

Arthur Kroker on cyberwar

What does it mean that war is now mediated through technology?

Today not only the act of war itself, but also the perception of war is a technological event. In a significant way, there are always two theatres of war: actual battlefields with real casualties and immense suffering, and hyperreal battlefields where the ultimate objective of the war machine is to conquer public opinion and manipulate human imagination. Particularly since 9/11 and the prosecution of the so-called “war on terrorism,” we live in a media environment which is aimed at the total mobilization of the population for warfare. For example, in the American “homeland,” mobilization of the population is psychologically conditioned by an image matrix, fostering deep feelings of fear and insecurity. This is reinforced daily by the mass media operating as a repetition-machine: repeating, that is, the message of the threatening “terrorist” Other. For those living in the increasingly armed bunker of North America and Europe, we don’t experience wars in any way except through the psychological control of perception through mass media, particularly television. The delivery of weapons – themselves intensely sophisticated forms of technology – are part of the same system. So tech-mediated war is the total mobilization for warfare with us as its primary subjects and targets.

What is the effect of our seeing from the bomb’s eye view?

Perhaps human vision itself has now been literally harvested by the war machine. When we see the unfolding world from the bomb’s eye view, this would mean that what we traditionally have meant by human perception – vision, insight, ethical judgment, discriminating between reality and illusion – has been effectively shut down, almost surgically replaced by the virtual vision machine of the militarized imagination. We are suddenly rendered vulnerable to the new virtual myths about the supposedly hygienic character of posthuman warfare. For

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instance, the spectacle of the bomb's eye view supports the illusion of war as being about so-called "smart" bombs, which are hyped as controllable in their targeting trajectories, with few civilian casualties. The audience becomes a spectator of this act, but it's a complete fabrication. Only long after the first Iraq war was it revealed that many of the cruise missile shots, which were supposed to be precise in their "target acquisitions," may have been staged video shots. The reality of that war had to do with massive bombing raids and anti-personnel cluster weapons, all of which were deliberately aimed at civilian populations.

How do you respond to the argument that precision weapons are the reason behind lowered death rates in war since WWII?

This is a very complex question. Industrial wars such as World War II have a necessary accident: high casualty rates both among the civilian population and mass armies of soldiers. In the post-historical time of assured nuclear destruction, mass conflict was avoided but the planet witnessed a contagious growth of local political wars, many of which were directly linked to the struggle for global supremacy on the part of the bi-polar powers of America and Russia. In the unipolar world of American empire, power is maintained by military strategy aimed at "full spectrum dominance" by an increasingly cyberneticized military apparatus. The empire fights for total sovereignty both over space and time. It seeks to virtualize warfare, reducing the unpredictable nature of urban war to the cybernetic certainties of precision weapons and cruise missiles and laser-guided bombs. However, it is the fate of all otherworldly illusions to finally succumb to earthly realities. Consider the two Gulf Wars, which may have been state-managed in the language of precision weapons and low civilian casualty figures, but were typified by anti-personnel cluster bombs aimed at terrorizing the Iraqi populations. Mass media do not discuss Iraqi civilian casualties since it is in the nature of empires to literally disappear the humanity of scapegoated populations.

Perhaps we should keep in mind that the ultimate casualty in the new era of micro-warfare is the death of political hope and an ethics of reciprocity.

When you think about all the technological innovation that has come out of the military, is there room for celebration in the civilian sector at all?

No [laughs], I don't think so. I really don't think so. One of the agitprop propaganda tactics of the military in the space program, among others, is to say there's this incredible spillover of civilian applications for military technology, but that's silly because the base of military expenditure for the most part is what Steve Kurtz from the Critical Art Ensemble has called "useless technology." That is, military programs serve a very traditional anthropological function in society. The military is a site of sumptuary expenditure: it produces weaponry that are all about sacrificial violence, either sacrificing the human race as a whole as the end game of nuclear assured destruction or sacrificing chosen scapegoats as a way of appeasing the psychological anxieties and appetite for destruction of society. If weaponry is not used, then it is fated for technological oblivion: military culture today possesses, in fact, an enormous archive of outdated weaponry that can neither be effectively used on the battlefield or successfully recycled. Sometimes sumptuary military innovations such as spent uranium are recycled in the form of armor piercing artillery shells which will be discarded on foreign battlefields or, in the case of the present Iraqi war, sumptuary military expenditures take the form of a spectacular scene of sacrificial violence (the night bombing of Baghdad) which was probably aimed at the real media target of the campaign of "shock and awe," namely the domestic population of the American homeland. Could it be that the real crossover of military innovations is in the area of the militarization of the media imagination? If so, we are then speaking about the innovative design of moral perversity as the true spearhead of the empire of technology.

What do you think Marshall McLuhan would say today if he were alive?

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McLuhan might say that in moving so quickly from hot wars to cold wars and then to viral warfare, under the sign of biotechnology, that warfare itself has become its own virtual simulacrum: a self-contained, self-promoting, self-transforming virtual phenomenon stretching from the hard physics of dropping bombs and abusive physical violence to the psychological colonization of human perception. In this case, war is the skin worn by an empire that knows only the language of violence. For McLuhan, the empire of technology performs “psychic surgery” on the global village by means of the war on terrorism. While often viewed as a technotopian, McLuhan’s perspective on technology and its possible applications was deeply pessimistic. He was always too much of a critical Catholic humanist to rest easy with the media hype of the war machine.

If you could give advice on the topic of developing filters to see through the military-mediated reality, what would it be?

I would restate the advice given by [German philosopher] Karl Jaspers in *Man in the Modern Age*. He said, “In times of radical crisis, everything depends on the individual who says no, who, acting out of the courageous impulses of human solitude, refuses to assent to a power that would be totalizing.” Critical ethical judgment on the destiny of individual freedom is the very best filter of perception. As Albert Camus said in his wonderful book, *The Rebel*, “I rebel, therefore we exist.”

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