



The Wars of Air and Electricity

Holly Lewis

LIVE VIDEO FEE

It's o-nine-hundred hours. Bug and I are shielding our eyes from the Texas sun, standing on the vast plane of shimmering concrete beyond the guarded entrance of the Fort Worth Alliance Air Show, a military spectacle sponsored by arms manufacturers, beer distributors, family radio stations, and The Fountain of Life Church of the Assemblies of God. Tens of thousands mill around the star-spangled hamburger stands, the black hawks and the fighter jets. But Bug and I have not traveled across Texas to eat foil-wrapped burgers and drink five dollar bottled water. We have not come to marvel at the synchronized aerobatics of the Navy's Blue Angels or the Army's Golden Knights. Bug and I have come to Fort Worth to save America from the shadowy avatars who seek to destroy "our way of life." Yes, you guessed it. We've come to check out The Virtual Army Experience (VAE), a twenty-thousand square foot travelling digital simulation built to train the masses to engage the enemy and defend freedom.¹

Paul Virilio postulated during the cold war that speed and motion transform the nature of objects and states. Noting the material and theoretical confluence of air power, three-dimensional surveillance, and filmic representation, Virilio announced that the merger of war and cinema occurred long before the arrival of digital culture.² Not only did the early military camera ops training of iconic directors (Jean Renoir and Russ Meyers, for example) transform the cinematic experience, the artifice of the silver screen changed the staging of war itself: Albert Speer's work for the Third Reich was more set design than architecture. The US Air Force hired Cecile B. De Mille to create the cadet parade uniform in the 1950s.³ More recently, the Bush Administration hired a Hollywood art director to create a state-of-the-art war room to sell the invasion of Iraq to the public, despite the outrage of veterans who said, "You don't care how sexy a sound system you have when someone dies of exposure to chemical weapons."⁴

The shift from analog to digital display marks the transformation of public space into military-entertainment kaleidoscope. The integration of twenty-four hour news networks into commercial architecture and infrastructure (screens in subway stations, international airports, night clubs, nail salons, and so forth) and the transmutation of a [former] defence project⁵ into a civilian social network—both of these structural changes occurring within the context of a permanent war economy—illustrate why the notion of a "virtual army experience" is both obsolete and redundant: *we already live inside a Virtual Army Experience*. Native-born, Western democrats are, at birth, conscripted into the role of citizen-support brigades for the maintenance of *empire*. By extension, even "peaceful demonstration" undermines itself within the collective American psyche, as a value *produced* by the same war effort it condemns through the rightist paradox "military power is the guarantor of free speech"; interruptive protest (human blockades, protesting beyond the authorized perimeter, petty vandalism, etc.) as such can be perceived as an attack on both free speech (it interrupts the promise of non-action, the "peacefulness" which grounds the right to demonstration) and an attack against the war effort, which stakes its claim as freedom's precondition. Resistance may not be futile, but it may make you an enemy combatant.⁶ Thus, the American citizenry's acceptance of the war is, in Lacanian terms, a *forced choice*, parallel to a bandit's demand for "your money or your life."⁷

Despite the use of the conjunction “or,” life is the only possible choice. If one chooses money, one loses both (is shot *and* robbed), since the value of a wallet full of money is dependent upon one’s ability to spend it. Likewise, when conscripts in the citizen-support brigade are offered the choice “your consent or your life,” no real choice is offered if “peaceful protest” is synonymous with being ignored and interruptive protest means being spirited away under the pretext of terrorism. The surface criticism of VAE’s use of video games as white propaganda⁸ fails to examine the program’s full intent. The primary goal of the military’s new travelling cybershow is not to sell the war to the masses, nor is it to provide the general public with an “educational experience”—not even as infotainment. Its goal is to temporarily promote a target market from *virtual citizen* to *virtual hero* for the purpose of interpellating this particular set into a full-immersion, didacto-romantic narrative⁹ that shapes the meaning of both killing *and* dying.

Getting There is Half the Battle

It’s October 11, 2008. The news screens tell us W is still president and capitalism is in crisis. Anything, and nothing, seems possible. The Fort Worth Alliance Air Show is billed as a family event celebrating “The Spirit of Freedom,” so I invite my closest family member to come along: Bug, my—as the insurance companies put it—*domestic partner*. As an all-American, neighborly gesture, I invite other friends of ours and their domestic partners along for the ride, making sure to extol the program’s merits: there will be a “highly advanced hologram of a F-22” and a “hands on night vision area,”¹⁰ but most of all there will be a war simulator where you get to shoot imaginary enemies with an M249 from inside a humvee. My recruitment pitch is a complete failure. Everyone is horrified. Even Bug is reluctant to attend. Damian thinks the whole event is just a complicated government scheme to photograph citizens and put them into a gigantic, Frankenstein’s monster-of-a-database.

Entering military space as a couple, as the Scene of the Two (in Badiouian terms), enhances the legibility of our illegal/extralegal subject position. To use Badiou’s terminology once again: Bug and I belong to the set, but we are not included.¹¹ Butler’s sense of interpellation is instructive here. Whereas in the original Althusserian model, the subject is interpellated into the symbolic order through an officer’s speech (“hey, you!”), Butler adds an additional step to the process: the individual “speaks” to the officer through some structural difference in their constitution. Thus, the subject is already read anterior to state intervention. For Butler, then, it is the watching before the speaking that interpellates a subject.¹² For Bug and me, the question is two-fold: (1) Must we “pass” (i.e., invent a screen) in order to access the simulation and complete our mission? The policy of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” puts enlisted gays and lesbians under a legal obligation to pass. Are queers in a military simulation under similar obligation? (2) *Can* we pass? In the parlance of queer theory (and before it, lesbian history), Bug and I are a butch-femme couple, and there is only so much we can do to obscure this fact. The best Bug can do is wear a baseball cap to cover her crew cut. The best I can do is hide my gaze and keep a distance from her as we walk. Passing requires a series of small acts of violence by the subject—that-is—the-Two against the truth that is their subject. One must disengage every point of communication: the eyes must be blank, the skin cannot connect, the smile cannot know. A couple can only convince the outside world that they are not a Two by repeatedly and consistently performing to one another “I do not love you. I do not know you.” It’s six A.M., and we’re floating down the highway. The sky turns pastel over the endless sorghum fields on either side of I-35.

Patriotic Space

We pay the \$20 per-vehicle entry fee. The cars and pick-up trucks parked in rows on the airport lawn are not covered in reactionary bumper stickers, nor do I see any hand-crocheted religious ornaments dangling from their rearview mirrors. Outside a few small, discrete military stickers and yellow ribbons we are standing in a grid of clean blank cars. Thousands of families roll neoprene lawn chairs and coolers down a walkway past a two-story tall, star-spangled, inflatable eagle set up to greet us. Bug softly hums "Tomorrow Belongs to Me," as we walk through the entrance. Military personnel in combat uniform do nothing more than hand us programs. No ID cards demanded, no "papers please," no security cameras—at least none that I can see.

The Kantian conception of space as form distinct from human agency won't get you very far around these parts. Here in "big sky country" even the clouds have subtext. At the air show, the sky is used as a flat surface, an empty screen conquered by trick pilots to wow the crowds below. To further complicate spatial distinctions, the show's organizers have set a screen against the sky in order to broadcast live from inside the planes during air performances. The closed-captioned interviews with the performance parachutists' gigantic talking heads seems utterly disconnected from the tiny white streaks off in the blue distance that begin falling to earth only seconds after the interviews ends. This demonstration of spatial dominance within the collective imaginary disrupts the meaning of here/there, inside/outside. Yet, the very ground of this display of dominance is the threat of a violent, categorical collapse of dimensions (here/there/inside/outside) in the Real: the possibility of the crash, of the disaster.

There is not an inch of shade to be found here. White tents bear endless, orderly rows of American flags across their flattened tops. Adolescents hover around gaming kiosks, squinting at dark LCD monitors in the bright morning glare. The human flow is ethnically diverse, even "multicultural": white men in sleeveless shirts and Oakleys, African-American cowboys, Indian women in brightly patterned saris, Latina soldiers in combat gear. I look to the right: a mother and father set their toddler into the cockpit of an F-16 fighter plane; I look to the left: a man photographs a tiny child pretending to work what looks like a grenade launcher set atop a light tactical vehicle. What is a pervert? When desire is the Law, yes, but also when the Law itself is the object of desire.¹³

What does it mean to cordon off an area to *establish patriotic space* within a nation-state? Of what sort of "plenitude" does this subset consist? What does it mean to wear the American flag, to establish one's body as a patriotic space within patriotic space? It seems to go beyond the fear of being mistaken for an Albanian spy or a Norwegian tourist. In the literalization of its metonymic sense—as in "my [familial relation/friend] died for this flag"—the stars-and-stripes become an *objet petit a*; it is no longer an ordinary flag, but a sublime object, a screen draped over the void in the symbolic order that gives meaning to the term "American," just as technology is also the sublime object, the *objet petit a*, the screen draped over the void of in the symbolic order that gives meaning to the term "Victory." Thus, patriotism is a form of *melancholy*.

In *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?*, Slavoj Žižek defines melancholy as the "reversal of mourning"; while mourning allows the retention of an object's essence by its loss, melancholy is "a faked spectacle of *excessive, superfluous mourning* for an object even before this object is lost."¹⁴ Is there a better explanation than this for the Religious Right's obsession with "the end of the American family"? Or the endless nostalgia for any number of contemporary popular fixations, be it the American frontier (*sans* locusts, disease, and the slaughter of Native Americans) or the "values" of 1950s soda-shop culture (*sans* McCarthy and segregation)? This a-historical violence produces the fantasy of a *Really alive but Symbolically dead* America, a Terri Schiavo

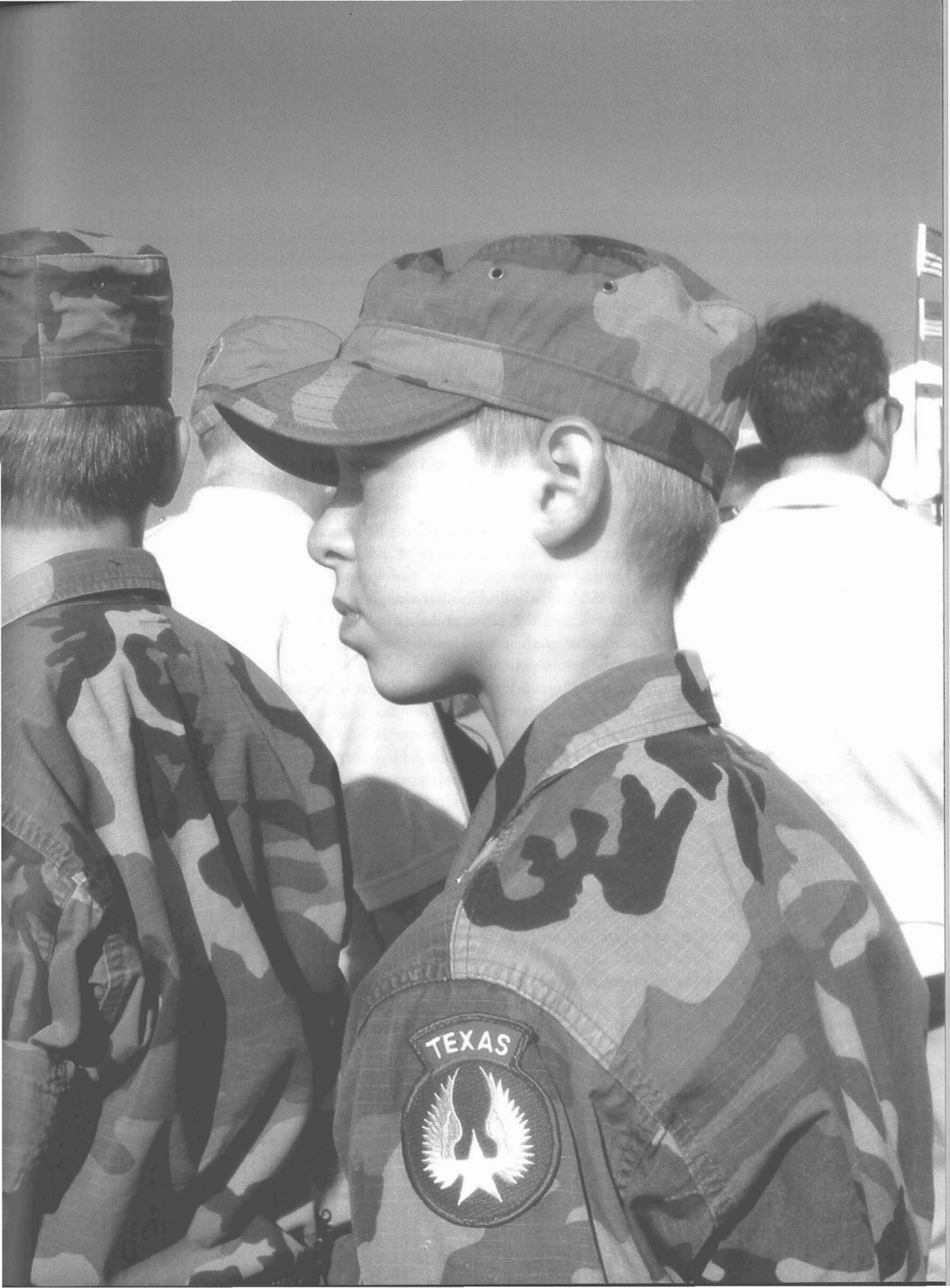
America: one that is still breathing but long gone, one that we never really knew personally, but one to which we “felt a deep connection,” and one that, with enough prayer, will be resurrected on some sunny day by a miraculous act of God in a transformative event that obliterates the Real once and for all. And in that moment of Real death, we shall be resurrected as *One* with the object of our perverted desire, the Eternal Law, and find everlasting *Symbolic* life.

The Soldier As Screen

You can't miss the Virtual Army Experience simulation tent, even though it should be hard to find, since it's partially covered with *digital camouflage*, a recent sartorial innovation from the Department of Defense, which prints a pixilated computer pattern directly onto fabric.¹⁵ Everything around the VAE is covered in this optical print—the eighteen-wheelers, the promotional billboards, the people—leaving the uncanny impression that the U.S. military can download itself onto any landscape in the universe whenever it wishes (albeit over a 52K modem). Apparently, the fabric pattern is capable of tricking the eye almost anywhere it appears: forest, desert, or urban landscape. Against the antiquated notion that the goal of camouflage is to *integrate* an object within a static environment, digital camouflage allows a moving object to *disintegrate* into the “flow of space.”¹⁶ Bug, an analog fetishist if there ever was one, says she thinks the invention of digital camouflage just means that warfare is now wholly filtered through digital scopes and surveillance cameras—the *best place to hide is on the surface of the screen*.

But the soldier's gift has always been “hiding from sight in order to see.”¹⁷ This is as true for agents of resistance as it is for the soldiers of imperialism: the balaclava of the Zapatistas, the bandanas of black bloc anarchists, and the “ordinary mien” of card-carrying revolutionary communists all attest to this fact. Bug and I are also hiding from sight in order to see. Passing is a form of existential soldiering, the act of which necessarily names the collective itself as a hostile substance anterior to any interaction within its space. (Isn't this one of the roots of disdain for those who “pass?” Once “outed,” the enemy elements within a collective, as expected, condemn the subject as an agent of subversion, while supportive elements of the collective are insulted by having been judged as “no better” than the hostile majority?) But it is quite possible that Bug and I are not passing at all. I am beginning to detect a visual strategy at work within the crowd: no one is looking at anyone; or rather, they look, but camouflage their gaze. Some hide behind sunglasses while others hide with the brims of their caps pulled low. “Don't Ask, Don't Tell” seems to have a correlate command, “Don't Look, Don't Show.”

Perhaps the most obvious “non-lookers” are the adolescent members of the Civil Air Patrol (CAP), a private paramilitary organization, which conducts Homeland Security missions including border patrol and air reconnaissance, as well as law enforcement tasks, such as “conduct[ing] aerial searches . . . for outdoor marijuana patches and other indications of illegal drug activity” and “provid[ing] security at heavily populated athletic events.”¹⁸ Today, the CAP cadets, some as young as twelve, are out in full-battle regalia, wearing old “analog” woodland camouflage and tightly-laced, black combat boots. An uncanny mix of baby fat, acne, and mirrored aviator glasses, they traverse the grounds with an air of authority. They gather in small groups with arms akimbo scanning the crowd like tiny terminators without staring at anyone in particular. In addition to Badiou and Žižek's respective critiques of “the face of the Other” as the foundation of ethics, a new question complicates the relevance of Levinasian humanism: *has visual communications technology altered the meaning of the face? Has advanced capitalism replaced the face with the screen?*



We Kill For Peace

Damian was right. At the front of the queue for the VAE, a tent full of soldiers stand behind a bank of computer screens fitted with webcams. A digital camouflage girl with a tight ponytail asks for my driver's license. They're going to give me a Virtual Army ID "just like soldiers have," she replies. A battery of questions appears on the computer screen: Name? Address? Age? College Education? Which degrees? Veteran status? Veteran status of family members? Which branch? *Marital Status*? I hesitate and click "Single/Unmarried." Meanwhile, the computer asks Bug if she is interested in a military career. She clicks "YES." ("What the hell was I supposed to say after they took my driver's license? 'No'?" she later complains.)

They take my photograph and hand me a Virtual Army Experience ID card on a cord to wear around my neck, but they don't take Bug's photograph. Instead, they scan her driver's license into their system and use the state-issued photo on her fake military ID. What I do not know now, but what I will later learn, is that the ID card contains a "tracker ... just like the real ones the Army uses to locate soldiers."¹⁹ Most likely, the tracker only follows us within the 19,500 square feet of the VAE. But I can only speculate.

We enter an air-conditioned metal holding cell littered with laptops that run the video game, *America's Army*. There aren't enough laptops to go around, but I manage to snag one. Unfortunately, the avatar is already dead. I asked one of the real digital soldiers for assistance. He apologizes; he can't reset the game. "You can try to find one where the player isn't dead. But I wouldn't bother, the game is about to begin." Like Hamlet's play within a play, there are infinite games within the game, and they are all the same game: the game of the Big Other. From a psychoanalytic standpoint, such infinite gaming takes the structure of obsessional neurosis: repetition as an attempt to escape the contingent nature of existence.²⁰ There is no need to reanimate my avatar because: (1) each avatar is just a reflection of an ideal melancholy hero who always-already scintillates with posthumous glory and (2) it is irrelevant whether or not the screens function. Screens are set design. Minor malfunctions serve as a sign of the complexity of the system, of its overall technological power. A Virtual Sergeant takes us to a dark corridor with low, theatrical lighting. He informs us that we are about to experience the simulation of a "real life mission," one that "actually happened." He also warns us that no cameras are permitted in the battle zone (perhaps another post-Abu Ghraib nod to "real life"). Having read the website, I already know the narrative logic that is supposed to stage the game:

SCENARIO

A well-armed genocidal faction in the notional city of Nradreg has surrounded a group of humanitarian aid workers and refugees, who face starvation and imminent attack. This enemy faction has rejected all diplomatic efforts to negotiate safe passage of relief supplies...²¹

Our Virtual Sergeant seems eager to race through the narrative "hoo-ha." He knows people are largely here to "blow shit up." Instead of repeating the long rationale invented by the Virtual War Planners, the iSarge simply informs the crowd, "You are on a humanitarian mission in 'the Middle East'." To signify this he makes a circular gesture around the whole of a rudimentary map. He says our goal is to save "the good guys" and to kill "the bad guys." He then pauses for emphasis, "Once you get to the refugee camp, the game is over. Remember: you're not supposed to shoot the refugees."

The Virtual Sergeant breaks from his cheerful pose and goes into a short sermon about death and the suffering right now, at this very moment, of our military analogs over in "the real world." Conflating the

virtual and the real, he tells us that the simulation is no joke—our success depends upon technical skill, agility, and physical fitness. The absurdity of this claim is quickly clarified: besides Bug and myself, our crack team consists of a boy about eleven years old and two jolly, gray Vietnam Vets, one in a walker with a hip replacement. We walk into a studio with half-a-dozen humvees embraced by a half-dozen concave screens. Bug grabs a machine gun somewhere up front. The boy is at the wheel. I can't see what the older fellows are doing. I take my position as the rear gunner. I put my finger in the trigger and stream into the fake world of a phony war.

When The Death Drive Is A Joy Ride

The Virtual Army Experience, a synthesis of hyperrealist aesthetics and programmatic play, supports Badiou's charge that advanced capitalism presents the world as both "fatalist and resolutely non-tragic."²² It is a complete reversal of the fascist aesthetic developed by F.T. Marinetti, whose modernist projects were decidedly anti-realist and violently celebratory. His *Zang Tumb Tumb*—a concrete poem which creates meaning by way of typography, space, and sound—is perhaps illustrative as a counterpoint to the VAE: where *Zang* uses of the page as two-dimensional cartography suggesting the reader as a third-dimension, VAE recreates the world as a three-dimensional map with a player locked into its sphere. Where *Zang* exalts the radically contingent nature of war and technology, VAE inserts players into an algorithm without consequence. Where *Zang* exalts the brutality of the senses, VAE brutalizes the player via sensory overload, instantiating symbolic death: *Zang* kills the Law, VAE kills the player.

To play the game is to be immediately thrown into chaos. The room fills with the sound of machine gun fire. The old vets inside the humvee are having a hard time keeping balance as simulated IEDs explode beneath us on a timer every forty-five seconds or so. The game of war has only started, and we've already died a thousand deaths. A minute or so into the game I realize that my machine gun doesn't work. (Maybe some virtual sand has jammed my plastic weapon?) I notice the insurgents are pure motion with unrendered faces. When I try to shoot them, nothing happens. Pale gold explosions crack in my eyes. I die a little more. The Sergeant said to raise a hand if our weapon doesn't work—but, really, is that what usually happens during urban warfare? Besides, this glitch is the most authentic aspect of my army experience yet, a glimpse of the Real. To be trapped in a quagmire without rationale, with failing equipment, battling a non-ontological enemy, a void-enemy, an enemy designed to conform to the protocols of the game itself—isn't that the closest one can come to experiencing the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan from the American perspective? The game ends and the lights come up. I'm not sure if my team shot up the virtual refugees we were supposed to protect. I couldn't distinguish them from the enemy. They weren't drawn with faces either.

This grotesque spectacle of authoritarian play invites rumination upon "the woman or the gallows dilemma" invented by Kant in *The Critique of Practical Reason*. In "The Forced Choice of Enjoyment," Adrian Johnston demonstrates how Kant's proposition articulates the distinction between *jouissance* and the pleasure principle; "Kant speaks of a scenario in which a man is offered a chance to have sexual intercourse with the woman of his dreams. The catch is that, after indulging in intercourse in conformity with his carnal inclinations, this man will be hanged."²³ Kant predicts that, in such a scenario, reason would win out over desire (the pleasure principle over *jouissance*). In "Kant with (or against) Sade," Žižek positions the neurotic subject within Kant's argument: "what if we encounter a subject (as we do regularly in psychoanalysis) who can only enjoy a night of passion fully if some form of 'gallows' is threatening him—that is, if, by doing it, he is violating some prohibition?"²⁴ In other words, Kant presents the question of the woman *or* the gallows. Žižek's neurotic answers Kant's question: the woman *and* the gallows, please.

But the *forced enjoyment* of the VAE presents the viewer with an answer/command in the place of Kant's question. An obsessional neurotic (religious) Sergeant might articulate the order as: "There is no woman. There are only gallows. Others have died in the gallows, so that you might be free to choose or reject dying in the gallows, so others might be free to choose or reject, etc." From the psychotic Sergeant, the command becomes a more advisory: "There are only gallows, kid. The only possible 'woman' in this life is to fit your enemy's neck in the hangman's noose before he fits yours." But it is the one who desires the law, the Pervert Sergeant, who brings Kant's conundrum to full reversal: "Let's go hang these bastards! And after that we'll enjoy their women!"

Living Dead Heroes

After our seven minutes of fake war is up, the teams exit for the debriefing area. Players whisper about kill counts and speculate on their scores. My gun didn't work, I tell our crew. Bug says her gun worked fine. She asks the boy if it was fun to drive the humvee. "I just sat there," he shrugs. "It was just kinda going all by itself."

Suddenly the house lights dim and a small projection screen appears. A pixilated video clip begins. It's George W. Bush giving a Silver Star to a soldier, apparently, for using his own body to protect the life of his gunner and crew, as "[t]he Humvees they were traveling in did not have doors."²⁵ No sooner than the screen goes down, the lights come up again. The soldier in the video clip, Sergeant Tommy Rieman, enters the room to golf claps. Rieman sighs and—in a voice that is surprisingly soft and polite if not slightly mechanical—he tells the story of how, while protecting his "real" team, he took two bullets and suffered eleven shrapnel wounds. He details the damage done to his body and the numerous surgeries required to restore him to health. As Sisyphus was awarded an eternal life of drudgery in punishment for cheating death, Rieman must reduce his act of courage, the now defining moment of his existence, to an advertising spiel repeated thrice hourly from nine-to-five.

Our Virtual Sergeant relieves the injured man from duty to make his final pitch: the Army needs new bodies. The desperation in the Virtual Sergeant's voice is unsettling. He attempts to shame us towards enlisting while simultaneously berating us for not having already enlisted. The problem is that most of those in attendance are aging veterans of the cold war era and the wives of active duty troops with young children in tow. Recruitment-age civilians are noticeably absent from the Airshow scene. It is the children who are both target market and the future. The Army agrees with Bug after all: *tomorrow belongs to them*.

Some in the crowd are still muttering about scores. The iSergeant motions to a red-shirted man at the back of the room and names him the "high score." He awards the man a live-action figure of *the very injured vet who just addressed the group*, and who now stands at the exit, ready to sign the free DVD copies of the *America's Army* video game. I learn that in addition to being reified as a mass-produced action figure, Rieman has been transformed into a historical character within the Army's massive multiplayer, online role-playing game. Unlike the insurgent avatars, Rieman's avatar has a face, albeit an uncanny face that hardly resembles its original. And so, after his conquering of Real Death, the soldier comes home to a Symbolic Death. He is both immortal and erased—a living memorial. At once he is a shadow and the light of a long dead star. Out of habit, Rieman begins autographing my DVD. I let him continue. And then I walk out the door into the white heat.

Going AWOL

Bug is aggravated and wants to go home. The NeXplore ShockWave Triple Engine Jet Truck rattles the concrete under our feet. We're making our way to the exit, but it's hot enough to blind, so we stop in at the

air-conditioned Air Force trailer to see the “highly advanced hologram of a F-22” and the “hands-on night vision area.” But the hologram is nothing more than a barely visible holographic print the size of a piece of notebook paper, and the only “hands-on,” night vision area I see is a spyglass cut into the wall with a green photo stuck behind it. Outside crowds gather and form queues to enter the show trailers. Inside the trailers, it’s standard carny fare: a celebration of the great American tradition of hucksterism, of bait-and-switch. All hail the Great Kaleidoscopic Nothing. Don’t think for a minute we don’t get the joke. Understand that it’s twenty dollars a carload, and that’s what we can afford.

We’re almost to the exit. A tall, forty-something man in a muscle shirt is moving towards us in the crowd. He stops and puts his chest out as we pass: “*What the hell is th....*”. He keeps Bug in his gaze as we flow past. I turn around to see if he’s coming towards us; fortunately a friend has encouraged him to keep moving along as if to remind him that first rule of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” is *don’t ask....* So much for the political magic of “being together.” I reiterate here Badiou’s critique of “the ethical primacy of the Other” and its assertion that “the experience of alterity...[is] the experience of a distance...the traversal of which is the ethical experience itself.”²⁶ Ideology, not distance, marks the space between me and Bug and the man in the muscle shirt. *I reject the interpellative call of the Other.* It’s not that the distance between us is insurmountable. It’s that this excursion (and by extension, this travelogue) is neither an ethical nor a political act; it’s nothing more than a phenomenological romp through a military theme park with the aim of *gazing back*.

This particular theme park—a screen park, really—reflects not so much a shift from panoptic to synoptic controls, but a synthesis of the two. Victor Burgin’s re-evaluation of Foucault’s “purified, purifying [enlightenment] gaze”²⁷ in relation to spatial history provides context for the intersection between twenty-first century visual architecture and ideology: the idea of the “cone of vision”—or sight as a series of powerful rays cast by the eyes onto objects—belongs to the world of Euclidean geometry and is the correlate of the classical conception of the world as One. By the late Middle Ages, the world had been set on a flat stage at the center of the cosmos, as if the universe were a snow globe, with God staring in at the whole of humanity, shaking up the plastic flakes a little every now and again. In this way, Burgin notes, the cone of vision is “conflated with the jailor, actual or virtual, in the tower at the center of the panopticon.”²⁸ Beginning with the Copernican (and bourgeois) revolution, the human gaze becomes the center of Earth; mankind can now explore the objects of the world infinitely in three dimensions using mechanical technology.²⁹ Burgin continues by adding the Internet to the long history of space, noting that space is no longer traversed by mechanical means but operates at the speed of light. Without time, and thus with space collapsed, postmodernity returns space to totality, to the “One” of antiquity. He then relates the contemporary era with a non-Euclidian geometry using the example of the Möbius strip where “apparently opposing sides prove to be formed from a single continuous surface.”³⁰

It is precisely Burgin’s example of the Möbius strip that explains the position of the twenty-first century citizen of Western democracy where the synoptic and panoptic also form “a single continuous surface.”³¹ As is well known, the panopticon—today best exemplified by global positioning satellites, the security camera, and eye-tracking technology—is the constant gaze of the Law upon the individual. But there’s a certain freedom to go about one’s own business in the panopticon (i.e., Let them watch! I have nothing to hide!) On the other hand, the synopticon, not just the commodity spectacle, but the spectacle as conscious social control apparatus, supplants this relative freedom with the ersatz power of a commanded gaze. This is the world of advertising, of CNN, of the VAE, whereby the masses are interpellated, are captured at the *apex* of their cone of vision.

What synthesizes the two visual strategies is the (per Žižek) Vanishing Mediator of *informatics*. One sees the product in the synopticon (sex, heroism, rebellion, nation), then the product is cathected into one's "identity," next the product is either recorded in one's online shopping cart or one uploads oneself to a social networking site invoking the object. And what creates this "single continuous surface" of the syn-panopticon are the predictive technologies, the analyses of the "user profiles," the interpretation of eye-tracking data, political polls, customer service surveys, etc. The data is then used to refine the production of ideology within the synoptic field. One is seen seeing the images that must be seen. In other words, one sees nothing.

"Subveillance" (also "sousveillance")—for example, capturing police abuse on cell phones—has been proposed to equalize power imbalance between capital/state control of the syn-panoptic field and the population; however, this solution has also collapsed into "a continuous surface" with its opposite, as well. One only need examine the growing collection of online "police taser videos" to see the limitations of the endeavor: the face of the Other writhes in pain at the hands of some well-documented sadist, but this evidence is easily rewritten into the synoptic field to sow fear and deter dissent. So if (the now electronic image of) the face of the Other cannot be the foundation of ethics—on the grounds that it is no longer stable ground—then there is little left to which to turn but the inaesthetic: perhaps the ethics of a truth, the tracing of an intuition, the immanent rupture of a continuum.

It's mid-afternoon and we're tired of virtual soldiering. But we're not nearly as tired as the "real" soldiers, the majority of whom leave the United States in search of a free education, many of whom return with traumatic brain injury and PTSD. In the end, the military theme park exists to purge the real: the real experience of U.S. soldiers, the real demands of the insurgents they are trained to kill, the real bodies of the civilians piling up in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Now it's time to go AWOL. Bug hangs her arm around my shoulder as we walk through the exit toward the parking area. As we pull out onto the highway, we pass those who did not attend—crowds of picnickers sitting in the shade under the trees at the edge of the path before the entrance to the airfield. Some watch the tiny planes loop in the distance. Others rest in the shadows.

ENDNOTES

1 United States Army, *America's Army Virtual Army Experience* (April 1, 2009); available online: <http://vae.americasarmy.com/>

2 Paul Virilio, *War and Cinema: The Logistics of Perception* (London: Verso, 1989)

3 Bill Radford, "A Digger, a Director and a Practical Joker," *Colorado Springs Gazette: USAF Academy 50th Anniversary Edition 2004* (Spring 2004)

4 Molly de Ramel, "Hollywood Designer Creates Military Media Center," *Fox News* (June 2008); available online: <http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,81191,00.html>

5 Barry M. Leiner, Vinton G. Cerf, David D. Clark, Leonard Kleinrock, Robert E. Kahn, Daniel C. Lynch, and Larry G. Roberts, Jon Postel, Stephen Wolff, *A Brief History of the Internet* (The Internet Society [ISOC]); available online: <http://www.isoc.org/internet/history/brief.html>

6 I refer here specifically to use of a Minnesota version of the USA PATRIOT Act (2001) to charge protest organizers with "Conspiracy to Commit Riot in Furtherance of Terrorism" for opening a "convergence space" to the public before the

- Fall 2008 Republican National Convention in St. Paul, Minnesota. Those charged were arrested previous to the protest itself.
- 7 Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI*, trans. Alan Sheridan, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1977), 212
- 8 White propaganda is open and direct attacks on political enemies, while black propaganda uses “mystery and silence.” Ellul notes that sometimes white propaganda is used as a cover for black propaganda. See Jacques Ellul, *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes*, trans. Konrad Kellen and Jean Lerner (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), 15-16
- 9 I refer here to the artistic schema presented in *Handbook of Inaesthetics*. Badiou notes that American popular cinema is generally a synthesis of the romantic and didactic modalities (i.e., the romantic hero saves a day and also learns an important moral lesson.) See Alain Badiou, *Handbook of Inaesthetics* (Stanford University Press, 2005), 5-11
- 10 Fort Worth Alliance Air Show, “2008 Exhibitors” (October 10, 2008); available online: <http://www.allianceairshow.com/SponsorsandExhibitors/2008Exhibitors/tabid/63/Default.aspx>
- 11 Alain Badiou, *Being and Event* (Continuum Books, 2005)
- 12 Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech* (London: Routledge, 1997), 25-27
- 13 This interpretation of desire/law originates with Hyldgaard's reading of Jean Clavreul's *Le désir et la loi*. Kirsten Hyldgaard, “The Conformity of Perversion,” *The Symptom: An Online Journal* 5 (Winter 2004); <http://www.lacan.com/conformper.htm>
- 14 Slavoj Žižek, *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism? Five Interventions in the (Mis)Use of a Notion* (Verso, 2002), 142-151
- 15 Hardy Blechman, Alex Newman, *DPM: Disruptive Pattern Material: An Encyclopedia of Camouflage in Nature, Warfare, and Culture* (Frances Lincoln, 2006), 221
- 16 Tom Vanderbilt, “The U.S. Army's New Clothes,” *Slate* (Sept. 8, 2004); available online: <http://slate.msn.com/id/2106359/>
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- 18 Maj. Gen. Antonio J. Pineda, *2006 Civil Air Patrol Annual Report to Congress* (Alabama: Maxwell AFB, 2006), 2-3
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- 20 On immortality and the symbolic order, “the signifier already considers him dead, by nature it immortalizes him.” See Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book III: The Psychoses 1955-1956* (W.W. Norton, 1997), 179-180
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- 23 Adrian Johnston, “The Forced Choice of Enjoyment: Jouissance between Expectation and Actualization,” *The Symptom: An Online Journal* 2 (2002); <http://www.lacan.com/forcedf.htm>
- 24 Slavoj Žižek, “Kant with (or against) Sade,” *The Žižek Reader*, eds. Elizabeth Wright and Edmond Wright (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, Ltd, 1999), 289
- 25 U.S. Military, “Sgt. Tommy Rieman: Heroes in the War on Terror,” *Heroes* (April 1, 2009); available online: <http://www.defenselink.mil/heroes/profiles/riemanT.html>
- 26 Badiou, 59
- 27 Michel Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1973), 51
- 28 Victor Burgin, *In/Different Spaces: Place and Memory in Visual Culture* (University of California Press, 1996), 39
- 29 *Ibid.*, 42
- 30 *Ibid.*, 44
- 31 For those interested in the details of the growth and development of surveillance and dataveillance, the works of David Lyon are indispensable. See David Lyon, *Surveillance Studies: An Overview* (Polity Press, 2007)