

# WAR & ART IN THE SCREENIC ERA

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Using the work of Joseph DeLappe, Anne-Marie Schleiner, Wafaa Bilal, and others as "objects to think with," this paper draws on images from both military weapons systems and digital media artists to sketch a critical phenomenology of the surface at the intersection of human sensoria and technological media in the context of war.

## Screen War

The U.S. military has been testing a new surveillance system – ominously named Gorgon Stare – that can track and transmit real-time movement across an entire town. [1] The system consists of a spherical array of nine cameras attached to the belly of an aerial drone. Each \$17.5 million pod weighs 1100 pounds and shoots at two frames-per-second at half-meter resolution, creating live three-dimensional geo-intelligence of an area. What it currently lacks in frame rate it makes up for in coverage. It utilizes tagging and other metadata in conjunction with ESPN-like instant replay software to organize different views and disperse them to various screens such as the tablets of soldiers on the ground and the centralized databases of Air Force analysts. The goal of this technology is to supplement the perceptual limitations of physical battlespace with a corresponding dynamic screen-based representation. Even though the system has thus far proved buggy and unreliable, its very existence reveals a long-enduring military fantasy of total vision – to integrate and suture the optical world and the screen world in order to create a more perfect, totalizing picture.

Such a system is rooted in a first-person screen subjectivity that exposes, dominates, and annihilates its 'other' while limiting its own exposure. It is a disembodied point-of-view that sees but cannot be seen, that targets but cannot be targeted, that shoots but cannot be shot. More Sauron than Gorgon, this omniscient eye that can see everything – that spies, targets, and shoots – is a cyborg construct of human and machine operations situated within the larger screen ecology of war. It is but one screen cluster within the imbricated screen-space of war that includes the weaponized screens of targeting and surveillance, the news screens of information and entertainment, and the video-game screens of fantasy and training. The screen has become a domain of war – a key battlespace of its own, distinct from but inseparably interfaced with 'real' battlespaces of war where target acquisition, televised news spectacle, and video game graphics intersect and entangle.

Examples of the screenic entanglement of war and media technologies are not difficult to locate: the handheld footage provided by embedded television reporters shares the same intense proximity to battle as that of soldiers' homemade YouTube videos, which in turn recreate the perspective of first-person shooter video games (in several YouTube videos of patrol missions, for example, soldiers have explicitly recreated the first-person video game perspective by attaching their digital camcorders to their helmets). [2] [3] A more disturbing overlap, perhaps, can be found in the visual similarities between the "AC-130 Gunship" level in the video game *Call of Duty*, for example, and the Wikileaks-ed "Collateral Murder" footage taken from the onboard targeting screen of a U.S. Apache attack helicopter from a

2007 mission over Baghdad. [4] In *Call of Duty*, players acquire and destroy targets from an aerial perspective. Likewise, in the Wikileaks video we witness, through a similar onboard targeting screen, the slaying of about a dozen people including two Reuters news employees with the Apache's 30-millimeter cannons. The game and the footage share the same black-and-white, cross-haired perspective and the squelchy audio of seemingly casual radio communication by the pilots and gunners as they carry out their destruction. Furthermore, they share a mode of vision structured by the same military fantasy of weaponized vision. Of course, despite their aesthetic similarity, they are not the same. Equating the game and Apache footage both trivializes war ("it's just like a game") and trumps up the game ("it's just like war"). There is, after all, a significant difference between war-like games and game-like wars – one is ostensibly for fun and the other for death. Rather, the video game and the Apache share a screenic kinship; they live in the same media ecology. Game-makers strive for the most intense version of war's reality in their games while war-makers strive for the game's reality in war. This aesthetic and ideological kinship, and the ways that we address it and are addressed by it, is the focus of this paper.

### Screenic Media Ecology

The screen, in all of these contexts, is more than a surface of representation; it belongs to and creates the event. Under these medial conditions, the distinctions erode between the screens on which war is waged and the screens on which it is witnessed. For example, the "Collateral Murder" video serves as not only potential proof of a crime, but is also the very screen through which the crime took place. Similarly, the infamous digital snapshots of the abuses at Abu Ghraib served simultaneously as both a record of and an implement of torture. The virtual screen world in these cases is indelibly linked to – and determinant of – events in the 'actual' world. During the first Gulf War, Paul Virilio located a succinct picture of this interplay between the screen and the world in the form of stealth warplanes like the F117a: they are war objects designed not only with consideration for their physical presence in flight but also with consideration for their screen presence (or lack of one). [5] They are designed to stay both in the air and off the screen.

In all these cases the boundaries between war fantasies and war acts, between information and propaganda, between document and spectacle come under question. Military technologies like Gorgon Stare and others raise important questions about the phenomenology of the war screen. How do we address this transmedial screen phenomena? What are the consequences of this evermore distant and robotic weaponry? What is the nature of virtual war or netwar in relation to the notion of a lived, embodied world? What are the modes of protest or resistance to a war machine increasingly comprised of autonomous robotic systems and cyborg constructs? Do drone operators dream of electric sheep?

How do we address these entangled screens of war? And how do we respond to the address of the screen? These are questions of an ecological nature. The phrase 'media ecology,' though perhaps overdetermined, is, as Matthew Fuller elaborates in *Media Ecologies*, a concept that perhaps best describes the complex, layered, "multiple relations of media dimensionality" that structures our "life in media" (including our wars in media). [6] The interpenetrated nature of the screen world, especially in the context of war, requires an ecological concept of the surface, what one might, in the spirit of Fuller, Félix Guattari, and others, call 'the screenic' – a transmedial, ethico-aesthetic concept referring to the transformation of complex medial, technological, bodily, and social operations into a surface of perceivable events. More than specific media technologies, the screenic addresses the interpenetration of bodies, machines, and images of war across various junctures of media convergence and divergence. Furthermore, it addresses the integration and disintegration of human sensoria within the expanding nexus

of screen networks spanning from television to the handheld devices and all the targets, targeters, and spectators interfaced therein. The screenic, then, is a kind of ecology of the surface where we address and are addressed by a host of technocorporeal and technosensory concerns, where the screen can serve as a site of weaponization (through surveillance, targeting, and tele-control), of record (through documentary and journalism) and of resistance (through hacktivism, art, and other tactical interventions).

## Screenic Interventions

How then do artists transform the virtual milieu of war into a mode of resistance? Some artists have responded to the militarized screen by disconnecting from it. In other words, they engage the screens and digital objects of war by transposing them to decidedly more durable substrates. They defamiliarize the screen by resituating its images elsewhere. They are screen-displacers. Conversely, other artists, hackers, modders, and activists attempt to think about (and with) war media by penetrating its screen space, if only fleetingly. Rather than reframe the screen in another context, these artists interface with the screenic and, as Rita Raley argues in *Tactical Media*, seek out ways to “evolve the virtual effects of war into a mode of resistance.” [7] They are screen-modifiers.

Screen-displacers seek a sustained, un-flickering response to the war screen as we can see in several artists’ responses to the digital snapshots of abuse at Abu Ghraib: Richard Serra’s crude charcoal sketch of the man on box at Abu Ghraib with “STOP BUSH” scrawled on it like a hurried piece of graffiti or a cave painting; Susan Crile’s delicate chalk and pastel renderings of the Abu Ghraib photographs where light white lines and vast negative space are punctured by the dramatic bold colors of an interrogator’s black gloves or a prisoner’s green hood; Fernando Botero’s painted recreations of the Abu Ghraib photographs, where his comically rotund figures take on a moral and emotional weight in their excess; Martha Rosler’s reboot of her Vietnam era collages *Bringing the War Home*, where conflict zones, comfort zones, and consumption zones collide when, for example, American soldiers are pasted into the idyllic domestic space of a magazine-ad living room; and, lastly, Jenny Holzer’s *Redaction Paintings*, which make a public spectacle of various redacted government documents related to torture, detainment, and the “war on terror.” Each of these works creates an intervention that, rather than entering the screen frame through cyber art practices, reframes the screen in a different milieu. They are objects that think about the screen by displacing it.

The practices of digital artists, on the other hand, have sought a more embedded approach that addresses, reframes, and thinks through (and with) emerging militarized modes of perception. Such tactical art practices seek to interfere with, disrupt, or otherwise interface with the screens of war. Rather than displace the screenic, they place themselves within it. Over the last decade, artists like Joseph DeLappe, Anne-Marie Schleiner, and Wafaa Bilal have experimented with the tactic of video game intervention, which utilizes game space to disrupt, if only fleetingly, our acquiescence to the screenic space of war.

In *dead-in-iraq* (2006), DeLappe entered the online first-person shooter *America’s Army*, a tax-payer-funded recruiting and PR tool for the U.S. Army. [8] As a neutral non-participant, rather than play the game, DeLappe, under the screen name “dead-in-iraq,” proceeded to type the names of dead American soldiers in the game’s chat box. If his avatar was killed he would resume typing upon regeneration. Over the course of the project, DeLappe logged the name, rank, service branch, and date of death of over

4000 American casualties of the Iraq War. Some of the players that encountered *dead-in-iraq* were indifferent, some were curious observers, and others went so far as to protect his avatar. Many of the players who encountered DeLappe's project within the game, however, became upset or defensive. To them, *dead-in-iraq* was not only breaking the social contract of the game by not playing, but he was also politicizing their fun. By interrupting the game with the names of the dead, he momentarily punctured a riskless and regenerative military fantasy.

In *Velvet-Strike* (2002), Schleiner, along with Joan Leandre and Brody Condon, created an intervention in the game *Counter-Strike*, a mod of the popular first-person shooter *Half-Life*. [9] Instead of the usual "spray paints" players use to tag territories or mark kills within the game, *Velvet-Strike* invited players to create and use spray paints with often humorous or provocative counter-military messages including a soldier and an insurgent kissing. Like *dead-in-iraq*, *Velvet-Strike* garnered interest in the press and in some corners of the art world, but many players within the game's online community were upset with the intervention into their game. Rather than see *Velvet-Strike* as a challenge to the burgeoning post-9/11 militarized discourse, they saw it as an attack aimed directly at the game itself.

In *Virtual Jihadi* (2008), the Iraqi-born artist Wafaa Bilal modified the game *The Night of Bush Capturing*, an Al-Qaeda-made mod of the popular *Quest for Saddam*. [10] In the original *Quest*, players fight stereotypically mustachioed Iraqis with the ultimate goal of killing Saddam Hussein. The Al-Qaeda mod reverses the premise, making the goal to kill George W. Bush. For his intervention, Bilal placed an avatar of himself as a suicide bomber in Al Qaeda's mod of the game. The work drew controversy and the original exhibition at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Troy, New York was shut down by the school's administrators. Those who opposed the exhibition saw Bilal's work as pro-terrorist project and failed to see it as nuanced attempt to create an alternative narrative through a hybrid of autobiographical details and the game's narrative. Bilal's stated goal was to investigate the inherent racism within Western media depictions of the Arab world and the conditions under which terrorist recruitment becomes an option. In general, Bilal's work has involved challenging Western modes of watching 21st-century war. Bilal's work involves modifying both skin and screen by implanting his body into technologically mediated environments and, conversely, implanting technologies (surgically) into his body: in *Domestic Tension* (2007) (aka "Shoot an Iraqi") Bilal created a web-based installation in which participants could login and shoot a remote-controlled paintball gun at him; *...and Counting* (2010), was a 24-hour tattoo project in which dots of visible and invisible (UV) inks on his back represented American and Iraqi dead respectively; and, most recently, in *3rdi* (2011), Bilal has constructed a cyborg experiment in which a camera that is surgically implanted in the back of his head, beams images to a museum in Doha, Qatar.

Each of these artists addresses the medial entanglements of the screenic by creating a glitch – an ephemeral moment of interference – that attempts to temporarily disrupt the accepted screen world and, in doing so, disrupt the ideology that underwrites it. By engaging video-game interfaces and interactions, surveillance technologies, robotics, mass media, internet cultures, and social networks, such art practices construct situations that fleetingly expose the screenic entanglement of bodies and media technologies within digitally mediated visual environments. The interventions are aimed less at the games themselves and more at the perceptive practices that structure the waging and witnessing of modern war. These interventions invite a critical dissonance that allows us to not only see the game, but more importantly to see ourselves gaming in the context of virtual war.

As Rita Raley has observed, such interventions are inherently temporary, ephemeral, and aleatory. "Tactical media," she says, "signifies the intervention and disruption of a dominant semiotic regime, the tem-

porary creation of a situation in which signs, messages, and narratives are set into play and critical thinking becomes possible." [11] They are tactical, not strategic, because their outcomes are uncontrollable and unpredictable. Their most elucidatory moments can arise out of accident and failure. They are rooted in contingency. They are timely, but they do not last; all that remains are secondary objects such as screenshots, videos, photographs, and bits of code. What, then, do these tactical media interventions accomplish? Are they part of real political change or just fleeting commentary? Are they a mode of resistance or a gesture toward resistance? What kind of action is cyber intervention?

### For Laughs, For Lulz

In a recent *New Yorker* essay, titled "For Laughs," about the conceptual artist Francis Alÿs, Peter Schjeldahl writes, "Most artists are still what artists have always been: people who make things. But the past half century has seen an increase, in number and in prestige, of artists as conceptual performers: people who chiefly do things, whatever their auxiliary output of pictures and objects." [12] Of course, "making" and "doing" are not as mutually exclusive as Schjeldahl suggests here, but his distinction does point to two different kinds of art objects: for makers, the object, itself, is the work and for doers, the remaining objects are a record of the work, not the work itself. Artists such as DeLappe, Schleiner, and Bilal are, at the end of the day, like Alÿs, doers insofar as their work is more event than thing. The work is lost save for a trail of text, code, screenshots, and clips. This kind of "doing" is what gives tactical media art its temporary, ephemeral, and aleatory qualities – the qualities of laughter and mischief.

The themes that DeLappe, Schleiner, and Bilal tackle are often serious and somber – not "for laughs" – but the nature of their work is mischievous. They break the rules of the game and create little glitches in the screen world. At about the same time that Schjeldahl published "For Laughs," a network of hackers calling themselves Lulz Security, or LulzSec, carried out a series of short-lived, but highly publicized hacks that exploited and exposed security loopholes on several high-value sites including the U.S. Congress and the C.I.A. LulzSec portrayed themselves as a band of merry hacksters who, like Alÿs, did it "for the laughs," or in their case "for the lulz." Lulz – which is modified internet-speak for LOLs or "laughs out loud" – in addition to laughter, also connotes the perhaps more radical idea of "lulls," a break in the flow of things. If there is no way outside of the techno-military screen world, perhaps the lulls and lulz of tactical media intervention become a gesture of resistance that, though it cannot break the frame, does manage, for a moment, to crack the surface. Somewhere between Alÿs and LulzSec, the screenic interventions of artists like DeLappe, Schleiner, and Bilal seek ways to penetrate the weaponized surface – to create lulls in its illusive continuity, to be the wily, regenerative Prometheus in the face of the Gorgon's stare.

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