier typology of *channel* (making a video message to another person), *identity affirmation* and *space of testimony*. While at the beginning of the war the apparently superficial video-selfie-use characterizes the protagonist as a content producer and user, it then serves to identify with the military self-image and finally creates a specific, private space for the expression of traumatic experiences.

Szerző

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La victoire avant tout sera
De bien voir au loin
De tout voir
De près
Et que tout ait un nom nouveau. [1]
Guillaume Apollinaire: *La Victoire* (1917)

In my study, I analyze how the shifted character of late modern warfare, namely the practice of network-centric warfare, is related to documentary representations of war. In the film I have chosen to study, *Nine Month War* (László Csuja, 2018), the fact and circumstances of war seem to be superseded by the presentation of the personal fate of the protagonist who suffers in the war. My claim is that this mode of representation is not purposely personal, but partly a reflection on the structure of late modern warfare, i.e., the iWar. While the personal narrative determines the film to a certain extent, and the protagonist's figure – sometimes literally, sometimes metaphorically – obscures the war going on in front of and beside him, I want to point out that *Nine Month War* shows this kind of war environment and the confusion and uncertainty it causes through the protagonist's selfie-videos.

The film's protagonist is Jani, a twenty-four-year-old man from Berehove. On receiving his call-up to the National Guard of Ukraine, he leaves his mother, Erzsi, and his fiancée, Zsani, and joins the army. In the training camp and at the front Jani reports on the events around him in the form of video-selfies: the videos of what initially appears to be an adventure are later replaced by increasingly distressing footage of Jani realising that he could lose his life in the midst of the escalating conflict. When Jani returns home from the front for a short time, the video-selfies are interrupted by scenes shot by the film's cinematographer, Zágon Nagy, who records the everyday life of Jani and his family in a traditional observational documentary mode. [2] As one can imagine, Jani's personality changes as a result of the war: he is traumatised by the events at the front, turns inward and finds it difficult to find his place at home, away from his fellow soldiers. In the first half of my paper, I'm analyzing the cinematic representation of late modern war and its relationship to film and vision primarily from a media-historical perspective: how can we approach the problem of iWar, what does the access to information mean in this context and what

kind of media and mediatisation specificities does war have after the 2000s. In the second half of my paper I'm focusing on *Nine Month War*: I am interested in mapping the phenomenological and reception-theoretical implications of the use of video-selfies in this documentary and the new functions this film adds to the use of video-selfies in warfare.

1. Modern and late modern warfare: the individualisation consequences of iWar

Already at their inception, cinematic media were shaped by war and vice versa: these medial models also shaped the structure of wars. Visual technologies (first drawing, maps, then photography, and finally film, digital technology and new media) played a key role in the systemic battle for vision and spectacle. It is neither the subject nor the scope of my analysis to make a detailed comparison between the nature of modern warfare and late modern warfare, and thus to examine the former at length, but in order to contextualise the latter, it is worth briefly addressing this issue. In his work on media history, *Optical Media*, Friedrich Kittler analyses, among other things, how the development and evolution of different media technologies is linked to the age of war. The theorist also examines the conditions of the emergence and functioning of optical media beyond the techniques of fine art. For the purposes of the present paper, I will highlight the most important one, i.e. technical image-making, however, according to Kittler, it is important to note that the development of these visual and technical media are closely intertwined; they follow from each other. Kittler focuses on the strategic and military nature of information and argues that, in this regard, "the age of media technologies is at the same time also the age of technical warfare" (Kittler, *Optical Media*, 41–42.).

Drawing on Paul Virilio's argument [3] according to which the primary interest of the opposing sides is to gain access to information faster than the other side (i.e. to control and observe both their own and the enemy's troops and to react to enemy actions with the least possible time loss), Kittler points out that information as a strategic interest has "crucially accelerated the explosive rise of optical media over the last hundred years" (Kittler, *Optical Media,* 42.). Kittler's analysis focuses on different cases to illustrate the problem of access to sharper, more accurate, faster vision through visual technology, i.e., the interconnection between vision and war strategy. [4] For example, aerial photographs were already taken in the American Civil War; in the First World War, pilots took photographs by pressing the same button as the button they used to bomb and sent them electronically to the base. [5]

A soldier exercises with a Hythe Mk III gun camera during training at Ellington Field in Houston, Texas, in April 1918. The Mk III was used to train aerial gunners, and the weapon captured a photograph when the trigger was pulled.

US photo analysts learn mosaic mapping technique.

With the everyday use of film as an optical medium, the on-board machine gun sight and the small format camera could be combined; by the time colour film was created, the infrared colour range and radar wave were already being used in the Second World War. Thus, Kittler provides a thorough analysis of the decisive role in war of one side's more accurate access to the sight of different areas. He also shows that technical media not only facilitate this, but – in a back-and-forth process – also transform the forms of warfare itself, defining the scope of war representation. [6] Kittler offers primarily a structural analysis of modern warfare up to the mid-20th century, but in terms of my study, late modern forms of warfare – emerging in the 21st

century – will be the most relevant. Lev Manovich approaches the question of war and visual technologies regarding the issue of perspective: by examining the development of perspective technologies, he analyses the relationship between war and visual technologies, primarily on the principle of radar (and in this context, ultrasonic imaging, multispectral photography, multispectral imaging, infrared, sonar and magnetic-resonance imaging). Manovich identifies the radar as the rationalization of sight, independent of the capacity of the camera and the human eye, and characterised by *immediacy*: the commander no longer has to wait for the film to arrive from the pilots (Manovich, "The Mapping of Space," 5.). Both radar and the technologies mentioned above are characterised by "remote sensing": "gathering and imaging of information without actual contact with the object or area being investigated" (Manovich, "The Mapping of Space," 6.). According to Manovich, since the 1960s, computer developments have led to a complete automation of vision: he calls three-dimensional computer graphics *interactive perspectivalism*, which he then links to the automation of perspective representation (Manovich, "The Mapping," 8-12.). In his analysis, all these technological innovations – similarly to Kittler's claims – were created primarily as instruments of war, as weapons.

What Kittler does not address – partly because the lectures in this volume were given in 1999 – is how the use of new media for warfare in the late modern era is renewing and changing war as an event, and how this is affecting its representations (on film). In what follows, I will seek to answer the question of the individualizing consequences of the characteristics of late modern warfare and the related differences of contemporary warfare compared with modern warfare. Although the altered wars of electronic warfare are still fought for the most accurate and quickest information possible (as was the case hundreds of years ago), the Gulf War of 1991 and its new technical means have given rise to new forms of warfare. [7]

Late modern warfare is a generic term for several types of contemporary warfare often overlapping in structure and time: John Ryan's iWar is essentially defined as attacks carried out over the internet and, in addition to nation states, individuals, corporations and communities can also engage in this cyber and information warfare (Ryan 2006) [8]; the term *virtuous war*, coined by James Der Derian, refers to a type of network-centric warfare in which technology creates a global form of virtual violence and an era of "infoterror" (Derian, *Virtuous War*, 27.) [9]; Andrew Hoskins' and Ben O'Loughlin's concept of *diffuse war* focuses on the representation and mediation of war. They suggest that multimedia representations of war spread and migrate in a seemingly chaotic way in a complex media environment (Hoskins and O'Loughlin, *War and Media*, 22). [10] There are several similarities between the different types, but the most relevant for my analysis are the issues of representation, the resulting disinformation environment and the changed horizon of perception – the latter being closely linked to the issue of *individualisation*. An important novelty of late modern warfare is the central role of the individual: Holger Pötzsch explores the phenomenon of iWar [11] on the battlefield – not exclusively on internet platforms. He extends the meaning of the prefix "i" from electronification (and Andrejevic's interactivity) [12] to individuation: he considers that different filtering technologies and search algorithms have

individualizing effects. Furthermore, increasingly advanced developments in digital forms of control and visual techniques are often centered on the individual, and provide unprecedented access to the battlefield at hand (Pötzsch, "The Emergence of iWar," 81–82.). Pötzsch distinguishes three different types of individuation: the first is the disabling of military or civilian internet-based centres by controlling hijacked networked computers: the individualizing nature lies in the fact that this operation can be carried out by a single attacker. [13] The second denotes a type of offensive strategy in which specific individuals are the targets: it is not a fight against mass armies, but rather a manhunt. The third type is the customization of filtering technologies which is making the information about the wars available to individuals: mediated perceptions of war are increasingly individualized. [14]

The starting point of my analysis is this third aspect: my contention is that in terms of form and content *Nine Month War* reflects the level of individuation of late modern warfare described above. Linked to a digital control network and located on determinable GPS coordinates, Jani would be involved in a kind of individualized war even without the documentary. However, by highlighting the protagonist and showing his video-selfies, the film reflects on this individualized form of war – with the aforementioned disinformation environment as its important part.

Of course, disinformation means different things from the experiential horizons of war observers (spectators), war coordinators and war fighters. Also, civil persuasion and military communication cannot be treated on the same platform, even if they sometimes merge in the contemporary context: a front-line fighter (like Jani) can be also an active observer of events on social platforms. The mediatization of war, as interpreted by Hoskins and O'Loughlin, refers to the process by which socio-cultural institutions and modes of interaction are changed by the increasing influence of the media (*War and Media*, 5). In this sense, we can talk about the transformation of war. The mediatisation of war is particularly important in this case because the way in which conflicts are perceived is crucial in times of war: it allows the public to support or attack the justification of war and the government to justify it, and the soldiers involved in the war to understand the events around them (*War and Media*, 5). However, an important difference in terms of mediatisation compared to the wars of earlier eras is that war communication is now less linear than Raymond Williams described it (i.e. the information flowing to the audience through different communication channels can be switched on and off at the will of the receiver): information can come from the broadcaster to the audience and back; but the communication message can also come from the soldier on the battlefield who starts a blog leaking secret information (*War and Media*, 13). Pieces of information that often contradict each other appear on many more channels and are spread on social media platforms in addition to the mass media, often even in the form of fake news. The latter can be called a disinformation medium or disinformation environment. [15] The presence of conflicting news content is obviously nothing new in the history of wars, since the daily press has always played a prominent role in shaping public opinion, but as Huhtinen and Rantapelkonen point out, the case of the war in Ukraine illustrates how the rhizomatic nature of the internet makes it almost impossible to form a clear picture of events from a decision-making

perspective: deliberately generated fake news on social media create a “rhizomatic underground war” (Huhtinen – Rantapelkonen, “Disinformation”, 50-52.).

In my view, disinformation and misinformation as a condition effects predominantly the audience watching the war on various screens, while it is the lack of information that characterizes a front-line soldier like Jani, the main character of the documentary, or military orders. “The war was supposed to break out again, but nothing came of it. We went out with full military equipment, tanks, uniforms, grenades, everything. We got this notification that they were coming across the Russian border […] and we stood outside day and night for three days.” These and similar phrases are repeatedly uttered in Jani’s (the protagonist’s) video-selfies, all of which are examples of how – as in the wars of the past – one of the main features of the weaponisation of soldiers is that they take for granted or accept orders and perform actions that they do not understand.

However, it is important to note that in late modern warfare, compared to previous wars, digitalisation has also changed the perspective of frontline soldiers. This difference, alongside the more digitally advanced use of military weapons, can be partly captured in the phenomenon of individuation that Pötzsch refers to, primarily for the group of recipients of war representations, but I believe that it also fundamentally shapes the everyday lives of those who are at the bottom of the military hierarchy (such as Jani). Thanks to algorithms, the acquisition of information about war, the indirect perception of war, is also changing, becoming individualised: in contrast to mainstream media, the increasingly personalised variables of social media applications fundamentally shape our perception as well as how we think about war (Pötzsch, “The Emergence of iWar,” 85.). It is important to highlight this aspect in the context of *Nine Month War*. Mykola Makhortykh and Maryna Sydorova examine the role of social media in the visual framing of the Russo-Ukrainian War, analysing the post-2014 war content on a Ukrainian-language social platform and showing how visual posts on social media differ from content in the mass media. (In many ways, Jani’s videos follow the pattern set by Makhortykh and Sydorova in terms of content and form, in which content is primarily produced by those who are at the bottom of the military ranks: similarly to Jani, they often show their temporarily adopted animals or capture the natural landscape around them.) The authors’ findings [16] confirm my hypothesis that as opposed to mass media, social media platforms accentuate the individual reception and perception of war and deepen its disinformation character. In my view, access to this media content unites the groups of war observers and war fighters in some ways, and makes a fundamental difference between the modern and the late modern front-line soldier. Although in *Nine Month War* Jani refers to the fact that the phones have been confiscated, and thus presumably he has no access to information indefinitely, the (conflicting) information circulating on social media and the possibility of accessing it fundamentally differentiates the horizon of perception of a former and a current soldier. Although the film does not address the question of how Jani learns about the war, rather gives the impression that it is natural for him to enlist as a soldier on the Ukrainian side, his video-selfie-broadcasts follow the patterns of war videos and posts on social media, as analysed by

Makhortykh and Sydorova – thus he is an active recipient of this media content.

I think that in this documentary the reinforced individualism is reflected through the emphasis on the personal and the almost exclusive use of Jani's point of view. All this suggests that for a front-line soldier there may be no other way of representing the war. My claim is not that it is impossible to make factual statements about a particular war, although I don't think it is possible to give a purely objective description of a particular conflict either. In my interpretation, the representational mode of *Nine Month War* reflects on two things. One, on the environment poor in information, that has been a feature of late modern warfare, in which the soldier at the bottom of the ranks follows short-term orders in response to the most rapidly received information. And two, on the information-overflow in a disinformation context, in which the soldiers themselves, as social media users, are also involved.

Thus *Nine Month War* focuses on a single individual rather than attempting the almost impossible task of depicting the war in Donbas in its totality. "An important aspect of the film was not to get involved in the political part of the armed conflict. Let's focus on the fact that this is a personal story: Jani and Erzsike's point of view should prevail as strongly as possible," [17] says the film's director, László Csuja. Still, in my view the film does show the political dimension of the conflict in some ways, although focusing on a single person.

2. Logging in from the war: video-selfies as role-playing and as a channel

In the following, I will analyze how the late modern war context leads to differences in representation, primarily in the focus on the individual, and examine the theoretical implications of reception of war footage shot with mobile phones and in the mode of a video-selfie. Regarding the latter, I think that Pötzsch's individuation is both substantively and formally crucial in *Nine Month War*: both substantive and formal aspects are expressed through the act of the video-selfie, which I approach primarily from a phenomenological perspective. The "virtualisation" of contemporary warfare has led many to argue for the "disembodiment" of war. Judith Butler, for example, argues that in the current war framework it is no longer possible to separate "the material reality of war from those representational regimes through which it operates and which rationalize its own operation" (*Frames of War,* 29.). Still, the subject of my analysis is a documentary in which, in my view, the protagonist's body and his perception are given a prominent role through the use of video-selfie. I focus specifically on Jani's videos in the selfie mode: my aim is to show how the disinformation environment of late modern warfare shifts the documentary film towards a more personal direction centered upon the individual, and I am interested in the phenomenological conclusions that can be drawn from this.

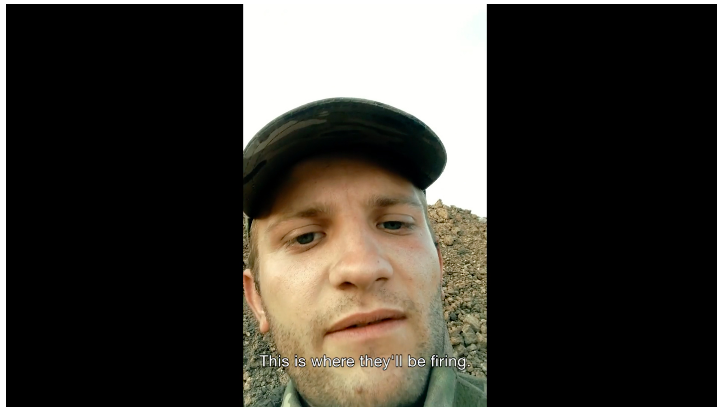
At the outset of this analysis, it is important to point out and clarify certain differences in roles. In contrast to the "usual" protagonists of human rights documentaries, Jani in *Nine Month War* is not a

civilian: although he is not a soldier by profession, [18] he enters the war as an official member of the Ukrainian army, and thus in content he differs significantly from the films in which fleeing civilians document their daily lives in the form of video-selfies. [19] However, in terms of content and function, Jani's footage is not entirely akin to the footages of soldiers who are mainly equipped with helmet cameras – that began to proliferate on the internet and became a staple of US news coverage at the outbreak of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. These on-site, real-time videos are primarily transmitted to the respective command centres, where various command, control and force deployment decisions are made on the basis of the videos (McSorley, "Helmetcams", 50.). [20] On the other hand, the same tools are also used to produce personal documentation, and this aspect is close to the recording activity of the protagonist of *Nine Month War*. In contrast to the violent footage of soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan, [21] the documentary nature of Jani's videos is more akin to the insights of Woodward, Winter and Jenkings, who – analysing photographs taken by British soldiers – have argued that through the emotional registers of military photographs, the geopolitical practices of the state are subjectivised, contrasting personal narratives with wider narratives of nation-state wars. "Photographic practices are significant because of their constitutive, memorializing and communicative functions around these geopolitical acts. The personal is geopolitical, in this sense" (Woodward – Winter – Jenkings, "Photographic Practices," 164.). In their interpretation, military photographic practice is "a performance of identity", an activity of identity expression. It is used as a communication tool to share – usually with people outside the military – the experience of what it means to be a soldier from the perspective of the person who took the photograph (Woodward–Winter–Jenkings, "Photographic Practices," 157.). Thus, the personal register of *Nine Month War* also derives from Jani's performance of his own military identity through the video-selfies: since he is not a professional soldier (Jani has not been in war before the documentary), [22] the video-selfies actually promote the affirmation of his military identity: the performance of identity constitutes the first group in the typology of video-selfie functions. (Perhaps the strongest point of this identification is when Jani flees from the family conflicts back to the "more homely battlefield".)

In the following, I will analyze two types of perceptual processes: one is the filmic identification of Jani's point of view through the video-selfie, and the other is the experience of the viewer of *Nine Month War* in perceiving the video-selfies, which I argue is different from the observer's perception of the scenes shot in documentary mode. For the first problem, I take Christian Ferencz-Flatz's study as a starting point, who examines how the problem of identification is developed in the case of video-selfies. The essential difference between a videochat and a video-selfie is the fact of recording: while the first is usually an unalterable digital reflection, the secondis determined by the nature of recording. Flatz considers video selfies as moving images whose author, protagonist and actual viewer is virtually one and the same individual; he carries out a phenomenological analysis of this genre in terms of perception, communication, effect, space and movement. Above all, the video-selfie is based on the dialectic of looking in the mirror, of seeing and being seen, but when the selfie is also recorded, this relationship becomes much more complex (Ferencz-Flatz, "You Talkin' to Me?," 236–238.).

As the taker of the video selfie sees him/herself recording the events, he/she is not only the protagonist but also the author and co-viewer of the video. The film thus reflects what the person sees, i.e. it can be understood as both an objective and subjective (viewer-centred) setting. The spatial position of the protagonist and the camera in relation to each other become virtually interchangeable: the protagonist is seen both in front of and behind the camera, on and off the screen – giving the film image a strange sense of sphericity and enclosure (Ferencz-Flatz, "You Talkin' to Me?," 236–238.). Thus Flatz shows how video-selfies create a completely new kind of entanglement between the subjects' experience of themselves and their relationship to others: he analyses the ambiguous experience of simultaneously looking at oneself while showing oneself to others, and showing oneself to others while looking at oneself (Ferencz-Flatz, "You Talkin' to Me?," 240.).

Keeping Ferencz-Flatz's analysis in mind, I will highlight two scenes that are oppositional regarding identification: they illustrate the process by which Jani seems to embrace his soldier self and then moves away from it. One of the first videos shows the first serious military deployment, as opposed to the clownish, relaxed atmosphere of the training camp. Jani, who used to be funny and commenting on the banter of his peers, suddenly changes his tone and announces himself as a serious, disciplined and stern soldier. This is the first time he has been seen in full gear: despite his best efforts, the viewer is more likely to see a civilian in military fatigues in the first war situation of his life than a professional soldier on deployment. The novelty of this scene is the sounds of guns and bombs fired can be heard in the background, and the man has to lie down to avoid being shot: "I think they're going to shoot at us from here. I'm waiting for the moment."



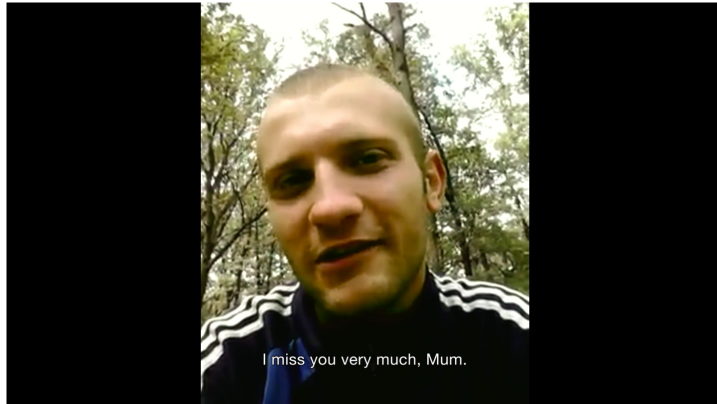
Jani's first video during a military attack. Nine Month War (László Csuja, 2018)

From the beginning of the film, Jani changes his point of view several times, and sometimes he doesn't take a selfie of the events around him but captures what is happening in front of him. The peculiarity of this scene is that, although it is the first instance in which Jani experiences war action, he does not switch from his digital reflection to his surroundings, but takes his own image throughout. I think this is a very important moment, because it is the real stake of *Nine Month War*: to follow the process of how the military becomes or does not become part of Jani's identity. By literally covering the war with his own face in this scene, Jani focuses more on making the fact more real for himself that he is a Ukrainian soldier, part of the war, and has to fight. On the one hand, Jani's confused speech can of course be attributed to the excitement and fear of war, but on the other hand, it can also spring from problems of identification: his lack of military experience creates a gap between the *viewing self* and the *viewed self*, because the digital image is unusual for Jani, he cannot identify with his military image yet. [23]

Thus, this scene can be understood as a kind of self-affirmation: Jani acquires visual evidence of his military self, and the resulting video helps him shape his identity – as if he were making the video not for an imagined audience but for himself, to convince himself. Based on this insight, I think that the definition of Ferencz-Flatz should be complemented by the *function of identity affirmation*, or more precisely, in the case of Jani, by a kind of *role-identity testing*, which I think the video-selfie can facilitate. The reinforcement of the military identity is exemplified by a scene, shot months later than this video, in which Jani is no longer recording as a confirmation for himself, but for an audience: this is also evident from the way he sets the phone in front of him, puts it down in a certain place, keeps moving away from it, and finally his whole body is visible. The viewer can still see Jani, but he is so far away from the phone that he is no longer there. Jani is on patrol at a border crossing, and he strictly stops a car that is passing by: presumably he started filming because he wanted to record the procedure in action. However, his footage is certainly intended for an outside viewer, not for Jani: he approaches the car firmly, aware of his military identity and the power attached to it. In summary, the man no longer uses the selfie function to find his own identity, to stabilise his military self-image, but to show it to his imagined audience.

This insight leads on to another scene with a completely opposite tone, in which the roles of the

spectators are reversed, or rather transferred. This is one of Jani's last check-ins from the war, in which he is seen in his own home clothes, sending a very personal message to his mother via video. "Mum, I love you very much […], when I have some time, I'll call you. Even if we can talk only for a minute or two, that's enough for me. I miss your touches and hugs so much, I miss your presence, I want to hug you. I miss even a fight with you or whatever…" Jani's emotional video may seem unusual to the viewer, since its implicit addressee is not the general audience (as in the previous case), but Erzsi, the man's mother.



Jani sends a message to his mother via the video-selfie. Nine Month War (László Csuja, 2018)

Apart from the obvious differences in content, i.e. the fact that Jani's homesickness overrides his military identity, we can notice an important difference in function: in this case (and in another video in which he recites a poem to his fiancée and her mother), the man uses the video selfie not as a means of documenting and affirming his self-image, but as a channel: he imagines his mother in place of his own digital image, as in a traditional videochat. In this case Jani is no longer making the video-selfie in the usual sense defined by Ferencz-Flatz, but is trying to fill the void caused by an absent, non-present person: this solution can be classified as a *channel*, the second group of video-selfie functions, and also points towards the third type, video-selfie as the *space of testimony.*

3. Video call as a symbolic private space

Before I present the third group of my typology – i.e. the shots that Jani took in selfie mode towards the end of his service, with "confessional" intentions – I will briefly discuss the scenes that he did not take in selfie mode. As viewers of *Nine Month War*, parts of the footage give us a kind of embodied film experience, i.e. we are physically touched. This is the case of the videos not shot in selfie mode, such as Jani walking in the trenches with the recording phone in his hand. Kevin McSorley's term *somatic war* is linked to the body, and more specifically to the perception of the military body: the theorist, analysing the footage of helmetcameras on soldiers in Afghanistan, concludes that the perspective of the helmetcameras does not offer an abstract overhead view, but "a sensory immersion in the ground" (McSorley, "Helmetcams," 48.) and creates the "rhythmic kinaesthetics of patrolling". According to McSorley, the representation of the conflict in

Afghanistan has changed in ten years: whereas the war was previously characterised as a disembodied war, multiplying symbols of 9/11, eventually it became a somatic war, a "medium of intense embodied experiences". The consequences are obviously not only perceptual, since representations influence the image of Afghanistan that viewers will have, as mentioned at the beginning of the paper.

> The embodied presence of the soldier is constantly felt in helmetcam footage, via the restless point-of-view, the sounds of breathing and vocali- zations, the reverberations of corporeal movement, the presence of shadows cast by the body, the sight of the soldier's rifle pointing the way ahead, the sense of hands shielding the sun. (…) War is thus rendered predominantly as a visceral first-person experience, and as an emotional experience, in these mediations. (McSorley, "Helmetcams," 52–53.)

Somatic scenes are also emotionally charged: as they are made from an individual perspective, they focus on the body of the soldier in danger, and thus can reinforce narratives of "new patriotism". [24] In the latter's understanding the purpose of war becomes increasingly existential or self-referential; the main goal is to rescue one's own soldiers, while the war is being defined as the struggle to do so. McSorley raises the problem that the helmetcam footages also function as a kind of seduction in this respect: by kinestheticising rhythm, emphasising physicality and heightening a sense of intimacy, such footage draws viewers into a militarised perception, with substantial ideological-political consequences. It is obvious that *Nine Month War* is a very different genre of work, so the scenes which stylistically belong to McSorley's category of somatic war, do not have the same function as described above, but on the contrary: although the scenes which are not shot in selfie mode somatically produce a certain ever-present effect on the senses, it is precisely through this sensual involvement that they alienate the viewer from the experience of war. For what we see is far from inviting: mobile phone footage of soldiers on constant standby, waiting in fear of enemy troops in the middle of nowhere. This has little to do with the "seduction" McSorley writes about. But the distancing aspect is matched by a counter-intuitive aspect that is specifically at play in the case of video-selfies: the interpretation of the video-selfie as a symbolic private space.

Although from Jani's point of view each check-in can be interpreted as a video call, I believe for the audience watching the film these are a different kind of media experience. In the following, I present the third type in the typology of video-selfies, which I describe as a space of testimony. From this point of view, in *Nine Month War* the face takes centre stage: by watching his video selfies, narrating the changes in his gaze, the spectator tries to read what s/he does not see, that is, what Jani does not show or report in detail: what might lead to his later changed, aggressive behaviour, and what makes him long for the front when he returns home. As Jani's service comes to an end, he is increasingly candid in his video testimonies about the events that shook him and his own mental state, but much remains unclear to the viewer and the man's family. The emphasis on Jani's face may be related to Walter Benjamin's claim that portraiture has cultic value, as

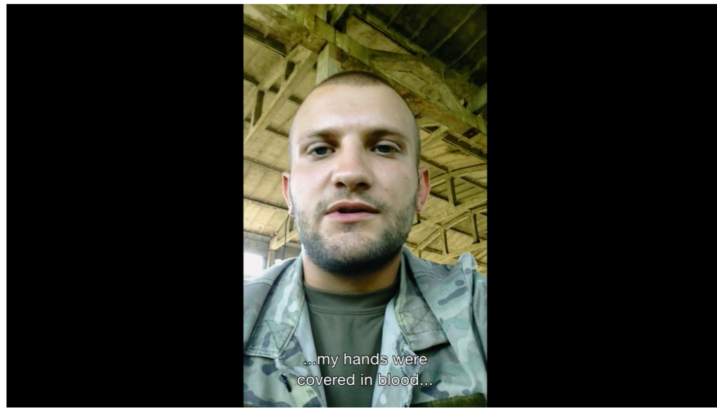
opposed to photographs without human figures, which have evidential value. “The aura beckons from early photographs for the last time” (Benjamin, “The Work of Art,” 27.). Benjamin points out that these photographs are accompanied by a kind of “fleeting expression”. Although in Jani’s case we are obviously talking about a moving image, and Benjamin writes of a complete loss of aura in the case of film as a medium, I think that the emphasis on the face and the narrativisation of the gaze give the photograph a cultic value: the spectator lingers on Jani’s gaze, trying to somehow see behind it and discover the reasons why he becomes more aggressive at home after the war.

In the scenes filmed by the crew at home, Erzsi repeatedly asks Jani about what happened at the front, she wants to know how her son is feeling, how the war is affecting him, because she is at a loss confronting his outbursts of anger. In these episodes, filmed in observational mode, neither the audience nor the people at home are given any answers as to what is going on in Jani’s mind, how he is processing the events of war. In fact, in many cases, he exaggerates the “glories” for his relatives, positioning himself as a tough soldier. In sharp contrast to this attitude is that Jani whom we meet towards the end of his service: a man who misses his mother, mourns the death of a comrade, feels doubt and uncertainty at the front, and seems to use the private space of the mobile phone to articulate his fears. In this way, the video-selfie appears as a kind of private, intimate space where Jani has the opportunity to confess his feelings and experiences honestly. Even though he is aware that his recordings will become public when they are included in the documentary (as a result of which he repeatedly plays a role, overacting his military identity), in his final log-ins he seems to forget his future wider audience and speaks more directly about his problems. According to Marie-Aude Baronian, video as a medium can also provide an opportunity for testimony: the theorist argues that the cinematic genre, which Jean-Pierre Meunier calls *home-souvenir*, gives the possibility of talking about different traumas (Baronian’s example is genocide), and for the victim’s family members to have access to them through viewing amateur videos. Although the point of the film-souvenir is to be viewed by people who know the individual(s) in the film, Baronian also emphasises that we can regard a home video that is foreign to us (i.e. not made by our own family member) as “familiar”, because the pixelated, shaky settings evoke a particular cinematic and aesthetic mode (Baronian, “Remembering Cinema,” 220–21.). The aesthetic nature of Jani’s videos can be contrasted strongly with the observational documentary mode of the episodes. These images are, of course, received differently by the viewers of *Nine Month War* compared to the family in the film: for the latter, Jani’s videos are primarily clues that go beyond the concrete image; they attempt to evoke and construct the “real” person depicted in the video selfies. They further the generalizability of the recorded scene, i.e. they function in a similar way as Benjamin’s “fleeting expression”. Zsani and Erzsi watch these videos in order to find out what has made the hitherto dear Jani a stranger to them, while the viewers of the film are more likely to follow a process that is almost obvious from the beginning of the film: the naive, adventure-seeking boy is mentally and spiritually damaged in the war, and from dangerous hopelessness he returns home to boring hopelessness.

In my view, this is where the film’s personal tone and its individualistic focus come together with

the wider political-social aspect of the war. The film is undeniably interested in Jani's personal environment: the relationship between Zsani and Jani, the tension between Zsani and Erzsi, the power play between Erzsi and Jani, and the man's attempt to separate from his mother. The war complicates these relationships even more, and the film tries to trace the consequences of the war on personal relationships by presenting these changes. Jani's video-selfies are thus partly derived from the individualised nature of late modern warfare, but the video-selfie as a media tool is much more than a documentary device. It creates a private space around the man in which he can express his fears, worries, insecurities – it also functions as a kind of digital confession, a space of testimony. The interesting thing is that while the videos visually evoke the video call, in many cases the recordings do not result in dialogicity but in Jani's turning in on himself: in the symbolic space created by the video-selfie, in the midst of war, he is completely alone.

This loneliness is also an important part of the ontological approach to selfies: in Frosh's interpretation, the selfie conveys not only the message "see, here, now", but also "see me showing you me", so the image includes both the act of filming/ photographing myself and the act of filming/ photographing. In this sense, then, the selfie is performativity itself: it makes visible both its own construction and the production of mediatization. The resulting loneliness stems from the selfie-taker's focus on the camera, engaging in a dialogue with the camera in order to create a certain "self" – a self that is isolated and distinct from the space in which the selfie is taken (Frosh, "The Gestural Image," 1610.). A similar reasoning is made by Bollmer and Guinness, who argue that although taking the selfie always involves the placement of the body in space, it is also always separate from it: the figure and the background are in relationship, but the background is always "eclipsed" in the act of taking the photograph. "The act of taking a selfie is an act of symbolic distinction, where the background recedes to the experience of the one taking the photograph, even though it is then registered in the image by the photographic apparatus, to be seen by others" (Bollmer–Guiness, "Phenomenology for the Selfie," 16.). Based on this approach, I argue that in the act of taking the selfie, the subject has the possibility to isolate her/ himself from the concrete space around her/him, and also to enter the symbolic space created by the performative act of the selfie. In the case of *Nine Month War*, Jani is linked to the possibility of articulating his military testimonies and his trauma. In addition to this, the selfie provides a space for the affirmation of the military identity analysed above, since its ontological essence is not only to represent or document the selfie, but also to produce, create and perform it by distinguishing it from its environment. It seems to me that the individualizing aspects of late modern warfare in relation to front-line soldiers, analyzed at the beginning of the paper, can be best captured in the differentiation of these video-selfie functions: while the seemingly superficial use at the beginning of the war characterizes Jani as a content producer and consumer who joins the disinformation environment, it then serves to identify with the military self-image, and finally creates a specific, private space for the expression of traumatic experiences.



Jani talks about the loss of his fellow soldier in one of his last video-selfies. Nine Month War (László Csuja, 2018)

Jani's videos are made for future potential viewers. As Barion points out, in the digital age the line between private and public content is no longer so clear-cut, and the man's footage is a perfect example of this: his log-ins partly show the thematic and formal characteristics of the videos of soldiers in the war in Donbas mentioned at the beginning of my paper, while the personal messages are more akin to family videos. But even the latter videos, which attempt to talk about trauma, are permeated by the possibility of being seen by a larger audience, because (in Baronian's interpretation) the recorded testimonies often have to be made in a private setting in order to be made public (Baronian, "Remembering Cinema," 222.). The third group of Jani's video-selfies is thus partly directed towards the audience and partly towards himself, insofar as his announcements are also identified as an understanding of his own situation. This suggests that, by mixing different cinematographic materials, the film can offer a much more complex picture than a purely personal narrative; the emphasis on Jani's family members and his home circumstances does not result in the obscuring or overshadowing of the war: for the spectator, the scenes shot in observational mode provide the necessary information to see "behind the image" by watching the video-selfies and to recognize the traces of late modern warfare on the individual behind Jani's specific words, by looking at his gaze.

However, it is important to emphasize that the video-selfie as private space does not necessarily go hand in hand with the success of trauma processing. The example of the characters in *Nine Month War* confirms a tendency: while Jani can articulate relatively well his own fears and how much he is affected by what has happened, at home he is silent, and his family cannot help him. Although the video-selfie can be identified as a fundamentally individual tool, as a form of individual expression, it can also take on a broader social meaning through its trauma-expressive function. It is worth distinguishing between the offline and online distribution of this content: in the first case (as in Baronian's examples), the testimony of the trauma victim is first viewed by a narrow family circle, and then processed as a community. This does not mean, of course, that the process is always successful, as *Nine Month War* illustrates too. Nevertheless, in the second case of online sharing, the question arises – especially given the dominant and influential presence of the representation of the war in Donbas on social media – whether military selfies could be able to

move beyond their own private space and start a more serious social dialogue in the digital space. In my view, videos like Jani's have a very dubious afterlife. On the one hand, there are countless cases that illustrate how often videos that are intended for private use and not aimed at the general public go viral on social media. On the other hand, it can also happen that they fail to reach the level that Baronian describes, and in many cases it is the self-disclosure rather than the trauma processing that soldiers engage in, as the community required for the latter is not at all evident in the virtual space. Therefore, it is feared that such digital content will become mere opinion on social media platforms [25] and that the social function of trauma processing will be lost.

In my interpretation, the three identified functions of the video selfie (*the performance of identity*, *the channel*, *the digital testimony*) form a three-tier typology: the sum of these functions can also characterize the way visual media are used by soldiers in late modern warfare. From the drone strikes [26] to the more than twenty-three ceasefires that have been concluded and broken, the war in Donbas is one of the most complex military conflicts of our time, and its media portrayal has been the subject of countless analyses. [27] In my study, I analyzed a specific case of the representation of this conflict from the perspective of film theory and phenomenology: how the increasing individuation of visual technologies changes the nature of war, and how contemporary technologies blur the distinction between the personal (trauma-processing) and the military, the political. In my view, in the disinformation environment of today's wars, it is no longer possible to distinguish so clearly between the war-watchers and the war-fighters who are at the bottom of the military ladder, because both sides are active users of social media, which also circulate war news. This digital environment has a huge influence on the way wars are represented and can radicalize masses of users by spreading fake news, but it is also questionable whether the same platform offers any form of dialogue on war issues: is trauma accessible by making testimonial military video-selfies available to a wider virtual audience, or merely "shareable" in the sense of social media? Besides mere mediation and presentation, based on the example of the protagonist of *Nine Month War*, it seems to me that the video-selfie can be more than a simple documentation tool for the individual: in the current circumstances, if not for processing trauma, the private space needed to articulate and talk about it is closer than we think – in our own digital mirror image.

[The Hungarian version of this article is published in this same thematic issue]

Jegyzetek

1. "Victory above all will be/ To see clearly at a distance/ To see everything/ Near at hand/ And may all things bear a new name." Trans. Anne Hyde Greet.
2. See for instance Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality, Issues and Concepts in Documentary* (Bloomington–Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1991), 38–41. and Thomas Waugh, *The Right to Play Oneself: Looking Back on Documentary Film* (Minneapolis–London: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), 75–76.
3. See Paul Virilio, *War and Cinema: The Logistics of Perception* (London–New York: Verso, 1989)
4. Harun Farocki's documentary *Images of the World and the Inscription of War* (1988) focuses on the relationship between war and photography. The film analyses World War II images taken by the US Air

Force during a bombing raid on an industrial plant in Germany in 1944. It was only decades after the war that it was discovered that these photographs already showed the Auschwitz concentration camp, which the Americans were supposedly unaware of at the time. One of the main claims of Farocki's film is that perceptions of war are often determined by the decision of what observers want and don't want to see.

5. The link between photography and the shooting of a gun dates back to the 19th century: a circular glass plate with a light-sensitive emulsion was placed in the barrel of Étienne-Jules Marey's chronophotographic gun, which was equipped with lens instead of lead and turned after each exposure, allowing him to take twelve shots per second in the 1880s. (With further improvements to the gun, he later achieved an exposure time of 1/720th of a second.) Mary Warner Marien, *Photography: A Cultural History* (4th Edition) (London: Laurence King Publishing, 2020), 227.; "Étienne-Jules Marey's photos with chronophotographic gun (1882-1904)", Mai Manó Ház Blog 2017. 09. 17., accessed 27 August 2021,
6. Kittler points out that at this time several members of the Entente Alliance were also leading film-makers, so the solution and outcome of the representation of the war favoured them: "Films presenting a world-destroying and virgin-defiling image of Kaiser Wilhelm II were thus exported to all the neutral countries." Friedrich Kittler, *Optical Media: Berlin Lectures 1999*, trans. Anthony Enns (Cambridge: Polity, 2010), 182.
7. The emergence of web 2.0 has played a central role in changing the nature of visuality and the emergence of two-way communication. In Hoskins and O'Loughlin's analysis, web 2.0 is seen as a new digital participatory media that has triggered a second phase of mediatisation: media have a wider impact on social processes, i.e. everyday life is increasingly embedded in the media space. Andrew Hoskins – Ben O'Loughlin, *War and Media: The Emergence of Diffused War* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010), 17–18.
8. The term iWar first appeared in an analysis by Johnny Ryan in 2007, who applied the term to the late modern mode of warfare: in his interpretation, iWar is distinct from the *cyber warfare* in the United States and from the Chinese *informatized warfare* – the latter referring primarily to military infrastructure and battlefield communications. Johnny Ryan, "'iWar': a new threat, its convenience – and our increasing vulnerability" *NATO Review*, October 1, 2007, https://www.nato.int/docu/review/articles/2007/10/01/analysis-iwar-a-new-threat-its-convenience-and-our-increasing-vulnerability/index.html
9. James Der Derian sees the invasion of Iraq as the starting point for a virtuous war: the US military, through its technological superiority, together with computer simulation, global surveillance and networked armies, has sought to prove and justify its own ethical superiority over the other side, while at the same time deterring, disciplining and, if necessary, destroying the enemy. According to the theorist, virtuous war usually relies on the doctrines of "just war" or, whenever possible, "holy war" in its arguments. See James Der Derian, *Virtuous War: Mapping the Military-Industrial-Media-Entertainment Network* (London: Routledge, 2009), 20. A further aim of virtuous war is that the threat of violence and its eventual implementation should be carried out "at a distance" if possible – without casualties. Obviously, this form of warfare is advantageous to those agents who are themselves digitally advanced, and thus gain a strategic advantage: virtuality thus becomes the fifth dimension, alongside time (Der Derian, *Virtuous War,* 31). Der Derian attributes an essential role to new media, suggesting that it is the various media platforms that have created the "age of infoterror" in the post-9/11 period: information has become a tool and multiplier of anxiety, fear and hatred (248). In Holger Pötzsch's interpretation, Der Derian's definition of infoterror is similar to infowarfare, which is "predicated upon the military capacity to surgically target and destroy enemy communication facilities, to tactically and strategically instrumentalize information infrastructures for military manoeuvres and, last but not least, to efficiently manage the flow of images and data to and from the increasingly de-territorialized global battlefields". See: Holger Pötzsch, "The Emergence of iWar: Changing Practices and Perceptions of Military Engagement in a Digital Era," *New Media & Society*

(2015): 81. The term "information warfare" is also used by Paul Virilio in his book *Strategy of Deception*, in which he writes that after the "electronic warfare" of the Iraq campaign, the United States launched "information warfare", based on three basic principles: "the permanent presence of satellites over territories, the real-time transmission of the information gathered and, lastly, the ability to perform rapid analysis of the data transmitted to the various general staffs". See: Paul Virilio, *Strategy of Deception*, trans. Chris Turner (London–New York: Verso. 1999), 18.

10. According to Hoskins and O'Loughlin, due to the fact that at any moment new images, data and information – potentially overriding or contradicting the previous ones – can arrive at strategic bases, the structure of strategic decisions is fundamentally transformed. This situation is not only present on the battlefield, but also in the public media: at the level of the observer of the war, different and divergent information is rapidly entering public consciousness, establishing new links and re-contextualising them, with often unpredictable socio-political functions and effects (Hoskins–O'Loughlin, *War and Media*, 22).
11. The reason Pötzsch does not use the terms diffused or virtuous war is that, in his view, they do not sufficiently address the individual character of late modern warfare.
12. Mark Andrejevic, *iSpy. Surveillance and Power in the Interactive Era* (Lawrence: UP of Kansas, 2007)
13. Distributed denial of service, i.e. DDoS attack.
14. Other focal points of Pötzsch's analysis are immediacy, intimacy and interactivity.
15. I use the term "disinformation environment" primarily to refer to the totality of media surfaces and the effect caused by contradictory or misleading information and fake news.
16. "Our study pointed to the presence of fundamental differences in the way the conflict was framed by pro-Ukrainian and pro-Russian users. The former tended to present the conflict in Eastern Ukraine from the patriotic perspective and frame it as 'the good war'; such an interpretation was articulated through the predominant use of such thematic categories as military machines, combatants and trophies. In contrast, pro-Russian users presented the conflict as an humanitarian crisis, emphasizing the destruction and suffering that the war brought through the predominant use of civilians and ruins categories". Mykola Makhortykh, Maryna Sydorova, "Social Media and Visual Framing of the Conflict in Eastern Ukraine," *Media, War & Conflict*, April 9, 2017, 376.
17. Klacsán Csaba, "Éreztem, hogy ebben a srácban van kraft" ["I felt that this guy had potential"], *Filmkultúra*, May 31, 2019, https://filmkultura.hu/?q=cikkek/arcok/csuja_laszlo
18. Formerly a civilian police organisation, the National Guard of Ukraine was brought under the control of the army in 2014, and its primary task is to maintain border security and public safety – unlike the regular army, it also includes many volunteers.
19. See, for instance, *The War on my Phone* (Elke Sasse, 2018), *For Sama* (Waad Al-Kateab–Edward Watts, 2019), *Midnight Traveler* (Hassan Fazili, 2019).
20. Footage taken with helmetcam and night vision footage is prominent in military recruitment advertising, where soldiering is presented as an experience and adventure, borrowing the representational codes of extreme sports. See Kevin McSorley, "Helmetcams, Militarized Sensation and 'Somatic War'", *Journal of War & Culture Studies*, Vol 5. no. 1 (2012): 50. Cf. Csuja: "I watched a film that was shot by Scandinavian soldiers with helmetcam in action in Afghanistan. But it was edited like an action film. It was interesting, but it was clearly going in the direction of being a documentary, but in the language of action films. I wasn't interested in that in this story. Our film is more about boredom, constant nihilism and stress" (Klacsán, "I felt").
21. See Kari Andén-Papadopoulos, "Body horror on the internet: US soldiers recording the war in Iraq and Afghanistan," *Media, Culture & Society*, November 11, 2009, 921–938.

22. László Csuja, the director of the film, said about the motivations of the main character: "(Jani) went to the war mainly because things would happen to him there. That he would become a grown man there. He'll go, nothing serious will happen to him: it will be like a party. Of course, as you can see in the film, he'll be confronted with the fact that it's not like that". Beretvás Gábor, "Tűzkeresztség. Interjú Csuja László filmrendezővel a Kilenc hónap háborúról" [Baptism of fire. Interview with filmmaker László Csuja about *Nine Month War*], *Filmtett*, August 23, 2018, https://www.filmtett.ro/cikk/tuzkeresztseg-interju-csuja-laszloval/
23. This kind of splitting can superficially resemble what Vivian Sobchack calls the *uncanny* – this occurs when someone is watching a home movie. The idea is that the viewer sees a video of her/himself that has been recorded by another person, but the spectator cannot unconditionally identify with what he or she sees.: a gap emerges between the "perceiving I" and the "visible me" on the screen. (Sobchack identifies different types and depths of this uncanny: axiological, epistemological and ontological.) However, this is not the case with *Nine Month War*, despite the superficial similarity: because of the immediacy of the video selfie, its living temporality, the problem of identification – which is Sobchack's primary concern – is not decisive. Sobchack, Vivian, "'Me, Myself, and I': On the Uncanny in Home Movies," in *The Structures of the Film Experience by Jean-Pierre Meunier. Historical Assessments and Phenomenological Expansions*, ed. Julian Hanich, Daniel Fairfax (Amsterdam: Amsterdam UP, 2019), 206–17.
24. Cf. Frank Joseph Wetta and Mark A. Novelli, "'Now a Major Motion Picture': War films and Hollywood's new patriotism," *The Journal of Military History*, Vol. 67, no. 3 (2003): 861–882, Project MUSE.
25. On opinion forming as an expression of individuality cf.: Bagi Zsolt, *Az esztétikai hatalom elmélete. Kulturális felszabadítás egy újbarokk korban* (Budapest: Napvilág, 2017)
26. Christian Borys, "Ukrainian forces says two drones shot down over war zone are Russian," *The Guardian*, May 21, 2015, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/may/21/ukraine-drones-shot-down-russian
27. Cf. Mykola Makhortykh and Yehor Lyebyedyev, "#SaveDonbassPeople: Twitter, Propaganda and Conflict in Eastern Ukraine," *Communication Review,* Vol.18, Issue 4 (2015): 239–70.; Makhortykh and Sydorova, "Social Media"; Lisa Gaufman, "Memory, Media, and Securitization: Russian Media Framing of the Ukrainian Crisis," *Journal of Soviet and Post-Soviet Politics and Society,* January 1, 2015, 141–175.

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