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## SELF SOCIALIZING THE CYBORG

The Gulf War and Beyond

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The cyborg self can be characterized as follows: through a paranoid rationality, expressed in the machine-like self, we combine an omnipotent phantasy of self-control with fear and aggression directed against the emotional and bodily limitations of mere mortals. Through regression to a phantasy of infantile omnipotence, we deny our dependency upon nature; upon our own nature, upon the "bloody mess" of organic nature. We phantasize about controlling the world, freezing historical forces, and, if necessary, even destroying them in rage; we thereby contain our anxiety in the name of maintaining rational control (Levidow and Robins, 1989, p. 172).

Vision and image technologies mediate the construction of the cyborg self. The so-called Gulf War highlighted their role. **In a very real sense, the screen became the scene of the war:** the military encountered its enemy targets in the form of electronic images. The world of simulation somehow screened out the catastrophic dimension of the real and murderous attack.

As the Gulf War also brought home to us, it was not just military personnel who became caught up in this technological psychosis. The "Nintendo war" involved and implicated home audiences, who took pleasure in watching the official images of war, often compulsively so. How was it possible to achieve this popular engagement? How were viewers locked into the war through their TV screens? How is the cyborg self generalized to the society at large?

**The Military Cyborg**

War converts fear and anxiety into perceptions of external threat. It then mobilizes defenses against alien and thing-like enemies. In this process, new image and vision technologies can play a central role. Combat is increasingly mediated through the computer screen. Combatants are involved in a kind of remotely exhilarating tele-action, tele-present and tele-engaged in the theatre of war, sanitized of its bloody reality. Killing is done 'at a distance', through technological mediation, without the shock of direct confrontation. The victims become psychologically invisible. The soldier appears to achieve a moral dissociation; **the targeted "things" on the screen do not seem to implicate him in a moral relationship.**



Moreover, by fetishizing electronic "information" for its precision and omniscience, military force comes to imagine itself in terms of the mechanical or cybernetic qualities that are designed into computers. **The operator behaves as a virtual cyborg in the real-time, man-machine interface which structures military weapons systems.** A new "cyborg soldier" is constructed and programmed to fit integrally into weapons systems. By training for endurance, the soldier attempts to overcome biological limits, better to respond to real-time 'information' about enemy movements. By disciplining his 'mindware' and acting on the world through computer simulations, the soldier can remain all the more removed from the bloody consequences of his actions (Gray, 1989).

In the Gulf War, the cyborg soldier was complemented by new "smart" weapons. Although the view from a B-52 bomb bay already distanced the attacker from any human victims, new weapons rationalized military vision even further. Paradoxically, the Gulf video images gave us **closer visual proximity between weapon and target, but at the same time greater psycho-logical distance.** The missile-nose view of the target simulated a super-real closeness which no human being could ever attain. This remote-intimate viewing extended the moral detachment that characterized earlier military technologies (Robins and Levidow, 1991, p. 325).

**It was the ultimate voyeurism: to see the target hit from the vantage point of the weapon.** An inhuman perspective. Yet this kind of watching could sustain the moral detachment of earlier military technologies. Seeing was split off from feeling; the visible was separated from the sense of pain and death. Through the long lens the enemy remained a faceless alien, her/his bodily existence de-realized (Robins and Levidow, 1991). Military attack took the form of thing-like relations between people, and social relations between things, as if destroying inanimate objects. Perversely, war appeared as it really was (Levidow, 1994).

In targeting and monitoring the attack, a real-time simulation depended upon prior surveillance of the enemy, conceptualized as a "target-rich environment." In the five months preceding the January, 1991 attack on Iraq, the US war machine devoted laborious "software work" to mapping and plotting strategic installations there. The concept of "legitimate military target" extended from military bases and the presidential palace, to major highways, factories, water supplies and power stations. The basic means of survival for an entire population were reduced to "targeting information." **Enemy threats—real-or-imaginary, human or machine—became precise grid locations, abstracted from their human context.**

This computer simulation prepared and encouraged an omnipotence phantasy, a phantasy of total control over things. At the same time, the phantasyed omnipotence required the containment of anxieties about impotence and vulnerability. The drive for electronic omniscience both evoked and contained anxiety about unseen threats. Designed to prepare real-time attacks, an electronic panopticon intensified the paranoid features of earlier omnipotence phantasies. Through these technological attempts at ordering a disorderly world, uncertainty was rendered intolerable.

Any attempt to evade penetration by the West's high-tech panopticon simply confirmed the guilt and irrationality of the devious Arab enemy. Any optical evasion became an omnipresent, unseen threat of the unknown which must be exterminated. This paranoid logic complemented the U.S. tendency to abandon the Cold War rationales for its electronic surveillance and weaponry, now being redesigned explicitly for attacking the Third World (Klare, 1991).

In the Gulf episode, the U.S. military portrayed the Iraqi forces as in hiding. When Saddam decided to avoid a direct military confrontation with the U.S. coalition's air force, he was described as 'hunkering down', almost cheating the surveillance systems of the West's rational game plan (Levidow and Robins, 1991). Iraq's caution was personified as the backward Arab playing the coy virgin: "Saddam's armies last week seemed to be enacting a travesty of the Arab motif of veiling and concealment ... [Saddam] makes a fairly gaudy display of mystique" (Time magazine, February 4, 1991, pp. 12-13). Such language updated an earlier cultural stereotyping of the mysterious Orient (Said, 1985).

The racist logic emerged more clearly after the U.S. massacre of civilians in the Amariya air-raid shelter. In this case, unusually, TV pictures showed us hundreds of shrouded corpses. In response, the U.S. authorities insisted that they had recorded a precise hit on a "positively identified military target," they even blamed Saddam for putting civilians in the bunker (Kellner, 1992, pp. 297-309). The U.S. continued to cite its surgical precision as moral legitimization, even though it was the precise tar-

*faceless alien*

getting which allowed the missile to enter the ventilation shaft and incinerate all the people inside the shelter.

**Constructing the Viewer**

This combined logic of fear and aggression is not just a military phenomenon. The Gulf War showed how much we, the home viewers of the Nintendo war, were also implicated in the logic of fear, paranoia and aggression. Seen on network TV, the video-game images were crucial in recruiting support for the U.S.-led attack.

The images evoked audience familiarity with video games, thus offering a vicarious real-time participation. Video games in the wider culture are also about the mastery of anxiety and the mobilization of omnipotence phantasies; these psychic dimensions correspond to the cyborg logic of the military "game." The parallel with weapons systems runs deep: after all, some innovators have alternated between designing military and entertainment versions of interactive simulation technology.

Where the Gulf massacre publicly enacted phantasies, video games privatize them. The processes of anxiety and control are actively structured by the computer-video microworld, with its compulsive task of achieving 'perfect mastery' (Leviow and Robins, 1989, pp. 172-175). In particular, the video game is a psychodynamic process of projecting and managing internal threats: "The actual performance required of us in the video game is like being permanently connected to broadcast television's exciting live event." Video games elicit young boys' phantasies of exploring the damage done inside the mother's body; here the male 'fears both his own destructiveness and a fantasized retaliation from the object of his destructive fantasies' (Skirrow, 1986, pp. 121-22).

Video games can thus be understood as a paranoiac environment that induces a sense of paranoia by dissolving any distinction between the doer and the viewer. Driven by the structure of the video game, the player is constantly defending himself, or the entire universe, from destructive forces. The play becomes a compulsive, pleasurable repetition of a life-and-death performance. Yet the player's anxiety can never be finally mastered by that vicariously dangerous play. He engages in a characteristic repetition, often described as "video-game addiction" (*ibid.*, pp. 129-33).

While the video game simulates a real-time event, the Gulf episode took such images as its reality. The Gulf War was "total television", an entertainment form which merged military and media planning (Engelhardt, 1992). "The Pentagon, and its corporate suppliers, became the producers and the sponsors of the sounds and images, while the 'news' became a form of military advertising" (Stam, 1992, p. 112). How, then, did this infotainment engage its audience, and even construct the viewer?

The home audience, which seemed to take great pleasure in its viewing, was also implicated in collective phantasies. Primitive anxieties were evoked and structured by a pervasive cultural rhetoric, which gave specific meanings to the electronic

images. The Iraqi state, even an entire society, was personified as an irrational monster, 'a new Hitler', from whom we must be saved. The sadistic rape of Kuwait posed a threat of symbolic buggery against the West, even a threat to civilization itself. Saddam seemed to personify a sadistic, unpredictable, limitless violence. He was a "madman" who transgressed the combined rules of morality and rationality. By exaggerating claims about Iraq's nuclear weapons development and speculating on its chemical weapons, the mass media portrayed a regional aggressor as a threat of global annihilation.

In the face of these perceived threats, viewers were infantilised, leading them to welcome a strong saviour who was apparently wielding a civilized violence on behalf of international law. When the West's attack transparently went beyond the official mission to 'free Kuwait', the ensuing destruction resonated with popular wishes to remove the source of primitive anxiety—by civilized means only, of course. In contrast to Saddam's sadistic Scud-like violence, the West was imagined to be inflicting a morally based violence: our missiles, by virtue of their precision and rationality acted as exterminating angels. This good/evil split permitted western TV audiences to deny the barbarism within their own civilization, to deny the internal sources of its violence, and to treat its destructive hatred as an enemy threat (Aksoy and Robins, 1991). Western rationality became inseparable from a paranoid projection which conflated, and confused, internal and external threats.

Bombed facilities were rhetorically personalized as Saddam's military machine. In this way, 'the media turned Iraq into one vast faceless extension of their demotized leader' (Stam, 1992, p. 114). The mass media also adopted U.S. military euphemisms which further reified the massacre. This language denied the human qualities of the victims, while attributing such qualities to inanimate objects: for example, 'smart' bombs 'killed' Iraqi equipment. Home viewers could thereby detach themselves morally from the human consequences of surgical strikes against the evil, non-human forces personified by Saddam (Kellner, 1992, p. 247).

The images did far more than to sanitize death. The video-game war also combined viewer and doer: 'telespectators were made to see from the bomber's perspective' (Stam, 1992, p. 104; cf. Levidow and Robins, 1991). With missile cameras "the sectors of destruction and information became almost completely synonymous" (Wark, 1991, p. 15). The images involved us as vicarious participants in destroying perceived threats to our bodily integrity, our physical existence, and our social order. Indeed, we could feel a pleasurable identification with high-tech violence against a barbaric enemy (Broughton, 1993).

In this paranoiac rationality, the problem is less about people accepting the literal "truth" of propaganda images, than about seeking refuge from anxiety. The danger is that people will choose fantasy, and fantasy identification with power, over a threatening or intolerably dislocating social reality (Rosier, 1991, p. 63). As an anti-war poster warned, "You are the Target Audience. When you watch the news, you are invited to enter into a pact. You are expected to believe in the same system, share the same values and goals."

Even those disposed to be critical could find certain parts of themselves consenting to this pact. The war images both evoked and contained primitive anxieties in all of us. We were confronted with invasive and induced feelings, and found ourselves experi-

encing feelings and thinking thoughts that were in an important sense not entirely our own. We had to reckon with feeling-states that seemed to inhabit and impose themselves on us, irrespective of our conscious desires. As Baudrillard (1991, p. 12-13) puts it, 'we were all held hostage by the intoxication of the media.'

### The Social Cyborg

The Gulf massacre brought home to us the role of high-tech systems in mass psychopathology. This episode belied the naive hopes of those who have idealized electronic information—as an instrument of participatory democracy, as a social prosthesis, or even as inherent resistance to the commodity form. Rather, electronic systems converted a paranoid environment; mediating an omnipotence phantasy, they converted internal threats into thing-like enemies, symbolizing rage at our bodily limitations.

In the paranoid-schizoid mode, 'the self is predominantly a self as object, a self that is buffeted by thoughts, feelings, and perceptions as if they were external forces or physical objects occupying or bombarding oneself' (Ogden, 1989, pp. 21-22). The fear and pain immanent within ourselves is evacuated and experienced as danger immanent within the other. Once they are externalized in this way, 'the establishment can get to work, offering its protection, keeping the threat at bay, zapping intruders, policing the boundaries' (Hoggett, 1992, p. 346).

Screen, surveillance and simulation technologies have become fundamental to this 'protection'. It now involves new global networks of sensors keeping track of worldwide targets in real time. Vision technologies appear to enhance security through continuous monitoring of the globe as a danger-rich environment. With the spread of such defense systems, 'real enemies' become elusive and omnipresent. The technologies now monitor an unidentified and amorphous threat 'out there', both within and beyond the boundaries of the western world.

For example, Britain has an estimated 200,000 video-surveillance cameras, many of them continuously-monitoring main streets and shopping centres. It is argued that the cameras not only help police to identify criminals, but also make people feel safer. If so, then the cameras compensate for—and even intensify—the social isolation which makes us feel vulnerable in the first place. This form of 'security' further constructs our lives as social relations between things, just as a Nintendo war 'protected' us from any human relation with its victims.

The Other is an unseen and invisible threat, detectable only through electronic surveillance and mediation. The technological-systems generate a structural paranoia: their panoptic vigilance requires the existence of a virtual enemy. It is not only the state which is caught up in this logic of paranoid rationality. Its psychic defense, which underlay the 1980s Star Wars project, became a mass-culture recruitment drive during the Gulf War. As in that 'virtual war', the whole society is now caught up in 'this visualization of things, this hypervisibility, this hyperpredictability and programming, hyperprogramming, of things' (Baudrillard, 1993, p. 251).

Through electronic mediation, this aspect of war pervades wider areas of our lives, thus socializing the cyborg self. We fear ourselves and each other, while identifying with an omnipotence phantasy of technological power. The ques-

tion remains: instead of infantilizing us, can electronic mediation help us to handle our fears and to identify with fellow targets of the paranoid panopticon?

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