Sounding Military Identity through US and Canadian Recruiting Videos

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Abstract: From basic training onwards, Canadian soldiers are encouraged by commanders to exemplify the "quiet professional," often in deliberate comparison to what they portray as the brash patriotic swagger of their US counterparts. This paper explores the musical techniques employed by recent US and Canadian recruitment campaigns to express implicit national military ideologies and identities. Drawing on fieldwork and interviews among US and Canadian soldiers, this paper connects opinions about recruitment commercials to the objectives published by their producers, and to David Huron's theory of music as an agent of "authority" in advertising. The campaigns' music, complemented by post-production visual effects, communicates aural signs to bolster distinct concepts of soldiering, ultimately targeting soldiers' and potential recruits' ideological fancy over the reality of military life, in both US and Canadian contexts.

The United States far outspends every other nation's military budget, accounting for almost half of the world's defense expenditures.[1] No doubt, the US enjoys a global military posture that no other nation can claim—certainly not Canada, the thirteenth-highest spender. However, Canada does have an active military, and like a smaller, younger, poorer, and less famous sibling, it often struggles to carry its identity out from under the shadow cast by its giant ally. A passive and subtle sort of anti-US nationalism pervades Canadian military circles, resentful of the constant burden of self-substantiation and of negotiating the imprint of the powerful behemoth next door. In this paper I investigate how the Canadian and American armies use music to express sometimes-contrary notions of national identity in their recruiting videos. By comparing the composed music of two US and Canadian television ads, I engage the responses of actual soldiers from both countries to demonstrate how different musical aesthetics connect directly to personal circumstances, military identity, and understated nationalistic ideologies.

In 2006, the United States and Canada were fully engaged in war: the US in Iraq and Afghanistan; and Canada in Afghanistan. With combat personnel spread thin for both countries because of an escalating insurgency and an increasingly elaborate and complex theatre of operations, the US and Canada each devised new television recruitment campaigns to boost enlistment. Despite their similar circumstances, the United States and Canada delivered their recruiting messages in very different fashions.

The US Army tasked a professional communications firm, McCann Worldgroup, with the creation of its new advertising campaign. The sixty-second television spot "Army Strong" was released in November 2006 to uniformly positive feedback and results. "Army Strong" continues today as the official marketing slogan, and has permeated all aspects of branding for the entire US Army, in all of its print and broadcast media.



Figure 1. The "Army Strong" logo of the US Army.

The “Army Strong” TV ads feature real soldiers, not actors, and they record and represent actual activities and events, not staged scenarios. Boasting about the protagonists of the video, Jonathan Cranin, creative director of McCann Worldgroup, offers that “no actor could ever authentically convey the power and intensity of an Army Strong Soldier.”[2] The producers announced at the launching that they underwent a three-day mini “basic training” exercise, where they got the inspiration for the name and the campaign by living as soldiers and “standing in their boots.”[3] This concept of realism contrasts with previous advertising efforts, such as the “Be All You Can Be” campaign (1980–2001) that relied on mostly outlandish G.I. Joe-type situations and a catchy musical hook, and which increasingly drew criticism for its perceived inauthenticity (Shyles and Hocking 1990). Yet, the real images in “Army Strong” have been very stylistically produced and edited, and are accompanied by strategic narration and highly epic-sounding music by Hollywood composer Mark Isham, whose acclaim hails from his work on an impressive number of big- and little-screen blockbusters—his latest film is the Jackie Robinson biopic *42*, and his TV work includes the music for ABC’s popular fairy-tale drama “Once Upon A Time.” In “Army Strong,” all of these creative elements contribute to a very realistic-looking and moving montage of life in the army.

Video 1. Promotional video for the US Army.

Despite the clear stamp of studio production in the image and sound, when I interviewed and surveyed a group of twelve soldiers from the Indiana National Guard about their impressions of this video, I received overwhelmingly positive comments about its authenticity.[4] On my query about whether the video was successful, my respondents unanimously answered “yes.” When I asked them to explain why, they delivered a recurring vocabulary of the video being “a call,” “uplifting” and “glorious,” and of its contents as a motivation to “inspire,” to instill “pride,” and most of all, to represent “strength.” The music helps to invoke these feelings by embodying “driving, excited anticipation,” infusing a sense of the “hopeful and heroic” as well as the “triumphant,” and “patriotic.” And how does the music do this? With instrumentation, namely “the use of brass as the main timbre,” and by “leading to

something," by "building to the end with more energy and higher scoring," "continuously building in pitch, volume, intensity with the peak and crescendo encouraging a recruit to commit," and by representing "a journey" reminding several soldiers of "a movie score from a Peter Jackson movie." I should add that these soldiers are, by trade, soldier-musicians, explaining their employment of formal musical terminology. One soldier admits that "the music makes this whole video;" several others acknowledge that the music is powerful, emotional, and moving. One soldier distinctly hears a sense of "American-ness," and told me that in more than twenty five years of his service, "this campaign is the first that seems real."

The musical score, in my semiotic interpretation, certainly encourages these sentiments and reactions. The brassiness and the *tutti* orchestration demonstrate glory and strength, and the choir's vocables add a powerful human core. A stream of very conspicuous modulations of a repeated conventional romantic theme, with two intermittent transitions and a closing section, imply a constant transformation, individual betterment, progress, and triumph. In terms of tonality, the theme begins in A minor and in less than one minute establishes itself in G# minor; the distant keys suggest a journey. Jonathan Pieslak, in his study of American soldiers and music in the Iraq War, likens the "Army Strong" theme to John Williams's music for the 1978 film *Superman,* not only for its tonal, structural, and instrumental parallels, but for its similar indexing of "American strength, nobility, and heroism" (Pieslak 2009:25–26). All of these factors contribute to a meaningfully US-centered display of a positive military experience for those in the military, and for those considering joining.



Figure 2. Canadian Forces recruiting poster.

What kind of media representation, by comparison, meets the expectations of Canadian soldiers and potential recruits? A commercial entitled "Fight with the Canadian Forces" (hereafter "Fight") supplies the yardstick. Produced by Publicis, an A-list advertising agency based in Montreal, "Fight" premiered on Canadian television channels in September 2006. In validating the new ad, the Director General of Recruiting for the Department of National Defence described to an advertising magazine what potential recruits expected to see: "they told us that they wanted realism and transparency. They wanted to know what we were doing today."[5] Although the length and rapid pace of the video matches that of the "Army Strong" video, the creators employ a quite different visual and aural aesthetic, offering a conspicuously drab color palette, and an equally, noticeably sparse soundscape.

Video 2. Promotional video for the Canadian Forces.

I asked a group of Canadian Forces Army reservists, who are also soldier-musicians, to share their thoughts about the video.[6] They framed their unanimous assessments about the ad's success in different terms than those of their US counterparts. Overall, they express the video's achievement of promoting a "sense of duty," and a "desire to help." Variations on this theme include notions of "making a difference," "fighting for justice," "helping civilians,"

and “defending peace.” Significantly, none of the informants use the words strong, patriotic, or even pride. As for the music, most in this group of Canadian reservists agree about a feeling of tension and apprehension. They hear iconic representations of heart beats and chaos, and diegetic sounds like vehicles, metal objects, and explosion aftershocks ringing in the ears. Most agree that the music is dark, but fitting, calling it “minimalistic” while setting an “appropriate” mood; it is “dramatic without being overpowering,” and “not a great piece on its own, but perfect in context.” The music then, with its silence, its random spacey percussion, and its piercing synthetic sounds offers a reasonably dramatic, gripping soundtrack to accent the action on the screen—the mission.

I interpret, in these two campaigns and their use of music, a dichotomy between the US commercial’s stroking of emotional patriotism and the Canadian commercial’s evocation of a sense of precarious urgency. In his study “The Sounds of American and Canadian Television News after 9/11,” James Deaville notes the differences in the music employed by national broadcast media in direct response to the events of September 11, 2001. He concludes that the music of US news providers “encouraged audiences’ feelings of fear and anger,” seeming to ratchet up support for military retaliation, while Canadian viewers received from their news media only “sounds evoking primarily the horror and tragedy of the event” (Deaville 2007:61). The networks’ choices of music served separate ideological roles, helping “to shape the mood of each nation” (61), possibly even affecting Canadian public opinion enough to reject a military role in the Iraq War that was to come. Deaville focuses on network news music, but his paradigm resonates strongly with music in advertising.

Cognitive musicologist David Huron, in a 1989 article that is among the first and only academic inquiries into music in advertising, asserts that “advertising music is perhaps the most meticulously crafted and most fretted-about music in history. Nationally produced television advertisements in particular may be considered among the most highly polished cultural artifacts ever created” (Huron 1989:572). The most powerful role of advertising music, in Huron’s opinion, is to establish credibility and authority, a role that the advertising industry takes very seriously and researches constantly. As he claims, “Advertisers not only have practical experience in coaxing out the social meanings of styles, they also have a body of theories (formal and informal) which have been tested on a ‘subject pool’ measured in hundreds of millions and experimental ‘trials’ measured in the billions” (571). To reach the state of what Deaville calls “subliminal ideological persuasion” (Deaville, 61), advertisers and their clients, not unlike anthropologists and ethnomusicologists, perform extensive fieldwork among the target audience.



Figure 3. Still frames from the Canadian Forces promotional video, showing the ad copy "fight fear," "fight distress," and "fight chaos."

For example, the Canadian Forces ad underwent a massive series of focus group tests before it developed into its final format. In one outcome, where the ad copy displays “fight fear,” “fight distress,” and “fight chaos,” the producers had originally included, but ultimately retracted, a fourth statement: “fight terror.”[7] In the responses from

the testing stage, “terror” proved an unpopular choice of terminology, possibly because it signified the presumption that the Canadian effort was governed by the US War on Terror. The majority of potential recruits were not interested in putting themselves in harm’s way only to be dragged into a narrative concerned with United States interests and values.

When I asked each of my groups to comment on their national neighbors’ advertisements and their choice of music, clear ideologies aired to the surface. One Canadian soldier, an Afghanistan War veteran whom I will call Sergeant Vincent, summed up his interpretation of the Army Strong video by noting, “The video is effective in its own way, but wouldn’t work here [in Canada].” When I asked him to elaborate, he pounced on the ad:

> Attitudes…. It just comes off as ‘Team America.’ Canadians just have a different attitude towards our country and have a better grip on how others view us, where Americans view the world as them, and [then] everyone else that isn’t them; we have a more universal view, which our commercial reflects…*Our commercial* shows us helping each other and other countries. The American video is ‘look how fucking cool we are.’… Despite being in their back yard, I think Canada is still more British in their attitudes than American. Our soldiers still have the ‘get some’ attitude, but it’s internal and more grounded, not in your face.[8] (my emphasis)

Sgt Vincent likens the music in Army Strong to “chest-puffing” and to something one might hear in a movie soundtrack “like Independence Day,” and he also finds that the music “is almost competing with the video.” His irritation with the US portrayal of military service is echoed in the comments of others in his group. One soldier claims that “Canada looks like hard work with a sincere bravery. USA looks like a macho show.” Another comments, “Looks like the USA is a party and Canada cleans up after it.” The nationalist subtext here warrants some comment because it goes a long way to explaining why Sgt. Vincent and others associate so personally and directly with the commercial.

In the fourteen years of my membership in the Canadian Forces Reserves as a soldier-musician, I have encountered countless examples of the United States entering Canadian military discourse as a caricature of carelessness and recklessness. When a soldier conducts him or herself inappropriately, such as by putting hands in pockets, leaving part of a uniform unbuttoned, or walking around with a helmet unfastened, a superior will often bark that “this is not the American Army.” Occasionally, when a soldier is ordered to make a piece of equipment safe and secure or to devise a plan that cannot fail, then it must be “Yank proof.” I am unsure of when these derogatory expressions first appeared, but they persist; in some ways, they grow stronger. Rambo is often the straw man invoked to signify an American worship of military maverickism, an idea obviously exacerbated by Hollywood. Frequently, a soldier will be referred to as Rambo when displaying a modicum of individuality: showing up late or in the wrong uniform; turning to the left when everyone else goes right; and so on. On a more grave note, in 1994 when members of the Canadian Airborne Regiment were found guilty of torturing a Somali teenager to death on a peacekeeping mission, a Canadian court martial tried and convicted the company commander, not for ordering the killing, but for “encouraging the ‘Rambo-like’ atmosphere that formed the context of the killing” (Bercuson 2009:31). When Canada christened a new elite counter-terrorist unit called the Canadian Special Operations Regiment (CSOR) in 2006, its first commander Lieutenant-Colonel Jamie Hammond declared to the press, “We don’t want Rambos here…In fact, we’re looking to weed out the Rambos. We want quiet professionals.”[9]

The concept of quiet professionalism permeates Canadian Forces ideology, and I find it significant that one half of the term inhabits the sonic realm. The CSOR, which garners the same kind of status as US Army Special Forces and US Navy SEAL teams, upholds a sort of golden standard for the Canadian Forces. As that standard, the CSOR lives in the shadows: its whereabouts, operations, personnel, and everyday activities are shrouded in secrecy and naturally, myth. But the effective silence of Canada’s most elite military example explains and exemplifies the notion of “quiet” professionalism. It also contextualizes the “Fight” commercial’s very prudent treatment of music as significantly iconic. In one Canadian soldier’s words, this music “makes great use of silence…which creates a barren soundscape. Typically I would call this thought provoking music because it leaves so much to the imagination that almost every person will have a different impression when it is over.” In absolute harmony with this statement, LCol Hammond proclaims that in his CSOR, “We want *thinking* people…We’re looking for people who are comfortable with *ambiguity*; who can deal with things getting crazy, or with the unexpected happening, and get on with the job” (my emphasis).[10]

Evaluating the Canadian Forces video music, some of the National Guard soldiers express skepticism, rightly questioning why an ad trying to recruit would employ such “dark,” “serious,” and “gloomy” music that conjures up a feeling of “foreboding.” One soldier believes the music “is a bit avant-garde for regular mass consumption,” and he half-jokingly asked me where this amazing pool of sophisticated young potential recruits was located. These responses, while perfectly reasonable, miss the notion that these elements, particularly the lack of a theme, the more diegetically inspired score, the feeling of apprehension, and the use of silence work as a deliberate antithesis to the Superman, Rambo, Independence Day, and Peter Jackson movie aesthetic. Had Canada produced a video employing epic Hollywood sound characteristics such as a full orchestral score, choir and a scripted narrator, it would have undermined its own attempt to break free from an aesthetic already tied to US identity. It is no wonder that the National Guard soldiers fail to pick up on the identity politics here; they are not the intended audience. The lot of Canadian national identity, sometimes, is that the only way to express Canadianness is to make it not-American.

Ultimately, neither commercial is more real than the other. “Army Strong” organically represents the US army experience as much as “Fight” does the Canadian, and both advertisements are equally mediated by the industry to deliver their messages. Judging the success of these campaigns, however, requires more than soliciting feedback from working soldiers, since the bottom line for Canada and the US is to increase the number of those who want to *become* soldiers. From 2006 onwards, both the “Army Strong” and the “Fight” campaigns successfully met their recruiting targets. In Canada, in fact, applications for the combat trades swelled up so much in 2007 that recruiting offices were bottle-necked and the entire Canadian Forces had to change the system of enlistment to expedite the enrolment process.[11]

Thomas Turino writes about the role of musical signs in nationalistic movements, and in particular, discusses the ability of icons and indices to emphasize the *possible* over the actual (Turino 2008:108, 146). Here, these videos display their greatest musical power. The vast majority of the real work of soldiering, whether in the combat or support trades, involves extremely mundane tasks such as waiting, sitting, standing, driving, cleaning, and maintenance—not the stuff of videos. A very small percentage of soldiers, and likely none of those that I interviewed or surveyed, has ever jumped out of a plane, provided medical attention to an Iraqi or Afghani child, physically shielded civilians from an improvised explosive device, or repelled down a mud cliff to rescue a distressed citizen. Furthermore, no soldier is issued a personal soundtrack. These videos are as false as they are real. Nevertheless, they broadcast *possibilities*: the US Army *could* be the unification of strength, glory, excitement, and self-improvement. The Canadian Forces *could* be a locus for the quiet professional, the cool and collected individual who wants to make a difference. And in sixty seconds, this music has the unique ability to *make* it so, and to *be* that soundtrack.

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[1] Information from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI). Accessed March 3, 2013. http://www.sipri.org/ [1]

[2] Quoted in Thomas Nickerson, “The Making of Army Strong.” The Official Homepage of the United States Army. Accessed January 15, 2013. http://www.army.mil/article/568/the-making-of-army-strong/ [2]

[3] Ibid.

[4] Members of the 38th Infantry Division Band of the Indiana National Guard graciously agreed to participate in this study by watching recruiting videos, completing anonymous surveys, and in some cases, being interviewed.

[5] Roger MacIsaac, quoted in Norma Ramage, “Advertising is War.” *Marketing Magazine.* October 2, 2006. Accessed January 15, 2013. http://www.marketingmag.ca/news/marketer-news/advertising-is-war-19941 [3]

[6] Members of the Royal Winnipeg Rifles Band watched recruiting videos and filled out anonymous surveys for this study. A few members also agreed to be interviewed and to exchange emails.

[7] Tim Naumetz, “Forces Drop ‘Fight Terror’ from Ads.” *Ottawa Citizen.* September 13, 2006.

[8] Email correspondence, March 31, 2013. Sgt Vincent’s name has been altered.

[9] Quoted in Chris Wattie, “Meet the Military’s Quiet Professionals.” *National Post.* April 29, 2006.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Bob Bergen, “Recruiting Success Creates New Challenge for Forces.” *Ottawa Citizen.* April 12, 2007.

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