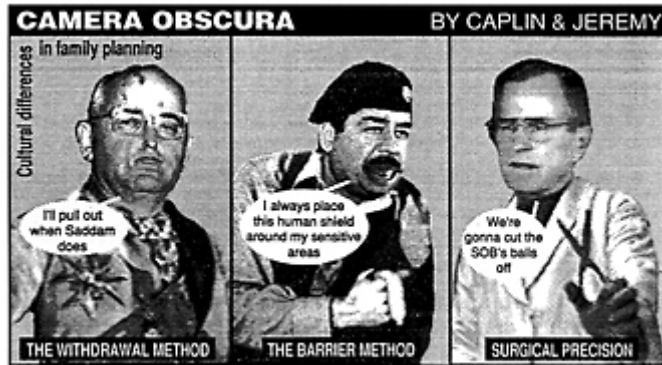


## The paranoid rationality of the Gulf massacre

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The 'Gulf War' executed and legitimated mass murder, in the name of defending civilized values. How did it gain a cultural hegemony in the West? As I will argue, the USA provoked disorder, mobilized primitive anxieties, and then contained them by symbolically exorcising evil demons. The episode also crystallized a modern, high-tech version of 'Orientalism' which denied the political basis of Arab nationalism by portraying it as a primitive irrationality, even as a perverse sexuality. In these ways, we were recruited into the paranoid rationality of the Gulf massacre.

### TECHNOLOGY AS IDEOLOGY

As this symposium concerns ideologies of technology, first I will suggest a way of conceptualizing technology as ideology. In capitalist society, the dominant ideology arises from the commodity form. Its mysterious character was deciphered by a much-maligned 19th-century philosopher, who analysed the commodity as fetishism and reification.

Through commodity exchange, the social characteristics of our labour appear as 'objective characteristics of the products of labour themselves, as the socio-natural properties of these things.' That is, we act as if social qualities and powers were attributes of things. In this way, we are controlled by the instruments and products of our labour. Moreover, 'To the producers, the social relations between their private labours appear as what they are: i.e., they do not appear as direct social relations between persons in their work, but rather as material [thing-like] relations between persons and social relations between things' (Marx, 1976, pp. 164-66, emphasis mine). Thus the term 'ideology' should describe our lived experience, our reified reality, not simply a misperception of that reality.

Marcuse extended Marx's concept of ideology to technological rationality. He attacked Max Weber for idealizing instrumental rationality as a value-free, calculable efficiency: such an ideology legitimates a specialized administration which dominates nature and humanity by reducing relations to quantifiable things. Everything is reduced to the administration of things: 'a reification of reason, reification as reason' (Marcuse, 1978, pp. 205, 217).

Moreover, by abstracting properties from their context, this formal rationality gives us only reified parts of objects (Marcuse, 1964). The decontextualizing practice of formal abstraction transforms objects of administration, especially people, into mere means for whatever purposes may be imposed (Feenberg, 1990). As Zygmunt Bauman (1989) has argued, the

Nazi Holocaust epitomized the rational, efficient processing of people as things; an entire society distanced itself morally and psychologically from the victims, whose extermination was justified as a social hygiene programme, carried out through a mundane technical division of labor.

Today, such reification is facilitated by computerization, by which we reduce reality to digitalized things. By attributing social powers to computers, and by fetishizing electronic 'information' for its precision and omniscience, we come to judge ourselves by the mechanical or cybernetic qualities that we have embodied in computers. The operator behaves as a virtual cyborg in the real-time, man-machine interface, which structures military weapons systems and others modeled after them, such as educational programs (Noble, 1989; Gray, 1989; Gray, forthcoming). Indeed, some innovators of interactive simulation have alternated between designing military and entertainment versions of similar technology (Roster, 1991, p. 56; Darley, 1991, p. 85).

Through such computer simulation, enemy threats — real or imaginary, human or machine — become precise grid locations, 'targeting information', abstracted from their human context. Moreover, we can experience the world through a fantasy of omnipotence, of total control over things. While Nintendo games may privatize such fantasies, the Gulf War publicized them, in the dual sense of validating and universalizing them. At the same time, the fantasized omnipotence requires containing anxieties of impotence, of vulnerability to unseen threats.

What do these images mean for perceiving reality? As computer imaging techniques become more sophisticated, their simulation capacity can devalue the objective authority of images in general. However, we should concern ourselves less with their 'truth' value than with the power relations which such images reify. Their political effect depends less on their technological origin than on an entire cultural rhetoric (Roster, 1991, pp. 61-63). In the Gulf War, computermediated images helped achieve a deadly persuasion, portraying a series of massacres as heroic combat ...

### **SADDAMIZED VICTIMS**

After it was claimed that Iraq had 'raped' Kuwait, that key verb became common parlance. Although there were reports of Iraqi soldiers literally raping residents of Kuwait, the term referred more symbolically to one country forcing a weaker one into submission. The metaphor served to displace the everyday submission which predated the invasion: that is, some Asian residents had already been virtual sex slaves of their Kuwaiti employers, and many immigrant workers had been denied basic civil rights, much less residency rights (Glavanis, 1991; Midnight Notes, 1992, pp. 2327). Rather than identify with those long-standing victims of the oil emirates, we were encouraged to identify with a unitary abstraction called 'the Kuwaiti people', collectively raped by Saddam. Here the nuances suggest Kuwait as a feminine victim, or perhaps as feminized by the 'rape' (cf. Stam, 1992, p. 121). What kind of rape was it? As one journalist quipped, the Iraqi people had been 'Saddamized' by their President before he did the same to the Kuwaitis. And the 'rape' of Kuwait symbolized the threatened buggery of the West itself. Shortly after the US attack began, an oil troubleshooter from Britain voiced his fear of the Iraqis, 'I wouldn't want them to bomb me — to send an Exocet up my backside' (Guardian, January 29, p.3; all newspaper references are to 1991) ...

As constructed by the mass media, Saddam Hussein was taken to personify a symbolic threat of buggery. As one writer later described the TV image of Western hostages in Baghdad: 'In the oriental imagination, the Saddam Hussein who strokes the hair of the child hostage on

television instantly becomes a devious pederast' (Wark, 1991, p. 9). Here a subconscious fear of buggery is more readily mobilized in Western mates, especially when linked with an imagined submission to the Third World.

Moreover, Saddam evoked a universal anxiety of moral violation, even chaos. As if Saddam's previous barbarity in Iraq were not sufficient, the mass media circulated a story of Iraqi soldiers evicting Kuwaiti babies from incubators — a story later discredited as sheer fabrication. One newspaper paper described Iraqi soldiers as 'vampires', literally draining the blood of civilians — 'atrocities beyond the belief of civilized society' (Daily Star, March 2, pp. 2-3).

These stories provided the mass media with a way to distinguish Iraq's behaviour from the atrocities committed earlier by the countries that pledged to save us from him. (Apart from their genocide and ecocide in Vietnam, consider also their complicity in the longstanding brutal occupations by Israel and Indonesia.) As in previous imperialist wars, rape and infanticide stories provided 'two primal, images of evil' for mobilizing the public: Saddam's name was often mispronounced so as to evoke Satan, sadism, Sodom and damnation (Kellner, 1992: 66-71).

Constructing the new Hitler, such images complemented superficial references to Nazism as irrational and sadistic. In that vein, Saddam was cast as the threat of a 'medieval' violence, almost naturally derived from irrationality.

This cultural rhetoric defined the political meaning of the video-game war. When the West's attack apparently went beyond the official mission to 'Free Kuwait', the ensuing destruction resonated with popular wishes to remove the source of primitive anxiety, only by civilized means, of course.

## CASTRATING METAPHORS

# Sucks to you!

*It's sweet idea to send up tyrant Saddam*

By PAULA WRIGHT

A SWEET taking the mickey out of Saddam Hussein has become a hot favourite with British troops in the Gulf.

New North firm F and M Dobson has agreed to give £1,000 worth of the Saddam Balls sweets to the forces.

The goodies, made at its Ponteland factory, were picked up by Mervyn Chisholm of Trade.

So far the chamber has managed to raise the equivalent of £2,000 worth of goods and cash for the troops with a series of fundraising drives.

Its spokesman Les Sage said they were overwhelmed by the generosity of people wanting to give things for the Gulf forces.

### Appreciated

"We have even had a local baker selling bread in the shape of Saddam Hussein's head," he explained.

"There has only been one complaint about the idea being in bad taste and I think people generally realize it is all for a good cause."

"I know these sweets have gone down well in the Gulf and I am sure Dobson's donation will be really appreciated."



Fuzilier Simon Davison and Dobson's supervisor Les Williams bite into Saddam's Balls. *Picture: BOB WILSON*

NEWCASTLE EVENING CHRONICLE, 23 February 1991

NEWCASTLE EVENING CHRONICAL, 23 February 1991

Some mass-media images revealed psychic defences against sexual anxieties. When the Sun newspaper set up a Gulf Lonely Hearts Club, it printed a pattern for its female readers to knit Willy Warmers [penis gloves] and send them to 'our boys in the Gulf.' A sweets' company

produced a new version, *Saddam's Balls*, and donated a large quantity to the troops: a local newspaper depicted a British soldier and a factory supervisor biting the sweets (*Newcastle Evening Chronicle*, February 23). At around the same time, in a satirical montage, Saddam was shown shielding his 'sensitive areas', while George Bush was a doctor wielding scissors with surgical precision, saying: 'We're gonna cut the SOB's balls off' (*Guardian Weekend magazine*, February 23-24, p. 7).

Although those castration images were intended humourously, they expressed unconscious anxieties about being bugged, while symbolically destroying the phantasized 'bad penis' of the father-persecutor. These were some subliminal meanings of George Bush's promise to 'kick ass.'

Castration metaphors, bound up with technological power, also arose in military language. British journalists and politicians spoke of the need to 'neuter' the Iraqi armed forces. Military strategists emphasized the necessity of winning 'air supremacy', not merely superiority; anything less than Third World submission was intolerable. Said Major-General Julian Thompson. 'It is vitally important that the Iraqi air force is rendered impotent before ground battle starts' (*Observer*, January 20, p. 11).

Some language conveyed stronger phallic imagery. Sir David Craig, Britain's Chief of Defence Staff, warned that Saddam had a 'very big military capability' and it was going 'to take some time to take it apart' (*Guardian* January 23, p. 2). Announcing his plans to attack the Iraqi army, General Colin Powell said, 'First we are going to cut it off; then we are going to kill it' (*Guardian* January 24, p. 1). When a 'techno-euphoria' celebrated the video images of precise hits, this had phallic and anal nuances, as expressed in the boast by US Colonel Alton Whitley. 'You pick precisely which target you want — the men's room or the ladies' room' (*Observer*, January 20, p. 10) ...

## **ELECTRONIC ORIENTALISM**

The Gulf War also updated racist representations of the Arab, in ways that Edward Said anticipated in *Orientalism*. In our electronic, post-modern world, he said, that standardization and cultural stereotyping have intensified the hold of the 19th-century imaginative demonology of 'the mysterious Orient' (Said, 1978, p. 26).

His book analyses the West's construction of a unitary 'Orient', whose essence persists through history and which can be adequately represented only by the West. The Orient remains uncivilized by virtue of resisting the combined morality and rationality of the West. Until recently, the sexual overtones were mainly about enlightened Westerners penetrating the resistant virgin, seducing the Arab into modernization. Short of such uplift, Arabs remained essentially biological beings, possessing an undifferentiated sexual drive. With the rise of Arab nationalism, revolutionary activity was portrayed as a bad kind of sexuality, as an incoherent sexual activity rather than as politics (*ibid.*, pp. 309-313).

In the Gulf War episode, those traditional stereotypes in themselves were inadequate for dehumanizing Iraq, which was the most secular, highly-educated and technologically advanced of the Arab countries. As we have seen, the earlier sexual allusions were updated. Saddam was demonized as a unique threat of irrational violence, of undifferentiated or even sadistic urges, symbolized by sodomy: he represented a perverse sexuality — now well armed.

Moreover, Iraq's cautious military approach was portrayed along the lines of the backward Arab as coy virgin. When Saddam decided to avoid a direct military confrontation with the US coalition's air force, he was described as 'hunkering down', almost cheating the surveillance systems of the West's rational game plan: 'Saddam's armies last week seemed to be enacting a travesty of the Arab motif of veiling and concealment ... [Saddam] makes a fairly gaudy display of mystique' (Time magazine, February 4, pp. 12-13).

These racist images emerged more clearly after the US massacre of civilians in the Amariya air-raid shelter. In this case, unusually, TV pictures showed us hundreds of shrouded corpses. In response, the US authorities insisted that they had recorded a precise hit on a 'positively identified military target'; they even blamed Saddam for putting civilians in a bunker (Kellner, 1992, pp, 297-309). The USA could only invoke its surgical precision as moral legitimation even though it was the precise targeting which allowed the missile to enter the ventilation shaft and incinerate all the people inside the shelter.

Yet the US response had an underlying logic: any attempt to evade penetration by the West's high-tech Panopticon simply confirms the guilt and irrationality of the devious Arab enemy. Any optical evasion becomes an omnipresent unseen threat of the unknown, which must be exterminated. This paranoid logic complements the USA's tendency to abandon the Cold War rationales for its electronic surveillance and weaponry, now redesigned explicitly for attacking the Third World (Klare, 1991). Reagan's arms-control director celebrated the Gulf War for demonstrating that SDI-type missiles 'can work, especially against the kind of Third World threat we're more likely to face than an all-out Soviet missile attack' (Adelman, 1991). Again, the psycho-political need for an enemy is projected onto hypothetical foreign threats.

## **NEW WORLD DISORDER**

Analogies and continuities with the Cold War run deeper than we might think. As before, the prime objective remains Western domination of the world's resources, partly by destabilizing all movements or regimes which resist that domination, As before, the USA goes beyond using disorder; indeed, the New World Order is promising to save us from threats which the USA has helped to create.

In an article written just after the Kuwait invasion, ex-CIA agent Philip Agee compared the Gulf crisis to the Korean one in 1950. In both cases there was a border crisis just waiting for escalation, where the US government made an invasion more likely to happen by signaling that it would not send troops to repel an invader; the USA then quickly gained UN authority to do so, and used that imprimatur to invade the original invader. As justification in Korea, US President Truman said, 'Our homes, our nation, all the things we believe in, are in great danger' — just as George Bush claimed to be defending 'our way of life' in the Gulf (Agee, 1991, p. 24) ...

The USA actually intensifies disorder in order to justify its global intervention and continued arms expenditure. Unlike the Cold War era, now even an erstwhile ally such as Saddam or Noriega can suddenly be demonized as the main threat to Western civilization, which must respond with new Crusades ...

## **HIGH-TECH BARBARISM**

Previously, popular anxieties could be focused upon the Red Empire, but now the perceived threat has become extended, through a paranoiac Panopticon. In the late 1980s, as the Soviet

Communist devil was disappearing, the US military justified buying its latest toys by claiming to protect us from uncertainty. Mere uncertainty may seem a poor substitute for an omnipresent threat of international Communism. However, through an extensive surveillance technology and video images, any country can become a simulated enemy, digitally reduced to a 'target-rich environment' (Robins & Levidow, 1991). In that way, we dehumanize people as mere things, whose hygienic annihilation allows us to distance ourselves morally from the human consequences.

By comparing Saddam to Hitler, our society denies the veritable Western sources of Nazism, particularly the West's Faustian worship of technique. Instead we project Europe's murderous, racist legacy onto the Third World (Stam, 1992, p. 119). While claiming to protect civilization from new Hitlers, we extend the bureaucratic-technological rationality which characterized the Nazi exterminations (cf. Bauman, 1909). As in earlier efficient massacres, we may try to distance ourselves psychologically from the victims. However, that pretence is belied by sexual metaphors, which express primitive anxieties. By symbolically castrating the bugger, we could contain the feared submission to a perverse sexuality, and even a feared collapse into psychic disorder; we could project disavowed, destructive parts of ourselves onto thing-like enemies.

Although such paranoid phantasies alone do not explain war, their mobilization does indicate how readily we become infantilized, yearn for a saviour, and treat our aggression as self-defence. As spectators, we can experience high-tech barbarism as if it were honorable combat. We can even imagine ourselves guiding the weapons, with surgically clean hands. If we are to resist this complicity, we will need to confront the paranoid rationality that evokes and contains our fears. In the Gulf War, paranoia structured the instrumental rationality of military action. A racist reifying language belied its nominal goal of saving humanity from barbarism. Although support for the war expressed desires for social collectivity, it remained psychopathological, by idealizing our own murderous aggression as angelic. Thus it is misguided to suggest that public support represented 'the desire for a communitarian solidarity with other people' (Stam, 1992, p. 122); this moral phrase more aptly describes the anti-war movement.

Indeed, war supporters often rejected information about the USA's victims. The problem here is less about people accepting the official 'truth' of propaganda images, than about their seeking refuge from uncertainty. The danger is that 'people will choose fantasy, and fantasy identification with power, over a threatening or intolerably dislocating social reality' (Roster, 1991, p. 63). Such fantasy now becomes particularly appealing: we are told that the West won the Cold War but we wonder what we have gained and fear that we have much to lose in the New World Disorder.

## **BEYOND PARANOID RATIONALITY**

The Gulf massacre illustrates the role of high-tech systems in mass psychopathology. A paranoid rationality, expressed in the machine-like self, combines an omnipotent fantasy of self-control with fear and aggression directed against the emotional and bodily limitations of mere mortals (Levidow & Robins, 1909, p. 172). This process extends commodity-type reification far beyond market relations, to our very sense of who we are. This dynamic belies the naive hopes of those who have idealized electronic information — as an instrument of participatory democracy, as a social prosthesis, or even as resistance to the commodity form (see computer gurus cited by Druckrey, 1991, pp. 22-23).

Rather, operating as a material ideology, electronic information constitutes a paranoiac environment: it structures thing-like relations between people, and social relations between things. If we are to subvert such reification of our collective social labor, then we will need somehow to de-reify technology, to appropriate its potential for mediating social relations between people. In so doing, we will need to find playful ways of handling our primitive anxieties, currently being manipulated in technological systems. Otherwise we will remain emotionally crippled, and complicit, in a paranoid rationality.

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