

## **Real Enough for You?** **Pil and Galia Kollektiv**

The story of the soldier returning from war is a common theme of cinema after Vietnam, from *Taxi Driver* to *Rambo* to the Russian movie *Brat* [Brother]. The returning vet usually finds it difficult to adjust to life back in civilization: relationships seem superficial, material possessions seems pointless, the authority of the civilizing process seems unbearable, the pursuit of happiness illusory. In all these cases, the war experience itself serves as a kind of authentic core, a barbaric 'real' in which the self is a 'bare' violence and survival instinct. So real is this experience that 'life' outside of war is reduced to the level of simulation and the new order established by the sacrifice of the soldier to an oppressive lie designed to conceal the horrific truth that lurks underneath the everyday. This is perhaps why we are so fascinated with persistent stories about Japanese soldiers who are still hiding in the jungles of small islands in the Philippines, refusing to acknowledge the end of the Second World War. This refusal complicates the simple dialectic of war and life that suggests periods of stability and prosperity follow the mayhem of war. For these soldiers fighting has never given way to the Japanese post-war economic miracle. They simply refuse to substitute the 'real' of war for the simulation of life. In a great number of other films, from *The Return of the Soldier* to *Waltz with Bashir*, the experience of war is presented as an amnesia, something that the veteran attempts to flee, but an experience which nevertheless dictates the course of his life like a meteor being slowly sucked into a black hole in space. In these movies, the war experience is framed as completely external to culture and representation and so radically transgressive that it cannot form a basis for subjectivity: in war, one is literally alien to oneself.

But what defines the 'real' of war? Why is the experience of war represented as a space that evacuates social structures and normative morality when the military is one of the most controlled and regulated spaces of modernity, overloaded with signifiers of meaning and hegemonic truth (heroism, patriotism, the love of one's family, one's country, one's freedom etc.)? In many ways, the horrific condition of warfare in the postmodern age does not derive from the irresolvable friction between the supposed normality of everyday life and the real rawness of fighting, but, on the contrary, from the smooth blurring of the two. Life in the Palestinian occupied territories, for example, is marked by prolonged military presence, from which no aspect of the everyday can escape. The Palestinian condition is made of a continuity between various degrees of intensification from the random 'everyday' search of vehicles at military check-points to full on, high casualty incursions of heavy, mechanized units into densely populated areas. War is simply the fluidity between these nodes of intensification, not an extraordinary event that breaks with the situation. Rousseau still envisioned war as circumstances arising around objects, not humans, between states, when he wrote in the *Social Contract*: "[t]he object of the war being the destruction of the hostile State, the other side has a right to kill its defenders, while they are bearing arms; but as soon as they lay them down and surrender, they cease to be enemies or instruments of the enemy, and become once more merely men, whose life no one has any right to take".

But the collapse of these modern, enlightened conditions of war is all but complete in the war on terror, the emblematic name for the postmodern fluidity between civic life and the military. We can no longer define a clear delineation between citizen and soldier. The U.S. Justice Department, for instance, in the cases against the alleged terrorist 'sleeper cell' from Detroit, found the suspects' normal conduct to be indicative of a highly sophisticated secret code: a perfectly dull tourist video of Disneyland was obviously an intelligence collection scheme intended to mark out strategic places to plant a bomb.

So, going back to the original question, under these postmodern conditions of war, where do we locate the external 'real' of war still propagated by cinema and literature? Two examples from the field of war photography that have kept resurfacing in recent years might be useful in answering this question. The first is the famous photograph of a man being executed by a shot to the head by South Vietnam Lt. Colonel Ngyen Ngoc Loan, Saigon Chief of Police. The picture was taken by Eddie Adams, in 1968, on a side street in Saigon and later won him the photograph a Pulitzer price. In Adams' obituary, the Washington Post wrote on this defining images of the violence of war in the latter half of the 20th century: "It was war in its purest, most personal form. It did not show preparations for battle or its aftermath, the bodies in flag-draped coffins".<sup>2</sup> In other words, according to the paper this is an image of war at its most real and raw. But later, evidence emerged to suggest that the execution was meant to happen indoors and that the Colonel stepped outside to allow photographers access to better light and angles, thereby actively participating in the staging of the photograph. The second example is of the equally well-known photograph by Robert Capa of a young soldier at the moment of his death in battle during the Spanish civil war. An exhibition of Capa's work at the Barbican last year brought to light evidence that again the photographer was not and perhaps could never be an objective witness, but is always an active participant in the events documented. It would seem that the soldiers were re-enacting a battle scene for Capa, when their theatrics attracted the rebel forces: "If the militia had posed and fired for the camera, they would have attracted the attention of the rebel forces. As Borrell stood to pose for Capa, he was cut down by a rebel bullet," writes Isabel Hilton in *The Guardian* following the controversy surrounding the exhibition.<sup>3</sup> Both of these photos are synonymous with the political agency of art, both are considered pure representations of war, clean of fancy, pathos and heroism. But both instances demonstrate well how the 'real' of war is produced as a simulation, and in both it becomes clear that the dichotomy between war and life is in fact a conflict between two competing symbolic structures.

The returning soldier narrative locates a gap between the ordinariness of life and the systemic brutality of war that resembles a tragic dramatic structure. The individual soldier is caught up in the amorphous mechanism of technological, economic and political powers that drive war. His particular ordinariness means nothing to these powers, which reduce it to a statistical factor, and so the soldier's struggle is as much against these forces as against the enemy. The only weapon left in the soldier's arsenal is to oppose the systemic violence with individualistic nihilistic one directed at everyone and no-one in particular. The only way to respond to the violent demands of the military system is to extend

its logic to all areas of life. In the fight for normality and stability, stability and normality are the first casualties; and this normality, the ordinariness of the everyday, the indexical materiality of the body of the dying soldier, the frailty and dignity of the suffering human body in general, can only be rescued as a symbolic order (generated as an impossibility) by the simulation of art.

In his writing about contemporary warfare, Paul Virilio repeatedly claims that the occupation of physical space has been replaced by the conquest of data. Surveillance technology overtakes weapons like bombs in strategic importance.<sup>4</sup> Matter recedes from the frame as speed becomes a determining factor in terms of the competition for data collection. In recent years, artists have often posited a kind of brutal personalization of war in the shape of mutilated bodies to counter these forces of abstraction. Thomas Hirschhorn's monuments, with their clunky cardboard physicality, exemplify this tendency to site the critique of war within a representation of 'bare life'. And indeed this term, appropriated for instance by Documenta 12 from Agamben, has been broadly interpreted as a call in casting the problem of artistic responses to war as a crisis of representation, to represent these very material casualties of international conflict. However, in casting the problem of artistic responses to war as a crisis of representation, art can only instigate a critique of its own impotence, since ultimately it is doomed to give shape to whatever it produces as a reflection of the Real. Worse, the war artist's supposedly personalising, but actually dehumanizing, of the victims of war, becomes a justification, whereby western governments can reclaim these bodies as the people in whose name and for whose freedom the battles are waged. The prohibition only recently lifted against publishing photographs of the coffins of dead soldiers returning from Iraq to the United States illustrates the fact that this is indeed a tension between two symbolic orders. In opting for embedded media over these representations of patriotic heroism, the U.S. effectively deployed representations of the 'reality' of war in a bid to overcome the alienation produced by the abstraction identified by Virilio. In Israeli news coverage of the conflict in Gaza, the emphasis was not on an ideological ethos, but on the children of Sderot, whose daily lives were being disrupted by Palestinian attacks. Nobody fights for state and glory anymore – it's precisely the reinstatement of normalcy called for by the invocation of its transgression that currently serves as the rationale for war.

In an article much cited in the artworld, Eyal Weizman has famously demonstrated the ways in which critical theory can be co-opted by the military.<sup>5</sup> The nature of contemporary combat, which can take place in densely populated urban spaces, where lo-tech terror cells are embedded within a civilian body, calls for new ways of thinking readily supplied by ideas of rhizomatic or psychogeographic operations: questioning given routes of navigation by penetrating houses through walls or rethinking identity as fluid when a pregnant woman might be a suicide bomber in disguise. But the fact that Israeli military academies train officers with texts by Deleuze and Debord is only surprising until we remember the ways in which their calls for a reinterpretation of space and subjectivity can ultimately be read as deeply liberal. The freedom to challenge power structures is not inherently at odds with the extra-governmental role often assumed by the military. Like Virilio, Weizman notes the ways in which warfare today often works to dismantle existing power structures and the

social units with which they are associated. Critique becomes the subject of a tragic irony when it continues to attack these already collapsing forms. In this context, opposing the bureaucratic forces of depersonalization can seem less productive than imposing them in the manner of the Atlas Group, whose flowcharts and archival classifications take possession of the Lebanon civil war without resorting to identifications with powerless victims outside of the social. Perhaps what is now required of art is not to cut through the (dis)simulations of power to reveal the true violence of the 'real', but to understand its own playing field as a struggle over different representations, not against representation in general.

In this context, Heidi Schaefer's imitation minefield, more engaged with formal arrangements of shape and colour than with any sense of real violence, seems to personify the war machine more than it addresses its casualties. The work, which at first glance could be mistaken for a Futurist fetishization of machines of destruction, in fact deals with the process of simulation that lies at the heart of war. Elsewhere, "animal vegetable mineral" presents a taxonomy of weaponry, in which familiar objects are revealed to have alternate meanings for the military – the stiletto also being a fighter plane, for instance. These pairings of words and their disparate referent images never try to take us beyond language into the brutal reality of war, instead they show the military transubstantiations of language itself. Washed out water colour explosions depicting video stills of bombings ask us to interrogate media representations without cutting through representation to a place beyond aesthetics. The victims of war are notable in their absence from this interplay of languages of representation: rather than a suffering body, the minefield installation produces a body controlled through the spatial organization of the gallery, the viewer squeezed to the margins of the piece. Even though the landmines in the gallery are an aesthetic simulation, a replication, of the real weapons, Schaefer does not allow the work to produce a 'real' to negate this artificiality, leaving us to contemplate the war machine almost in its own terms.

## Notes

1. Rousseau, Jean-Jacques, *The Social Contract*, New York, NY: Cosimo, 2008, p. 20
2. Bernstein, Adam, "Photojournalist Eddie Adams, Pulitzer Prize-Winner, Dies",
3. *The Washington Post*, Washington, DC: The Washington Post Company, Monday, September 20, 2004; Page B06
4. Hilton, Isabel, "The Camera Never Lies. But Photographers Can and Do", *The Guardian*, Manchester and London: The Guardian, 27.9.08
4. See for example Virilio, Paul, *Desert Screen: War at the Speed of Light*, London: Athlone Press, 2002.
5. Weizman, Eyal, "The Art of War", *Frieze*, London, Issue 99, May 2006.