# Phantom Images

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Let me begin with two image sequences from the 1991 allied war against Iraq that stand for a single type of picture. The first sequence, taken from cameras in a helicopter, a plane, and "a drone" – which is how the light unmanned reconnaissance planes have been described – shows a segment of the terrain they are flying over. In the centre of the camera's lens we can see the projectile flying towards its target. The detonation more than exhausts the range of contrast. The automatic aperture fails to achieve a balance: the images cease.

During the 1920s in the US, film recordings taken from a position that a human cannot normally occupy were called phantom shots; for example, shots from a camera that had been hung under a train. In narrative film images taken from a position of a person are referred to as subjective. We can interpret the film that takes up the perspective of the bomb as a phantom-subjective image. The film footage from a camera that is plunging towards its target, a suicidal camera, stays in our mind. This perspective was new and it offered us an image of something about which we had only limited knowledge until the cruise missiles of the 1980s appeared. They were presented together with the term "intelligent weapons," and they combined the ill-considered notion of intelligence with an equally ill-considered subjectivity; it was a mnemonic construction bent upon self-flagellation as it beat its path into nothingness.

Animated films, whether drawn or computer-calculated, also often used a perspective that a manned film camera cannot occupy, or only with great difficulty; for example, the perspective offered from the point of view of a bullet shot by a gun. The animated films thus promulgated the possibility of a ubiquitous point of view that the cinematographic competition was not capable of, and that contributed to its rhetoric of exaggeration. Cartoon or animated film is a genre that cannot really represent death. In animated film, everything is always reversible. But the continually redrawn animated image is well suited to the representation of the methods and functions of technology.

Computer animations can be distinguished from other drawn images because they have pioneered a particular stylistic standard. Such self-proclaimed universal rules existed in American films in the 1950s – images made in the firm conviction that there can be no other image of the world. Whenever computer animation begins to process photographic data, it contains
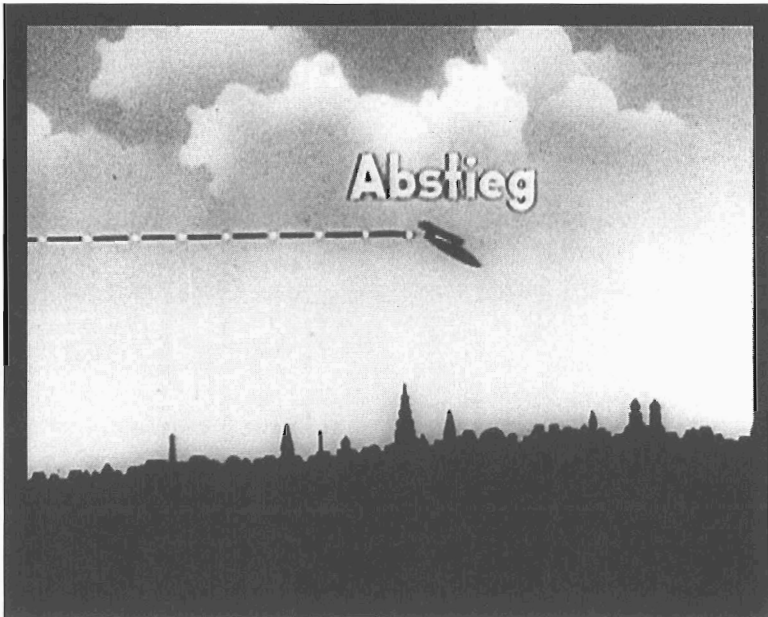
Eye/Machine, 2001

an inherent critique of the photograph. Stemming from the dubious notion that the computer is superseding earlier visual media, computer-generated animations present themselves as exemplary images capable of representing sex and death.

A corollary to the common view in 1991 that the pictures from these cameras – whether filming the missiles approaching their target or the detonation – made the war look like a computer game is that war resembles child's play. Cartoons are something for children, and computer animation is a form of symbolic assimilation. Almost all technical representations which maintain that *they only* represent the operative principle of a process have a large share of mystification in them. For example, it must be noted that in these 1991 Gulf War images, no people can be seen. The battlefield is uninhabited. When you see an entire roll of such images you cannot help but think that the war will continue on well after humanity has disappeared from the face of machines.

The operative pictures of the projectile flying towards its target and the ensuing detonation show largely military objectives, barracks, air raid shelters, airfields, and bridges. Bridges appear again and again as strategic targets, even if the civilian population was using them. At a press conference during the first Gulf War, a representative of the US military showed a film in which a car could be seen driving away from a bridge that had just been hit – and he made a joke about it. Today you cannot get footage from the military archives in which cars can be seen, footage that would force you to conclude that humans were indeed present at or near the target. It is obvious, then, how war tactics and war reportage coincide. The images are produced by the military and are controlled by the military and politicians.

In the first war against Iraq in 1991, the image of the police worked according to the principle of the good-cop/bad-cop scheme. On the side of the Iraqis was the bad-cop who used conventional methods of power to keep the reporters and cameramen from the field of battle. They did not want to have them documenting the fact that the Saddam-regime was perhaps capable of terrorizing its own population and the population of Kuwait, or that it was not capable of organizing an army that could offer at least minimal protection for its retreating soldiers, not to mention its own civilian population. The good-cop from the US, by contrast, excluded the photographers and cameramen structurally from the event itself, thanks again to the "filming bombs," as Theweleit called them. Bombs with cameras in them offer no room for an independent observer.

Iraq allowed a couple of journalists to stay in Baghdad during the war, among them Pete Arnet from CNN. They sent us the green contrast-enhanced panoramas. Like Ernst Jünger in Paris, Arnet experienced the bombarding of

Baghdad first-hand from the roof of his hotel, but, in contrast to Ernst Jünger, he was held under a sort of house arrest. Both were forced to offer an aestheticized reflection, one befitting the mind of an armchair military strategist perched on a hill. The correspondents in Baghdad belonged to a tactical reserve of an intensely contradictory strategy of the Saddam-regime: on the one hand they were supposed to conceal the inferiority of the Iraqis, on the other hand, they were supposed to expose the inhumanity of the allied war against them. To do so they required a photo of dead bodies, of as many dead bodies as possible, a close-up of them in one picture.

There is a film about a minute long, made in 1942, of the training flight of the missile HS 293 D over a shipwreck near Peenemünde. It was recorded by a television camera in the warhead of the projectile. The television pictures were sent by a transmitter to an accompanying plane that fired the missile and then deviated from the missile's path without losing sight of it. From the plane the missile was guided to its target using a control stick closely resembling the modern day joystick. Since, as is well known, it was impossible to record electronic images right up until the 1950s, this sequence is probably the only remaining film documentation of this experiment – one of the technicians filmed it from the monitor with his camera. The miniaturization of the television camera was a developmental advancement, but the HS 293 D itself was never used during World War II. By contrast with the rocket-builders, the rocket-television-camera-installers continued their work not in the US, but in the West German television industry.

I recall a quotation:

> We feel that it is immoral to design weapons whose construction presup-
> poses the death of the soldier using it, and thus – at least in our understand-
> ing–implying sacrifice as part of the mechanism of the weapon. In Japan,
> however, the mission of the kamikaze pilot who dives his plane into an
> enemy destroyer is considered an honour. They also have torpedoes that are
> guided towards their target by a pilot built into it. An interesting twist to the
> saying: 'the bullet is a blind idiot.' (Ernst Jünger, *The Gordian Knot*, 1953)

The bullet is a blind idiot, or, to quote from the "Soldier's Song": "Go on, Luise, wipe your face, my darling, / Not every bullet hits its target" (*"Nun ade lieb Luise, wisch ab Dein Gesicht/ Eine jede Kugel die trifft ja nicht"*). The pictures from the warhead of the missiles of 1991, together with the expression "intelligent weapons," are so distressing, or so gripping, precisely because the bullets are not blind any more. And in war, death is always someone else's death. The pattern of recognition and object tracking of seeing bombs threatens with infallibility. Paul Virilio's comment that

these images are aimed at us sounds like a self-fulfilling prophecy.

The apparatus HIL, short for "hardware in the loop," is a machine that tests the flight path of rockets as they travel towards their target and corrects their course, independently navigating their flight to their strategic objective. The apparatus, about as large as an automobile, offers a large number of variable parameters and can perform quick swerving movements with great precision. The large-scale image shows the scanning warhead and its tilting prisms; images are transmitted to the warhead – simulated pictures of the landscape it has to fly over. In this case the images are based on pictures taken from an aerial camera, and in them you can see the forests, home communities, and streets below.

The tactical warhead stores and processes the aerial photos, and the processing of the photos can be seen in green and red lines. The green lines appear to suggest something like an initial suspicion. The search-target program discovers a constellation in a picture, perhaps a part of a recognizable pattern, and stores it. The program then draws a line in the picture and searches again for an aggregate of pixels that would allow it to continue drawing that line. When the line is verified, when the outlines of a street-crossing, bridges, or power lines appear, which are registered as landmarks, the colour red is used to show that they have been verified, rather like a somewhat slow-moving mind that underlines in red a thought that seems to be correct. The automated eye has recorded only a few search patterns through which it looks at the images of the real world. These picture-processing apparatuses work with the same sort of clumsiness with which robotic arms perform a new task. Each movement is broken down into fragments, and each fragment of the movement is performed with equal dedication, precisely but with absolutely no habitual elegance. But just as the robots in factories first used manual labourers as their model until they outperformed them and rendered them obsolete, these sensory automatons are suppose to replace the work of the human eye.

In my first work on this subject, *Eye/Machine* (2001), I called such pictures, made neither to entertain nor to inform, "operative images." These are images that do not represent an object, but rather are part of an operation. Later it occurred to me that this term came from Roland Barthes. In his book *Mythologies* (1957/1964) he wrote in his theoretical afterword: "I must return here to the distinction between the language of objects and meta-language. If I am a lumberjack and I name the tree that I am chopping down, I say – whatever the form of the sentence may be – *the tree*, and I do not speak *about* the tree. … If I am not a lumberjack, though, I cannot say *the tree*, I can only talk *of* and *about it*."

In this theoretical text, Roland Barthes was striving to maintain his own practice. He wanted to belong to the revolutionary left, but did not want to

be part of the Soviet blanket-weavers, which is exactly what the French communist Party wanted from its intellectuals. Moscow persecuted semiotics with characteristic hatred because it was based upon a much denounced Russian avant-garde theory, namely: formalism – the only theoretical novelty, according to Foucault, communism ever produced.

Today we are under no pressure to become radical materialists and to trace the manifestations of materialism in the structures of language and thought. If we take an interest in pictures that are part of an operation, this is because we are weary of non-operative pictures, and weary of meta-language. Weary of the day-to-day practice of re-mythologizing quotidian life, weary of the ever-changing and many-channelled program of images custom-made to mean something to us. What is shown in these programs comes neither from the micro- nor from the macro-cosmos, but rather from the middle level; its lower boundary line is the close-up of the human face, its higher level a street block of houses. This is the filling, so to speak, in the picture of the cosmic sandwich. Children are encouraged not to eat the filling without the bread, an exercise in the sublimation of desire. Or perhaps the movie and television industry has exhausted itself in its overproduction of material.

In an exhibition like *CRTL Space* (2001) my interest was focused upon seeing pictures that were not cropped and framed in order to compress space and time. Films or photos that were taken in order to monitor a process that, as a rule, cannot be observed by the human eye. Images that appear so inconsequential that they are not stored – the tapes are erased and are used again. Generally the images are stored and archived only in exceptional cases, but exceptional cases one is sure to encounter. Such images challenge the artist who is interested in a meaning that is not authorial and intentional, an artist interested in a sort of beauty that is not calculated. The US military command has surpassed us all in the art of showing something that comes close to the "unconscious visible."

Today the materialists are the artists like Heidi and Alvin Toffler; they don't belong to an intellectual circle in Paris, but to a think-tank in Washington close to the Pentagon. In their books *The Third Wave* and *War and Anti-War*, books with a huge circulation in the paperback editions, they assume that there is a necessary correspondence between the technology of production and the technology of destruction, of manufacturing and war. War is in this axiomatic and evolutionary view a field of activity like any other, much as one would compare agriculture to industry. In this respect, it ought to be noted that the inhabitants of Carthage had far more complicated catapults than agricultural tools, and that during World War II, when the military was developing radio-controlled weapons, the jet airplane, stereophonic recording, and the computer, there were more labouring slaves on German ruled territory than ever before.
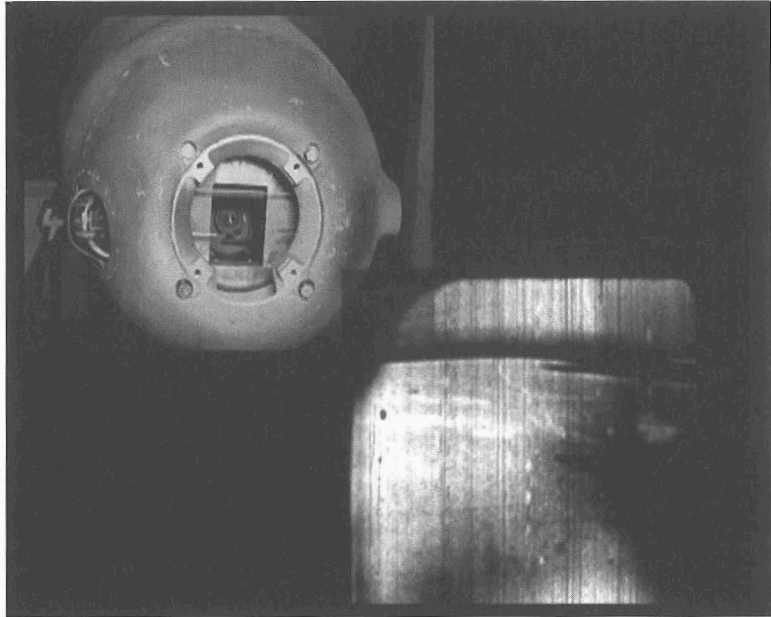
War at a Distance, 2003

The reductionist representation of the Swiss weapons manufacturer Örlikon shows the approaching flight of a projectile that is then sighted by ground defences and destroyed by an anti-ballistic missile. This sequence of products, in which a new product displaces an old one, is also a model of culture. The cold war made it possible for over 40 years to write off rockets, tanks, jets and planes, and ships that were never used materially and were sometimes morally worn out already before they were completed. The products of the IT industry have a longer shelf life than the machinery of war. And in order to keep the market free of constipation, moral campaigns have to be waged, but these themselves grow old and wear out.

The expensive production of computer products, generally immaterial things, was supposed to be one of the causes of the sudden collapse of the Soviet Union. The competitors lost the race, not simply because they were too weak, but also because they did not need the competition as a motor for the process of aging and rejuvenation.

But now the arms industry itself has a hard time justifying its new products. It lacks an enemy that could produce anti-ballistic weapons against it, which would then require anti-anti-ballistic weapons. And it is hard to make systematic sense out of the ways of war: you can supply weapons to an ally who then leaves the alliance and becomes an enemy, as in the case of Afghanistan and Iraq. I am speaking here from the phantom perspective of war, from the perspective of an imagined war-subjectivity. In Brecht's *Mother Courage* we find the sentence: "War always finds a solution." Barbara Ehrenreich interpreted the sentence to mean that war is incredibly inventive when it is a matter of its own survival. Even if no one wanted war any more, it would attempt to mutate into a war of automatons in a deserted field of battle. In rich countries the majority do not want war. War is not necessary, just as gold backing is not necessary for currency. Yet people have recently come to believe, with Hobbes, in gold backing for our culture. And we create holidays in memory of a common denominator, violence. The recent wars that have been led with unimaginable superiority on one side – in asymmetry – are the ritual precursors of such holidays.

The fantastic impression of an abandoned battlefield upon which the war is continually being fought – a bit like the toys that come to life when the children are sleeping – remind one of the emptiness of the production plants. In the automobile industry, for instance, you only see the people working where there is no more space for robots. When observing the connection between production and destruction, the following analogy appears: while factories in rich countries have fewer and fewer people in them, more people than ever before perform manual labour in poor countries. And even the wars increasingly take place in poor countries. The operative war pictures

from the Gulf War of 1991 that do not show any people are paradoxical. Despite the censorship, the pictures were more than propaganda attempting to silence the sum total of perhaps 200,000 dead. They were, perhaps above all, in the spirit of a utopia of war, a utopia that doesn't reckon with encountering people, accepting them only somewhat disdainfully as victims.

When asked about casualties on the Iraqi side in 1991, one US military spokesman said, "We don't do body counts." One could translate that into: "We are not their gravediggers; we let others do that dirty work." Or one could read it as a statement that the rich countries do not boast with the enemy's dead and that they want to avoid casualties among their own soldiers. For the poor, that is a source of hope, the hope that from the achievements of the rich something will trickle down to the poor.

It is true that operational pictures conjure up the image of a cleanly led war, and they are stronger than the pictures of the dirty war, like the pictures of an air raid shelter in Baghdad in which a couple of hundred civilians were torn to pieces. The television spectators were supposed to appreciate the war technicians and to sympathize with the technology of war through the images of aerial photographs, which were actually made only for the eyes of the war technicians. But they still remained political beings who spoke with each other and criticized pictures; they knew how to distinguish between the first war, when Iraq attacked Kuwait and attempted to annex it, and the second war. In 2003 the pictures from the warheads of missiles were rarely shown. And there was no talk of intelligent weapons, only of precision-guided weapons.

Due to the secrecy surrounding military operations, it is difficult to prove the following assumption, but everything seems to support the theory that in both Gulf wars there were no intelligent weapons, none that could seek out and hit its target on its own. It was more than the usual wartime trickery of the opponent. Here there was a continuous attempt to make the idea of a seeing bomb so popular and common that, thereafter, they would have to be ordered, developed, and paid for.

Similarly, there are no pictures that do not aim at the human eye. A computer can process pictures, but it needs no pictures to verify or falsify what it reads in the images it processes. For the computer, the image in the computer is enough. Nevertheless, the "objective language" pictures are distinct by degrees from the "meta-linguistic" pictures, much as the aesthetics of the machine are distinct from commodity aesthetics. And the axe of Roland Barthes's lumberjack is not simply a manifestation of goal-related rationality: even a tool communicates not only with the materials of its trade, but also with the human senses.

Sights of War

Images from my film *Images of the World* appeared to me back in 1988 to be an adequate means of representing the situation at hand because they maintain their distance vis-à-vis the victims. They are more appropriate than close-up pictures: images of the selection on the ramp, images of the starving prisoners in the barracks, the mounds of corpses being cleared away by a bulldozer. With such images symbolic violence is once again being perpetrated against the victims; and even with the best intentions they are being *used*.

There are even recordings, made after Auschwitz was liberated, of Soviet doctors performing autopsies in the open air upon the bodies of the dead prisoners. The gesture of an autopsy is an attempt to recreate the individual history of the victim. But filming it adds nothing at all. Above the aerial photographs of the concentration camps, in which the individual is scarcely larger than a dot, I wrote a brief comment: "In the grain of the photograph lies the respect and protection of the personality."

It is only too clear that we are not shown the pictures taken from a distance in order to spare the dead yet another humiliation. There are rarely good reasons for showing us the images of mutilated victims. Usually they are being used for political business. In addition, even the distant pictures of a horrible event refer to pictures offering no distance simply by standing in contrast to them. Unavoidably, despite the humanitarian attempts, the barbarianism comes shining through. Much as the image of love is cross-referenced to its dirty precursors and to the effort required to get over them.

A Texas Instruments advertisement argues that it is economically cheaper to drop computer-guided bombs and even cheaper still to use precision-guided missiles. A productive misreading of the message provides us with the interpretation that, with fewer bombs, there would be a drop in sales that would have to be compensated. If there were a connection between production and destruction, they would have to sell less hardware and more guidance systems. More guidance systems can only be sold when there is a precise distinction between friend and foe. The economy, at least that of the weapons manufacturers, calls for war in the name of humanitarian goals.