

“Blow the Homeland Dream to Smithereens”:
The Cooperation of Postmodernism and Modernism in
Billy Lynn’s Long Halftime Walk by Ben Fountain

by

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Abstract

Ben Fountain's novel, *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk*, is a satirical war novel that centers on the discrepancy between an American soldier's reality and the reality of the homeland dream, that is, the reality portrayed by the media and experienced by average Americans in the era of post-9/11 war. Since its publication in 2012, the novel has been adapted to a popular blockbuster movie. However, Fountain's novel has not received the attention of literary scholars that its unique nature warrants. Specifically, Fountain's fragmented experimental portions are widely unnoticed.

This thesis explores Fountain's writing styles closely and sets his techniques in conversation with accepted literary scholars and theories that center on postmodernism, modernism, and each style's differing usage and purpose. Through this theoretical background and careful analysis of Fountain's work, this thesis will argue that Fountain employs a postmodernist plot that highlights the hypermediation of post-9/11 war culture and a modernist form through experimentalism. Fountain's postmodernism implies that it is impossible for literature to portray reality of a soldier's experience and reduces war to just a spectacle. His modernism, I will argue, conversely, physically displays his main character's real sensory experience. Through what this thesis terms his hybridization of styles, Fountain's novel reveals a brutal, unsettling truth about awareness of post-9/11 war among average Americans.

This thesis aims to examine the paradoxical styles present in Ben Fountain's contemporary story *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk* to discover what average American readers can learn about post-9/11 war through this novel and make an overarching claim about public perception and knowledge of the war. In his journey to uncover truth, Fountain uses his novel to plant a seed of hope for future average Americans to better understand the reality of a soldier or veteran's post-9/11 war experience. He urges his readers to question the hypermediated reality that our 21st century pervasive media ecology has fostered.

Keywords: postmodernist hypermediation, modernist experimentalism, post-9/11 war, spectacle of war, reality of experience

CONTENTS

Introduction	1
Chapter One: <i>Ben Fountain's Postmodernist Plot</i>	8
Chapter Two: <i>Ben Fountain's Modernist Form</i>	23
Conclusion	44
Works Consulted	47

Introduction

“People say, well, what’s it like to be in combat? And I would try to tell them. In thirty seconds, I’d see their eyes begin to glaze over...it’s so unique a situation...it’s hard to impart the experience of what it’s like.” –Gary Solis, Expert on the Rules of Combat and Veteran

“So it gets back to, like, this voyeuristic feel of the greater American society wanting to know what’s going on over there, and then when they get this little, brief, you know, clip that can hold their attention span, they’re all over it.” –Matt Gallagher, Former Infantry Officer

In April 2010, Neal Conan hosted a radio broadcast on NPR discussing “The Things Civilians Don’t Understand About War,” in which he interviewed the two men quoted above. This broadcast aired soon after an incident where a video of an airstrike in Baghdad was leaked and spread virally across the United States. The NPR segment begins by introducing this video because, Conan notes, these explicitly violent images are relatively unusual in American media, but when they do appear, it suddenly becomes evident that post-9/11 wars are out of sight and out of mind. This lack of understanding can lead to a viewer interpreting the video without sufficient context. As he concludes his introduction to the segment, Conan says, “Those of us back home are shocked and disturbed by these images in part because pictures like these are so unusual, not because incidents like these are so unusual but because wars in Iraq and Afghanistan sometimes seem as if they’re being conducted out of sight” (Conan). As the broadcast continues, Conan, Solis, and Gallagher discuss the fact that there is much, sometimes intangible, information about post-9/11 war that American civilians just do not understand.

Conan's broadcast reveals a brutal fact: because post-9/11 wars are often "out of sight," average Americans do not know much about the contemporary wars waged in their name. Most of the time, post-9/11 war is not even on the average American's mind. Less than one percent of people in the United States are in the military (Conan). If you are not in the military, not connected to someone in this small group of people, not a scholar, and not a politician it is likely that you are able to avoid the subject of post-9/11 war almost entirely. In fact, immigrants in the United States who have hailed from places where war is being waged are often those most directly impacted by post-9/11 wars. The atrocities and violence they have experienced is often unknown or not approached by average Americans.

Yet, 9/11 is aligned with a total change in the media landscape in America that implies average Americans have increased access to information about post-9/11 war. Why has knowledge of war waned in relation to an explosion of new pathways to information? The early 2000s and the response to 9/11 is characterized by the rise of pervasive digital media forms in our culture. In contemporary America, citizens can watch videos of homecoming spectacles or horrifically violent actions from the comfort of their own home and with the click of a few buttons. However, in his in-depth survey on American war culture, literary critic Patrick Deer suggests that even amidst this persistent media environment, America lacks a cohesive post-9/11 war culture (Deer). It is paradoxical that Americans are saturated with information, but still lack a deep understanding of the wars sparked by the 9/11 attacks.

The American novelist Ben Fountain confronts this problem. In his 2012 novel, *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk*, he takes aim at the contradictions and elisions of contemporary American war culture. His novel forms a political and ethical argument regarding what is at stake for America when civilians do not understand war. In many ways, his story very closely

resembles the story broadcasted by NPR. In Fountain's satirical novel, which takes place in 2004, a three minute and forty-three second video of the Bravo Squad (an American military squad) engaging in warfare with Iraqi insurgents goes viral as a result of an embedded Fox News crew. In response and in order to encourage steadfast support of the Iraq invasion, the Bush administration sends the remaining eight-members of Bravo Squad on a two week mid-war "Victory Tour" across the nation.¹ The tour culminates on Thanksgiving Day at the Dallas Cowboys football game, where the Bravos are to appear in the halftime spectacle with Destiny's Child. Fountain's novel presents war information as pure spectacle, offered up as entertainment and wholly detached from the lived realities of combatants, victims, and even average Americans themselves.

Readers experience this whirlwind day and hypermediated society through the perspective of nineteen-year-old Specialist Billy Lynn, a member of the Bravo Squad. Set on a single day in 2004, the novel follows Billy as he encounters elite Texan war-supporters, Cowboys players, and general fans of football, soldiers, and all things 'American' that yearn to know more (and already think they know a lot) about aspects of war and trauma. In this way, Fountain thrusts Billy in to a postmodernist world where uninformed civilians in his novel assume that they fully understand Billy's experience at war, solely because they witnessed his battle through a hypermediated channel. However, this thesis argues that at times Fountain actually does allow readers to access Billy's true sensory experience of this postmodernist world,

¹ I refer to Bravo Squad's two-week taste of freedom as a "mid-war Victory Tour" because the Bravos must return to their position abroad at the end of the tour. This looms in Billy's thoughts throughout the novel.

through experimental portions that include readers in Billy's raw interpretation of the postmodernist, society of the spectacle that he is witnessing.²

Fountain embeds readers in a postmodernist media environment full of spectacle and endless mediation without access to the real. However, he does this at the level of plot only in his novel. This leaves open a critical space for Fountain's form to counteract the effects of postmodernist hypermediation. This thesis argues that Fountain fills that space by creating a kind of modernist relic *within* his otherwise postmodernist novel. When Fountain allows access to Billy's uninhibited sensory experience throughout Thanksgiving Day, he allows modernist formalism and experimentalism to furnish access to a world beyond the spectacle.

In my first chapter, I will argue that Fountain's plot, like his writing environment in 2012, relies on a postmodernist style. His plot elements and characters continuously refer to hypermediation and the lack of access to reality of the war experience. Yet within this postmodernist plot, I will claim, Fountain dramatizes tones of dissatisfaction toward the situation that postmodernism creates. That is, the spectacle of war that hypermediation creates. Throughout the novel, Billy is angry, dissatisfied, and overwhelmed by the various plot events in which his story has been hijacked by the media. Readers can sense this main character's tension and disenchantment with his postmodernist world.

This dissatisfaction, this thesis proposes in the second chapter, drives Fountain to use modernist experimentalism in his form throughout the novel. He depicts Billy as frustrated by postmodernist plot events that have reduced his war experience to a halftime show spectacle. Thus, Fountain incorporates portions of modernist experimentalism as a way to reveal Billy's reality of experience. Modernist experimentalism allows Fountain to use literature to access

² The "society of the spectacle" is a term I use from the work of Guy Debord in his book *Society of the Spectacle*. His work and this term will be discussed in further detail later.

Billy's sensory experience. Through modernist form, part of Billy's true experience and emotions are finally revealed, regardless of the postmodernist hypermediation that surrounds him and his experiences.

In this argument, the foundational modernist and World War I veteran, John Dos Passos, acts as a signal and guide to consider how Fountain's fragmented pieces re-inscribe modernist experimentalism. It was the blatant similarities between the two authors' experimentalism that first alerted me that Fountain abandoned his postmodernist style and returned to an earlier moment in literary history of modernism in his fractured, experimental sections.

By presenting modernist experimentalism that implies accessibility to the reality of experience is *possible* within a postmodernist plot that implies accessibility to the reality of experience is *impossible*, Fountain crafts what may appear to be a confusing, even hypocritical message.³ In terms of war, modernism was born as a response to new media outlets that grew because of war; it worked to shatter the façade of mediation and attempted to reveal true reality of experience for those involved in war. Postmodernism, alternatively, grew as a response to later wars and attempted to make an argument about how hypermediation created an

³ The consensus among literary scholars is that postmodernism is a direct and radical reaction to the search for access to reality in modernism (see Jameson; McHale). In his book *Postmodernist Fiction*, Brian McHale notes that scholars traditionally construct 'modernism versus postmodernism' using a number of binaries like 'depth versus surface' and 'experience versus image,' respectively. Postmodernism is always understood as a reaction to the basic objectives of modernism and to modernist formal experimentalism. McHale also introduces his own theory of the dominant, stating that the two styles primarily differ because modernism asks dominantly epistemological questions of literary texts first and postmodernism first asks ontological questions of literary texts (McHale 10). Regardless of how exactly modernism compares to postmodernism (in terms of McHale's dominant questions or in terms of binaries), McHale's work surveys the abundant criticism that marks postmodernism's purpose as completely opposite to modernism's purpose. Considering postmodernism is so widely understood to have a purpose drastically different from modernism's, Fountain's combination of the two styles could be understood as contradictory in terms of the purpose of his literature.

impenetrable spectacle of the war experience. The two styles have drastically opposite purposes and goals.

Fountain's contradictory combination is potentially why scholars tend to ignore his experimental sections. In general, *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk* lacks abundant critical analyses. Most of what is written on Fountain's novel appears in mainstream media outlets such as online journals or magazines. To make creating scholarship on this piece even more difficult, much of the response to Fountain's novel is actually centered on its adaptation into a Hollywood film. Put simply, it is difficult to locate trustworthy, relevant literary criticism on any aspect of Fountain's novel.

More specifically, scholarship on Fountain's experimentalist sections is particularly rare. Scholars may have avoided facing the reality of (what this thesis claims is) a combination of postmodernist plot with modernist form because these styles existing together in a single work challenge a typical literary scholar's preconceived mold of the primary purposes of modernism and postmodernism. However, this thesis elects to closely examine, not ignore, Fountain's experimental pieces. Tracking Fountain's techniques has formed the argument that by providing modernist access to his main character's sensory experiences during a day at a Cowboys football game, Fountain breaks down the surface of the postmodernist plot to uncover modernist depth of Billy's reality. In a broader view, it provides hope for better understanding (or at least understanding what cannot be understood) regarding the reality of experience for American soldiers and veterans.

Therefore, although it may seem paradoxical for modernism (to which postmodernism radically reacted) to exist within a postmodernist plot, this thesis will argue that Fountain's modernist experimentalism acts as a relic; it lives and breathes reality of experience into his

novel.⁴ Billy's sensory experiences displayed using modernist experimentalism reemphasize the point Fountain makes in his postmodernist plot: average Americans⁵ know little about Billy's real emotions or experiences, whether that is his experience at the Thanksgiving Day Cowboys game or his experiences in wartime. Consequently, by providing access to Billy's true experience, Fountain teaches readers an important lesson about post-9/11 war: there is much that average American citizens do not and cannot know about the reality of experience of war. By alerting average American readers of their experience-based shortcomings, he hopes to create a more self-aware public than the one displayed in his postmodernist plot. In this way, Fountain uses his relic of modernism to plant a small seed of hope for better understanding of post-9/11 war. If readers understand that there is much they cannot understand, the general public in turn becomes more skeptical, unassuming, and eventually knowledgeable about post-9/11 war. Fountain's hybrid novel encourages average American readers to ask questions and learn about the reality of experience of war rather than mistaking hypermediation and the spectacle of war for reality.

⁴ As noted in the previous footnote, it is generally accepted that postmodernism is a reaction to modernism. However, this thesis does not mark the first time that postmodernism and modernism are considered together and connected. In his book *Postmodernism*, literary theorist Frederic Jameson expresses frustration with pinpointing the actual difference between modernism and postmodernism. He even notes that for the purposes of completing his book on postmodernism, he *pretended* "to believe that the postmodern is as unusual as it thinks it is, and that it constitutes a cultural and experiential break [from modernism] worth exploring in greater detail," although in Jameson's reality, postmodernism is not as a severe of a break from modernism as it believes itself to be (Jameson xiii). In fact, Jameson proposes that modernism exists as postmodernism "in embryo," therefore indicating that the two are, somehow, one in the same, but postmodernism is a further developed version of modernism (Jameson xiii). Although this thesis instead views modernism as a living relic (meaning, the same as it was in the past; in resistance to newness) rather than an embryo, Jameson's theory of connectedness between the two styles was extremely helpful in forming this view of Fountain's modernist relic.

⁵ Throughout this thesis, I often refer to "average" or "regular" Americans. This indicates someone who is not and has never been involved in any war effort in any way. Also known as, the majority of American citizens.

Chapter One: Ben Fountain's Postmodernist Plot

As a writer in the midst of post-9/11 war, Fountain tends to employ postmodernist themes and techniques throughout his novel's plot. Postmodernism was the dominant literary and artistic style when Fountain wrote *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk*. Thus, it might appear unsurprising that Fountain uses postmodernist plot elements to display and comment on the excessive hypermediation in his society. However, I will argue that he expresses dissatisfaction with the realities (or rather, lack of access to reality) that postmodernism and hypermediation create. This chapter includes a survey of the plot elements that are clearly postmodernist in his novel and argues that Fountain expresses cynicism and dissatisfaction toward his postmodern world through the thoughts and situations experienced by his main character, Billy.

Before delving in to Fountain's usage of postmodernism in the plot of his novel, it is imperative to briefly explain postmodernism as a style. This will provide access for interpreting Fountain's plot elements as postmodernist. As wars of the 20th century raged, the media ecology in America continued to alter in response. The movement known as postmodernism became tied to shifts in media ecology provoked by the Cold War (1947-1991), the Korean War (1950-1953), the Vietnam War (1955-1975), the Gulf War (1990-1991), and American involvement in wars continuing today. These changes in the media landscape included the emergence of television, film with color and sound, and computers into American media culture. Through these outlets, citizens began to understand war differently. Americans suddenly had easy access to hypermediated stories about the war. Average citizens were able to feel more involved in the war effort through the influence of digital media, regardless of if the information they were receiving was true or false. Literature reacted accordingly. Although aspects of modernism in literature remained throughout the 20th century, beginning around 1945, the literary rupture known as

postmodernism signified these media ecology shifts and altered how authors and artists acknowledge reality.

Postmodernism is traditionally understood as a reaction to modernism, specifically, a reaction against the belief that literature can access reality, or even that reality is accessible at all. Postmodernists critique modernists' attempts to use literature as a tool to excavate reality as misguided. Instead of reality, postmodernists believe that there only exists hypermediation and representations. Postmodernists seek to reproduce events (often events associated with wars) and ultimately make an aesthetic claim about the hypermediation of our culture and society. As Frederic Jameson describes in his book on postmodernism: modernism is obsessed with the newness of objects and postmodernism is too, but in terms of breaks, "shifts and irrevocable changes in the *representation* of things and of the way they change," not the object itself (Jameson ix).⁶ Modernists focus on an object; postmodernists focus on the representation of that object.

Generally, then, postmodernism began as a reaction against the real and grew as a belief that everything is a mere representation and an iteration of hypermediation. This is exactly the idea that Fountain's major plot elements support. In many of his plot events, Fountain depicts an extremely hypermediated environment and ways in which the hypermediation restricts access to the reality of experience of post-9/11 war. Within Fountain's plot and for most postmodernists, war is just a spectacle. In his short book *The Society of the Spectacle*, Guy Debord provides Marxist critical theory that describes the concept of "the spectacle" in a number of contexts. He writes that life is the "accumulation of spectacles. Everything that was directly lived is now merely represented in the distance" (Debord 4). Debord's theory has been influential for

⁶ Emphasis is Jameson's.

postmodernist writers and thinkers. Debord provides more insight to postmodernist ideas when he claims that reality and experience are entirely separate. Reality, he says, exists in a separate “pseudoworld that can only be looked at,” but not accessed (Debord 4). There is no deeper meaning that can be obtained behind the image; there is just an image. For postmodernists, this is the type of society that Americans were living in since midcentury. The proliferation of television and color and sound film created a hypermediated world, where the many wars and persistent American involvement in violence abroad made it nearly impossible to understand amidst such mediation. Postmodernist literature diagnosed this hypermediation in American society and dismissed modernism’s attempt to excavate experience through literature as erroneous. One cannot use literature to access real experience, scholars said, there is nothing tangible behind that overly mediated image of reality. Thus, to many postmodernist scholars including Fountain (at least in his plot), war was just a spectacle.

Although hypermediation itself existed well before the beginning of the 21st century, much of Fountain’s postmodern digital environment sprouted from a media landscape change associated with post-9/11 war. To examine how deeply hypermediated Fountain’s writing environment actually was, this work briefly follows the landscape change that occurred before and during post-9/11 war: the rise of mass media in a new way; that is, through omnipresent digital forms.

At the turn of the century, American life was permeated with advanced media forms. When Google was created in 1998, Americans and citizens of the world now had the ability to search information quickly and easily. The need for and use of handheld newspapers, magazines, and posters to understand war has diminished as the influence of search engines such as Google has exploded. Not only can Americans now receive information about the war (whether true or

false) at any moment or any location, but they can also experience firsthand accounts of war through a number of media platforms.

Once the twin towers were destroyed in 2001 and post-9/11 war began, Skype (created in 2003) and Facebook (founded in 2004) allowed families to stay in contact with their loved ones and soldiers abroad. Due to the creation of YouTube (2005) American citizens are readily provided with millions of videos like the viral one that made Bravo Squad famous in *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk*. Or, for bored Americans who are eager for a good cry, YouTube offers a plethora of popular soldier homecoming videos. Watching movies on war has never been less effortful; with media platforms such as Netflix (online streaming began in 2007) romanticized Hollywood films like *Black Hawk Down* and *Zero Dark Thirty* also infiltrate our war culture and overall understanding of the interminable post-9/11 war.

Over time, these media forms have only become more pervasive. The vast majority of college students could glance at their iPhones and notice automatic news alerts from CNN or the Washington Post. Just in the past afternoon, I have received three news updates from sources like these, whose headlines tell stories of fallen soldiers, veterans, their families, and their interactions with politicians. None of these stories have discussed the realities or policies surrounding post-9/11 war.

With this type of pervasive media environment, it would be nearly impossible to avoid what Baudrillard, a postmodernist scholar, terms a “hyperreal[ity]” that replaces reality (Baudrillard, *Simulations*, 7). Together, these numerous information channels form a new, human-crafted (and therefore inauthentic and unreal) story about post-9/11 war. To speak from a postmodernist viewpoint, the “story of the war” created by Netflix and YouTube is entirely different from the true “story of the war.” In fact, postmodernists assert that the true “story of the

war” is impossible to access through literature. Baudrillard refers to postmodernism in *Simulations* as “The desert of the real itself” (Baudrillard, *Simulations*, 6). The media landscape changes associated with post-9/11 war undoubtedly indicate that Fountain was living and writing his novel in a time where the hyperreal story of the war dominated (and terminated) reality. The dominant literary theory of the time, postmodernism, supported this notion in face of the rise of pervasive mass media.

The incoherent timeline of post-9/11 war also creates barriers to accessibility of reality and therefore promotes a postmodernist way of thinking. As the digital environment has developed, so has post-9/11 war. The American Military has moved between Afghanistan, Iraq, and multiple other countries as they fight the “War on Terror.” At times, a simple fact such as the current location of the conflict is unknown by educated Americans. Our reasons for fighting have altered. Most Americans can only provide brief, widely advertised (but not substantial) reasons for fighting when asked. Our enemies have changed names: Saddam Hussein, Osama bin Laden, al-Qaeda, ISIL, the Taliban (“Flashpoints USA”). Post-9/11 war is constantly evolving along with our media landscape, making it difficult for Americans to keep up. Post-9/11 war is also famously never ending, which is why some scholars have nicknamed it the “Forever War” (Deer 58; Dudziak 4). Because of this lack of typical temporality associated with war (a clear beginning, a definitive end),⁷ it is difficult to characterize post-9/11 war. A cohesive post 9/11 war narrative is lacking, partially due to the aforementioned confusion and continuous evolution surrounding post-9/11 war itself (Deer).

⁷ In her book, *War Time: An Idea, Its History, Its Consequences*, legal historian Mary L. Dudziak discusses in detail the temporality of war and how, in the gray area spurred by our current situation, policies of “wartime” that would not be acceptable during a time of peace are still used (see Dudziak).

Not understanding the timeline of the war or simple truths such as where, who, and why America is fighting makes post-9/11 war all the more unreachable and inaccessible for typical Americans. As a way of emphasizing this inaccessibility, postmodernists have questioned the basic events of post-9/11 war. Baudrillard, for instance, proposes the seemingly ridiculous (and yet, completely believable) idea that “The Gulf War Did Not Take Place” (Baudrillard, “The Gulf War Did Not Take Place”). To Baudrillard’s mind, the war itself could just be a hyperreal spectacle that only exists in a “digital space” (Baudrillard, *Simulations*, 105).

In line with Baudrillard’s ideas, Fountain’s media environment was characterized by a lack of access to reality and a convoluted war timeline.⁸ Consequently, I want to argue, Fountain’s key plot elements and most characters scream, “there is hypermediation that we cannot surpass to access the reality of the war!” At the same time, in his plot elements, Fountain creates a main character that is particularly satirical. Fountain accepts the hypermediated digital media environment we live in, but displays his main character’s dissatisfaction with it as well. With his plot, Fountain does not ever imply that literature could get past the hypermediation to expose the real (like a true postmodernist), but Billy is obviously disgruntled by this fact. As I will show, Fountain’s inclusion of Billy’s cynical, satirical, and sometimes strangely humorous attitude toward plot elements reveals that Billy is unhappy with the hypermediation that restricts access to the truth and reality of experience of post-9/11 war.

Consider, for instance, Bravo Squad’s rise to fame. As noted, a viral video captured by an embedded Fox News crew depicted “the battle of Al-Anasakar Canal” in which Bravo Squad takes on Iraqi insurgents. This video is what prompted the Bush Administration to incite the mid-

⁸ The convoluted war timeline is assuredly created, in part, because of the hypermediation of information. I do not mean to assert that these two phenomena are entirely separate.

war “Victory Tour” in the novel.⁹ Fountain uses this viral video to demonstrate both America’s changing media landscape and the associated surface-level, postmodernist understanding of representations of reality. In the hypermediated contemporary war culture, Americans can “learn about” the events, battles, and wars abroad from the comfort of their couch and with the click of a button. Yet, that is not true knowledge gained if one consults postmodernism. The Texans in Fountain’s novel genuinely believe they know all about the Bravo Squad and their battle. The video, they think, allowed them unrestricted access to Bravo Squad and their experience in the battle of Al-Anasakar Canal.

In one instance, a woman and her family approach Billy to discuss how they just could not stop watching the footage when it came on television. In a paradoxical comment, the woman asserts that watching the battle was like a movie and she “had to keep telling [herself] *this is real*, these are *real* American soldiers fighting for our freedom, this is *not* a movie” (Fountain 44).¹⁰ Throughout the novel, Fountain continuously depicts foolish characters mentioning how they saw the video everywhere and they know everything conceivable about the Bravo’s experience from the video. This woman, for instance, repeatedly stresses the reality of her experience, but Billy knows that all that the woman saw was a surface-level representation of reality. Accordingly, Billy is not pleased with this interaction. His dissatisfaction with what the woman thinks she knows shines through when Fountain writes, “No matter their age or station in life, Billy can’t help but regard his fellow Americans as children. They are bold and proud and certain in the way of clever children blessed with too much self-esteem” (45). Sarcastic,

⁹ Fountain often shows Billy’s thoughts about the ridiculousness of a “Victory Tour” when Bravo Squad must return to the war shortly after the tour. In Billy’s mind, no victory has been achieved. Nothing is over. This paradox is one way that Fountain displays Billy’s cynicism about hypermediation (a viral tour) that does not actually represent reality (the men actually must return to Iraq).

¹⁰ Emphasis is Fountain’s.

borderline offensive thoughts like this are not unheard of for Billy, especially when he is faced with average Americans who fully believe that hypermediated recreations of events are his reality.

Fountain writes of the Fox News video, “The Fox News footage was viraling through the culture” (4). From this and other clues throughout the novel, such as mentions of YouTube videos, readers can assume that the video manifested across different, pervasive platforms that are associated with the new age of social digital media. By including this video as a key plot point in his novel, Fountain makes readers aware that there is a surface-level, representational way of understanding the war through media in our midst. By including Billy’s cynical reaction to citizens who accept hypermediation as his reality, Fountain also creates tension with these postmodernist tendencies.

The story of the Bravo Squad’s battle becomes even more convoluted when readers are informed of one other specific manifestation of their story. The battle tale is told through a *Time* magazine edition, which the Bravos are often asked to autograph. Fountain includes details of the edition that causes some discomfort with war-related hypermediation. Fountain describes the edition of the magazine that is meant to tell the Bravo’s story and thus Billy’s story: “There follow six pages of copy and photos, plus a 3-D schematic with arrows and labels that bears no relation to any battle that Billy can recall. It is not even a Bravo on the cover but Sergeant Daiker from Third Platoon, a dramatically blurred close-up of his clenched and fearsome face” (Fountain 125). The fact that the cover of the Bravo Squad’s story is an image of someone who is not even a member of Bravo Squad creates uneasiness in the reader. Displaying a picture of a different Sergeant who was not even involved in the battle of Al-Anasakar Canal reveals how clearly out of touch media can be regarding real facts. Considering how the picture of Sergeant

Daiker is described (“dramatic” “clenched and fearsome”), it is likely that the magazine only included this particular image because it would evoke more emotion and interest from the reader, regardless of the fact that the person pictured was not even in the battle. Or, perhaps, the magazine did not even care who the photo displayed. To make matters worse, Billy cannot even identify or relate to the labels that the magazine uses to describe the battle.¹¹ This and the photo represent a prominent disconnect between what the media portrays and reality of experience in post-9/11 war. With this plot element, Fountain seems to say that the spectacle of the war through media is so pervasive, in fact, that the people fighting and the specifics of the battle do not even matter enough for the media to get straight. The media cannot get it straight because, regardless, the result will be a surface-level representation of the battle of Al-Anasakar Canal. This postmodernist aspect of Fountain’s plot emphasizes the lack of access to reality of the war experience.

This plot element also stresses the theme in *Billy Lynn’s Long Halftime Walk* of cynicism toward the circumstances created by hypermediation and postmodernism. In this plot moment, Fountain writes a realistic event where the image of a soldier and the schematic of a battle are both entirely incorrect. This hits readers as sadly humorous. The fact that the magazine either did not bother or did not succeed in getting the information right is actually believable, which makes the event entirely sadder. This, along with the awkward situation itself, hits Billy and readers with a twinge of dissatisfaction toward hypermediation and the lack of access to reality.

Another key background plot event in the novel is the possible adaptation of their story into a Hollywood movie. In the beginning of the novel, the soldiers joke about actresses and actors that might play them in the movie. Throughout the day, Albert, an experienced Hollywood

¹¹ “a 3-D schematic with arrows and labels that bears no relation to any battle that Billy can recall” (Fountain 125).

producer, accompanies the Bravos. Members of Bravo Squad are excited about the opportunity to adapt their story to a movie, but also apprehensive about how their real-life war experience could possibly be translated into a film for entertainment purposes. At various points, Billy becomes particularly frustrated with the attempt to change their story into a popular, Hollywood movie. He thinks angrily while reminiscing on painful war memories, “so put *that* in your fucking movie, if you can” (Fountain 42).¹² This plot element is particularly postmodernist because it depicts an effort to reduce Bravo’s experiences to a representation that will likely become another piece of the hypermediated digital landscape.

Fountain also depicts Billy wrestling with the idea of the realness of the movie. His thoughts begin by thinking about how everyone is struck by how “real” the viral video of Bravo Squad fighting looks, but to Billy, it looks “so real [that] it looks fake.” Fountain then writes,

“Would a more polished product serve better, one wonders—throw in some story arc, a good dose of character development, artful lighting, and multiple camera angles, plus a soundtrack to tee up the emotive cues. Nothing looks so real as fake, apparently, though ever since seeing the footage for himself Billy has puzzled over the fact that it doesn’t look like any battle he was ever in. Therefore you have the real that looks fake twice over, the real that looks so real it looks fake and the real that looks nothing like the real and thus fake, so maybe you do need all of Hollywood’s craft and guile to bring it back to the real” (289).

Clearly, Billy is struggling with thoughts about reality and representation. This inclusion is completely postmodernist on Fountain’s part. Even the real footage of the battle does not look familiar to Billy. The hypermediation somehow impedes reality of experience, a truly postmodernist thought. This section also points to Billy’s own dissatisfaction with the convoluted nature of a war story that hypermediation creates. The many levels of reality and representation are inseparable and confusing. Pure reality, it seems, is utterly inaccessible in this moment. With Billy’s frustration and confusion about the movie, Fountain swiftly communicates

¹² Emphasis is Fountain’s.

that the story of these men could never be told accurately in a movie and that is extremely difficult for Billy to comprehend. Fountain uses the movie plot to again tell his story using a postmodernist paradigm, but also to alert readers that because of postmodernism and the spectacle of experience, in real life, Hollywood war movies could never possibly uncover a reality that the soldiers would recognize.

The character most closely associated with the movie is Albert Ratner, the hopeful producer. Albert is Fountain's attempt to display postmodernism in a character. Albert is hyperconnected and associated with numerous channels of hypermediation, but in the end Albert is just a mere representation of Hollywood. Although he does have the Bravo's best interest at heart, the characters know nothing about him other than the fact that he is hyperconnected. Albert is the embodiment of postmodernism and new digital social media forms that are exploding when the novel takes place in 2004. He is constantly depicted texting, calling, or pervasively communicating in some way and is therefore a hypermediated character. The first moment when readers are introduced to Albert, he is "hunkered down in BlackBerry position" (Fountain 3). Even the posture of Albert's body is described as crippled by the weight of the new forms of media and communication. Throughout the novel, Albert is consistently engrossed in some type of digital interaction. Fountain writes, "From time to time Albert looks up from his BlackBerry to check on Bravo" (130). The fact that Albert only occasionally looks *up from* his BlackBerry, rather than occasionally *down at it* illustrates the omnipresence of new digital platforms in daily life.

Thus far, we have encountered how two of Fountain's major plot elements (Bravo Squad's rise to fame and the movie deal) and Fountain's characterization of Albert throughout the plot have openly displayed postmodernist ideas about hypermediation and merely surface-

level access to reality. We have also briefly followed how Fountain portrays how Billy feels toward the reality that postmodernism creates, which is cynical and dissatisfied. However, the most jarring occurrence of Fountain's display of postmodernism and Billy's anger toward the situations it creates is when Bravo Squad takes the stage for the halftime show. The show is a blazing, blinding, recorded halftime spectacle including both the Bravo Squad and Destiny's Child. In the novel, Billy relates this performance to "cold-blooded concepts [such] as mayhem, chance, nature out of control" (Fountain 235). This is Fountain's postmodernist metaphor for our digital environment that encourages hypermediation and understanding war as a spectacle.

As Bravo Squad stands still, Destiny's Child and their dancers spin and twirl all around them. The Bravo Squad represents the inaccessible reality of the war and a soldier's experience. Destiny's Child and the dancers represent America's omnipresent, showy hypermediation. Billy thinks, "The entire stage has become a blowup of foreplay aerobics, rocket thrusting, shadow humping, knurling hips and ass, here...the dancers are twurking Bravo and not a damn thing you can do except stand at attention and get pole-danced in front of forty million people" (Fountain 239). This public show of sexuality spurred by desire for media attention is directly juxtaposed to the Bravos who are standing at attention. Just like in this fictional halftime spectacle, Fountain seems to comment, the reality of post-9/11 war (and thus Billy's reality) is blown up to a spectacle with flashy, sexualized headlines or pictures, (like the one of Sergeant Daiker in *Time* magazine) but a spectacle that is ultimately lacking depth. Additionally, Billy's description and reaction during the event clearly indicates his dissatisfaction with his hypermediated world. He angrily thinks, "not a damn thing you can do except stand at attention." At one point, Billy reacts to a taunting dancer who is getting too close to him, he "speaks with all the feeling he can jam through his teeth: *Fuck off*" (Fountain 239).

Fountain directly mentions hypermediation and Billy's frustration that the spectacle will be watched across the country and beyond. In the midst of becoming frustrated by the dancers and the fact that he is being watched by forty million people, Billy thinks, "It's not right. Nobody said anything about this. What might be merely embarrassing in real life is made obscene and hostile by TV. Billy hates to think of his mother and sisters watching this" (Fountain 239). Billy is terrified that his embarrassment will be broadcast across the country. Beyond just the appearance on television, reincarnations of this recording may appear on multiple platforms for an even wider audience, such as YouTube. In fact, Billy later re-watches the performance on YouTube and is better able to understand the enormity of the display. In this way, regardless of Fountain's metaphor, the show itself is also hypermediated; representations of it are recreated and proliferated widely.

Along with involving hypermediation, the halftime show also reinforces postmodernist ideas about the lack of depth or reality of something that is hypermediated. Fountain shows the surface-level aspects of the halftime show in two major ways. First, he demonstrates this postmodernist factor with his song choice. During the booty shaking, Destiny's Child sings their hit song "Soldjah Boy." This song is an example of the lack of depth that a swirling halftime spectacle like this (which is a metaphor for hypermediation) can create. It is both humorous and sad for readers as they realize that the group is singing a pop song about soldiers while jerking around a Military Squad. Fountain wants his readers to see the ridiculousness of this situation, but also recognize that this circumstance is not unheard of in our culture. In many ways, dancing around a Military Squad while singing a surface-level song about a soldier's experience and strength is exactly how American media deals with post-9/11 war. Everything is hypermediated and a mere representation. Fountain crafts a main character that is clearly cynical and angry

about this fact. Fountain uses this plot moment and the disturbing song choice to warn readers that our postmodernist world creates a horrifying and offensive restriction to the accessibility of reality of war experience.

Another way that Fountain reveals that this hypermediation/halftime spectacle does not display reality of experience is through the members of Bravo Squad's reactions to the show. The show, which was meant to be (and likely perceived on television) as a celebration of Bravo Squad actually encouraged anger and embarrassment within the men. As mentioned, Billy expresses anger toward the spectacle consistently. The Bravo Squad stood up with Destiny's Child and literally partook in the halftime celebration, but their reactions to the show were not celebratory in the least. They were upset and felt used. After the halftime show, the Bravo Squad even releases some of this anger in a physical fight with a stagehand. Billy's frustration throughout this event and other plot elements reveals his dissatisfaction with the environment that hypermediation and postmodernism create, specifically the fact that they reduce his war experience to a spectacle. Fountain uses the halftime show as an obvious declaration of postmodernism, as an announcement that our society is infiltrated by hypermediation and surface-level representations of war-related situations.

Each of these plot elements display the theory advanced by postmodernism that reality cannot be accessed in a hypermediated world. Through three major plot events, the details of Bravo Squad's rise to fame (the viral video and story), the movie adaptation plot, and the halftime show readers see that Fountain is signaling the aggressive hypermediation of American war culture in 2004. Weaved through these plot elements is Billy's discontentment with the situation that these postmodernist tendencies create. He often seems cynical and frustrated at the fact that American media culture just barely brushes the surface of the reality of experience of

war. In the next chapter, we will approach how and why Fountain uses modernist experimentalism, which this thesis argues is fueled by the tones of dissatisfaction toward the media situation and lack of public awareness about the war that Fountain's postmodernist plot creates.

Chapter Two: Ben Fountain's Modernist Form

Fountain wrote *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk* in a war culture that encouraged a postmodernist style. The fundamental building blocks of his story (his plot, his characters) display the culture's tendency toward hypermediation and the lack of access to reality of the war experience. Furthermore, he includes ridiculous, frustrating situations for Billy and the Bravo Squad that were caused by hypermediation and an associated lack of general understanding of post-9/11 war. Yet while his plot strongly suggests postmodernism is his primary style, Fountain's form tells a different story. Woven into the fabric of his novel are several strands of modernist experimental thread. These experimental pieces rupture the assumption that *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk* is simply the postmodernist novel it appears to be at first glance. Instead of reinforcing postmodernist theories, Fountain's experimental portions work toward the opposite goal. As I will argue, his experimental sections aim to excavate Billy's real experience. In his pivot from postmodernism to modernist experimentalism, Fountain indicates that we *can* access and represent reality (with some restrictions) and therefore better understand war and experiences through literature.

In order to fully explain the effect that Fountain creates by using postmodernism and modernism together, this section will briefly discuss modernism itself. Then, it will focus on exactly how Fountain uses modernist experimentalism and speculate why he creates these experimental sections. Whereas scholars that examine Fountain's novel tend to ignore his experimental portions, this thesis will forcefully situate Fountain's text within the context of modernism as a means of arguing for Fountain's political and ethical project in the novel.

Modernism, in general, refers to a cultural movement that gained traction at the start of the 20th century. As a term, it is used widely. In his book *Modernism, Media, and Propaganda*,

Mark Wollaeger depicts the far-reaching definition of modernism when he describes it as “the widely accepted umbrella term for the aesthetic innovations that flourished...in the first decades of the twentieth century” (Wollaeger xii). The modernist movement reacted to enlightenment ideology and WWI with a desire for more realistic and authentic representations of life. In his collection of criticism focused on modernism, Michael Whitworth speaks to the question of what modernism owes to Victorian realism. Although, he notes, modernists separate themselves from their predecessors, modernists’ search for reality is inherently connected to past realism (Whitworth 99). For the purposes of this thesis, “modernism” refers to post-WWI efforts to reveal and excavate the reality of human experience through literature. In his critical introduction to modernist theorist Adorno’s work, Simon Jarvis writes that modernist “works of art are...precipitates of natural historical experience...[and] are also cognitive, attempts to know and to criticize that experience” (Jarvis in Whitworth 123). Modernists worked to get closer to and recreate the reality of human experience through their art.

Often, modernists chose to do this using experimentalism, especially experimentalism that reflected new technologies. Scholars agree that modernists searched for newness and novelty in their excavation of real experience (Jameson ix; Cole 4; Murphet 213). In her book on modernism and violence, Sarah Cole writes, “Modernism aligned itself with innovation [and]...embraced their new century specifically as an era defined by novelty and found the reigning self-expression of their times...in technology” (Cole 4). Through strategic uses of new technology like film and widely proliferated news, the modernists experimented with historical human experience. In this way, they created what Frederic Jameson terms a “modernist conception of unique style...[and] accompanying collective ideals of an artistic or political

vanguard or avant-garde” (Jameson 15). With this unique, experimental style, they hoped to portray reality.

It is likely that this increased experimentalism and heightened attempt to unearth authentic experience came as a response to modernists’ changing media ecology. Like almost all other wars in American history, World War I is attached to drastic alterations in the media landscape. In his collection of modernist criticism, Michael Whitworth writes, “Modernism came into the world at the same time as many of the mass media familiar to us today” (Whitworth 141). In the case of World War I, this rise of mass media involved changes such as increased access to broadcasted news and the creation and proliferation of propaganda and film. This pervasiveness of new media and the complexity of information spreading during and after World War I affected and created modernist experimentalism (Love; Wollaeger).¹³ For instance, Wollaeger addresses the propaganda boom of the 1930 and its direct relation to modernism art and literature. He speaks to “the proliferating array of discourses through which ideology was disseminated, spreading in waves across the globe” (Wollaeger xi). In this time, most people had increasing access to more ideas. The way people were accessing information about everything, especially the war, was changing.

Due to these drastic media landscape changes, many modernist writers yearned to access the “true story of the war” and authentic experience. In his piece on Adorno, Jarvis writes,

¹³ In her research, Heather Love focuses on the complexities of information spreading during this time. In fact, she specifically examines John Dos Passos’ *U.S.A. Trilogy* (the modernist piece this thesis will center on) using cybernetic theories (those that theorize information spreading and communication). She ultimately concludes that Dos Passos employs a combination of the two major cybernetic theories: one that favors randomness and one that favors patterns. For instance, John Dos Passos’s “Newsreel” sections are organized but contain chaotic information. This paradoxical combination, she notes, indicates the “complex nature of information...[within] the fabric of early twentieth-century communication culture” (Love 128).

“Modern art...has become abstract because it senses the need to imitate this loss of experience” (Jarvis in Whitworth 128). Much modernist experimentalism appears abstract and fragmented; it was used as an attempt to return to experience that was seemingly lost through new media channels. Modernists, facing the newly chaotic information spreading, explained by Love and Wollaeger, had a desire for real understanding amidst convoluted media messages, especially those about the war.

One author who demonstrates this urge to excavate reality of experience of the war and citizens in a war culture is John Dos Passos. According to Donald Pizer and his analysis of Dos Passos’s writing and the development of his modernist style, Dos Passos did not simply employ modernism for stylistic reasons, but instead because by the time he wrote the *U.S.A. Trilogy* Dos Passos discovered that modernism allowed him to express his interpretation of the purpose of art. Pizer writes, “Modernism for Dos Passos was therefore not a stylistic convention to be exploited because it was in vogue, but was rather pursued primarily for its ability to help him convey his maturing notion of the purpose of art” (Pizer 66). To Dos Passos and other modernists at this time, the option to access and display reality became a primary “purpose” for literature. Overall, Pizer’s work also supports the widely accepted theory that the *U.S.A. Trilogy* is the culmination of Dos Passos’s modernist techniques and is therefore his most experimental work (Pizer 51). Pizer’s meticulous glance at the history of Dos Passos’s work and techniques affirms that modernism and the accompanying experimentalism is how Dos Passos portrayed his art: by showing the whole, real vision of life and experience, including context. Over the years, Pizer notes, Dos Passos became more experimental in his search for the real.

Thus, Dos Passos’s *U.S.A. Trilogy*, specifically *1919*, is considered his most obviously modernist experimental work. In *1919*, Dos Passos oscillates between prose and experimental

sections, telling stories of the Americans who are involved in or affected by WWI (Dos Passos). Dos Passos titles the regular prose portions with the name of the main character featured in that section, the visual experimental moments as “The Camera Eye,” and news oriented experimental moments as “Newsreel” (Dos Passos).

In his Camera Eye sections, Dos Passos writes raw visual perceptions that are perceived by a human watching a film or images through a camera. Like a camera, Dos Passos’s written form directly expresses what is seen through the lens. In his Newsreel portions, Dos Passos combines headlines and jarring lines from news excerpts to recreate the feeling of reading or listening to the news during 1919. Both of these fragmented portions have a main goal of accessing the experience of a person either involved in or affected by World War I. They attempt to reach a concrete reality of experience because of the convoluted nature of news at that time in American history. Trying to excavate real experience of citizens affected by the war through experimental sections marks Dos Passos as a modernist writer. Thus, with his “Camera Eye” and “Newsreel” sections, Dos Passos attempts to excavate real experience. This goal is one reason that he is a well-known member of the modernist canon because, as discussed previously in this chapter, modernist artists and authors hoped to capture reality and true experience amidst their changing, uncertain media environment.¹⁴

¹⁴ Although modernist authors wanted to express reality and true experience, this does not always mean that their historical work itself was true. They were interested in accessing human experience, not displaying undoubtedly true historical facts. Noticing that Dos Passos’s *1919* is often viewed as living history, Milton Cohen researched the validity of three of Dos Passos’s historical claims present in *1919*. Cohen concludes that Dos Passos’s validity is a “mixed bag” (Cohen 139). Although most of Dos Passos’s major facts are correct, he seems to ignore important details and suggests direct causality between events too freely. Cohen implies that Dos Passos’s work is useful as a historical reference and as an example of public opinion, but not all encompassing or completely accurate.

Julian Murphet writes of modernists' responses to their new media ecology and simultaneously confirms Dos Passos's rightful place in the modernist canon. Murphet describes modernists as "testing the newly mechanized techniques of cinema and advertising for their aesthetic potentials and then transposing those back into the older arts" (Murphet in Miller 213). This is precisely how John Dos Passos uses his "Newsreel" and "Camera Eye" sections. Radio and worldwide-proliferated messages were trending ways to spread information in the early 20th century. The "Newsreel" sections in *1919* reflect Dos Passos's attempt to play with these new media practices, but in the form of the "older arts," that is, in written text; a novel. Similarly, film began to boom around the same time. Dos Passos used the same maneuver in his "Camera Eye" sections that he used in the "Newsreel" portions of his text. The "Camera Eye" sections of *1919* portray the reality of life, as it would appear through the lens of a camera, but in written form.

Though he writes nearly a century after Dos Passos, Fountain also uses a similarly avant-garde, unique style and yearns to excavate reality of experience through fragmented, experimental portions of text. It is on these grounds, that I connect these two authors and propose that Fountain creates a relic of modernism in his form throughout *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk*. Fountain, like Dos Passos, plays with the aesthetic potentials of new media (in Fountain's case: text messaging, words on the big screen at the cowboys game) and transposes them into "older arts," that is, when he uses the form of the novel. For example, Billy receives several text messages that interrupt his experience at the Cowboys game. Texting is an important way that Fountain depicts Billy communicating with his family, friends, and his love interest, Faison. It also allows readers a glance at Billy's true experience as a connected young soldier. Throughout the novel, he receives texts from his sisters, a pastor, Faison, and more. Fountain casually

mentions Billy's digital communication and it often serves as a quick disruption to the plot, revealing Billy's reality of experience in real time. For instance, Billy "drops back a couple of paces and checks his cell. Pastor Rick has sent him another bible text—

"Know that the Lord is God!

It is He that made us and we are His.

The guy is relentless...Billy deletes the text" (Fountain 46).

In another moment Fountain writes, Billy "sits back and pulls out his cell...reads the text from his sister Kathryn

"keep it in yr holster kid" (9).

Readers feel as if they are receiving the text messages with Billy; they even are informed of his mental responses to the messages. Regarding Murphet's description, these texts show Fountain using new media in an older form. This is, according to Murphet, exactly what modernists do. Fountain uses avant-gardism in the same way that modernists like Dos Passos used it at the turn of the 20th century.

The text message experimental portions of Fountain's novel can most closely be aligned with Dos Passos's Newsreel sections. Both include fragmented, bits of information and communication, and both allow the reader access to someone else's experience of reading this disjointed, sometimes chaotic, information. In the case of Fountain, that "someone" is Billy and, in a way, other young soldiers. In the case of Dos Passos, the "someone" is an American citizen in 1919 being startled by the headlines and reports of war. Dos Passos's Newsreel sections can therefore be understood as inherently linked to Fountain's text message experimental sections in form and purpose.

Fountain also depicts his modernist experimentalism in other ways. Just like Dos Passos, Fountain aims to excavate real experience using various, differing experimental techniques. Fountain's most noticeable experimental techniques appear in his novel as large chunks of swirling words and sounds that inhabit a full page or more. These sections are intrinsically linked to speech and sensory experience. Thematically, they emphasize the delusion of public knowledge regarding post-9/11 war (one of Fountain's main themes, addressed continuously in his postmodernist plot). Fountain introduces these passages with a description of the public discussing the war or related topics. For instance, the first time one of these experimental portions appears in his novel, Fountain writes:

“After two solid weeks of public events Billy continues to be amazed at the public response, the raw wavering voices and frenzied speech patterns, the gibberish spilled from the mouths of seemingly well-adjusted citizens. We appreciate, they say, their voices throbbing like a lover's. Sometimes they come right out and say it, *We love you*. We are so grateful. We cherish and bless. We pray, hope, honor-respect-love-and-revere and they do, in the act of speaking they experience the mighty words, these verbal arabesques that spark and snap in Billy's ears like bugs impacting an electric bug zapper” (37).

He begins his introduction with numerous references to “voices” and “speech” so that readers understand that the following experimental section should be understood as an aural stimulus for the Bravo Squad. Fountain also describes these verbal inclusions as chaotic and buzzing when he uses the words “frenzied,” “gibberish,” “spark,” and “snap.” This characterization of the public's words as overexcited hints at Fountain's overall idea that the public is “seemingly well-adjusted,” but in reality is unaware and ignorant of the topics they are attempting speak about. This is specifically demonstrated when Fountain writes that they only experience these mighty words through the “act of speaking,” not through actual actions or experience. The public's chaotic verbal impulses therefore act as overcompensation for their lack of knowledge. This is

why Fountain refers to them as “verbal arabesques,” they are decorative and ornate but without deep meaning or substance, they are surface-level, just like arabesques. Fountain reaffirms this idea of surface-level, unsubstantial comments when he uses short fragments to describe what the public is saying. He writes, for instance, “We cherish and bless.” This incomplete sentence does not form a full thought, just as the public’s words do not have sufficient meaning. With these clues about verbalization, chaos, and the lack of awareness, Fountain eases readers in to Billy’s sensory experience in the experimental section displayed on the next page of his text.

Fountain’s experimental section appears in his novel as follows:

“terrRr

Eye-rack,

Eaaaar-*rock*,

Sod’m

freedoms

nina leven,

nina leven,

nina leven

hero

sacrifice

soooh-preeeeme sacrifice

Bush

Osama

values

dih-mock-cruh-see”

(Fountain 38)

Fountain continues his commentary on sound and speech within the actual manifestation of his experimental portions. He demonstrates sound through a number of avenues including the combination of upper and lowercase letters (“terrRr”) and the random italics (“*soooh-preeeme sacrifice*”), both of these techniques indicate aural emphasis. The auditory nature of this method is confirmed in one’s real experience while reading the novel because it can be difficult to understand the meaning of these “words” without reading the section aloud. Meaning, for instance, “nina leven” may not obviously be “nine eleven” unless a reader either imagines what it sounds like or speaks “nina leven” out loud. By detaching reading from automatic, internal mind processes, Fountain forces readers to physically hear these sections and therefore feel as though they are actually in a conversation like the one that Billy is experiencing.

Fountain takes the importance of sound a step further when he incorporates the pronunciation of the speakers in his experimental portions. Specifically, the fact that many of these “words” are written to express a southern or, in the case of Johnston, western dialect (Johnston 4).¹⁵ This is explicitly shown in Fountain’s inclusions like “dih-mock-cruh-see” and “nina leven.” The “cruh” in “dih-mock-cruh-see” stretches the “uh” sound and alludes to a southern/western voice. The “i” sound combined with the ending “a” sound associated with reading “nina” forces readers who are speaking this section out loud to sound like they have a

¹⁵ Carrie Johnston discusses region in her article, “Postwar Reentry Narratives in Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Ceremony* and Ben Fountain’s *Billy Lynn’s Long Halftime Walk*.” She tends to describe the characters in the novel as “western” as opposed to “southern.” For the purposes of this thesis, either characterization is acceptable.

southern accent. Billy's head is abuzz with not just any type of voices, but the voices of men and women from Texas. This inclusion makes the experimental section even more real. Incorporating the accents of the people Billy converses with allows readers to fully witness and become a part of Billy's sensory experience.

The reading of this experimental area is also affected by the spaces on the page. Some "words" are separated from previous "words" with more spaces than others. This could indicate that Fountain hopes his readers will take longer between these sections of words and thus separate them more severely. For instance, the three descending "nina leven"s are separate from the preceding set of "words," but are comparatively close to each other. This allows readers to view the falling "nina leven"s as associated and more cohesive than readers might understand them if all of the fragmented parts were all separated equally. This shows repetition in what Billy is hearing ("nina leven, nina leven, nina leven"). The members of the Texas elite are constantly and repetitively speaking about 9/11, in Billy's experience.

More generally, the spaces between the "words" also indicate that more is being said in the conversation than Fountain includes. These are simply words that Billy is picking up on as his head swirls from comments made by an ignorant group of citizens who utilize buzz words from post-9/11 war. The spaces, therefore, provide readers with a similar experience to Billy's. Fountain's readers follow the spacing in Billy's conversation through the spacing on the page. With the spacing, Fountain again unearths Billy's sensory experience.

On a thematic level, the spaces create a type of scarcity on the page that also reaffirm the superficiality of the comments made by the public to Billy and other soldiers. Fountain shows that the thoughts of the public and their conversations with Bravo Squad are overall useless and incomprehensible. The public spits jargon regarding the war, which they think will be interesting

to their listeners. Instead, the soldier's head buzzes with the noise and he does not internalize the thoughts of the public, and considering his success at excavating experience, Fountain's readers' heads do the same.

In his experimental sections like the one shown, Fountain brings readers deeper into the raw sensation of hearing. His point, in sections like these, is entirely modernist. Fountain alerts his readers that it is actually possible to unearth reality of experience through literature. He excavates and portrays Billy's sensory experience in these portions. Fountain's experimental form echoes modernism in its attempt to create actual experience of some sense (in this case, hearing) while reading a novel. Instead of heavily relying on visual senses like Dos Passos does in his "Camera Eye" sections, Fountain's experimental techniques form what would more accurately be called "Camera Ear" sections. Fountain's primary experimental sections are based on audio perceptions of sounds and the pronunciation of words and phrases. Regardless of the actual sense (visual or aural) being mimicked in his experimental parts, Fountain still imitates Dos Passos through fragmentation and the overall purpose of this section: to accurately relate a real-life experience through experimental form.

By echoing Dos Passos's conclusively modernist Camera Eye section, Fountain allows modernism to exist and function, as a relic does, within the form of his otherwise postmodernist novel. Fountain's fragmentation creates a "Camera Ear" section that slowly and deliberately marks sounds, accents, and pronunciations of words and speech. This is a purposeful creation of life-like experience for readers who are not physically hearing Billy's conversation. In this way, Fountain's modernist experimental portions break through his postmodernist plot and reveal a glimpse of hope for Americans to understand post-9/11 war experience through literature. Readers feel and experience with Billy as he hears uninformed Americans speaking on his

personal experience and the war that only he and Bravo Squad have actually witnessed. When Fountain alerts readers that general citizens know nothing about Billy's experience at war by showing Billy's experience while talking about war, he actually does teach his readers something about war. He teaches them that no one can understand post-9/11 war quite in the way that Billy and Bravo Squad can understand post-9/11 war, and that as members of the general public, readers should be aware of this shortcoming that they have. Fountain's modernist experimental portions reveal that there is hope for understanding this simple fact. Once readers understand this fact and regular citizens are comfortable with admitting what that they do not know about the war experience, Fountain will have successfully created a curious, skeptical public that is aware of their lack of knowledge and willing to learn what they can about war and the experience of war.

Fountain firmly characterizes his form as modernist by referring to Dos Passos's Newsreel in his text message portions and to Dos Passos's Camera Eye in what I have termed Camera Ear sections. Fountain, like a true modernist, works to reveal the reality of Billy's experience on his whirlwind day surrounded by regular Americans who believe they understand his experience with war abroad. He allows a modernist form to live and thrive within a postmodernist plot. Fountain unearths Billy's thoughts, sensory experiences, and emotions through his experimental sections to ultimately show how little Americans actually know about the post-9/11 war experience for soldiers and veterans.

There is one other critically important scene where Fountain uses modernist experimentalism to access Billy's experience. In this scene, Fountain again overwhelmingly argues that regular Americans have a corrupt view of the experience of war and patriotism within soldiers. This, in essence, is why Fountain chooses to use modernism. Fountain uses modernist

experimentalism to briefly access experience and reveal that the experience of a soldier in a mid-war situation¹⁶ is not the same as what the media and the spectacle of the war portray. He does this in hopes that if citizens grasp that their understanding of the war is twisted and inaccurate, they will accept their shortcomings and work to learn what they can feasibly learn about war.

This important scene occurs when a singer belts the “Star Spangled Banner.” Numerous scenes in *Billy Lynn’s Long Halftime Walk* include music and, when they occur, Fountain emphasizes them through experimental techniques. Fountain uses fragmentation and stresses the sounds and changes of the music. In this particular scene, he intermingles the experimental pieces with Billy’s first person narrative for five whole pages of text.

To start, the scene includes typical Fountain experimental portions that allow readers aural access to Billy’s experience. For instance, Fountain enforces the reality of Billy’s sensory experience when he uses capital letters to indicate an increased noise level and emphasis of the singer’s voice. He forms parts of the song by writing,

“WHHHHHHAAAAAAAAAATTTTTTTT

so

PRRRRRROOOOUUUUDDDDLLLLLYYYY” (Fountain 204).

And

“GAAAVE PROOOOF

through the

¹⁶ Or Post-War, depending on how one views Billy’s position.

NIIIIIGHT” (206).

Fountain’s decision to use fully capitalized words indicates the increased noise level and emphasis placed by the singer as she howls the song in a way that is typical and recognizable by American readers. The larger words are easily contrasted with the small, deemphasized, and disregarded words such as “so” and “through the.” The additional letters, as well, again remind readers that we are reading Billy’s listening of a singer belting the “Star Spangled Banner.” This shows that these words are being elongated and stretched out as the performer sings. This technique allows readers to hear and feel what Billy is hearing.

Fountain continues to push readers to experience what Billy hears in the song. For example, to represent the passage of time, Fountain uses another method. At times, he separates the additional letters with large vertical and horizontal spaces to show that the singer is holding the letter, the vowel sound, but shifting the note of the song. For instance, in one moment while the singer is changing a note, but maintaining and stretching out one vowel sound, Fountain demonstrates by writing:

“at
 th’
 twi-
 i-
 i-
 i-
 i-
 light’s” (204, 205).

With the spaces, Fountain reveals both the passage of time and the changing of pitch as the singer forms the “i” vowel sound in the word “twilight’s.” By switching his experimental fragmentation to a description of music, Fountain has more opportunities to blatantly describe sound and the experience of hearing. In this section, compared with the previously discussed fragmented moments, he is better able to comment on noise level, pitch, and the passage of time. This is particularly because these elements are often more noticed and purposeful in music rather than conversational speech.

Yet, there are also moments in his experimental survey of music where Fountain reverts to his formerly explained and typically used techniques. For instance, at times during the “Star Spangled Banner,” he again relies on pronunciation of words. He writes,

“Bah-ha-neeerrrrrrrrr

yeh-het

waaaaa-eh-eh-

aaaaavvve

Ore th’ Laaa-ha-annnnddddd of the Freeeeeeeeeeee-HEEEEEEEEE” (206).

Fountain’s inclusions such as “ha” in the words “Banner” and “Land” and “eh” in the words “Yet” and “wave” adds an “h” sound into the pronunciations of these words. This creates a feeling that the singer is breathing heavily into her words. This type of commentary on the pronunciation of words could have easily been found in other portions of Fountain’s speech-based fragmentation. The final “HEEEEEEEEE” again demonstrates the increasing pitch and decibels as the singer comes to a peak moment in the “Star Spangled Banner.” With music,

Fountain is able to create similar feelings of raw aural sensation within the reader and even expand on these experiences.

Thus, in this section, Fountain again uses modernist experimentalism to pull readers into Billy's sensory experience of the singing of the National Anthem. He does this with spacing, capitalization, and spelling. He is even able to use his experimentalism a bit differently when it involves music instead of conversation. Regardless, in this moment, his techniques work in junction to genuinely make readers feel as if they too are hearing the National Anthem. It is a particularly important point that Fountain is forcing his readers to engage with Billy's experience of the National Anthem. He wants his readers to have a raw encounter with the sensory experience while Billy is witnessing what is sometimes viewed as pure Americanness. In the non-experimental portions of this scene, which will be discussed next, Fountain shows readers that Billy's experience of hearing the National Anthem is disorienting. Fountain does this, I argue, in order to forge a political and ethical argument.

Through the five pages of this scene, while Fountain is keying the reader in to Billy's aural experience, he also provides intermittent access to Billy's thoughts on this experience. This is where Fountain demonstrates the substance of his argument about regular citizens' perceptions of the experience of war. Between the outbreaks of music, Fountain includes Billy's thoughts on the singing, noise, and his surroundings during the production of honor and pride that is the "Star Spangled Banner." Billy's musings seem particularly cynical during the performance of this song, which many people tend to associate with American pride and thus, soldiers. With Billy's pessimistic and, overall, tragic thoughts in the transitions to experimental pieces, Fountain is able to construct an argument about the showiness of the "Star Spangled Banner," associated ideas of patriotism, and what Americans cannot know about the experience of war. He shows that these

are empty formalities that experienced soldiers like Billy are too realistic to believe. When the song begins with “Ohhh-

oh” (Fountain 203),

Billy thinks:

“Ohhh-oh, ohhh-oh, ohhh-oh, an echo banging around the bruised hollows of your brain, *ohhh-oh*, as if you’re standing at the mouth of a cave calling tentatively, hopefully into the dark. *Ohhh-oh, anybody there?* Ohhh-oh, ohhh-oh, ohhh-oh...Pavlovian cue for bursting of dopamine bombs and xylophone trills up and down your spine. Then the trapdoor springs beneath your feet” (203).

The opening of a song that “should” elicit joy, pride, or patriotism instead creates an anxiety within Billy. Here, Fountain is allowing full access to Billy’s emotions about the anthem. To Billy, the initial “Oh” does not indicate that a powerful, emotional ballad about our country will follow. Alternatively, it somehow reminds him of a hesitant call into a dark cave. This is a scene of loneliness, looking “hopefully” for someone else, another human being, who is also in the dark. Billy is likely looking for someone who understands. Fountain has indicated too many times in his novel that “someone who understands” is not the general American public.

Next follows a brief transition to an experimental technique as Fountain cascades the noise with changing font size and repetition: “Ohhh-oh, ohhh-oh, ohhh-oh.” Quickly, however, Billy’s explicit thoughts return and move from loneliness and desolation to excitement when Fountain writes, “Pavlovian cue for bursting of dopamine bombs and xylophone trills up and down your spine.” Finally, it seems, he has some form of the typical, or at least expected, emotional reaction that Americans receive from the “Star Spangled Banner.” Dopamine is a neurotransmitter that affects a human brain’s pleasure and pain pathways. “Dopamine bombs” combined with the sensation of “xylophone trills up and down your spine,” implies that Billy is experiencing some type of excitement, possibly in the form of anxiety, thrill, or eagerness. The possibility that Billy is anxious as the ballad begins is reinforced by his final thought that “the

trapdoor springs beneath your feet.” This shows that the built-up excitement and anxiety of the “ohhh-oh” eventually bursts and, for the rest of the song, Billy is free falling through the trap door. After the built-up anxiety or excitement is broken, the music eventually creates a feeling loss of control within Billy.

This loss of control is repeated in Billy’s subsequent thoughts during the transitions between the musical experimental portions. Billy’s thoughts begin with the dark phrase: “Thence to the ritual torturing of a difficult song” (Fountain 203). Suddenly, Fountain makes it certain that Billy is not eager or excited in a pleasurable way. He is struggling with the national anthem; worse, he is being “tortured” by the national anthem. This torture comes in the form of loss of control. Fountain writes of Billy, “He has to remember to breathe. He feels calm and agitated all at once, self-awareness teased to such a screaming pitch that his skull might split at any moment, and he moans, it is just too much to hold in” (205). The sound of the music is affecting Billy emotionally which eventually leads to a physical outburst in the form of a moan. Billy is uneasy as the national ballad flows through the air to his ears. The song somehow creates confusion and contradiction within his body, he feels both “calm and agitated.” He is on edge and no longer feels natural, in fact, “he has to remember to breathe.” Fountain is working to display the significant effect that the “Star Spangled Banner” has on Billy. Fountain does not depict a character with simple feelings of joy and pride. He shows a struggling, confused young soldier. This inherently disproves the American ideal of a perfect, obedient, strong, and steadfastly proud soldier. When he shows Billy’s loss of control in his response to the national anthem, Fountain reveals that the understanding of the war by Texas elites is simplistic and uninformed. In this sad, disturbing moment readers realize that the wealthy Texans Fountain has been illustrating for the entire novel are unaware of this disconnect and confusion within soldiers like Billy.

This section is particularly interesting because it allows readers unrestricted access to Billy's experience (his hearing of the "Star Spangled Banner"), yet also yanks away the belief that regular citizens can access a soldier's experience when he shows Billy's jarring thoughts on the song. Fountain implies that, through modernism, readers may have some access to Billy's aural experience, but overall, interpretation of that access is greatly misconstrued. We can experience what he hears as the singer continues, but regular citizens cannot truly know his experience and emotions. For instance, Americans are "supposed" to hear the National Anthem and feel bursts of joy and pride. That is not at all what Billy feels.

Again, however, access to Billy's raw experiences still exists. The fact that readers can get inside Billy's experience and feel what he does points to a seed of hope planted by Fountain using modernist experimentalism. If readers can witness and feel Billy's raw experience, they can also grasp the idea that there is much that the general public does not and cannot understand about Billy's war experience. Paradoxically, but cleverly, Fountain uses demonstrations of Billy's experience to prove that full, unrestricted access to his experience is not possible.

In this section, we have briefly surveyed the basics of modernist experimentalism. By revealing Fountain's fragmented experimental sections as unquestionably linked to Dos Passos's Newsreel and Camera Eye sections in his *U.S.A. Trilogy*, it is proven that Fountain employs modernism in his experimental sections. Both authors yearn to access and expose reality of raw, sensory experience through literature. Fountain creates a modernist relic within the form of his novel and thus allows modernism to survive and thrive within his otherwise postmodernist novel. Finally, in an assessment of the scene where a singer performs the National Anthem, Fountain's argument about experience and the general public's understanding of that experience is uncovered. Fountain, by revealing raw, aural experience through modernist experimentalism and

combining this with Billy's cynical response to the song, also implies that readers and the general public could never fully grasp Billy's experience with war through the media, although often, they believe that they can and do fully understand his experience.

Regardless of Fountain's undoubtedly postmodernist plot, he creates a modernist form. This piece of seemingly misplaced modernism amidst a sea of postmodernism implies hope for better understanding of the war experience that the postmodernist plot alone does not allow. In his modernist experimental pieces, however, Fountain does not imply that "better understanding of the war experience" means an easily accessible, direct understanding of a soldier's experience. Instead, by providing modernist access to a soldier's raw experience combined with a postmodernist plot, Fountain indicates that there is hope for understanding that many of the spectacle stories encountered in our hypermediated environment are not precisely what they seem. At the end of Fountain's novel, after experiencing both postmodernist and modernist styles, readers finally understand that they could never fully understand the experience of war.

Conclusion

“It dawns on Billy that these smiling, clueless citizens are the ones who came correct. For the past two weeks he’s been feeling so superior and smart because of all the things he knows from the war, but forget it, they are the ones in charge, these saps, these innocents, their homeland dream is the dominant force. His reality is their reality’s bitch; what they don’t know is more powerful than all the things he knows” (Fountain 306).

“Their reality dominates, except for this: It can’t save you. It won’t stop any bombs or bullets. He wonders if there’s a saturation point, a body count that will finally blow the homeland dream to smithereens. How much reality can unreality take?” (Fountain 306,307).

In the final two pages of his novel, Fountain depicts Billy experiencing a powerful epiphany and marks the blatant discrepancy between the reality of average Americans and the reality of soldiers and veterans. Billy spent his two week “Victory Tour” surrounded by regular Americans and convinced that he was the most informed, knowledgeable person on the topic of war because, of course, he was the only one who had lived that experience. Yet, in the final moments of the text, with a hopeless and existential air, Billy realizes that the homeland dream of war and honor for America, although a part of ‘unreality,’ dominates Billy’s reality. But quickly, Billy’s thoughts turn, and readers realize that the dominating reality cannot save anyone. Suddenly Fountain’s goal for his novel is uncovered: blow the homeland dream to smithereens.

Throughout this thesis, we have explored Fountain’s use of a postmodernist plot with a modernist form. Through his plot, Fountain illustrates the unfortunate, dissatisfying reality of an uninformed public. With his modernist experimentalism, Fountain depicts Billy’s real, sensory

experiences and alerts average Americans to all that they do not know. Fountain's hybridization of styles and the set-up of his novel urge readers to recognize their knowledge-based shortcomings, ask questions, and help to blow the unaware, uninformed homeland dream of 'reality' to smithereens. In this way, by presenting severe issues facing our society and a possible solution, Ben Fountain provides readers with a splash of hope for better understanding the experience of post-9/11 war efforts.

In our era of "fake news," this message is more important than ever before. To combat hate and lies, we, as regular Americans, have to be informed consumers of media. We should not blindly accept the hypermediated images that we see on television or other avenues of social media. This, Fountain shows us, only socially isolates veterans and soldiers even more forcefully than they already are socially isolated from average Americans. Fountain crafts a novel that swiftly and skillfully depicts the misconceptions and lack of awareness rampant in the American public regarding war. He makes obvious that our perceptions of war are important because they influence general understanding and have the ability to harmfully reduce veteran and soldiers' experiences to a spectacle. Fountain alerts readers not to accept hypermediation as reality. His end goal is to create an informed group of readers who are willing to be skeptical, ask questions, and learn real information about American involvement in post-9/11 war.

Instead of deeply examining media theories and past work on the spreading of information, the theoretical background for this thesis was primarily based on the theories of postmodernist and modernist styles. This is because Fountain's hybridization was the central original connection drawn and therefore, the main point argued in this thesis. As explained thoroughly in the introduction, many scholars interpret postmodernist style as incompatible with the goals of modernist style. While *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk* upholds the notion that the

two styles have opposite goals, Fountain also demonstrates that postmodernism and modernism can work together, proving different points along the way, but overall creating a useful, insightful story together. In some ways throughout Fountain's novel, his postmodernist plot represents the average Americans and their obsession and unconditional belief in hypermediation. Additionally, his modernist form provides access to Billy's experience, and therefore represents soldiers, veterans, those involved in the war effort, and even immigrants who were once victims of this aggression. Using these two conflicting styles in one novel allows readers to recognize the vast divide in the realities of these two groups of Americans. However, the end product is a cohesive story. Metaphorically, this may be an encouragement that if the reality of veterans, soldiers, and victims of American aggression was more efficiently incorporated into the reality of average Americans, a cohesive story could be forged.

Finally, the work of this thesis in characterizing and highlighting Fountain's interesting hybridization of styles has created the opportunity for Fountain's novel to be better known and inspires scholars to be more willing to address his story. I hope that after reading this thesis, scholars are encouraged to understand Fountain's unique novel in new, exciting ways. I truly believe that his story is meant to be told and spread; without proliferation, the impact of *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk* will not reach the level it should. I want scholars to work with Fountain's piece, theorize it, ask questions of it, and use it to blow the homeland dream to smithereens. The discrepancies between realities unsettles readers and should inspire us to bridge the divide between a soldier's reality and an average American's reality. We must pursue the reality and truth of experience of war as best as we can to construct public awareness and understanding.

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