

# Warporn Warpunk!

Autonomous Videopoesis in Wartime

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## Grinning Monkeys

How do you think you can stop war without weapons? Anti-war opinion that fills public squares around the world stands as powerless in front of the raging US military as the cosmetic democracy of International Courts. Reason cannot prevail against the animal instincts of a superpower: a homicidal force can be arrested only by another, stronger force. Every day we witness such a Darwinian show: history repeating itself through a cruel confrontation of forces, while "freedom of speech" plays itself out as an ineffectual drawing room exercise. Pacifists too are accomplices of instinctive forces, because animal aggressiveness is within us all.

How do we express that bestiality for which we condemn armies? Contrary to the self-censored exterior of the radical left (not only that of the conformist majority), it should be admitted publicly that watching Abu Ghraib pictures of pornographic tortures does not scandalise us. On the contrary, it excites us in exactly the same way as the obsessive voyeurism that draws us to 9/11 videos. Through such images we feel the expression of repressed instincts, the pleasure rising again after its narcotisation by consumerism, technologies, goods and images. We show our teeth, as monkeys do, when their aggressive grin looks dreadfully like the human smile.

Contemporary thinkers like Baudrillard and Zizek acknowledge the dark side of Western culture. If 9/11 has been a shock for Western consciousness, Baudrillard puts forward a more shocking thesis: we Westerners had an active desire for 9/11, the death drive of a superpower that, having reached its natural limits, knows and desires nothing more than self-destruction and war. The indignation is hypocrisy; there is always an animal talking behind a video screen.

## On the Videowar Battleground

Before pulling the monkey out of the TV set, we have to focus on the battleground on which the media match is played. The more reality becomes a function of mass, personal, and networked devices, the more wars become media wars, even if they take place in a desert. The global war that we are now engaged in began with the 9/11 broadcasts and continued with guerrilla video; now, every day we receive videos from the Iraqi front shot by invaders,

militiamen and journalists. Each action in such a media war is designed beforehand to fit its spectacular consequences. Terrorists have learnt all the rules of spectacular conflict, while imperial propaganda, much more expert, has no qualms about playing with fakes and hoaxes (for instance the dossiers on weapons of mass destruction).

Bureaucratic propaganda wars are a thing of the past. New media have generated new forms of guerrilla combat, opening up a molecular front of bottom-up resistance. Video cameras among civilians, weblogs updated by independent journalists, smart-phones used by American soldiers in the Abu Ghraib prison: each represents an uncontrollable variable that can subvert the propaganda apparatus. Video imagery produced by television is now interlaced with the anarchic, self-organised infrastructure of digital networked media that has become a formidable means of distribution (evidenced by the capillary diffusion of the video of the beheading of Nick Berg). Today's propaganda is used to maintain a connective imagery rather than a collective spectacle, and the intelligence services set up simulacra of the truth based on networking technologies.

### **The Videoclash of Civilisations**

Alongside the techno-conflict between horizontal and vertical media, two secular cultures of the image face each other on the international mediascape. The United States embodies the last stage of videocracy, an oligarchic technocracy based on hypertrophic advertising and infotainment, and the colonisation of worldwide imagery through Hollywood and CNN. Ideologies such as Nazism and Stalinism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century were intimately linked to the fetishism of the idea-image (as all of Western thought is heir to Platonic idealism). Islamic culture on the contrary is traditionally iconoclast: it is forbidden to represent images of God and the Prophet, and usually of any living creature whatsoever. Only Allah is *Al Mussawir*, 'He who gives rise to forms': imitating His gesture of creation is a sin (even if such a precept never appears in the Quran). Islam, unlike Christianity, has no sacred iconographic centre. In mosques, the *qiblah* is an empty niche. Its power comes not from the refusal of the image but from the refusal of its centralising role, developing in this way a material, anti-spectacular and horizontal cult.

Indeed, on Doomsday, painters are meant to suffer more than other sinners. Even if modernisation proceeds through television and cinema (that paradoxically did not receive the same negative critique as painting), iconoclasm remains active and breaks out against Western symbols, as happened in the case of the World Trade Centre. To strike at Western idolatry, pseudo-Islamic terrorism becomes videoclasm, preparing attacks designed for live broadcasting and using satellite channels as a resonant means for its propaganda. Al-Jazeera broadcasts images of executed Iraqi civilians, whilst Western mass media removes these bodies in favour of the military show. An asymmetrical imagery is developing between East and West, and it will be followed by an asymmetrical rage, that will break out with backlashes for generations to come. In such a clash between videocracy and videoclasm, a third actor, the global movement, tries to open a breach and develop therein an autonomous *videopoesis*. The making of an alternative imagery is not only based on self-organising independent media, but also on winning back the dimension of myth and the body. Videopoesis should speak – at the same time – to the belly and to the brain of the monkeys.

### Global Video-Brain

In the West, minds and media were both awoken by the simple physical impact of live media images, not by the news of tortures at the Abu Ghraib prison or of Nick Berg's beheading. Television is the medium that taught the masses a Pavlovian reaction to images. It is also the medium that produced a globalised, collective consciousness (something more complex than the idea of public opinion). The proliferation of the media caused feelings to mutate into video, led to a becoming-video of the collective brain and collective narratives. The global video-brain functions through images, but individual brains think outside images. This is not about crafting a theory, but recognising the natural extension of our faculties. Electronic and economic developments move at too high a speed for the collective mind to have time to respond in speech; there is only time for reacting to visual stimuli. A *collective imagery* arises when a media infrastructure casts and repeats the same images in a million copies, producing a common space; a consensual hallucination around the same object (that afterwards becomes oral culture or movies).

In the case of television, such a serial communication of a million images is much more lethal, because it is instantaneous. On the other hand, the networked imagery works in an interactive and non-instantaneous way; this is why we call it connective imagery. Imagery is a collective broadcasting of the same image across different media. According to Goebbels, a lie repeated a million times becomes public discourse, part of everyday conversations, and then accepted truth. It is in collective imagery that media and desire meet, that the same repeated image modifies millions of bodies simultaneously and inscribes pleasure, hope and fear. Communication and desire, mediasphere and psychosphere, are the two axes that describe the war to the global mass, the ways by which war reaches out beyond itself to our own, distant bodies, and the ways image inscribes itself into flesh.

### Animal Narrations

Why does reality exist only when framed by a powerful TV network? Why is the course of events affected by the evening news? Collective imagery is not affected by the video evolution of mass technologies only, but also by the natural instincts of human kind. As what Aristotle called a "political animal", the human being is inclined to set up collective narratives which represent the instinct of belonging to a kind. Let's call them *animal narratives*. For this reason television is a "natural" medium, because it responds to the need of creating one narrative for millions of people, a single animal narrative for entire nations, similar to what other narrative genres, such as myths, epics and religious scriptures, did and still do. Television represents, above all else, the primordial feeling of belonging to one Kind.

Each geopolitical area has its own video *macro-tractor* (CNN, BBC, etc.), which the rest of the media relate to. Besides the macro-tractors, there are *meta-*



*attractors*, featuring the role of critical consciousness against them, a function often held by the print media (*The Guardian*, for instance) as well as web media. Of course, the model is much more complex: the list could continue on and end with blogs, which we can define as *group micro-attractors*, the smallest in scale; but suffice it to say here that the audience and power of the main attractor are ensured by the natural animal instinct. This definition of mass media might seem strange, because they are no longer *push media* that communicate in unidirectional ways (one-to-many), but *pull media* that attract and group together, media in which we invest our desires (many-to-one). Paraphrasing Wilhelm Reich's remark about fascism, we can say that rather than the masses being brainwashed by the media establishment, the latter is sustained by the desire to belong.

### Digital Anarchy: A Videophone vs. Empire

Traditional *media war* incorporates the Internet. The networked imagery (with television, internet, mobile phones and digital cameras) turns into a battleground: *personal media* such as digital cameras bring the cruelty of war directly into the living room, for the first time in history, at the speed of an Internet download and out of any governmental control. This networked imagery cannot be stopped, and neither can technological evolution. Absolute transparency is an inevitable fate for all of us. The videophone era seriously undermines privacy, as well as any kind of secrecy, including state secrecy. The outrage expressed about the scandal at Abu Ghraib by US Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld, in his testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee is extremely grotesque: "We're functioning...with peacetime constraints, with legal requirements, in a wartime situation, in the Information Age, where people are running around with digital cameras and taking these unbelievable photographs and then passing them off, against the law, to the media, to our surprise, when they had – they had not even arrived in the Pentagon". A few days later, Rumsfeld prohibited American soldiers in Iraq from using any kind of camera or videophone. Rumsfeld himself was the 'victim' of the Internet broadcasting of a famous video that shows him politely shaking hands with Saddam Hussein in 1983.



New digital media seem to have created an unpredictable digital anarchy, where a videophone can fight against Empire. The images of torture at Abu Ghraib are the internal nemesis of a civilisation of machines that is spinning beyond the control of its creators and demiurges. As Baudrillard notes, the Empire of the Spectacle is now submitted to the hypertrophy of the Spectacle itself, to its own greed for images, to an autoerotic pornography. The infinitely repeatable character of digital technology allowed for the demise of the copyright culture through P2P networks, but also for the proliferation of digital spam and the white noise of the web. Videophones have created a networked megacamera, a super-light panopticon, a horizontal Big Brother. The White House was trapped in this web. Digital

repetition no longer delivers us to the game of mirrors of weak postmodern thought – to the image as self-referential simulacrum – but rather to an interlinked universe where videopoesis can connect the farthest points and cause fatal short circuits.

### **War Porn**

Indeed, what came to light with the Abu Ghraib media scandal was not a casual short circuit, but the implosion into a deadly vortex of war, media, technology, body, desire. Philosophers, journalists and commentators from all sides rushed to deliver different perspectives for a new framework of analysis. The novelty of the images of Abu Ghraib and Nick Berg (whether fictional or not is not the point) consists in the fact that they forged a new narrative genre of collective imagery. For the first time, a snuff movie was projected onto the screen of global imagery; and Internet subcultures, used to such images, suddenly came out of the closet: *rotten.com* finally reached the masses. Rather than making sense of a traumatic experience, newspapers and weblogs worldwide are engaged in drawing out the political, cultural, social and aesthetic repercussions of a new genre of image that forces us to upgrade our immunity system and communicative strategies.

As Seymour Hersh noted, Rumsfeld provided the world with a good excuse to ignore the Geneva Convention from now on. But he lowered the level of tolerance of the *visible* as well, forcing us to accept cohabitation with the Horror. English-speaking journalism defines as *war porn* the popular tabloids and government talk-shows fascination with super-sized weapons and glinting uniforms, hi-tech tanks and guided missiles, a panoply of images that some define as the aseptic substitute of pornography proper. Ridley Scott's *Black Hawk Down*, for instance, is war hardcore. The cover of *Time*, showing "the American soldier" as Person of the Year, was considered pure war porn by Adbusters: "Three American Soldiers standing proudly, half-smiles playing on their faces, rifles cradled in their arms".

War porn is also a sub-genre of *trash porn* – still relatively unknown, coming from the dark side of the Net. It simulates violent sex scenes between soldiers or the rape of civilians (pseudo-amateur movies usually shot in Eastern Europe and often passed off as real). War porn is freed from its status of Net subculture; its morbid fetishisation of war imagery becomes a political weapon, serving the voyeurism and the nightmares of the masses. Is it a coincidence that war porn emerges from the Iraqi marshes right at this time?

### **Digital-Body Rejection**

The metaphorical association of war with sex that underpins much Anglo-American journalism points to something deeper that was never before made so explicit: a libido that, alienated by wealth, awaits war to give free reign to its ancestral instincts. War is as old as the human species: natural aggressiveness is historically embodied in collective and institutional forms, but several layers of technology have separated today's war from its animal substratum. We needed Abu Ghraib pictures to bring to the surface the obscure background of animal energy that lies underneath a democratic facade. Did this historic resurfacing of the repressed occur today simply because of mass dissemination from digital cameras and videophones? Or is there a deeper connection between the body and technology that is bound to prove to be deadly sooner or later?

As the mass media are filled with tragic and morbid news, the digital media, by contrast, seem to lack what Alain Badiou calls the “passion of the real”. Instead, new personal media connect to the psychopathology of everyday living; we might say that they create a new *format* for it and a new genre of communication, but above all, they establish a relation with the body that television never had. *War porn* seems to signal the rejection of technology by subconscious forces that express themselves through the same medium that represses them: this rejection might point to the ongoing adaptation of the body to the digital. The proliferation of digital prostheses is not as rational, aseptic and immaterial as it seems. The electronic media seemed to have introduced technological rationality and coolness into human relations, yet the shadows of the digital increasingly re-surface. There comes a point when technology physically unbridles its opposite. The Internet is the best example: behind the surface of the immaterial and disembodied technology lies a traffic of porn content that takes up half of its daily bandwidth.

At the same time, the Orwellian proliferation of video cameras, far from producing an Apollonian world of transparency, generates instead domains ridden with violence, blood and sex. The next *Big Brother* will resemble the movie *Battle Royal* (2000), in which Takeshi Kitano places a class of students on an island and forces them into a game of death where the winner is the last one to survive. We have always considered the media to be prostheses of human rationality, and technology the new embodiment of the *logos*. But new media also embody the dark side of the Western world. In war porn we find this Siamese-twin body comprised of libido and media, desire and image. Two radical movements that are the same movement: war reinvests the alienated libido, personal media are filled by the desperate libido they alienated. The subconscious cannot lie; skeletons sooner or later start knocking on closet doors.

### **Imagery Reset**

War results from the inability to dream that comes after all libidinal energy has been depleted by an outflow of prostheses, commodities, images. War violence allows us to believe again in images of everyday life and images of the body – as well as advertising images. War is an *imagery reset*. War brings the attention and excitement for advertising back to a zero degree, where advertising can start afresh. War saves advertising from the final annihilation of the orgasm, from the inflation of the value currency towards utter indifference. War brings the *new economy* back to the *old economy*, to traditional, consolidated commodities; it gets rid of immaterial commodities that risk dissolving the economy into a big potlatch and into the anti-economy of the gift that the Internet represents. War has the ‘positive’ effect of redelivering us to ‘radical’ thought, to the political responsibility of representation, against the interpretative flights of the “weak thought” of semiotics and postmodernism.

Pornographic images of war, as stated earlier, are the reflux of the animal instinct that our economic and social structure has repressed. But rather than a *psychoanalysis* that simply justifies new customs and fashions, we seek to carry out a ‘physical’ analysis of libidinal energy. In wartime we see images re-emerge with a new autonomous and autopoietic force. There are different kinds of images: war porn images are not

representations, they speak directly to the body, they are a cruel, lucid and affirmative force, like Artaud's theatre, they are re-magnetised images that do not provoke incredulity. They are neural icons running on the spinal motorways, as J.G. Ballard might put it.

Radical images redeliver the body to us; radical images are bodies, not simulacra. Their effect is first physical, then cognitive. Deleuze: "The movement-image and the flux-matter are rigorously one and the same thing". The damned tradition of the image is back, with the psychic and contagious power of Artaud's theatre, a machinic image that joins together the material and the immaterial, body and dream. Ballard: "Fiction is a branch of neurology". In a libidinal explosion, war porn liberates the animal energies of Western society like a bomb. Such energies can be expressed through fascist reactions as well as liberating revolts. Radical images are images that are still capable of being *political*, in the strong sense of the word, and they can have an impact on the masses that is simultaneously political, aesthetic and carnal.

### **Videopoesis: The Body Image**

How can we make an intelligent use of television? The first intelligent reaction is to switch it off. Activist collectives such as Adbusters.org (Canada) and Esterni.org (Italy) organise yearly TV strikes, promoting a day or a week's abstinence from television. Can Western society think without television? It cannot. Even if we were to stop watching TV because of a worldwide blackout or a nuclear war, our imagery, hopes and fears would carry on thinking within a televised brainframe. This is not about addiction; the video is simply our primary collective language, just as once upon a time there were religion, mythology, epic and literature. We can repress the ritual (watching TV) but we cannot repress the myth. We can switch television off, but not our imagery.

For this reason, the idea of an autonomous videopoesis is not about alternative information but about new mythical devices for the collective imagery. In its search for the Perfect Image – the image that is capable of stopping the War, subverting Empire and starting the Revolution – the global movement has theorised and practiced *video activism* (from Indymedia to street TVs) and *mythopoesis* (from Luther Blissett to San Precario). However, it never tried to merge those strategies into a *videopoesis* capable of challenging bin Laden, Bush, Hollywood and the CNN at the level of myth, a videopoesis for new icons and formats: for instance, the video sequences in William Gibson's novel *Pattern Recognition* that are distributed on the Net. Videopoesis does not mean the proliferation of cameras in the hands of activists, but the creation of video narratives, a new design of genres and formats rather than alternative information. The challenge lies in the body image. Through videopoesis we have to welcome the repressed desires of the global movement and open the question of the body, buried under a polite rhetoric of Third Worldism and residual Christianity. While Western imagery is being filled with the dismembered bodies of heroes, the global movement is still uneasy about its desires.

War porn issues a challenge to the movement: not to try and equal the horror but to produce images that target and awaken the sleepy body. Throughout its history, television has always produced macro-bodies: mythical, giant bodies magnified by media power, bodies as cumbersome as ancient gods. The television regime creates monsters,

hypertrophic bodies, images of the President of United States, Al Qaeda phantoms and movie stars – while the Net and personal media try to dismember them and produce new bodies out of their carcasses. Videopoesis must eliminate the unconscious self-censorship that we find in the most liberal and radical sections of society, the self-censorship that conceals the monkey's grin with crypto-Christian imagery, hides the grin of the monkey. Once crypto-religious self-censorship is eliminated, videopoesis can begin its creative reassembly of dismembered bodies.

**Warpunk: "I like to watch...!"**

Watching cruel images is good for you. What the Western world needs is to stare at its own shadows. In Ballard's *The Atrocity Exhibition*, war news and violent scenes improve adults' sexual activity and the mental condition of psychotic children. Warlords are filling the collective imagery with brute force. Why leave them to do it in peace? If in the real world we are always victims of the blackmail of non-violence, in the realm of imagery and imagination we can feed our wet dreams at last. If American imagery permits the drift towards fascism and offers an apology and justification for any kind of violence, our response can only be one of resistance and action, i.e., *warpunk*.

Warpunk is not a delirious subculture that aesthetically embraces weapons. On the contrary, it uses radical images as weapons of legitimate defence. To paraphrase a Japanese saying, *warpunk* steals from war and empire the art of embellishing death. *Warpunk* uses *warporn* in a tragic way to overcome the self-censorship of Western counter-culture. Above all, we are afraid of the hubris of the American warlords, of the way they face any opposition, stepping over all written and unwritten rules. What is the point of confronting this threat with the imagery of the victim, that holds up to the sky hands painted in white? Victimhood is a bad adviser: it is the definitive validation of fascism, the sheep's bleat that makes the wolf even more indifferent. The global movement is quite a good example of "weak thought" and reactive culture. Perhaps this is because, unlike warlords and terrorists, it never developed a way of thinking about the tragic; about war, violence and death.

In Chris Korda's video *I Like to Watch* (2002; download available at [www.churchofeuthanasia.org](http://www.churchofeuthanasia.org)), porn scenes of oral sex and masturbation are combined with those of football and baseball matches and with well-known 9/11 images. The phallic imagery reaches the climax: the Pentagon is hit by an ejaculation, multiple erections are turned into the 9/11 New York skyline, the Twin Towers themselves become the object of an architectural fellatio. This video is the projection of the lowest instincts of American society, of the common ground that binds spectacle, war, pornography and sport. It is an orgy of images that reveals to the West its real self. *Warpunk* is a squadron of B52s throwing libidinal bombs and radical images into the heart of the Western imagery.

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