About the Beauty of War and the Attractivity of Violence

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Figure 1: The poster motif of the exhibition. © Museum of Cultural History, University of Oslo. Photo: Ann Christine Eek

Some 15 years ago, there was a discussion in our museum on whether we should create a temporary exhibition about weapons as aesthetic objects. No one – from sweet grandmothers to pacifist former hippies – found the idea ethically doubtful in any way. The thought never occurred to them. This I found interesting.

Our museum – a museum of cultures and societies from all parts of the world – has lots and lots of weapons, brought to us by missionaries, sailors, travellers, explorers, ethnologists … It seems that everyone has a fascination with weapons.

Having spent an exciting childhood in a large, abandoned WW2 coastal fortress on the Norwegian coast, I knew this fascination. Weapons are at least in principle meant to be used for violence, and they are often connected to *official* power, so I thought why not combine beauty and violence, even beauty and war. This idea was met by anger and disbelief among the museum staff and some of them asked to be relieved of any duties in connection with such an exhibition. But this was just the initial reaction.

So the question became how does one go about making an exhibition that combines beauty, war and violence?

Now, the title of this paper "About the Beauty of War and the Attractivity of Violence" (the Norwegian title was "Om Krigens Skjønnhet eller Den Vakre Volden"), was meant as a teaser. I did *not* intend to create an exhibition about the beauty of war and violence itself. Today, I might have done so, but that's another – also potentially interesting – story. I wanted to create an exhibition about the aesthetics *surrounding* war and violence.

At first, my ideas went in the direction of having displays, for example, of military/political leaders giving enthusiastic speeches, and then the public could push them aside and see the real horrors of war – that kind of thing. But I found this approach too moralistic and sentimental, and besides, what would the public learn from that? Nothing! Everyone would nod and say "war – it's simply horrible."

So I wanted the public to be exposed to something they might not have thought about before. And I wanted to be honest about my own ambiguity. And yes, this was an "I" exhibition: the content was entirely mine.

My main focus in this paper is on the concept and the narrative structure, which I consider just as relevant today as in 1995. The exhibition itself was very simple, based as it was on a very low budget.

The introductory part consisted of an assortment of weapons, decoratively arranged, like in the old museum exhibitions, with a text reflecting upon the fascination with weapons, a fascination shared by the original owners of the weapons.

A second part focused on magical weapons and magical "uniforms". We displayed Japanese swords and the love poems dedicated to them, comic book magical swords, pictures of mythological swords, and a valuable copy of a Viking sword, presented as a gift to Heinrich Himmler on one of his visits to Norway in 1941 (it is said that he turned it down, because he wanted the original, which, of course, he did not get).

We showed a picture of a Marquesas warrior, with magical protective tattoos, and we even exhibited a large phone booth where the public could open the door and interrupt Clark Kent while he was changing into his real identity as Superman.
In the next part, we turned our attention to the real world of military aesthetics, explaining how the beauty of uniforms

- is connected to the fact that power and glory usually go together,
- shows who our friends and our enemies are,

Figure 2: The introduction was a melange of weapons, in the old museum style.
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Photo: Jorunn Solli

Figure 3: A phone booth for Clark Kent.
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- indicates the exact function of the soldier wearing it in the military system, and,
- shows that the person wearing it has a legal right to exercise violence on behalf of the government and/or ruler.

In order to illustrate the aesthetics connected with different types of war, we displayed

- tribal warfare by showing parts of the documentary *Dead Birds* from New Guinea (1964, David Gardner),
- the splendid panorama of armies marching against each other in *Ran* (1985, Akira Kurosawa),
- the more modern machine aesthetics as represented by *Triumph des Willens / Triumph of the Will* (1935, Leni Riefenstahl), and
- computerized war by letting the public try to attack a target with an F-14 Tomcat on a computer (war games of that kind were primitive in 1995), reflecting upon how large armies have been replaced by highly competent, technologically sophisticated smaller units, etc.

Figure 4: Different types of war.
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The computer game served as a transition to the aesthetics of war as communicated to spectators. Here, visitors could sit in a comfortable chair in a Norwegian living room and watch the fighter planes of Operation Desert Storm (the liberation of Kuwait) take off into the beautiful sunset. On the wall of the living room, there was a romantic painting of a Norwegian nature scene and family photographs. Those who

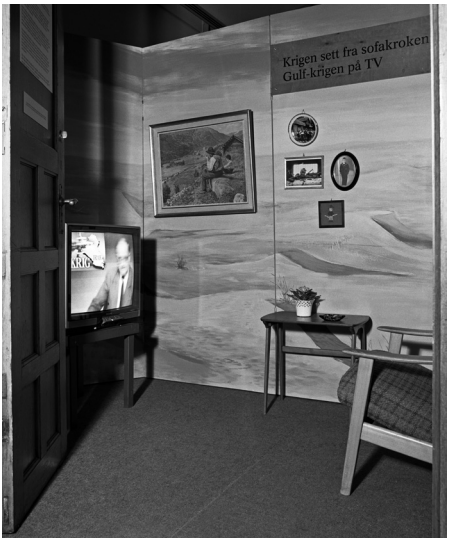

Figure 5: A living room with TV news about the Gulf War, family photos on the wall, including a burnt to death Iraqi soldier.
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Photo: Jorunn Solli

let their eyes wander over these were surprised to find that one of the family photographs was a portrait of an Iraqi solider, burnt to death.

We then turned to Bennetton's use of a bloody uniform in its advertising at the time of the Balkan war: was it unethical or, on the contrary, an act of ethical bravery?

And what about a romantic, Boy Scout, war-like advertisement from the *Illustrated War Magazine* of July 1915: was it naively charming?

Figure 6: Benettons bloody uniform advertisement related to the Balkan war.
© Museum of Cultural History, University of Oslo.
Photo: Jorunn Solli

Figure 7: Advertisement from the Illustrated War Magazine, July 1915.

The next part dealt with the aesthetics of friends and enemies. The classification of people into mental types like thieves, rapists, Arians, Jews etc. during the 1930s is indirectly alive and well in the cartoons, where a "unibrow" or a "weak chin" is a sure sign of dubious mentality. Heroes, on the contrary, have strong chins, of course. We laugh about of this, but the typical cartoon hero is still a slightly softened version of the standard authoritarian regime type of hero.

We reflected upon the gradual making of enemies, starting with the German process of the 1930s, in which families found it more and more awkward to keep up good relations with neighbours and friends that happened to be Jews – the gradual distancing, the gradual disinterest, the gradual acceptance of the image of that person as an enemy – to the Balkan War again and showed parts of a modest anthropological documentary (Christie/Bringa, *We are all neighbours,* 1993) that happened to be filmed in a Bosnian village during the early stages of the war, when everyone laughingly denied that the war would have any influence on their relations with their neighbours, friends and relatives, and then, within a few months, how circumstances had changed and turned them into mortal enemies.

In 1995, the debates on the "Islamic threat" to "Norwegian culture and values" were not yet an issue, so we did not spend a lot of time on that in the exhibition, although we did use a xenophobic illustration, in which the standard 1930s "dangerous Jew" image is juxtaposed with an almost similar "dangerous Muslim" image from the early 1990s.

The general "normalization" of xenophobia in Norwegian society in recent years brings me to the last, and most difficult, chapter of the exhibition: The normality of violence. It was combined with a personal reflection on creating an exhibition like this, and a personal admission of avoiding the question of the normality of violence

Figure 8: (right) Poster for the exhibition "Der ewige Jude" shown in Munich, Vienna and Berlin, 1937-39;
Figure 8: (left) "Norwegians! We want your jobs. We want your houses. We want your country." Flyer, Norway, probably early 1990s.

because I found it too difficult. Nevertheless, I continued telling the audience why, with some examples. Anyway, this *is* a theme almost always avoided. The beauty of Japanese swords, yes, the culture surrounding them, okay, but connecting this beauty and this exotic culture to the "normal", down-to-earth use of a Japanese sword as a tool of execution? No way.

Figure 9: The beauty of Japanese words and the down-to-earth use of a Japanese sword.
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Figure 10: Shrunken heads and texts about head-hunting removed.
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Photo: Ann Christine Eek

In the 1970s, we removed the shrunken heads from our exhibitions – I am sure you all are familiar with them. They were taken down because they were like a "black hole", sucking in the visitors' attention and making it impossible to convey an – after all – reasonably sympathetic picture of societies that engaged in head-hunting. But removing them was, of course, a form of well-meaning censorship. In the everyday life of everyday people, trying to preserve normality is an understandable way to secure safety, survival, love and mutual respect. But in order to preserve this normality, humans are willing to go very, very far in accepting, even enjoying, or simply not reflecting on, violence against other humans.

Is it possible to consider a spectator of gladiator fights 2000 years ago as a person with high moral standards? How far away in terms of time and geographical distance do we find the turning point when we stop seeing a practice as a normal way of their life, and start seeing it as an obviously criminal way of our lives?

This is a theme that could and should be explored. It is perhaps difficult to handle conceptually in an exhibition, but it is probably a good thing in itself to make the public aware of the everyday importance of these questions.

The Beauty of War was a great success, although it was overshadowed a bit by another museum's exhibition on Norwegian home decoration, which, according to the exhibitors, was rather provincial, of course, gaining quite a lot of media attention. A journal of philosophy (Brenna/Sandmo, ARR 1/1996) enthusiastically devoted an article to the *The Beauty of War*, attributing to me far more advanced thinking than I've ever had.

And one morning, one of the gallery attendants came to me and told me that the day before, at closing time, there had been a "situation" with a lady. "She was really difficult", he said. "She refused to leave before she had seen and read all of it!"

Which brings me to my last point: When presenting difficult themes, trust that the public will be grateful for the invitation to think together with you – and take the risk that they may refuse to leave at closing time.