The Digital Fog of War: Baudrillard and the Violence of Representation

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> What vertigo pushes the world to erase the Idea? And what is that other vertigo that, at the same time, seems to force people to unconditionally want to realize the Idea? (Baudrillard, "The Violence of the Global")

I. Introduction

Traditionally, war was thought to be a time of uncertainty and doubt, but also of change and transition. In ancient Rome, for example, it is said that the temple gates of Janus were opened during times of war, and rarely, shut during times of peace. Situated between these two gates stood a statue of Janus—the two-faced god of transitions and passages who peered into both the past and future concomitantly—with his gaze fixated on both openings. Once opened, the gates remained so for around 400 years of wartime. They closed again just after The First Punic war in 235 BC and opened around eight years later. It would remain open for almost two more centuries of bloodshed.

Today, however, the gates are no longer standing, nor do we even know their actual location. Likewise, in our so-called "End of History" phase, it seems that the transitional character of war has all but disappeared (Joxe, 2002). "Unlike earlier wars, in which there were political aims either of conquest or domination," as Jean Baudrillard writes of the First Gulf War, "what is at stake in this one is war itself: its status, its meaning, its future. It is beholden not to have an objective but to prove its very existence" (Baudrillard, 1995: 32). Virtual War—war in "real-time"—

assumes its own kind of permanence and virulence. Without the necessity of a clear (geo)political objective, war has, in effect, proliferated beyond its former spatial and temporal delimitations (something that Carl Schmitt, for example, had warned about some 40 years ago already; see Schmitt, 2003). To put it slightly differently, a war that today claims to have terror as its main object is one for which virulence must be always already operative (Debrix, 2008). At the "center" of contemporary warfare lies an apparent uncertainty: about its object, its purpose, its location, its beginning and end, its logistical deployment and organization, and even its main protagonists (drones replacing troops on the ground, in the air, and under water). This uncertainty or perhaps evanescence of war has not been a benign occurrence. Indeed, the uncertainty/unlocalizability /unreality of war—the techno-virtual fog it operates in, with, and as—has given rise to endless and boundless opportunities for violence/virulence. It is in this sense that the virtuality and virulence of contemporary warfare are fused with each other. War today, in its various occurrences but also through its main representational logics and justifications, seemingly evades intelligibility at every turn and yet, paradoxically perhaps, always seeks to reproduce itself in that fog.

James Der Derian diagnosed this phenomenon in 2001 when he remarked that the virtual revolution in war "is driven more by software than hardware, and enabled by networks rather than agents" (Der Derian, 2001: xiv). A few years prior to Der Derian's intervention, Baudrillard had recognized several mechanisms by way of which new media are involved in the production and representation of war responsible for the thickening of the fog that seems to surround it. In the early 1990s, Baudrillard described a visible confusion that resulted from mass media's broadcasting of the first Gulf War. Twenty-four hour news outlets propped up talking heads through "an assortment of vague and contradictory diagnoses" that obscured any sense or idea of an epicenter of war (Baudrillard, 1995: 48). War in and for the media was everywhere precisely because its core or referent was nowhere to be found or, rather, was always already the result of a wide array of media operations and proliferation of visual codes (see also Der Derian, 1992). Today, this media saturation of images, signs, and meanings (what Der Derian

once called a "global swarming" effect; see Der Derian, 1996) is perhaps further exacerbated. Moreover, we can no longer try to locate this confusion/saturation /swarming within large media conglomerates and their useful idiots (supposing we ever could). Rather, we see it now in the not-so-silent blogging and tweeting majorities or masses, the so-called viewing/acting/texting agents now turned into their own media and media networks. This is the infinite 0-1 conglomerate of a so-called free and democratic mediascape: the virulent and virtual productivity and circularity of a digital *demos* that desperately chases the dangling carrot of a political referentiality/reality/immediacy that is fatefully out of arm's reach (although perhaps not out of drones' range).

As confused as "we" (so-called members of the public or *demos*) may be about the condition of war virtuality/virulence, let us not be fooled by appearances: the postindustrial West is generally well versed and quite comfortable in navigating war's unfolding simulacrum. This is not only the case in the more obvious terms of the entertainment industry's development of increasing depth of reality in fictionalized depictions of war on the screen, such as video games and film (Virilio, 1989; Der Derian, 1992; 2001), but also in terms of informational and digitalized media platforms purporting to tell mesmerized viewers what is reallyhappening in the world—namely, informational modalities in which contemporary warfare is re-presented and re-produced through a multitude of digital, virtual, and online media vectors, and allegedly for the benefit of the people or *demos* (albeit a *demos* always already assumed and expected to be on Twitter or Facebook).

In this article, we ask a series of questions about the contemporary interplay of war and various modalities of representational media and digital technologies. First, in the digital age, what are some of the mechanisms/modalities of representation through which war's "absent" center is at once obscured *and* re-invented by media productions and distributions of signs and meanings, and how is it that, through contemporary digital media vectors in particular, war is both decentered or proliferated *and* re-centered or re-anchored? Second, how is the

demos' being or life—ceaselessly tethered to the need or demand for a "real time" mediatized apprehension of the omnipresence of warfare—involved or, in fact, invested in the proliferation of war's violence or virulence? Finally, what is at stake for the real (and, perhaps, the "geopolitics" of war in "real time") in analyzing not only the representation of war violence, but also the violence or virulence of representation itself, of which war may well be but an image or symptom?

A beginning of an answer to some of these questions has already been provided by Der Derian and his concept of "virtuous war." Der Derian warns that "virtuous war requires a critical awakening if we are not to sleepwalk through the manifold travesties of war." Thus, Der Derian continues, we need to find ways to ceaselessly deploy critical perspectives that confront us with the "fact" that virtual/virulent war operates in everyday (digitalized, mediatized) life by "projecting a mythos as well as an ethos" (Der Derian, 2001: xvii). The mythos of virtual/virulent war is very much the product of its representational fog. This, in itself, is not a new discovery. What may be new, however, or at least more intensified, are the ways, techniques, layers, and levels of representation, and indeed media (and the members of the *demos* as media vectors and networks too) that strive to maintain war's virulence and violence in this fog. This means that, with the help of Baudrillard's insights into representation and the production of the real, we can argue that the radical uncertainty about war is predicated on and exponentially reproducedwithinan implosive violence, one that is internal to the system of war representation itself. Thus, in this article, we also make the case for "locating" the responsibility for war's uncertainty and virulence not in its object (a so-called objective geopolitical event or situation) or subject (an allegedly intentional geo-political actor or agent), but rather in the expectation that a coherent and fixed political object of war, the visual verification of a center or core to war, the presence of key existential stakes and key social and political actors or agents granted ontological priority, and the deployment of contextualized circumstances, justifications, or purposes about war will all have been mediatically and digitally rendered or made real.

Such an expectation about the ontological "location" of the objects, subjects, stakes, and processes of today's virulent war is generative of another expectation: that of the so-called self-evident violence of war and, by extension, of anything that socially and politically is said to matter for and about the *demos* (since virulent/virtual war is an all-encompassing, or all-swarming, "geopolitical reality"). In other words, what the so-called objects and subjects of today's virtual/virulent war expect "their" war to represent is what ensures a disposition towards violence (a violence of "the global," perhaps, as Baudrillard intimates) that may well be the result of attempts at securing a will to meaning, a will to make sense of things, and a will to be of political objects and subjects that today takes place or, rather, is intensified in virtual and digital modalities of representation and mediation. Part of the critical stake of this essay is to "locate" the violence/virulence of contemporary warfare not just in its empirical geopolitical "events," but rather in the representational domain inside which those so-called events are expected to make sense, that is to say, in the always already preemptively belligerent and aggressive realm of representation (where the challenge is to produce and impose meaning at all costs).

II. The Fog of War

The claim about a certain quality of reality or even realism to new digital informational or communicative technologies has played a formative role in the global staging of several recent social and political conflicts. In both the Arab Spring and the Occupy movements of 2011, for example, digital technologies were celebrated for their real-time capacity and their subversive (democratic) potentials. The virtue of reporting "from the ground" of the event itself was championed as a matter of authenticity. There was a common sense that "truth" would finally be able to speak from its "real" source (the *demos* itself?). Not only is there a prevalent uncritical (even if sometimes well-intentioned) faith in new media and their digital technologies today, but, more importantly, there is often an impulse of liberation. Yet, this impulse is stifled by its faith in representation. The hope for openness, transparency, immediacy, and indeed liberation is so tethered to the real (and to the will to reality) that it ends up being negative or, at least,

self-defeating. It often becomes evident that the so-called democratic uses of new media technologies—particularly in terms of reporting violent war events or conflicts of allegedly great concern/importance to the global *demos*—are, far from producing a clearer picture of an objective event, contributing to an ever thickening fog of meaning and truth.

These new media technologies in and of themselves are not the object of our critique here. Moreover, we are not interested in "clearing the fog" of the real or war. Again, our critical intervention in this essay has more to do with deploying perspectives that may expose the violent dispositions of the contemporary mythos of war (and revealing the complicit role of the digitalized demos in the intensification of this mythos) than with attempting to clear the way for a different ethos about everyday reality, digitalized media, and the prevalence of warfare in political representations. In fact, part of our argument is also to suggest that the various cultural, political, and ethical mechanisms that seek to clear the fog of the real (and war) often end up reproducing it. The lure to criticize and debunk reality often requires that another real, another certainty, another dominant meaning, or indeed another democratic necessity be established through the same means and techniques, and media, that had to be challenged in the first place (thus, the simulacrum continues to proliferate its reality-effects).

Behind the widespread "global" celebration of digitalized technologies for their newly found representational capabilities and accuracies, there lies the idea that, perhaps following a collective disgust with the dealings of Western media outlets as more or less uncritical props for the social/economic/ethical status quo in the past several decades, disseminated and "democratized" media technologies can de-mystify the world, lift its aura in a way, or perhaps "dig deeper" into the "truth" than, say, what the media networks involved in reporting news (including war news) in the 1980s and 1990's (the famous CNN effect) ever could do. Because these technologies are far more in real-time than news networks, they are also generally thought to be able to evade oppressive/repressive censorship of particular corporate/class/state/ideology interests. But even more than escaping

filters, digital representations today are often thought to be able to eliminate all of the ambiguities born of time. Thus, we (members of the public/*demos*) want to believe that mediation can be removed. And we want to subscribe to the view that any distortion occurring between an event and its perception/memory, or between the "actual" and its account, can evaporate. By reducing to the virtually infinitesimal or invisible the filter/screen between the image that represents and the real that is and, furthermore, by placing the productive responsibilities for the image into the hands of the user (literally into the *digits*), the digital establishes itself as something capable of demolishing the "malicious" surface of appearances to reveal a meaningful density of truth through the quasi-immediate interface. This is the dream of immediacy rediscovered and perhaps finally realized.

At a most basic level of analysis, the risk involved in pointing to this desire for mediatized or digitalized immediacy would be to undermine the visual evidence of the violent/virulent occurrence of the omnipresence of war. For example, could we have deployed a critique of the US military's and the US government's use of torture in the War on Terror were it not for the seemingly unfiltered "shock and awe" of the Abu Ghraib photos? Again, from the point of view of the ethos of virtual/virulent war, the lure of digitalized immediacy has its uses (and, possibly, benefits, too, even for the *demos*). But, from the perspective of war's mythos, it must be said that the "truth" about war and war operations cannot be fully revealed because representation, no matter how immediate or seemingly unmediated, always works by imposing some meaning onto things/events that are made visible/representable.

Consider the role played by digital media in the Boston Marathon bombing in April 2013. Within a matter of minutes of the blasts, even before the smoke could clear the scene, images and videos of terror taken from spectators' mobile devices circulated through cyberspace. Everything was seemingly captured in that instant. The horror that drew so many people to capture images through their smart phones seems to speak on its own; it needs no commentary, no meaning to be

given to it. In fact, it appears to have no mediation, no appropriation or narrativizing, no contextualizing either. That is precisely why smart phones are so apt at giving us such images, such representations, such "pure" meanings about things. Especially, such a horrifying violence, it is said, needs no commentary, no sense to be made of it. An immeasurable violence is done to the violated when one tries to make sense of the senseless (Agamben, 1999). Yet, as Baudrillard had already pointed out in his remarks on the Gulf War, "everything which is turned into information becomes the object of endless speculation, the site of total uncertainty. We are left with the symptomatic reading on our screens of the effects of the war, or the effects of discourse about the war, or completely speculative strategic evaluations" (Baudrillard, 1995: 41). In their digital representation, images of war and images of terror are dissolved into their own information. Information (what the image/event wants to tell us, to reveal, allegedly) already infiltrates the tweeted or texted image/scene (of horror, of war) with an urgency of signification and meaning. Images of horror cannot make sense, perhaps must not be made sense of, and yet they somehow beg for meaning, for circulation, or for propagation, in the hope that they may reveal something to someone. Thus, the digitalized mediation of the image, even in its instantaneity, still takes place. Images—or whatever event might have been "caught"—must succumb to a will to information, to a will to meaning, even if it is falsely affirmed that what is digitally rendered needs no commentary. Put differently, the image levels the event it represents by entering into a mass/global indifferent exchange, into a virulent global (representational) circulation that murders singularity or, indeed, the moment of trauma (on this question of the erasure of trauma, see Debrix, 2008: 4-5; Edkins, 2003: 37-38). The enigmatic singularity of the event—which, for Baudrillard, was once a precondition for any sort of historical transition—gives way to an endlessness of representation, whether such representation appears to have a clear ethical or political purpose/signification or not.

It is in this always operative tendency of rendered appearances to yield meaning (even if their meaning is to be information-worthy), not in the image or event itself,

that we situate the conditions of possibility and reproducibility for the ever-thickening representational fog and for the violence/virulence of images, or better yet, of appearances. To make war or, as the case may be, the terror event mean something—even in some of the most immediate reactions often designed to evoke injustice or, indeed, incomprehension—is the generative point of violence, the source of representation as a virulent/virtual code and mode of signification. Baudrillard writes, "Everywhere one seeks to produce meaning, to make the world signify, to render it visible." He adds, "We are not, however, in danger of lacking meaning; […] we are gorged with meaning and it is killing us" (Baudrillard, 1988: 63).

Indeed, the Western world—increasingly, the global—has found itself with a proliferation of meanings and significations in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. It is as if the so-called crisis of nihilism (thought to be characteristic of much critique and philosophical suspicion throughout the 20th century) later on produced something of the opposite order. The mass violence of the 20th century inaugurated not a complete void of despair or meaninglessness, but instead a flood of meaning, if not an overproduction of it. Baudrillard refers to this frantic explosion of meaning/signification as "a panic-stricken production of the real and the referential, above and parallel to the panic of material production […]" (Baudrillard, 1983: 7). Here, Baudrillard describes a mode of production of a different kind, not motivated by class interests or exploitation of value, but by an automated, perhaps viral, abreaction to the empty core or disenchantment of things and the world: that is to say, the degree to which things seem to lack a singular center of gravity or have lost a justifiable reference to the real world, and yet each thing that "matters" is also an attempt to get at reality as a question of accumulation (of meaning), circulation (of signs), and filling up of all interstitial spaces of communication and value. The end result is an over-abundance of signs and images of reality, something that culminates in what Baudrillard calls hyperreality—things appear more real than reality itself.

The story that needs to be told is thus not about the undoubtedly deplorable

"truth" or fact of explosive and warlike violence, but about a violence of another sort. In the radical digital transparency of the global scene, we (members of the *demos*) often have full or direct exposure to explosivity, as we saw above with the image of terror. But what still needs to be thought and problematized is *implosivity* or what may be called *implosive violence*. Implosive violence is a violence for which we do not, and perhaps will never, have much of a language (Rancière, 2007: 123). Although, not having a language for it or, rather, as we saw above, seeking to find a language to talk about it and, perhaps, to make sense of it is still sought after. This is, perhaps, what digital pictures of war/terror violence seek to capture or want to force through. Implosive violence, often digitally rendered these days, is in close contact with media technologies and representational devices and techniques because it seeks representation and meaning. This is why implosive violence insists on calling in wars (against terror, for example) and on mobilizing war machines (against terrorist others, against vague enemy figures), but wars and war machines that no longer have—to the extent that they ever had—a clearly identifiable object and subject, or a clear mission/purpose. As such, this implosive violence and its wars (the new Western/global way of war, perhaps) must remain uncertain, unclear, foggy, inwardly driven, representational, and indeed virulent. They must remain uncertain and confused even as they are digitally operative and desperately capture events/images to give the impression that meanings/significations can and will be found. Yet, as we saw above, it is not meanings exactly that must be found, but information and the endless guarantee of its immediate circulation. As information occupies the empty place of meaning, certainty, or truth, images must be instantaneously turned into appearances that search for meanings that will never be discovered because, instead, a proliferation of information-worthy facts and beliefs will take over (perhaps this is what US fake pundit and comedian Stephen Colbert famously referred to as "truthiness"). Or, as Baudrillard puts it, "free from its former enemies, humanity now has to create enemies from within, which in fact produces a wide variety of inhuman metastases" (Baudrillard, 2003). Thus, this implosive violence is destined to be a global violence since it "is the product of a system that tracks

down any form of negativity and singularity, including of course death as the ultimate form of singularity. […] It is a violence that, in a sense, puts an end to violence itself and strives to establish a world where anything related to the natural must disappear […] *Better than a global violence, we should call it a global virulence.* This form of violence is indeed viral. It moves by contagion, produces by chain reaction, and little by little it destroys our immune systems and our capacities to resist" (2003; our italics).

In a way, this global virulence is all-out and everyday war itself. It is also the Global War on Terror, a war whose virulence and ever present (virtual, potential) violence mediatizes and hyper-realizes everyday life for a lot of human bodies in the West and beyond (is that not also something that the Boston Marathon bombing smart phone representations struggled to tell us?). For Baudrillard, this is how we should apprehend the mythos of globalization (since globalization is all about virulence).

To suggest, as many still do, that there is any sort of remaining hegemony in the production of cultural and political meanings (as, for example, Horkheimer and Adorno once told us; see Horkheimer and Adorno, 2002) is anachronistic. But it is also a convenient claim to make. As we mentioned above, such a posture implies that hope can be around the corner, that things can be changed, that the *demos* can be rescued and liberated, that it can trust the immediacy offered by today's digitalized media, and that such an immediacy is the guarantee that not all meanings are lost (again, it is about proving meaning by way of information, the real by way of appearances). Viral, virtual, and virulent media representations have assumed the empty throne abandoned by the modern sovereign/core of power in the implosive West/global. The implosive immediacy of proliferating videos, images, memes, articles, utterances, leaks, wikis, blogs, clips, blips, flips, or flops reigns supreme and sovereign. And it is this proliferating sovereignty of digitalized mediation/representation that ensures the circulation of war's violence/virulence too (it is, in this way, war's platform and generator). As Baudrillard intimates, this representational, mediatized, and informational virality

or virulence is simply the historical logic of the West/modernity brought to its fatal and perhaps absurd end, a tautology of Western modernity and globality inwardly and mediatically hyper-realized (truth, being, and language all operating as one and the same, indifferently, in a circulatory movement of immediately available appearances). It is the eternal recurrence of the same, or perhaps the eternal recurrence of the always already replayed. Of course, we (digital modern subjects) could ignore all this. We could go on to celebrate representational, real-time digital technologies and their visual/viral/virulent practices in the belief that, somehow, they will continue to give us the truth of war, the truth of violence, the truth of senseless terror/horror. Perhaps, they may even give us a new hope/meaning about the *demos*, about "our" ontological positioning in, through, and with digital media. And maybe the ethical impulse is indeed to ignore or, at least, selectively use this Baudrillardian critique of war's and representation's violence and virulence. But another posture, one we advocate, is to take another look at the violence of representation itself, at the virulence of the West and the global, and at modernity's own implosive history—which, of course, is the history of representation, too—to which today's digitalized technologies and media owe their significance and, at times, urgency.

III. From Explosive Violence to Implosive Virulence

As early as in *The System of Objects* (1968), Baudrillard argued that technological development in the West was undergoing a significant reorientation from the outward to the inward. The material reproduction of the spatial, boisterous, expansive technological realities and imaginaries of the industrial era began to turn toward representational technologies. Today, we may understand this reorientation to have culminated in the overarching category of digital representation. We now find ourselves not with spaceships or intergalactic travel, but with infinite prequels and sequels of the *Star Trek* and *Star Wars* franchises, each featuring more impressive and realistic computer graphic imaging than the previous one, and each serving as a point of reference for the next.

The age of mechanical reproduction, characterized by such innovations as the

motor vehicle, the airplane, and the rocket ship, gradually gave way to an intensification of its own signs and images that has culminated in what can be called digital reproduction. Digital reproduction is less occupied by realizations of spatial expansion than by the intensification of the efficiency of representation through computer-generated imagery, mobile smart phones, etc. The promise of a rational transfiguration of reality made through various vectors of knowledge production—philosophy, social critique, science, literary fiction, politics—gave way to a saturation/swarming of signs and images now asked to convey that very promise. With this overall logic in place, and whether this was announced before or not, we have also witnessed an apparent change from the production of technologies that navigate war to the imaging/representational technologies that reproduce it (Der Derian, 2001; Luke, 2009). The digital image, unlike the gun, the warhead, or the gas chamber, is instantaneous and infinitely reproducible. Herein lies its violence and virulence: the image belongs to a viral order of reproduction, and thus also proliferates through mere "contact" (electronic communication) between users. It is violent not like a bomb, but like a contagion (or, as we also see today with drones, the bomb/gun becomes what is triggered within seconds by the viral image).

The virulence of the digital/viral image does not exist in a vacuum. Wars too, in the most repugnant sense of the word, are viral phenomena. For if war proliferates like or through its image, there can no longer be any effective ethical or political opposition to it. Each opposition to war constitutes a kind of electronic "contact" operative through virulence. Thus not only is there no center of war anymore, but also no center for standing against it (for example, to be for or against terror in the context of today's global wars is an ever-shifting proposition, particularly for non-Western subjects that often are called in to align themselves in relation to the war on terror). The universal, once thought capable of ending wars, has been globalized, brought to the level of a global political economy of indifferent exchange. As Horkheimer and Adorno already told us, "Representation gives way to universal fungibility" (Horkheimer & Adorno, [1944] 2002: 7). And today, the only universal left is that of global, digital exchange. This explains how,

in the face of trauma, the turn to the immediacy of digital representation becomes a kind of universal gesture: a reflex, if not an abreaction, betraying a will to immediacy and universal meaning/information. It is here, perhaps, that we see most clearly the violence that comes with our being unhinged by the global. It is the violence of a "virtual global culture," which has "replaced universal concepts with screens, networks, immanence, numbers," and "is characterized by the supremacy of technical efficiency and positivity, total organization, integral circulation, and the equivalence of all exchanges" (Baudrillard, 2003). From this perspective, the virulence of information about war—the way it proliferates and evokes meaning through "viral media" networks such as blogs, Twitter, Facebook, Reddit, 4chan, etc.—is also part of a greater global virulence.

However, because the terms by which we refer to this so-called digital shift have also been leveled against one another in the total equivalence of sign/image exchange, they too become equally exchangeable variables dissolved into information. Thus, what is perhaps more important than tracing the empirical shift, or series of shifts, responsible for the movement from explosion to implosion, is to theorize the intensification of the desire for authenticity. It is through what Baudrillard refers to as the "categorical imperative of communication" that we face a global "state of terror […], an over-proximity of all things […], meeting with no resistance, and no halo, no aura." (Baudrillard, 1988: 27). This imperative of communication or information—which might also be understood as an imperative to represent social and political reality in a digital age—has been exacerbated by the development of more efficient/immediate electronic means of communication and representation. Thus, the "digital fog of war" is also characterized by a radical mobilization of so-called agents/actors—*the demos*—to communicate, and in doing so, to deepen a great collective uncertainty about the nature of war and the war event.

IV. Mediatization and the Draw of Communication

There is a fundamental confusion at the heart of the virulence/violence of the global: the confusion between communication and mediatization. Traditionally,

communication implied immediacy and sovereignty. Communication tends to describe an immediateinteraction or unmediated exchange between two independent, sovereignsubjects/actors, presumably for mutual benefit or the betterment of the social whole. Communication is a foundational theoretical root not only in the tradition of liberal political thought (from Hobbes to Rawls), but also in the history of modernity at large. On the other hand, mediatization has traditionally signified a loss of immediacy and the subsumption of sovereignty/autonomy (and perhaps free-will, too)under representation. As Paul Virilio points out, "*MEDIATIZATION* was the opposite of *COMMUNICATIONS*; it was a relic of feudal barbarity, of ancient ostracism. Up until the twentieth century, to be MEDIATIZED meant literally being stripped of one's IMMEDIATE RIGHTS" (Virilio, 1995: 6). Virilio describes Napoléon's strategic mediatization of territorial threats, whereby a sovereign would be conquered and, although rendered impotent, left in his formal position. The *appearance* of power and sovereignty remained.

The liberalization of the media has clear historico-linguistic roots in the opposite of what it purports to inaugurate as an open or free society. In effect, what appears as an ideology and process of liberation and democratic openness has its roots in disciplinary social control and management. Underlying the ideology of "freedom of information," even in its most benign interpretations and applications, are the historical effects of the broadening and deepening imperative of mediatization as informationalization.

Mediatization has its roots in a common strategy deployed by a sovereign (as Virilio intimated) required to mobilize a play of appearances in order to usurp, relocate, and re-concentrate power (as Machiavelli, for example, noted). It implies some sort of intervention in immediacy—a disruption whereby the mediator interferes, displaces and replaces the positions and relations of agents (Debrix, 2003: xxxiii-xxxiv). This, in a way, is a modality of sovereign exception too; one premised upon a capacity to disrupt existing relations and representations. According to Virilio, to be mediatized originally meant to be hollowed out and left as a mere shell. Long before the language of semiotics was developed, all that

remained of a mediatized prince was his *sign*—the signified and signifier, and along with them, power, legitimacy, substance, and subjectivity, could all be liquidated, dissolved, and exchanged. God, the sovereign, and all other modes of ontological anchoring crumbled under the weight of their own representations, eventually revealing their own absences. Thus, when in the early sixteenth century Nicolaus Copernicus laid ruin to the geocentric view of the universe in favor of his theory of heliocentrism, he might as well have thrown out centrism altogether (logocentrism withstanding). As Nietzsche wrote, "Since Copernicus, man seems to have got himself on an inclined plane—now he is slipping faster and faster away from the center into—what? into nothingness?'" (Nietzsche, [1887] 1989: 155). By displacing the centrality of the earth, Copernicus destabilized not only a single spatial narrative, but also the centrality, exceptionality, and singularity of human consciousness and its inter-subjective realization: civilization. By banishing the earth and all of its finite contents to obscurity in the unintelligible immensity of the cosmos, he also opened the possibility for reflecting upon the radical contingency of our own emergence: humanity, its civilization, and its subject as a cosmic accident.

Around the same time, but in the political sphere, Machiavelli rendered explicit through historico-theoretical narratives what so many strategists before him had already lived, embodied, and intuited. Namely, the interchangeability of centrality between subjects and the collapse of legitimate rule. Machiavelli demonstrated how one may utilize this fungibility to re-anchor sovereignty through strategic "plays of appearance" (Machiavelli, 1994: 53-55). And then there is Galileo, the "Father of Modern Science," whose technical improvements to the telescope furthered the project of Copernican displacement, but also provided new intelligibilities by extending our observational capabilities to further reaches of an unimaginably vast universe. "This is the moment," Baudrillard remarks on this scientific achievement, "when human beings, while setting about analysing and transforming the world, take their leave of it, while at the same time lending it force of reality. We may say, then, that the real world begins, paradoxically, to

disappear at the very same time as it begins to exist" (Baudrillard, 2009: 11). For Baudrillard, by the time something is apparent to us, we are already in its wake. What can be seen and understood is always what has long disappeared. Enlightenment thus marks the pinnacle of a kind of radical dissolution. "To analyse," Baudrillard reminds us, "means literally 'to dissolve'" (Baudrillard, 2009: 11).

It is no coincidence that by the time of the Enlightenment, what Copernicus had destabilized—sovereignty and the centrality of civilization—became championedpolitical realities in the broad spectrum of liberal social contract theory. It is only after the de-centering of "man" and civilization that both become explicitly represented as central, and the whole legal/juridical/ethical edifice imagined by classical liberalism begins to take hold. If not for the strategic mediatization between warring sovereigns who, in effect, dissolved each other's legitimacy, Hobbes would have had a harder time envisaging a theory of sovereignty desperate enough to locate true legitimacy—the authenticity of rule—into something like a "representative" consent to rule (Hobbes, 1994). In other words, was Hobbes not already operating at the level of a re-anchoring of legitimacy (and legitimation of the sovereign, first and foremost), after it had in fact already vanished? Legitimacy only appears as a categorical foundation of political order once it experiences its own negation. Legitimacy becomes a matter of political concern when the sovereign, the *demos*, possibly "man" is in need of reconstitution. This is the mediatizing work of representation too. Representation murders what it re-presents, but it eventually tries to re-solidify or re-constitute that which it has murdered in the first place. In this sense, and as we hinted at above, representations of war in a mediatized/digitized age operate according to a similar principle. They have always already annihilated war's possibility (as an event), thus evoking Baudrillard's provocative claim that "the gulf war did not take place." But representations have also done away with all of war's "real" boundaries, constraints, causes, and temporal motivations/markers, thus rendering it ever present, continuous, foggy, and virulently operative.

Through the dense manifold of classical liberalism, Western civilization has sought to re-solidify or re-anchoritself around a center (sovereignty, the state, the subject, the *demos*, war, etc.), but, paradoxically, by way of its eccentricity. It has tried to re-legitimate itself through the threat of its illegitimacy. And it has attempted to re-realize itself by way of its ever mediatized un-reality (or, better yet, its undecidability as either real or unreal, thus leaving us with hyper-reality). The social contract—abstractly understood as our social ascent from the chaotic substratum of instinct and originary violence, or primordial war—thus had to reconnect with several theological functions of centralization, legitimation, and meaning production, even if the organization of political power had lost any semblance of organic, much less ordained, origins.

This historical tendency of representation to dissolve and re-solidify may be broadly referred to as hyper-mediatization, which, as we have suggested, is something deeply rooted in the representation of war too. Within this tendency, communication and informationplay important and functional roles as mechanisms of social codification/signification/meaning-making. To be sure, communication/information is the draw toward something absent—the social real, we will say—precisely *because* of its absence; it is a productive void in the third order of simulation (Baudrillard, 1983: 11). The imperative to communicate and, today, to propagate information (digitally, if at all possible) is most likely born of the profound undesirability of the absence of a core, of sovereignty, of social reality, or of the subject, which, paradoxically, efforts to communicate further annihilate by putting into circulation a series of appearances. The "signs of the real" are substituted for "the real itself," Baudrillard writes. It is "an operation to deter every real process by its operational double, a metastable, programmatic, perfect descriptive machine" (Baudrillard, 1983: 4).

V. Conclusion

To wish to communicate some truth about war, to seek to represent it, to insist on explaining it or even justifying it (or one's opposition to it) may be an ethical gesture. But to communicate, to seek and give meaning, or indeed to want to

represent war (even by way of the immediacy or "real-time" effect of digitalized media) is still about thickening its fog. The representation of war, whatever form it takes, will never be much more than endless information/prognostication, all the more so since war will never take place (since it will always already have taken place). Thus, seeking to make sense of war through/as representation will always be a matter of describing a pathology without disease. Only proliferated symptoms will be made visible and granted significance in the flow of information and the desperate quest for meaning. Symptoms of a proliferated war without a core, a meaning, a purpose, or a subject are everywhere around us. They make up our mediatized universe of war and/as terror. They are both the substance and appearance relayed by digital technologies and media on behalf of a *demos* that itself has become the medium, a network that processes and distributes images and events. As Baudrillard writes, "Every event today is virtually inconsequential, open to all possible interpretations, none of which could determine its meaning: the equiprobability of all causes and of all consequences" (Baudrillard, 2008: 36). It is indeed in this manner that war gains its momentum and virulence. Not to recognize this representational virulence, and further to demand that war reveal an origin, a cause, a responsibility, or indeed a subject or object that could grant it meaning is to reproduce its fog and, possibly, to acquiesce to its violence. After all, there is no such thing as a benign representation or appearance (of war, or anything else, for that matter).

The various attempts at representing, explaining, justifying, or making sense of war and its violence, often in traditional referential geopolitical terms, are involved in an infinite splitting of what war must be or mean as much as they are concerned with a deepening and widening of the violence/virulence of its (global) representation. In its dissolution/dissemination through political analysis, war reveals its violent representational forms. On the one hand, analytically dissolved and disseminated, war becomes unlocalizable, thus, in a way impossible to contain. It can no longer "take place." On the other hand, although it can no longer be waged in one place, it still must proliferate its effects virally and virulently. Representationally unhinged from any object (and reifying no particular

subject or, rather, all sorts of subjects at once), war can no longer be geopolitically maintained, cultivated, and made use of by way of any of the (modern) categories that once sought to give it gravity: geography, ideology, morality, sovereignty, domination, or history. Thus, war becomes strategically useless even if, tactically, it betrays the violence or virulence of representation everywhere it is found. Just like in the image of terror/terrorism, all we witness, then, is panic. Panic war is a "floating reality… where we live on the edge of ecstasy and dread" (Kroker, Kroker, and Cook, 1989: 14).

Ungrounded, strategically indifferent, and yet representationally effective and virulent, panic war no longer stands in as the "substantial event" of time/history, as the referential hinge that allows passage from one human epoch to the next. Today, Janus, the God of passages, transitions, and attributions of meaning in time, may still be worried about war. But Janus must now fixate his gaze in all directions (thankfully, today's Janus is likely to have access to YouTube…). The once mythologized and later romanticized uniqueness of Janus' bioptic talents has been transmuted into an impossible requirement of omniscience, omnivoyance, and omnipresence. The temple of Janus, which was once a symbolic spatial conduit for the inertia of time, has collapsed under the weight of an indifferent, perhaps more catastrophic, inertia: the inertia not of war's violence (counter-actable through peace), but rather of the violence of war's representation (that knows no bounds and no antagonisms). War no longer takes place in order to mediate time or to usher in a strategic (political) change through conflict. Perhaps it never really did. Rather, as representation, war tactically preserves and perpetuates violent conflicts and a propensity for doing away with things (starting with meaning) through a kind of digital/informational immanence (today's preferred version of representation or mediation).

Toward what ends/futures does this war and its representation reproduce themselves virally and virulently? Or, better yet, what compels us, if anything at all, to reproduce this war and its violence through our fascination with real-time digital technologies? Is it perhaps that the ideal of world peace still seduce us and

that we must continue to represent war so that, if nothing else, we can always be there to try to antagonize it? Or is it perhaps instead that we harbor a secret wish of global/total annihilation, some will to terror hidden just beneath cognition, perhaps to unsettle regimes of representation, meaning, and truth once and for all? Are we and our digitized technologies of immediation advancing boldly in the face of war and war's representation in the hope that our will to total visibility/informationality can function as the accursed share of the system? Is it such a principle (today's secret death wish, perhaps), or is it another principle, more conventional but just as sinister perhaps, the will to communicate in the open that can explain that our opinions, theories, explanations, blogs, tweets, statuses, SMS's, emails, video recordings, and photographs of war/terror/agony have to surface in pixels and circulate by way of viral imaging? Could it be that war is merely an excrescence, "[a]n indefinite extension: metastasis" (Baudrillard, 2008: 52)? Read this way, whether it has a logic, whether it can be explained, whether it can even be put into language or in representation, war would be like some sort of cancerous growth, exceeding temporal/transitional configurations. "In a system where things are increasingly governed by chance," Baudrillard writes, "finality turns into delirium, and elements develop that know only too well how to exceed their end—until they wind up invading the whole system" (Baudrillard, 2008: 30). Without a locatable or intelligible object/subject, but equipped with the representational virulence of the digital, war becomes an in(de)terminable principle of decomposition and decay.

Perhaps we need to learn to recognize the symptoms of this decomposition/decay, the symptoms of this fatal strategy (or tactics) of the real and representation. First and foremost, we probably need to recognize that what is often taken today to be a beacon of democratic immediacy and authenticity—new digital technologies of representation/mediatization as disembodied extensions of alleged human subjects/agents—is precisely what incants and then performs the totality, globality, virtuality, and inescapability of war and its violence. Indeed, the more we think we see, and the more quickly and directly we think we can capture "our" reality, the deeper we are in war's digital

fog and the more irremediably involved we are in the maintenance of its virulence.

To give Baudrillard the last word, at least for now, any power (representational, digital, virulent) that seeks to "absorb the negative […] is devoured by what it absorbs" (Baudrillard, 2010: 59).

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[Main Page]   [Contents]   [Editorial Board]   [Submissions]