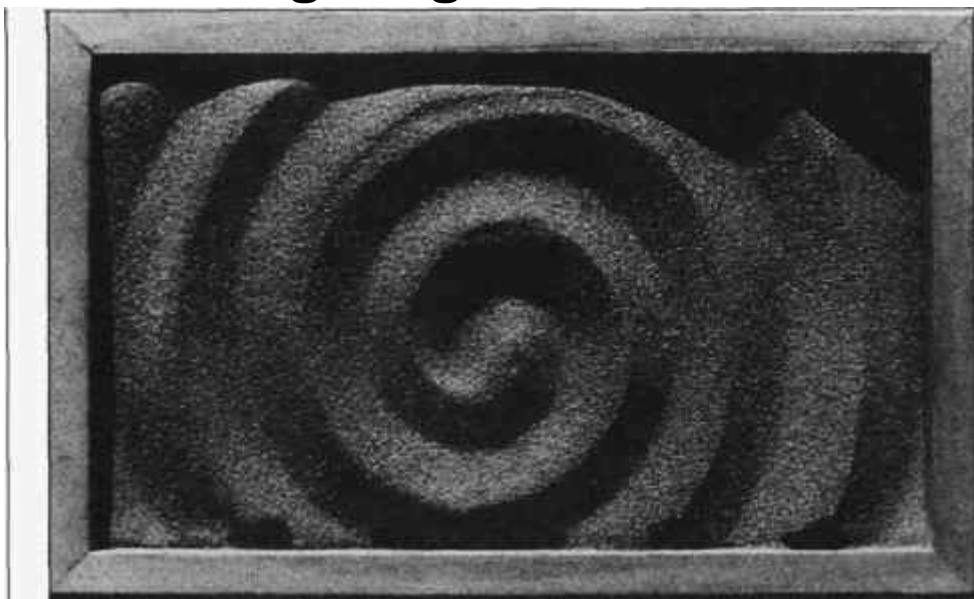


Dick Hebdige stands back from the virtual war

## Bombing Logic



We are 'involved' in the most thoroughly mediated war in history but now more than ever vicarious contact with the front line via blanket news coverage fails to guarantee comprehensibility, still less access to the truth. The battlefield today is electronic. Wars are waged, as ever, over real territory and real spheres of influence. But conflicts between 'major players' are now also conducted in a 'virtual' space where rival hypothetical scenarios, 'realised' as computer simulations, fight it out over the data supplied by satellites.

Meanwhile, hygienically edited highlights of the action get replayed nightly on the news through ghostly green videos shot through the night-sight viewfinders of airborne artillery. In this screened space anything can happen but little can be verified.

The Gulf war has demonstrated that the mere accumulation of data doesn't confer an automatic advantage unless it is complemented by quality analysis and contextual detail. Witness, for example, the wildly discrepant assessments of the effectiveness of allied air-raids in the first days of the war or the 'classification error' which led to the deaths of hundreds of civilians in Baghdad.

Decoy and sabotage have moved far beyond Saddam's cardboard tanks and missile

launchers. These strategies are now incorporated into weapons design in the form of 'logic bombs' - computer viruses built into weapons systems sold for export, which are programmed to go off when targeted on the system's country of origin. The existence of such systems is less important than the fact that they are technically feasible and get reported as such.

The speed, spread and penetration of electronic communications mean that these ploys play an increasing public role not just in the 'theatre' of military operations but also in the diplomatic wrangling which custom decrees takes place 'behind the scenes'. Radio Baghdad's offer to withdraw from Kuwait, for example, was broadcast in advance of Gorbachev's meeting with Tariq Aziz to raise the meeting's diplomatic stakes.

The role of information in an internationally mediated environment has sinister implications when combined with the new high-tech modes of warfare currently being tested in the Gulf. As tv onlookers we are placed at the centre of events no human being could ever witness in the flesh, by close-ups of a bomb's-eye view of the interior of a ventilator shaft right up to the moment of impact.

But the larger picture is

systematically distorted by the military and political calculations concerning the strategic uses of information and disinformation. Whole chunks of 'enemy territory' are 'disappeared' by means of censorship, radar and the wholesale destruction of Iraqi communications facilities. Politically as well as militarily sensitive targets are also 'taken out' in this process.

Thus in a bid to weaken Arab support for allied action, Saddam turned the bunker deaths of Iraqi citizens into an international photo-opportunity while allied and Iraqi intelligence continue to collude in suppressing images of the dead Iraqi conscripts slaughtered by the bombing of Kuwait. With the BBC 'illustrating' the cluster bombing of Iraqi airfields with an arms manufacturer's demonstration video, tv's claim to 'show it like it is' in 1990 appears as obscene as it did in the Falklands war.

Even more than in the earlier conflict, direct vetting of journalists' copy and reliance on allied debriefings ensure that military priorities squeeze out alternative perspectives and agendas. When reduced still further in the fires of competing Arab nationalist and allied 'neo-internationalist' populisms, this urge to simplicity threatens to distil

the conflict into an opposition between Good and Evil. However, the fact that the polls seem to indicate that gung-ho reductionism hasn't really taken off this time round suggests a significant advance on the Falklands' spirit.

It may be that this is the first post-modern war, not just because it's 'screened' but because the consensus in the West for war appears to be reluctant. It remains unconvinced about the plausibility of 'ultimate victory' in the face of the region's myriad problems and widespread anti-Western animus and sceptical towards the categories of 'Goodies v Baddies', which have been used in the past to call the West to arms.

It is significant that PJ O'Rourke reports in the *Observer* that no pejorative term has been coined among allied troops for the Iraqis. 'There is no Gook or Kraut or Nip for this war', he writes, 'and the only Iraqi jokes I've heard have been on the telephone from back home'. Like the rest of us, the soldiers learn what is happening in the Gulf by watching CNN.

But there are other lessons to be drawn from what the war makes visible - in the image of a desert war bogged down in muddy trenches worthy of the Somme in the wettest Saudi winter in memory or in the prophetic footage of cormorants drowning in the worst oil disaster yet recorded. For the world's first totally screened war has placed a mirror at our disposal. In it we can see reflected the ecological, psychological, spiritual damage and the massive human waste of this war.

These are the products of a technological mastery untempered by a political imagination capable of either managing it in the interest of the planet, or of inventing a machinery capable of arbitrating between differences of interest without condoning the annihilation of one side or the other. The challenge - more urgent now than it was even in the cold war - is to think differently and to act otherwise.