

THE FIRST CASUALTY?

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Should we not turn the expression around, then, and say that politics is war pursued by other means?¹

The deafness of power is the mother and father of all terrorist movements. Speech by violent actions ultimately becomes the only choice because appeals with words have failed to register.²

It is not, as the journalistic cliché goes, that truth is the first casualty of war, it is the concept of reality that is the first casualty.³ The Persian Gulf War was not so much the first Third-World, post-Cold War as the culmination of a series of developments spanning the entire century; these developments can only be characterized as the evolution of total war. Such totalization is, as Virilio points out, the derealization of war itself. The Persian Gulf War was in this sense not the first mediated war (World War I), nor the first electronic war (Vietnam), but perhaps the first postmodern war, a postmodern war for which the media events of Vietnam, the Falklands (Malvinas) war, and the invasions of Grenada and Panama form, in Baudrillard's sense, one series of models. Moreover, taking the "liberation of Kuwait" as its main impulse and "mid-intensity conflict" with regional powers in the Third World as its paradigm for military action, the war was mapped (via television) onto a complicated temporality: writing itself both projectively and retroactively, it was identified with both an entirely mythical World War II and some future "Star Wars" missile defense system. This was a war that will, in all probability, become a model for the continuation of the Bush administration's "war on drugs," while the "forgotten war" against AIDS, which has claimed more than 100,000 American lives, continues with no promise of victory in sight.⁴

The seemingly instantaneous and continuous story telling (eg. CNN Headline News)

facilitated by new communication technologies combined with the complete automation of warfare, may indicate the triumph of the hyper-real over the real. As one U.S. soldier in Saudi Arabia observed: "If the boys had had these video games – 'Nintendo', 'Tetris', 'Ninja Turtles' – in Vietnam, the mental health level would have been much higher." Military manoeuvres and combat training have, with the growth of the simulation industry in the 1970s, become large scale electronic war games. Thus, when the air war commenced on January 16th, the Pentagon's Crisis Situation Room became a TV control room, where operations specialists and intelligence analysts monitored three large projection screens, one of which was tuned to CNN (while their counterparts monitored U.S. television in Baghdad.)⁵ Simultaneously, network and cable news studios became "war rooms" full of military experts, retired chiefs of staff, and maps of the "theatre of operations." The Persian Gulf war was thus a kind of simulacra game in which the technology of entertainment television and the technology of mass destruction were deployed together as part of U.S. military strategy to both deceive Iraqi military forces and to pre-empt/post-empt the formation of an oppositional public sphere.

Such a construction of the "reality" of war requires us therefore to go beyond the usual debates about the role and performance of the news media as an information provider. While the "pool system" and the "security review" of stories certainly extended military control over information, the media's own examination of this issue tended to ignore many other factors which shape the production of news discourse, thereby perpetuating the self-serving myth of a "free press" in which the commercial news media are presumed to have an adversarial relationship to the institutions of political power. Despite the grumblings of some journalists and a lawsuit filed by the Centre for Constitutional Rights to overturn government press controls on constitutional grounds, the majority of print and broadcast journalists made every effort to work within the system of restrictions. CBS news correspondent Richard Threlkeld, for example, appeared on television helping coalition forces to take surrendering Iraqi troops into custody. News organizations refused to air the uncensored footage obtained during a visit to Iraq on February 2 by Ramsey Clark, a former U.S. Attorney General. The Persian Gulf war was, in every sense, a co-production between the Pentagon and news organizations which are only a small part of media conglomerates anchored in transnational market relations.⁶ Thus it came as little surprise that, in early March, Army General Thomas Kelly was able to tell journalists at the Pentagon: "I'd just like to say that, believe it or not, I've enjoyed this little interlude... at no time were you ever impolite to me and at no time did I ever become offended."⁷ Such codes of politeness, which, as Pierre Bourdieu has suggested, always contain concessions to power, have all of



the force of military "guidelines" in regulating the production of news discourse.⁸ It is this code that members of ACT-UP violated when they suddenly appeared one evening on the CBS Evening News to announce: "Fight AIDS, Not Arabs!"

Our main concern then with this order of televisual high-speed, hi-tech war is not information but "simulations" of war and politics. We are not, however, as Baudrillard and his followers propose, at the end of representation, of politics, or of history. Rather, we have seen the extension of American political spectacle into the global public sphere constituted by CNN. Political spectacle, as Michael Rogin has pointed out, is a form of power grounded in real social forces and relations.⁹ When White House spokesperson Marlin Fitzwater proclaimed on the evening of January 16 that the "liberation of Kuwait" had begun, the administration was appropriating the language of Third World Nationalist liberation movements on behalf of U.S. geopolitical and economic interests. "Spectacle," Rogin writes, "is the cultural form of amnesiac representation, for specular displays are superficial and sensately intensified, short lived and repeatable."¹⁰ This is an apt characterization of the most memorable images of the Persian Gulf war: the greenish footage of anti-aircraft tracer bullets lighting up the sky over Baghdad during the U.S.-led allied air attack over Iraq, scenes of Israelis donning gas masks during Scud missile attacks, black and white "smart bomb" videos destroying Iraqi military targets (but not Iraqi civilians), and Iraqi television clips of U.S. prisoners of war.

Such images had all the emotion and drama of a television miniseries. But unlike "fact-based" television movies (which are full of blood, death and destruction) the early days of the television techno-war was replete with maps and technical information on weapons systems to reassure us of our technological superiority and to further distance us from Iraqi culture and history. In the first three days of continuous, real-time coverage (which garnered the largest TV audience in U.S. history) there was little sense of devastation, and no signs of death. Military censorship prevented us from seeing images of people returning in "body bags" (renamed "human remains pouches") at Dover Air Force Base, the main military mortuary. Bombing and killing, life and death, were completely separated from one another. High-tech weapons used without restraint had given the new American empire a way of waging near-nuclear war without fear of death or mass destruction. In this sense, the signs of death were abolished; the deadliest effects of allied bombing of Iraq-occupied Kuwait and Iraq only began to appear after a cease fire had been declared on February 28.

Even though President Bush has declared that the "spectre of Vietnam has been buried forever in the desert sands of the Arabian Peninsula," this prime-time TV war – with its

dramatic images of bloodless, costless success – was in some respects similar to the original sanitized "living room war," except that "smart bomb" videos have replaced bomb-sight films. The war in Vietnam, which became one of the U.S.'s longest running movie epics, was spectacular in a literal sense: "Waged in the name of 'credibility,' it was intended to project a superpower's image as the mightiest on earth."¹¹ Yet, the saturation of "smart bomb" videos rendered the Persian Gulf war spectacular in a marketing/advertising sense: it served to bolster the image of a military-industrial complex whose products had fallen into disrepute and whose continued production was put into question by the end of the Cold War. The pro-war slogan "Be a Patriot . . . not a Scud!" reveals that the real heroes of this war turned out to be the new generation of weapons originally designed to be deployed against the Soviets in Europe.

But no matter how closed the circuits of information in this "video game" war, or how massive the indifference of the "masses" to the political and moral issues of war, no matter how indistinguishable patriotism and fanaticism became, there were also signs that some publics refused to be collapsed into the "public opinion" routinely offered up by newscasters and political pundits as quasi-scientific evidence of a collective will to war. Undoubtedly, the primary effect of such polls, as Pierre Bourdieu has written, is to create "the idea that a unanimous public opinion exists in order to legitimate a policy, and strengthen the relations of force upon which it is based or which make it possible."¹² We should not forget, however, that "opinions are forces and relations of opinions are conflicts of forces." Within the contradictory space of postmodern televisual war, the only real opposition is "not between the enemies who fight the war but between the war makers and the war victims" (or those, like participants in the anti-war movement, who speak the discourse of victims of war).¹³

The meanings of political spectacle, like the meanings of all mediated events, cannot be adduced from the institutionalized arrangements for the production and distribution of symbolic forms, nor from their construction, but only from the social-historical analysis of their reception and appropriation. Publics are not merely consumers of spectacles, with all of the connotations of passivity and conformity to prevailing military or political orthodoxy this formulation implies. The meaning(s) of the Persian Gulf war, however apparently fixed by the use of public relations techniques by the military, or evacuated by the blurring of fictional and nonfictional genres, are rather the product of articulations, of contestation and ongoing discursive elaboration among differently situated social subjects.¹⁴ Thus, those involved in the peace movement, conscientious objectors, members of the Military Family Support Network, artists, alternative media workers, organizers of teach-ins, as

well as innumerable others, all joined together to form, however tentatively, an oppositional public sphere to challenge the deafness of power. It is in the name of these publics, therefore, that we must refuse any form of postmodern cultural criticism that would essentialize questions regarding the effects of either propaganda or postmodern spectacle, that would prove incapable of analyzing the relationship between meanings and power, and would shrink from addressing both the dynamics of domination and the resistance to media hegemony.

NOTES

1. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1980) 93.
2. John Berger, "Silence of the Scams," *In These Times* (April 24–30, 1991): 21.
3. Paul Virilio, *War and Cinema: The Logistics of Perception* (New York: Verso, 1989).
4. Robert Massa, "The Forgotten War," *The Gulf War Reader: History, Documents, Opinions*, ed. Micah Sifry et al. (New York: Random House, 1991) 323-25.
5. Jon Weiner, "Why We Fought," *The Nation* 10 June 1991: 782.
6. For an account of the transnationalization of cultural industries and the emergence of a total corporate information-cultural environment, see Herbert I. Schiller, *Culture Inc.: The Corporate Takeover of Public Expression* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).
7. Norman Solomon, *FAIR, Activist E-Mail* 15 March 1991.
8. Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977) 95.
9. Michael Rogin, "Make My Day!": Spectacle as Amnesia in Imperial Politics" *Representations* 29, 99-123.
10. Michael Rogin, "Make My Day!," 106.
11. J. Hoberman, "Vietnam: The Remake," *Remaking History* eds. Barbara Kruger et al. (Seattle: Bay Press, 1989), 176.
12. Pierre Bourdieu, "Public Opinion Does Not Exist," *Communication and Class Struggle* eds. Armand Mattelart and Seth Sigelaub (Bagnolet: International General, 1978) 125.
13. Peter Bruck, "Strategies for Peace, Strategies for News Research," *Journal of Communication* 39 (1989) 108-29.
14. John Thompson, *Ideology and Modern Culture: Critical Social Theory in the Era of Mass Communication* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990).