

Warring Opinions:  
An Investigation into the Sublime Aesthetic Narratives of Contemporary Warfare

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## Abstract

This project uses aesthetic concepts of the sublime as critical categories for exploring opinions and subjective responses to war as they are presented in selected soldiers' memoirs, literary theory, films, and public affairs—from World War I to the (ongoing) Gulf War. Representations of sublime force as well as sublime sacrifice and idealism permeate even “objective” journalistic accounts of warfare and inform the perspectives through which we engage with war in thought and feeling. The project argues that “opinion” is not merely a rationally measurable statistical phenomenon but an aesthetic problematic through which we experience ourselves in relation to the world. Soldiers' memoirs and public discourses narrate the trauma of war and express opinions that swing between and simultaneously uphold radically different positions: war as a sublime communal endeavor versus war as the destruction of social meaning. These opposing opinions reflect different aesthetic and narrative strategies: different ways of representing one's position in the world and of managing overpowering forces and emotions. Opinion itself is built and supported through our emotional narratives of sublime antagonism and/or sublime interest in the social world.

The critical thought of Hannah Arendt, J. Glenn Gray, Paul de Man, Walter Benjamin, Sigmund Freud, and Immanuel Kant are central to the analysis of sources throughout the project.

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## Introduction

Caught up in the whirlwind of wartime, one-sidedly informed, without distance from the great transformations that have already occurred or that are beginning to, and without a glimmer of the future taking shape, we ourselves lose our bearings with respect to the significance of impressions that crowd in on us as well as to the values of the judgments we form.

Sigmund Freud, "Thoughts for the Times on War and Death," as translated by Samuel Weber in *Targets of Opportunity: On the Militarization of Thinking*

You hate it... but your eyes do not.

Tim O'Brien, *The Things They Carried*

This project began with two related aesthetic experiences. First was the sight of the collapse of the World Trade Towers, which I heard about on the radio and was later stunned to see endlessly replaying on television. Second came crowds protesting the invasion of Iraq; these were the largest crowds I had ever seen and walked with for a political purpose. But I didn't think about the aesthetic dimension of these experiences at first. I was thinking about what people were thinking, and about the opinions that were manifested in the images they produced.

So, I researched public opinion. The tense opposition between patriotic unification and patriotic dissidence within the public field in first years after the September 11 event seemed to turn on opinion, yet I had difficulty uncovering ideas that adequately described the situation. The significance of opinion has passed through many historical permutations with regard to its strength or weakness as a form of knowledge, its private or public character, its servitude or challenge to the state, its visible performance or statistical measurement. Plato recognized it as a power less complete than knowledge but more complete than ignorance, participating in both being and non-

being, and not adequate to support action. For my inquiry, Hannah Arendt's reinterpretation of opinion's ancient significance, asserted after its status has risen and collapsed (and after the status of knowledge itself has also shifted), will prove important. The gradually developed link between opinion and particular collective spatial contexts is also central. Montaigne observed and questioned the cultural fact that a given "truth" can be "delimited by mountains and [become] a lie on the other side of those mountains."<sup>1</sup> His critique led toward the importance the term gained in the philosophy of Locke, Hume, and Rousseau, where opinion took on the status of a moral truth and law capable of challenging restrictive state governments and religious dogma, and potentially founding more equitable and just relations between people. Habermas has traced the political significance of opinion in its seventeenth- and eighteenth-century character as rational discourse on matters of knowledge, politics, religion, and morality in his *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. This text also traces the dissolution of opinion's public and rational integrity through the rise of consumer capitalism and commercial media. Under these conditions opinion loses its validity as a foundation for rational deliberation between individuals and moves toward its modern appearance in polarized positions that are passively consumed as mass-produced information. Opinion

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<sup>1</sup> My quotation comes from Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann's *The Spiral of Silence: Public Opinion—Our Social Skin* (68). Her text offers an account of historical formulations of opinion that influences the brief contextualization I offer here. First published in 1980 in Germany, *The Spiral of Silence* presents her research on opinion as linked to perceptions of aggressive attitudes in the social sphere. Affects of fear and anxiety caused by these perceptions point toward defensive stances that mark our political opinions with irrational passion rather than clear judgment. In response to the negative emotion of fear, she claims that oppositional minorities tend to fall silent. She uses the figure of skin to suggest an immediacy of perception that lacks the "clarity" associated with vision and "insight."

has become, as Foucault notes in his “What is Enlightenment?” not a matter of open questions, but of pre-determined formulas.

Walter Lippmann’s *Public Opinion*, published in 1922, demonstrates the impoverished view of opinion that has been dominant throughout the twentieth century. He argues that individuals in contemporary society are incapable of assimilating the complexity of their world into coherent vision or rational judgments. Faced with the “great blooming, buzzing confusion of reality,” we form and re-impose emotionally charged “pictures” onto the chaotic scenes of external reality to create a sense of order. Because we impose pictures on reality in any case, it would be efficient, Lippman reasons, if an elite agency were to shape and distribute these, and in so doing, organize society’s unruly masses into a stable form.

Lippmann’s “pragmatic” approach turns on a vision of a threateningly vast social field filled with turbulent masses. In the desire to stabilize individual, and thus collective, perceptions against this threatening disorder, which resembles the mathematical as well as dynamic forms of the Kantian sublime, he proposes a program for separating and sustaining an orderly, harmonic relation between perception, thought, and reality—a relation Kant associates with the beautiful. His plan to manage our mental pictures by manufacturing consent brings together aesthetic and political goals, constituting an aesthetic ideology. This political project carries an unmistakable reactionary elitism. The political imposition of ruling interests’ “knowledge” on the social world is only very thinly veiled, and its clarity makes the underlying aesthetic character of this imposed harmony easier to miss. Lippmann’s term “manufacture of



consent” is coined in a chapter titled “Leaders and the Rank and File”: a notably authoritarian and even militaristic frame for viewing the social world, which suggests his aggression toward the masses.

Lippmann’s underlying view of opinion as a sheltering set of schemas for understanding the world leaves it open to manipulation through authoritarian narratives, false dichotomies (yes/no or pro/con frameworks limiting complexity), and emotionally potent visual symbols. He viewed these as the tools of government’s “self-conscious art,” the manufacture of consent. *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*, by Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky, offers a detailed argument concerning the collusion of media, corporations, and government in polishing the application of these discursive tools. These authors’ critique is a valuable oppositional perspective on what has become a main topic of contemporary research on public opinion: opinion production, management, and control. Huge bodies of research have focused on the possibilities of measuring and controlling public opinion; there are huge amounts of money to be made wherever corporations and political parties can secure public approval, and reflecting the public’s approval back to them in the polls is one of many ways to do this.<sup>2</sup> But this approach to opinion does not explain the complexity of opinion’s field. While the use of symbolic devices to deflect social antagonism and secure consent may have determined the views of many who “bought in” to the story of Good and Evil that animates the “War on Terror,” the underlying view of opinion as fundamentally impoverished belies the millions, nationally and internationally, who

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<sup>2</sup> Susan Herbst’s *Numbered Voices: How Opinion Polling has Shaped American Politics* provides support for this argument.

pictured events differently and resisted the imposition of peace through perpetual war. Observing this tension, I at first focused on the divide between the hegemonic position of support for war and the perspectives that offered resistance. Eventually, I would return to a recognition of the aesthetic paradigms operating in these judgments, using Kant's account of the sublime and the conflict between the faculties to highlight opinion's intertwining of perception, feeling, and thought.<sup>3</sup>

Getting nowhere slowly by tracing the two hegemonic positions' mutual exclusivity, I wanted to begin exploring the problem from a position of agreement between the two sides, even a tenuous one. Following the U.S. invasion of Iraq, "support for the troops" had become a mantra repeated ad infinitum from a wide range of positions within the United States.<sup>4</sup> Although the content attached to this "support" was viewed differently from perspectives that glorified or denigrated militarism in general, in the case

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<sup>3</sup> My work in centers on the Kantian and post-Kantian philosophical tradition of the sublime as disharmony within the subject's faculties and between subjective faculties in the world—as opposed, in this tradition, to the beautiful (the subject's experience of which reflects the harmony of these faculties). The tensions that animate the subjective sublime are central to the description of modern accounts of war. My attention has thus focused on articulating the relations between the faculties and the capacity for communication in conditions of direct and indirect exposure to the sublime force and scale of modern warfare. While I am aware of the vast, itself mathematically sublime, recent literature on the sublime in its pre-Kantian and Longinian situation, as well as on its significance in Kantian philosophy as a whole, it is beyond the focus of this project to provide a review of this literature.

<sup>4</sup> While there were significant anti-war protests even preceding the invasion of Afghanistan, hegemonic support for war rendered this position all but invisible. Anti-war movements adopted slogans like "support our troops, bring them home" in order to even be able to enter public dialogue by presenting a view that was less easily written off as extreme. It cannot be denied, however, that this was an "American" phenomenon; international perspectives, many of which had experienced the power of U.S. or other military figures more directly, held a better vantage point regarding their possible effects, and were less enthusiastically "supportive."

of this particular conflict, the privileged position of soldiers themselves seemed to be granted a respect that was not extended to civilian “enemies” that suffered war’s violence. This led me to wonder what soldiers themselves were thinking about the conflict. But: soldiers’ opinions are generally excluded from public debate by their very position as soldiers. Military command prohibits or strongly discourages the expression of dissent as defiance of orders; soldiers are effectively banned from speaking freely unless they have no qualms about the campaign in which they are involved. Current-events reporting thus offered little material through which to investigate the opinions of those who had the most at stake—those who would actually be called to risk or sacrifice their lives regardless of their position toward the controversy over war.

Soldiers’ memoirs, however, represented their reflections on the experiences of war without this restriction. Some, composed years after the experience, have had the benefit of long contemplation to support their judgments. Others, composed in the moment and posted—ahead of military prohibition—online for the wired public, show the impulsive rise and fall of enthusiasm for the project of war. I read many more memoirs than are treated in this project, but in all of them, war’s aesthetic power to overwhelm and shock the soldier’s sensibility formed a prominent theme within the text. In some cases its pattern became the main structure of the narration. Soldiers described war as sublime.<sup>5</sup> Some attempted to characterize it as positive, some presented it as trauma; all

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<sup>5</sup> As my analysis in the first chapter will show, this description of war as sublime should not be easily dismissed as an *aestheticization* of war. Rather, soldier’s accounts of their wartime experiences display the pattern of the sublime scenario as an overwhelming of subjective faculties by external forces and an ambivalent struggle within these faculties to regain active balance.

point toward a sublime aspect of war that marked them heavily. The sublime elements of war reshaped their view of world and self. It didn't just change their *opinions*, it changed *them*.

I began writing about sublime aspects of the war experience as soldiers represented them, and built up the outline for the first chapter of this project. In the background of this work was my feeling that much as war's aesthetic changed the soldiers, the hegemonic opinions that spread over society after September 11 had also changed people. Among all the memoirs I had read, J. Glenn Gray's *The Warriors: Reflections on Men in Battle* stood out because it reflected not only on war but on the forms of thought that war spreads across cultures. Gray's draft letter arrived in 1941 with the same mail that announced his doctorate in philosophy had been conferred. His position as a soldier and philosopher give him a special relevance for my project, as his perspective for answering its central question concerning the transformation of subjective thought and feeling in wartime is probably unique. While his writing, and the authority it merits, are marked by the Second World War, this does not mean that his service in this particular disaster, or his membership in what is referred to as the "Greatest Generation," are in themselves the source of his importance.

If the Second World War proves an important context for this project, it is because of the repetition with which it made visible certain tendencies of the First World War: its totality, the indistinction between civilian and soldier as targets of violence, the massive technological force and bureaucratic organization that draw human reason starkly into question. Gray's importance also is to have made clear, through deliberate

reflection, many of the ways in which violence nonetheless exerts a powerful draw on the senses. His text shows a concern not just to write through his experiences, but to recognize the ways in which war appeals to people in general, the reasons history finds people perpetually ready to fight. He describes war as a collective aesthetic experience that can be dramatized as meaningful because of the way it counters everyday feelings of frustration and isolation. War, in his analysis, offers a sublime contact with a wider world, *even if* its violence leaves the world in fragments. To this point, we might recall the proposed campaign of “Shock and Awe,” through which the Bush administration intended to manifest U.S. military supremacy over Iraq. The campaign’s title turns on the two moments of the Kantian sublime: shock at a massive power, awe at moral and rational law. Aerial bombing exacts a grotesque transformation of this progression, aligning supposed moral righteousness with vast physical destruction—precisely the terms Kant attempted to place in tension. This collapse of meaning into aggressive force and violence is a powerful distortion of aesthetic experience.

This vision of sublime experience as capable of unifying or dissolving cultural frameworks reveals problematic tensions within individual subjectivity, as well as within the social field. My project’s first chapter, “War’s Sublime,” provides interpretation of war’s violence with respect to the Kantian aesthetic construction of subjectivity as well as a reading of sublime patterns of violence in soldiers’ memoirs. Gray’s account of war’s sublime appeal, along with textual evidence provided in other memoirs, supports the proposition of sublime moods or modes in addition to Kant’s cognitive models of the mathematical and dynamic sublime. Warfare’s opposition and vacillation between

material destructiveness and absolute idealism generate a negative sublime, which exceeds subjective faculties and leaves them traumatically out of balance. But war's sublime is not necessarily an irresistible appeal. This chapter also explores the political aesthetic of two films that represent war without allowing violence to overtake their communication.

Gray's work is also of key importance to this project because of his friendship with Hannah Arendt. These two thinkers, whose positions are shaped in important ways by the experience of war, offer personal and philosophical insight into links between aesthetics and politics. Gray's writings from the late sixties, which attempt to describe the problem of violence from a civilian perspective, can be elucidated by recognition of his exchange of thought with Arendt. My second chapter, "War Passions," explores this exchange and pairs its findings with readings of very recent soldiers' memoirs, addressing the role of ecstatic aesthetic experience, actions, and passions in relation to recent and current military conflicts. Gray's views on passions and violence develop from the argument, central to Arendt's thinking, that action is both essential to human political life and vanishing due to increasingly bureaucratized frameworks of government and labor. We seek ecstatic experiences, even negative ones, to escape these passivizing frameworks. Cultural representations of war tout the comradeship of soldiers and the adventure of combat, aligning war with active subject forms rather than with the obedience to orders that soldiering usually entails. Readings of recent war memoirs trace the shifting dynamics of action and passion in their authors' experiences, highlighting their attempt to attain action and community through military membership, the passions

of frustration and anxiety that their tours of duty offer, and their attempts to recover active potential. Each of the veterans treated in this chapter expresses a slightly different take on (what I'm calling) war's aesthetic paradigm; that is, each represents the relation between the sensory experience of war and the self-knowledge attained by reflecting on that experience in his own particular way. Through analysis of their memoirs, my earlier concern with opinion opened into an interest in how the circumstances of being forced into passivizing situations (which I characterize as sublime) became material for the action taken in the production of their accounts, their writing.<sup>6</sup>

The question of what we can glean by comparing these soldiers' accounts to one another is carried over into the following, and final chapter, "Warring Opinions." Anthony Swofford's memoir, *Jarhead*, opens with the claim that "what follows is neither true nor false but *what I know*." These words model the form of knowledge that this project had been seeking all along: subjective opinion experienced through sensation and recognition of feelings called up by the world's challenge to subjective faculties. This third chapter attempts to make the relation between aesthetics and politics, the sublime and opinion, at last explicit.

After the first two chapters' articulations of philosophical structures with first-hand literary accounts of war's sublime scale and force, the final chapter brings together

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<sup>6</sup> The philosophical discussion concerning the opposition of activity to passivity, which frequently valorizes activity over passivity, is as long as the history of Western philosophy itself. In my view, the interchange between active and passive positions and the capacity to move between these positions is a central characteristic of human experience, and I do not mean to cast either term as exclusively "good" or "bad." Here, while I view passivizing experiences as problematic and potentially destructive for the human subject, I also explore their productive potential to disrupt and allow the reshaping of subjective experience into new forms.

a group of writers whose commentaries attempt to synthesize the social, political, and discursive traces and tendencies left in the wake of war's collective trauma. This chapter's first gesture is to assert a positive understanding of opinion as common sense in contradistinction to the instrumental warring opinions that are generated by hegemonic discourses of war. Hannah Arendt's reading of Kantian aesthetics as fundamentally a political theory allows me to trace a link between war's sublime and these divergent forms of opinion. Arendt valorizes a very peculiar idea within Kantian theory: common sense. With this concept Kant designates those forms of feeling and thinking that are common to all people and that allow for the operation of language and the communication of our pleasures and displeasures, our feelings of justice and injustice.

The reflection on feeling (aesthetic experience and judgment) that is central to individual subjectivity is also the foundation of human collectivity. Crucially, Kant views this common sense as enabling us to perceive the world through the perspective of others and actually to consider others' perspectives alongside our own. He goes so far as to make this pluralized perspective central to the concept of judgment, claiming that we must imagine others' perspectives as part of the reflection on our own. Based on Kant's theory, Arendt interprets judgment as fundamentally separate from questions of a single and absolute truth, oriented instead toward the construction of a political world. Kantian aesthetics, she argues, actually constitute a political philosophy. Judgment bears on recognition of a plurality of perspectives that construct a human world and open the interrelated possibilities of communication and politics. In this emphasis on perspective and on the ability to imagine the positions and judgments of others, Kantian judgment



begins to closely resemble opinion, which Arendt defines as the ability to interact impartially by seeing the world as it appears to the other as well as it is revealed from one's own standpoint.

This ability to see from another's perspective, to imagine the other's feeling and thinking, is disrupted and distorted by events and discourses of war. When faced with the event of September 11, a violent spectacle of scale and force that challenged our comprehension, American public discourse was overwhelmed. The perception of a sublime spectacle and its threat of further violence called up feelings of fear from which many sought shelter in an assertion of national superiority, a distorted form of the subjective sublime that—in Kant's account—should push reason toward contact with reality, not idealism. Language shifted from a form of communication to a form of violence that excluded and vilified anyone who challenged the newly asserted ideals of patriotism and unity. The shock of such collective trauma, and its sensational appearance in the mass media, generated a climate of reactionary passions, but little active interpretation. Warring opinions, a retaliatory aggression toward any outside perspective, overtook the judgment of many people on both sides of traditional hegemonic divides within American politics, rendering communication with the outside world, as well as within U.S. borders, extremely difficult.

Arendt's emphasis on opinion as the ability to see from another's viewpoint and to reflect on one's own is not an expression of humanistic tolerance but an ethical encounter with reality. Kant viewed sublime experience as the sensation of something that is out of joint with our faculties' power of comprehension. This attempt to feel and

think something beyond our own powers stood for him as the foundation of our morality. The position of the other is beyond the borders of our own individuality, but in harmony with our faculties: communication with the other is possible and necessary even though perfect comprehension is not. Our attempt to recognize this gap is the foundation of an ethical politics. Refusal to recognize the other is a refusal of our own active powers and a confinement within destructive passions. Without the sublime, the radical heterogeneity of material reality is not lived. Without others' viewpoints, we fail to construct a human reality and suffer alienation. Without the challenge of other perspectives, we elevate our own into an inhuman absolute and employ it as a weapon against the world. Without communicative exchange of opinions, human reality fades and we are left with the inhuman fantasy and ideology of war.

My interest in the events that created the context for this exploration only gradually became recognizable to me as aesthetic. I didn't define them for myself as sublime at first. They were historical and political facts. Buildings and lives were destroyed. Then the destruction was reproduced and expanded to a horrendous scale in Afghanistan and Iraq. People protested. The perilous material interaction of seeing the event, feeling, and thinking in response to its huge scale and knowing that the event has been seen, felt, and reflected on throughout the world makes them both aesthetic and political. This is the importance of the sublime: to make our human powers appear in both their failure and their potential. What disturbs our capacity to feel and think as we usually do opens the possibility to feel, think, and act in new ways. In his essay "What is Enlightenment?," Foucault explores the continued significance of Kant's essay of the

same title. Foucault proposes that the task and method of Kant's philosophical inquiry was to deduce what is impossible for us to know from the form of what we are. He suggests that contemporary philosophy should proceed in a closely related manner, aiming to "separate, from the contingency that has made us what we are, the possibility of no longer being, doing, or thinking what we are, do, think." He further specifies that "this work must be done at the limits of the self" (46). The subjective aesthetic of the sublime operates at the limits of the self. In drawing together the experience of war and the sublime I attempt to expose a crucial contingency that has made us what we are, as our aesthetic response to the shock of violence has triggered certain forms of thinking and doing that reproduce war's violence by fracturing communication with a wider world. In this contingency that has remade subjective and social relations, we can also trace the possibility of responding differently and actively in order to repair and transform our ways of seeing, thinking, and acting.

I had not been working on the project for very long when another event shocked public sensibilities and spurred, for many, an active reconsideration of war's power and right. The Abu Ghraib prison scandal offered a terrifying glimpse into the world of the other—the world of imprisoned and tortured Iraqi civilians and of the soldiers who unleashed their violence on these "detainees." Here was a horrible sublime encounter with the other as victim of war's destructiveness, a set of images of subjection from which we recoil and which we can't really comprehend. These images called many to question the war, but for many their impact was countered by a narrative of individual criminality staged through the court-martial of soldiers who had behaved

(unquestionably) with great cruelty, but who were not ultimately responsible for the cruelty of the prison's policies. The concluding analysis of this project, "Tortured Standards," addresses Errol Morris' documentary *Standard Operating Procedure*, a film that offers an artistic engagement with the aesthetic power of the scandal's representation in images, and a reflection on what these images allows us to see, feel, think, and know. Placing Morris' film in dialogue with Hannah Arendt's philosophy and critique, the conclusion finds that his production achieves her ideals. Through the film's interviews Morris encounters and allows a public audience the possibility of viewing the world through the perspectives of others, rebuilding the ethical plurality of opinion that is lost in wartime. This accomplishment supports the possibility, interrogated throughout the following interpretations, that while the sublime character of the contemporary social world and its violence in wartime may disrupt subjective reflection and communication, they may also create contexts for rebuilding these powers and remaking collective reality.

## 1. War's Sublime

*Storm of Steel*, Ernst Jünger's memoir of World War I, opens with a florid description of his generation's desire for wartime experiences:

Grown up in an age of security, we shared a yearning for danger, for the experience of the extraordinary. We were enraptured by war. We had set out in a rain of flowers, in a drunken atmosphere of blood and roses. Surely the war had to supply us with what we wanted; the great, the overwhelming, the hallowed experience. We thought of it as manly, as action, a merry dueling party on flowered, blood be-dewed meadows. "No finer death in all the world than..." (5)

Philip Caputo begins his memoir of the Vietnam War, *A Rumor of War*, with inadvertent echoes:

I joined the Marines in 1960, partly because I got swept up in the patriotic tide of the Kennedy era but mostly because I was sick of the safe suburban existence I had known most of my life. (4)

The only thing I really liked about my boyhood surroundings were the...forest preserves, a belt of virgin woodland through which flowed a muddy stream called Salt Creek....Once in a while I found arrowheads in the muddy creek bank. Looking at them, I would dream of that savage, heroic time and wish I had lived then, before America became a land of salesmen and shopping centers. That is what I wanted, to find in a commonplace world a chance to live heroically. Having known nothing but security, comfort, and peace, I hungered for danger, challenges, violence. (5)

Though writing of different wars in different nations, and ultimately developing different attitudes toward military conflict, both veterans mix sublime images into their accounts of aesthetic yearning for the heroic opportunities attributed to war. Jünger freely mixes blood and roses, unabashedly pointing toward the involvement of aesthetic feeling and violence. For Caputo, the connection is less graphic; but an aesthetically appealing relic of violence, the arrowhead, is drawn from a muddy natural environment that held more aesthetic interest than supermarket aisles and "dirtless streets on which nothing ever

happened” (4-5). Both writers express the expectation that war will change them subjectively—that the experience of sublime violence will pose satisfying and “overwhelming” “hallowed” “challenges,” offering to counter boring life with, at the very least, the chance of a great death.

Caputo’s book is titled and prefaced with a biblical prophecy of apocalyptic warfare:

And ye shall hear of wars and rumors of wars. See that ye be not troubled, for all these things must come to pass, but the end is not yet... for nation shall rise against nation and kingdom against kingdom...then shall they deliver you up to be afflicted and shall put you to death... but he that shall endure unto the end, he shall be saved (Matthew 24:6-13).

The sublime allegory of submission, sacrifice, and recuperation is held up over the ensuing narrative. Its dynamic pattern is met and complimented by the text’s visual descriptions of violence on a sublime scale. The undisguised relish that Caputo and Jünger take in detailing this violence through their writing communicates the dark aesthetic appeal of war.

They are not the only ones to feel war’s ambivalent attraction, which extends, as this project as a whole will show, through many combat veterans’ memoirs, war reporting, and collective fantasy. The response to violence as an aesthetic phenomenon bringing us a not wholly unpleasant shock and surprise at the devastating forces operating in our world is a troubling matter. Although it follows the basic pattern of sublime experienced outlined by Kant, many responses seem to lack the component of moral feeling that he linked to the sublime. Rather than generating a sense of moral freedom from violence, contemporary expressions of the sublime may remain tied to its passive

reception. The possibility of finding meaning in modern warfare seems to be undermined by the lethality and destructiveness of its methods, but this does not kill its appeal. If aesthetic experience, our ability to know ourselves through reflection on those aspects of the world that heighten our feeling of life, forms a part of our self consciousness, then this tendency suggests something problematic in our relationship to ourselves and to reality. Soldiers' memoirs offer vivid accounts of this aesthetic experience and attest to its persistence even when violence is not a distant spectacle, as it usually is for the civilian. Careful readings of these accounts show its importance in determining their relationship toward the world, as individuals and as members of society. This investigation of the problem will begin by tracing the patterns of sublime experience in the memoirs of Caputo and Jünger, as well as J. Glenn Gray, a philosopher who recounted his memories of World War II in *The Warriors: Reflections on Men in Battle*. It will then offer readings of two films in which the relation between the sublime and violence take on very different forms, resisting violence rather than submitting to its passion. Before these essays, a brief account of the Kantian sublime will help to show the philosophical significance of aesthetic experience as a foundation for subjectivity, and will suggest that the violent forms it takes on in soldiers' accounts are not without precedent in Kant's own writing. This background will help us to underscore the prominence of sublime violence in the soldiers' memoirs, as well as to recognize the complexity it attains in their own representations.

## **An Aesthetic Subject**

The importance of the claim that war exerts an aesthetic appeal through its appearance as sublime is grounded in the fact that subjectivity itself is constructed through aesthetic experience. While we think of Kant as a strict advocate of reason's ability to overcome all, his construction of the subject's cognitive power relies fundamentally on the capacity to feel pleasure and pain—enjoyment. His philosophy does not exclude physical feeling and emotion, but actually depends on them as its foundation. The power to reason operates only on the basis of a first sensation of enjoyment; reflection on this feeling leads us to judge its qualities, and this aesthetic judgment ultimately allows for the production of other judgments of synthesis, differentiation, etc. The abstract rational dimension of Kant's thought (we cannot know things in themselves, artistic experience must be disinterested) balances astride the fact that what knowledge and reason we do possess develop out of an immanent material capacity for experience. The idea that affects of aesthetic enjoyment are at the foundation of subjectivity radicalizes the claim that war's appeal is on the order of the sublime. The aesthetics of war can then be seen as a problem positioned at the foundation of our subjectivity.

Kant's critical philosophy famously failed to find adequate grounding for subjective knowledge in subjective self-transparency or direct access to things in themselves. Instead, it offers an understanding of subjectivity that finds and grounds itself in its own pleasure of experience. Kant's aesthetic subject begins its process of judgment with the "feeling of life" that we experience in the presence of something beautiful. Jochen Schulte-Sasses' essay, "The Subject's Aesthetic Foundation (on



Kant),”<sup>7</sup> traces the process through which Kant develops this feeling of life into the ground of subjective identity. The self-reflexivity of feeling is the basis for subjective thought. The subject first reflects cognitively on the “feeling of life” brought by pleasure in an aesthetic object. Judgment is formed out of feeling, as thought feels itself thinking about its own feeling (37, 39). This reverberating development of thought through feeling, counter to transcendentalist traditions that anchored subjectivity in divine will, emphasizes the immanence of feeling, and the reflexivity of thought turning back upon that feeling, as central to subjectivity and judgment. The “power to judge” is thus “a foundational power to initiate an arche-separation of the self” (39). Kant’s schema of the mental powers is not a purely abstract vision of the mind’s pure power of reason, but forms around the immanence of the mind’s material experience. Aesthetic feeling/judgment is the joint between understanding, imagination, and reason. Schulte-Sasse describes aesthetic judgment as a double or

oscillating power; it unfolds itself in two directions, into one as a discriminating force, into the other as a synthesizing force. Put differently: when reflective judgment produces a feeling of pleasure and displeasure, it grounds itself in a unified being; when it swings into the other direction, it begins a process of differentiation that lays the ground for the employment of understanding and reason. This is precisely why the feeling of pleasure elicited by an aesthetic object expresses a ‘being commensurate [Angemessenheit] with the cognitive powers’ [29; 27]. (39-40)

Reflection on aesthetic feeling initiates judgments of unity and differentiation. Through the feeling of life the subject begins to feel the different powers of its mind operating in harmony; by reflecting on the feeling it gains a sense both of the unity of those powers and their differentiation from one another.

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<sup>7</sup> *The Spirit of Poesy*, Northwestern University Press 2000.

The Kantian construction of subjectivity and cognitive powers thus depends upon affective immanence, responsiveness and reflection; his articulation of the subject through these phenomena grants material sensations a prominent, foundational place in thought and reason. The two moments of affective experience followed by reflection, and the oscillation between unity and differentiation they set in play, are at the root of subjective self-identity and differentiating judgment. The dynamic play of the faculties, which culminates in conscious rational thought, is set in motion by aesthetic sensation: delight in the case of the beautiful, agitation or ambivalence in the case of the sublime. However, the production of a stable and rational subjective relation to the world is not the only possible outcome of this sensory-thought process, as Kant indicates through his lengthy efforts to distinguish true artistic taste from mere liking. Taste recognizes the beautiful form which inspires a harmony of the faculties and leads the subject toward well-being and real social values. But countless likeable kitschy objects also appeal to the senses. The mere liking these objects inspire disperses the ego's pleasures across various shallow enjoyments; it fails to develop a unified subjective, and ultimately, collective identity. The sublime implies other and perhaps more dangerous imbalances; this may be the reason Kant shies away from the sublime toward the beautiful in his decision concerning which is most primary for the formation of judgment. The excessiveness of the sublime object, the straining of the faculties caused by the sublime, might lead the subject as easily toward a de-centering or ecstatic experience as toward a transcendental idea of reason. Worse, the reflection of reason on the sublime might tend toward a violent totalization that seeks to counter and control its excessiveness. Aesthetic

experience leads to self-construction; the feeling of life and the play of reason involved in this construction leave the self open to transformation and deformation. (The dynamic play of the faculties calls to mind the force of Freudian drives and the mental agencies they form and permeate—an issue that will be taken up further along, in the third chapter’s discussion of the death drive.) These possibilities, rather than posing chance aberrations, appear as pitfalls or temptations in Kant’s complicated explication of the sublime, recur in his work’s reception, and constitute the openness of the sublime to the field of war and violence.

### **Violence in the Sublime**

Kant tells us the sublime is an aesthetic experience associated with the overwhelming of the imagination and its subsequent rescue by rational freedom. Sheer physical enormity or astonishing natural powers characterize objects that inspire the sensation of the mathematical and dynamic sublime, respectively. The experience of the sublime is an intermixing of aesthetics and morality: when the imagination gives up the fight to form a total perceptual understanding of the immense natural object, rational judgment “is compelled to *think* nature itself in its totality as the exhibition of something supersensible, without our being able to bring this exhibition about *objectively*.” Reason’s vocation to transcend nature is the “law-governed *task*” posed by the failed apprehension of an object too great or powerful to produce the pure harmonious “play” of faculties in the beautiful (Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, hereafter *CJ* 128). Kant sees the moral vocation of the human being as a striving to maintain active power of decision over and against

contingent circumstances, feelings, and passions. Through this effort we will resist our material nature and context, which continually influence us from inside and out. We will strive to transform our feelings; instead of simply avoiding displeasure, which would guide us to act only in our material self-interest, we will learn to bear displeasure, and even to transform it into a higher pleasure as we reach toward disinterested and potentially moral feeling and thought. Our reactions to the sublime model this process. In a moment of surprise, we are caught off guard by an external stimulus and seized by powerful feelings as the imagination strives to represent a massive object or force in the outside world. The imagination's strain is unpleasant, as is the shock—but our power of reflection moderates and overcomes the shock by offering a rational totalization of the experience. We become able to admire the external power to the degree that we can think its scale and force through rationally, pushing our imagination to help us perceive it as clearly as we can without distorting attempts to avoid, deny, or domesticate its inhuman appearance. In this way, Kant describes our reason as inextricably linked to our powers of perception. Reason pushes us toward recognition of material reality by directing the senses to the materiality of the world, without the instrumental, defensive, and self-interested frames (that operate even on the level of sensation, as we avoid displeasure) that so deeply pervade our thought that we are usually not even aware of them. Kant's analysis of the sublime locates this aesthetic experience in our ability to see the world "merely in terms of what manifests itself to the eye" (130). In this way, we are able to overcome our shock or amazement, *Verwunderung*, through admiration, *Bewunderung* (133). Paul de Man has directed our attention particularly towards this

linguistic play. The closeness of the German terms through which Kant expresses the sublime transformation demand the same attention to material detail that characterizes the perception of the sublime. To follow his argument we must recognize the material function of the signifier that is highlighted by the subtle differentiation of letters and syllable that allows a differentiation in meaning.<sup>8</sup>

In one of many passages elaborating the definition of the sublime, Kant calls up the figures of the warrior and general:

For what is it that is an object of the highest admiration even to the savage? It is a person who is not terrified, not afraid, and hence does not yield to danger but promptly sets to work with vigor and full deliberation. Even in a fully civilized society there remains this superior esteem for the warrior, except that we demand more of him: that he also demonstrate all the virtues of peace—gentleness, sympathy, and even appropriate care for his own person—precisely because they reveal to us that his mind cannot be subdued by danger. Hence, no matter how much people may dispute, when they compare the statesman with the general, as to which one deserves the superior respect, an aesthetic judgment decides in favor of the general. Even war has something sublime about it if it is carried on in an orderly way and with respect for the sanctity of the citizens' rights. At the same time it makes the way of thinking of a people that carries it on in this way all the more sublime in proportion to the number of dangers in the face of which it courageously stood its ground. A prolonged peace, on the other hand, tends to make prevalent a mere[ly] commercial spirit, and along with it base selfishness,

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<sup>8</sup> Paul de Man highlights this distinction in his “Phenomenality and Materiality in Kant.” Kant’s language, he claims, performs a stylistic fragmentation, in which attention to the syllabic construction of words, their materiality as signifiers, becomes crucial to following the philosophical argument. This fragmentation directly corresponds to Kant’s assertion that sublime perception must disarticulate the appearance of the world from its framework of human interests. Just as reading of Kant’s argument must operate at the level of the syllable, reason must operate on the level of material reality. Kant’s argument is thus *performed* through his language. De Man finds this level of argument more rigorous than the (less impressive) tropological or narrative level through which Kant offers other formulations of the sublime. This may be—but I find the tropological level very important for exploring the pitfalls within Kant’s position. I will argue that they correspond to other modes or moods of the sublime (other subjective forms of reasoning against trauma), as well as to the re-making of the Kantian sublime in its historical reception and cultural application. (*Aesthetic Ideology* 89-90)

cowardice, and softness, and to debase the way of thinking of that people. (*CJ* 121-22)

The pattern of disinterested rational persistence in the face of physical challenges is similar, but here Kant presents his argument through a different framework. The example of warrior and general personify the transformation of threat, war's danger—an overwhelming and sublime force, into the sublimely moral vocation of heroism. He takes the example even further, claiming that war itself may even be sublime if it is well organized: danger fades in the face of rational totalizing principles for efficient action. These models of organized violence give figure to a dynamic sublime in which, as de Man notes, “the faculties of the mind have to overpower, to be *uberlegen* (superior to) the power of nature”: reason, honor, duty, heroism, must overcome fear, a natural feeling, but not a moral one. De Man cannot fail to notice that the cultural exemplars of sublime reason in this passage are very different from the material model offered by vision. Given Kant's later writings on the ideal of peaceful civilian government, de Man claims that these figures stand in the text to call up:

the spontaneous affect that prompts admiration for heroes in battle, the impulse...that makes politicians envious of those who are allowed to wear a uniform. The point of the example is to separate affective from rational judgments. For the victory of the sublime over nature is the victory of one emotion (admiration, respect, etc.) over another emotion, such as fear. (“Kant's Materialism,” *Aesthetic Ideology* 123)

De Man highlights the presence of warring figures in Kant's explication, but seems unruffled by them—in addition to this rationalization of their presence, he suggests that they are trivial, silly, and bland (123). The figuration of the example, however conventional, however apt for demonstrating victory and dominance of one emotion over

another, seems to betray something excessive in the operation of the affective attachments involved, which are clearly figured as being in *conflict*. The whole of aesthetic experience, of subject self-construction, begins with the “play” of affects, which—through the warring figures—begins to lean toward a struggle or fight rather than a free play. Kant himself notes that the sublime involves a moral “task” to resist passions and create the conditions for reason’s free play. But the “play” of freedom in the sublime is no frivolous game. Even beyond this distinction, the way in which these figures call up our affect, and the way in which Kant attaches morality and rational law to them, indicate a mixing of ethics and emotion that is neither free nor disinterested: these are culturally symbolic figures that cannot be seen as free of interest. The progression from warrior (noble savage) to general (exemplar of military institutional structure) to civilized battlefield (unlikely, if not oxymoronic) seems more a troubling allegory than a clear example. De Man may claim that these examples are banal, but I would nonetheless argue that their conversion of violence and aggression into heroic sublimity indicates the tremendous difficulties posed by the articulation of affect with reason, especially in the concept of the sublime. If no less a thinker than Kant has let his language carry his argument so far afield, there is very likely not only a linguistic/cultural context but an element of the argument itself that determines the disturbance at this point and through these symbolic figures. The experience of the sublime, beginning with self-affection, proceeding to self-reflection and therefore reason, articulates rational thought as a folding of feeling into feeling. If aesthetic feeling forms the joint between the faculties of imagination, understanding, and reason, then reason would seem to be forever *articulated*

*with* and inseparable from affect. The figures of warrior and general represent violence, battle, and potential victory. The “victory” of the sublime would seem to be merely a joint between emotions of fear and of admiration. De Man says it himself: the sublime’s victory is that of *one emotion over another emotion*. This reading emphasizes the violence operating in the sublime: the violent encounter with the outside world and the violence of the self-discipline that requires a victory converting this shock into admiration and enjoyment. The violence implicit in the figures representing these mental processes points toward an inherent violence within the articulation of affect and reason, an intense conflict or ambivalence mediating between passive and active orientations toward the world. The tension between the cultural valuation of these warring figures with their negative material context, warfare, also suggests a tension between disinterested reason that retains a basis in material reality and an ideological reason that imposes cultural frameworks on material reality. We will see that these two forms of violence (material and ideological idealism) are closely linked to the sublime in soldiers’ memoirs.

In his essay, “Phenomenality and Materiality in Kant,” de Man emphasizes the excessive features of the sublime more thoroughly. He summarizes Kant’s description,

The imagination overcomes suffering, becomes apathetic, and sheds the pain of natural shock. It reconciles pleasure with pain and in so doing, it articulates, as mediator, the movement of the affects with the legal codified, formalized and stable order of reason. (*Aesthetic Ideology* 86)

And offers an assessment:

we are hardly dealing with a tight theoretical argument....What we have here is less authoritative but a great deal more accessible. For one thing, instead of being an argument, it is a story, a dramatized scene of the mind in action. The faculties



of reason and imagination are personified, anthropomorphized...the relationship between them is stated in delusively interpersonal terms. What could it possibly mean, in analytical terms, that the imagination sacrifices itself, like Antigone or Iphigenia...for the sake of reason?...[H]ow can faculties be said to *act*, or even to act freely, as if they were conscious and complete human beings? We are clearly not dealing with mental categories, but with tropes, and the story Kant tells us is an allegorical tale. Nor are the contents of this tale at all unusual. It is the story of an exchange, of a negotiation in which powers are lost and gained in an economy of sacrifice and recuperation. It is also a story of opposite forces, nature and reason, the imagination and nature, tranquility and shock, adequacy (*Angemessenheit*) and inadequacy, that separate, fight, and then unite in a more or less stable state of harmony, achieving syntheses and totalizations that were missing at the beginning of the action. (*Aesthetic Ideology* 86-7)

The allegorical tale that de Man emphasizes (with the exception of the feminine figuration of imagination) runs in striking parallel to the cultural narratives underlying the sublime aspect of the warrior. While de Man highlights the irrational appearance of this little drama in a philosophical text outlining the operation of the faculties and the production of subjectivity, we might offer a counter claim: this story's pattern of conflict, sacrifice, and recuperation occur in Kant's argument because its articulation of passivity and activity and of exchange between subject and other *does* belong at the heart of subjective experience and desire. It is through this type of figuration—a power of language—that the subject performs and transforms itself. Other elements of Kant's description support this argument as well. The section on the dynamic sublime is rife with ambivalent intersubjective tensions: power, fear, resistance, anger, desperation, submission, apathy, agitation, vibration, violence, prostration, worship, and amazement are all noted as aspects of the experience of the sublime. De Man claims that the allegorical representation of the faculties is delusive and misleading because Kant's philosophical project has “nothing to do with the pragmata of the relationship between

human beings” (“Kant and Shiller 143). While this may be true with regard to the passage’s immediate context (the discourse on the sublime as dynamic interplay of the faculties) it does not hold true for Kant’s project in a larger perspective. Kant frequently emphasizes common sense and proposes that moral feeling as response to the sublime is equivalent to the sense of taste in response to the beautiful. These senses are transcendental, as are the faculties themselves. They may be confined to the individual body and mind, but their structure is reproduced in every body and mind. This shared sensory and cognitive structure is the basis for communication with others in the world; our ability to communicate our pleasure, displeasure, and sense of justice bears directly on Kant’s interest in “pragmatic” relations between people. (The role of common sense as a feature of public reality will be discussed in this project’s third chapter.) The prominence of conflicting powers in the descriptions of the faculties emphasizes the internal division of the subject. The dramatic figuration through which Kant expresses the conflict places these tensions at the center of a subjectivity that is internally divided, takes pleasure in displeasure, and synthesizes what coherence it can through dominance and submission rather than harmony. The allegory of the sublime works on several levels: demonstrative description of intra-subjective tensions, dramatic personification expressing the cultural roles attached to the conflicting positions, and a less than implicit commentary on the moral significance of violent sacrifice to secure justice and right. These meanings are all held in tension with the additional radically materialist dimension of Kant’s philosophy. De Man noted his writing’s signification at the level of the signifier; his writing also carries these other figurative levels of significance.

Kant employs the figures of war and warriors and the allegory of sacrifice and recuperation to represent the sublime through conventional narrative devices. These devices allow Kant to dramatically figure the tensions at play between sensation and reason. They are performative in the manner of drama and theater: modes of communication that require players as well as an audience.<sup>9</sup> They thus suggest the external collective context in which every subject is situated, as well as the internal play of the faculties. The incompatibility between the subject's material limits, its rational desires, and its external reality mark the sublime with a negativity that, in Kant's theory, makes it less pure than the positive harmony and pleasure characterizing the beautiful. The subject contemplating the beautiful is tranquil; the subject contemplating the sublime is in turmoil, changing, living through first a moment of material dissociation and then seeking a new totalization. Kant's use of the figures of war and warriors to represent the sublime may be conventional, but not accidental. The experience of war and the construction of the warrior out of civilian subjectivity are one of society's most prominent models for the sublime transformation. Perhaps the allegory of the sublime has been made familiar by countless narratives that seek to recuperate reason and new strength from the experience of war.

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<sup>9</sup> De Man associates theatricality with Schiller's versions of the sublime rather than Kant's ("Kant and Schiller 141). Here, I'm not accusing Kant of transforming the sublime into a theatrical spectacle but suggesting that the more "staged" elements of his own argument have an important function: emphasizing plurality and cultural context rather than isolated individuality.

### **Sublimely Patterned Memoirs: *Storm of Steel* and *A Rumor of War***

The gloom and monotony of World War I's trenches and the undifferentiated green damp of Vietnam's jungles may seem odd settings for the experience of the sublime. But sublime experience turns not on beauty that pleases the senses, but on colossal scale and power. The wars that devastated these settings offered both. World War I's vast lines of trenches changed the recognizable forms of landscapes, a conventional example of beauty, into "wastelands lying in deep shadow" (CJ 129). The Vietnam War's violent deforestation operated another vast environmental transformation. The scale and power of modern warfare are, without question, sublime. This section will trace the subjective effects of war's aesthetic presentation in memoirs of soldiers who viewed it directly.

Ernst Jünger's account, adapted from his war diaries, is set in the trenches of World War I. Jünger is a proud observer of the war's setting and the power required to transform it. The scale of the entrenchments and the devastation surrounding them operates a mathematical sublime, while the force that was required to wipe the land clean of its natural shapes offers a dynamic sublime. The trench world may be the first site in which man is the source of the power that works a sublime transformation of the earth; at the very least, it is the first in which man does so in seconds of destruction rather than years of construction. *Storm of Steel* traces Jünger's experience of one trench and one battle after another. The narrative moves on an emotional level from his initial exuberance over battle's test of strength and certainty of national victory towards his certainty of defeat, but never loses its zest for violent experience. Jünger occasionally shudders at scenes of pain and destruction, but remains fascinated and continually

emboldened by dangerous forces. He writes of one battle's artillery barrage:

Each second seemed to want to outdo the last. As if by some magical power, one house after another subsided into the earth; walls broke, gables fell, and bare sets of beams and joists were sent flying through the air, cutting down the roofs of other houses. Clouds of splinters danced over whitish wraiths of steam. Eyes and ears were utterly compelled by this maelstrom of devastation. (138)

The destructive energy is characterized as a building storm. Each second outdoes the next in a progression, an incremental increase of force. There is a subsiding or falling of materials, but also propulsion as they are sent flying and dancing. The tension of opposites and excessive force of the scene exert a powerful draw to the senses. In description of another battle,

[t]he road presented an apocalyptic scene. Death was reaping great swathes. The echoing cry of war, the intense fire of handguns, the dull force of bombs, all exhilarated the attackers and lamed the defenders. All that long day the battle had been smouldering away; now it caught and burned. Our superiority grew with every second, because the narrow wedge of shock troops, now fanning out, was followed by broad sections of reinforcements. (250)

Jünger's enthusiasm for the fight is maintained despite blunders and wounds. In this battle Jünger suffers a wound in the chest from his own allies on account of forgetting to remove an English coat he had scavenged for warmth; then, (recklessly not wearing his helmet) he takes a blow to the head. More important to him than these mishaps is the larger scale of the conflict and its turning in his allies' favor. The description's initial gesture toward the negativity of this "apocalyptic scene" in which "[d]eath was reaping great swathes" merely sets the stage for the more important echoing and massing battle cry that are the real expression of power and energy—the sublime conversion—of the scene. This battle, which was not actually a German strategic victory, provided Jünger with

a turning-point...and not merely because from then on I thought it possible that we might actually lose the war.

The incredible massing of forces in the hour of destiny, to fight for a distant future, and the violence it so surprisingly, stunningly unleashed, had taken me for the first time into the depths of something that was more than mere personal experience. That was what distinguished it from what I had been through before; it was an initiation that had not only opened the red-hot chambers of dread but had also led me through them. (255-56)

Again, Jünger prefaces his claims with a negative moment, the dawning realization of defeat, but shifts into a recuperative mode to emphasize the material pleasure he takes in the scale of the battle—the “incredible massing of forces” and their “surprising” violence when “stunningly unleashed.” These qualities align closely with the subjective shock associated with the sublime. Jünger goes on to emphasize the ecstatic character of the experience, the sense that its meaning passes beyond “mere personal experience.” The passage’s final sentence again shifts from negativity to recuperation: from dread to its beyond, from fear to something else...detachment? transcendence? Jünger does not give us a word to characterize the totality of the experience, but leaves its proximity to the sublime in no doubt.

This narrative frequently offers the pattern of sublime experience in which a negative moment of shock or dread is followed with a positive recuperation, renewed resolve, revitalized energy. Even fighting on while bleeding out from a wound is figured positively: “Slowly I pulled myself up, while the blood that was bogging my lungs trickled out of my wounds. As it drained away, I felt relief. With bare head and open tunic, I stared out at the battle” (284); “The loss of blood gave me the lightness and airiness of intoxication” (286). Here Jünger’s wounds only enhance the sublime experience; the physical pain they cause is replaced with “intoxication” as he overcomes

his physical limits and rises up to view the scene of battle. Jünger's placement of sublime experience at the center of danger is at odds with Kant's claim that the sublime is experienced at a distance, when viewing danger from a position of safety. Jünger's sublime, while capable of rationalizing recuperative movement, is one of extreme experience for the sake of extreme experience. While Kant holds the rational subject he is trying to support back from the abyss of physical strain that goes beyond being, toward a being for destruction, Jünger leaps from the trench and straight into that abyss. The prospect of death is not at odds with his form of the sublime, but rather a fulfillment in place of the rational synthesis that stabilizes its Kantian form. In the face of his continued survival, Jünger does in fact seem slightly bewildered:

at...moments, there crept over me a mood I hadn't known before. A profound reorientation, a reaction to so much time spent so intensely, on the edge. The seasons followed one another,...but it was still war. I felt I had got tired, and used to the aspect of war, but it was in this familiarity that I observed what was in front of me in a new and subdued light. Things were less dazzlingly distinct. And I felt that the purpose with which I had gone out to fight had been used up, and no longer held. The war posed new, deeper puzzles. It was a strange time altogether. (260)

This sense of uncertainty is alleviated by a new prospect of death in battle:

I felt the bullet taking away my life. I had felt Death's hand once before...-but this time his grip was firmer and more determined. As I came down heavily on the bottom of the trench, I was convinced it was all over. Strangely that moment is one of very few in my life of which I am able to say they were utterly happy. I understood, as in a flash of lightning, the true inner purpose and form of my life. I felt surprise and disbelief that it was to end there and then, but this surprise had something untroubled and almost merry about it. (281)

Jünger, faced with death, again employs his sublime conversion of overwhelming force into aesthetic value. While Kant attempts to distance the subject from sublime force, he also uses the figure of the warrior, the one who must resist direct exposure to violence, as

an exemplary figure for the sublime. Jünger's continual transformation of physical force and pain into sublime resolve may be the sort of thing Kant had in mind. But Jünger takes the pattern to an uneasy extreme. The fact that the soldier's risks run alongside the possibility of death radicalizes the relation between the soldier and the sublime. The experience of the sublime pushes thought and sensation to their extremes; death, as the beyond of experience, unknowable and largely unassimilable to thought, offers a negative model of the sublime. The sublime's excess always involves a negative moment of sensory displeasure, as imagination fails to represent an object that is incompatible with subjective powers of perception. In Kant's schema this negative moment is followed by a pleasurable reflection on reason's resistance and overcoming of this strain. If the subject's active power is actually negated by the encounter with the sublime—through death, irrecoverable trauma, or passive submission to excess force—the sublime's positive moment cannot overcome the negative. The negative sublime combines aesthetic feeling with violence to produce trauma or passion. Any person, any suburbanite, as Caputo discontentedly was before Vietnam, can meet death in its manifestation as banal accident or domestic tragedy. War invests death with a structure of meaning that extends beyond individual loss.<sup>10</sup> Its negativity is theoretically countered or transcended by honor and purpose. Clearly, we are no longer in the realm of the material reason Kant outlined. In this negative version of the sublime, the compensatory moment is accomplished through recourse to an abstract ideal. This ideal may have a rational structure despite completely

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<sup>10</sup> The mechanisms through which nationalism and tradition develop this sense of wartime "meaning are a focus of Chris Hedges' book *War is a Force that Gives Us Meaning*.



detachment from material reality. It operates a sublime economy of sacrifice and rational recuperation that leaves Jünger “happy” to find himself collapsed with a gunshot wound at the bottom of his trench. Caputo is also drawn into this negative sublime, but relates to death with far more ambivalence.

Caputo’s *A Rumor of War* marks his experience of the sublime by reference to the soldier’s strength and freedom of spirit as well as to the extremes of experience offered by modern combat. His perspective leads him to criticize the Vietnam War, but not to reject war in itself. The war offered Caputo an “experience as fascinating as it was repulsive, as exhilarating as it was sad, as tender as it was cruel”; it was without question “the most significant thing that had happened” to him (xvi). He describes his book as

partly an attempt to capture some of its ambivalent realities. Anyone who fought in Vietnam, if he is honest with himself, will have to admit he enjoyed the compelling attractiveness of combat. It was a peculiar enjoyment because it was mixed with a commensurate pain. Under fire, a man’s powers of life heightened in proportion to the proximity of death, so that he felt an elation as extreme as his dread. His senses quickened, he attained an acuity of consciousness at once pleasurable and excruciating. It was something like the elevated state of awareness induced by drugs. And it could be just as addictive, for it made whatever else life offered in the way of delights or torments seem pedestrian. (xvi-vii)

The mix of pleasure and pain, the quickening of consciousness, the heightened feeling of life, and the presence of dread are all linked to Kant’s sublime. But Caputo’s sense of the sublime, like Jünger’s, entails a greater exposure to violence and danger; this intensity gives Caputo’s experience a drug-like or addictive quality.<sup>11</sup> The experience is so strong it makes other experiences seem pedestrian. Though the feeling of boredom was a factor

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<sup>11</sup> The theme of war as addictive is highlighted in Chris Hedges’ *War is a Force that Gives us Meaning*, a text that will be discussed in chapter three.

leading Caputo to join up in the first place, the encounter with the sublime of battle constitutes a new and different controlling power.<sup>12</sup> The desire for aesthetic experience is succeeded by an ambivalent desire for repetition, a repeated approach to the limit. Rather than reason's passage beyond the sensible dimension, Caputo's descriptions show the tyranny of material experience. His attempts to reclaim an active rational stance will fail before the trauma of war's material violence.

Caputo begins his service enjoying the rebellious spirit captured and magnified by the military form. A long column of recruits breaks out in song as they near their destination, the end of a long forced march; Caputo writes, "[t]he song was like a cry of defiance. They had just humped through thirty miles of wilderness in intense heat with forty pounds on their backs, and they were coming in singing. Nothing could subdue them" (20). Recruits submit their bodies to the physically overwhelming demands of the training regimen but overcome its intensity by freedom of spirit, inspiring the feeling of a collective sublime. His early descriptions of combat maintain this positive tone. Going into combat for the first time, he writes: "The truth is, I felt happy. The nervousness had left me the first time I got into the helicopter, and I felt happier than I ever had" (76). Riding with his platoon by helicopter into a hot landing zone, he explains:

Circling down, the helicopter began to draw ground fire; the rounds made a noise like corn popping as they whipped past the air craft....I could only think of what a pilot had once told me: 'if a chopper gets hit in the right place, it has the flying characteristics of a falling safe.' Nevertheless the experience—our first of a hot LZ—was not entirely unpleasant. There was a strange exhilaration in our helplessness. Carried willy-nilly down toward the landing zone, with the wind slapping against our faces and the trees rushing in a green blur beneath us, we felt

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<sup>12</sup> Boredom and frustration as negative conditions encouraging the aestheticization of violence will be a key theme of the following chapter.

a visceral thrill. It was like the feeling of being on a roller coaster or in a canoe careening down a wild rapids; the feeling, half fear and half excitement, that comes when you are in the grip of uncontrollable forces. (105-6)

This experience begins the shift into a negative sublime. The landing zone itself, instead of offering the safe completion of a dangerous passage, presents new dangers. Rather than pairing fear with an active recuperative idea of spirit or freedom, here the exhilaration remains tied to passivity, “helplessness,” “being in the grip of uncontrollable forces.” The Kantian frame, in which the subject feels its moral power of reason transcend sensible determination, does not match up with Caputo’s. His pleasure, at least in this description, remains one of surrender to material forces. The “visceral thrill” of being “carried,” “careening” through a landscape that can be perceived only as the rush of wind and a blur of green, shows Caputo’s position as passive. He is given over to the force of military technology that carries him to the landing zone, but also and equally importantly, to the visceral bodily passion of speed and danger.

Morality and mortality enter the scene together at the end of this particular battle. As the Marines sift through documents at a Viet Cong station they have taken over, they begin to worry over the enemy’s personal letters and photos.

We lingered for several minutes, trying to make some sense out of it. The company had only done what it was expected to do and what it was trained to do: it had killed the enemy. Everything we had learned in the Marine Corps told us to feel pride in that. Most of us did, but we could not understand why feelings of pity and guilt alloyed our pride. ...The drill fields and our first two months in Vietnam had dulled, but not deadened, our sensibilities. We retained a capacity for remorse and had not yet reached the stage of moral and emotional numbness. (117)

The encounter with the lost signs and representations of lost enemy soldiers reintroduces an element of moral concern, at least for the short term, that opposes the surrender to

material circumstances of warfare. The soldiers' moral feeling, their active power to question or resist violence, has been "dulled" but it is still alive, not yet fully dead. The encounter with the material bodies of those dead enemies, though, operates very differently:

the mutilation caused by modern weapons came as a shock. We were accustomed to seeing the human body intact; to us, a corpse was an elderly uncle lying in a coffin, his face powdered and his tie in place. Death admits to no degrees: the elderly uncle...is just as dead as the enemy soldier whose head has been blown apart by a forty-five caliber bullet. Nevertheless, we were sickened by the torn flesh, the viscera and splattered brains. The horror lay in the recognition that the body, which is supposed to be the earthly home of an immortal soul, which people spend so much time feeding, conditioning, and beautifying, is in fact only a fragile case stuffed full of disgusting matter....The sight of mutilation did more than cause me physical revulsion; it burst the religious myths of my Catholic childhood. I could not look at those men and still believe their souls had "passed on" to another existence, or that they had souls in the first place. I could not believe those bloody messes would be capable of a resurrection on the Last Day. They did, in fact, seem "more" dead. Massacred or annihilated might better describe what had happened to them. (121)

This experience of human physical destruction has no recuperative moment. It appears as an absolute that admits no supersensible validation or transcendence; rather, it abolishes the thought of such transcendence. The surface of the human body, once broken open, functions as yet another encounter with the negative sublime. Kant's sublime maintains a difficult relationship to boundaries: the mathematical sublime is too large to fit within the human frame of perception (it can't be taken in at a glance); the dynamic sublime is a show of force that overwhelms human strengths. The stunning force unleashed by modern weapons is sublime insofar as it exceeds and overwhelms human physical strength. Applied to the human body, it obliterates the boundaries of the human frame. The horrible sublime produced here draws together the mathematical and dynamic

functions of the sublime as a structure—the body—that is usually granted respect, if not sublime awe, is broken down by sublime force. In addition to this formal doubling, which intensifies the negative force of the sublime, is the conceptual problem of human destructive force. Kant's dynamic sublime is a threatening power of nature that nonetheless must be considered through reason as a "might which has no power over us" (*CJ* 119). Kant attributes a moral dimension to this resistance: it is our moral vocation to meet overwhelming forces with the internal freedom of our rational power. But war's sublime is itself a product of human reason (technology and instrumental reason). The moral problem posed by the destructive force of human reason doesn't offer the same recourse to transcendental compensation. For Caputo, the spectacle of wrecked bodies shatters faith in transcendence and, over time, begins to threaten his own subjective coherence.

The next narratively consequential events of Caputo's text are his transfer from the front lines back to regimental headquarters, a shift from "a first rate infantry battalion, with a unique spirit and personality" to a "military organization, a soulless, bloodless thing. Papers. Reports. Pins on a map" (141). Worse than being removed from a group that still holds a measure of sublime appeal, he describes his new bureaucratic position as "Officer in Charge of the Dead." His new duty is to track, confirm, and describe casualties in grim reports whose terms, such as "traumatic amputation" (loss of any body part, heads included) test the ability of language to report such destructiveness:

some marines had been so badly mangled there seemed to be no words to describe what had happened to them....In effect [one marine] had been disintegrated, but the official report read something like "traumatic amputation, both feet; traumatic amputation, both legs and arms; multiple lacerations to abdomen; through and

through fragment wounds, head and chest.” Then came the notation “killed in action.” (159)

The descriptive language does work, though again, through a negative sublime process. The clinical terms, in addition to the sequencing of one injury after another, leads the reader through the same cognitive struggle to imagine a scene whose physical experience cannot be supported or simply apprehended, then closes with death, the negative substitute for transcendental recuperation. Caputo’s new position re-emphasizes the destructive aspect of human reason, as his job of tallying casualties and calculating kill ratios feeds directly into the rational efficiency of military strategy. While the proximity of death in the battlefield offers Caputo the compensation of an intense feeling of life, the continual proximity of death in the corpses he must count produces “morbid depressions” and self hatred. While on the battlefield the sensation of life compensates for death; off it, counting bodies, Caputo feels they “seemed to have died for nothing; if not for nothing, then for nothing tangible. Those men might as well have died in automobile accidents” (191). Having too much time to think about these facts in a deadening routine, Caputo begins to experience nightmares and psychological dissociation. A terrible dream fulfills his wish to get back to the front.

That night I was given command of a new platoon. They stood in formation in the rain, three ranks deep. I stood front and center, facing them. Devlin, Lockhart, and Bryce were in the first rank, Bryce standing on his one good leg, next to him the faceless Devlin, and then Lockhart with his bruised eye sockets bulging. Sullivan was there too, and Reasoner and all the others, all of them dead except for me, the officer in charge of the dead. I was the only one alive and whole, and when I commanded, “Platoon, rye-eet FACE! Sling HARMS! FORWARD MARCH!” they faced right, slung their rifles, and began to march. They marched along, my platoon of crippled corpses, hopping along on the stumps of their legs, swinging the stumps of their arms, keeping perfect time while I counted cadence. I was proud of them, disciplined soldiers to and beyond the end. They

stayed in step even in death. (189)

The dream also fulfills his wish for a beyond in which human energy and will survive destruction. The dream offers transcendence of deathly forces by dedication and will—but in a horribly mangled form. The imposition of orderly ranks on the dead mirrors his daily activity of counting and recording casualties. Pride in their discipline substitutes for the shame and disappointment Caputo feels at following orders that degrade battle sacrifice with statistics. The fearful form taken by the fantasy of transcendence may be an internal reaction against Caputo's longing for a positive sublime that offers the feeling of life even through danger. It combines this longing, in distorted form, with an expression of his hatred for the mechanical sublime of military bureaucracy, which subsumes death into cold statistics and reasoned efficiency. The tensions of the dream are between coherent life ("I was the only one alive and whole), order (both physical and moral, as Caputo is physically whole and the corpses maintain disciplinary order although broken), and destruction (the details of wrecked bodies). The dream's form offers a horrendous, negative sublime solution to the horrendous problem with which Caputo is struggling.

Evidence of psychological strain extends beyond the territory of the dream: the next day, Caputo experiences dissociation and double vision. He describes the sensation of

mental bisection...Half of me was in the mess, listening to two officers talking of practical military matters, of axes of advance and landing zones, and the other half was on the dream drill field where legless, armless, eyeless men marched to my command....Then they vanished. Suddenly...In their place, I saw Mora and Harrison prefigured in their death. I saw their living faces across from me and, superimposed on those, a vision of their faces as they would look in death. It was

a kind of double exposure...Asleep and dreaming, I saw dead men living; awake, I saw living men dead. (190)

The blow to subjective coherence caused by this conflict between Caputo's desire for aesthetic transcendence and its violent degradation of all ideals in material violence and through instrumental reason is powerful. Despite the haunting of his visual field by death, Caputo "did not go crazy," at least not completely, but the symptoms of the struggle between imagination and reason do alter his perceptions. The "double exposure," seeing the living as corpses, became Caputo's "constant waking nightmare," a symptom of the two exposures to danger that he eventually comes to view as a choice: the sensation of life brought on by real proximity to death on the front lines, or the death of disenchantment and rationalized violence characterizing his otherwise fairly safe position at headquarters. Caputo chooses the battlefield, requesting transfer to a line company in which he can feel the "magnetism of combat," "live more intensely under fire," and perhaps escape from the visions of death by placing himself in a situation that will allow less time to "brood over...corpses" (218-19).

The choice is less than completely successful. Caputo removes himself from the guilt provoking relative comfort of headquarters to the miseries of jungle warfare with its heavy rains, sucking mud, legions of insects, snipers, booby traps, and marching orders across "Purple Heart Trail" (246). In the miserable danger provoked by such orders, as opposed to the exhilarating danger of fire-fights, Caputo moves toward the apathy that Kant sometimes associates with the human face of the sublime:

A sudden and mysterious recovery from the virus of fear had caused the change in mood. I didn't know why. I only knew I had ceased to be afraid of dying. It was not a feeling of invincibility; indifference rather....Walking down the trail I could



not remember having an emotion more sublime or liberating than that indifference toward my own death. (247-8)

This passage doesn't even carry the suggestion of a moral principle underpinning Caputo's acceptance of death. He presents himself as indifferent, passive—not even ambivalent about this negative possibility.

The mission down turns out better and worse than he expects. Caputo and his men are drawn into a fire-fight that provides him with one of the high moments of his war experience and the return of his sense of aesthetic delight in battle. Creeping along near a river, his platoon draws fire from a VC-controlled village just around the river bend. They engage in a fight in which Caputo skillfully commands and leads his men to destroy the soldiers guarding the village. Although the depth and speed of the river prevent them from crossing to destroy the village itself, Caputo feels wildly ecstatic at the success of his maneuvers.

Well, all right, there would be no pursuit, no final climactic bayonet charge. Still, I felt a drunken elation. Not only the sudden release from danger made me feel it, but the thrill of having seen the platoon perform perfectly under heavy fire and under my command. I had never experienced anything like it before. When the line wheeled and charged across the clearing, the enemy bullets whining past them, wheeled and charged almost with drill-field precision, an ache as profound as the ache of orgasm passed through me. And perhaps that is why some officers make careers of the infantry... just to experience a single moment when a group of soldiers under your command and in the extreme stress of combat do exactly what you want them to, *as if they are extensions of yourself*. (my emphasis 254)

This fire-fight lets Caputo relive his fading ideal of the sublime in combat. The elation of danger is complimented and amplified by the control he maintains, and which allows him to feel a powerful excitement and expansion of self. The scene contained the dramatic force of modern weaponry focused successfully on the enemy target, as well as the

human spectacle of well-ordered lines of soldiers advancing swiftly and precisely. They *are* extensions of Caputo both in that they *follow his order* and in that they *fulfill his desire for order*, facilitating his experience of the sublime. It doesn't take long for this experience to be countered. On their way back to friendly lines, a minor incident prefigures a more serious one. Caputo passes back the order, "Don't bunch up," a frequent cautionary directive reminding troops to maintain safe following distance, minimizing the potential damage that could be imposed on their line by a single well-aimed shot or shell. His words, passing down the line, get muffled and confused into "Burn the hut," an order some troops carry out as they pass by a non-hostile hamlet, causing considerably more confusion. The perfect order of Caputo's troops has not outlasted the short fire-fight. Moments later, a remote-detonated mine explodes as the men pass over it. Caputo is not seriously hurt, but men standing very close to him are badly injured by the explosion and its shrapnel. The military order that facilitates Caputo's combat sublime is wiped away as "blind chance," the "true god of modern warfare," strikes at his men (264-6), gravely injuring these extensions of himself rather than simply determining his own death.

In the remainder of his active duty, Caputo begins again to suffer from the feeling of dissociation that had plagued him at headquarters. He eventually pushes for a retaliatory measure that could compensate for the mine. When his troops' questions in the village uncover the identity of two VC involved in building mines and booby traps, Caputo orders the soldiers back out on a night mission to arrest, and if necessary, kill the two VC. The order is an attempt to reclaim independent action and to seize the possibility for justice or revenge. His decision would seemingly recuperate for and

reassert order, countering the negative sublime of war's disastrous chance events, but chance prevails again. Caputo's men confuse their directions in the village or confuse the claims of their informer and end up seizing and killing the friendly informer and another innocent villager. The bungled incident brings an end to Caputo's military career, as villagers report the incident and Caputo, along with the men involved, are court-martialed for their role in the death of civilians.

Of course, they're not convicted. The court-martial, despite their guilt, appears as another manifestation of hostile chance—in this example strangely wedded to the bureaucratic rationality of the military. Caputo's narrative does much to de-romanticize and negativize the sublime appeal of war. The details of his story invoke pain, shame, irony, and disgust more often than a positive sense of the sublime. Caputo struggles to justify his attraction to war even as he admits its sublime appeal is distorted by war's destruction of ethical feeling and that its material brutality disrupts its moments of transcendental feeling. Still, he refuses to fully deny the possibility of sublime experience in warfare. He cannot hate war in the way so many Vietnam-era protestors did, because for him it represents a material reality that contains the possibility of ecstatic experience as well as overwhelming destructiveness. On some level he does not question the fact that these two qualities belong together. His narrative is framed by a disclaimer:

this book ought not to be regarded as a protest. Protest arises from a belief that one can change things or influence events. I am not egotistical enough to believe I can. Besides, it no longer seems necessary to register an objection to the war, because the war is over. We lost it, and no amount of objecting will resurrect the men who died, without redeeming anything, on calvaries like Hamburger Hill and the Rockpile.

It might perhaps, prevent the next generation from being crucified in the next war.

But I don't think so. (xxi)

The surrender to uncontrollable forces stands as more attractive to Caputo than the “egotistical” attempt to resist. While this position is deeply unattractive to a subject that has set him or herself against the value of the military’s sublime ecstatic experience, Caputo’s representation of war as an irresistible force, an incomprehensible reality, presents a melancholy sublime.

### **Ecstasy and Transcendental Reason: Reflections on the Sublime and the Soldier**

I’ve been taking some liberties with the sublime as articulated by Kant, but I’m not the first to do so. De Man’s lecture “Kant and Schiller” harshly critiques Schiller’s tendencies to empiricize, psychologize, and idealize the mental processes Kant outlined. Schiller emphasizes the imagination’s role in creating a physical experience of terror and the need for a psychological transcendence that allows escape from threat. Kant emphasizes fearsome sights tranquilly absorbed from a distance, leaving the mind functioning freely and preventing the need for dissociative splitting. Schiller’s goal is to describe a practical psychological experience that can be observed in and manipulated through aesthetic productions—especially of the theater. Kant’s goal is to describe the structure of the subjective faculties of imagination and reason (*Aesthetic Ideology* 143). Schiller’s apparently more domesticated and practical version of the sublime paradoxically leads to a completely idealist vision of subjectivity, as Schiller claims that the sublime teaches us to rigidly separate our moral and physical selves. In this account, sublime experience is the sensation of an “ideal security” that allows us to “consider the

sensory part of our being, the only part of us that can be in danger, as an exterior natural object that is of no concern to our person, to our moral self” (qtd in *Aesthetic Ideology* 146). Kant’s careful attention to the faculties and refusal to psychologize the sublime contradictorily leads him to a radical materialism, wherein the experience of the sublime is based in vision—the eye’s reception of images independent of any pre-imposed understanding of their order or unity (“Phenomenality and Materiality in Kant” *Aesthetic Ideology* 88). Schiller’s idealist and ideological version of the sublime, and aesthetics in general, leads to his widely felt influence in humanism, education, culture, and the aesthetic vision of the state (150). In Kant, the elements of immanent materialism that disrupt his philosophical project—and the vision of subjectivity it offers—have been largely ignored (88). Elements of both versions of the sublime, of idealism and materialism, are apparent in Jünger and Caputo’s memoirs.

Both veterans situate the sublime almost always in the thick of conflict, close to physical danger. They rarely show either the theatrical distance that Schiller claims enhances sublime experience or the tranquil separation that Kant approves. Intense physical threat and terror, which both philosophers exclude, are the premise of Caputo and Jünger’s sublime. Kant’s exclusion of the physical dimension, however, holds only on a superficial level. As de Man argues, material reality pervades his notion of the sublime. Jünger’s descriptions, as in “[e]yes and ears were utterly compelled by the maelstrom of destruction,” highlights the relation of the eye to the spectacle; both writers emphasize that a special feeling of life—a sensation deeply connected to Kant’s aesthetics—is set humming by the closeness of violence. This feeling of life seems to

compensate or recuperate from the negative moment of exposure to threat. Both veterans also describe conceptual elements that are involved in the recuperative moment of the sublime, but the stability of their relations to a sublime recuperation are different.

Jünger is captivated by the adventure of physical intensity: endurance through assault and survival against destructive force are his recuperative trade for the pain and fear of war's sublime. There are though, vague conceptual elements to his sublime. We might recall a previous quote to re-place the emphasis: "[t]he incredible massing of forces *in the hour of destiny, to fight for a distant future*, and the violence it so stunningly unleashed, had taken me for the first time into the depths of something that was more than personal experience" (*Storm of Steel*, my emphasis 255). Abstract concepts of destiny and futurity mesh with material force. The composite of temporal leap, unknowable fate, and physical force offers Jünger a unity of supersensible elements and material violence that draws him beyond "mere personal experience" just as the sublime, in Kant's theory, draws the subject toward rational harmony. The vagueness of the concepts employed here, though, seems more in line with Schiller's idealism than with Kant's immanent transcendentalism. For Jünger, the idealization of war as destiny and path to the future gives violence its sublime character. Aligning his paradigm with Schiller's, the part of us that is in danger is secondary to the moral self that embraces war as destiny and future. This position, collapsing material war and idealism, allows Jünger to ecstatically celebrate war for war's sake, as some celebrate the aesthetic ideal of "art for art's sake." But Jünger's ecstatic experience of violence as a material and ideal dimension that draws him beyond subjective boundaries is far more extreme than the

Kantian paradigm of transcendental reason or of Schillerian idealism. For Kant, the ecstatic element of the sublime is moderated. There is the negative moment of imagination's strain and failure, in which the eye's vision materially experiences the object, and there is the recuperative moment in which reason passes beyond imagination to pose an idea of the supersensible. Jünger's model amplifies the sublime pattern to the limit. Passing Kant's model, in which one faculty ecstatically exceeds another, passing Schiller's model, in which an ideal renders the body irrelevant, Jünger's extreme unleashes a terrifying violence by fusing the ideal with the material.

For Caputo, order fills the role played by Jünger's destiny and futurity. The role of the sublime hero is to maintain military order—which entails vitality, quickness, and will—in the face of terror and violence. The sensation of unity with others through military order is the recuperative moment of Caputo's sublime. Unlike Jünger's mystical destiny reached through magical force, Caputo's order is dependent on the existence and functional behavior of really existing material others. Other soldiers, acting in coordination and effectively unifying their individual actions, their training, and their material weaponry (as opposed to Jünger's vision of independent warriors acting simultaneously) are required to create Caputo's overarching sense of order. Because of Caputo's link to external reality, real objects and people, his sublime is less stable. The ecstatic element in Caputo's experience is linked to the struggle of the group, which becomes an extension of his feeling of life and desire for order. Caputo's sublime thus loses its recuperative mode and falls into negativity when he sees the death war deals out to his fellow soldiers. Death becomes the negative transcendental mode of Caputo's

sublime. His ecstatic experience takes a reversible form: the positive ecstasy of ordered unity alternates with the negative ecstasy of subjective destruction and death. Freud would be a better analyst of Caputo's sublime, whose negative form borders on the uncanny, than Kant or Schiller. Jünger's experience of sublime ecstasy is independent of reality: it leans towards a psychotic break from the values that organize civilian consciousness (preservation of life and the world of human property) and embraces the destruction of all unities (whether things, people, or self). Caputo's sublime is marked by a struggle with reality, specifically with the return of the repressed reality of death. The appearance of deathly doubles of the living signals the collapse of Caputo's vision of military order as heroic. Military order coincides not only with its body of fighting soldiers, but with soldiers' deaths. Death is the flip side of military power, and the repressed term of Caputo's vision of war as sublime. Caputo's struggle with death recognizes the reality of its power—his ecstasy is an obsessive compulsion to maintain order through military discipline. Caputo's sublime may be described as melancholy because he refuses to accept the loss of his desire: order. Although he has been betrayed by war's sublime, he continues to feel its attraction. Rather than accepting its worthlessness, he wallows in his inability to enact change. The ecstatic sensation of being drawn out of the self by the joy of order or by its negative image, death, is more enticing than any other subjective experience. Compared to war's sublime, "whatever else life offered in the way of *delights or torments* seem[ed] pedestrian" (my emphasis xvii).

We can gain a stronger perspective on war's sublime appeals by examining the



analysis offered within another soldier's memoir; J. Glenn Gray's *The Warriors: Reflections on Men in Battle* directly addresses the problematic of war's sublime. Gray's description emphasizes a trio of enjoyments accompanying the experience of war: "the delight in seeing, the delight in comradeship, the delight in destruction" (*The Warriors* 29). While only the delight in seeing directly draws on the visual dimension of the sublime, the other appeals also provoke the ecstatic sensation that Gray identifies as central to the sublime.

Gray emphasizes the almost instinctual operation of the desire to see.

War as a spectacle, as something to see, ought never to be underestimated. There is in all of us what the Bible calls "the lust of the eye," a phrase at once precise and of the widest connotation. It is precise because human beings possess as a primitive urge this love of watching. We fear we will miss something worth seeing. This passion to see surely precedes in most of us the urge to participate in or to aid. Anyone who has watched people crowding around the scene of an accident on the highway realizes the lust of the eye is real. Anyone who has watched the faces of people at a fire knows it is real. Seeing sometimes absorbs us utterly; it is as though the human being became one great eye. The eye is lustful because it requires the novel, the unusual, the spectacular. It cannot satiate itself on the familiar, the routine, the everyday....How many men in each generation have been drawn into the twilight of confused and murderous battle "to see what it is like"? (29)

Although Gray moves from this explication to a discussion of beauty in battle, we can see in this description's examples of the highway crash and the fire that the delight in seeing is not only invested in beautiful images. Collisions that destroy and warp bodies and machines, fires that rage and consume—images that, far from fitting into a formal frame, actively destroy formal borders—inspire this delight. The implication is that the delight in seeing is somehow already a delight in destruction that corresponds to the breaking of boundaries governing forms of life. The formal unity of the human being fades into the

absorption of the eye. The aesthetic paradigm operating here is clearly not the beautiful but the sublime, as Gray admits a few pages further along—but not before trying to posit a unifying, rather than disarticulating, function in this enjoyment.

[S]ensuous curiosity is only one level of seeing. The word “see” with its many derivatives, like “insight” and “vision,” has an imaginative and intellectual connotation which is far more expansive than the physical. Frequently we are unable to separate these levels of seeing, to distinguish the outer from the inner eye. This is probably no accident. The human being is, after all, a unity, and the sensuous, imaginative, and intellectual elements of his nature can fuse when he is absorbed. [The] “seeing” [of both the aesthetic/intellectual contemplation and the merely curious] is for the sake of seeing, the lust of the eye, where the eye stands for the whole human being, for man the observer. (30)

This description attempts to hold together the pure material dimension of sight that can delight in destruction and the intellectual component of insight or harmony between the subject and the object of vision. The figure of “man the observer” bridges the gap uneasily. The ecstatic character, which breaks down subjective borders, and which is central to the sublime, makes it difficult to simultaneously assert its production of a unified whole. Gray rejects the Kantian gesture of claiming that a “human spirit triumphs over these blind forces and lifeless powers of nature [observed in the dynamic sublime].” He claims instead that the

awe that steals over us...is...a recognition of power and grandeur to which we are subject. There is not so much a separation of the self from the world as a *subordination* of the self to it. We are able to disregard personal danger at such moments by *transcending the self, by forgetting our separateness*. (35)

I think the distinctive thing about the feeling of the sublime is its ecstatic character, ecstatic in the original meaning of the term, namely, *a state of being outside the self*.... The ecstasy satisfies us because we are conscious of a power outside us with which we can *merge in the relation of parts to whole*. Feelings neither of triumph nor of depression predominate. The pervasive sense of wonder satisfies us because we are assured that we are part of this circling world, not divorced from it, or shut up within the walls of the self and delivered over to the

insufficiency of the ego.... We feel rescued from the emptiness within us. In *losing ourselves we gain a relationship to something greater than the self*, and the foreign character of the surrounding world is drastically reduced. (36-7)

Emphasizing the recuperative moment of sublime ecstasy (the idea that in losing the self we gain something greater), Gray attempts to retain a positive unifying function of an experience that also disrupts subjective structure. The unifying moment of Gray's sublime is not elevated by Kantian reason; it remains on the level of material realities of life and death. In this way, Gray removes the sublime from the rigor of the moral law which it expresses in Kantian theory. Depending on moral law's transcendental relation to the material world, Kant's sublime offers only a stiff comfort to subjectivity: the vision of what must be in the realm of the moral offers insight into human freedom, but also presents us with a "law-governed task" through which "reason must exert its dominance over sensibility" (Kant, *CJ* 128). Gray redraws sublime transcendence more permissively as an immanent unity of self and world, but he draws self and world together (counter-intuitively) in the moment of war. It seems bizarre to find subjective comfort in the reduced "foreign character of the surrounding world" when the surrounding objects are materials of war and the "whole" with which one merges as a "part" is the military project of war—but this is nonetheless what Gray implies. His vision of the sublime is of a drive to see, to unify with objects through the desire of the eye, that keeps pushing past subjective boundaries, destruction, moral imperatives. The question presses from beneath his text: how can the "insufficiency of the ego" be so dreadful to make war itself our dread refuge? (We will return to this question in the following chapter.)

The second appeal of war examined by Gray's text, the "delight in comradeship,"

also de-centers subjective experience. Providing a sense of unity with others, comradeship generates a feeling of liberation quite unlike the individual freedom of choice offered by liberal democratic society. While individual freedom often appears as alienation and emptiness, comradeship offers a sense of community and purpose that “liberate” the individual from his separateness. This is another form of ecstatic experience offered by war, an “ecstasy not unlike the aesthetic ecstasy previously described, though occasioned by different forces” (45). The parallel between the ecstatic sublime and the ecstasy of comradeship draws closer as Gray develops the negative dimension of comradeship: its tendency toward sacrifice.

The secret of comradeship has not been exhausted, however, in the feeling of freedom and power instilled in us by communal effort in combat. There is something more and equally important. The sense of power and liberation that comes over men at such moments stems from a source beyond the union of men. I believe it is nothing less than the assurance of immortality that makes self-sacrifice at these moments so relatively easy. Men are true comrades only when each is ready to give up his life for the other, without reflection and without thought of personal loss....

Such sacrifice seems hard and heroic to those who have never felt such communal ecstasy. In fact, it is not nearly so difficult as many less absolute acts in peacetime and in civilian life, for death becomes in a measure unreal and unbelievable to one who is sharing his life with his companions. (46)

Much as Gray claims that the spectacle of the sublime draws men so completely out of themselves that the risk of death fades before the desire to see, comradeship provides a framework in which self and other become so indistinct that death would seem to conserve rather than sever their unity. In a life that is so completely shared, death provides a route to complete identification rather than separation, as “what is real in me goes forward and lives on in the comrades for whom I gave up my physical life” (47). This schema, in which heroism and sacrifice join together, repeats the confused relation

of unity and destructiveness that appeared in Gray's discussion of the sublime. Contrary to traditional versions of the soldier-hero, Gray sees in the tendency to sacrifice the same deep moral problems posed by war's sublime spectacles. The desire for sacrifice is based on comradeship, unity with a material group; the simplicity of this closeness to others on a material level is easily exploited by rulers and governments. Comradeship and sacrifice provide a seeming moral foundation that supports state violence.

Gray recognizes this complicity, but steps back from it. In the case of the sublime, he rejected Kant's moral schema—the claim that imagination's sacrifice links up with moral triumph; here however, he reasserts on the level of material reality the “sacrifice” that Kant struggled to keep within the realm of mental faculties:

Are we not right in honoring the fighter's impulse to sacrifice himself for a comrade, even though it be done, as it so frequently is, in an evil cause? I think so....I do not doubt for a moment that wars are made many times more deadly because of this striving and this impulse. Yet I would not want to be without the assurance their existence gives me that our species has a different destiny than is granted to other animals. Though we often sink below them, we can at moments rise above them, too. (50-51)

The “delight in destruction” is the only appeal of war that Gray (despite his apparent goal of providing a philosophical argument against these appeals) manages to condemn without also recuperating or romanticizing. It is also the appeal most completely inherent to war itself: “If the lust of the eye and the yearning for communion with our fellows were the only appeals of combat, we might be confident that they would be ultimately capable of satisfaction in other ways” (51). The delight in destruction offers a more “sinister” enjoyment. Its sole objective is the expression of an aggressiveness that is present, but not always overt, in the experience of the sublime and

the tendency toward sacrifice. Acts of destruction provide another form of ecstatic experience, but one in which borders are transgressed without the simultaneous construction of larger unities. In Gray's description:

the delight in destruction has, like the other [appeals of war], an ecstatic character. Men feel overpowered by it, seized from without, and relatively helpless to change or control it. Nevertheless, it is an ecstasy without union, for comradeship among killers is terribly difficult, and the kinship with nature that aesthetic vision affords is closed to them. Nor is the breaking down of the barriers of the self a quality of the appeal of destroying. On the contrary, I think that destruction is ultimately an individual matter, a function of the person and not the group. (56)

While the ecstatic experience of war's other appeals can be interpreted as overflowing subjective boundaries to form connections with the outside, Gray reads destructive ecstasy as focused precisely on destroying all that falls outside subjective borders. If in the other appeals Gray reads a mixture of Eros and Thanatos, the delight in destruction is purely a death drive: "The utter absence of love in this inverted kind of creation [a creation of death] makes the delight essentially sterile" (57). Nothing good comes from the delight in destruction. Gray refuses to associate it with any goals other than fighting for the sake of fighting (53), chaos and moral anarchy (56), and a return to a Hobbesian "war of every man against every man" (57). Worse, Gray claims this problematic enjoyment "swallows up other pleasures," leaving the subject trapped by boredom and restlessness everywhere else than on the battlefield (57). The question seems unanswered—how can this be a delight? We might suggest that this appeal is an enjoyment of sheer force. There is no ideal component to this appeal, only the exercise and enjoyment of material force itself. Here the soldier himself partakes of the dynamic power or force that triggers the experience of the sublime by unleashing and being

gripped by the absolutely destructive in his own nature. The pattern of sublime sacrifice and recuperation runs in reverse for this delight: the ideal element, one's human capacity for social meaning, is sacrificed to a material destruction that transcends everything else.

### **Irresistible Appeals?**

Surveying Western literature's many records of soldiers seized by the ecstatic fury of the delight in destruction, Gray quotes Ernst Jünger, the "warrior" whose records present such vague ideal justifications for fighting that they merely collapse into a vision of war for war's own sake. Gray is unable—or unwilling—to valorize the delight in destruction, but Jünger finds nothing more sublime than its experience. The other appeals Gray admits to, the delight in seeing and in comradeship, share the dimension of ecstatic experience. All three appeals involve the sublime: they draw visions, attachments, powers into relationships of sacrifice and recuperation that radically alter the subject's vision of self and world. Destructiveness, death, and overwhelming material force are central to all three appeals, yet even a careful analyst like Gray doesn't escape admitting that their experience really is memorable and enjoyable. Recent memoirist and Gulf War veteran Anthony Swofford expresses no uncertainty regarding the soldier's ability to find delight in destruction, even in anti-war arguments:

There is talk that many Vietnam films are antiwar, that the message is war is inhumane and look what happens when you train young American men to fight and kill, they turn their fighting and killing everywhere, they ignore their targets and desecrate the entire country, shooting fully automatic, forgetting they were trained to aim. But actually, Vietnam war films are all pro-war, no matter what the supposed message, what Kubrick or Coppola or Stone intended. Mr. and Mrs. Johnson in Omaha or San Francisco or Manhattan will watch the films and decide once and for all that war is inhumane and terrible, and they will tell their friends

at church and family this, but Corporal Johnson at Camp Pendleton and Sergeant Johnson at Travis Air Force Base and Seaman Johnson at Coronado Naval Station and Spec 4 Johnson at Fort Bragg and Lance Corporal Swofford at Twentynine Palms Marine Corps Base watch the same films and are excited by them, because the magic brutality of the films celebrates the terrible and despicable beauty of their fighting skills. Fight, rape, war, pillage, burn. Filmic images of death and carnage are pornography for the military man; with film you are stroking his cock, tickling his balls with the pink feather of history, getting him ready for his real First Fuck. It doesn't matter how many Mr. and Mrs. Johnsons are antiwar—the actual killers who use the weapons are not. (*Jarhead* 7)

Despite (or perhaps partly because) of the nakedness of claims like this, Swofford's book is fairly successful at de-subliming his descriptions of war. His book is so suffused with a tone of anger and resentment at the state's exploitation of young men's eagerness to enjoy violence that it provides an unusually unromantic and unappealing account of war.<sup>13</sup> Interestingly, the film made from an adaptation of his book, into which he reportedly had much creative input, is much less successfully repellent. The film suffers from its visual representation of the "despicable beauty" of war's destruction. The persistent difficulty so many former soldiers seem to have in controlling the work of the sublime in their experience and in the texts that describe them point to the difficulty of producing an account of war that successfully counteracts war's sublime appeal. The final sections of this chapter will address this question through readings of two films: one, a treatment of D-day, the other a contemplation of the role of war in history, memory, and subjectivity.

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<sup>13</sup> We will return to a reading of Swofford's text in the second chapter.



### **A Mechanical Sublime—*Overlord: D-Day, June 6, 1944***

Britain's Imperial War Museum holds huge reserves of film shot by Army photographic units and camera guns on bombers, culled from news footage, and captured from German planes and fighting units. Stuart Cooper was recruited to build these materials into a feature film portraying the build-up to D-Day. The very odd result, originally released in 1975, is a narrative film that articulates documentary footage with newly filmed sequences following a fictional character, Tom Bellows, from his training to his death in a landing craft on D-day morning.

*Overlord* kills off its fictional hero, ingloriously staging his death before his boat even reaches the beach. The film's effectiveness turns in part on the tensions between Tom's death as he imagines it in a premonition that fills the first scenes, his death as it actually happens, and the mythic/sublime conception of the heroic death in battle—which is in no way fulfilled by the events of Tom's experience. *Overlord*, instead, studiously opposes the sublime as an *appeal* of battle. The film employs a catalog of images that Kant uses to describe the sublime—night skies, here crossed by bombers; panoramic shots of vast wastelands, ruined by war; fierce ocean waves tossing boats filled with soldiers training for a possible rough weather landing on the French coast. Even Gray's example, fire, is vividly employed in images that show large portions of cities aflame. Yet instead of exciting the ecstatic fascination of battle described by many veteran memoirists, the film's images are oddly *unexciting*. They don't have the exhilaration of Coppola's carefully choreographed helicopter flights or sudden illuminations of coastlines into flame in *Apocalypse Now*, or the wrenching dread and gore of the sniper scenes in

Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket*. The overall impression conveyed by *Overlord* is of war as a vast machinic process—mathematically huge, dynamically overwhelming, subjectively empty. This impression is built partly by the quality of the images themselves, partly by the very thin narrative structure of the film.

Many sequences of aerial footage in the film were shot relatively automatically during training or bombing flights. Automatic cameras were fixed to the bomb bays of planes; camera-guns were set to activate as the gunner pulled his trigger. The construction of these images was determined through rational interest in military efficiency and record-keeping. Their perspective is set to be interpretable by military staff, but they are not framed with any artistic intent. Granted, the sublime is a quality that resists or exceeds subjective efforts at framing, so the lack of artistry in itself has little relation to the images' production of a sensation of the sublime. In fact, the sublime element of these images could be precisely their lack of subjective framing: the production of filmic images *without framing for a viewer* disrupts the idea of the subjective viewer itself. As the power of the imagination is disrupted by the magnitude of objects and forces that call up the sublime, here the sensible vision of the subject is disrupted by images whose purpose is determined by a destructive rationality that exceeds subjective frames and distorts natural powers to its own ends. The subject is de-centered in this relationship, but not through an ecstatic emotional or physical response. Instead the experience is more along the lines of Kant's claim that the sublime has an initially depressive effect; but in this case it is difficult to overcome this emotion through rational contemplation, since the destructive aspect of human reason is in fact central to

the problem.

*Overlord's* thin narrative exacerbates this effect. Offering only a loose story following Tom's training, it refuses to bring additional framing power to the mechanical visuals. Historical footage combines with new plotted sequences incompletely. Scenes advancing Tom's story alternate with historical sequences showing anonymous others undergoing training for war. Scenes of Tom's training open onto institutional documentary footage of machines amassing for war, or already involved in the conflict of which Tom will become an utterly insignificant part.

If the film succeeds in emptying action footage of warfare—the visually sublime—of its exhilaration, it does the same with the appeal of comradeship. Tom's opaque personality and quiet unresponsiveness don't provide a very good lens to portray a comrade's dedication to the group. While his interactions with other soldiers around him are affectionate and unproblematic, he doesn't necessarily seem to fit into the group. The film closes moments after Tom's death in the landing craft; the film never offers a stirring vision of individual soldiers struggling actively together. The film's purposeful imbalance between the action of the individual and the vast machinery of war is more suggestive of the negative aspects of comradeship, the fact that ties between individuals can be exploited on an institutional or governmental level, than of the happiness of group unity.

Tom's letter to his family (which is never sent—regulations intervene) clearly emphasizes the unappealing sublime of large-scale modern war. He has recently received a letter from his own family sending birthday wishes, and sits by himself in a grove of

trees on the training base writing a reply. We hear Tom's internal voice reading out the composition in his characteristically flat tone:

We all think the invasion can't be far off; it's like being part of a machine that gets bigger and bigger, while we get smaller and smaller until there's nothing left....I don't think I shall live to see the end of this war. It seems silly, but this war has killed so many people already. I'm just going to be another one, of that I'm sure. I can feel it, the way you feel it when you're going to get a cold. I didn't know whether to tell you, but I thought you shouldn't get one of those letters. Please be brave; I'm not frightened.

As he writes, describing the machine of war growing, the shot pans out to take in more and more of the shadowy tree trunks that stand around him like columns or figures. His own figure fades into their lines as the shot expands, until he becomes indistinguishable, visually articulating his feeling of disappearing into the war machine. At that point, the shot fades out and into an aerial view with planes roaring over town and coast, then switches to heavily loaded trucks roaring down roads. Tom's voice pauses and returns, underlaid with the engine sounds, aurally paralleling his integration into the machinery of war. When he pauses again, the engine sounds roar up even more loudly. The impression of a mechanical, rather than dynamic or mathematical, sublime is very strong, and quite unappealing. This sublime is produced by the vast scale integration of men and machines in the project of war.<sup>14</sup> As in the mathematical sublime, the scale is too large to comprehend. Individual soldiers are purposely kept unaware of the precise outline of the machine, though they are aware that it is huge. As in the dynamic sublime, a tremendous force is present—but this force is rationally built up out of human technology and

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<sup>14</sup> James Dawes' book *The Language of War* touches on the waste of war as being itself sublime, and also on the "technological sublime" produced by awe at the nineteenth century's vast machinery of war (74, 241 note 8).

experimentation. Individual men, soldiers, are sacrificed as a general premise of the machine's operation, revealing the mechanical element as the dominant factor. The machine's effective performance is so highly prioritized that people are expected to die even in training exercises. Tom expects that he will be one of many people to vanish into the machine's operation.

The visual constructions of the film's final scenes develops Tom's premonition of his death into an actual occurrence. The film opened with his premonition: in grainy slow motion Tom is running, in uniform, rifle in hand, up the beach (toward the viewer) when he is struck and recoils—his head back and his arms thrown out (in a gesture director Stuart Cooper intended to mirror that of Robert Capa's well-known photo of a wounded Spanish Civil War soldier's falling<sup>15</sup>). The scene shifts to Tom, at home, running up the path behind his home just before departing for a training camp. The distance and length of the two running shots are parallel, and visually suggest that Tom is actually moving forward toward this death. In the final scenes of Tom's experience, we see again the shot of his run up the beach and the moment of trauma. But first—Tom is in the landing craft D-day morning moving toward the beach. The scene is clearly chaotic, but inside the boat soldiers are struggling to be calm and light. A friend is quizzing Tom on the girls they've met through their training experiences. Tom stops at the name of Janie, a girl he met at a dance, but was separated from when his unit was relocated without warning; he falls into a daydream about her. In the fantasy, they are alone in a quiet, empty room, and they play at Tom's death; he falls back into her arms then lies still while she removes his

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<sup>15</sup> Cooper discusses this issue in a photo-essay "Capa Influences Cooper" included in Criterion's edition of *Overlord*.

clothes as one would the clothes of a corpse. She says “Now I’ll bring you back to life,” takes off her own smock, and bends to kiss him—the perspective is from Tom’s view of her face lowering to his own. The shot switches to Tom in the boat; he is inching up and forward, wide-eyed, as if to look out over its edge. The shot focuses in on his eye, and there is a fading together of images so that it is as if we can see the shadow of Janie’s bending form darkening then merging with the mottled shading of Tom’s own eye, then the silhouette thins out and stretches into the grainy running figure on the beach. Within Tom’s eye the grainy figure recoils and begins to fall. The shot switches to Tom’s fantasy of the landing, boots running in the sand, a clear shot of the hit and recoil, then of his falling to the sand with open eyes and bloodied temple. Again the shot changes and Tom is reeling back in the boat with his hand over his eye and temple. His fellow soldiers spring to help him, then realize he’s dead. The film concludes with a mix of scenes showing Tom’s body being carried away and historical footage showing other wounded and dead being loaded into boats to return to England. These fade to aerial shots. The film’s final image is an aerial shot curving above a ruined building on a hilltop.

The film’s representation of Tom’s death is completely deprived of heroic content: he does not even reach the beach, as many people didn’t, but he dies as in a daydream, as if looking up out of the boat to see Janie. In part, Stuart Cooper ended the film with Tom still in the boat to avoid filming scenes portraying the complete chaos of the D-Day landing.<sup>16</sup> The film portrays the build-up of men and machinery for that

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<sup>16</sup> “Capa Influences Cooper.” Cooper admitted that filming the chaos of the D-Day

moment, as well as the devastation the war was already heaping on England and Europe. But it does not bring Tom across the line of the beach and into active combat. Not every soldier experiences the combat ecstasy of a Jünger, or the liberation of comradeship recognized by Gray. Tom experiences neither the intense negative ecstasy of Caputo's hallucinations, nor the ecstatic joy of command that he found so irresistible. His death parallels other, less sublime, relations to death, which Gray describes; these are more closely related to the mechanical sublime of modern war and much less socially valorized.

The civilian often views and idealizes the soldier as sublime warrior. He is idealized as the one who confronts danger and death with courage, and so achieves a positive sublime relation to death, whether he lives through the encounter or not. The soldier's willing sacrifice is doubly sublime because it removes the negative sublime of death from the civilian realm. Antagonists and aggressors cannot bring death, the unthinkable, into the civilian world because the soldier stands in its way. This myth's many variations are told and retold, justifying war as central to the security of civil society, recasting its destructiveness as a necessity for the support of social life.<sup>17</sup> One of the strengths of Gray's text is his willingness to question the "relation to death" that this

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landing was beyond the scope of his production. I would argue that its omission secures the film's effectiveness.

<sup>17</sup> Paul Virilio vividly argues this point in *Pure War*: "If the civilian is characterized by his cowardice at confronting situations, then he's really what the military wishes him to be. In that case it's the military that assumes the courageous role 'Live in peace, my brothers; live in peace my women; I will confront death for you'....We certainly don't need to be protected from wondering about something which is a condition of our existence: death....Because *that's* the military's justification" (108).

myth, and the real conditions of war, create in individual soldiers: “I began to ponder the question how men at war consider the possibility of their own imminent death? What relations to death can warriors attain, or can they gain any relation to death at all?” (99). Although he discusses the positive and heroic relation to death some soldiers achieve, he also defamiliarizes the wartime rhetoric of sacrifice by addressing war’s rationalization of death:

I was influenced more than I cared to admit by the regnant mood of recklessness with human life. Men are expendable, as the current phrase had it; life was a commodity to be doled out and used up by a suprapersonal will. Probably few of us consciously reorganized our values according to this fact, but even the simplest mind among us could sense that it mattered relatively little to the collective body whether he survived or not. (99)

The relative disinterest which the military invests in the individual soldier’s survival is the radical reverse of the heroic sacrifice that protects the civilian social sphere. Where the individual is accustomed to thinking of him/herself as valuable, active, autonomous, one who becomes a soldier becomes instead absorbed into a military whole in which he/she is expendable. Gray discusses a subjective dullness developed by this new role, the exhaustive training that accompanies it, and the fatigue brought on by battle’s traumatic intensity:

In mortal danger, numerous soldiers enter into a dazed condition in which all sharpness of consciousness is lost. When in this state they can be caught up into the fire of communal ecstasy and forget about death by losing their individuality, or they can function like cells in a military organism, doing what is expected of them because it has become automatic. It is astonishing how much of the business of warfare can still be carried on by men who act as automatons, behaving almost as mechanically as the machines they operate.... Death comes to thousands who are only minimally conscious and snatches them away from life without their awareness of the moment or its significance. (102)

By becoming fully integrated into the machinery of war, Gray further claims that the



soldier's "mind becomes so preoccupied with the mechanics of action that larger issues never enter, and self-awareness is dimmed to the vanishing point" (103). The language of these quotations clearly parallels the fictional letter Tom writes to his family, describing his sensation of being drawn irrevocably into a vast machine. While Gray views this automatism as a sort of escape from the fear of death, it could also be interpreted as an anticipation of death, or an indistinction between life and death. The "vanishing point" of this automatic merging with the machinery of war is a deathly absence.

Gray also emphasizes the tendency to daydream as a device for avoiding a fully conscious confrontation with the imminence of death. A section of his own journal written while awaiting the D-Day invasion reads:

What do I think of this new adventure looming before me? Today I have thought about it for the first time. It will be dangerous, that is certain. It will also be difficult. But somehow I am unable to anticipate. I simply await—and dream of the end of the war. I daydream more than I used to. (101)

Tom's presentiment of death appears as the flip side of his daydream about Janie. His character could be interpreted as being so fully drawn into the mechanical sublime of war, in which death merges with life, that his daydream of the end of war takes the shape of death. The daydream of Janie, whom he could be with if not for the war, is tangled up with the imagining of his death, and the daydream stops short at the moment of her attempt to bring him back to life. Tom is "unable to anticipate" an outcome of his D-Day adventure other than that of his own death. Bound up in the mechanical sublime as an expendable piece of machinery, Tom can't think beyond the immanent possibility of his death.

Cooper, the film's director, draws the film up short of a full representation of the D-day landing. The physical violence built into his film occurs at a distance, removed from subjective emotion by mechanization and technology. The narrative of Tom's experience emphasizes the structural violence by which individual subjectivity is drawn into the machine of war. To portray this violence there is no need to stage the battle scene of the landing itself. Tom doesn't reach the beach and he doubles his distance from it through his daydreams. His eye is not drawn into the sublime spectacle of war's material reality, because the mechanical sublime is not an "appeal" of war. Its rationalized violence does not offer a recuperative feeling of unity, but rather of vanishing, being used up, "getting smaller and smaller until there's nothing left."

The centrality of the eye in Tom's final scenes is difficult to interpret. The daydreams are a kind of vision, but not of material reality. The daydream of death corresponds to Tom's fate, but obliquely, from a distance: it is not an exact premonition of the event. The eye and the distance necessary for its perception are central to the materiality of the sublime; the mechanical sublime's *anaesthetic* effect is symbolized in this organ which *senses*, but *through distance and without touching its object*. Cooper offers us only a distanced vision of war. We look at it, but it does not touch us. We see its sublime violence without being drawn into its ecstasy. The construction of the film purposefully short circuits war's "delight in seeing" because this dangerous attraction is more suited to the extinguishing of vision than to our sight.

***Notre Musique: Hell-War/Paradise-Peace, Shot/Counter-shot***

“*Notre Musique*” (Our Music) the title of Jean-Luc Godard’s 2004 film, gestures toward the aesthetic problem of the sublime by calling up potentially resonant and dissonant qualities of music and articulating them with ambivalent qualities of images. A lecture on visual representation, given by Godard himself, is built into his film. He shows students series of contrasting images, the shot and counter-shot that build the grammar of film: “Look at two pictures of the same moment in history. Then you’ll see that truth has two faces.” One picture, he says, leads toward fiction, another toward documentary. One shows imagination, one reality. “Try to see something. Try to imagine something. In the first case you say: Look at that. In the second you close your eyes.” The movement between these articulations is what Godard calls “our music.” Shot and counter-shot may have a negative relation, but they are not a simple opposition; something happens between the two, in the articulation through which they speak to us, that introduces a third term. The continual movement and flux of articulated images also complicates the opposition, making the reversal a movement of thought, part of a continuing experience that moves beyond the frames of individual images. This pattern, an articulation of sense and thought that continually tumble through one another, shows the same complexities of ideality, materiality, and negativity that characterize the sublime.

Godard refuses to bring his expressions of the sublime to a clear rational conclusion. His film addresses the overwhelming forces of subjective and historical experience without presenting an appealingly sublime vision of war or of an unproblematic peace. *Notre Musique* is broken into three segments, which portray the

realms of Hell—expressed through war, Purgatory—set in the city of Sarajevo, and Paradise—materially a small beach guarded by US marines, more figuratively the afterlife of one of the film’s characters. The film’s lightly-woven narrative is rooted in the fact that the main setting, Sarajevo, and the characters moving through it, have suffered through war and violence. The film’s first segment, Hell, works to produce the feeling of a negative sublime in the viewer.

Godard portrays hell with rapidly fired images of war. Some segments of film are in bad condition, and light tears through their images. In certain moments the screen shifts from these bright explosions to dead black. The timing is off—some figures stutter in their motion, other speed up or slow. The perspective keeps shifting—distant explosions, intimately tormented faces. The film clips come from everywhere—bomb bays of aircraft, documentary, Hollywood, international cinema. Zulus charge, following quickly after crusaders, falling over the Nazi genocide’s confusion of corpses, past bloodstained sidewalks, starving children, plump little boys playing war and pretending to fall dead, very young faces bearing rifles, aircraft fire, fire. The viewer can’t make sense of the searing images, of violence that is too materially real mixed up with dramatically staged cavalry charges and cowboy-Indian shootouts. One recoils from every image on some level—the visceral abject response to a charred fist, the conceptual horror that war’s violence can be dramatically staged for cameras and loving audiences. A guiding voice-over compounds the viewer’s distress. “Our father, forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us,” a momentary gesture toward recuperation, is cast aside: “Yes, exactly as we forgive them and no differently.” Images

of destruction and death keep piling up. They move quite quickly—sometimes too quickly to take in fully—and there are too many, too ruptured from one another, showing too much destructive force, from too many moments in which no one showed forgiveness. The guiding voice prompts us to consider the incomprehensibility of death—“We can think of death two ways: the impossible of the possible, or, the possible of the impossible. Now—I is an other [je est un autre].”

These images, like the vastly large or powerful, don't come together in the viewer's subjective frame. They repeat over and over the failure of the imagination to synthesize what exceeds its power: death. But while they draw the viewer into the first gesture of sublime experience—the effort and failure of the imagination—they don't offer the recuperative unification that Kant finds in moral transcendence or that Gray locates in ecstatic links to the natural world. Godard's visual construction of war avoids the “delight of the eye” by refusing to present a coherent visual field on which we see violence operate its sublime force; without this setting, viewers may be set outside themselves, but are deprived of a larger unity that they may join. The mixed sources of the images also emphasize their existence *as images*. This emphasis on their representational quality adds an element of distance to the experience, an awareness that this is a citation, a simulacra built out of bits and pieces real and imaginary. Godard offers a representation of disaster, not a force to identify with. The opportunity for moral transcendence is also sidestepped with the quotation and response to the “Lord's Prayer.” The recuperative gesture toward forgiveness is cancelled out by the moral failure to transcend injustice. Trespass is met and doubled by further trespass; physical boundaries

of bodies and lives are crossed, obliterated. By the terms of our own request, even god could grant only destruction and death as compensation. Atonement is unthinkable (“impossible” in the film’s language): I would have to suffer what others have suffered—death, which makes me other to myself.

Godard’s negative sublime touches on the relation to death, but in a different mode than we have seen so far. Jünger’s sublime unleashes deathly destruction in its pure celebration of war for its own sake. Caputo’s shows death as the inverse of battle’s ecstatic heightening of subjective feelings of life and order. Gray explores the soldier’s unique subjective experiences through his relation to death and danger. *Overlord* attempts to de-sublime the soldier’s privileged relation to death by representing it mechanical rather than sacrificial. *Notre Musique* goes further, shifting death’s meaning and weight from the soldier’s experience to the civilian’s. Against the idealization of heroism and sacrifice that mark conventional discussions of the soldier’s relation to death, Godard frames death as one of many pieces in the film’s discourse. Upholding the theme of complex oppositions (certainty/uncertainty, imagination/reality, fiction/documentary) a main character in the film, Olga Brodski, separates her self-destructive plans from suicidal discontent: “Life is one thing, death another.”

Olga’s character also represents one side of a conceptual opposition. She is one of two young Israeli women whose explorations of Sarajevo’s war-torn past and reconstruction forms the film’s central narrative. The women do not know each other and never meet; they are like the split perspectives that belong to every image. Desiring and imagining peace in their own country, the two women are drawn to Sarajevo, a place

deeply marked by civil war, but where, as Olga's double, Judith Lerner, says, "reconciliation seems possible." Judith, a journalist, has plans to draw people together through personal connections (and despite institutional obstacles) to address war's legacy of loss and the hope of reconciliation. Olga Brodski's purposes are less clear and more solitary. She also wishes to act for peace, but where Judith's plan emphasizes survival, communication, and reconciliation, Olga's employs radical reversal and shock. Judith hopes to initiate and gain publication of a dialogue concerning personal experiences of World War II's tragic events. She hopes it could re-order public perceptions of historical trauma by recovering communication. Olga's plan is a radical theatrical performance; it will present a spectacle of public trauma, but is carefully crafted to prevent endangering anyone but herself. She stages a "terrorist" attack in a Jerusalem theater, but (unknown to anyone) she has no weapons. After announcing her plan to take over the theater, she gives the audience five minutes to get out, saying that "if one Israeli would die with her—for peace, not for war—she'd be happy." The film does not stage these scenes for the viewer, instead they are reported in the telephone conversation of two characters who knew her only slightly.

"Then what happened?"

"Everyone got out, leaving her alone. The marksmen arrived and shot her before she opened her bag. It contained only books."

Olga's act of protest deliberately reverses the paradigm of deathly sacrifice between citizen and soldier. Olga sacrifices her own life to challenge the notion that soldiers and war offer protection to the civilian. In the drama she stages, the "theater" of war is a civilian space, which the military invades with weapons and death in the very same

action that imposes its protection.

Olga's actions lead towards the film's construction of a potential positive sublime, or paradise, countering the negative sublime of hell/war. Her plan is carried out in the film's second segment, Purgatory. Earlier in this main segment of the film, Olga's voice had spoken over blurred images of her figure walking in Sarajevo:

It's like an image, but a distant one. There are two figures, side by side. I'm next to her. I never saw her before. I recognize myself. But I have no memory of all that. It must be far from here. Or later on. I don't give a damn. The state of our poverty is clearer. The landscape is strewn with wire, the sky is red with explosions.

The third segment's short scenes show Olga walking in a forest. As she walks her voice repeats: "there are two people, side by side. I'm next to her, but I never saw her before. I recognize myself. It's like an image, but a distant one." She comes to a fence and crosses through a wire gate onto a little beach guarded by the U.S. Navy. There are other people there, reading and playing games. She looks out over the water and her voice speaks again; "It was a fine clear day. You could see a long way. But not as far as Olga had gone."

These scenes and their narration, repeated with a slight difference, pair up as moments in the experience of the sublime—an off-balance transcendence. In her first description of the two figures, Olga is still alive—herself. She stands next to her death, which inserts a distance through which she can't recognize this "other" person. In the second description of the two figures she has crossed over death, and again, can't recognize her former self. The third moment, from the beach after she has crossed through the gate, suggests a sort of suspended transcendence. She knows herself, or



knows of herself, but still can't see into the distance that has been crossed. This sublime turns on distance and heterogeneity, modulations of being into something else. It suggests a possibility of subjective transformation that I would argue is not *only* the "otherness" of death asserted in the film's first segment. Olga's actions bring about her own death, but not merely as destruction. She retains a recognition of some aspect of herself in all three moments of vision, and always shows a readiness to see what is there, whether it's clear or obscure, distant or close. This openness to existence, experience, otherness, distance shows a facet of the sublime that suggests a possibility of peace rather than the fascination of violence.

## 2. War Passions

Reflecting on his experiences as a soldier, J. Glenn Gray remembered receiving a letter from a friend who had come to think of him as “*the soldier.*” Gray felt ambivalent at learning of his friend’s feelings:

To him I had come to stand for the qualities that he associated with universal man at war. The idea, I recall, both flattered and insulted me a little at first, but ended by impressing me with its truth, though I never should have conceived it on my own. I wrote in my journal: “Perhaps the worst that can be said is that I am becoming a soldier. To be a soldier! That is at best to be something less than a man. To say nothing of being a philosopher.” Since then I have frequently wondered what it meant to be a “soldier” and why I regarded myself then, insofar as I was a soldier, as less than a man. (*The Warriors* 25-6)

The soldier, exposed to the violence of war and the structure of military order, is deprived of the practices that shape civilian identity. As a soldier, one’s past and future as an individual are secondary to one’s role as a “center of force, a wielder of weapons” that may protect allies and threaten enemies (26). The relation to self and other is stripped of its humanness by instrumental aggression. Gray did not want to remain a soldier and returned, after the war, to philosophy. His reflections on war are articulated, with unusual modesty, through his role as a philosopher. Being focused on the importance of thought, his writing, when turned to reflect on war, showed an unusual ability to quietly and carefully think through war’s overwhelming forces. Eventually, his thought recognized patterns of violence marking the civilian sphere as well as the battlefield, altering or compromising the identities of civilians as well as soldiers.

Gray offers an account of war’s sublime that decisively departs from Kant’s dynamic narrative of reason triumphing over the imagination. Gray emphasizes an

ecstatic separation from self rather than moral dignity, and thus allows the effect of sublime experience to shift from morally uplifting toward potentially annihilating the subject. Against the formal system of faculties through which Kant's philosophy attempts to moderate the impact of excessive stimuli on the subject, Gray describes the subject as welcoming the break-down of its own boundaries. As previously argued, this aesthetic can produce radically negative violence as well as a strange possibility of open and peaceful relationships. This section will ask what, in Gray's view, leads or predisposes the subject to this extreme form of experience, and begin considering the roots of sublime disintegrations in more common, everyday frustrations.

Gray describes ecstasy as the central feature of war's sublime appeal. Expanding our view of a quotation by highlighting short sections that were previously set aside (41), we can better diagnose its pervasive attraction.

I think the distinctive thing about the sublime is its ecstatic character, ecstatic in the original sense of the term, namely, a state of being outside the self. *Even in the common experience of mindless curiosity there is a momentary suppression of the ego, a slight breaking down of the barriers of the self, though insignificant in comparison with the rarer moods in which we are filled with awe.* This ecstasy satisfies because we are conscious of a power outside us with which we can merge in the relation of parts to whole. Feelings neither of triumph nor of depression predominate. The pervasive sense of wonder satisfies us because we are assured that we are part of this circling world, not divorced from it, or shut up within the walls of the self and delivered over to the insufficiency of the ego. *Certain psychologists would call this just another escape from the unpleasant facts of the self's situation. If so, it is an escape of a very different sort from the usual.* We feel rescued from the emptiness within us. In losing ourselves we gain a relationship to something greater than the self, and the foreign character of the surrounding world is drastically reduced. (my emphasis, 36-37)

Gray links the special quality of sublime ecstasy to a feeling as common as curiosity, granting that it may easily be scorned as an escape from reality, but also maintaining

there is something important about this particular form of escape. The escape into sublime experience offers a link to a “greater” power and alters the character of subjective relations to a greater world, rather than merely severing ties to reality. The use of curiosity as a common experience prefiguring sublime *ekstasis* is not accidental. In curiosity the ego temporarily disappears into the object of its interest. This display of openness to a foreign world usually withdraws back into a private perspective, but it also briefly gestures toward a world outside the ego’s boundaries. Gray’s phrasing, calling up the “common experience” of curiosity, can also be read as a collective experience of curiosity, in which we join with each other in losing ourselves in some shared object of fascination (a Hollywood starlet, a sensational crime, the latest events in the newest war). This plural element of ecstatic experience, the fact that it always requires an outside or an other is important to understanding the sublime’s appeal. The “insufficiency of the ego” fuels a desire for ecstasy that is not solitary, but engages with the world—whether productively or destructively. If the sublime, and particularly the negative sublime of warfare, offers an intensive experience that powerfully attracts the subject, we should consider more carefully the satisfaction it allows and the subjective inadequacies that it compensates.

Gray argues that sublime experience breaks the barriers of the self but reveals a totality in which we merge as parts within a whole. While this claim sidesteps the Kantian framework of reason’s triumph over imagination, it also reaches toward the hidden grain of materialism in Kant’s philosophy.<sup>18</sup> Gray’s account in this way leans

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<sup>18</sup> The interpretation that immediately follows attempts to position Gray’s account in

toward Kant's argument that in sublime experience we must see the world just as it appears to the eye: an experience that disarticulates the eye's function from the understanding and interest of the subject as a whole, and articulates it instead with a wider material world. But Gray also retains the allegorical structure of Kant's argument, albeit with different "actors." Rather than a collapse of imagination rescued by reason, we have the individual's insufficient ego "rescued" by the greater totality of the world itself. Rejecting the formal "faculties" at play in Kant's narrative, Gray nonetheless works within the same allegorical form, despite using terms that carry a less explicit moralistic/ideological charge. His emphasis on the individual's material situation as immanent to the world rather than psychologically separate from it re-grounds the search for totality in the material rather than rational realm. If one compares it with Paul de Man's critique of Kant, this argument parallels the immanent materialism beneath Kant's formal rigor. Kant's description of the intertwining of reason and imagination builds an articulation or joint between thinking and feeling, paradoxically leveling the distinction between pure reason and sensation. Thought and feeling—the whole of subjectivity—are inseparable from their immanent and formal material context. Gray's argument also locates the human subject off-center from the psychological "thinking" self, proposing that subjectivity is truly centered only in its relation to the material world to which it belongs and to which it is subjected. In his words, the sublime entails "recognition of the power and grandeur to which we are subject. There is not so much a separation of the self from the world as a subordination to it" (35). This interpretation connects the

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relation to the two divergent structures of argument that Paul de Man highlights in Kant's *Critique of Judgment*. See the first chapter's section "An Aesthetic Subject."

individual to the total world as a dependent element, not as a master of his circumstances. Through these lines we might judge that Gray is arguing not so much with Kant, whom he mentions directly, as with Schiller, on whom he is silent.

Schiller's account of the sublime, as discussed earlier, takes an idealist rather than materialist turn.<sup>19</sup> In his description, the mind splits from its material circumstances by producing an idea that triumphs over all physical danger and survives ideally beyond the destruction of the body that produced it. This case of mind over matter, upholding the purity of ideas above base material reality, is all too familiar. It provides a support for aesthetic theory and the arts as central to education and worthy of popular understanding. It "domesticates" aesthetic concepts for these public uses, in de Man's view, but also justifies their radical totalization. This phenomenon is observable, as previously argued, in the tyranny of ideal over material concerns observable in Jünger's writing. As a more contemporary example, we might cite the Bush administration's ideal vision of the Iraq war trumping all practical advice and observable reality.<sup>20</sup> The popularization of this idealist aesthetic is an undergirding element in dominant ideologies of individual autonomy and agency. It provides one of many frameworks in which the active self, working through rational ideas, can be presented as overcoming the passivity of merely being caught up in material circumstances. Schiller's vision of the sublime as total rational triumph exploits tendencies toward idealization that already appear in Kant's

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<sup>19</sup> See the first chapter under section heading "Ecstasy and Transcendental Reason."

<sup>20</sup> Mark Danner's article, "The War of the Imagination," provides an extensive argument that the administrative understanding of the Iraq war's potential outcomes was based in fantastic ideal resistance to reality. (*The New York Review of Books*, V 53, no. 20: 2006)

own figurative explanations, such as in the dynamic of sacrifice and recuperation and the description of the general's sublime attraction as more powerful than the statesman's. The view of the commanding military personality that remains resolute in the face of danger, preserving a heroic determination, dignity, and civility despite overwhelming opposition, embodies this triumph of idea over material. This idealized vision of the soldier as the active individual who upholds ideal standards neatly aligns with the ideology of autonomous agency, allowing the soldier's sacrifices to become attractive to the civilian. Such culturally dominant strains of idealism provide "aesthetic" (read subjectively potent) justifications for the material devastation of warfare: right ideas and ideals are seen as impervious to destruction, no matter what happens to the individuals who hold them.

Gray's discussion of the soldier's sublime opposes this path to glory.<sup>21</sup> Clearly aware of the popular attraction to romanticized violence and heroism, Gray takes care to undermine this appeal: while the soldier appears in popular narratives as one who has achieved noble action through sacrifice, Gray's argument insists otherwise. The soldier's ecstatic experience is a subjection rather than an active power. The view of the soldier as a vital and active agent whose ideals will triumph is reversed here, as Gray's soldier is submitted to greater powers than his own with no certainty of triumph for his individual subjective being. Instead Gray emphasizes the limited and privative aspects of

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<sup>21</sup> Kubrick's film, *Paths of Glory*, set in World War I, provides an extraordinarily rich portrayal of the soldier's attempts to uphold any active and moral agency under the pressure of war's physical violence and inhuman hierarchal procedure. If time and space allowed, a reading of this film that articulates its presentation of this problem with those of the philosophers and veteran memoirists examined here could prove rewarding.

subjectivity by invoking our fear of being “shut up within the walls” of a self or ego that is an empty boundary, an “emptiness within us.” Rather than remain trapped in this psychological isolation, Gray claims that the mind willingly splits toward its outside, seeking an experience that disrupts and breaks through the ego’s enclosure, even if that experience is the violence of war. We might say, as de Man commented concerning Kant’s military examples, that Gray’s underlying observation—a chance for wartime adventures is seized upon to counter boredom and emptiness—is banal and obvious. That would merely embrace the fatalism underlying the “desperate insufficiency of the ego.” The question as to why “the ways of peace have not found—perhaps cannot find—substitutes for the communal enthusiasms and ecstasies of war” (216) also deserves a consideration that such fatalism forecloses. The attraction to ecstatic submission rather than alienation provides a link in Gray’s argument between soldierly and civilian experience; this link leads the civilian to become a soldier and draws the civilian into passionate support for the soldier’s violent submission.

### ***Understanding Violence Philosophically: Gray and Arendt Reflect on Civil Society***

*The Warriors* places the problem of violence mainly in the field of battle itself, but even in this text, Gray includes himself in a civilian collective that welcomes violence:

There is in many today as great a fear of a sterile and unexciting peace as of a great war.... The majority of us, restless and unfulfilled, see no supreme worth in our present state. We want more out of life and are always half-ready to chance everything on the realization of great expectations. Though most of us do not know what we expect of life, we reject inwardly the fate present existence has in store for us: isolation, petty routines, the stale entrapments society sets for us. Reality is so different from our dreams and the confident hopes of our youth. Happiness is so elusive, won by the privileged few alone. It is this crushing



disappointment of our confident expectations that makes us welcome a chance to exercise the military virtues, to escape into adventure, to feel the genuine excitement of the communal and the sacrificial. (216)

With these comments, Gray summarizes the sense of discontent that also marked Jünger and Caputo's memoirs: frustration with a stale peace engages the wish for conflict. *The Warriors* was published years after the Second World War's end. Later still, in 1969, Gray's writing returned to the problem of violence, now considering why its force increasingly permeates civil society. His arguments in the essay "Understanding Violence Philosophically" and in an "Epilogue" composed for a new German edition of *The Warriors* were published together with several pieces on Heidegger in a small book titled after its initial essay. Clearly troubled by the social violence that accompanied the Civil Rights and Vietnam anti-war movements, and by the Vietnam war's presentation of the U.S. as on the wrong side of an armed conflict, here Gray worries the theme of civilian discontent less eloquently than in *The Warriors*, but with more sustained attention.

Ecstasies, both negative and positive, and the opposition between action and passion form the central categories in Gray's analysis of the turbulent energy of his civil environment. Much as he argued for an understanding of ecstasy through its ancient meaning (standing outside the self) rather than its contemporary colloquial meaning (great happiness and excitement) as key to understanding soldiers' wartime experiences, Gray insists that an understanding of passion's ancient meaning is necessary to a description of contemporary experience.

Passion used to be understood in our tradition as the very opposite of action, a usage that I think we should revive because it is vitally needed. Passion, as

philosophers like Spinoza understood, is an undergoing, a being acted upon from without in contrast to an action which is initiated within. As such it is the clearest contradiction of freedom.... In addition to this primary character of being acted upon, passion also implies that in its grip one suffers. The passion of Christ meant his agonies before and during the Crucifixion. *Passion, therefore, in its original and still lingering meaning is a kind of suffering in which we are handed over to external forces, and are rendered unfree.* (original emphasis, *Understanding Violence Philosophically* 11)

A certain proximity of passion and the sublime is clear in this passage: the quality of subjection and submission to external forces characterizes both experiences. But while Gray used the ecstatic sublime to describe the soldier's experience of a great force that *frees* him from subjective privation by unifying him with a powerful material world, passions are caused by our capture within mundane social circumstances that prevent us from acting freely:

As a result of many well-known forces today, such as increasing anonymity caused by industrialization, technology, and overpopulation, it has become vastly more difficult for any of us to act in significant ways or to believe in the importance of our individuality.

What does the frustration of this power to act do to us? The answer seems clear: it creates passions. (11)

These statements further contextualize the "insufficiency of the ego" Gray refers to in *The Warriors* as well as suggesting the shared source civilians' and soldiers' desires. To the civilian, deprived of the power of action, suffering within the boundaries of the ego, the soldier's ecstasy, in which violence creates a sensation of communal belonging and natural totality that is often mistakenly viewed as a form of action in itself, appears as a path of escape and recovery. The soldier's appearance of activity (reinforced by those idealist schemas of Schiller employed by political opportunists and military recruiters) offers a supposed path to the recovery of activity and freedom. Even remaining strictly

within the civilian social field, Gray observes: “The typical response to this passion is violence” (12). Gray clearly sees the lack of a context for effective social action in an advanced industrial and consumer culture as the cause of a tendency toward violence. This continual readiness to fight allows young people to easily envision themselves as soldiers and perpetuates the social readiness for war. The social circumstances associated with this problem are familiar enough, but we may better understand their interconnection with subjective passions if we examine them in more depth.

Gray’s concern with civilian violence in these essays coincides with that of his friend Hannah Arendt, who published “Reflections on Violence” (which contains much of the argument of her book *On Violence*) in 1969. She cites Gray as the authority on comradeship and the spirit of sacrifice in violence; he notes the centrality of her work in shaping his own argument: “I have borrowed extensively from this excellent essay, particularly her analysis of action and its frustration today” (3). Of course, the discussion of action and its frustration is characteristic of Arendt’s work not only in this essay, but throughout many of her texts, especially *The Human Condition*; this text provides particularly crucial grounding for Gray’s thinking.

The opposition between passions and actions is crucial for Gray because the power of action is for him, as it is for Arendt, central to the human condition. Gray develops its significance as the expression of human freedom:

One of the distinctive features of being human—when we set aside the definition of man as an *animal rationale*—is the achieving of individuality through meaningful action. It has long seemed to me that the definition of freedom as the power to act is the soundest and most comprehensive way of understanding this important but ambiguous quality of human existence. (10)

Gray rejects the definition of man as a rational animal in a gesture of opposition toward views and arguments of the social sciences (popular and powerful then as now) that viewed man first as an animal and second as capable of reasoning. These theories analyze violence as a natural expression of aggressive impulses underlying and sometimes overcoming the capacity for thought and decision. The first few pages of Gray's "Understanding Violence Philosophically" oppose this argument by pointing towards elements of human experience that distinguish humanity from mere animality. He highlights the interconnecting individual and collective qualities of memory, imagination, conscience, and language in which we experience ourselves as singular but can also feel drawn beyond the self into positive ecstatic experience of a public world of stories and actions that frames and supports our own existence (5-9). While Gray points to German existential philosophy as the source of these ideas, we can also easily recognize their link to Arendt's thinking.<sup>22</sup> She also bases her opposition to the definition

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<sup>22</sup> Both writers are students of Heidegger. Gray held correspondence with Heidegger and is well-known as a skillful translator and editor of his work in English. His essays in *Understanding Violence Philosophically* emphasize Heidegger's insights concerning the material and linguistic interconnections that characterize our being in the world. His essay "Splendor of the Simple" emphasizes the simplicity he sees as a central strength of Heidegger's thinking: "the splendor of the simple lies in its power to uncover essential relations of man to the world as it really is. Heidegger's thinking is ultimately simple in that he has seen and shown some of these relations, enabling us to attain a less psychological and more phenomenological orientation to the world we inhabit" (63). Heidegger's existentialism very likely influences Gray's reading of the Kantian sublime. Tracking these philosophical debts is not irrelevant to my current project, but would have drawn me far afield from its focus. Accordingly, its development has instead followed the shared emphases of Gray and Arendt. Arendt's interlinking of stories and action and direct commentaries on Kant bear directly on my argument. She too carries a debt to Heidegger, but she diverges from his position by emphasizing political collectivity, an important theme for my project's discussion of war's violent appeal and the recovery from its trauma.

of man as *animal rationale* in his capacity for community. The “common sense” that allows us to build a shared reality by communicating the perceptions of our independent senses to others is crucial to Arendt’s understanding of specifically human reality (*The Human Condition* 208-9). In this regard, Arendt’s thinking is open to a dimension of Kant’s argument that Gray does not address explicitly: the possible, through problematic, approach to ecstatic experience through human community rather than through the “circling world” of Gray’s sublime experience.<sup>23</sup> For Arendt, speech and action are the crucial capacities through which we exercise our common sense and build the “web of appearances and enacted stories” that holds communities together in present memory and movement toward a future. In Arendt’s thinking, freedom is not pure, but is rather also bound up with the capacity for action in the web that links individuals to one another and to the concrete things of a public world.

Arendt’s account of freedom and action are linked to ancient Greek philosophical and political ideals. Free action in the political sphere of the ancient Greek city allowed men to meet and speak together of their common world, but also carried the difficult prerequisite of freeing themselves from other necessities and obligations. Arendt develops an understanding of freedom that centers on a public power but reduces the emphasis on freedom *from* other concerns. Her understanding of freedom as power of action emphasizes the human abilities for speaking and risking, starting something new in the world by acting in ways that allow them to appear as individuals in a public world.

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<sup>23</sup> Gray does address the importance and need for human connections through his emphasis on “concern” and “friendship,” but these lack the explicit political dimension that Arendt emphasizes. Friendship has more private features; concern extends not only to other people but to possessions and nature.

The human capacities for speech, action, and freedom are for her interwoven in the human “willingness to act and speak.... to insert one’s self into the world and begin a story of one’s own” (186). When one summons the courage to appear in public this way, one acts to exercise freedom. Her account of freedom agrees with the “ambiguity” that Gray attributes to freedom, as she strongly emphasizes the always uncertain consequences of action and the gossamer quality of the human world, which depends on interconnections built by speaking *to* others, appearing *between* them, and on a sense that is *common* but intangible (182-3).

So, freedom is linked to a specifically human power—the potential to act in togetherness. But this connection also marks freedom with ambiguity: it is beset by all the frailties and failures that characterize human power as *potential* rather than certain. We have seen above how quickly Gray leaps through the argument that opportunities for action are declining in our public world. This issue is addressed, as he mentions, in Arendt’s “Reflections on Violence,” but the conditions that support the claim and its significance are really set out in *The Human Condition*. We can continue to expand our understanding of Gray’s claims by reading his text with references to Arendt’s. For Arendt, action is both the initiative through which the individual realizes his being and impossible without a supporting web of relationships. Action’s individual expression can only appear in public; and reciprocally, the web of relationships that binds individuals into their public world is built through speech and action. If opportunities for these decline, or meet with a change in the conditions for their reception (their being seen, heard, shared, responded to, remembered) then the public world itself begins to wither

and the power of the individual, which is based on the power to act in and through a world outside himself, declines. The individual becomes “anonymous,” in Gray’s description, because he is deprived of the conditions needed to make his appearance known and understood by others.

As Gray notes, industrialization and technology are central to Arendt’s argument concerning the declining power of action in contemporary society. Arendt analyzes industrialization by recognizing the flip-side of Marx’s famous observations on the development of a free laboring class. Marx emphasized the alienation of self that occurs when one’s labor power, inherent in the very energy of human life and being, is offered for sale. Through Arendt’s analysis, insofar as this self-alienation is real, it is the side consequence of a world alienation that is more deeply linked to the condition of free labor. She observes the freedom of labor as fundamentally privative: before assuring profit for individuals it assured the “deprivation for certain groups of their place in the world and their naked exposure to the exigencies of life.” Only through this exposure did early systems of industrial capital create “both the original accumulation of wealth and the possibility of transforming this wealth into capital through labor” (254-55). Free labor is free in the senses not only of mobility and choice but in the privative modes: unsheltered and unbound from the tradition of particular public places, communities, and webs of relationships. Without these public attachments, the individual may be free, but only as an isolated point in an economic system that “remains bound to the principle of world alienation from which it sprang; the process can continue only provided that no worldly durability and stability is permitted to interfere, only as long as all worldly

things, all end products of the production processes, are fed back into it at an ever increasing speed” (255-6).

Technology contributes to this world alienation and to the decline of human action by disturbing the relationship between humans, nature, and tools. While tool-based systems depend on the hands that hold and use the tool to create useful objects, technological systems use machines to which the human worker must adjust his/her own movements so as to work more efficiently. The machine’s essential use is to *ease the process of production*, not to make the product possible. Technological systems thus emphasize the productive process rather than the object that it builds. This shift of emphasis undermines the human relationship to the world of built things by distancing their production both from natural human movement and from natural processes: “the automatic motion of [machines’] processes have begun to rule and even destroy the world and things” (151). Her argument becomes more pointed in connection with modern technological abilities “which no longer observe or take material from or imitate the processes of nature but seem actually to act into it” (238), transferring the ambiguous aspects of human action—its unknowable and uncontrollable consequences—into a vastly wider universe. The action of science and technology may be determined by desire for knowledge, but there is no way to know for certain how that knowledge will be applied afterward. Arendt’s claims go beyond this simple fact to recognize that in technologically-based processes like nuclear energy production and nuclear warfare we have acted to produce what never could have come into being without human action. Technology begins processes that it cannot control and the consequences of which cannot



be cushioned by human plurality; rather, the vast scale and unprecedented quality of scientific action actively destroys the framework of human relationships and threatens even the natural world within which a public world can be constructed. In technological action, while many of the fears she voices have become so omnipresent as to be ignored, Arendt develops the negative dimensions of action. When undertaken without the framework of human togetherness as its proper sphere it can become a destructive power. While this insight was devastatingly new as Arendt and Gray wrote, it remains even more powerful for us.

Overpopulation, the other negative social force named by Gray, seems comparatively weak, but it likely that its inclusion is due to Arendt's critique of the "social world" of vast bureaucratic governments and conformist behavior that, she argues, has replaced the public world of action and appearance. The social world itself constitutes a mathematical sublime constructed by the concentration of mass populations in vast cities with ever multiplying bureaucratic and economic networks extending through them. This perception of the world is not an invigorating, but rather a passivizing spectacle. In *The Human Condition*, the *social* is explicitly contrasted with the *public*. Noting that in ancient Greek thought, only the public space of the polis, a small city, could support free action, while in modern Romantic thought only the private space of the family can support genuine human relationships, Arendt observes a philosophical shift in response to the changed nature of human being together (38-9). The modern city is a vast network of free workers and forms of association, but it is not a public world. Conditions of industrialization, which concentrate workers in huge

production and trade centers, have disrupted traditional forms of collectivity, and produce conditions that are social rather than public. The individual is isolated from public appearance in this social world and instead becomes a member of the social mass, channeled into conformist behavior by membership in this huge but anonymous group. Democratic government operates differently in these cities than in Arendt's ideal presentation of their Greek predecessors. The party systems that were developed to "make representative government possible where direct democracy would not do" (because the governed group had become too big) are ineffective: "the huge party machines have succeeded everywhere to overrule the voice of the citizens, even in countries where freedom of speech and association is still intact" ("Reflections on Violence" 33-5). Bureaucratic governments that maintain stability in modern mass societies splinter authority and action into nameless processes, preventing individual action from appearing and generating relationships, and resulting in a paralyzing "rule by nobody" (40). Arendt describes the social consequences of these problems in "Reflections on Violence":

In a fully developed bureaucracy there is nobody left with whom one could argue, to whom one could present grievances, on whom the pressures of power could be exerted. Bureaucracy is the form of government in which everybody is deprived of political freedom, of the power to act; for the rule by Nobody is not no-rule, and where all are equally powerless we have a tyranny without a tyrant. (33)

The social space shaped by bureaucracy creates the conditions Gray summarizes: "it has become vastly more difficult for any of us to act in significant ways or to believe in the importance of our individuality" (*Understanding Violence Philosophically* 11). Because action is so fully interconnected with a public world, the rise of society determines both

the decline of action and the decline of its conditions of possibility. When Gray claims it has become more difficult to act in significant ways and believe in the importance of our individuality, these two elements are joined by Arendt's argument: the "revelatory character of action [the way it allows an individual to appear among others], as well as the ability to produce stories and become historical [the capacity for language and for memory, in which the public becomes part of the individual], together form the very source from which meaningfulness springs into and illuminates human existence" (*HC* 324). The key element of the positive action they describe is its presence in a public framework—the positive ecstatic relation through which we transcend self and cross into being with others. The experience of acting beyond one's self, together in a world with others, is fundamentally different from subjection to the norms of a mass society in which one's action and speech are invisible. In mass society people are isolated by the world alienation of modern forms of labor and social management. Because there is no real togetherness in mass society, there is no basis for action. Arendt writes that

without a space of appearance and without trusting in action and speech as a mode of being together, neither the reality of one's self, of one's own identity, nor the reality of the surrounding world can be established beyond doubt. The human sense of reality demands that men actualize the sheer passive givenness of their being, not in order to change it but in order to make articulate and call into existence what otherwise they would have to suffer passively anyhow. (*HC* 208)

In elaborating the consequences of social rather than public communities, Arendt gives an eloquent description of action and, in opposition, an evocative model of passions. The possibility of pleasure in active being as construction of self and common world opposes passive suffering; yet, the passage also admits that action and passion are both real human modes of experience, active experience leading to a joyful sense of truth in a

common world, passion leading to a sense of powerless suffering. Arendt claims her understanding of action as joyful experience of self is inspired by the quotation from Dante that stands as epigraph to her chapter on action:

in every action what is primarily intended by the doer, whether he acts from natural necessity or out of free will, is the disclosure of his own image. Hence it comes about that every doer, in so far as he does, takes delight in doing; since everything that is desires its own being, and since in action the being of the doer is somehow intensified, delight necessarily follows.... Thus, nothing acts unless by [by acting] it makes patent its latent self. (175)

Desire for being and the intensification of this desire through action, a realization of potential *as joy*, call to mind the philosophy of Spinoza, whom Gray mentions in connection with passions, but whose work goes unmentioned in *The Human Condition*. Perhaps because Arendt so persistently emphasizes the importance of a sheltering public world (this is what she adds to Dante's account of delight in action: the claim that this delight is bound up not just with the being of the doer, but insists in the relationship between active beings) the Spinozan understanding of human being as one mode of a universal and divine substance is out of the scope of her argument. Spinoza's theory works toward an immanent transcendental relation to the divine. Arendt's describes the transcendental form of humans' relation to one another. The transcendental form of public experience that enhances individual being is much more modest than Spinoza's universalism; but Arendt's description does resonate with the potential joy in being that permeates Spinoza's thinking. Spinoza defines action and passion as affections (feelings, moods) of individuals caused by encounters with others. Passions are called up by confusing encounters which help us to know neither ourselves nor the others affecting us. Actions are direct experiences of a harmony between our being and others. Spinoza's

definitions definitely correspond to Arendt's description of passion as an impoverished relation to exterior forces and action as a joyful relationship of recognition. Nonetheless, Arendt's thinking, so marked by the failures and disasters of human being in contemporary history, hovers closer to Kantian models, which insist that our faculties (capacities for thinking and sensing) determine what we can and cannot know. These faculties, rather than being limited modes affected by a universal reality, are not and cannot be adequate to perfect knowledge of reality. Even careful reason frequently deceives us concerning what is possible. Yet, peculiarly, Kant's failure to find a certain ground for reason led him instead to emphasize the aesthetic sense of judgment as central to human experience and knowledge. In his models of the beautiful and the sublime we might find very general parallels to Spinoza's understanding of activity as linked to feelings called up by encounters in the world. Encounters with beautiful and sublime objects set our feelings and imagination humming and our reason reflecting in a delightful or fearsome way, culminating in judgment. While this is as close as Kant comes to the notion of adequate ideas in Spinoza's theory, his understanding of judgment is also made possible and expanded beyond merely subjective whim by common sense: the capacity through which shared senses lead to shared judgments and a wider sense of collective reality. Arendt's employment of this idea can be seen in *The Human Condition*, but is more fully elaborated in her *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, which show that she held this concept to be the crucial element that opened Kant's system to a truly public dimension and grounded activities of thinking in a plural world.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> In Kant's philosophy, certainty rests in no more solid ground than the immanence of

Adherence to a practical, Kantian approach to human capacities, however, does not prevent her writing from at moments engaging with the energy and joy Spinoza links to the realization of potential, or with the depression accompanying our subjection to forces that hinder such action.

In Arendt the problem of passions over and against actions comes to the fore because social conditions seriously impede the exercise of common sense. As positive forms of individuality and togetherness vanish, common sense—the ability to build sense of a common reality through communication—is also undermined. Individuals are isolated and unable to articulate their mode of being from passion into action. Unable to find the joining point with others that defines and frames their action, they remain passive and suffer rather than building a common world. Subjection to mass norms is a passion, a passing into control by external forces that undermine and destroy the power of action. Most sharply to the point, Arendt’s “Reflections on Violence” claims: “the greater the bureaucratization of public life [the more fully are individuals deprived of the freedom and power to act] the greater will be the attraction of violence” (33). *The Human Condition* employed a vast historical sweep to narrate the gradual decline of action as a power of human togetherness and creativity. Gray picks up this narrative at “Reflections on Violence,” where Arendt moves to emphasize the consequence of that decline: where people are unable to act, they seek to regain power through violence.

Gray privileges positive forms of ecstatic experience, emotions and capacities that

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feeling and thinking called up by our encounter with the world, and the transcendental presence of these capacities for feeling and thinking in all people. Arendt perceives this *common sense* as the implicit foundation for a Kantian political philosophy. See the opening of chapter three for further discussion than is offered at this point.

draw us out of our selves and into connection with a public world, as essential to human being. Without them we are isolated and deprived of a framework for action that offers self realization and the creative hope for future and community. Instead, he claims, we suffer passions, ecstasies of *isolation*, in which we are set outside ourselves by the failure to exercise our human powers of acting, beginning, and realizing self through community. Without the creative power of action and its context of togetherness we are tempted to break out of isolation through violence. Violence seemingly offers the chance to disrupt boundaries through force and begin something new through the destruction of what has been. Violence appears as a tempting substitute when power declines because it mimics the creative element of beginning and the essential contact with an outside reality that characterize action. Passions give way to violence, a negative ecstatic mode, where action cannot offer a positive ecstatic link to collective being.

Passion's closeness to violence affectively links the worlds of civilian and soldier: both move from suffering toward destructive risk. Gray knows by direct experience and by careful reflection that the soldier is not actually freed from passions, but even his measured judgment notes that some positive elements of wartime experience appeal to both soldiers and civilians. Countering the passions of isolation that characterize the emotional tone of modern mass society, the comradeship of soldiers offers a strong attraction: the appearance of a meaningful community. Similarly, the exposure to powerful forces in combat offers an experience of a wider world, a deeply satisfying contrast to world-alienation. But the subjective benefits of these experiences are unstable; they are more likely to expose the individual to a greater subjection than to lead

toward action. Comradeship, so powerful during wartime, dissolves when peace removes the concrete objectives that held the group together and frees soldiers from their shared subjection to military command. Its positively sublime element, the construction of a potent collective that transcends individuality, can only be maintained during wartime's threat. Even before peace dissolves comradeship, its basis is in sacrifice and risk. A link like that formed by friendship offers mutual support; each friend helps to strengthen the other's individuality and cannot imagine the destruction of the other except as a deep loss. By contrast, comradeship readily allows self-destruction because the mutual exposure to death is the basis of comradeship's solidity (*The Warriors* 91, 45).

The sublime attachment to a wider natural world is also ambivalent. In the violence of warfare this experience of a huge natural force to which we are subject borders closely upon ecstasies of destructiveness for its own sake—a negative sublime, an aesthetic experience of passive submission to violent forces.<sup>25</sup> Even if the natural world is rediscovered through the destruction of people and things, this paradigm cannot be seriously upheld as a recovery from world-alienation. The individual that is already beset by passions, already subjected to negative outside forces, easily yields to destructive and self-destructive violence. When the borders of the self become isolating and imprisoning, the negative sublime's violent destruction of all borders becomes a great temptation,

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<sup>25</sup> The precedent for a negative sublime was drawn in the preceding chapter from Jünger's aesthetic presentation of the most traumatic elements of combat and from Caputo's experience of war as the dissolution of all values save material violence itself. I also observe its philosophical precedent in those strains of moralistic violence legible in Kant's presentation of the conflict between the faculties and amplified by Schiller's development of "rational transcendence" into a fully abstract idealistic ideology. By this term I indicate an aesthetic experience that culminates in trauma, passivity, or defensive idealism rather than recuperative action.



despite its inability to offer a positive tie to community or redemptive action.

Nonetheless, the attempt to regain active power or redemptive compensation for suffering is remarkably persistent. Even as he emphasizes the negative dimension of passions, Gray points out that one meaning of “passions” refers to the sufferings of Christ on the cross. The example cannot help calling up this suffering’s compensation: the resurrection’s sublime/transcendent redemption of all people. In another meaning, passions refer to the written texts that document the works and sufferings of saints. Here too, passions are met with sublime compensation.

Gray’s account of violence struggles with social narratives that emphasize the positive sublime elements of military experience as displays of active agency, heroism, and special collective power. How are contemporary soldiers figuring their own experiences? Many contemporary soldiers’ memoirs show the passions of suburban boredom or urban despair that pressed their authors toward enlistment, but they also show that military service is usually just another form of being handed over to external forces, acted upon, and rendered unfree. Most soldiers’ memoirs pointedly lack the sublime compensation conceptually linked to sacrifice. The sublime, when they describe it, is destructive rather than redemptive; their narrative patterns recall the suffering that once defined passion.

**Anthony Swofford: *Jarhead***

I remember about myself a loneliness and poverty of spirit; mental collapse; brief jovial moments after weeks of exhaustion; discomfiting bodily pain; constant ringing in my ears; sleeplessness and drunkenness and desperation; fits of rage

and despondency; mutiny of the self; lovers to whom I lied; lovers who lied to me; I remember going in one end and coming out the other; I remember being told I must remember and then for many years forgetting. (3)

Anthony Swofford's memoir, *Jarhead: A Marine's Chronicle of the Gulf War and Other Battles*, records his experiences on the front lines as a Marine sniper, the longing for honorable identity that led to his enlistment, and the anger that grew as this longing was disappointed. His book fits the pattern of unredeemed passion outlined just above; it details his sufferings as it undermines historical accounts that attribute meaning and grandeur to war. His writing, raw and bitter, is probably the most effective and skillful produced by a soldier of recent American conflicts. (It has received much attention and was adapted to film in 2005 by director Sam Mendes.<sup>26</sup>) In describing "The Suck," as he and others occasionally call the Marines "because it sucks dicks to be in it and it sucks the life out of you" (52), Swofford vividly conveys the "going in one end and coming out the other" (3) of military service: a transformation in which self-control is radically removed, reshaped, and re-purposed for interests that are not one's own. Swofford contextualizes his entire military experience by presenting events out of temporal sequence: the realization that his experience of battle will be driven by oil interests is positioned very early in the text, before any description of his enlistment or basic training. Swofford's military unit, along with many others, arrives in Saudi Arabia first to ensure the safety of Saudi oil fields. He offers this description of the mission:

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<sup>26</sup> Despite Mendes' admirably bleak production, the film offers a much more palatable representation of events. The film's visual representation of the desert as arena of war does not capture the same effect as its textual representation. For readers, the images called up by Swofford's words are fully suffused with his anger in a way that is not reproduced by the film's narrative voice.

We'll be shielding enough oil to drive hundreds of millions of cars for hundreds millions of miles, at a relatively minor cost to the American consumer. We joke about having transferred from the Marine Corps to the Oil Corps, or the Petrol Battalion, and while we laugh at our jokes and we all think we're damn funny jarheads, we know we might soon die, and this is not funny, the possibility of death, but like many combatants before us, we laugh to obscure the tragedy of our cheap squandered lives with the comedy of combat and being deployed to protect oil reserves and the rights and profits of certain American companies, many of which have direct ties to the White House and oblique financial entanglements with the secretary of defense, Dick Cheney, and the commander in chief, George Bush, and the commander's progeny. (10-11)

The run-on sentence form used to recall the mission's purpose and the Marines' reaction to it emphasizes the dynamic in which they are caught up: a chain of events and entanglements in which they have no control and which extends beyond their military organization through financial and political systems that can determine, without deserving, the sacrifice of many lives. The mission's objective, to shield and shelter, helps to preserve a sense of unity, despite the questionable purpose to which their group's energy is being devoted. But the problematic of passions, the loss of control and self-determination, a being "handed over to external forces" that Gray describes, is clearly present. And the protest lodged in this description is intensified by the book's historical timing: this memoir was published in 2003, not long into the next Iraq war, with collective passions again shaped by Dick Cheney, now as vice-president, working alongside the former president's progeny.

Equally intense, though more ambivalent for Swofford, is the sense of being remade into a collective identity. This complaint against the military could be raised even in more politically justified military campaigns, let alone during this suspect endeavor. While he often expresses dismay at the motivations that have placed him in

the Arabian Desert, the objection to the loss of self that accompanies military unity is a continual refrain. Soon after this text's publication, the Army employed a recruiting slogan that is suggestive with regard to Swofford's objections: "An Army of One." The slogan allows the suggestion that the military will so perfectly empower the individual that he will become an army unto himself. The reverse reading, more in line with reality, would recognize that recruitment signals the individual's induction into a massive totality that is unified by the erasure of individual identities. Swofford notes the uselessness of defending any right to free speech, a privilege of civilian individuals, when his battalion commander gives explicit instructions concerning the message to pass on for reporters:

The language we own is not ours, it is not a private language, but derived from Marine Corps history and lore and tactics....*Deadliest weapon on earth? The marine and his rifle. You want to win your war? Tell it to the marines!* When you are part of that thing, you speak like it. Reporters are arriving to ask me what I think about sitting in a desert, waiting for war. I'll answer that I like it; I'm prepared for anything that might come my way; I have supreme confidence in all my leaders, from my team leader to the president. (14)

The collective identity constructed by military training, orders, hierarchy, and tradition demands conformity. "When you are part of that thing, you speak like it"—whether you like it or not. The collective identity curtails Swofford's actions and expressions, as discipline requires him to remain within certain boundaries. Although he chafes at such confinement, he does occasionally embrace the bravado and valor of the collective image, especially when he sees discipline and endurance in his fellows' behavior. But the collective symbol also joins together individuals and qualities he would angrily prefer to have no connection with:

The sad truth is that when you're a jarhead, you're incapable of not being a jarhead....Though you might be an individual, first you are a symbol, or part of a

larger symbol that some people believe stands for liberty and honor and valor, God and country and Corps. Sometimes this is correct. Sometimes this is foolish. But either way, you're part of the goddamn thing.

That jarhead, with the high and tight haircut, the Disneyland T-shirt, acid-wash jeans, farmer's tan, poor grammar, and plain stupid look on his face, he is you. And that one, with the silly regulation mustachio, the overweight wife from his hometown of Bumfuck, with three kids in tow, three kids covered with sticky boardwalk foods and wet sand, one of them crying because he has to pee and the older sister just punched him in the face, he is you. And that jarhead is you, the one with the wife just twenty-four hours out of a bar in the PI, the both of them deeply in love with each other and all things American—you can tell this by the U.S. flag miniskirt she's wearing and her red, white, and blue high heels, and the ocean-wide patriotic grin on his face—goddamn, he is you....And the jarheads fighting and warring and cussing and killing in every filthy corner of the godforsaken globe, from 1775 until now, they are you.

This is troubling and difficult to admit, and it causes you unending anguish, and you attempt to deny it, but it's true. Even now. (120)

The Marine Corps ties together every one of its members in a symbolic tangle that includes every quality of its individuals: honor, valor, and patriotism mesh together with foolishness, ignorance, bad-taste, naive enthusiasm, malice, dirt, love, violence.

Combined with this mess, any clarity of individuality vanishes. Swofford feels himself sucked into the tangle, in which all terms become identical, with “unending anguish”—perhaps an extreme statement, but perfectly expressive of the passionate suffering Gray connects to the loss of individual action. Swofford had joined the military hoping to benefit from its symbolic power by gaining access to manhood, status within the family and society, and membership in an honored group; but he quickly realizes that this power is one he must subject himself to, rather than one through which he can be recreated as an active subject. His enlistment did transform him, but his regret and resentment for the transformation is palpable. In hindsight, it seems, he wishes to recover for himself a “private language.” His anguish is tied to the loss of the individual subject position

through which he could speak in an active self presentation. A truly private language would perhaps not function very effectively, but at least it would avoid the tangle of collective passions that the Marine Corps cultivates.

Experiencing the brief war from the front lines and then working on its grizzly clean-up only intensify the passions of bitter anger Swofford suffers. The most direct conflict Swofford is engaged in is, ironically, with another Marine Corps task force. He describes the scene as his team moves together toward the Kuwaiti border, talking and wishing they were somewhere else, then:

[O]nly feet above our heads the sky splits open as a round passes over. The sound is like a thousand bolts of lightning striking at once.... Rounds pass directly over my head while I retrieve my spotter's scope from my ruck. As they pass over, it's as though all sound and time and space in their path are sucked into the rounds. A five-ton truck blows one hundred yards behind us. Its water buffalo also blows, into a large bloom of five hundred gallons of water. And another five-ton takes a hit.

I gain visual. The tanks shooting at us are M-60A1s, friendlies. ....Unlike the minor enemy assaults with artillery and rockets we've experienced over the days prior, we know that our own guys will not stop until the entire convoy and all nearby personnel are annihilated, because that is the way of the Marine Corps. We are fighting ourselves but we can't shoot back. (218)

Swofford's team leader radios the opposing task force; Swofford describes his furious communication:

*Who the fuck do your tanks think they're shooting at to their southwest, it's fucking friendlies!* And Johnny continues to scream at the man, and I hear in his voice astonishment and rage, because of all the things that Johnny believes in, the superiority of the sniper and the importance of the small unit, first he believes in the Marine Corps and that the Marine Corps takes care of its own, as in doesn't kill its own, and even though he knows different, just like the rest of us he's never experienced the *horribly sublime* reality of Marine Corps tanks shooting at you and hitting your very own supply convoy, and strangely enough, hearing the loud screeching friendly fire rounds rip overhead, the rounds pulling all time and space with them, is more mysterious and thrilling and terrifying than taking the fire from the enemy, because the enemy fire made sense but the friendly fire makes no

sense—no matter the numbers and statistics that the professors at the military colleges will put up on transparency, friendly fire is fucked fire and it makes no sense and cannot be told in numbers. (my emphasis, 219)

Swofford describes this experience as horribly sublime. All the marks of both the mathematical and dynamic sublime are included in this account. The experience cannot be quantified, “told in numbers.” It disrupts subjective orientation in time and space as the speed and force of the rounds pull “all time and space with them.” It is “mysterious and thrilling and terrifying” but, and this is key: it is all these things but “it makes no sense.” This experience is horribly, negatively sublime. This “fucked fire” puts the soldiers in the passive position of being fucked, very possibly literally penetrated by violence, with no possibility of resisting. Swofford’s total shock at this development is also registered in the description’s shift from his own perceptions to Johnny’s and back again. Swofford’s writing rarely engages the perspective of someone outside himself; here, his long-form sentence moves from Johnny’s beliefs, to the rest of the team, into Swofford’s own conclusions. It seems almost as if the shock has thrown Swofford out of his own tenuous critical position (from which he complains about being a jarhead) and into alignment with the others. The passage calls up details of the team’s training and organization, its beliefs and creeds, emphasizes its unity, then points toward its possible obliteration as the “friendly” rounds “rip overhead.” In this passage, noting that there is no sensible precedent for the “horribly sublime reality” in which his team is caught, Swofford’s record moves from passions suffered into the language of ecstatic experience. A negatively sublime potential annihilation irrupts within the mechanical sublime of the military’s vast statistical calculations of probable gains and losses operated by its vast

force, which it has incomprehensibly turned against its own.<sup>27</sup> Experiencing the negative sublime draws Swofford outside himself into the team's shared plight, but without offering a recuperative movement. Friendly fire is "fucked" and senseless.

This encounter, a close brush with his own military's destructive force, only intensifies the emotions called up as Swofford's battalion pushes forward into Iraqi positions that have been demolished by aerial bombardments. Again, his thoughts move outside his individual perspective into a wider focus. He feels a momentary recognition of historical repetition, positively figuring the present as his chance to know the past and follow in the footsteps of his role models: "This is war, I think. I'm walking through what my father and his father walked through—the epic results of American bombing, American might" (222). Within a few sentences the perspective shifts from historical recognition to the blasted materiality of the present, as the presence of the bombing's victims imposes itself on Swofford's thinking.

We stop for a water break. A few feet behind me a bombed jeep sits on the road. A corpse is at the wheel, sitting erect, looking serious, seeming almost to squint at the devastation, the corpse's face not unlike our faces—what has happened?... On either side of the jeep, more corpses, two near me, one not, all belly to the desert, as if they were running from the bomb—as if running would've helped.... I assume the men were screaming before the A-10 or A-6 dropped its bombs. But maybe they were on their way to Kuwait City for supplies, and it was evening and the men neither saw nor heard the plane that dropped on them. Perhaps one of the men was telling a dirty joke or repeating a rumor he'd heard about the major's wife. But they must have been screaming. I hear them now. (222-3)

Screams and violence, force, waste, and regret deeply mark the remainder of Swofford's

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<sup>27</sup> The term mechanical sublime was introduced above (in the first chapter's discussion of *Overlord*) to describe the military's combination of mathematically sublime scale with dynamically sublime force. It points toward the tension between Kantian sublime modes, which reference natural magnitudes/powers, and modern machinery of war, which employs instrumental reason to produce devastation on the scale of natural disaster.



account. His battalion's next task, after the short conflict ends, is to clean up some of this destruction. In this task, the soldiers are drawn into close contact with the plethora of corpses left in the wake of daisy-cutter bombs, which send out a concussion powerful enough to kill anything within two acres. Inside the bunkers they find and clear out, the "mouths of the dead men remain open in agony, a death scream halted" (238). The extended proximity to death after such a short exposure to combat is baffling to the marines. Swofford describes the bizarre and profane suffering it produces by recounting another soldier's crimes:

Crocket has found a corpse he particularly disagrees with. He says the look on the dead man's face, his mocking gesture, is insulting, and that the man deserved to die and now that he's dead the corpse deserves to be fucked with. And Crocket goes to the corpse again and again, day after day, and with his E-tool he punctures the skull and with his fixed bayonet he hacks into the torso. And he takes pictures....Crocket is being driven mad by that corpse. I understand what drives Crocket to desecrate the dead soldier—fear, anger, a sense of entitlement, cowardice, stupidity, ignorance. The months of training and deployment, the loneliness, the boredom, the fatigue, the rounds fired at fake, static targets, the nights of firewatch, and finally the letdown, the easy victory that just scraped the surface of a war—all of these are frustrating and nearly unendurable facets of our war, our conflict....Crocket—hacking at the dead Iraqi soldier and taking pictures of the waste—is fighting against our lack of satisfaction. (238-9)

Swofford attributes the desecration of corpses to "Crocket," a name which recalls and undermines the heroism of Davy Crockett, "King of the Wild Frontier." This figure of American history and legend fought in the Creek war and died at the Battle of the Alamo. His "namesake" in Swofford's text is represented disfiguring the dead in the desert "frontier" far beyond the borders of American civility. This metonymic historical revisionism can be intensified through another, military, invocation of his name: the Davy Crockett is also a very small nuclear device developed during the Cold War.

Strategically, the radiation put out by this missile would function not only to kill enemy troops, but to spread a level of radiation that would make its detonation-environment temporarily uninhabitable, clearing an area of opposition and securing it for U.S. or NATO occupation. Swofford's representation of Crocket encountering and disfiguring corpses emphasizes the U.S. military's violent and destructive claim over the territory it occupies. Crocket's documentation of his behavior through photographs, for contemporary readers, suggests not only a gesture of critique toward the Cold War but a prefiguration of the scandal at Abu Ghraib. There, U.S. soldiers imposed their cruelties on their *living* prisoners, and did so largely in accordance with policy rather than against it. Crocket's illicit activity in the first Gulf War culminates in the criminal/procedural scandal of the second war in Iraq.

Swofford reflects further on the attraction of the bodies and their death-filled bunkers, which soldiers seem unable to resist entering, despite the presence of dangerous booby traps.

The platoon continues collecting relics for the same reasons Crocket puts the damage to the corpses—in order to own a part of the Desert, to further scar this landscape already littered with despair and death, and to claim and define themselves, define their histories, to confirm that they are marines, combatants, jarheads, to infuse the last seven months of their young lives with value, and to steal history from the dead Iraqi soldiers who now have nothing to remember.

For this complete absence of memory the dead men are envied their deaths, that perpetual state where they are required only to go on being dead. No other consequences exist for the corpse. The corpse suffers violence and contempt, the corpse is shot and knifed and cursed and burned, but the corpse will not suffer loneliness and despair and rage. (242-3)

The corpse *will not suffer*. Swofford's account does not and cannot justify the desecration of bodies, but it captures the problematic that fuels it: passions of fear, rage,

despair, frustration, and the uncertainty of the living soldiers. Compared with the orders, chances, and dangers the living soldier must undergo, and must hold afterward in a rotten memory of subjection, the dead appear as free. Biblical resonances support this image of the dead as having transcended physical pain: “For the souls of the righteous are in the hand of God and no torment shall touch them” (Solomon 3:1). The biblical passage continues, emphasizing the transcendent life the righteous have attained, “In the eyes of the foolish they seem to have died...But they are in peace.” Swofford counters such spiritual transcendence, emphasizing death itself as an escape from contingency, struggle, and memory into “a perpetual state where they are required only to go on being dead.” He emphasizes that while the physical corpse may still be violated, it no longer suffers violence, as it no longer possesses an individual subjectivity that can suffer the passions of “loneliness, despair, and rage.” Swofford takes an extreme interpretation: though awful, death came to the Iraqi soldiers as a release from the burdens of living, choosing, struggling to act or living with one’s subjection. The strange and desperate behavior of the victors over their dead enemy reflects their attempt to recover an active power, to mark and change their alien surroundings, to release the tension of their subjection. Gray writes that passions lead to violence. Swofford essentially offers the same interpretation. The military’s force of subjection, in this case, reveals its purpose—the production of violence—as well as its incidental difficulty in containing and controlling the various forms of violence it generates.

Memory, time, and force are key elements in the passions Swofford describes. His interpretation of the soldiers’ behavior invokes a series in which these elements

interact. The marines hunt and steal relics, hoping to “own”—to exert individual possession and physical control over—their war experience, and to extend that ownership through time. This ownership must be exerted over the “Desert,” which is not just a landscape of shifting sands but the military’s shorthand for the whole “Desert Storm” experience. To own part of the Desert would be more than to have just been there, followed orders, and survived. It would involve a mastery of the experience through action and its memory, which seem decisively outside the grasp of most soldiers. And this possibility is resisted by the figure of the desert itself. Composed of uncontrollable and innumerable individual grains of sand, inhospitable and alien to the soldiers’ cultural standards of living, the desert as “wasteland” offers a desolate sublime landscape to counter individual attempts at mastery and to challenge even the military’s vast project of occupation. The reaction to this frustration, then, is to “further scar” the landscape. The scar imposed on the soldiers by their subjection and frustration must be reversed and projected outward. While they can’t “own the Desert,” the impulse to mastery must still be expressed somehow. They will attempt to leave a destructive mark on their surroundings. In reaction against the traumatic mark that will resurface again in their futures, they try to impose a mark that will remain through time in their surroundings. This destructive “mastery” is part of the attempt to “claim” and “define” a “history” and a “value” for their experience. The soldiers try to extend the force of their actions both forward and backward in time. Their violence attempts to cover over, match, or cancel out the violence they have suffered and wish not to remember. It attempts to project a history and value that seem absent from the present into the future.

It struggles with the “loneliness and despair and rage” of the present that they know will follow them into the future. The complex of memory, time, and force in these subjective tangles shows Gray’s insight into passions as more than a merely economic mechanism in which suffering builds tension and violence releases it. Both the suffering and the violence seem perpetuated by the presence of memory and the struggle to construct a historical value linking the self with a coherent and meaningful past, present, and future. Without a recuperative framework of value or context for action, passions repeat themselves like the symptoms of trauma that Freud, in his *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, described haunting the shell-shocked soldiers of World War I. Their repetition carries the destructive experience of subjection forward into the present and future. They are trying to bind and control the passions, but the failure to do so seems to amplify their intensity. It is almost as if soldiers like Crocket are seeking to pull themselves out of passion and into a negative sublime, compulsively reproducing destructiveness on a material level in order to draw themselves out of subjected passion and into an ecstasy that allows escape from the self. Only when the capacity for action (rather than for following and obeying) has been effaced by desperate passions could such violence, going so far “beyond the pleasure principle” into destructive ecstasy, appear as a defense mechanism.

Swofford finds the recovery of control unlikely. He describes the scene that ensues when a Marines captain, apparently intuiting the need for a “psychotic and frenzied” release, suggests that several companies get together for a free fire of all the weapons collected from the Iraqi bunkers (243). The soldiers form a firing line and shoot into the desert at random, wildly cycling through weapons and then tossing them aside:

I fire, as next to me my platoon mates fire, from the hip, with no precision, as though we are famous and immortal and it doesn't matter that we'll likely hit nothing...we burn through the magazines...and when the dead click sounds...or a mangle of metal occurs...because the weapon has failed, we throw the rifles aside, watching them leave our hands and land in a tumble, as though throwing aside a disturbing memory that will someday resurface. The RPGs [rocket propelled grenades] explode with a pop. No one hits a target with an RPG, rather the rounds bounce and flail, exploding finally for nothing. We fire and fire the AKs [AK-47 machine guns] a factory of firepower, the fierce scream of metal down range and discharged cartridges and sand flying everywhere, now all of us shooting in the air... with the mad desperate hope that the rounds will never descend, screaming, screaming at ourselves and each other and the dead Iraqis surrounding us, screaming at ourselves at the corpses surrounding us and the dead world.

I throw my rifle on the discard pile and run toward the Humvee, and I dive under the vehicle as the fire line continue to send a wall of metal into the air, and I weep, and I hear my screaming friends, those men I love, and I know we'll soon carry that mad scream home with us, but that no one will listen because they'll want to hear the crowd-roar of victory. (244-5)

Again Swofford groups together problems of memory, history, violence, passion. The soldiers attempt to claim a heroic stance (“as though we are famous and immortal”) while desperately casting aside memory (the figure of empty or broken rifles piling into traumatic memories). In the figurative wish that “the rounds will never descend” they hope to release and escape the consequences of their own time and memory. Metal projectiles scream. Men scream. The common outcry suggests their similarity: men themselves seem to have become projectiles, a “factory of firepower” more dangerous than their shrapnel, with no purpose but that of destructive explosion. At the end of the passage, the juxtaposition of the soldiers’ wild screams with the victory roar of civilian celebration further emphasizes the impossibility of recuperation from these passions. The victory roar—an apparent celebration of mastery and control—drowns out the true cry of pain and frustration and hides, rather than heals, the soldiers’ trauma. Swofford renders

the “crowd-roar of victory” even more unnerving than the spectacle of soldiers screaming out their surrender to pointless violence.

If there is a recuperative element, a recovery of action, in Swofford’s long narrative of impassioned subjection, it is the complaint that builds the second of his book’s four conclusions. The text clearly struggles over concluding, as the soldiers struggled over the conclusion of “their war” and then continued to struggle with its effects on their memory and subjectivity. The first conclusion juxtaposes the (first) Gulf War with Vietnam: a homeless Vietnam veteran expresses his thanks to the young veterans who have just recovered the image of soldier-hero that, for the older veteran and for the divided public perceptions he returned to, was lost in the jungle. Swofford’s story of a short, pointless, and unheroic conflict undercuts this conclusion’s finality. He purposefully resists allowing the book to rest with this historical recovery. The third and fourth endings bolster this critique of war history and soldierly heroism. The third apologizes to mothers for warfare’s waste, even in the case of “just wars.” In the fourth Swofford expresses gratitude that he did not personally, knowingly, directly kill any of his enemies: when he had the chance, a captain took the opportunity from him by calling in an artillery strike. Swofford didn’t use his deadly skills as a sniper, and while a professional soldier is supposed to proudly bear the burden of killing, he is now grateful not to have fulfilled that particular “responsibility.” This exonerates him from a measure of individual guilt, but not from collective guilt. While these conclusions certainly undermine the ideological idealization of war and soldier-hero, the second conclusion opposes these visions most clearly and actively by proposing an entirely different purpose

for the warrior: “the men who go to war and live are spared for the single purpose of spreading bad news when they return, the bad news about the way war is fought and why, and by whom and for whom, and the more men who survive the war, the higher the number of men who might speak” (253). Swofford’s “passion” of war counters the “good news” of survival with the obligation to testify to war’s “bad news.” War offers suffering and death, but no transcendence. He ramrods the point home by criticizing veterans who evade their responsibility and anticipating the objections to his argument:

Unfortunately, many of the men who live through the war don’t understand why they were spared. They think they are still alive in order to return home and make money and fuck their wife and get drunk and wave the flag. These men spread what they call good news, the good news about war and warriors... These men are liars and cheats and they gamble with your freedom and your life and the lives of your sons and daughters and the reputation of your country.

I have gone to war and now I can issue my complaint....And you must listen. Some of you will say to me: You signed the contract, you crying bitch, and you fought in a war because of your signature, no one held a gun to your head. This is true, but because I signed a contract and fulfilled by obligation to fight one of America’s wars, I am entitled to speak, to say, *I belonged to a fucked situation*. I am entitled to despair over the likelihood of further atrocities. Indolence and cowardice to not drive me—despair drives me. I remade my war one word at a time, a foolish, desperate act....  
What did I hope to gain? More bombs are coming. Dig your holes with the hands God gave you. (254)

In this conclusion, Swofford remorselessly expresses his disgust and despair over the American vision of wars and soldiers as a dangerous lie. Anyone who preaches “good news,” the gospel of war according to historical idealization and ideological manipulation, is a swindling evangelist, a cheat. Swofford’s account disgraces the cultural ideal of the warrior, but he claims that his military contract is fulfilled; he is now entitled—and obligated—to make his complaint. The action of recreating the war for his



readers to see its wasteful reality is undertaken as a despairing responsibility. Swofford insists on the passive subjection underlying the supposed active power of other veterans who return home to “fuck their wife” with his own statement, “*I belonged to a fucked situation.*” He belonged to it and still belongs to it; this is the bad news other veterans hide. His statement of the situation is deliberately brutal, and emphasizes his entitlement to represent the experience of war’s reality as it was. While profane language appears in most of the book’s exchanges of dialogue, “fucked” in this instance, describing the entire Desert situation, the entire military situation, has the same special meaning it carried when Swofford described friendly fire as “fucked fire:” the complete penetration of people, things, places, time, and memory with absolutely destructive and senseless force. The line between action and passion is very tight in the competing claims the passage presents. Swofford claims the power of action, but he does so through despair, an emotion we more commonly align with suffering and subjection. Belonging to a *fucked situation* again emphasizes the passion of subjection Swofford underwent as a soldier. The apocalyptic last lines of the conclusion—“More bombs are coming. Dig your holes with the hands God gave you”—again emphasize the bad news that war offers no transcendence. This may be read as yet another fatalistic submission to inescapable controlling forces, or may stand as a caution to the reader: take some other action before you have no other choice.

**David Bellavia: *House to House, Passion to Passion***

While few military memoirists recorded the brief Gulf War (and those who did took their

time, publishing their work in the run up to the next Iraq conflict), soldiers' memoirs of the lengthening Iraq War proliferated immediately. One of the more action-packed is David Bellavia's *House to House: An Epic Memoir of War* (co-authored with military historian John Bruning). Though the title's grandiosity may be over the top, Bellavia's account does record experiences from one of this war's more intense and sustained battles: Fallujah. The book swings frequently from earnest soul-searching to military machismo and preposterous humor, bearing chapter titles that range from "The Last Caress" (about close combat) to "The Stay Puft Marshmallow Cock" (in which helpless laughter commemorates medical treatment of a fellow soldier's groin wound as he returns to the fight with penis carefully bandaged and slung up to his stomach). Consistently, Bellavia glories in the misery of infantry combat, enthusiastically embracing the abject horror it wrecks upon self and enemy, insisting that enduring these tortures builds courage and perfection. The book's initial bravado sets the tone:

April 9, 2004  
Diyala Province, Iraq

Dust cakes our faces, invades our sinuses, stings our eyes. The heat bakes the moisture from us with utter relentlessness. Our body temperatures hover at a hundred and three. Our ears ring. On the edge of heat exhaustion, we get dizzy as our stomachs heave.

We have the spastic shits, with stabs of pain as our guts liquefy thanks to the menagerie of local bacteria. Inside our base's filthy outhouses, swarms of flies crawl over us....

All this, and we get shot at, too.

Welcome to the infantry. This is our day, our job. It sucks, and we hate it, but we endure for two reasons. First there is nobility and purpose in our lives. We are America's warrior class. We protect; we avenge. Second, every moment in the infantry is a test. If we measure up to the worst days, such as this one, it proves we stand a breed apart from all other men. (1)

Bellavia often writes in this collective voice. Where the first word of Swofford's

book is “I,” Bellavia opens up with an “our.” Nonetheless, this collective is less than inclusive. Bellavia’s text shows an odd set of divisions between inside and outside in reference to the body’s boundaries, here covered with and invaded by filth and threatened by penetrating bullets. Guts liquefy and internal temperatures rise almost beyond control (soldiers have died from heat exposure). The descriptions of intense physical suffering and threats to overwhelm the body’s tenuous balance are dramatically stated. But the collective that suffers these affronts is patronizingly set off from America’s civilian world. These are the trials of “America’s warrior class,” which stands “a breed apart,” clearly a cut *above*, “all other men.” Bellavia characterizes soldiery as “a job,” an inescapable element of everyday life, but also as a special form of labor that elevates its subjects—ironically by subjecting them to the most abject suffering and risk. The ambivalence Bellavia expresses in this initial passage is intriguing. “It sucks and we hate it” but soldiers endure because it gives “nobility and purpose.” The misery of the infantry’s collective labor offers a payoff in the ideal realm. The passion of physical suffering, Bellavia claims, is compensated by membership in a group that can claim something that is apparently missing from mere civilian forms of subjection: individual virtue and group identity give them *reasons for being*.

The juxtaposition of forms of labor continues:

Our workplace is not some sterile office or humming factory. It is a stretch of desolate highway in a vast and empty land. A guard tower burns in the background. Shattered corpses litter the ground around us. Vacant corpse eyes, bulging and horror-struck stare back at us. The stench of burned flesh is thick in our nostrils. This was once an Iraqi Civil Defense Corps checkpoint... Thanks to a surprise attack launched earlier in the morning, it is nothing more than a funeral pyre. We arrived too late to help, and our earnest but untrained allies died horribly as the insurgents swept over them....

This is our workplace. We began to acclimate to such horrors right after arriving in the country. While on our second patrol in Iraq, a civilian candy truck tried to merge with a column of our armored vehicles, only to get run over and squashed.... Our first sight of death was a man and his wife both ripped open and dismembered, their intestines strewn across shattered boxes of candy.... That was three weeks ago. We're veterans now, proud that we can stomach such sights and still carry out our job. It is this misery that defines us, gives us our identity. It also cleaves infantrymen apart from everyone else in uniform. Some call it arrogance. So be it. We call it pride since we believe fervently in what we are doing. (2-3)

Some call it arrogance, indeed. This description, perhaps meant to sketch a vivid series of pictures of the soldiers' working conditions, inadvertently also offers an account of their failures. "We arrived too late to help" the Iraqi Civil Defense Corps; "Our first sight of death" in a country supposedly overrun by insurgents is a pair of *civilians* who are "smashed beyond recognition" by the occupation's military convoy while attempting to carry out their civilian labor. The offhand dismissal of civilian laborers is grating. Bellavia disparages both American laborers, who merely work in "sterile offices" and "humming factories," as well as Iraqis who are trying to work in the war zone that has overtaken their civil environment. Apparently Bellavia feels work that doesn't have to be justified by "fervent belief" is not worth doing, and the people who do it are themselves worthless. Rather than other workers filling his labor space, Bellavia perceives an "empty land," yet he describes it as rather well occupied with corpses. As he admits, the "work" of combat "cleaves infantrymen apart from everyone else in uniform." The verb "cleave" carries the contradictory signification of Bellavia's account. Cleaving implies both separation and clinging. Bellavia's description makes it all too clear that he is radically cut off from less seasoned fighters as well as from those he is supposed to "protect" and "avenge": by his own account, he may actually be dangerous to them.

Clearly, Bellavia *needs* “fervent belief” to rationalize and elevate the contradictions and failures of the infantryman’s subject position. Separated from civilian social reality as well as from much of military hierarchy, Bellavia must cling to his beliefs.

The fervent belief that characterizes Bellavia’s position as a soldier offers a strong contrast with Swofford’s cynicism. Both writers point out the misery of infantry work, but while Swofford observes the paradoxical conversion of base physical misery and threat into spiritual nobility, he is fully aware of the psychological function of this supposed recuperation.

I realized the grunt holds Spiritual High Ground because he creates it; through constant bitching and inebriation he creates his own Grunt Island, and the poor, sad, angry grunt on the outside is actually a happy grunt on the inside... through profanity and disgrace he has communicated the truth of his being— an awful life punctuated by short bursts of mostly meaningless action, involving situations where he might die horribly or watch his friends die horribly. The very real possibility of dying at any moment—that is the grunt’s magic, his Spiritual High Ground (52).

Swofford describes the infantry soldier as cut off from the rest, holding the parodically emphasized Spiritual High Ground of Grunt Island; Bellavia sincerely claims to be a breed apart, proven to possess nobility and purpose. Swofford portrays the possibility of death as an abject exposure, which the soldier defends himself against by converting it into a sacrifice for which he demands respect. Noting the physical exposure, hypocritical commands, and pointless waste that mark military labor, Swofford recognizes and rebels against military passions. By contrast, Bellavia views every risk as a challenge to survive and prove one’s superiority, and fervently believes in the Spiritual High Ground that Swofford satirizes. While Swofford reads the grunt’s pretention to superiority as a sadly ineffective defense mechanism, Bellavia’s commitment to military values is determined

by his contempt for civilian life, and acts as a defense against his own failures to develop strength in his former–civilian–identity.

Bellavia satirizes is capable of satire; he applies it to his own past for the amusement of his fellow soldiers, claiming that the snowballing consequences of a failed theater production led to his enlistment. But the real story is shared with his readers.

As the youngest of four boys...I was once considered the weakest link. Every son had at least a master's degree, some had two. I struggled through most of college but failed to graduate. I was the son who had to be sheltered and protected. That came to a boiling point shortly after my twenty-third birthday when I moved back home. I was out in my parents' backyard when I heard a commotion inside the house. When I went to investigate, I ran right into a pair of crack-addled burglars ransacking the living room. My mother had just returned home after a serious surgery and was unable to move out of bed. My father stayed in the doorway to the bedroom, ready to protect her.

The hoods jeered and laughed, seeing me as no threat at all. I fled downstairs to the basement and found my father's shotgun. I held the weapon, but realized I was not prepared to use it. I didn't even know how....Slowly I put the weapon away....Instead I found a baseball bat.

When I reappeared, the hopheads howled with derision as they carried off our valuables....I stood paralyzed with fright and watched them.

As they got into their car outside, my father came out of the bedroom and stared at me with a mixture of disgust and pity. I was still the timid little boy he and my mother had had to shelter from the real world. I was not yet a man, even at twenty-three.

....That look shamed me, and the humiliation drove me to join the army in search of the heart and spirit I so desperately lacked. I needed to understand courage. I needed to become a man.

....Six years later, the boy who failed his family that day is long dead. The man who replaced him is at ease with fear. It is his motivation. Anger, aggression, hate—they have smothered that timid disposition. In a matter of days, I will be the home invader this time, only those I find inside Fallujah's houses will not be high-strung boys paralyzed by fear....

I am a killer now, too. I want to kill. I *yearn* to kill my enemies. (45-46)

Bellavia's memoir carries the title *House to House* in reference to the battle of Fallujah, an urban theater of war, in which soldiers moved and fought from one house to another.

But the narrative framework of the story also follows Bellavia's movement from house to

house as an emotional transformation carrying him from his parents' house, in which he failed to act, to enemies' houses, where he acts to kill.

Before joining the military, Bellavia had failed to gain the social markers of maturity (college degrees, independent income, independent residence) and remained sheltered by the family as in childhood. While he doesn't describe in detail the frustrations of routine and subjection Gray emphasizes, it is clear that Bellavia lived under his family's shadow and within its influence without gathering his own active power. The event of the robbery dramatically emphasizes his inability to act by submitting him to passions of fear, shame, and humiliation. Bellavia enlists in the military, thinking this will teach him courage; instead, military discipline engages the cycle from passion to violence Gray's writing warns against. From weak subjection, he shifts to the exercise of violence, symbolically "smothering" his former persona with violent ecstatic emotions of hatred and rage. Proudly announcing the death of the "timid boy," Bellavia displays his former self as the first casualty of his war against fear. Nonetheless, he recognizes a problematic irony in the transformation: the military has made him into the thing he opposed, the intruder and destroyer of homes. While he frames the honest account of his enlistment with the questions "*What have I become?*" and "*Am I beyond redemption?*" (45-6), it's clear that he prefers the new identity and will not truly mourn those it harms. Italicizing these questions is seemingly meant to point out their urgency, but it also has the odd effect of over-dramatizing them, as if they are voiced from outside Bellavia's new persona by his former "timid disposition." The passion of humiliation that he suffered as a frightened civilian propels Bellavia to justify

violence, interpreting its physical power as a superior form of subjectivity. Now occupying a position of military prowess, Bellavia isn't troubled by the civilian questions of redemption, despite the fact that he joined the military precisely to redeem himself. Though he claims that military commitment generates higher virtues and perfection, its redemptive power appears as a guise thrown over the negativity of its pure force. The hatred and pity directed at his former self seems to transfer onto everyone outside the infantry and the front lines of fighting. He claims agency through membership in a "Warrior class," and uses its power to deaden and negate his former self, making himself an instrument of hate while pretending to a noble and elite purpose for his chosen passions. The warrior persona of military ideology offers a perfectly crafted set of passions through which he can punish his former self's weakness and also violently enact his revenge upon intruders in the form of insurgents. As an infantry soldier, Bellavia takes on the persona of a man among men, a hero among heroes. The potent attraction of this identity, the collective superiority it offers in contrast to his former identity as "weak link," is apparently irresistible.

The facade of sacrifice and misery that go along with infantry life only intensify the image of strength and nobility Bellavia seeks. The bravado of his account is so over-pumped that it appears as overcompensation: "[W]e don't mind doing the nation's dirty work....Bring it. We're the infantry" (19). Here we might also remember and apply Gray's observations: "Such sacrifice seems hard and heroic to those who have never felt communal ecstasy. In fact, it is not nearly so difficult as many less absolute acts in peace time and in civilian life" (*The Warriors* 46). From this reflective perspective, Bellavia's



enlistment appears as an escape hatch rather than as a determined attempt at character building. The military context redirects his failings into a more active appearance and provides a framework in which his vengeful impulses can be rehearsed as noble. Rebuilding his subjective agency in a civilian context, without the propulsion of drill sergeants, basic training, and romanticized heroism, would have been a very different task. Bellavia's characterization of the infantry as an active elite is undercut by his obvious reliance on military ideology to re-frame his subjectivity. Yet, despite fervent adherence to ideals of soldierly glory, he ultimately claims his wife and young son *save him* from the vagaries of military life and combat. After several campaigns in Iraq and several rocky emotional experiences on home leave, he realizes the warrior identity is neither the one needed to support his new family nor the role he should be playing within it. During a temporary re-stationing in Germany, Bellavia notes that the military is less satisfying without the communal ecstasies of combat. While other men are met by wives and girlfriends, Bellavia suffers loneliness:

There was nobody there for me. That night, I sat in the barracks and watched all the single nineteen year-olds get ready for a night on the town. By eight, they had all left to meet girls and drink. I spent the evening watching German TV in an empty barracks. Out of combat, this would be my life: hollow, lonely, devoid of love. (303)

He decides to leave the military at the end of his tour of duty. Aside from a new-felt isolation, he realizes his son Evan's first milestones are being marked with others: "Somebody else had taught him how to throw a baseball. Somebody else bought him his first mitt.... These were my duties, sacred ones a father must do as a part of his son's rite of passage. I had failed him again by being absent" (304). Responsibilities outside the

military code begin to challenge Bellavia's sense of superiority. The aggression and hate that shape the warrior's identity at last come into conflict with family ethics: the very standards Bellavia had failed at before disappearing himself into the military. But he doesn't really set aside the passions of military service until his young son makes him do so. Bellavia returns from a stint in Iraq as a journalist (a temptation to return to the military scene that he couldn't resist) to receive a stern lecture from five-year-old Evan. "You can't go to Iraq anymore.... People get shot in Iraq," the boy informs him: "you know why you didn't get shot?...Cause I saved you...No more going to Iraq. Iraq is done, got it?" (307). And Bellavia decides that it is; he allows Evan's determined command to save him.

Of course, Bellavia doesn't really see a conflict between the code of the military and that of the family. He finally recognizes their competing demands on his time can't both be met. After a long time spent with his fellow soldiers, he decides the moment for family has arrived; but his commitment to military ideals remains intact. During his final trip to Iraq, after a moment of recognition and shared mourning with an anonymous Iraqi woman who had paused to lay her own flowers beside his on a sidewalk in Fallujah, he gives a totalizing interpretation of his experience there:

Through it all, I witnessed the best of the human condition—the loyalty, the self-sacrifice, the love that the brotherhood of arms evokes. I realized then that I am complete for having experienced that. Those who died gave their lives for their brothers. They gave their lives for a noble ideal: that human freedom from tyranny and oppression is a basic human right. We were the force to do that, and my brothers paid the price.... I knew this: as long as I honored these men each day, I would have a second chance at redemption. (300)

Bellavia's realization is twofold. He recognizes that the collective experiences of

military life make his own being “complete.” While he states this revelation in terms that are so cliché as to become almost meaningless if directly interrogated, we can still observe the psychological function they perform for Bellavia. These terms are the sublime elements of comradeship that Gray describes—the forces that “rescue” the ego from its own insufficiency. Gray, in his own reflections, is careful to point out that the attractions of combat are not without heavy costs. Here Bellavia’s thinking turns to recognize that while his life is completed by such experiences, others’ lives were lost in combat. But, instead of balancing the reality of this loss against that of ecstatic experience, Bellavia plunges into the idealism of the war’s justification. His language does mark the reality of subjection to military goals; in saying “we were the force,” Bellavia implies that his energies and others’ lives were the fuel expended to reach an outside goal. But rather than recognizing the implications of this subjection, he brushes it aside in favor of the *ideal* he and others served. In honoring the men who have now been fused with the ideal, Bellavia redeems himself from the losses of combat and retains the completeness of comradeship. His idealization of military service is so compulsive that the book’s closing lines describe his fervent hope to see his sons play soldier together. Bellavia completely sidesteps any real recognition of losses or questioning of gains. His embrace of the ideals of comradeship and heroism blinds him to their relativity (an element Swofford recognizes all too clearly): each side can hold its ideals sacred, each side can fight to the death as comrades in arms. The passionate attachment to an ideal does nothing to prevent war’s waste, the exploitation of what is “best in the human condition” for goals that fail to uphold that standard.

**Colby Buzzell: *Killing Time in Iraq***

Colby Buzzell started dispatching his experiences and observations about the Iraq war from his Army post in Mosul on June 22, 2004. In the blog titled “My War,” Buzzell created a personal space to intersect with public perceptions of the American military’s struggle in Iraq, only to dismantle the site later, when it began to cause conflict within the chain of command. Buzzell’s reactions and reflections in creating and destroying his blog during military service generated enough interest to get him a book deal: his long, rambling, and oddly entertaining *My War: Killing Time in Iraq* is now a record and contextualization of his war and blogging experiences. The book offers a direct look into Buzzell’s contradictory motivations and gestures, and these are highly contradictory. Buzzell is moved by one impulsive perception after another and looks sometimes to established authority, sometimes to the counter-culture, for models in self-construction. He follows passions for military comradeship, passions of protest that defy direct orders: passions that offer an ecstatic element of risk and break up the boredom of everyday life, whether military or civilian.

Buzzell was a diarist long before he began blogging. His book presents a sadly comic account of his on again, off again relationship to a written life-record.

When I was living in San Francisco, prior to Army life, I kept a diary of my so-called life in a journal of sorts, which I showed to absolutely nobody, except to a couple of close friends, but I didn’t allow them to read it. I just showed it to them and was like, “Hey, this is what I do when I’m bored...”

I wrote in that journal, not because I had any aspirations of ever becoming a writer, but because I didn’t have any aspirations to do anything at all whatsoever, and writing about it was just a way to make the days go by a little bit faster....

One of the turning points that finally made me want to join the military was the

day I came home from work, exhausted, and I picked up my journal and started reading it from beginning to end.

It was the most depressing piece of literature I'd ever read.

At the time, like I said earlier, I was going through this mid-twenties thing. It was shortly after my twenty-sixth birthday, I was like "Holy shit, I'm gonna be like fuckin' thirty soon, my life is *soo* over," and reading what I wrote down on paper confirmed that I was doing absolutely nothing with myself, that every day was the same as the day previous, and most importantly I wasn't doing anything to better my situation. There was no escape. And then I realized that if I didn't do something quick I'd probably spend the rest of my life living like this.

And that was probably the moment when I said fuck it, and got my ass down to that recruiting station....

So when word started circulating that hard times were coming my way, and it was clear I was headed to the Middle East, I instinctively went out and bought a half dozen or so field journals, so I'd have something to do when I got there. (52-3)

Buzzell's "I" leads off almost every sentence, thought, and action in this passage—with the interesting exceptions of "writing...was a way to make the days go by," "[t]here was no escape" and "when word started circulating that hard times were coming." Yet, the passage describes a state of subjection rather than of agency. Buzzell is exhausted, bored, depressed. His "I" seems caught up in negativity and privation: he is doing nothing with himself, unable to better his situation, growing older without prospects for change or real action. He is clearly stuck in the bad passions characteristic of civilian life, undergoing a routine existence rather than acting on his potential. In another passage, he admits the powerful draw of Army slogans: "I joined because, like they say in the old recruiting commercials, I wanted to 'Be all that you can be,' and more importantly, 'It's not just a job, it's an adventure' " (20). Clearly, Buzzell on his own is not summoning the active power to realize any goal. Even writing—a possible framework for reflection and action—is just another force to draw him along; writing makes the days pass, but without making them full. To counter this boredom, since his own actions can't

produce an escape, Buzzell takes the path of submitting himself to a different force: the military's promise to engage potential and provide adventure. "[D]oing something" takes the form of enlistment. Buzzell's post-Army impulse to buy some journals to take to the Middle East signals excitement over having some adventurous action to record. Now, to use the frame Benjamin offers in "The Storyteller," he could become someone who travels afar and brings back a story of experience. But the wording of Buzzell's description undercuts such enthusiasm. "[W]ord starts circulating": rumors and inside information move through the soldiers, telling them that "hard times were coming." Forces outside individual agency are acting on and through Buzzell and other soldiers. Buzzell doesn't emphasize actions to be recorded, but instead presents writing as "something to do once I got there."

Still, the military journey seems to have given him enough hope to re-engage the writing impulse that was abandoned after reviewing his depressing civilian journal. And since "hard times" are expected, Buzzell is probably also hoping to recover the "therapeutic" element of journal keeping and the "release" it provided by easing time's passage (53). But even this recuperative look at the journal emphasizes its flip side: the suffering that Buzzell tries to ease, rather than active escape achieved. He does keep a journal at the beginning of his deployment in Iraq, but once again "out of boredom, [makes] the mistake of reading [the] journal entries from beginning to end." He complains:

I didn't like a single thing that I had written down. What bothered me was that the experience of "combat" so far was nothing like I had expected it to be. War, thus, far, for me, was quite possibly the dulllest, most anti-climactic experience I'd ever been through in my entire life, and the only

thing I was really combating in Iraq was boredom. The only shooting that my platoon had done so far was at a poor Iraqi who had probably been on his way to work, in a car that probably had a “God Bless America” bumper sticker on it. That’s it.

What kind of war journal is that?

It was all repetitive, and every day was pretty much the same as the day before, and I realized that I was writing about the same shit over and over again. I cringed at some of the stuff I was putting down on paper.... So I stopped. (104)

So once again, Buzzell finds his journal a repellent record of boredom and routines undergone rather than a document of active interest. Although he’s exchanged civilian for military life, there’s still no escape; in fact, this is “quite possibly the dullest, most anti-climactic” experience of his “entire life.” He quits the journal, until he finds a new format.

Into the eighth month of his deployment, Buzzell explains:

we had more downtime than we knew what to do with. A lot of hours of the day were spent doing two things: jack and shit. I had just got done reading *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* in its entirety, and was running low on new books to read and things to do and was getting bored with hanging out at the gym every day, when at this one particular mail call, the new *Time* magazine came in, and I brought it back to my room and read an article called “Meet Joe Blog.” The article grabbed my attention.... [It] said that a lot of these so-called “bloggers” were just people talking about their everyday pathetic lives via rants and stories, and some were wannabe amateur journalists who took it upon themselves to become the media....

The whole blog thing reminded me a lot of the fanzines I used to read back in the nineties.... Hardly any were done to turn a profit or with any commercial interest, and most people that published zines paid to have them published themselves and never made a dime from them, which made them more personal and real. And they became an alternative to bigger magazines, kinda how this article in *Time* was saying that these self-published blogs were becoming an alternative to the media.

The thing that caught my eye in the article was a brief paragraph that said there were Joes doing them in Iraq and they even had a name for them: “mil-bloggers.” I did a double take when I read that part. (113)

In the phenomenon of blogging, Buzzell finds a new framework for his personal records.

He might not like what's been happening to him, might not want to reread it now or later in life after its immediacy fades, but by unleashing the rants and stories of his pathetic life on the public he might be able to convert them into something else. He could "become the media," or even better, become an "alternative" to the media. This alternative label does a lot of work in the passage. It links up with something of Buzzell's punk-rock skater past: an attempt at personal and non-commercial forms of action and community, a resistance to established rules and laws. An alternative is also what Buzzell was looking for, but didn't necessarily find, in joining the military: a chance, an escape, a realization of potential instead of stagnant passions. And since he can't imagine the military would knowingly let its soldiers publish blogs, the blog as alternative is a way to act out against the subjection he's chosen as a soldier. Buzzell acts immediately to research the blogs and finds additional motivation for "becoming" the alternative media. Most of the mil-blogs he uncovered

were just saying a bunch of brainwashed rhetoric. Like "Oh the Iraqi people love us, we're doing the right thing, I love the Army, I love my country, I love our president."... [I]f I wanted to read stuff like that I'd go to the official U.S. Army recruiting website.

I looked around and I couldn't find a single blog out there that was written by somebody who locked and loaded their weapon every day, went out on missions, and saw for themselves up close and personal what it was really like out here.... I'd been in Iraq for a while now, and we were doing multiple combat missions per day, countless raids, countless missions, and being in an infantry platoon, we were spending most of our time outside the wire, thus I probably had a different perspective than someone who never left the base.

Fuck it.

...I decided right there and then to start up a blog....If these soldiers and even officers were doing them and saying all sorts of moronic shit...I might as well do one, too. And who knows? This could be kinda fun, a great way to kill some time out here. (114)

Time and boredom still appear as combatants to be fought, but now Buzzell intends to



kill them rather than just ease their irritations, and he hopes to enjoy it rather than just suffering through. Other soldiers' "brainwashed" accounts from within safe bases make him feel his own experiences are comparatively important. A broader context and a possible public audience reshape Buzzell's perception of the journal (a private record) into that of the zine (a resistant intervention in public discourse).

Buzzell's first entry in the blog continues to observe the boredom and routine of military life, but the project of constructing stories and posts seems to bring a bit of impulsive energy to the record. He explains to possible readers:

I have no set formula on how I'm going to do this, I'm just going to do it and see what happens. You think the Sex Pistols knew what the fuck they were doing when they first started jamming? They just fuckin' did it.  
About me: I am an 11 B infantry soldier in the United States Army, currently in Mosul, Iraq. Our mission: to locate, capture, and kill all noncompliant forces here in Iraq. So far we've done pretty damn good. I've been here for about eight months now, and I have no idea how much longer I'm going to be here. My whole outlook on everything has changed since being here, and I've probably aged a great deal over here. So far, this has been one hell of an experience. Lots of lows, and very little highs. Every day is the same, a patrol, an OP [observation post], a TCP [temporary check point, a road block and car search], same food at the chow hall, see the same faces, same streets, etc. Nothing really ever changes here. Time goes extremely slowly out here as well. (107-8)

Likening his blog's experimental spontaneity to a Sex Pistols jam session strikes a rebellious note. The point, he suggests, is to act: to do something and strike a discordant note that might nonetheless harmonize with people's interest and build community. To this end, the Sex Pistols reference links Buzzell's efforts to the work of a group rather than a single artist. Although he is the individual soldier-author behind the blog, the reference shows that he doesn't consider himself alone in shaping the events and ideas that will be recorded there. Accordingly, he shares the lyrics of the Black Flag song from

which the title of his blog is taken, subtitles the blog “Fear and Loathing in Iraq” after favorite writer Hunter S. Thompson, uses an introductory quote from *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*, and imports Picasso’s *Guernica* as a visual header for the website. This cobbling together of materials complicates the tone of the blog. While the quote claims “[w]ar is not only a practical necessity, it is also a theoretical necessity, an exigency of logic.... That war should ever be banished from the world is a hope not only absurd, but profoundly immoral,” *Guernica* visually protests war’s destruction. These contradictory elements of the website are characteristic of Buzzell’s mixed feelings about the war and further, of his subjective tendency to be drawn in by powerful forces, whether rhetorical, visual, physical, or interpersonal. Even though he channels them through the more active framework of publication, Buzzell’s passions continue to swing from military subjections and ecstasies to rebellious impulse, and back again.

Buzzell recounts his thinking as he posted the *Guernica* image on his website.

Quick history lesson: *Guernica* is about the aerial bombing of that town during the Spanish Civil War that left sixteen hundred civilians killed or wounded and is considered one of the greatest antiwar paintings of our time. It’s also one of my favorite paintings, it has that Slayer-album-cover feel to it, which I like. I also had my barracks room back at Fort Lewis decorated with a *Guernica* print. Now when I looked at it, it kinda reminded me of Iraq, in a way. The dark colors, the grays, and the women with outstretched arms with that look on their faces that says “Why?” reminded me of the house raids that we were doing, the scared crying Iraqi women in the corner, holding their babies, who were also crying, while we searched the house. The animals reminded me of all the animals that roamed freely in the streets there, at times they seemed just as scared of us as the people. And the fallen soldier with a broken sword stirred up a bunch of emotion as well. Of course if you look by the fallen soldier’s hand, in the bottom middle of the painting, you see a little flower growing, which means hope comes out of destruction. Which hopefully is the case with Iraq. (116)

Buzzell’s unselfconscious description of a great anti-war painting as having a “Slayer

album-cover feel” offers a history lesson he didn’t intend; his candor provides a great display of the ever more indistinct relationship between artistic statement and consumer preference. His comments also capture his own developing understanding of the work of art. As he looks at the painting in the context of his blog, he begins to see it not only as a piece of decoration, but as linked to military campaigns of the past as well as his own actions in war. Alongside its projection of an edgy, angry, rock album-cover feel, the image calls up emotions, recognitions of fear, questions of purpose, uncertain hopes. Against the claim Swofford advances, that anti-war representations of war’s destruction are always misapplied by actual soldiers, Buzzell develops both an intellectual understanding and an emotional resonance with the painting. Still, his attunement to the suffering war brings is countered by his obvious pride in his identity as an infantry soldier. Buzzell clearly feels and reflects the “whole duality-of-man thing” (116). He relishes the contradictions of his presentation, rather than seeking to rationalize them.

The public format also allows Buzzell to encounter and engage the views of civilians, drawing even more disparate elements into the blog’s text. He recalls checking on the blog at “every opportunity,” not to write new posts but to get comments and emails from readers (149). He is clearly intrigued and amused—and occasionally struck into thoughtful reflection—by the forms through which civilians express interest in his stories and experiences. Their wide-ranging concerns add variety and perspective to the drudgery of military routine. The mail-call feature on the site (in which Buzzell posts replies to some readers’ questions) and his exchanges of emails with readers create a bizarre mix of ethico-political questions, demented fan-style rants about the pros and

cons of different military weapons and vehicles, “pats on the back” (293) for being a soldier, praise from veterans noting the chaotic authenticity of his style as opposed to the polished perspective of military histories, complaints about his excessive use of profanity, entrepreneurial questions about what Iraqis want to buy now that they’re “free,” and pop-culture references to the truth of fiction. One Iraqi woman’s post stands out in particular for her gracious expression of grievous doubts about American intentions, and for Buzzell’s quick reply.

QUESTION: Dear sir, I discovered your blog today and I read some of your letters. I’m an Iraqi living in Baghdad. Every time I walk or pass by troops I wonder, how do they feel? Are they convinced they should be here? Do they hate us? Blame us? Have they expected what is happening or have they imagined something different when they came a year ago? For me, I thought there would be peace, and we would be able to look for a better future. I thought that we would be able to forget the 24 years of wars and benefit from our money to rebuild the country instead of buying weapons, but all these were just illusions. ... Most of Iraqis are against violence and we believe that most terrorists, or who are called resistance, are either not Iraqis or are gangsters who want to benefit from the situation here in the name of resistance.... All those terrorists want is pushing Iraq into a civil war. I think many countries are willing to put Iraq in this situation so they can go on with their plans and this is all part of a big game in which you and me are just players. I do not even drop the possibility that American politicians are behind some of the events that are happening. They said their war is against terrorists, but they brought the terrorists to our country to fight them here. There is even a possibility that Al Qaeda is a fake and it is really a tool for the Americans being used to help in controlling the whole world (if you have seen the movie *Wag the Dog*... you will understand what I mean). .... I used to feel sorry when I hear that a soldier had died. I think about his family and children and why they had to pay for it. Now I also feel sorry when I hear that Iraqis are being killed every day... I pray for you and us to stay safe in this bloody world. Yours, Zena

ANSWER: Thank you for sharing your thoughts. No, I have not seen the movie *Wag the Dog*, but I have seen the Stanley Kubrick flick *Dr. Strangelove*, which I highly recommend to anybody who lives in another country, who wants to know what our government and high ranking military officials are really like behind closed doors. The movie is extremely accurate, especially with this current Bush administration. (202)

Buzzell's response to this Iraqi's concerns seems hasty, but his pop culture swerve actually answers her most pressing question with effective directness. The short-hand references to dark satirical films form a language in which Zena and Buzzell exchange figurative images of governmental secrets and lies. Buzzell actually answers in stronger terms than Zena suggested. While *Wag the Dog* is a damning portrayal of the manufacture of consent through the spectacle of war and threat, it imagines the threat of war as wholly unreal and fully manufactured. Its plot involves a government project to distract the public from a presidential sex scandal by hiring a Hollywood director to shoot scenes of an imaginary war, then distributing the footage through television news. *Dr. Strangelove, or How I Stopped Worrying and Learned to Love the Bomb*, is a blacker representation of conspiracy by far, one which represents elitist governmental officials strategically embracing the destruction of the planet's population. For Buzzell, as an American soldier, to recommend this film as an "extremely accurate" figuration of U.S. military and federal leadership is really quite shocking, and vastly widens the field of possible answers to Zena's questions about soldiers' feelings and convictions.

Strange as it is for Buzzell to recommend *Dr. Strangelove* to foreigners seeking insight concerning American political motives, it's even odder when paired with a portion of his response to a reader's query concerning possible improvements to the Stryker armored vehicle. Listing practical elements like better air conditioning and seat cushions, Buzzell also suggests making the vehicles soundtrack-ready:

Loud speaker on the outside of the vehicles. Nothing motivates troops more before a mission than good motivational music. Remember in the movie *Apocalypse Now*, when they had the speakers hooked up to the Air Cav helicopters? Well, we need to do the same goddamn thing with the Strykers.

(208)

He goes on to reminisce about an operation during which counter intelligence agents, in a joint mission with American soldiers and Iraqi Civil Police, used loudspeakers to great effect:

we had the loudspeakers blasting “Ride of the Valkyries,” theme song from *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*, “The Star-Spangled Banner,” and the *Rocky* theme song. It motivated the hell out of us all. In fact, it even motivated the Iraqi Police, I remember looking over at them and they were all getting into it big time. (208)

Buzzell adopts *Dr. Strangelove* as a model to describe his government, and *Apocalypse Now* as a model for improvements to its fighting vehicles. For Buzzell, life and cinema are not fully separate but overlapping realities. Cinema can provide a revelatory portrayal of government corruption; soldiers can lend their work cinematic flair with the use of a soundtrack. Life can thus be lived as cinematic spectacle. Contradiction between cinematic messages is not a problem, either. While he accepts and promotes the critical perspective of Kubrick’s dark satire, he also hopes to emulate and recreate the obscenity of *Apocalypse Now*’s air cavalry. The clash of critical disenchantment and violent motivation shows the range of passions to which Buzzell subscribes. The filmic representations seem to be appropriated for their ability to provoke a powerful response, not to build up a coherent subjective world view. We might wonder how Buzzell can *want* to be motivated and fight in support of a conspiratorial government. The ideal nobility of the soldier is incompatible with such exploitation. But Buzzell’s contradictory attitudes show (as Kubrick shows in another of his films, *Full Metal Jacket*) that belief in an ideal cause is not really necessary to produce an effective soldier. In fact, a strong

cynical stance can make it easier to perform a soldier's dirty work, since the violence of combat necessarily undermines all normal ethical civilian distinctions and frequently does the same to international codes governing warfare itself. Buzzell's desire to fight, to be part of a combat unit in particular and the military in general, is linked to his desire to experience something outside the dreary repetition of civilian passions. Military passions push the subject past normal concerns, but not into a higher spiritual plane, as evidenced by this exchange:

QUESTION: In your opinion as a human being living in the heart of the storm, what is the meaning of life? Sincerely, Chip

ANSWER: The meaning of life for me right now is to make it back in one piece. (210)

Buzzell's intellectual affiliations and emotions can split into countless contradictory directions—so long as his survival is assured. In the context of combat, “meaning” accommodates any position that can increase the likelihood of survival. Coherence, under pressure of military passions, is a goal to be upheld for the physical body only. Buzzell is in this way a perfect military subject: his rebellious penchant for chaotic positions and experiences allows him to suffer the tension of military passions without breaking down.<sup>28</sup> Because he holds no fully stable subjective boundaries, but rather opportunistically seeks passions, he does not resist military subjections, which range from being used in service of a government and goal he doesn't really support to physical exposure and risk.

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<sup>28</sup> In *A Grammar of the Multitude*, Paolo Virno notes opportunism and cynicism as bad sentiments that strikingly characterize the contemporary work force. The military poses an extreme form of the arbitrary hierarchy and rapidly changing demands that have become central to post-Fordist labor.

Buzzell's apparent comfort with contradiction in his own personality allows for the appearance of many disparate elements within his blog. As he has no compunction about revealing his own inconsistencies, he doesn't hesitate to expose the contradictions of the military and the media either. Buzzell's blog became famous after he posted CNN's version of an Aug. 4, 2004 fire fight in Mosul, offered a first-hand account of the event, then topped it off with the Army's press release. CNN online's version of the story was predictably short:

Clashes between police and insurgents in the northern city of Mosul left 12 Iraqis dead and 26 wounded, hospital and police sources said Wednesday.

Rifle and rocket-propelled-grenade fire as well as explosions were heard in the streets of the city.

The provincial governor imposed a curfew that began at 3 p.m. local time... and two hours later, provincial forces, police and Iraqi National Guard took control, according to Hazem Gelawi, head of the governor's press office in the Nineveh province. Gelawi said the city is stable and expects the curfew to be lifted Thursday. (qtd in Buzzell, 248)

CNN's brief account emphasizes the restoration of control after a short two-hour struggle, making no mention of the U.S. Army's involvement. The Army's press release similarly puts casualties at 8, emphasizes the effective action of Iraqi National Guard (ING) and police forces, and times the fight at three hours, although it does offer more specifics on the tactics and apparent objectives of the insurgents: "Terrorists are targeting security forces as well as facilities that provide for the health and well being of citizens of Mosul. These attacks underscore the desperation of terrorists in their attempts to halt the progress of democracy and prosperity in Iraq" (262). Buzzell's account of the fighting that day ("here's what really happened") spans eleven pages and claims the ING didn't even show up until the gunfight "had been going on for 4 ½ hours" (248, 256). Rather



than portraying efficient response and return to order, his description highlights the intensity of insurgents' opposition, the chaotic uncertainty of the fight, and the overwhelming terror of being the object of a sustained attack.

We were driving down Route Tampa when all of the sudden all hell came down around us, all these guys, wearing all black, a couple dozen on each side of the street, on rooftops, alleys, edge of buildings, out of windows, everywhere, just came out of fucking nowhere and started unloading on us. AK fire and multiple RPGs were flying at us from every single fucking direction. IEDs [improvised explosive devices] were being ignited on both sides of the street. I freaked the fuck out and ducked down in the hatch and I yelled over the radio, "HOLY SHIT! WE GOT FUCKIN HAJJIS ALL OVER THE FUCKIN' PLACE!!!! They're all over goddammit!!!"

Bullets were pinging off our armour, all over our vehicle, and you could hear multiple RPGs being fired, soaring through the air every which way and impacting all around us. All sorts of crazy insane Hollywood explosions were going off. I've never felt fear like this. I was like, this is it, I'm going to die. I cannot put into words how scared I was. (251)

Buzzell's driver speeds out of the ambush zone safely, but a few minutes later radio command directs them to return to the scene and engage the combatants: "I'm not going to lie, I didn't want to go back. Fuck that shit, I don't want to get killed. That was the last place on earth I wanted to be. I was scared to death. But we had to go back, and we did" (252). Here "crazy insane Hollywood explosions" mark an excessive reality Buzzell wants to escape, not a cinematic spectacle that can be profitably incorporated into real life. As Buzzell's platoon returns to the ambush zone, he describes the frantic firing that ensues:

We rolled back into the area where we'd just dodged death, and we were taking fire from all over. I fired and fired and fired and fired and fired. At EVERYTHING.... We were taking fire from all over, and every single one of us had our guns blazing. At one time, I saw a dog try to run across the street and somebody shot it. (252)

In the wild disorganization of the moment, Buzzell gets reprimanded for swiveling his

gun so sharply after a pair of insurgents so that he's shooting directly over the heads of soldiers in the rear hatches of his vehicle, alarming them greatly. He runs out of ammunition and has to climb out of the armored vehicle to retrieve ammunition boxes that are strapped on the *outside* of the vehicle—"whoever thought of that idea should be fucking shot" (523). At the end of the day he is left with a set of experiences that, even with his taste for "adventure" and comfort with contradiction, he is at a loss to coordinate.

I was smoking like a chimney, one right after another. My nerves were completely shot and I was emotionally drained and I noticed that my hands were still kinda shaking....I was thinking how I was lucky to be alive. I've never experienced anything like the fear I felt today....

The attacks on my platoon up to this point had been just chickenshit hit and run bullshit, an IED here, a solo RPG or rocket there....

These guys today were on the offensive, had held their ground, and showed no fear whatsoever.

Sgt. Vance saw me sitting by myself, and he came over and...asked if I was OK. I thought about that one for a second and I told him, "I don't know." He bummed a smoke and said, "Are you sure?" I told him how I wasn't really in the mood to roll back out for another inning with these guys, and I also told him I was kinda tripping out about how not everybody I engaged today had a weapon in their hands. And that I wasn't really too sure about what happened to some of those people.

Vance started telling me a little bit about his father, who had been in Vietnam, and who had given him sound advice about situations like this, "Put all the things that bother you, and keep you awake at night, and clog your head up, put all those things in a shoe box, put the lid on it, and deal with it later. (259)

In the memoir's text, Buzzell follows this excerpt from his blog with the comment "I've put the events of that day in a shoe box, put the lid on it, and haven't opened it since" (260). Despite this claim, his account (posted on the blog) gives readers a different view of the facts than the news media and the official military account. Buzzell's personally setting them aside *after* recording them publicly works on a different level than the

official foreclosure of chaotic fear and aggression in favor of control and competence. His behavior follows a strange pattern. Counter to the Freudian paradigm of repressing an impulse or experience to keep it out of conscious recognition, Buzzell first consciously records the incident in publicly accessible written form, then represses it. His account shows the passions suffered in combat's disorganization as the flip side of governmental claims to maintain order. Against the hidden trauma this would impose on some subjects, Buzzell makes it public knowledge.

The clear tension Buzzell effectively draws between these accounts of the conflict in Mosul is perfectly shaped to become a news story in itself—and it does, when a reporter (Mike Gilbert of *The News Tribune*, Tacoma, Washington) “quotes the hell out of” Buzzell’s blog to build up a story for his paper. The publicity brings the blog to the attention of the military as well, and Buzzell’s commanding officers, while claiming not to punish him, give him a set of guidelines for continuing the blog without creating a security breach. Basically, he’ll be confined to the base and not allowed to go out on missions with his squad (so that he won’t have much to write about). As insurance, he’ll have to clear his writings with his commanding officers before posting them publicly. This creates a real dilemma for Buzzell. While other soldiers laughingly offer to trade places with him (opting for safety at the base rather than risky missions) Buzzell, for all his irreverence, takes his job seriously and wants to continue doing it. The embarrassment of being confined to base, which makes Buzzell look like a liability to the squad rather than a good soldier, and the authoritarian framework of handing his writing in for approval or censorship by superior officers—well, it takes all the fun out of it, which

is probably what higher command intended. Buzzell decides to quit blogging rather than be confined to base, and even though his immediate higher-ups assure him that they'll get this limitation of his activities revoked as quickly as possible, he doesn't feel comfortable taking up their time:

I could tell that [the First Sergeant] was busy and that he had more important shit to do than to read one of my blog posts like it was my English homework. That was when it hit me that this was all completely stupid.

Here we are, inside some FOB [Forward Operating Base] in butt-fuck Iraq, surrounded by thousands of people that would love to kill Americans, and I'm handing over what I've written for review for the green light before I can post it on the Internet. I signed up to be an infantry soldier in the United States Army, whose job is to locate, capture, and kill noncompliant forces, not to be some writer or some wanna be Ernie Pyle.

That was when I said, You know, this is lame, I quit. (299)

Yet Buzzell can't just sign off without another great point-counterpoint. He regrets letting the blog peter out in a way that so completely concedes to the military's superior judgment and decides to stir up controversy by posting someone else's writing, someone that, while not violating security in any way, will really upset command. He contacts Jello Biafra,<sup>29</sup> describes his plight, and asks for a statement to post. Biafra obliges, writing:

Real patriots care enough about our country—and the world—to speak up, stand up, and fight back when the government breaks laws, lies, steals, and gets innocent people killed. Real patriots do their buddies and the people back home a huge favor when they bypass our censored corporate media and become the media themselves—telling us from a real person perspective what war and a grunt's life are really like. History is important. As long as people in the field speak up we have a chance of preserving the truth. Otherwise it's the bullshit gospel according to Fox News and the Bush-Croft regime and peoples' own memory being erased even more than we've got now. To all the troops:...We support you by saying, "Bring the Troops Home!" as loud and as often as we can. (320)

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<sup>29</sup> Jello Biafra, former lead singer of punk group *The Dead Kennedys*, is a spoken-word artist and radical left political activist.

Buzzell posts Biafra's statement with great satisfaction (without permission), and the Army, just as he hopes, goes "ballistic." He receives a brief storm of emails warning him to "cease writing" or face charges. Without knowing the trouble Buzzell's in, a blog reader posts the comment: "I'm glad I live in a country that would allow a soldier in the middle of a war to put this letter on the Internet" (321). Buzzell seems to have deeply enjoyed the controversy he stirred and the conflicts it made visible. But he is apparently equally swayed by a message his battalion commander sends him, and posts its nobly traditionalist counter-argument to Biafra's radical oppositional stance as the final word on his blog. The battalion commander (BC), about whom Buzzell has observed that "there's probably not a single soldier here that doesn't think that God put our BC on this planet to lead men into combat. He's that inspiring" (301), offered these thoughts:

Far too often we simply carry on an inner dialogue when someone else speaks to rehearse what we will say when they finish. This war on terrorism will be with us for some time, so I offer an open letter to the generation I will pass this burden on to.

I believe we are making progress in Iraq and in Afghanistan.... The task is daunting. You can release a person from bondage. You can remove a tyrant from power. You can create the conditions for liberty. But you cannot simply grant or proclaim freedom.... I think we owe [the people of these countries] more than a couple of days to realize that their hopes and dreams have a chance to grow and one day flourish.... Make no mistake: I'm no crusader—I do what I do because I'm a professional soldier. For me it's been simple: protect the innocent, punish the deserving, accomplish my mission, and bring my men home, period.

I am a simple soldier, proud to serve, but my days in the service of the Queen are drawing to a close. Soon all of the cold war junkies will be gone and you my friends and your band of X generation anti-heroes will have the reins. Like it or not, you are now the fulcrum upon which the balance beam rests. I will tell you that the outlook is damn good. I am absolutely humbled every day to have the rare privilege to march among the young men and women who chose to give soldiering a try. None finer have ever served under the colors....

I submit that it is our love of freedom, the embrace of our wives or sweethearts, the love of our children or family, and the earned respect of our brothers in arms

that cast the walls that make the will to endure a fortress that can never be taken. I will be proud to stand the watch until my time is at an end, but soon you will mount the ramparts and stand the watch alone. In closing, I leave you with the words of Marcus Aurelius: “Think of yourself as dead. You have lived your life. Now, take what’s left and live it properly. What doesn’t transmit light creates its own darkness.” (323-6)

Though claiming to speak as a “simple soldier,” Buzzell’s commander is actually weaving a more complicated net of identities, duties, and ideals. He speaks as a believer in the soldier’s nobility as watchman and protector over the ideals of liberty and shared responsibility, and calls Buzzell into this belief as well. The proposition that, despite its “anti-heroic” stance, generation X is equally capable of valor as the “greatest generation” plays into Buzzell’s desire for heroism. In praising those who “chose to give soldiering a try,” the BC couches a gentle reminder that Buzzell is in this situation because of his own decisions, an appeal to maturity and responsibility that tends to defuse or redirect rebellious energy. And Buzzell has already considered that point himself, noting that he signed up to be an infantry soldier, not a writer. Like a cleverly manipulative teacher or parent, Buzzell’s commander doesn’t tell him what *not* to do, threaten punishment, or describe the risks of continuing. Instead he holds out an honorably flattering invitation to the soldierly elite. The ideological work of the message is to address Buzzell as a worthy member of a group with an idealized social function, while keeping the ideas just close enough to reality to make the position it offers plausible and attractive. The Marcus Aurelius quote is as close as he comes to telling Buzzell to cut the crap and keep his priorities straight, but its language is so evocative that even this appears in the tone of inspirational goal rather than reprimand. Buzzell is as easily drawn toward this ideological submission as he was toward rebellion.

This message apparently stood as the final post on the blog. Buzzell cops a rebellious stance by claiming that in posting it he was “disobeying a lawful order” (322), but it seems clear that the battalion commander expected his “open letter” to be made public. Military command probably wasn’t disappointed that Buzzell closed with this gesture toward the continued strength of the military and the legitimacy of its mission in Iraq, or that Buzzell has since maintained that it was his own decision to shut down the blog.

Although the subjective position of the soldier, with its nobility and action through service, remains attractive to Buzzell, he’s not taken in so far that he volunteers to serve out another deployment in Iraq. His comments on leaving the military are unromantic, until the book’s final paragraph, where he shows again a willingness to be caught up in military passions. But he does resist the sort of totalizing gestures that Bellavia indulges in, claiming they don’t fit his experience, implying that they don’t fit reality. Describing the flight back to the U.S. that would coincide with the end of his active service, Buzzell explains:

Now if this was the movies they’d have the guy sitting in the plane on his way back to the world, looking out the window, with maybe the Green Day song “Time of Your Life” playing in the background, and he’s reflecting on the war, about all his buddies that he’s lost, all the dead bodies he’s seen, and all the life-changing experiences and epiphanies that he went through and whatnot, but for me it seemed to be the opposite. I was not really thinking about Iraq at all, in fact it actually felt like I was never there. The only things that I was thinking about was a Guinness inside a smoky bar, going to the Social Distortion show in a couple weeks in Seattle, hanging out with my wife, and just chilling out. Maybe after spending the last year in hell, I could appreciate heaven a little bit more now, but then who knows. The heaven that I’m going to could be hell for all I know, and I’ll find out soon enough. (352-3)

Even as Buzzell envisions the “movie version” of his story, he can see that “the guy” in

the movie can't actually be him. Though the pop culture references of film appear as a shared set of figures for referencing his emotions and his views of the world, the figure of the war movie hero doesn't work here. The refrain of the Green Day song he references for his imagined film hero's musings is "It's something unpredictable/ but in the end it's right./ I hope you had the time of your life." Buzzell rejects his imagined cinematic portrayal and its soundtrack's assurances. He's not entirely sure that his military experience is at its end, as, "[t]he Army has me on inactive reserve status for six more years, which pretty much means I'm draftable" (353). He doesn't feel a sense of rightness or purpose developed over time, retroactively redeeming the alternating boredom and exhilaration of combat. He's looking forward to very simple and immediate pleasures that were out of reach during his service. While this renewed appreciation of simple things is part of another set story for veterans (returning to build a home and family a la 1950s nostalgia), Buzzell doesn't fit that mold either; the Social Distortion show hints at a continued oppositional social stance. And against the cliché of life changing (presumably life-enriching) epiphanies about survival or heroism or on-going pride and honor, Buzzell worries that his prospects will be basically the same, boring and dead end, when he exits the service, except that he'll be even less suited for civilian life:

Since I'm not reenlisting, and no employers that I know of are looking for M240 machine gunners, that kinda narrows my options down a bit.... [H]ow the hell can I go back to data entry? Temp work? Valet parking? Or any "normal" job for that matter?.... I'll probably end up doing what most vets do when they get out, which is to use their GI Bill to go back to school. If school doesn't work out, I guess there's always a job at the FedEx. And if that doesn't work out, I guess I can write the word "Veteran" after the word "Homeless" on my cardboard sign. (353-4)



The one positive addition the Army makes to Buzzell's prospects is an affordable college education; but he hadn't really wanted to do that or seen it as a guarantee to better status before he joined up, so he seems to have ended up very much where he started. Thus, while he never wants to go back to Iraq and feels that the impulse to fight is "completely out of my system now" (352), Buzzell ends the memoir by dramatizing his continued susceptibility to military passions:

if I ever got a call from the battalion commander saying that he was getting everyone from the Second Platoon Bravo Company 1/23 INF back together, to go "Punish the Deserving" for one last tomahawk chop out there in Iraq, and that he was going to lead the way, and everyone was going, and they needed me as... machine gunner again, I'd probably tell him, "That's a good copy, sir. Let's roll."  
Hell yeah. (354)

Hell yeah? Buzzell captures the nature of his military passions one last time for the reader: Hell—everything that is to be avoided, suffering without reprieve, evil unrestrained; yeah—affirmation, acceptance, embrace. Buzzell joins contrary forces again in this short reckless phrase that expresses his enthusiasm for undergoing extreme experience, exposure, and risk rather than suffering in civilian security. Although he knows better, the appeals to comradeship and heroism that accompany military passion make it more tempting than the passions associated with "normal" jobs and civilian life. Buzzell's skepticism concerning civilian life, the impossibilities or irrelevance of action he sees in a state governed by real-life Dr. Strangeloves, makes the reckless exhilaration offered by military service appear as an attractive alternative. When he had to choose between the challenging possibility of active communication in his blog and continued "active" military service, he chose to conform to his role as an infantryman. Buzzell, for

all his restless energy, doesn't find real action in the military or in his sporadic resistance to its demands on his subjective role. Still, as a time to kill, war breaks the norms of civilian behavior and offers a possible suspension of civilian passions through the exercise of violence. Buzzell opportunistically follows military passions as an alternative way to kill time.

### **Camilo Mejía's *Road from Ar Ramadi***

While Buzzell's book is animated by irreverent bravado, Camilo Mejía's book is full of sincere regrets. Mejía's mild tone doesn't carry the energy of Buzzell's banter, but his military career is marked with more genuine conflict, personal action, and determination. His memoir, *Road from Ar Ramadi: The Private Rebellion of Staff Sergeant Camilo Mejía*, describes his path from struggling immigrant teenager to U.S. Army soldier to war resister.

In 1994, at the age of eighteen, Mejía immigrated to the U.S. from Costa Rica with his mother and brothers. His parents had been active supporters of the Sandinista Rebellion; their changing political fortunes had previously spurred several family movements between Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and the U.S. By the mid-nineties his grandmother had obtained citizenship for herself and permanent resident status for her daughter, and this represented an opportunity for stability in the family. Mejía quickly discovered that the apparent promise of financial comfort in the U.S. was illusory. He worked long hours for low pay and attended night school to graduate on time from high school, then finished a year at a community college with financial aid before state cut-

backs decreed that his low-wage job should enable to pay tuition independently. Without college aid, Mejía found himself “without any prospects for the future. It seemed as though I was working my butt off for a life that offered nothing at all. It was these circumstances that led me to join the U.S. Army” (15). So, as for many other young soldiers, the financial stability and future tuition benefits promised by enlistment offered a path to escape from a perpetually precarious minimum wage existence. But these were not Mejía’s only considerations. Much as Buzzell was looking for a dubious bonus in the military’s chance for adventure, Mejía was also hoping for less tangible subjective benefits:

More than the promise of financial stability and tuition, the military held out the promise of helping me claim my place in the world. It wasn’t even that I wanted to be a U.S. citizen; I just wanted to be with a group of people with whom I shared something, to acquire a sense of belonging. My visit to the recruiters’ office wasn’t to decide whether I wanted to join, but to decide what military branch and specialty I would choose, which turned out to be the army’s infantry. (15)

If a sense of isolation and worldlessness tend to generally characterize the emotional life of modern society, the combined problems of immigration, poor jobs, transitions between schools, and the difficulties of upholding a college schedule while working all intensified Mejía’s personal sense of dislocation. These elements created a desire for a supportive community. The military tradition of honor and comradeship seemed to hold out the collective identity he needed. Perhaps because the appeal of comradeship was such a strong force in determining his enlistment, Mejía is sensitive to the government’s exploitation of this virtue for less than noble causes, as well as to his own and other soldiers’ exploitation of its strength to justify their own violent actions. During his

service he became increasingly discontented with the gap between military ideals and real practice. He found small ways of resisting the subjection of service, such as refusing to “drop” the men on his squad to the ground for punishing physical humiliations, and refusing to allow anyone (any rank) to punish him in this way either (25-6). But he served his active time in the Army and transferred into the National Guard to fill out the remaining years of his contract. His service was just several months from its end when—in January 2003, during the run-up to the Gulf War—his Guard unit was stop-lossed. Soon after, Mejía was sent to serve in Iraq (18).

The assignment to Iraq brought up new ethical conflicts for Mejía, as he was now involved in a conflict with which he strongly disagreed.

Back in the United States, before deployment, I hadn't had the courage or clarity to openly express my doubts about participating in a war that I believed was unjustified. Besides, I didn't want to be labeled a coward. I knew that openly expressing my opinions could be construed as unpatriotic and treasonous, and that I might even be court-martialed and sent to jail.

As the prospect of the invasion became more real, I tried to find comfort in the excuses that soldiers use when fighting wars they don't believe in. I told myself that I was a soldier and it wasn't for me to judge the reasons behind the decisions of those higher up the chain of command. I had signed a contract, I was wearing a uniform, and I had to do my duty, period. Besides, I was an infantry squad leader and my squad needed me. (23)

Mejía worries over the justice of the Gulf war in a way that Buzzell didn't, but both soldiers feel bound and compelled by the strength of their written contract with the military. As Buzzell leaned on the idea that he had signed up for the infantry and now had to act accordingly when faced with conflicts generated by his blog, Mejía also feels (or at least quiets his doubts with the idea) that the signed contract has changed his subjective position from civilian to soldier. He knows that the state has the power to

punish him for acting outside the bounds of right conduct: honor, courage, loyalty. Yet Mejía clearly also believes that qualities of courage and justice can exist outside their military definitions, and sees a conflict between his own developing standard of right action and the standards imposed by the military. Acts that he feels require courage (expressing dissent, refusing commands) would be seen under military standards as manifestations of cowardice. The appeal of comradeship temporarily trumps these concerns, as Mejía feels a genuine bond of respect with the soldiers of his squad. While the real subjective transformation exacted by the military contract can be viewed as a passion in the negative sense (a loss of the independent power to act), comradeship is a surrender of self that is experienced as an ecstatic bond to a larger whole.

This immediate positive relationship holds sway for a time over Mejía's choices. He finds an immediate outlet for his ambivalence in secret dissent: feeling strongly that, should anything happen to him, he wants his family and especially his young daughter to know that he opposed the war, he asks a trusted fellow soldier to photograph him holding up a placard that says "GIVE PEACE A CHANCE" (23). The image of Mejía holding up a secret message of his ethical position in a hidden photograph stands as an odd counterpoint to the most famous images of U.S. soldiers produced during this conflict, the photographic documentation of prisoner abuse at Abu Ghraib. Mejía uses the camera to capture an image of conflict between personal and military standards that he can't express directly or publicly, at least not yet. The public revelation of the Abu Ghraib photos (which came later) raised and intensified doubts about the U.S. military's standards of conduct.

Mejía's experiences in Iraq raise his doubts to a level of unreconcilable tension. The diffuse suspicion directed at every Iraqi and the stark terror of ambushes press Mejía to follow orders and react with violent fury when threatened. But they also cause him to question policies that disregard the safety of soldiers by requiring set routes (which are easy to ambush) and long missions (which make slow targets). Further, patrolling certain areas of the city and guarding particular locations regularly, Mejía begins to get an understanding of people's feelings about the occupation. Through anonymous incidents, such as a patrol in which he senses onlookers' admiration for a teenager who showed defiant pride against soldiers' rough treatment (91-92), and through more personal discussions with Iraqis he comes to know well, Mejía's perception of Iraqis' perspectives begins to alter his own. One discussion with an Iraqi he considers a friend (having spent many hours in pleasant conversation with him while guarding his gas station) cuts to the center of his conflict with military conduct.

Mohammed and I continued talking about Iraq and the U.S. occupation. At one point, pressed my Mohammed's searching questions and having run out of answers, I suggested to Mohammed that we were in Iraq to bring freedom to the country and its people.

"Freedom?" Mohammed looked at me, incredulous.

"Yes," I insisted with a straight face, not even believing my own words. "But you said that you don't want to be here," pressed Mohammed, also with a straight face.

"I don't," I continued.

"And you said that your contract with the army was over," continued my friend, reminding me of something I had told him in the past.

"Yes, I said that," I admitted.

"Then why are you here?"

"Because the army can keep you in after the end of your contract," I explained, sensing where he was going with his questions....

"Against your will?" he asked with his eyebrows raised.

"Yes," I said, quietly.

"So how can you bring freedom to us, when you don't have freedom for

yourselves?”

I was unable to answer that question, but I remember thinking that Mohammed just didn't know how armies worked, even though I was aware that he'd been conscripted into the Iraqi army in his youth. Besides, my neither my freedom nor its absence had anything to do with participation in a war that I had opposed from the outset. My misfortune was tied to a decision I had made at age nineteen when I signed a military contract and forfeited most of my rights.... No I kept telling myself, freedom had nothing to do with it.

But deep inside I felt differently. I knew that, in the end, no one could force me to do anything I didn't want to do.... I could say no to senseless missions that put the lives of both soldiers and innocent civilians in unnecessary danger. I could assert my freedom and say no. The problem was that everyone else was doing what they were told, and the easiest thing was to keep my mouth shut and think that Mohammed just didn't understand. I hadn't just lost the freedom to think for myself as an individual with moral and spiritual values, independent from the military; I had also lost the freedom to accept the fact that I wasn't free. (133-134)

Mejía views soldiers' loss of freedom as both absolute and as illusory. In order to maintain the soldier's facade of active power and honor, he must follow orders to the letter. In order to maintain the illusory freedom that characterizes military power, he precisely cannot admit that his active power is compromised by its order. Here we can glimpse a subject struggling with negative ecstatic passions. Mejía's initiative is subject to greater external forces, the military's baffling mix of bureaucratic command systems and overwhelmingly destructive machines that make resistance or recuperative action impossible. With this description, Mejía represents his position as predetermined and without appeal from bad passions; he is guiltless for not resisting because resistance is impossible. Countering this absolute loss of freedom, Mejía maintains that his freedom *could* still be asserted, that he could act out his dissent by refusing to obey. The conversation with his friend leads Mejía to realize that, viewing himself as bound to a contract rather than free to act on his convictions, he has taken the path of least resistance—quite literally so. Acting individually to resist service that he feels is unjust,

while his fellow soldiers continue to follow orders, will be extremely difficult. It will require resisting not only the chain of command, but the powerful appeal of comradeship, the immediate and ecstatic connection to others that drew him to the military in the first place. Mejía employs the figure of *depth* to represent the internal certainty that counters both the disempowering passions of military subjection and the appeal of comradeship. “Deep inside” he knows; under and far from his conscious rationalizations and justifications, he builds the determination to act in opposition to the Army’s regulations. There is a strange tone of distant reflection to Mejía’s decision. He characterizes it as purely internal, a development of his own inner sense of right, opposite the ecstatic forces that draw the subject out of itself. But his certainty is also oddly opaque, so divided from his behavior as a soldier, that it seems almost unconscious.

Mejía begins to slide out from military subjection through underhanded tactics rather than direct action. He uses the bureaucratic tangle caused by his soon-to-expire green card and extended military tour as a pretext to get a short leave to return to the U.S. He doesn’t exactly decide to go AWOL, but that’s what he does. On the morning he is supposed to return to Iraq, he explains,

The hours passed and I stayed in bed. I didn’t know exactly when I had to leave and I hadn’t looked at the clock on the night table for a long time. But I knew I had to go back to Iraq. Before I knew it, night had fallen again. I had missed my plane. I decided I would go back the next day, and then I slept. (220)

He works through many arguments and counter arguments for returning to Iraq, but finds that

none of these reflections provided easy answers, and the truth is that there was never a moment of complete clarity at which I made a firm decision to resist the war; I simply didn’t get on the plane when I was supposed to. I thought I would



get on the next flight and then missed that one too... until one day I woke up simply knowing that I would not go back.

Deep inside I knew I had stayed behind for a reason, that there was a purpose for my coming home and for not returning. I knew that even if I didn't go back to Iraq, the war for me, would be far from over; perhaps it was just beginning.... This would be, first and foremost, a war waged within myself, one where my fears and doubts would come face to face with my conscience, a war to reclaim my spiritual freedom. It would also be a war against the system I had come from, a battle against the military machine... I knew that I somehow had to turn my words into weapons, that speaking out was now my only way to fight. (222-223)

Mejía resists, we might say, symptomatically, before he resists consciously. He disobeys orders first by failing to follow them, and secondly by defying them. Although the Freudian unconscious is usually thought to operate in indifference towards ethics, here Mejía seems to act unconsciously in accordance with his ethical will. Mejía's stillness is key. He doesn't move to follow orders, follow his training. On one level, his motionless inactivity symptomatically expresses or performs the military's restriction of his freedom, its confinement of his active power. But in another signification, stillness is literally the first moment of his resistance, a moment in which he opposes military passions on the simplest level: by refusing to be moved. Before his thoughts consciously conclude to resist, his unconscious thought works through a primary process: it figures or represents his resistance through his physical stillness. Instead of remaining in an unconscious resistance though, Mejía takes advantage of the stillness as a space for reflection, for effectively recognizing his own symptoms and accepting their signification. Even though his reflections come from these internal resistances rather than from a clear (conscious) logical process, the failure to follow orders shows that Mejía is capable of refusing the orders of discipline and right behavior that animated his movements as a soldier. The circumstances brought about by his unconscious (decisionless, not clear, hidden)

resistance create the new set of circumstances in which he will discover a rational purpose and resolve to fight on different terms. Next, in speaking out—making conscious, making clear, and making public—Mejía openly defies military restrictions on his freedom of action. Mejía uses the figure of war to describe the new conflict that he initiates, suggesting a refocusing of aggressive energies, a new understanding of the conditions under which he should be fighting. Rather than fighting against his own ethical quandries while conforming to military standards and participating in war’s physical violence, he will construct an ethical position to counter the violence of militarism and war. Mejía refigures war as both personal and public; he recognizes that his own passions, as well as the military institutionalization of violence through which tried to escape them, are involved in the conflict.

The figure of depth remains prominent in his self-descriptions. Mejía explains his application for conscientious objector status, which he recognizes seems strange after years of military service: “it took the experience of going to war for me to see things in a broad perspective and realize that I was, deep down, a conscientious objector” (299). Mejía uses the simple phrase “going to war” in an odd way, allowing us to notice the intuitive passivity of an apparently active grammatical structure. He’s not making war or fighting the war. War is foregrounded as a place or state that one can go to or be sent to, as when someone “goes to prison.” Like prison, war is a framework in which people are rendered passive and passively moved, a framework in which they are subjected external forces of confinement and order. But, within this experience of subjection, Mejía *sees*. The place he is sent to and the forces that exploit his frustrated energy also alter his

perspective. The urban warfare Mejía becomes part of during the occupation of Iraq brings something very different into his striving for comradeship and duty-bound vision of the military—a civilian world:

There were times in Iraq when I failed to see things the way I was supposed to as a soldier, when I knew that what we called targets were in fact homes, public squares, or markets, when I knew that what we called enemy combatants, terrorists, or Saddam loyalists were in fact people, sons, daughters, parents, human beings. (299)

Seeing the ways that war destroys civilians' interconnected lives and public world intensifies the conflicts he feels with military standards. This presses him towards the realization that some aspect of his subjectivity, which he hadn't recognized before, has not been shaped to those standards. Against an "insufficiency of the ego" that must be supplemented or caught up in external powers, Mejía thus argues that an essential kernel of subjectivity is not carried away in the negative ecstatic experiences and passionate submissions of military service. This subjective element is key to his "realization": he makes *himself real* as a conscientious objector in a way that he had not been as a soldier. Without actually escaping his social situation, Mejía recognizes the reality of a different and threatened world outside. Through this world he gains a new sense of his "deep," latent, potentially resistant identity, and forms the determination to act. This new way of appearing to himself and others provides Mejía with a different foundation and framework for his experiences. Rather than seeking an experience that draws him out of or passivizes his self (negative ecstasies and passions) he takes on a new subjective position that can resist ecstatic appeals. Mejía's recognition of Iraq as a threatened community rather than as an occupied territory allows him to see the tension between

military designations and worldly reality. Through his active vision of reality, as it appears to him as an *individual* rather than as a soldier, and his reflection on this perception, Mejía reconstructs his subject position. A foreign city may not offer the sheltering elements of a public world that Arendt and Gray emphasize (shared language, memory, stories), but it's enough. Mejía forms an identification with a fragile public and uses it to shift from passion towards action, to think through his behavior and begin to choose differently.

There is a negative consequence to Mejía's unconsciously initiated action and subsequent conscious determination. Resisting military command opens him to military discipline in a different way. His "private rebellion," while apparently reclaiming his independent action, exposes him to a different subjection: trial, judgment, imprisonment, and dishonorable discharge. The possibilities of action and passion are, as Mejía's trial indicates, not clearly delineated but interchanging. Mejía trades the capture of his emotions and ideas within an ideologically charged system of subjection for actual physical imprisonment. In the process he makes the elements of coercion that animate the military more visible, and succeeds in opening a certain amount of public dialogue about the war. Leaving the courthouse, after the trial, he claims "I was not sad or bitter, nor was I afraid. Instead I experienced a deep sense of empowerment on that beautiful day" (299). Once in prison, he behaves again with good conduct, and thus wins an early release. Since release from service was one of the main goals of his resistance, his rebellion does—eventually—essentially succeed. But the questions of independent action, ethics, and subjection to institutional discipline remain rather muddy. (Perhaps they can

only be made clear through violent totalizations.)

Mejía cultivates a conclusion by separating the ideal from the physical:

Though I was handcuffed as I walked down the steps of the courthouse to the police vehicle, that was the moment that I gained my freedom. I understood then that freedom is not something physical, but a condition of the mind and of the heart. On that day I learned that there is no greater freedom than the freedom to follow one's conscience. That day I was free, in a way I had never been before.  
(300)

Maybe, but in a way most people never experience, and never want to experience. The paradigm of the free will and imprisoned body is not one that could fully and permanently satisfy a desire for ethical change in the real world. This is the moment when the "private" quality of Mejía's "private rebellion" comes into question. Is his rebellion *private*, when it is met with the judgment and punishment of a social institution? Is his protest, which subjects him to imprisonment and turns his physical being into a symbol through which government manifests its coercive force, an effective public action? If his protest is publicly significant, does his exchange of physical submission for ethical freedom accomplish an action or merely expose him to a different set of subjections?

Despite the many open questions, Mejía's choices demonstrate independent will and ethical conviction. His memoir is deeply marked by passions, but his concluding gesture toward individual judgment, individual conscience, and thinking demonstrate their potential to contest and transform the forces of passion. Mejía's claim to the private freedom of individual feeling and thought, despite the limiting and subjecting forces of government, essentially insists on the activity of thought and its power to resist ecstatic passions. J. Glenn Gray closes both of his essays on the problem of violence by asserting

the necessity of thought. His epilogue for the German edition of *The Warriors* claims:

I am more convinced than I was ten years ago that philosophic thinking on the ultimate sources of violence and war can contribute more than a little to the kind of shaking of the foundations and consequent self-reflection that must precede the founding of peace. (43)

In this he perhaps agrees with Arendt that we are never more active than when we think (*HC*), and might agree with Mejía that we can recover freedom through the movement of thought. The sequence Gray suggests—thinking, shaking of foundations, self-reflection—implies a circuit of exchange (and possible transformation) between the thinking subject and his world. We should continue investigating these possibilities by reflecting on the way in which passions and actions animate the border between individual and public experience in our common sense, communication, and capacity for reflection.

### 3. Warring Opinions

#### Opinion as Common Sense and Communication in Dark Times

In a sheer inexhaustible flow of arguments, as the Sophists presented them to the citizenry of Athens, the Greek learned to exchange his own viewpoint, his own “opinion”—the way the world appeared and opened up to him (*dokei moi*, “it appears to me,” from which comes *doxa*, or “opinion”)—with those of his fellow citizens. Greeks learned to understand—not to understand one another as individual persons, but to look upon the same world from one another’s standpoint, to see the same in very different and frequently opposing aspects. (Arendt, “The Concept of History” *Between Past and Future* 51-2)

Hannah Arendt wrote of communication in the ancient world, idealizing the plurality of perspectives co-existing in the Greek public sphere. She continually emphasizes the ability to exchange viewpoints, ways of seeing the world, as central to human life in common, freedom, and politics. Kant’s philosophy, with its insistence on a common sense or *sensus communis* that makes communication itself possible, offers Arendt another framework for exploring communication and politics. She locates Kant’s implicit contribution to political philosophy in the aesthetic sense of taste, and finds in this concept a link between the generally human and the intimate particularity of experience.

Kant claims, “common understanding of men...is the very least to be expected from anyone claiming the name of man.” His account of how this understanding can transcend individuality involves language and sensation. From the immediacy of “taste,” the pleasure or displeasure within us at a sensation, Kant develops an argument that this subjective sense, being shared by all individuals, acts as a transcendental connection between people. Particular material feeling cannot of course be transmitted directly from

one person to another (we cannot directly know the truth of another's existence) but the commonly held capacities for sensation, imagination, and communication operate together, allowing us to imagine the other's experience and thus bringing a "nonsubjective"—or better, "intersubjective"—element into our subjective faculties. In Arendt's description: "the nonsubjective element in the nonobjective senses is intersubjectivity" (*Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy* 67). The importance of material sensation in this articulation of individual and collective experience is clear, and it demonstrates once again Kant's inclusion of material corporeality in his philosophical system. While this emphasis on sensation and thought as they work in human bodies bars human access to absolute truth, that lack is bridged by a capacity for reflection and communication that turns the intimacy of sensations into a link between people. In Kant's formulation:

under the *sensus communis* we must include the idea of a sense common to all, i.e, of a faculty of judgment which, in its reflection, takes account of the mode of representation of all other men in thought, in order, as it were, to compare its judgment with the collective reason of humanity....

[one may reach this] *enlarged thought* if he disregards the subjective private conditions of his own judgment, by which so many others are confined, and reflects upon it from a *general standpoint* (which he can only determine by placing himself at the standpoint of others). (*CJ* paragraphs 40 and 41, qtd in Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy* 70)

Arendt emphasizes this common sense as present in and operating through communication. Referring back to Kant's expectation that anyone "claiming the name of man" must consider others' perspectives, we can see that the work of language in "naming" and constructing connections between people is a requirement for common sense. Kant's valorization of judgment as passing beyond private subjective conditions



“presupposes the presence of others” and the ability to speak with them (*LK* 74, 70). “Judgment,” as Arendt paraphrases and interprets Kant, “and especially judgments of taste, always reflects upon others and their taste, takes their possible judgments into account. This is necessary because I am human and cannot live outside the company of men” (67). Judgment is in this sense always plural and inherently political. Kant’s philosophy opens here from an account of individual (even if transcendental) subjective faculties to an account of the aesthetic foundations of political life. His inquiries into cognition’s access to truth shift toward the public exchange of feeling, opinion, and judgment.

The capacity for judgment, the common sense which allows us to sense others’ positions, and opinion as exchanged in the Greek polis and idealized by the Enlightenment converge in Arendt’s vision of the political world. Without these human potentials there could be no action through speech, no alteration of the world through communicating one’s own way of seeing it, and no expansion of the world by hearing and becoming able to see another’s. There is clearly an ecstatic element in this exchange of opinions, as their communication allows us to move between our own position and others’. In Kant’s common sense and “disinterested” judgment we find the space that Arendt claims constitutes the human world as it exists *between* people, as an inter-space or intersubjective experience. These concepts provide insight into an understanding of opinion that is more complex and more illuminating than the statistically generated “public opinion” of contemporary polling practices and journalistic reports. Rather than representing a simple reactionary stance, this form of opinion is open to exchange; its

exchange and communication can become part of a public world, not just a private position. But if this is not usually the way we think of our world and of our opinions we should not be surprised, as they are only one possible and perhaps idealistic potential form of human thinking and community. The previous chapter discussed Arendt's historical and philosophical account of the decline of action, speech, and freedom and its resulting alienation. She also cautions that "dark times" further deprive us of this common sense and shrink the world of our opinion to private dimensions or totalizing ideologies.

The world lies between people, and this in-between—much more than (as is often thought) men or even man—is today the object of the greatest concern and the most obvious upheaval in almost all the countries of the globe. Even where the world is still halfway in order...the public realm has lost the power of illumination which was originally part of its very nature. More and more people in the countries of the Western world, which since the decline of the ancient world has regarded freedom from politics as one of the basic freedoms, make use of this freedom and have retreated from the world and their obligations within it...[W]ith each such retreat an almost demonstrable loss to the world takes place; what is lost is the specific and usually irreplaceable in-between which should have formed between this individual and his fellow men. ("On Humanity in Dark Times," *Men in Dark Times* 4)

When we retreat from negative social conditions, we become distanced from the world of human relationships. Even as we find shelter in private life (by no means a guarantee of safety), our retreat from public community is "often accompanied by...radical loss of the world...fearful atrophy of all the organs with which we respond to it—starting with the common sense with which we orient ourselves in a world common to ourselves and others and going on to the sense of beauty, or taste, with which we love the world" (13). Our communicativeness and our feeling for the world built up through it are interdependent in Arendt's thinking. Without public life we begin to lose both.

Arendt observes that “dark times” are “not identical with the monstrosities of this century” and are not historically new. Instead of defining dark times in connection with the events of the world wars, she emphasizes the distortions of language and communication that preceded and accompanied these events.

If it is the function of the public realm to throw light on the affairs of men by providing a space of appearances in which they can show in deed and word, for better and worse, who they are and what they can do, then darkness has come when this light is extinguished by “credibility gaps” and “invisible government,” by speech that does not disclose what is but sweeps it under the carpet, by exhortations, moral and otherwise, that, under the pretext of upholding old truths, degrade all truth to meaningless triviality. (viii)<sup>30</sup>

The political and social disasters of the world wars took place specifically in public—in a social world where language that should have made reality visible instead obscured what was happening:

Until the very moment when catastrophe overtook everything and everybody, it was covered up not by realities but by the highly efficient talk and double talk of nearly all official representatives who, without interruption and in many ingenious variations, explained away unpleasant facts and justified concerns. (viii)

The transcendental capacity for common sense in no way guarantees that our communicativeness will be exercised for the purpose of illumination—with ethical concern for others and disinterested commitment to public knowledge. Arendt isolates this abuse of communicative power as itself a specific trauma separate from, but intertwined with, the shocking events of the wars. Her definition of the world as

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<sup>30</sup> The Bush administration’s “legal” redefinition of torture and exploitation of new terminology such as “security detainee,” “extraordinary rendition,” and “illegal combatant” could be viewed as examples of the governmental camouflaging of truth Arendt describes. This is not the place to outline their effect in detail; but my conclusion will address the problem of “detainee abuse” as it appeared in the Abu Ghraib prison scandal.

communicative space and communicative relations between people renders the dissolution of communication into “mere talk” as in itself leading toward world destruction. In *The Human Condition* she describes warfare as the loss of human dignity specific to being *with* others as opposed to being *for or against* others. When speech and action are only for and against others, they can no longer reveal the unique position and viewpoint of the individual and “speech becomes indeed ‘mere talk,’ simply one more means toward the end, whether it serves to deceive the enemy or to dazzle everybody with propaganda; here words reveal nothing” (180). Here communication falls to the level we most usually associate with opinion: the mutually exclusive stances of for/against. Rather than revealing the individual’s particular way of seeing and position in the web of human relationships, it erodes these relationships and the meaning they carry. The deceptive and bureaucratic language of wartime government not only conceals events but corrupts and distorts relationships. Reducing intersubjective opinions about the world as we see it to the instrumental and mutually exclusive opinions of enemies destroys the common world as surely as war’s violence destroys the physical world.<sup>31</sup>

Against this degradation of the common world, Arendt’s analysis of “dark times” attempts to describe the qualities of certain individuals whose convictions and determined

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<sup>31</sup> Invoking mere talk, being-with, and the darkening of the public world, Arendt draws on Heideggerian concepts (*Being in Time*’s section 27); however, it is clear that for her being-with is a *positive* foundational subjective experience and that mere talk’s darkening of the truth is an historical phenomenon linked to the developments of modern society in opposition to the public world. Jeffery Andrew Barash offers an argument on these points in his “The Political Dimension of the Public World: On Hannah Arendt’s Interpretation of Martin Heidegger” (*Hannah Arendt: Twenty Years Later*).

presence in the public world “illuminated” its darkness somewhat. She also addresses the difficulty of building a meaningful relationship to a past that destroyed countless relationships, countless individuals, and seemingly even the capacity for meaningful communication. The post-World War II historical moment presented its survivors with an inhuman and seemingly meaningless series of disasters that were nonetheless an achievement of human action instrumentally directed against the other. Against the temptation to withdraw from this chaotic reality of inhumanity and guilt into private and imaginary worlds, Arendt insists not that the “unmastered past” be “mastered,” but simply that it be known:

The best that can be achieved is to know precisely what it was, and to endure this knowledge, and then to wait and see what comes of knowing and enduring....After the First World War we experienced the “mastering of the past” in a spate of descriptions of the war that varied enormously....Nevertheless, nearly thirty years were to pass before a work of art appeared which so transparently displayed the inner truth of the event that it became possible to say: Yes, that is how it was. And in this novel...very little is described, still less explained, and nothing at all “mastered”; its end is tears...and what remains beyond that is...the shattering emotion which makes one able to accept the fact that something like this war could have happened at all. (20)

The work of art (Arendt refers here to Faulkner’s *A Fable*) brings the disaster of war into human discourse, allowing it to become—the passage has a certain ambiguity on this point—not necessarily the object of precise *knowledge*, but the medium that calls up a “shattering emotion” of “tragic recognition.” Art enables a representation through which we repeat the suffering of the past and bring it together as “an event, a significant whole” (20). This is not mastering; it is not knowing in the usual sense either. What Arendt emphasizes is the process of subjective and collective involvement in narration, the construction of a story: “No philosophy, no analysis, no aphorism....can compare in

intensity and richness of meaning with a properly narrated story” (22). The “shattering emotion” of the reader/listener mirrors the shattering of the public world, creating a correspondence between subject and history that allows a re-articulation where reparation is not possible. The story’s intensity of meaning works to resupply meaning that has been destroyed by re-articulating what has been broken; in this work it begins to rebuild the intersubjective world. A human text that represents and calls up in its audience all the alienated potential of common sense is needed to humanize the encounter with traumatic history. Precisely the communicative capacity eroded by war is needed for recovery from war’s trauma.

Communication and aesthetic responsiveness are essential to the construction and preservation of a human world. This world, as the traumatic history of Arendt’s own lifetime demonstrates, “is not humane just because it is made by human beings, and it does not become humane just because the human voice sounds in it.” It can become humane

only when it has become the object of discourse. However much we are affected by the things of the world, however deeply they may stir and stimulate us, they become human for us only when we can discuss them with our fellows. Whatever cannot become the object of discourse—the truly sublime, the truly horrible or the uncanny—may find a human voice through which to sound into the world, but it is not exactly human. We humanize what is going on in the world and in ourselves only by speaking of it, and in the course of speaking of it we learn to be human. (25)

Events become meaningful through the action of communication. By imagining, representing, and exchanging our reflections, we build them into our world. In speech with others, we discuss events, hear how others see the same events, and build a community of shared meaning based on this ability to see from different perspectives.

But as the passage above indicates a certain ambiguity in the status of the work of art and the event it narrates, in this passage we again find reference to resistant elements—extreme forms that hold an ambiguous relationship to human discourse. The truly sublime, horrible, or uncanny cannot be fully humanized although they can “find a human voice through which to sound.” These elements determine the “shattering emotion” that passes through stories.

Kant’s *Critique of Judgment* proposed two forms of aesthetic experience—the beautiful and the sublime—and privileged the common experience of the beautiful as central to the formation of public life. He thought the harmony of form in beautiful objects to align with the harmony of faculties it stirs in the individual and further, proposed this harmony between people in their common sensation of the beautiful could act to make harmonious public life possible. Arendt’s interpretation of Kant emphasizes this connection between the beautiful and collective life, pointing out that Kant raises the proposed concern for sharing our delight in the beautiful forms to the level of a social contract. Kant’s words claim: “a concern for universal communication is something that everyone expects and demands from everyone else, on the basis, as it were, of an original contract dictated by [our] very humanity” (*CJ*, paragraph 41 164). In contrast, the sublime is associated not with harmony but with tension and failure of the imagination, with moral law rather than disinterested delight. Arendt does not offer any extensive discussion of its importance for Kant’s political theory in her lectures, but the sublime does appear in her discussion of art as the recovery from trauma.

Kant defines the sublime as a quality of the subject’s capacity for sensation and

thought rather than a quality of the object being judged. Because what we might call sublime in the world is not suited to but exceeds our capacity for imaginative representation, we can only grasp it as a totality by using reason to propose an idea of nature and natural design that can enclose it (*CJ* 128). The relationship between the sublime as a subjective capacity for reason and the quality of the object/event that calls up this capacity is more problematic than the harmony of form presented in the beautiful's subjective experience and objective material form. The beautiful easily becomes an object of reflection and of discourse; we enjoy communicating our pleasures to one another. But the sublime cannot be represented so harmoniously, and the relationship to judging and communicating about it, even when sharing interest in a sublime spectacle—as Arendt discusses Kant's relationship to the sublime spectacle of the French Revolution—is complicated. One may be enthusiastically fascinated while the same time condemning, as Kant was toward the revolution in France (*LK* 48). The mediation between pleasure and displeasure that characterizes the sublime is difficult to capture. The sublime disarticulates the faculties that the beautiful harmonizes. Even when judged from a safe distance, sublime forces and magnitudes push our capacity for feeling and thinking to their limits, and cannot be reduced to “objects” of discourse. They cannot be adequately represented by discourse or simply aligned with human meaning. Their experience divides the subject itself. They cannot be made human because they exceed human powers of thought and perception, but Arendt claims they can “find a human voice through which to sound.”

Arendt's formulation here indicates her insistence on an ability to communicate



even at the border where human symbolization breaks down and the subject cannot uphold an active stance toward meaning. The poetic phrasing of what cannot enter discourse *sounding through a human voice* is not determined by poetic license. This phrase renders the speaker's status *as speaker* problematic. The meaning of his speech inheres in the sublime or horrible that sounds through it, not in his own active intention. The reverberation of the voice becomes the passive vehicle of something radically inhuman. The shock of horror at war's atrocities, the sublime scale of its devastation, the uncanny quality of language that deprives people of their humanity, the unassimilable "experience" of contacting yet surviving these deathly elements cannot be made human even if we find words to speak of them. They shatter our feeling and thinking, and our human world along with them. But to endure voicing them and passively knowing this fragmentation is imperative. The claim that what cannot enter discourse will find a human voice in which to sound insists that even the trauma of subjective disarticulation can and must be communicated. A human voice will find a way to make audible and sensible what has been suffered, not through mastering it in discourse, but by transmitting an account of the world as it appeared: the traumatic shock of history. We can rearticulate the breaks in our world by narrating its fragmentation.

Arendt's continual emphasis on communication and on the power of narration to build meaning and relationships must bring to mind the writing of her friend, Walter Benjamin, whom she lost to the political devastation of World War II. Benjamin understood the trauma of war, and of much of modern social life itself, as the destruction and devaluation of experience—yet he wrote to manifest this loss. Arendt's claim that the

worst that can happen must still find a voice through which to sound seems in some ways a protest at the lost voice of her friend. Her insistence on communicating the trauma of the inhuman recognizes the capacity for evil, destruction, and unthinkable loss but proposes the re-establishment of meaning. Her ideal of a speaking community is never invulnerable to shock, but it will not be blind, deaf, or silent toward injustice either. By being called to speak even what is unspeakable we learn what it is to be human and recover community after disaster. If this is true, then even through the darkest times the potential of communication preserves the potential of recovery.

Times have been pretty dark. The illumination of the public world that Arendt saw receding in the face of mass culture and bureaucratically administered society remains dim. The plurality of human ways of seeing is often obscured by mass broadcast of mutually exclusive opinions. The exploitation of common sense (human communicativeness and the potential for action) itself by new forms of service and information economy has extended the sense of world-alienation that Arendt diagnosed deeper into human experience.<sup>32</sup> The scale of contemporary society and social conflict has expanded in size and intensified in force, making the concept of shock that Benjamin read as “the sensation of the modern age” more and more relevant as we become less able to comprehend our social reality.<sup>33</sup> The Kantian paradigm of sublimity, in which sensory shock and passivity can lead to active rational reflection, falls apart as shock is followed

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<sup>32</sup> Paolo Virno maintains that “post-Fordist labor has absorbed into itself many of the typical characteristics of political action” (*A Grammar of the Multitude* 50).

<sup>33</sup> “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,” *Illuminations* 194.

by shock, or by rationalization rather than reflection.<sup>34</sup>

The work of synthesizing meaning from the traumatic events of contemporary history—bringing light to dark times by transmitting a significant account of how the world appears—remains essential. This chapter will explore three texts that reflect on collective trauma and its representation in public discourse. Benjamin’s essay “The Storyteller” will provide our starting point. This critical text offers a descriptive model of the tensions between stories, information/journalism, and myth/journalism as narrative forms. This model will carry over into the following analyses of more recent texts: Chris Hedges’ *War is a Force that Gives Us Meaning* and Slavoj Žižek’s *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*. The three texts’ styles and modes of investigation are widely divergent, and they feel quite distant from one another in time. (Benjamin’s analysis emphasizes the novelty of informative discourses that form today’s mass media; for the recent texts, the wide reach of broadcast “infotainment” is a given.) But all three texts reference a historical moment marked by traumatic events; moreover, they all attempt to synthesize the sublime forces overtaking our world into significant forms rather than passively fascinating spectacles. To this end, the three texts critique hegemonic opinions as destructive and express alternative opinions that open up a world between people rather than demolishing our potential for thought and communication.

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<sup>34</sup> Naomi Klein’s *Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* offers the provocative argument that “shocking” a market (traumatizing its people through economic warfare, instability, and torture) has become a central tenet of contemporary capitalism.

## **Walter Benjamin and War Veterans: Sublime Narration**

The opening paragraphs of Benjamin's 1936 essay "The Storyteller" (*Illuminations* 1969) powerfully invoke the trauma of the war that has just past, as its imminent repetition blocks out the future. Then his writing folds back on itself, providing a historical critique of discursive forms, focusing especially on the vanishing presence of stories. The essay's short segments move through readings of short stories and interpretations of the social forces that generate the new commercial discursive forms of the novel and journalistic information. These new media, passively consumed in isolation rather than actively spoken and listened to, fill or cover over the vanishing time and space of the story and storytellers. The loss of stories is mysterious, but undeniable:

Less and less frequently do we encounter people with the ability to tell a tale properly. More and more often there is embarrassment all around when the wish to hear a story is expressed. It is as if something inalienable to us, the securest among our possessions were taken from us: the ability to exchange experiences. (84)

Throughout the essay Benjamin elaborates the reasons "experience has fallen in value" by describing and diagnosing modes of social transformation since the industrial revolution: urbanization's fragmentation of communal ways of life, the shift from manual craftsmanship and labor to machine processing, printed literature's replacement of oral narration. Each change in ways of living and producing brings changes in modes of communicating and forming experience or meaning. His account of the interrelationship between social forms and communication closely relates to the argument of Arendt's *The Human Condition*, as she places "inalienable" human potential, action, in connection with speech and storytelling. Benjamin includes the trauma of war among the forces altering

experience and discursive practice, hauntingly characterizing its role with the essay's opening claims.

With the [First] World War a process began to become apparent which has not halted since then. Was it not noticeable at the end of the war that men returned from the battlefield grown silent—not richer, but poorer in communicable experience? What ten years later was poured out in the flood of war books was anything but experience that goes from mouth to mouth. And there was nothing remarkable about that. For never has experience been contradicted more thoroughly than strategic experience by tactical warfare, economic experience by inflation, bodily experience by mechanical warfare, moral experience by those in power. A generation that had gone to school on a horse-drawn streetcar now stood under the open sky in a countryside in which nothing remained unchanged but the clouds, and beneath these clouds, in a field of force of destructive torrents and explosions, was the tiny, fragile human body. (Benjamin, "The Storyteller" 84)

Benjamin crafts this opening carefully for maximum impact on the reader. The first sentence introduces the war as starting point of a yet un-named and unknown but inexorable process. Second, he introduces the soldier's transformation from an active agent collecting experience and stories to an impoverished, silent trauma victim. Despite a flood of war books, stories are absent—leaving open the question of what these books might contain, if not stories that can be told by one mouth and retold by another. The figure of the mouth is important here. The mouth represents the speaker or storyteller who has counsel: practical advice about how to act and how to continue one's own story. And we need counsel, of all the kinds Benjamin lists next—strategic, economic, bodily, moral—but the ability to construct meaning and counsel from all these experiences has been undermined by forces Benjamin is careful *not* to align with experience: warfare, inflation, (corrupt) governing power. The next sentence opens with a generation, a group that has grown and experienced in a common time the same social and productive forces.

Today this generation sounds even more quaint than in Benjamin's moment. Transported toward a common education in a horse-drawn streetcar, a vehicle relying on the energy of domestic animals fueled by simple grain, they express a natural organization of life, growth, movement, development. "Under an open sky" this generation is exposed to an unprecedented level of violence engaged by mechanical warfare. Elements of nature (the sky and clouds) remain, but not those which symbolize shelter. The "tiny, fragile" body somehow absorbs this shock or is destroyed by it. The sentence has moved from a generation that grows and learns together to a silent body. The paragraph has moved from the mouth that speaks counsel to a body that stands silent in a "field of force" it may not withstand.

The figures of fragmentation and collectivity moving through the paragraph work in unexpected ways. The mouth, a disembodied fragment, stands in to communicate the experience of an integrated, active individual and its connection to the community. The active force of the storyteller is from the beginning represented through a partial object, a body fragment, a single organ that opens and forms an interface with the outside.<sup>35</sup> Storytelling, through this representation, appears as a medium of exchange that is material and sensory but fragmentary; it works as both an extremely direct and a spatially mediated organ of transmission between people. Speech is of course not literally passed

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<sup>35</sup> In Melanie Klein's theory, *partial objects* mediate between the pre-egoic subject and the outside world. They are gradually brought into coordination as parts of the coherent body of the subject rather than objects outside it. Their sensory exchange with the world is one component of the movement toward a coherent identity. Here, the mouth as part object appears in a parallel role with regard to the articulation of language and the social exchange of communication. In this role it takes on the key function of articulating and coordinating relations between subjects in the social group.

from mouth to mouth, but stories are materially articulated and repeated through this physical organ of intersubjective exchange. The mouth's double function—to speak, but also to sense through taste—also provides a figure for the affective power of stories that are intimately sensed as pleasure or displeasure. The mouth's work of articulation, as in the articulation of speech, provides a figure for a community that is coherent but not totalizing; it represents a group of individuals each with his or her own set of stories and counsel for the others. The chain of stories that links this community has an opening/closing structure: mouths may open to speak, tell, and retell stories, or they may close, and the exchange of stories may falter. Without the mouth's work of articulation, the community may lose its coherence.

The generation also shows variable potential for connection and division. The generation is a temporal and spatial collective that has links to nature: birth, growth, regeneration as natural cycles. But it is also a very loose collective. Although contemporary in time and space, its members may or may not have the opportunity to exchange stories and build community. Then Benjamin's writing reduces the generation to the body; a collective figure shrinks to an individual one. The organic environment, the countryside, is disastrously transformed and a natural collective is reduced to a single mutely sensing body that must absorb this shock. Although the body seems a more complete figure than the mouth (a disembodied organ), here it appears as a mute, passive surface unprotected from violence. The mouth at least can speak or cry out, but the body is exposed to the unspeakable, and Benjamin's argument that storytelling is at an end resonates in the body's speechless shock. The body is silent and expressionless in the

chaos of war's destructive force. Storytelling is silent as well.

Benjamin juxtaposes the lost expressiveness of storytellers with the expressionlessness of war's trauma. Yet the *expressionless* for Benjamin has a specific literary and communicative value. Shoshana Felman highlights his use of this term as a concept linking literature to "what cannot be said in words" but nonetheless draws together art and the real, signifying "although and because it has no possibility of statement" (*The Juridical Unconscious* 13). The figure of the body amidst war's destruction of natural and human coherence crystallizes this expressionlessness: it signifies precisely by signaling the impossibility of upholding human meaning under this trauma.

Benjamin also displays this tension between meaning and meaninglessness, expression and the expressionless through the allegorical figure of the angel of history. "Theses on the Philosophy of History" includes this description:

A Klee painting named *Angelus Novus* shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress. (*Illuminations* 257-8)

The angel is caught in the violence of historical "progress" much as the "fragile human body" of "The Storyteller" is caught in the explosion of warfare. The angel's face is described as if his eyes and mouth are forced open in the same way his wings are forced



open by the storm of history; his face shows less a willed expression than the force of shock. The openness of his mouth can no more offer speech than could his open wings, but the figure's expressionlessness is itself eloquent. The angel's enduring, open vulnerability to history's force allows him to see differently than we do: we "perceive a chain of events," a mathematically sublime spectacle of event following event, cognitive moment following cognitive moment—but the angel sees an apparently endless sublime extension of violence. The angel cannot help but sustain his perception of the silent dead and smashed artifacts that we exclude from a vision of history as progress. Benjamin views the interpretation of history as progress as a myth obscuring culture's material violence; we will have more to say about this mythic history soon.

The angel's mouth is open, but it has nothing to say before this spectacle. The fragile body caught in war's destruction in "The Storyteller" will similarly have no story to tell. The angel is propelled just before the storm of history, but the human body is caught within and surrounded by its force. The natural and cultural destruction that the body encounters in warfare are more than the imagination can process, more than a subject can order into a story; these forces represent a trauma rather than an experience. The war veterans Benjamin invokes are silent because they have undergone an event that is not "communicable experience," but a trauma that shocks and destabilizes subjective unity (whether or not it leaves the fragile body intact), and thus cannot be simply imagined, thought, spoken, or communicated. Benjamin's skill in communicating this traumatic break, which shattered a generation, is to incorporate it into his writing *as a break*. By limiting reference to the war's disaster only to the second paragraph of the

essay, then resuming the account of storytelling's decline, Benjamin causes war's traumatic excess to haunt all the claims that follow. As Shoshana Felman argues:

This vivid and dramatic explanation is placed right away at the beginning of the text, like an explosive opening argument or an initial shock or blast inflicted on the reader, with whose shock the whole remainder of the text will have to cope and to catch up. The opening is, indeed as forceful as it is ungraspable. The text itself does not quite process it, nor does it truly integrate it with the arguments that follow. And this ungraspability or unintegratability of the beginning is not a mere coincidence; it duplicates and illustrates the point of the text, that the war has left an impact that has struck dumb its survivors, with the effect of interrupting now the continuity of telling and of understanding. (*The Juridical Unconscious* 26-27)

Benjamin's essay insists on telling the story by exposing the inability to tell a story. The expressionless figures with which Benjamin signifies the trauma of war reveal the shock that cannot enter into discourse. He finds a way to signify the world as it appeared to him by this emphasis on figures that cannot speak. We might think here too of Arendt's claim that what cannot be addressed in discourse will nonetheless find a human voice through which to sound: Benjamin's writing expresses the silence of those who have been overtaken and rendered expressionless by the inhuman roar of history. He resumes a narration by showing that part of the story must be the ungraspably radical interruption of the subjective and intersubjective process of understanding and exchanging experiences. (In the last section of this chapter, we will explore Žižek's argument that most of our discourses on war displace this traumatic interruption through fantasy.)

What *was* poured out ten years after the war, in the flood of war books that filled the gap between those who could not share stories? Benjamin is keenly interested in, although often critical of, the forms of discourse that have overtaken the story's space. Although he provides an account of the story's decline independent from the argument

impressed on the reader by the essay's second paragraph, his counter-positioning of stories, newspapers, and novels demonstrates his understanding of each discursive form with its corresponding social conventions and further reinforces how much has been lost.

Both the novel and information arise as forms of communication in the city's conditions of high population density and its paradoxically correspondent anonymity. The story belonged to small communities where listening and working in common spaces allowed stories to be shared and repeated across generations. The city's perpetually mobile population and labor force shook and overturned this web of relationships. Benjamin's harsh estimation of the novel ties it to the "transcendental homelessness" whose form it expresses (99).<sup>36</sup> Disconnected from a traditional home in space, the novel's reader symbolically condenses a home in time. During the time span of reading a novel, one follows the progress of events in the life of its protagonist. The climax and resolution of the novel work against time to crystallize all these events into a single moment of illuminated meaning. Benjamin darkly concludes that in the novel, the meaning of life is crystallized in death:

The novel is significant, therefore, not because it presents someone's fate to us, perhaps didactically, but because this stranger's fate by virtue of the flame which consumes it yields us the warmth which we never draw from our own fate. What draws the reader to the novel is the hope of warming his shivering life with a death he reads about. (101)

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<sup>36</sup> Benjamin's analysis of novelistic form, as his own essay explicitly indicates, is based on that offered by Georg Lukács in *The Theory of the Novel* (first published in Berlin, 1920). The theme of homelessness, which Benjamin adopts from Lukács, is important to this project—but here I am more focused on Benjamin's application of the concept than on Lukács' formulation and I have not yet undertaken a detailed exploration of Lukács' theory in its significance to this project's source materials, soldiers' memoirs, from the perspective of genre.

By contrast with the story, which gives advice for living and can always be supplemented with the question “what happens next?”, the novel exhausts its meaning in its symbolic conclusion. Rather than providing counsel it provides a sense of comfort countering fate and escaping social isolation by locating meaning in the totalizing effect of death over life rather than in the acts of living. In the aftermath of World War I, Benjamin linked this effect to a passive attempt at escape from both past and future: “Then came the attempt to forget the lost war. The bourgeoisie turned over, to snore on its other side—and what pillow could have been softer than the novel? The terrors endured in those years became the down filling in which every sleepyhead could easily leave his imprint” (“Theories of German Fascism” *Selected Works*, v. 2 315). The novel’s symbolic totalization of life’s meaning in death functioned to draw together and transform the real terrors of war into ideals of romantic fate. We could read a measure of this idealism in the novelistically structured closing moments of Bellavia’s war memoir. He draws comforting meaning into his own life through the symbolic memory of his dead friends, then romanticizes and essentializes his role as warrior by imagining his sons playing soldier.

In “The Storyteller,” journalistic information provides of one the first emblematic pieces of evidence that storytelling—the exchange of experiences—is vanishing: “Every glance at a newspaper demonstrates that [the value of experience] has reached a new low, that our picture, not only of the external world but of the moral world as well, overnight has undergone changes which were never thought possible” (84). The newspaper, like the novel, becomes influential in urban and industrialized environments—places where the

individual simply does not know much that may be happening around him. Journalism is “the expression of the changed function of language in a world of high capitalism” (“Karl Kraus” qtd in Felman 27). As opposed to mercantile and agrarian economies (in which people could intimately know many of the people they worked with as well as the processes through which they produced and traded goods), capitalist economy disarticulates individuals from the products they produce, from those they use, and from the people near whom they live and work. In these conditions, language itself enters the commodity market, supplying information that people do not have about a world they are alienated from. The new discourse offers information that is “understandable in itself,” promptly verifiable, and “already...shot through with explanation” (89). Instead of communicating experience, in which the actions of living are infused with meaning through their connection to memory, community, and tradition (as in stories), Benjamin claimed that news becomes marketable precisely when people become “increasingly unable to assimilate the data of the world around [them] into experience,” as they do in large cities....

If it were the intention of the press to have the reader assimilate the information it provides as part of his own experience, it would not achieve its purpose. But the intention is just the opposite, and it is achieved: to isolate what happens from the realm in which it could affect the experience of the reader. (“On Some Motifs in Baudelaire” 158)

The information in the newspaper is a consumable and disposable commodity. It is not meant to be brought in close to the reader’s sense of meaning, but to fill in the external gaps in his picture of the world. It isolates what happens from readers’ experience so that they are less threatened by its impact. The newspaper both compensates for and sustains

society's world alienation. The tension between the power of language as medium of experience (stories) and language as medium of isolation (information) corresponds to very different ways of viewing the world. The story allows active involvement and becoming while information tends toward mastery, definition, and defensive distance from the world. Benjamin demonstrates this clearly in "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire":

Historically, the various modes of communication have competed with one another. The replacement of the older narration by information, of information by sensation, reflects the increasing atrophy of experience. In turn, there is a contrast between all these forms and the story, which is one of the oldest forms of communication. It is not the object of the story to convey a happening *per se*, which is the purpose of information, rather, it embeds it in the life of the storyteller in order to pass it on as experience to those listening. It thus bears the marks of the storyteller much as the earthen vessel bears the marks of the potter's hand. (159)

Shaping the different discursive modes are different and competing strategies for living and communicating in the world. Story and information represent not exactly subjective versus objective ways of viewing the world, but more accurately *intersubjective* versus objective views. Information provides immediately comprehensible accounts of *what happened*, not what it meant. This strategy maintains a distance or separation between the subject, the event described, and the materials involved—as well as between the subject and the others to whom the event happened, those who initiated the happening, and those who wrote the informational account of the happening. The active human interpretation of the event, which is always part of discourse, is concealed. This passivizes our reception of the information, making us less likely to think about its possible alternate interpretations, multiple meanings, internal tensions, etc. The story, by contrast, brings together the circumstances of the happening with the life and actions of

the storyteller, communicating not just a factual event, but its appearance within and through the life of the individual. The point is not to convey a happening but an experience. Thus, while information camouflages its human dimension, the story is purposefully marked by a subject's way of seeing and experiencing.

Benjamin uses the model of craftsmanship as a simile for the story's communication: a story "bears the mark of the teller much as the earthen vessel bears the marks of the potter's hand" (159). This figure points toward significant qualities inhering in the story and its teller: materiality of the speaker and the discursive product; activity, skill, and know-how; purpose and functional value; tradition and artful craft. The story takes on the character of the vessel that can be passed between people and filled by each with different contents. But the material marking of the story by its teller seems to be a crucial element for our consideration of how warfare has contributed to the decline of storytelling and how it has altered human discourse. In the flood of war books Benjamin dismisses, there is nothing like "experience that goes from mouth to mouth"—nothing like a story. One of the story's central characteristics is to be shaped actively by its teller. As the potter shapes clay into a vessel, the storyteller shapes a happening into experience. The story models how the listener too can live actively. The war books Benjamin disparages have not shaped the war into an experience that holds counsel for active life: the war writers themselves, and the texts they produce, are *marked by* the war.<sup>37</sup>

Benjamin clearly and systematically lists the structural forces that have acted upon them

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<sup>37</sup> "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire" includes references to Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and explicitly discusses traumatic shock as an excessive energy from the outside world intruding into subjective memory to leave permanent traces (161).

with inhuman force: tactical and mechanical warfare, inflation, corrupt government.

The figure of the vessel, from which we have (by negative inference) drawn the analogy of a traumatic mark left by war, also appears in Benjamin's "The Task of the Translator." In this essay, the vessel is in fragments:

Fragments of a vessel, in order to be articulated together, must follow one another in the smallest detail. So, instead of making itself similar to the meaning, to the *Sinn* of the original, the translation must rather, lovingly and in detail, in its own language, form itself according to the manner of meaning [*Art des Meinens*] of the original, to make both recognizable as the broken parts of the greater language, just as fragments are the broken parts of a vessel.<sup>38</sup>

In the essay on Baudelaire, Benjamin offers an analogy between the production of stories and the production of a clay vessel that is marked and shaped by hand. In describing translation, he emphasizes the fragmentary nature of any text with relation to the greater language. He presents the vessel in this case as already fragmented, and the work of the translator as the articulation of the fragments with one another. The translator must articulate the pieces together well enough, it seems, that we can see the pieces *as broken* and perhaps gain some idea of what has been shattered. The translator's "production" (unlike the storyteller's) reveals an original fragmentation, not a coherent whole. In place of the storyteller's intact vessel, the translation offers evidence that something has been shattered. It is clear that Benjamin feels only the best translations achieve this documentation; poor translations hide the breaks in the original's meaning, gluing the

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<sup>38</sup> The translation used here is from Carol Jacobs, offered in Paul de Man's "Conclusions": Walter Benjamin's "The Task of the Translator" (*The Resistance to Theory* 90-91). The same passage appears in Harry Zohn's translation in *Illuminations*, page 78. Thank you to Thomas Pepper for reminding me of this additional, fragmented, appearance of the vessel.



pieces back together to create an apparently seamless whole.<sup>39</sup> In these figurations of fragments and translation, we can read another figure of trauma. We can imagine the production of war books through this figure as the subjective and cultural translation of the war's trauma. The product cannot be a story offering counsel and coherence, but it might document the fragmentation of the ability to tell a story—the disarticulation of coherent subjective experience in trauma. This recognition of the trauma may be the most active stance that can be taken towards its sublime force. It will at the very least require active interpretation on the part of its audience. Benjamin implies that more often, like poor translations, war books distanced or repressed trauma by offering informative accounts and mythic totalizations that encourage passive reception.

Information's rise to prominence makes sense in the context of cultural shock. A strategy that maintains distance between the subject and traumatic events would offer some defensive shelter when social conditions deprive the subject of active potential. Benjamin also notes that journalism—a seemingly objective discourse—cedes to sensationalism. The camouflaging of subjective interpretive work in journalism actually allows this to happen quite easily: the label of “objective reporting” does not prevent the introduction of completely irrational content, and it makes such content much more difficult to recognize accurately.<sup>40</sup> Without a prominent discourse of active interpretive

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<sup>39</sup> “Gluing” is precisely the figure that de Man disparages in Harry Zohn's translation.

<sup>40</sup> Susan Buck-Morss' text, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*, discusses Benjamin's insight that the rational form of cultural institutions does not exclude their production of irrational content (253-4). Journalism is an excellent example of this tension between institutional form and cultural production. The following section will explore Chris Hedges' claim that journalism's product is myth.

exchange, forms of linguistic meaning slide back toward a form Benjamin claims as more ancient even than the story, the myth. This form narrates human subjection to indifferent and overwhelmingly powerful forces. The story's active stance worked to "shake off the nightmare which myth had placed upon [mankind's] chest" ("The Storyteller" 102).

Benjamin uses the contrast between the myth and the fairy tale (the earliest story form) to emphasize the story's qualities, but we can also glean an understanding of myth through the comparison:

The first true storyteller is...the teller of fairy tales. Whenever good counsel was at a premium, the fairy tale had it, and where the need was greatest, its aid was nearest. This need was the need created by the myth....In the figure of the fool [the fairy tale] shows us how mankind "acts dumb" toward the myth; in the figure of the youngest brother it shows us how one's chances increase as the mythical primitive times are left behind; in the figure of the man who sets out to learn what fear is it shows us that the things we are afraid of can be seen through; in the figure of the wiseacre it shows us that the questions posed by the myth are simple-minded, like the riddle of the Sphinx; in the shape of the animals which come to the aid of the child in the fairy tale it shows that nature not only is subservient to the myth, but much prefers to be aligned with man. The wisest thing—so the fairy tale taught mankind...—is to meet the forces of the mythical world with cunning and with high spirits....The liberating magic which the fairy tale has at its disposal does not bring nature into play in a mythical way, but points to its complicity with liberated man. (102)

Myth is often characterized as a narrative form that explains the action of the overwhelming natural forces to which individuals are subject. Benjamin's mention of "mythical primitive times," in which few technologies presumably were available in the struggle with nature, might suggest this interpretation. But these examples can also be read as cultural conflicts: it is not only nature but human culture and laws of inheritance that cause difficulties for the youngest brother; the mythic riddle solved by the wiseacre and the obstinate perseverance of the fool both offer critiques of cultural narratives and

forms of human logic; the view of nature as perpetually and essentially hostile to humanity is itself another myth, another cultural interpretation imposed on the world. The myth's logic may provide an explanation of a cultural conflict, but it offers it in the form of a predetermined fate, emphasizing and naturalizing culture's power over the individual. The story reverses the inevitability of this paradigm, emphasizing the power of subjective activity to overcome or see through myth's fatalistic logic. These two conflicting discursive forms reflect the tension between active and passive strategies of meaning—articulating one's own identity versus being articulated by dominant systems of subjection. The myth's system of meaning is powerful, but disempowering. Susan Buck-Morss describes its problematic appeal by noting myth's power to “satisfy the desire felt by humans for a meaning-filled world... at the high price of turning that world back upon them as inescapable fate” (*Dialectics of Seeing* 78). Benjamin clearly opposes the finality with which myth confuses natural and cultural forces, portraying culturally contingent events of history as if they were naturally predetermined and beyond human influence. The fairy tale's alliance of nature with humanity contests visions of history as inevitable. Given the essay's complex structure, which maintains mechanical warfare as an event resonating implicitly throughout its argument and pressures the relationship between discourse and industrialization, we should credit Buck-Morss's insight that the fairy tale's alliance between humanity and nature “challenges the myth that industrialization had to develop as it has, that is, as a mode of dominating both human beings and the natural world of which they are a part” (275-6). The fragile human body of the essay's first sections stands in a natural world where “nothing remained unchanged

but the clouds” (both human body and natural world are devastated by war’s violence), but this disaster cannot be viewed as the only possible culmination of events. Benjamin’s perspective both recognizes the real historical trauma that has silenced the telling of stories and calls out the necessity of recovering an active voice to challenge its inevitability.

While Benjamin protests the loss of the active voice, the structure of his essay shows that the voice may have to be recovered first through encountering the expressionless, by writing or translating the mark or break war has made in the subject’s capacity for communication and experience. Among the memoirs examined in this project, from Jünger on, we have not discovered Benjamin’s model for stories offering active counsel to active listeners—experience that can be passed from mouth to mouth. Instead we find a range of subjective positions and responsive passions toward war’s trauma: some attempt to rationalize or essentialize war’s violence, others seem to take the exposure and articulation of suffering itself as a significant act leading towards recovery.

Writers like Bellavia and Caputo grasp eagerly at symbolic and mythic formulations that could put the chain of experience back in order. Despite their attempts to reassert an epic, active, heroic subjectivity, their writings’ conscious and unconscious ambivalence indicate this effort as a reaction against the mark of war rather than its transformation into experience. Buzzell dives into the subjective passions enforced by combat, without attempting to make them coherent or productive. Swofford exposes the negativity of trauma, the scream that replaces speech in the veterans. Mejía shows the negative passions of war, but suggests as well that the return to action may begin in a

silence that cannot be easily explained, an unconscious movement of resistance rather than a communicable and teachable decision. Gray offers his “reflections,” responding to trauma without pretending to tell “the whole story” or determine a final position of certainty. The passions and negative sublime that pattern their writings show various attempts to communicate or to recuperate traumatic breaks in the capacity to exchange experiences. Through binding war into mythic inevitability or attempting to signify its destruction of communicable experience, they show the deep mark war has left on them. The particularity of their writing shows in the strengths, and even in the weaknesses, of their approaches, whether they pile up clichés or strike out original reflections. In this human particularity, even if it fails to speak as *experience*, they cause war’s violence to sound in human voices. All the memoirs treated here engage a process of writing war’s trauma, while simultaneously working to recover the power of expression.

### **Fields of Force: The Reporter and the Meaning of War**

Shoshana Felman emphasizes the depth of the conflict between journalistic and experience-based representations of the world:

Information and narration are not simply two competing modes of discourse (two functions of language). They are in fact two strategies of living and communicating, two levels of existence within a culture. Narration seeks a listener; information, a consumer. Narration is addressed to a community, information is directed toward a market. Insofar as listening is an integral part of narration, while marketing is always part of information, narration is attentive and imaginatively productive (in its concern for the singularity, the unintelligibility of the event), while information is mechanical and reproductive (in its concern for the event’s exchangeability, explainability, and reproducibility). (*The Juridical Unconscious* 188)

We might intertwine a third strategy with Felman’s analysis, positing mythic journalism

as a sensational form of information—a mode through which information both solicits and reproduces its audience as a unified social group subjected to the same fateful events. Mythic journalism radicalizes the passive reception of mass media. Beyond information’s concealment of the experience within events, mythologization reasserts the “nightmarish” essential subjection of humanity to violence (whether natural, economic, or political) in order to crystallize an equally dreadful unity out of alienated mass society.<sup>41</sup> In myths, markets and governments strategically enforce and exploit radical differences between individual human and group perspectives; mythic journalism presents these divisions as essential rather than as culturally contingent. Through mythic journalism, we build up examples of one side of a dialectical perspective, ignoring the fact of different positions, incommensurate realities, and the possibility of imaginative exchange to form bridges between them. Instead, we actively embrace discourses that destroy communication.

In 2002, during the ongoing conflict in Afghanistan and in the face of the upcoming invasion of Iraq, Chris Hedges published a book that denounced wartime journalism as a discourse of mythic excess. A “veteran” reporter himself, Hedges has covered military conflicts throughout South and Central America, in Africa, the Middle East, and Eastern Europe. Moving from one conflict to the next, spending more years in more war-torn regions than many U.S. military veterans, he gathered the dark

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<sup>41</sup> Virno describes the tendency of seeking refuge to result in new forms of danger and in “horrifying forms of salvation” such as entrusting oneself to the unifying authority of cults, ethnic militias, corporatism, totalitarianism, etc. The group identification in which we seek shelter and protection against alienation may itself become worthy of dread and produce traumatic violence. (*A Grammar of the Multitude* 34-35) What I’ve termed mythic journalism provides a discursive form of such dangerous refuge.

background for a book that is part combat memoir and part counter-sensational exposé. As we'll see, J. Glenn Gray's under-read *The Warriors* provided an important model for the text that put Hedges on the U.S. bestsellers list. But while Gray insisted on the possibility of an end to war, and where Benjamin claimed returning soldiers fall silent in the face of violence that disturbs subjective and cultural frames for the exchange of experience, Hedges titles his book with a statement that appears to argue the opposite: *War Is A Force That Gives Us Meaning*. The provocative title draws on Hedges' observation of news media's mythic distortions of reality; although he often struggles to maintain a critical stance toward this powerful schema for meaning, his title should be read as a diagnostic thesis, caution, and disillusioned confession.

The book draws not only on Hedges' eyewitness accounts and memories of numerous wars but on the writings of veteran soldiers, civilian survivors, psychologists, authors of canonical fiction and poetry, the authority of the classics, and the insight of modern philosophers. Its seven chapters are arranged according to themes that dovetail with the organizational methods of Gray's *The Warriors*. Gray highlights "Remembering War and Forgetfulness"; Hedges uses "The Hijacking and Recovery of Memory." Gray writes of "Love: War's Ally and Foe," Hedges of "Eros and Thanatos." Gray discusses "The Enduring Appeals of Battle," Hedges addresses "The Seduction of Battle and the Perversion of War." This theme, along with his chapter on "The Myth of War"—which links the emotional appeal of aestheticized war with the discursive practice of war reporting—is arguably the most important for Hedges' case against journalism's distortion of public knowledge. Its title also demonstrates an interesting quality of Hedges'

rhetoric. While the “appeal” of battle holds an intriguing position between individual and public (and possibly also legislative) perspectives, Hedges substitutes terms that emphasize the sensuality, “seduction,” and the ambivalence of attraction/repulsion: “perversion.” Hedges’ terms belong to the “private” world of sexuality, secret, and sin—and to their condemnation by religious doctrine and, to some degree, within the discipline of psychology. Hedges’ disillusionment with war is not just with the physical violence of warfare, the political violence of states, and the distortion of the mass media, but with the corruptibility of the private, subjective human desire for meaning itself. There is an element within his argument that ties meaning inextricably to force and despairs over the impossibility of transmitting meaning without perpetuating violence. Paired with myth, Hedges’ complimentary figure for war’s corruption is drug addiction. He links the individual perversion and capacity for evil that are magnified by war to the concepts of addiction and disease, but refuses to de-couple these concepts from guilt and depravity.

Modern warfare and war journalism are attributes of a world where, in Benjamin’s phrase “[e]very morning brings us news of the globe, and yet we are poor in noteworthy stories.” While the complexity of the world has expanded immeasurably beyond what can be comprehended and experienced by the individual, the work of journalism is to “make sure no event any longer comes to us without already being shot through with explanation” (“The Storyteller” 89). Hedges’ title statement, “war is a force that gives us meaning,” makes sense only in this journalistic context. The excessive force of war exposes the individual to a sublime that bears a negative relation to the capacity for meaning, as Arendt or Benjamin would understand it. The events of mechanical



warfare (violence, mass destruction, death, friendly fire, indistinction between civilian and soldier) are ungraspable in the mode of storytelling which binds life and event; but they can be explained by the press, which treats them as information rather than experience. Where active modes of interpretation falter, passive ones flourish. Hedges' title means that war and war journalism *give* us meaning—a *passivizing* formula suited to mass societies where communication is marketed and consumed rather than actively practiced or performed. As received through journalistic accounts, Hedges claims: "War makes the world understandable, a black and white tableau of them and us. It suspends thought, especially self-critical thought. All bow before this supreme effort. We are one" (10). The representation of the world offered by journalistic accounts provides an immediately graspable explanation by reducing the complexity of conflict, the singular suffering of countless victims of violence, and the ungraspable multitude of social relations into a simple opposition between two unified groups. In this reductive schema, the plurality of human positions shrinks to the absolute opposition between one's own social group and the other's, but the urgent "meaning" of this opposition has a powerful affective appeal.

Hedges bends the title's message toward critique through two evocative figures:  
war as myth and war as drug:

[W]ar is a drug, one I ingested for many years. It is peddled by myth-makers—historians, war correspondents, filmmakers, novelists, and the state—all of whom endow it with qualities it often does possess: excitement, exoticism, power, chances to rise above our small stations in life, and a bizarre and fantastic universe that has a grotesque and dark beauty. It dominates culture, distorts memory, corrupts language, and infects everything around it, even humor, which becomes preoccupied with the grim perversities of smut and death. (3)

Figuring war as narcotic and mythic characterizes war's force as corrupting and its meaning as false. Hedges couples his confessed addiction to this force with an accusation against cultural and governmental institutions that supply it with a mythic value and aesthetic attraction (meaning) that are in direct contradiction with its real destructiveness. He links the dissemination of war's myth to objective and factual sources of information as well as fictional representations (placing the state at the end of the list, with the authors of fiction), implying the perpetual exchange between reality and fantasy that constitutes human understanding.

In suggesting that war is myth, Hedges references the seductive qualities journalism endows it with: the heroism of battle, the honor of sacrifice, the prominence of ideal justice over material devastation. He suggests these appeals are "peddled" by the press the way drugs are peddled by pushers; the supposed rush of battle and high nobility of sacrifice paralleling the physical rush and high through which drugs are advertised. The myth of war functions as an advertisement: the figural relation between pusher and product emphasizes the economic dimensions of war and of the media's market. It also implies the target market, the consumer who "buys" the myth literally and figuratively, while criminalizing the entire frame of the transaction: ad, product, purchase, and addict are tied into a destructive illegal exchange. The commercial and social relationship called up by the figure thus brings a more than "merely figural" reality to his argument: myth can be interpreted not just as a parallel figure incidental to the war as drug metaphor, but (as Benjamin also views it) as a discursive form mediating between the subject and the economic/political world.

Hedges is critical of journalism's role in disseminating the myth of war:

The press has been culpable since the telegraph made possible the modern war correspondent. And starting with the Crimean war, when the first dispatches were fed by newly minted war correspondents in real time, nearly every reporter has seen his or her mission as sustaining civilian and army morale. (22)

This description's claim that the journalist *sees* his work not just as labor but as a "mission" suggests that perception is shaped by a mythic framework before any event even takes place. In the language of Hedges' central metaphors, journalists are not just peddlers of myth but the first users of war's drug: their perceptions are altered by the emotional high of collective membership and historic conflict. The shift from information into sensation is not just a possibility based on information's bypassing the need for active interpretation, but an over-determined element of its production. The journalist's report is subject to a context of collective feeling before it is subject to actual events. The mythic framework of collective membership in a nation that feels as a group and with an orientation toward ideal goals—morale—is built into the journalist's perception of self and other, and thus into his explanation of events that would be much more difficult to grasp without such a frame:

The potency of myth is that it allows us to make sense of mayhem and violent death. It gives a justification to what is often nothing more than gross human cruelty and stupidity. It allows us to believe we have achieved our place in history because of a long chain of heroic endeavors, rather than accept the sad reality that we stumble along a dimly lit corridor of disasters. (22-23)

Myth imposes an ideal frame over traumatic reality. It substitutes good, right, and heroism for chance, cruelty, and disaster. But it does so through attributing power, right, and authority to some totalizing entity outside the subject and outside the subject's own temporality (nation, race, religion, ethnicity bound to a historic destiny beyond individual

constraints). Myth “allows us to make sense,” myth “gives” justification, myth “allows us to believe.” Myth provides meaning through our submission to its order. In phrases that call to mind Benjamin’s account of the angel of history and his resistance to visions of history as progress, Hedges claims the mythic imposition of meaning re-orders a temporal corridor of disasters into a unified chain of heroic endeavor. Mythic discourse forms an ordered and absolute totality that covers over the disorder of wartime violence, and fulfils subjectivity’s desire for meaning at the cost of its active power of judgment. Through his critique of “myth,” Hedges addresses the problem Arendt described as “mere talk”: language deprived of real communication, aimed instead at destruction. Myth replaces communication with warring opinions that distort our ability to see the world from any other position.

If Hedges blames individual affect for this susceptibility to totalizing myths, he also gestures toward the systemic deprivation of human action and communication endemic to modern social conditions. In this vein, Hedges borrows extensively from J. Glenn Gray’s *The Warriors*. He and Gray tell of re-encountering friends from their time in war-torn cities and receiving their strange confessions. Gray describes the experience:

In 1955 I talked with a Frenchwoman who had suffered cruelly during the war...but was now living in comfortable bourgeois fashion with her husband and son. We reviewed the misadventures of those war days, and then she confessed to me with great earnestness that, despite everything, those times had been more satisfying than the present. “My life is so unutterably boring nowadays!” she cried out....“You know that I do not love war or want it to return. But at least it made me feel alive, as I have not felt alive before or since.” And a few days later I listened to a strikingly similar report from a German friend.... “Sometimes I think that those were happier times for us than these,” he concluded, and there was something like despair in his eyes. Neither one of these people was accustomed to such a confession; it came from both spontaneously and because I had known them in distress and in prosperity. They were not

longing for the old days in sentimental nostalgia; they were confessing their *disillusionment with a sterile present. Peace exposed a void in them that war's excitement had enabled them to keep covered up.* (Gray 216-17 my emphasis)

Hedges echoes:

In the fall of 1995, a few weeks after the war in Bosnia ended, I sat with friends who had suffered horribly. A young woman, Ljiljana....was emigrating to Australia soon— where, she told me, “I will marry a man who has never heard of this war and raise children who will be told nothing about it, nothing about the country I am from.”....

Yet all she and her friends did that afternoon was lament the days when they lived in fear and hunger...They did not wish back the suffering, and yet, they admitted, those days may have been the fullest of their lives. They looked at me in despair. I knew them when they were being stonked by hundreds of shells a day, when they had no water.... But what they expressed was real. *It was the disillusionment with a sterile, futile, empty present. Peace had again exposed the void that the rush of war, of battle, had filled.* (Hedges 6-7 my emphasis)

The theme of these passages, disillusionment with the passivity of modern existence, is common to many writers; but the structural similarities between these two passages are too pronounced to be accidental. In addition to the almost identical phrasing of the italicized selections, the narrative references to closeness in desperate times, the frame of confession, the looks of despair, and reassurances of the spontaneity and genuine emotion reproduced in Hedges' account indicate that his writing must be modeled on Gray's. Later in the text, Hedges quotes and references Gray on numerous occasions, and his writing is marked by other un-referenced echoes, like those shown by the following (Gray's text precedes Hedges'):

The majority of us, restless and unfulfilled, see no supreme worth in our present state. We want more out of life than we are getting and are always half ready to chance everything on the realization of great expectations. (Gray 215)

Most of us, restless and unfulfilled, see no supreme worth in our lives. We want more out of life. And war, at least, gives a sense that we can rise above our smallness and divisiveness. (Hedges 7)

Hedges uses these claims, much as Gray does, to expose the paradox of war's widespread appeal and undeniable destructiveness. Much of Hedges' book moves Gray's argument about the Second World War forward to post-WWII civil wars and the contemporary "war against terror." Gray reflects on the social context in which isolation, passivity, and frustration generate a tendency toward violence and allow war to appear as a viable strategy for living:

Violence has been, I think, a perennial refuge from this painful malady. It is hard to overestimate the extent to which millions in our day feed upon violence and the threat of violence for their emotional nourishment. Magazines, newspaper, movies, and television afford a kind of vicarious satisfaction of this appetite. And potential violence is apparent everywhere, in relations of parents and children, of workers and their employers, of racial minorities and majorities within society, and many others. Though organized state violence, which is the definition of war, is different from these, they are hardly separable, for without the secret love of violence and the accustoming of the psyche to it, which daily experience provides, effective fighting in war would be unthinkable. (217)

Hedges touches on these points when he writes that "those who have the least meaning in their lives, even the legions of young who live in the splendid indolence and safety of the industrialized world, are all susceptible to war's appeal" (4). The myth of war becomes an appealing discursive strategy by transferring the tension of violence between social partners to social others. Where subjection has built up frustration and a sense of meaninglessness, subjects can welcome even self-destructive violence. Instead of the banal structural violence built into social relationships and subjective disempowerment, war myths offer a framework in which violence can be exerted and enjoyed. Here Gray and Hedges come up against an idea that seemingly opposes the argument that war provides a positive sense of meaning by building shared social purpose: a secret love of

violence for itself, rather than for a historic goal or a community's continuance. Mythic narratives interestingly allow for both possibilities: there is a sweeping drama in the sense of being bound up with a community's justice as well as in complete subjection before an absolute power. The two modes of meaning are not mutually exclusive; both require the individual's ecstatic subjection to an outside force, discursive or physical.

Hedges is determined to denounce war's myth, but he sometimes has trouble controlling its discursive power within his own writing. We can consider two moments in his text:

in mythic war we imbue events with meanings they do not have. We see defeats as signposts on the road to ultimate victory. We demonize the enemy so that our opponent is no longer human. We view ourselves, our people, as the embodiment of absolute goodness. Our enemies invert our view of the world to justify their own cruelty. In most mythic wars this is the case. Each side reduces the other to objects—eventually in the form of corpses. (21)

The enduring attraction of war is this: Even with its destruction and carnage it can give us what we long for in life. It can give us purpose, meaning, a reason for living... [W]ar is an enticing elixir. It gives us resolve, a cause. (3)

The separation between the discursive force of mythic war and the physical force of war's destructiveness tends to vanish in passages like these. The first passage attempts to highlight myth's inaccuracy by tracing a series of delusions that lead to objectification and destruction. But its active verb formations make this somewhat less effective: we imbue, we see, we demonize, we view. The sense of the verbs may not be positive, but nonetheless they suggest the real force of discourse to shape perception and to transform the relation between self and other. To apply Arendt's thinking, the human world itself is composed of discursive action between people and groups. Discursive violence is already the production of violence. Destroying or distorting the communication between

people is already destroying their world. The meaning produced by myth is inseparable from its violence, but meaning it is—nonetheless. Hedges may intend the “meaning” produced in this dynamic to dissolve for his reader with the reduction of bodies to objects at the passage’s end, but he also knows that this is not always what happens in warfare. Piles of bodies, victims, may as easily reinforce the mythic opposition of good and evil as point toward the conflict’s meaninglessness. Mythic perception is a violent force in its own right, not “just” an idea or advertisement for violence.

The second passage also bends this way: war “can give use purpose” “even with its destruction and carnage” or *because* of its destruction and carnage? Hedges’ chapter “The Cause” suggests that the mythic cause for war may lie precisely in victimization through violence: war’s violence gives cause for more violence. The assertion that war can “give us what we long for in life” presents meaning as thoroughly entangled with, and perhaps inseparable from, force and violence. In this passage the verb forms are again passivizing. The underlying suggestion is that perhaps force and meaning are identical; perhaps it doesn’t matter whether we actively create meaning, actively inflict violence, passively suffer our subjection, or displace that subjection onto others.

The figure of war as drug strengthens the link between passivity and violence that underlies mythologizing discourses of war. Even more than mythic representations of violence, the figuration of war as a drug—as a substance that chemically alters human ways of feeling, thinking, and acting—drives Hedges’ argument that war is a physical force that captures, overpowers, and controls consciousness. Despite dangerous narcotic effects of addiction and overdose, drugs also interlock with forms of ecstasy and escape.



War represented as a drug thus conveys Hedges' two main points: first—war is a destructive, controlling, addictive force; second—we turn to it as an escape and release. Myths of war interlock with the second point, forming narratives of collective purpose that render war's dissolution of normal social ties as meaningful and heroic rather than negatively “escapist.” Before war's addictiveness can take effect, there is mythic desire:

Lurking beneath the surface of every society, including ours, is the passionate yearning for a nationalist cause that exalts us, the kind that war alone is able to deliver. It reduces and at times erases the anxiety of individual consciousness. We abandon individual responsibility for a shared, unquestioned communal enterprise, however morally dubious. (45)

The myth of war seems itself to exert a narcotic effect. As Hedges claimed journalists are willingly caught up in the mission to support morale before they've even seen a conflict to report, their consumer market is pre-conditioned toward the same unreflective collective identification. Already we have analyzed the indistinction between discursive and actual violence in the “myth of war” concept, but here we see that it is also already linked to the physical rush of violence that Hedges describes as the “drug of war.” The exultant certainty and erasure of anxiety accomplished by mythic narratives produce a drug-like suspension of individual identity and judgment. The “dubious” moral value of mythologized identities is determined not only by the abdication of responsibility, but by their articulation of discursive with physical violence. Hedges warns that if “we allow mythic reality to rule, as it almost always does in war, then there is only one solution—force” (22). Mythic absolute opposition to the enemy not only allows but provokes the release of absolute force and total destructiveness. Affective and discursive violence reinforce one another: the “myth of war sells and legitimizes the drug of war. Once we

begin to take war's heady narcotic, it creates an addiction that slowly lowers us to the moral depravity of all addicts" (25). Here we must note something odd, and objectionable, in Hedges claim that all addicts are morally depraved. This condemning over-generalization has roots in Christian temperance movements and in early psychology, as well as in more moderate contemporary clinical and popular trends to discourage the use of what are termed psychological crutches. Its resonance with the ideology of the "War on Drugs" also displays a reactionary political dimension that is completely misplaced given his broader argument. Underneath this baggage, Hedges views susceptibility and/or addiction to the intoxicating power of a drug as manifestation of a passive responsiveness to outside stimuli that he deems inherently pathological, a passion in the worst possible sense. While he admits that the sensory reality of warfare is capable of cutting through myth, for those directly exposed to the violence, violence may become an addiction and an end in itself that overwhelms every other aspect of life. The desire to believe in myth and the addiction to violence stem from the same problematic passivity: an ecstatic submission to overwhelming forces. (In the next section, we will explore Zizek's psychoanalytic interpretation of this investment in passivizing fantasies.)

The details of Hedges' diagnostic approach to contemporary fascination with violence owe much to J. Glenn Gray; but Gray wrote of the possibility of recovery: "men will have to make someday an absolute break with their past, as dope addicts must with their habit, if war is to pass away" (*The Warriors* 230). Hedges' figuration of war as a drug recalls Gray's figuration of war as an addiction that must be resisted under all circumstances. Yet, Hedges refuses Gray's argument that war itself must be abandoned,

leaving open a mythic possibility of ethically responsible warfare in which an addiction can justifiably be indulged. This divergence between the two writers points to what may be the philosophical failure of Hedges' book: war is presented as an evil, as inescapably addictive, as morally depraved, as a source of meaning, and as potentially justified. The title may be intended as provocative and diagnostic, but its function is duplicitous.

Hedges both fails to control the function of this "meaning" in his text (we might cruelly note that he admits to his own addiction) and refuses to adopt a principled opposition to war as such. Instead, he insists that he is not a pacifist and that the "poison that is war" must sometimes be taken to prevent greater wrong (3, 16). It seems difficult to reconcile how war can be both an addictive drug that induces the indiscriminate and evil irruption of force and the solution to an ethical problem; there is a sort of excessive supplemental logic to Hedges' insistence on having it both ways. The "antidotes" he suggests, humility and compassion, seem appropriate yet inadequate, likely the first casualties of war's ruthlessness.

Despite recognizing the pernicious social force of myths peddled by the state and its ideological outlets, Hedges essentially views war as a subjective trap—an individual addiction to the ecstatic rush produced by mythic meaning and violence. If individuals could resist the pull of myths that embrace absolute unity and right and simply view themselves and their nation as "less wrong" than those they make war with, then, he suggests, war would not be so devastating. But in figuring war as a drug, Hedges makes this sketchy position untenable: a drug works on the subject regardless of the pretext under which it is taken. Soldiers and civilians exposed to violence would be exposed to

an addictive force no matter how justified their campaign. But he writes of the exposure to violence: “[w]ar exposes the capacity for evil that lurks not far below the surface within all of us. And this is why for many war is so hard to discuss once it is over” (3). In this turn, even the trauma of war becomes the trauma of a subjective encounter with its own capacity for evil—a private subjective flaw rather than a political problem. Is the storyteller’s silence, in Hedges’ account, an inability to face an inner abyss that is the hidden condition of possibility for war? Is the figuration of war as myth and drug an elaborate screen for the idea that war is really an internal aggressiveness that can “give us meaning” only when harnessed productively to a bogus collective narrative? Hedges isn’t saying so directly, but this would make sense of the strange circuit running between a positive ideal absolute (mythic community) and a negatively absolute material force (war as drug). War is a force that gives us meaning: when framed by Eros (the drive for social belonging) our meaningless destructiveness (the death drive) becomes manifest as a socially and subjectively meaningful force that we passively receive as if from outside ourselves. Hedges invokes Freud’s concepts of Eros and Thanatos, and while he doesn’t make the point as bluntly as just stated (he tends to explicitly emphasize the conflict between the two rather than their collusion), he is interested in the inter-tangled dynamics and substitutions of these productive and destructive drives:

[T]he most acute form of suffering for human beings is loneliness. The isolated individual can never be adequately human. And many of war’s most fervent adherents are those atomized individuals who, before the war came, were profoundly alone and unloved. They found fulfillment in war, perhaps because it was the closest they came to love. If we do not acknowledge such an attraction, which is, in some ways, so akin to love, we can never combat it. We are all tempted to honor false covenants of race, nationalism, class, gender.... War is often—maybe always—a false covenant. Sham covenants are based on

exclusion rather than universality. All covenants that lack an adequate sense of humility and an acknowledgment of the sinfulness of our own cause are false covenants. (161-2)

Here Hedges explores the importance of Eros, while pointing toward its possible failure. “Sham covenants...based on exclusion” (myths of war) bind people together by providing an outlet for their aggressiveness; the excluded other receives the force of the death drive. This dynamic makes Hedges’ claim that the isolated individual can never be adequately human highly questionable. Regardless of the relative acuteness of loneliness, humans in groups are imminently capable of inhumanity. In his own description, individuals loyally adopt myths, build them into a collective identification, and escape the feeling of social isolation by joining with the group to hate and destroy some other. Freud deftly characterized the tangled exchanges between Eros and Thanatos with the observation that “[i]t is always possible to bind together a considerable number of people in love so long as there are other people left over to receive the manifestations of their aggressiveness” (*Civilization and its Discontents* 72). Hedges’ argument shows an awareness of the mutual services performed by the two drives, but he more consistently claims the distance between them. Myths of war shift into war itself, and the work of Eros is abolished. Hedges points to the “sham” deal myths of war provide for the subject by emphasizing their ultimate service of the death drive:

In the beginning war looks and feels like love. But unlike love it gives nothing in return but an ever-deepening dependence, like all narcotics, on the road to self destruction. It does not affirm but places upon us greater and greater demands. It destroys the world until it is hard to live outside war’s grip. (162)

This progression constitutes Hedges’ most damning commentary on war’s destructive power. Affects and social attachments that “look and feel like love” unfold into

destructiveness when the inverse of social attachment—aggressiveness toward the outside—is engaged by war’s violence. The absolute meaning and unity signified by myths of war are illusory. Hedges does his best to separate the ecstatic effect of war from meaning that makes contact with reality by emphasizing the distance between its material effect and its social affect. He presents myth disparagingly as a false covenant and as a deceptive appearance. But these disparagements don’t explain mythic discourses’ powerful effects. Claude Levi-Strauss analyzed myth as a powerful narrative form offering the symbolic resolution of real cultural tensions. With the claim that “myth is language,” Levi-Strauss locates mythic power precisely in its linguistic operation: “providing a logical model capable of overcoming a contradiction,” or building a symbolic relationship that withstands real conflict (“The Structural Study of Myth” 209, 229). Myth is located at the point where cultural symbolism and reality collide, at the linguistic juncture between collective fantasy and social antagonism. It is itself generated by social tension, and its symbolic resolution of tension on the level of linguistic meaning (crucial to social unity) functions even if it encourages the release of actual violence. Hedges’ definitions of myth don’t directly discuss the productive and destructive power of language that underlies their function, but he tries to address the social antagonism that they harness. The above passage clearly aligns the ecstatic effects of mythic community, the addictiveness of physical destruction, and the death drive—the subject’s own overwhelming capacity for violence. The connection develops more vividly:

The Thanatos instinct is a drive toward suicide, individual and collective. War *celebrates only power*—and we come to believe in wartime that is it is the only real form of power. It preys on our most primal and savage impulses. It allows us to do what *peacetime society forbids or restrains* us from doing. It allows us to

kill....

I have watched *fighters*...enter villages...and begin to shoot at random. Flames soon lick up from houses. Discipline, if there was any, *disintegrates*. Items are looted, civilians are battered with rifle butts, *units fall apart*, and the violence directed toward unarmed men, women, and children *grows as it feeds on itself*. The eyes of the soldiers who carry this orgy of death are *crazed*. They speak only in guttural shouts. They are *high on the power to spare lives or take them, the divine power to destroy*. And they are indeed, for a moment, *gods* swatting down powerless human beings like flies. The *lust for violence, the freedom to eradicate* the world around them, even human lives, is seductive. And the line that divides us, who would like to see ourselves as civilized and compassionate, from such communal barbarity is razor thin. In wartime.... the frenzy of the crowd is overwhelming. (my emphasis 171-2)

Hedges begins this segment with an emphasis on the death drive's internalization, the turning of aggression toward the self in suicide; he describes warfare as a social form of this impulse, a collective will to self-destruction. The passage then describes the death drive's active externalization, violence against others, before returning to its social manifestation as a pressure of the crowd on the individual. The "line" between civility and violence seems not only to thin but to blur. Eros appears as a binding and restraining confinement to be escaped rather than a positive connection with others. War "celebrates only power"; Hedges clearly defines power (which thinkers like Arendt define as human action in common) as brute force, another example of his tendency to identify meaning (a collective communicative process) with force and violence. Social unities are undone by the death drive's permission to kill: the order and professionalism of soldiers disintegrates and their command and support structures fall apart as well. The violence "feeds" on itself—an interesting formulation that displays the confusion of inner and outer motivation for war's destructiveness. This "instinct" of aggression has an internal origin, but when unleashed it generates a circuit in which violence functions as an external

stimulus for more violence. Soldiers—Hedges refers to them here as fighters, emphasizing their aggression over their social organization—experience this circuit as the “high” of unrestrained violence, feeling it as a divine and inhuman power. Hedges also pairs “lust” for violence with the “freedom” to destroy, drawing up a tension between externally conditioned desire and internally willed potential. All these formulations point toward ecstatic experience, an overwhelming of subjective boundaries. The tension between internal and external cause follows from the individual ego’s experience of a drive that exceeds its control. The “frenzy of the crowd,” an apparently external force, is in part an inner-subjective conflict.

Hedges’ argument thus ties his figure of the drug of war to the death drive, an inner subjective force that exceeds the boundaries of the ego and can be experienced as an external power and threat. A social sphere based on the exclusion of the other (based on the death drive’s externalization) constitutes a dangerous closed circuit for subjectivity. When social meaning is based on aggression rather than shared interest, destructiveness permeates all relationships. Hedges finds that mythic discourse is closed to outside perspectives. Its absolute oppositions determine its violence: “by finding our identity and meaning in separateness the myth serves another important function: it makes communication with our opponents impossible” (24). Violence becomes the form of communication. Communications in which bombs and corpses *figure as messages* replace thinking, speaking, and listening when a culture’s discourse closes itself to any outside: Robert McNamara employed bombings and corpses to communicate with Vietnam’s communist regime in 1965 (8); George W. Bush deployed them in his “Shock



and Awe” plan to communicate the futility of resistance to Iraqis in 2003. An ecstatic communal transcendence in the ideal realm is complemented by indiscriminate material destruction. The exchange of individual isolation for an unquestionable social bond produces a powerful feeling of connection, but submission to the group’s absolute based on nothing but desire for belonging and passionate frustration allows a violence that destroys self as well as other.

Hedges emphasizes the role of the death drive as an individual and ultimately isolating exercise of violence in order to dismantle the appearance of war as a source of individual and social meaning. “War ascendant wipes out Eros,” he insists, marking a separation between human destructiveness and capacity for connection (176). Gray also insisted on the ultimately isolating character of the delight in destruction:

[T]he delight in destruction has, like the [other appeals of battle], an ecstatic character. But in one sense only. Men feel overpowered by it, seized from without, and relatively helpless to change or control it. Nevertheless it is an ecstasy without union....I think that destruction is ultimately an individual matter, a function of the person and not the group. (*The Warriors* 56)

For Gray and Hedges, the absolute form of human destructiveness cannot combine with Eros. Its “ecstasy without union” operates through the violent exclusion of everything outside the self, dismantling all ties to a human world. Rather than an ecstasy of union, which breaks down the borders of the self to allow community with others, this ecstasy without union breaks down all borders *except* those of the self (Gray 56) . But this formulation seems strained. The radical rejection of the entire world—not without parallel to the clinical definition of psychosis—would sever every identification and recall every affective attachment to people or things. The death drive might liberate the subject from

the boundaries of civilization, but in doing so it would dissolve (at least temporarily) subjective identity as well. This ecstatic dissolution is the negative absolute on which Hedges grounds his critique of war's meaning. The collapse of all meaning into unbounded force, the addictive passion that replaces "meaning," is the reason he so strongly links force and meaning and the reason he blames individual subjectivity for the inhumanity of war.

But acts of war are not constituted only by acts of physical violence and ecstatic frenzies of the death drive. The inhumanity of war can operate on an even greater scale when it is functionalized and bureaucratized.<sup>42</sup> And without Eros and collective identity, war would not be a political problem but a series of individual crimes. An instinctual impulse may accumulate its power not through pure connection to one drive or the other, but through its satisfaction of both at the same time. Freud so continually observed combinations of Eros and Thanatos in individual and social behavior that he was led to discuss the separation he had drawn between the two as speculative and provisional.<sup>43</sup> In his 1932 letter "Why War?" Freud claimed:

when human beings are incited to war they may have a whole number of motives for assenting—some noble and some base....A lust for aggression and destruction is certainly among them...The satisfaction of these destructive impulses is of course facilitated by their admixture with others of an erotic and idealistic kind.  
(*Standard Edition* 210)

Without entering what could only be a lengthy discussion of Freud's commentaries on

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<sup>42</sup> As will be discussed in the conclusion, Arendt's study of Adolf Eichmann supplies one of many possible examples of the functionary's effective production of violence.

<sup>43</sup> *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 71-73. This raises questions of whether the two should be viewed as separate impulses or as different inflections of the same drive—but this is not the place to pursue such an inquiry.

the role of the drives in war and violence, we can observe that Hedges is eager to separate the influences of life and death drives in conditions of war because he relies on Eros as a remedy to rebuild subjective relationships with the world. Love, he claims, “may not always triumph, but it keeps us human. It offers the only chance to escape from the contagion of war. Perhaps it is the only antidote. And there are times when remaining human is the only victory possible” (168). Opposing the death drive’s purportedly meaningless aggression to internal and external being, love allows a positive relation with the other: “It recognizes both the fragility and sanctity of the other. It recognizes itself in the other” (161). Love provides a form of inclusive unity to counter the absolute alliances founded on exclusion that allow the death drive free reign. In arguing that we must avoid the destructiveness of mythic and drug-like war, while at times positing the necessity to fight against others who succumb to these passions, Hedges is demanding that love overpower death even in warfare—a mastery of one drive by another that seems unlikely to be realized, given their entanglements with one another, with discursive patterns that link them to social forces, and with the traumatic material shocks of warfare that also disturb subjective coherence.

Hedges’ recommendation is to substitute one intense, instinctive, affective ecstasy for another:

when Thanatos is ascendant, the instinct must be to reach out to those we love, to see in them all the divinity, pity, and pathos of the human. And to recognize love in the lives of others—even those with whom we are in conflict—love that is like our own. It does not mean we will avoid war or death.... But love, in its mystery, has its own power. It alone gives us meaning that endures.... Love has power both to resist in our nature what we know we must resist, and to affirm what we know we must affirm. And love, as the poets remind us, is eternal. (185)

We could read the beginning of this passage most uncharitably: when the death *instinct* is ascendant, *the instinct must be* to oppose it through love. If the instinct for love has to be emphasized as what we *must* engage according to Hedges' teaching, its status as instinct is rendered uncertain. *Instinct* is precisely what arises automatically; it *is* an imperative, and does not need to be voiced in the imperative. If we need external direction to feel this counter-imperative to the death instinct, then there is little question which will prevail. This should be recognized as another instance of Hedges' failure to fully control, or to be fully convinced by, his own argument. But we should also more charitably attempt to draw out his intended message.

A sense of meaning that does not rely on destructive absolutes can be called up by the feeling and recognition of love. The power Hedges attributes to love is the active production of a meaning that is not just "given" to us by the force of collective hatred, and does not dissolve into mutual destruction. The love he describes here offers an ecstatic experience of connection that counters the passive sensationalism of myth; this feeling has power to "resist" and to "affirm" what we know we must: it is associated with a positive framework of judgment rather than an exclusion of the other. This feeling's articulation in a social context could produce the positive sense of self-extension through communities and across social boundaries that must replace the negatively sublime ecstasy of violent hatreds. If its active power can be exchanged despite the sweep of myth through airwaves, printed pages, and individual emotion, then perhaps opinion as common sense—the shared ability to unfold our feeling and thinking into action—can replace mythic passions. Although his own language muddies the point, it seems that

Hedges is encouraging a shift from collective passions to active ethical relationships.

Hedges' conclusion is based on a very fragile condition. His closing vision of love as eternal seems vague and inappropriately idealistic given his description of humanity's repeated failures of responsibility and ethical relationship in the face of war's destructive ecstasies. When we interrogate the text in search of examples supporting Hedges' conclusion, the precedent for love's mysterious power still seems missing, but there is something else: simple stories of connections and friendships that hold together against wartime divisions. Although Hedges does his best to undercut the human harmonies they work by emphasizing their sad aftermaths, they provide models of action and storytelling that convey his book's strongest strategies for resisting mythic passions and rebuilding common sense.

In one example (there are only a few), the story begins as Hedges recounts a conversation with a Bosnian Serb couple, the Soraks, who lost their home and almost lost their granddaughter during the siege of Gorazde in 1992. The couple complained bitterly about the cruelty of Muslims—then abruptly stopped, admitting that they knew not all Muslims were this way. “It is our duty to always tell this story,” Drago Sorak admitted, telling how their Muslim neighbor, Fadil Fejzic, had risked his own safety to bring milk from his cow every morning for their infant granddaughter, whose mother was too malnourished to nurse her. The neighbor handed them half liters of milk every day for over a year, always refusing any payment for this precious resource, until the family could secure the mother and child's passage out of the city. Hedges is careful not to overplay the story's significance, but he grants it a special type of force:

These small acts of decency... in wartime ripple outwards like concentric circles. These acts, unrecognized at the time, make it impossible to condemn, legally or morally, an entire people. They serve as reminders that we all have a will of our own, a will that is independent of the state or the nationalist cause. Most important, once the war is over, these people make it hard to brand an entire nation or an entire people guilty. (53)

Stories like the Soraks' are lived, told, and exchanged in a different world than the mythic narratives and opinions that create absolute divisions between us and them. A story's force moves from person to person in a rippling pattern; this natural progression through contact and exchange is much different from the broadcast forms through which journalism spreads myth. The story recreates interest between people, and begins a process of communication rather than exclusion. Rooted in personal subjective experience and revealing the world as it appeared to particular people, a story's articulation of feeling and thinking achieves an active structure rather than a passive one. The storyteller articulates subjective experience with and through social relationships, rather than imposing passively received frameworks on self and other. The active articulation of events and experience is complemented by the listener's active interpretation of the story—in which he/she sees the world through a new perspective that offers meaningful counsel. Fittingly, given Benjamin's observation that a story must necessitate interpretation rather than offer informative explanation, Hedges does not tell us why Fadil Fejzic gave the milk to his neighbors. We don't know if he held a fully reasoned and principled refusal to discriminate against Serbs, or whether in the massive economic and cultural forces that shook the Balkans he was just clinging to the simplicity of what was close to him—his milk cow, his neighbors. Fejzic's action initiated this story. But more important than for us to know the cause is to actively interpret the story. As we

actively think through the possibilities we imagine a range of possible realities. The story thus has an exemplary force to shape what others will think and perceive by widening the opinions and possible actions of the story's listeners and re-tellers.

Hedges describes such acts to remind readers that each person can retain a will independent of our subjection to war's material force and discursive myths. However, the position that determines whether we will act in opposition to war, creating fragile webs of community, or be swept up in war's drama of violence and victimization is not clear. The discursive form of a story requires its listeners to feel the story's relevance and actively construct its meaning through their own thinking, then extend its power again through their own actions in retelling. A mythic narrative (like the publicized but discredited account of infants left on the cold floor of Kuwaiti hospitals that impassioned Americans' support for the Gulf War) imposes a clear and obvious meaning immediately (Iraqis are cruel, unfeeling, evil; U.S. soldiers are rescuing heroes). Neither form entails perfect knowledge of "reality," but both entail strategies for dealing with the gap: stories ask for interpretation, myth offers a ready-made schematic. The story is structured around an unknown element, the unspoken and perhaps not consciously recognized cause of action. The myth attributes cause and effect to structurally exclude uncertainty—to exclude alternate feelings and interpretations. A story's structure is open and encourages communication; a myth's structure exerts a totalizing exclusion. Stories provide examples that can guide common sense and judgment; myths support only reactionary opinions. Tellingly, the Soraks claim they have an obligation to share this story. Instead of perpetuating mythic exclusions, they work to open potential spaces for communication

between individuals on opposite sides of war's divide.

While Hedges does validate the importance of the "small acts" that generate a different discursive and collective practice, he is determined to place greater weight on myth, even as he attempts to demonstrate the existence of alternative practices:

these acts also remind us that in wartime most people are unwilling to risk discomfort, censure, or violence to help neighbors. There is a frightening indifference and willful blindness, a desire to believe the nationalist myth because it brands those outside a nation or ethnic group with traits and vices that cannot be eradicated. Because they are other, because they are not us, they are guilty. Such indifference, such acceptance of nationalist self-glorification, turns many into silent accomplices. (53-54)

Several points should be noted in this passage. First, the action that begins a story is often a risk. We often think of action as the result of conscious rational deliberation, but the will to action is not identical with conscious rationality. In addition to this unsettled character of action in relation to subjectivity is its dependence on the outside world. Chance and social context play strong roles in determining the result of an action. This is the source of action's vitality: the collective context allows the individual's actions a place in the group's web of stories, providing a meaningful link to a communal world.<sup>44</sup> But in a context of mythic opposition and warring opinion, where individuals gain their sense of meaning from unquestioned unity with a group that holds mythic claims of right and justice, action may expose us to the group's hostility and align us with the enemy. If mass society generally reduces the space in which individuals can act and share stories, the prominence of mythic discourse further limits the space of action by magnifying its risks. Second, the odd set of affects Hedges draws together to describe the social tone—

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<sup>44</sup> Arendt describes action's productivity as a function of community in *The Human Condition*, page 184.



indifference, willful blindness, desire to believe—suggests a subjective position that has invested in its own passivity. The release of passions and sense of absolute meaning offered by the mythic opposition of us and them produces a subjective/social unity that is more immediately valued than action's uncertainties. Mythic narratives offer to bind the subject immediately into an exultant certainty of collective membership, without the anxiety of responsibility and risk that can accompany the struggle to act independently. The exemption from responsibility dovetails with a third point to be taken from the passage: the absolute division between us and them creates an ideal certainty that overcomes material facts. The material fact that a neighbor who fits into a different social category is nonetheless just as human as we are is ignored or denied when ideal unity and right are valued irrespective of actual conditions. The cause's idealist sublime transcends material objections. "Silent accomplices" allow the myth to speak for them; myth invokes an absolute right they would never claim independently. From another perspective, accomplices are silent because they have sacrificed their active power as storytellers: building community by valuing and exchanging experiences. A social myth that forecloses active experience in favor of mass passions makes us silently complicit with its violence.

Hedges employs an unusual vocabulary of myths and drugs to describe the problem of communication in mass society, and particularly in wartime. By invoking myth (rather than opinion) and drug (rather than nationalism or violence) Hedges seeks a way to talk around the familiar, unenlightening frameworks of media debate, ideology, and cliché. In his account, everyone is *not* "entitled to an opinion" based on mythical

irrationality. No one should “buy” a discourse of embattled hatreds. No government should sell violence under the labels of patriotism and security. Hedges uses the idea of myth and drug to describe the experience of war *as it appears to him in his own experience and judgment*: as a failure of community, communication, rational judgment, and individual will. While Arendt found the distortion of communication by the government and the press in wartime sufficiently traumatic to constitute the specifically dark character of dark times, Hedges—a reporter—traces the blame into subjectivity itself. The subject is always poised between two strategies: actively articulating its being and its world, or being itself articulated by outside events. Hedges sees the willingness with which we throw out our own voices in order to feel ourselves voiced through the absolute membership of nationalist myths as central to the political problem of war. Although discursive and institutional authorities of media and government may be “peddling a myth,” Hedges places the real problem on the side of *demand* rather than supply. Hedges wants to understand and present war in his own perspective—through subjectivity’s desire for its own ecstatic subjection and through the struggle to recover from this trauma. He cautions that the desire for mythic meaning “set in the vast arena of war with its high stakes, its adrenaline driven rushes, its bold sweeps and drama, is heartless and self-destructive” (159). This meaning’s intercomposition with violence makes the return to communication difficult, and the shame of encountering one’s own destructive potential, “coupled with the indifference to the truth of war by those who were not there, reduces many societies to silence” (176). The passive reliance on mythic ideals of absolute justice and the historic inevitability of war makes it impossible to encounter a reality

outside the myth:

As long as we think abstractly, as long as we find in patriotism and the exuberance of war our fulfillment, we will never understand those who do battle against us, or how we are perceived by them, or finally those who do battle for us and how we should respond to it all. We will never discover who we are. We will fail to confront the capacity we all have for violence. And we will court our own extermination. By accepting the facile cliché that the battle underway against terrorism is a battle against evil, we, like them, refuse to acknowledge our own culpability. We ignore real injustices that have led many of those arrayed against us to their rage and despair. (180)

Over the abyss between human perceptions opened up by the passive acceptance of myths, Hedges proposes that we must return to our own voices, the examples of particular relationships, and the active exchange of communication. Rather than receiving our sense of meaning from sweeping myths broadcast across nations, we should begin looking for it between real people in the shared capacity for communication.

**Negative Absolutes and Sublime Potential: Zizek's *Welcome to the Desert of the Real!***

The last text within the small constellation of this chapter's inquiry addresses a concern that is shared by Chris Hedges: the subjective investment in passivity. *Welcome to the Desert of the Real!* benefits from Zizek's commitment to psychoanalytic theory, which offers him a more specialized vocabulary for analysis of social and subjective phenomena than are available to Hedges, and at times allows him to formulate a more precise diagnostic frame. Within this book, the critical focus proceeds from documenting the existence and appeal of mythic journalism to examining its status as fantasy and its relationship to the human ability to encounter reality.

Punctuated with an exclamation point, this book's emphatic and ironic "welcome" refers to the new climate of shock and fear that followed the September 11 attacks: it was published in 2002 as part of small Verso series reflecting on the anniversary of these events. Across from the slim text's title page, Verso publishing imprints its mission to "comprehend the philosophical meaning of September 11 and... leave untouched none of the prevailing views currently propagated." Despite the efficient marriage of manifesto and advertisement that bills the text as exemplary of the most "stimulating and provocative" of thoughts on a shocking event, the book does work toward a critique of the hegemonic opinions that circulated in the gloom of the disaster and attempt to identify a more productive response. The analysis it offers is grounded in psychoanalytic theory and philosophy, but also extends to politics and ideology critique. Examples are drawn from Hollywood films, jokes, and historical memory. The category of the sublime is frequently invoked in Zizek's descriptive analysis of events and forces that exceed conscious subjective understanding—first in the negative mode of terror and shock, later as potentially creative action. The work of the present section will be to trace and highlight Zizek's argument concerning sublime elements of collective experience, hegemonic opinions as expressions of fantasy and passions, and the potential for action.

Zizek's emphatic title is excerpted from the popular Hollywood action movie *The Matrix*. He exploits the film's dramatic central images to exemplify the fantasies of passive subjection operating in the social responses to the event of September 11. The film stars Keanu Reeve, whose perpetually baffled yet resolute face provides the perfect screen projection for his role: subjectivity faced with stunning events and forces beyond

its comprehension. The film's plot subjects Reeve's character to the realization that his life is an illusion; what he had recognized as reality is revealed to be only a virtual reality.

Within the filmic fantasy, human bodily existence is suspended and administered by the Matrix, which parasitically supplies its own needs through the energy of human experience generated in this virtual reality. The spectacle of countless helpless humans subjected to the illusion of the Matrix's virtual reality is one of the film's key images. The line "welcome to the desert of the real" is spoken by a resistance leader (played by Laurence Fishburne) to Reeve's character when he awakens out of the Matrix's illusion into an alternate reality of collective struggle against the Matrix. The film offers two visions of "real reality." First, countless humans plugged into a mega-computer as its energy source; second, a desolate post-war vision of a city in ruins. Together these visions of "reality" exemplify the inter-related subjective and political positions on which Zizek builds his analysis. The image of pure bodily subjection to a totalitarian structure expresses a fantasy of victimization and attachment to suffering that shapes one's perception of self and other. The image of desolation underlying glossy "virtual" reality figures both the ravaged Third World existence masked by First World consumer culture and the corrupt material violence that is hidden by the symbolic order of law. The significance of these examples will be discussed further as we proceed; for the moment, we should note the role of these images as negative sublime spectacles and fantasies. Zizek aligns the affective power of such fantasy images, which proliferate in our mass media and Hollywood distractions, with the spectacular images of the World Trade Center attacks. The repetitively broadcast images of the towers falling, bordered and

framed by television screens, looked more like a sequence from a summer blockbuster than like a part of U. S. “reality” (11). The sensation of shock and victimization attached to the terrorist attack interlocks with the spectacles of victimization that abound in the collective dreaming of our mass culture. This interaction suspends the event between “real” trauma and fantasy and highlights our affective attachment to the fantasy of sublime suffering. Opinions about this event are entangled in its appearance as both trauma and fantasy.

Zizek attempts to describe and diagnose the *Zeitgeist* in which these fantasies operate. He follows Alain Badiou’s lead in focusing on the “passion for the real”: “The ultimate defining moment of the twentieth century was the direct experience of the Real as opposed to everyday social reality—the Real in its extreme violence as the price to be paid for peeling off the deceptive layers of reality” (5). Zizek capitalizes the Real, following the Lacanian designation of the Real as the immanent material register of existence that must be repressed in order to establish the Symbolic order, the register of social meaning, language, and law-governed experience. The Symbolic order articulates an unspeakable Real being into a subjectivity that can be named and recognized within social reality. Everyday *reality*, in Lacan’s description, is dominated by the Symbolic order. The Real corresponds to an insistent materiality that is immanent in subjective being but also radically exceeds it. The Real exerts a force that resists subjective identity, language, and order, and occasionally traumatically interrupts them.<sup>45</sup> Here, in Zizek’s

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<sup>45</sup> My gloss on the definitions and relations between the Lacanian registers of Real, Symbolic, and Imaginary (which will appear in the following pages) is supported by Lacan’s discussion in book two of his seminars, *The Ego in Freud’s Theory and in the*

text, the Real is employed as a negative sublime violence that can be revealed beneath the normal social order. The price of the revelation is to suffer this violence—a passion for the Real, a passion of suffering as the *price for* the Real.

Our historical narration of the American twentieth century is formed around a succession of violent events. Žižek’s argument calls the list to consciousness: World War I and shell shock; World War II with Pearl Harbor, the Shoa, Hiroshima and Nagasaki; the political assassinations and police brutality of the civil rights struggle; the Vietnam War, its violent images of suffering, and its accompanying social unrest; September 11, and after it Abu Ghraib. We are still caught in the passions of these Real events as collective traumas, wavering between repeating their suffering and denying their signification of radical social antagonisms. The terminology that names our passion for them is itself ambivalent in Žižek’s text: Badiou’s “la passion du reel” is translated as both the passion *for* the real and, in the chapter headings, as the passion *of* the real. In our “passion for” something we consciously direct our energies toward the object, displaying our passion for cooking, gardening, learning, or for protecting freedom. This is a “goal-directed,” productive, and coherent relation between affect and activity. A “passion of” is a different matter, something we are caught up in and subjected to: a passion of rage, of lust, of jealousy, a passion of fundamentalist jihad. In a passion *of*, we passively (and possibly destructively) suffer an affect that is beyond our conscious

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*Technique of Psychoanalysis*, in “The dream of Irma’s injection (conclusion)” (162-70). In this text, Lacan sketches the relation between the registers in terms of the images, affect, and surrounding circumstances of Freud’s dream, a context which is relevant to my invocation of the registers in relation to the images, affect, and circumstances surrounding the event of September 11.

subjective control. Žižek's argument focuses on this tension between activity or passivity and between full agency or victimization. Is it possible to make sure a passion *for* doesn't slide into a passion *of*? Are they ever really fully separable? Don't subjection and activity go hand in hand in contemporary experience, as we attempt to escape or repress our subjection to the deadening habits of administered social life by regaining an ecstatic sense of reality through thrilling action, which is often only another form of administered consumption or prepackaged fantasy? In a passion for/of the Real, which turns on shock, subjective agency seeks its own passivization.

The passion for the real is unstable. Still, Žižek claims it becomes problematic not necessarily when it overwhelms us and slides into *passions of*, but when it ultimately only reinforces the status quo. "The problem with the twentieth century 'passion for the real,'" he writes, "was not that it was a passion for the Real, but that it was a fake passion whose ruthless pursuit of the Real behind appearances was *the ultimate stratagem to avoid confronting the Real*" (24). The passion for the Real, rather than breaking through the Symbolic order in a traumatic event, can be redirected as fantasy. Here we can incorporate the role of the Lacanian Imaginary, which is less prominent in Žižek's chosen vocabulary for this text, with the passion for the real. An event like September 11, he claims, exposes us to something heterogeneous to our usual Symbolic experience of reality: "what happened on September 11 was that this fantasmatic screen apparition entered our reality. It is not that reality [the Real] entered our image: the image entered and shattered our reality (i.e. the symbolic coordinates which determine what we experience as reality)" (16). The intrusive element is not the Real, but an element of our



Imaginary, the register in which we articulate affect and images—a visually driven register of perception and fantasy, in which we compose and decompose material sensations into discrete unities or threatening fragments that can be given symbolic meaning. The affective power of images, the satisfaction of seeing things as unified wholes and the intensity of seeing unities fall apart, allows the passion for the real to slide into a *passion for the semblance of the real*: a passion for spectacles that allow us to experience the appearance of the real without the full traumatic threat of the Real (10). This description sounds a bit like the dynamic of the sublime, but without an ethical resolution. At this point in Žižek’s argument the sublime appears as “*theatrical spectacle*,” an aesthetic phenomenon involving vision, distance, passion, and fantasy (9).

The passion for semblances comes into play in our perception of the World Trade Center attacks as we watch the towers fall over and over on television. Its fantasy status is also at work as we attach our emotions to ideological narratives that compose a frame and meaning for the potentially traumatic events, as when we adopt one of the dominant hegemonically opposed positions concerning September 11. As described by Žižek: for the American right, the event is explained by the existence of a ruthless and absolute evil that hates and attempts to destroy America; within the left, America has finally gotten what it deserves for its excessive power and influence over global political relations and its exploitation of the Third World for its economic benefit. Žižek suggests that these imaginings of the event are the province of those who were not actually there, who only saw the falling buildings framed by a television screen (mimicking the fantastic destruction of Hollywood productions) without also smelling the burnt rubble. But of

course, this includes almost everyone.<sup>46</sup> This imaginary relationship to the event makes it possible to appropriate the position of victim without directly confronting the traumatic abyss of destruction and death; it brings the fantasy of passive victimization into social reality. Without questioning the framing of the event (or being actually caught in its traumatic impact) we will ultimately only displace its violence. Žizek claims “the question we should have asked ourselves as we stared at the TV screens on September 11 is simply: *Where have we already seen the same thing over and over again?*” (17). Recognizing the imaginary satisfaction afforded by this semblance of the real could open a way to realign the fantasied relationships underlying our reaction to it.

These passions of semblance, Imaginary substitutes for the Real, depend on a fantasied relationship to the real as absolute horror, as the traumatic abyss they avoid. Žizek identifies this view of the real as horrifying unsupportable excess that must be immediately re-veiled with ideological meaning as another ideological mystification. The passions of semblance—in which a horrifying real is reworked as a bizarre spectacle, an exception that ultimately supports the rule of symbolic law, or a punishment that reframes the violence within a system of meaning—rely on a fantasy that poses the real’s horror as a necessary complement or constitutive exclusion securing the social order. We can see this dynamic at play in the logic of pre-emptive warfare as a response to the September 11 attacks: governmental order reserves the right to employ the terror of warfare in “rogue nations” or against “illegal combatants” in order to exclude terror from

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<sup>46</sup> In an alternate description of the passion for semblances, Žizek proposes that the traumatic Real can be encountered only as a semblance: a fiction, a nightmare (19). People closer to disaster might be more likely to experience it through these modes than through the fantasy he associates with those who are more sheltered by distance.

the social sphere. Within the limited range of hegemonic opinions that support this U.S. militarism, the passion for the real can take on reactionary and progressive forms. The “reactionary” passion for the real, as Žižek calls it, domesticates the horror of the Real by appropriating its force to be turned against any element that threatens security: triumphal militarism claims the necessity of doing the dirty work and relishes the obscenity of violence as the mechanism that secures moral order. The “progressive” version of this passion casts the violence of the real as an impediment to the project of social construction, a residual conflict that must be resolved or eradicated in order to secure the social field for the ideals of democracy and equality: once tyrannical rulers like Saddam Hussein are violently removed, terrorism will naturally vanish. Žižek critiques both justifications for war by observing that both rely on the ambivalent relation to the real as material violence external to social order (31). Both view the real as an unassimilable element that must be excluded from the social order, but whose excluded existence allows the social order itself to appear as consistent and without antagonism. While he uses Lacan’s language rather than Freud’s, Žižek’s argument follows from the Freudian insight that it is always possible to join many people in love (through the unifying energy of Eros) as long as some others are excluded from the group’s unity and thus made available to receive their aggressiveness (the destructive energy of the death drive). Observing this dynamic in contemporary ideological formations, “terrorists”—and interestingly *terror itself* (the horrible real)—serve as the excluded other. By viewing “the real” as a horror from which we all recoil, we displace antagonistic drives (which are central to the subject itself and present in every social relationship) to the excluded

margins of the social field. The conflicting energies of drives for meaningful unity and destructive fragmentation are reconciled by this constitutive exclusion; but far from actually excluding violence from the social field, this dynamic turns it into the social order's hidden "obscene" rule of operation.

Zizek adds to the explicitly political dimension of this psychoanalytic interpretation by his reference to Agamben's foundational political category *homo sacer*: the "mere life" that exists without access to the political form (law, rights, representation) that protects the citizen, and can be dispatched or preserved by the social order.<sup>47</sup> Governmental attempts to exclude antagonism from the social order increasingly show the potential to render any person *homo sacer* (32): instead of enemies protected by international law we have illegal combatants who can be targeted or tortured indiscriminately; instead of the constitutional protection of U.S. citizenship we may be submitted to surveillance and imprisonment under a wide range of pretexts. Fundamental human vulnerability, which government supposedly protects with supplemental rights,

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<sup>47</sup> Agamben's *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* addresses the power over life and death as central to political sovereignty and the exposure to this power as central to political existence: "Contrary to our modern habit of representing the political realm in terms of citizens' rights, free will, and social contracts, from the point of view of sovereignty *only bare life [homo sacer] is authentically political*" (106). From the ancient Roman legal designation of the criminal as *homo sacer* (human life that can be killed by the government without this action's categorization as murder or sacrifice), Agamben develops a reading of the ambivalence of "the sacred" with relation to life, law, and politics. The two sides of this ambivalence correspond to two aspects of political order: "The sacredness of life, which is today invoked today as an absolutely fundamental right in opposition to sovereign power, in fact originally expresses precisely both life's subjection to a power over death and life's irreparable exposure in the relation of abandonment" (83). This double appearance of life (as sacred and abject) and power (as lawful and obscene) is characterized by Zizek as central to the social order's coherent appearance and obscene function; security and material violence are not mutually exclusive but interdependent aspects of our political situation.

laws, and moral order, itself functions as the excluded medium through which the government appears to secure its order. The displacement of this subjection from self to other is a central component in the militarism of the American reaction against the September 11 attacks. In the passion of semblance through which we respond to the attack, we have been reduced by traumatic violence to mere life threatened with destruction. Our “American way of life” may or may not be actually under attack, but in imagination it is already shattered. The reaction against this ambivalent fantasy of passivity justifies the transformation of the enemy into *homo sacer*—being without rights, open to destruction. The Third World nations deemed responsible for the attacks can be transformed into a “desert of the real,” a landscape incapable of supporting a socio-political form of life, to displace the specter of such a desert opening within our own society. By claiming the position of victim, U.S. ideology displaces its fantasy of passivity under violent attack back onto the Third World. The plaintive, resistant objection to violence—“things like this don’t happen here”—determines that they will happen somewhere else.

Contemporary forms of First World subjectivity, as Žižek describes them, swing between active—or more properly reactionary—antagonism and passively undergoing their administered role in the social order. As the social sphere fills with consumer pleasures and distractions, symbolic social roles are increasingly played with a measure of cynicism that prevents us from feeling their hold on us, but makes actually resisting them seem futile. Žižek coins a “tasteless allusion” to *homo sacer* in order to call attention to the passivity of the position he calls “*homo sucker*”: “When we think we are making fun

of ruling ideology, we are merely strengthening its hold over us” (71). The subject upholds the possibility of a real outside the domestic reality of symbolic order’s roles, prohibitions, and standards—but this possibility remains an imaginary fantasy rather than an active striving for a different kind of life.

Zizek invokes, but does not take full advantage of, a critical term that could describe this dynamic: “repressive desublimation” (146). In psychoanalytic theory, “sublimation” entails the redirection of unruly drives toward moral or ethical activity that supports subjective positions in a public world. The term “sublimation” also names a chemical process: the transference of a substance directly from solid form into vapor form. Sublimation is thus a figural term that turns, in both psychoanalysis and chemistry, on the associative relationships between base physicality (solid matter) and higher spiritual refinement (vapor). It also entails a threshold or invisible mediation through which forms change. In Kantian aesthetics, this transformative mediation also characterizes the sublime: the movement from the failure of physical apperception (sensation and imagination) to reason’s conceptualization of the supersensible and moral law. Repressive desublimation works backward, deregulating reason’s judgment of base material pleasures and affects, allowing the direct expression and mindless enjoyment of instincts instead of their conversion into meaningful action. However, instead of really freeing the subject from civilization’s prohibitions, desublimation exerts an indirect mode of repression. Although sublimation mediated and redirected unruly impulses, it provided an outlet through which their resistant energy could take on symbolic form. Marcuse, who coined the term repressive desublimation in his *One-Dimensional Man*,

argues that there are “repressive modes of desublimation, compared with which the sublimated drives and objectives contain more deviation, more freedom, and more refusal to heed the social taboos” (78). Marcuse’s understanding of sublimation emphasizes its importance as a process in which mediated drives can express ethical resistance to the arbitrariness and possible perversion of moral laws. Repressive desublimation yields more immediate satisfaction, but the social directive to enjoy (and to enjoy the prescribed consumer products) disrupts critical distance from consumer society and prevents enjoyments from finding modes of expression and communication that build a human world. Repressive desublimation privatizes enjoyment. Without stigmatizing the “base” materiality of drives it seals them up in individual pleasures, preventing that materiality from being exchanged in active communication. The potential of the drives, their Real antagonism, is subverted and domesticated.

Zizek discusses subjective forms constituted by this desublimation in more detail in his text *The Ticklish Subject*. In permissive contemporary culture, social authority (the Symbolic order, the super-ego) administrates our lives through directives towards pleasure (“Enjoy!”, “Be yourself!”, “Succeed!”, etc) rather than prohibitions and obligations (“Obey your parents!”, “Support your family!”). This causes a shift in subject forms. The Oedipal subject, which had to sublimate its drives but could gain access to public meaning, cedes to what we could call a “liberal totalitarian subjectivity” (corresponding to what Zizek calls “liberal totalitarian” governmental administration). This subject form can become the victim of its own drives in a different way. Oedipal subjectivity requires repression, but liberal totalitarian subjectivity undergoes repressive

desublimation. The void of authority in which it forms is filled by an intensive *passionate attachment* or *fundamental fantasy* (345). Instead of experiencing subjectivation in reference to a social code that must be obeyed, this subjective form circulates around a fantasy of its fundamental passivity: the material vulnerability to sensation, pain, and suffering—one aspect of its Real being. In Žižek’s description, this subjectivity retains a powerful attachment to the scene of self-recognition and subjective constitution through the experience of pain and suffering (265). This fantasy, which Žižek calls *inter-passivity*, is invoked in *Welcome to the Desert of the Real!* to explain the insistent attachment to victimization as justification for violent aggression. The fantasy’s fundamental passivity is exemplified by the fantastic central image of *The Matrix*: the human body helplessly subjected to the virtual reality of the Matrix, its capacity for feeling fully and meaninglessly exploited by a hostile other (96). Although this fantasy scene is repressed (or even foreclosed) in order for the subject to constitute its active status, its ability to enjoy rather than suffer, it returns as the specter of victimization and vulnerability before a horrible real, unthinkable evil, etc, or as the attraction to the totalitarian logic of an absolute struggle for survival—like the supposed “war against terror.” These fantasies of subjection offer an intense ambivalent enjoyment—a sublime passion. In Žižek’s account, these fantasy mechanisms determine the permeation of social discourse with images and opinions that cast the U.S. as profoundly victimized, seized by a sublime suffering out of which it forms the ideal justification for an endless war. Žižek’s recourse to the category of the sublime in describing this fantasy relation is determined by his understanding of the Kantian sublime as “beyond the pleasure



principle' ....a paradoxical pleasure procured by displeasure itself" (*The Sublime Object of Ideology* 202). Through the fundamental fantasy of inter-passivity, a foreclosed pleasure in the displeasure of the subject's own "passive" material responsiveness, the subject recognizes its own being. Žizek's various texts draw this subjective process into alignment with the Kantian sublime, in which aesthetic pleasure in displeasure—the ambivalent overwhelming of subjective faculties by outside powers—is central to the formation of subjectivity through self-reflection. Žizek's attention to the sublime's excessive appeal, its link to the death drive as beyond the pleasure principle, determines his focus on the sublime's negative dimensions and the link between this negative sublime and a perverse subjective structure. Where Paul de Man noted the allegorical roles of suffering, sacrifice, and recuperation at work in some articulations of the Kantian sublime, Žizek pushes the structure to the limit—aligning the sublime with ideological subject formation and political antagonism, emphasizing subjection, victimization, and retaliation.

We can see here the vanishing distance between Hedges' treatment of passivity and Žizek's. For Hedges, alienated subjects continue to submit themselves to violent regimes because they are deceived into perceiving them as meaningful. In Žizek, people submit because they (unconsciously) enjoy it. The critical component of their analyses is to recognize the interplay between individual subjection and totalitarianism. Seen through Žizek's psychoanalytic terms, however, the problem is not to get people to replace myth with truth, but to change their fantasies, which determine reality. Both writers recognize the dangerous function of absolute ideals in public discourses, but

Zizek adds an important critical dimension by treating the relation between positive and negative absolutes differently.

The structure of absolute certainties that Zizek observes is not unlike Schiller's idealist schema of the sublime: the negativity of shock and threat serve as the inverse of an idealized moral certainty. We claim an idealized "right" to retribution through taking on the position of "sublime victims." Since the contemporary ideological field increasingly contains no positive absolute—no symbolic law, no sincerely adopted subjective obligation, no sublime authority—the supposedly absolute negativity of terrorism functions as a negative sublime generating an excessive cycle of violence. If "the only Absolute is that of sublime/irrepresentable Evil" (137), then a sense of justice is built through oppositional identifications: if we are the victims of evil then we are not the evil that we fight. The shift from the negative reactionary position that insists "things like this don't happen *here*" to a more reflective "things like this shouldn't happen *anywhere*" (49) can't be made within a system of representation that poses the negative absolute of violence and evil as forces that intrude from outside one's own social field instead of forces present within one's own social group, and even within one's own subjectivity. The fantasy of an Absolute Evil forecloses an ethical reflection on justice that could prevent it from devolving into idealism: "in relating to others [justice] has to relate to itself: in short...it has to ask how we ourselves, who exert justice are involved in what we are fighting against" (57).

Reactionary retribution is not the only possible response to the event of violence in the social sphere, just an easy one. The more difficult response would counter the

negative absolute of violence with the positive absolute of the act, shifting the governing principle of the social field from repressively administered passions to potentially productive action. Žižek shares with common understanding, and with all the writers engaged within this project, a conviction that a life of security and consumer placation is not enough. He comes very close to Hannah Arendt's argument in "Reflections on Violence" when he states that "[t]oday's rise in 'irrational' violence should ...be conceived as strictly correlative to the depoliticization of our societies, that is, to the disappearance of the properly political dimension, its translation into different levels of 'administration' of social affairs" (133). The loss of the political dimension of real communicative action (relationships that engage with a world outside individual security and pleasure) leaves us subject to "administrative government" that attempts to manage life without conflict. He recognizes too, that while negative ecstasies of hatred or fear or violence toward an evil "enemy" control and redirect the passions that fail to find release within ordinary social relations, these fantastic indulgences do nothing to change the status quo. A sense of risk may be generated, temporarily intensifying the sense of life, but when the goal of action remains only security (the eradication of threat/conflict) without social change, nothing changes. The temporary outlet of ecstatic passions ultimately reinforces the status quo. The fantastic narrative of a war against terror offers a fantasmatic outlet for social antagonism, the destructive energies of the death drive that generate tension within a secure social frame. Yet, while the violence of war materially devastates other landscapes—the desert of the real of other nations—U.S. business goes on as usual. Žižek observes:

The problem is that, precisely, America is not in a state of war, at least not in the old conventional sense of the term (for the great majority of people, daily life goes on, and war remains the exclusive business of state agencies): the very distinction between the state of war and the state of peace is thus blurred; we are entering a time in which a state of peace itself can at the same time be a state of emergency. (107)

With this problematic insight, Zizek identifies the gap between actual war and the state of emergency as status quo *as the problem*. An actual war, presumably, would facilitate social change. Failing this, the fantasmatic war on terror only offers a hypocritical sensation of risk and displacement of violent subjection onto the Third World. Zizek should know better than to even backhandedly suggest that a real war would solve the problematic contemporary identification of peace with perpetually displaced emergency. The many cases examined in this project (and Zizek's own historical knowledge) demonstrate that war dissolves the inter-subjectivity needed for political action and produces little besides trauma for individual subjectivity. But legal justice, the other form through which justice probably should have been sought, appears in the logic of exception an essential support for the governmental administrative project of war. What is needed is political action of a different sort, an action that resists fantasies of violence and opens new possibilities of collective power.

To exemplify such action, Zizek points toward the 2002 refusal of Israeli reservist soldiers to serve in the occupied territories. The conflict between Israel and Palestinian forces had, in their eyes, become a campaign by Israel "to dominate, expel, starve, and humiliate an entire people," which required reservists to behave with brutality that degraded their own humanity as forcefully as it did the humanity of their Palestinian targets. Zizek praises the reservists' reconceptualization of their supposed enemy, the

focus of social antagonism, as a neighbor—a relation within the human world. The Israeli reservists saw and judged the real relationships between Israel and Palestine differently, and then acted to make their perception visible in the world. Žižek emphasizes:

One cannot be enthusiastic enough about this refusal, which—significantly—was downplayed by the mass media: such a gesture of drawing the line, of refusing to participate, is an authentic *ethical act*. It is here, in such acts, that—as Saint Paul would have put it—there actually are no longer Jews or Palestinians, full members of the polity and *Homo sacer*... We should be unashamedly Platonic here: this ‘No!’ designates the miraculous moment in which eternal Justice momentarily appears in the temporary sphere of empirical reality. ...  
Our duty today is to keep track of such acts, of such ethical moments. (116-117)

Clearly, Žižek is enthused about the possibilities of this action, and compresses a good number of philosophical references into his praise. Without fully diving into these, we can gloss their importance. Žižek uses St. Paul’s contrast between life and death as subjective modes or ways of being (rather than objective categories) to critique contemporary mass culture and administrated life as a form of death rather than an exhilarating sense of life. In achieving an ethical act, the reservists shift from deadened subjectivity towards living action. The reference to Plato draws upon the notion of ideal forms as the eternal complement of our temporal perceptions, and also on Alain Badiou’s concept of Event as eternity’s intervention into time. The tension between Jews and Palestinians, full polity and *homo sacer*, follows from Žižek’s argument that the radical meaning of Agamben’s theory is the arbitrariness with which state agencies designate people as one or the other. With all these references behind Žižek’s interpretation of the reservists’ act we can see the many levels on which he understands this act to operate. Action is a living force countering the deadening frustrations of everyday reality. Rooted in a particular social context, its effect potentially transcends all the boundaries and laws

of that context. Its eternal quality springs from this potential—a moment of realization for the potential that is always present but usually unrecognized. Politically, the suspension and replacement of categories of being distributed by state authority (citizen and *homo sacer*) with a relationship of greater equality—neighbors—reclaims the power to form intersubjective relationships and the capacity for communication. Instead of accepting the fantasmatically powered state narrative of absolute victimization and opposition to the enemy, this resistant act reasserts human power to see and judge the situation in common, build new stories, and form new relationships.

However, reflecting further on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Žižek notes that “In Palestine today, there are two opposing narratives, with absolutely no common horizon, no ‘synthesis’ in a wider meta-narrative; thus the solution cannot be found in any all-encompassing narrative” (129). He is right to note the importance of these mutually exclusive narratives. But he concludes that the two sides cannot ever approach one another directly in reconciliation, and implies that any resolution to their conflict will have to be rigorously imposed through outside standards of evaluation. Efforts at “understanding” the two positions as legitimate, he claims, will be useless. We might seek a different possibility in the fact that the Israeli Reservists he praises were able to set aside the mythic opposition between Jew and Palestinian in order to recognize their common humanity. To recognize the other as neighbor is not necessarily to “understand” him/her. As Arendt specifies, the exchange of viewpoints does not entail “understanding of one another as individual persons” but “look[ing] upon the same world from one

another's standpoint."<sup>48</sup> The common possession of vision and sense and their extension through communication, not understanding as agreement or tolerance, are for her the basis of human political community. If the Israeli Reservists can see from the position of the other and act on this vision, then potential for a new political relation must be present between Israeli and Palestinian, no matter how difficult it is to realize. This potential will almost certainly not be accomplished through the imposition of an outside law or unitary meta-narrative, but could perhaps develop through the exchange of multiple narratives and the rebuilding of communication.

Zizek, while claiming one cannot be too enthusiastic about the Reservists' act, does in fact temper his praise of the Act by forgetting its potential and also by elaborating the reasons it is usually refused. Although he proposes the Act as the alternative/solution/escape from the reactionary stances that ultimately displace and perpetuate Absolute Evil, and thus places it in the position of a positive absolute, the absolute character of the Act seems tenuous. We might immediately question Zizek's characterization of the Act as Eternity appearing in a fleeting moment (doesn't anyone who wants to rebuild a public world want it to last a little longer?); but, in the guise of answering anticipated criticisms, Zizek actually goes farther in undermining its power. Appearing in the contemporary ideological field as a potentially very great risk, he explains, the Act is a radical refusal of the usual privilege accorded to security. The Act responds to a very different imperative, "what Derrida, following Kierkegaard, called the madness of a decision" (152). Zizek attributes our hesitance to assume the risk of action

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<sup>48</sup> See opening quotation and discussion of the current chapter.

to the combined effects of its risky nature and its radical power: “an Act retroactively changes the very co-ordinates into which it intervenes. This lack of guarantee is what its critics cannot tolerate: they want an Act without risks—not without empirical risks, but without the much more radical ‘transcendental risk’ that the Act will not only simply fail, but radically misfire” (153). We cannot be certain of the ways in which an Act will change the social co-ordinates in which it intervenes. Its effects far outstrip the feeble powers of intention as they spread across the social field in ways we cannot elect, control, legislate. Its power approaches the absolute in the sense of far surpassing subjective control, but we cannot necessarily assume that it will constitute a *positive* absolute in the sense of producing the desired effect. The Act borders the Real, and it may appear in the social field as yet another trauma to be displaced. Its decision is powered by the death drive; it goes beyond the pleasure principle’s balance toward a radical risk that disregards self-preservation and security. For these reasons, Zizek argues that the Act is incompatible with democracy, with the will of a legislatively governed people. But it seems that the ethical act’s disregard for external constraint would make it potentially threatening to any form of government. Posturing to indicate that these criticisms of the Act amount to little besides the standard narrow interpretation of Kant’s advice to the enlightened, ‘think all you want—but obey’, Zizek disparagingly suggests that the critics may be thinking, but instead of acting they’ll obey. But his rehearsal of the critique is not helpful.

Here we might remember Arendt’s theorization of the act, which was positive while being fully aware of the problem of risk associated with action. Zizek frames this



problem in the negative mode of radical risk that must be assumed nonetheless. His connection of the ethical act with the death drive makes sense. Rather than attempting to locate a pure expression of Eros capable of avoiding all antagonisms, he follows Lacan's example by emphasizing the death drive as desire for something other than security and existence, commitment to something exceeding the limits of subjective social reality (*The Ticklish Subject* 263). This radical disconnection allows action that does more than react against the excluded other, and in doing so, disrupts the coordinates of social reality. But Zizek's closes his essay with the argument that the war on terror is the violent displacement of the threat of the Act: we fear that our fragile and not particularly satisfying "liberal democratic consensus" would be dissolved by an act that truly altered social relationships, so we instead orchestrate a "coalition of the willing" to attack a shadowy enemy. This conclusion is probably the least compelling point in his argument; it seems more a crass provocation than a reasoned conclusion. (Especially so, given that his observation that the political right is alive and active. The Bush administration can certainly be seen to have acted—although with dubious ethics—on the global scene, making certain relations of power more radically naked, altering the balance between corporate profit and governmental obligation.) Instead of emphasizing the negative mode of risk, as Zizek does, we should consider Arendt's concept of action as beginning. Beginning has its own set of ambivalences: it is difficult to gather courage for a new beginning, and it is not without risk either. But to consider ourselves as beginners also implies a positive sense of freedom, which counters the privative freedom associated with risk and emphasizes all the positive qualities of the act that Zizek does promote. The act as a

beginning can break our ties to fantasies of passive victimization and narratives of the real as absolute horror or evil. In action, we move from repetitive inter-passive fantasies to an inter-subjective world. As Arendt emphasized,

the human sense of reality demands that men actualize the sheer passive givenness of their being, not in order to change it but in order to make articulate and call into full existence what otherwise they would have to suffer passively anyhow. (*The Human Condition* 208)

The forbidding border Zizek emphasizes between passive fantasy and ethical action, in this perspective, becomes less static. Action builds a sense of reality based on our communicative appearance in the world rather than on passively undergoing our social role. It replaces passive suffering (and antagonistic reacting) with new beginning. A beginning offers a new way of seeing the world and moves from the necessity of crisis management toward building new relationships. Of course, both stories of devastation and construction have to have beginnings, but the concept of beginning leans toward the future, calling on our hope rather than our cynicism.

Arendt's vision of action is in a way less absolute than Zizek's. Action for her works in the circle of common sense, the subjective sense that transcends individual subjectivity and allows the construction of a public world. Based on this transcendental sense as capacity for communication and construction of reality, rather than just capacity for suffering, Arendt's vision of action retains a positive valence even as it recognizes material sensitivity and responsiveness. The boundlessness Arendt perceives in every beginning, the chain reaction in which "to do and to suffer are like opposite sides of the same coin" and no effect is defined by exclusive roles of actor and sufferer but passes between beings who are always capable of acting in response (*HC* 190), offers a variant

of the sublime form with a human communal basis. While exceeding any individual, this sublime action nonetheless avoids the abyss of sublime violence. Žižek, who perceives so clearly the ideological traps of cynicism, and our need for hope in action, should appeal to this sublime facet of action as a beginning: our ability to imagine a different world and rebuild our active potential.

## Conclusion

### **Tortured Standards and the Art of Common Sense: The Abu-Ghraib Prison**

#### **Scandal and Errol Morris' *Standard Operating Procedure***

This concluding section will explore Errol Morris' film *Standard Operating Procedure* to demonstrate the work of artistic counter-narratives in re-opening public thought and communication, even where reactionary opinions and retaliatory "justice" have distorted the perception of events. Morris' focus on the soldiers who were court-martialed and sentenced in the wake of the Abu Ghraib prison scandal bears on the problems of agency, passions, and violence in wartime. It also engages questions of collective narration by reflecting on the myth that emerges from mass broadcast journalism and military justice, the information contained in a photograph, and the stories told by those who actually saw the traumatic events. His film addresses the sublime as a quality of the external world (the excess that cannot be apprehended by our senses), as a quality of the other (whose experience we do not know), and finally as the attempt to grasp a wider picture of the world than our own finite positions first allow. It accomplishes this extension by allowing viewers to see through others' standpoints.

While Morris' film can be viewed as documentary, it provides a very different narrative of the war in Iraq than has been offered by most journalism. Journalistic coverage of the war often has not deserved the status of documentary. Certain coverage of the conflict was influential precisely because it had failed to document its (clearly unreliable and hardly disinterested) sources. Despite record-setting protests that

countered the U.S. invasion of Iraq before it even started, the Iraq war was largely reported in the mythic discourse Hedges decries. The rhetoric of the “war on terror” engaged as a principle of justice and security following September 11 created a narrative of heroic resilience and legitimacy for the in-fact unjustified military campaign. Journalism largely supported this narrative. Military policy ensured its prominence in reporting: journalists were allowed access to soldiers on the ground only if they were “embedded” in the military unit. This policy guaranteed that a sense of comradeship and a mission to uphold civilian and soldierly morale would color most reports. It took fourteen months of war and the exposure of the Abu Ghraib scandal before Michael Getler’s May 9, 2004 *Washington Post* article, entitled “The Images are Getting Darker,” claimed:

it seems that it is only in the past month or so that a line has been crossed. The images being presented to newspaper readers and television viewers more recently seem to capture the horrors and human costs of war more starkly, and they are stirring stronger emotions. It is as though, rather suddenly, the gloves have come off, and the war seems less sanitized, more personally intrusive. (B 06)

The article cited a set of events reported through dark images (the mutilated bodies of four security contractors hung from a bridge, a Marine pictured carrying a fallen soldier in a body bag, a military transport plane carrying flag-draped coffins) and suggested that these “images, even more than words... are pushing the conflict into new territory.” Among the darkest of these new images were the photos leaked from the military’s criminal investigation into the conduct of soldiers at Abu Ghraib. Perhaps the photos seemed “even more than words” to “push the conflict into new territory” because the scenes they revealed seemed so at odds with the mythic mainstream narrative of U.S.

soldiers as heroes fighting against the remnants of a tyrannical, torturing regime. The mythic narrative had always ignored apparently minor details such as that regime's installation by U.S. power, but here was another problem. To reveal U.S. soldiers as the torturers rather than as the liberators of Iraq allowed a glimpse into a new part of the negative sublime history of disaster rather than contributing to a triumphal myth of justice and progress. This break in the mainstream narrative implied a very different and unpleasant set of events behind the details people prefer to ignore.

The photos themselves generate a visual aesthetic capable of countering and contesting the framing myths of the war. Looking at the bodies and the faces of the "detainees" in the photos, viewers of U.S. media could suddenly fall into a collective subject position that had previously been all but unrepresented to them—the position of Iraqis subjected to U.S. military domination. Simultaneously, they could be drawn into the apparent nonchalance, strong poses, and winning smiles of the torturers. The struggle between attraction and repulsion to both of the positions offered by the photos could bring viewers a measure of insight into the overwhelming forces of warfare and its power to degrade combatants on both sides of the conflict. Despite their existence within a bounded photographic frame, the photos carry a force that seems to jump their frames. They are "intrusive," as the *Post* article put it, and they create a feeling of ambivalence that corresponds to the frame-dismantling violence of war.

Irrupting upon a social field that had been widely divided concerning the war's justification even before it began generating images like this, the photographs caused a public scandal that further exposed the rifts between individual citizens, between the U.S.

public and its government, and between the U.S. and other nations of the world. In an article titled “Regarding the Torture of Others,” Susan Sontag wrote—too early, maybe too optimistically—that the Bush administration’s attempt to control the release and the interpretation of these images would fail before the images’ power to reveal the hell of war: “it seems that one picture is worth a thousand words. And even if our leaders choose not to look at them, there will be thousands more snapshots and videos. Unstoppable” (*The New York Times Magazine* May 23, 2004). But very few people sustained a reflective gaze toward this spectacle of vast division.<sup>49</sup> The spectacle of horror provided by the images themselves deflects attention from their wider significance. The military’s criminal proceedings attempted to contain the damage by scapegoating the low-ranking soldiers pictured in the photographs, making the real ethical divisions in the social field vanish under the criminal activity of a few immoral individuals.

Individual culpability for violence in wartime—a theme Hedges strongly underlined—takes a deceptive turn in connection with the Abu Ghraib prison scandal. Hedges was right about the need for personal reflection rather than collective identification, and about the tendency for triumphal identification to sweep through mass society as a justification for widely craved passionate release—but he failed to note that too quick an assignment of guilt to the individual recreates the same dynamic of

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<sup>49</sup> Lacan refers to the difficulty of averting one’s gaze from horror in order to question its real significance in his *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*: “the offering to obscure gods of an object of sacrifice is something to which few subjects can resist succumbing, as if under some monstrous spell” (275). Few are able to maintain this gaze precisely without *succumbing* to the capture of horror, which blocks our perception of the actual conditions governing violence.

exclusion that solidified the group in the first place. The photographs of American soldiers torturing Iraqi prisoners at Abu Ghraib, taken by the soldiers themselves, seem to offer a clear window into a deranged but ultimately hidden and confined universe. The cruelties the photos record can easily be written off as the demented diversions of a few soldiers who exploited the context of wartime detention to indulge their taste for the macabre, perverse, and sadistic. It is more difficult to understand them as the product of administrative instruction and standard operating procedure. The explanatory paradigm of individual deviance, rather than systemic corruption, became dominant.<sup>50</sup>

Documentary filmmaker Errol Morris chose to investigate the polarizing effect of the photographs and to tell the story differently. He filmed interviews with people directly involved in the prison scandal and the military's criminal investigation: Janis Karpinski (formerly Brigadier General and head of the entire prison system in Iraq under U.S. occupation), soldiers who worked in Abu Ghraib as prison guards, a civilian contractor working there as interrogator, and the military photographic analyst who classified the images' content as criminal or as standard operating procedure. These interviews, in transcript, ran to hundreds of thousands of pages and formed the material for his film and for the book co-authored with Philip Gourevitch and initially published under the film's title, *Standard Operating Procedure*. The book, unconstrained by standard film length, is able to present interviews in extended form and provide contextual information for the prison's actual development. My analysis will

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<sup>50</sup> Within the military, at least one source did contest this explanation. General Taguba's report on the 800<sup>th</sup> MP brigade did find fault with higher authorities, who have never been charged or tried.



occasionally draw on this wider context. But the tension created by the film's pairing of interviews and notorious images generates an intensity that the book's careful composition cannot match.

The photographs that emerged from Abu Ghraib were leaked from the military's investigations, and revealed a world that had been hidden and (in terms of such evidence) unknown to civilians. *Standard Operating Procedure* questions whether the insight we gained from these pictures was true—or whether it in fact helped to conceal the truth. This questioning of the truth-narrative that emerged from trials linked to traumatic criminal events recalls Hannah Arendt's reporting on the Eichmann trial, and her forceful critique of the Jerusalem court's failings. While there are many differences between Eichmann's public trial by the state of Jerusalem and the U.S. courts-martial of low-ranking military prison guards, there are also certain productive similarities and comparisons to be drawn. In *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, Arendt published her critique of the sublime theatrics of justice; with *Standard Operating Procedure*, Morris composes his own critique of public relations to justice. Thus, here as throughout the project, Arendt's writing will often provide a reference for comparison.

*Standard Operating Procedure* presents a story that comes from the world outside the frames of the photographs and bears directly on their significance, namely the context for the photos and what they meant to the people who took them. Soldiers describe their involvement in the action captured by the most notorious images leaked out of Abu Ghraib: Lynndie England with a prisoner on a "leash," a hooded man with electrical wires attached to his fingers, Sabrina Harmon with the corpse of detainee Al-Jamadi,

stacks of naked prisoners, prisoners forced to masturbate in front of a group of soldiers, and blood pooled and streaked in a prison cell. Morris' film recreates the horrible effect of the photographs by allowing the viewer to see them *as images* (open to multiple interpretations but not identical with any of them) that capture only a moment separate from its past, its future, and its social purpose or re-purposing. It also encourages us to look at the photographers as human subjects, themselves with similarly complex social and temporal conditions. The film replaces the scapegoating of the soldiers with a reflection on the double function of their photos in the media: to cause a scandal, and to confine the scandal only to those unfortunate enough to be pictured in the photos seized by the Army's Criminal Investigation Command (CID). Morris synthesizes images and interviews to explore the sublime function of the photographs: their ambivalent oscillation between revealing and concealing the truth, and the stumbling of subjective and social imagination against this complex dynamic. His action as interviewer and director of the film also offers a rare example of truly public—in Arendt's sense—communication. His performance of speech and narration, constructed through editing, framing, and questioning our frames of reference, builds a world between people—even as he documents the dissolution of that world in prison and torture. Through this reconstruction of events, Morris creates his own rich text.

The film's opening credits are displayed along with a visual sequence of the prison photographs, which move into view near the front of the screen—on a black background, framed in white—and stream backward into the screen's dark distance. The presentation of the photos on black with white frames is continued throughout the film,

and is a clear figure for Morris' understanding of photograph as window onto the unknown world of another. In his commentary on the film, Morris calls photographs "island universes," emphasizing their isolation from the world of the viewer and from their own spatio-temporal context. In this early credit sequence, we see the photos float like islands on a dark sea or planets in black space, each image disconnected from the other and from any surrounding ground of context or certainty. The film's fifth scene Morris introduces Brent Pack, the technician who analyzed the photographic images the CID had seized from several soldiers' cameras and laptops. Pack's testimony highlights the legal scrutiny to which the photos were submitted early on. Against the viewer's likely defensive condemnation of the pictures, he argues for a careful analysis of what the pictures show, rather than the emotions they call up, in order to determine whether they depict criminal acts or "standard operating procedure." Later in the film, Pack explains how he produced a time line ordering all of the images by coordinating the information embedded in the digital images (time and date) with several images capturing the same scene on different recording devices from different perspectives. Morris accompanies Pack's explanation with graphics of the photo-images, again with their white borders, appearing on the black backdrop. But now, instead of floating like scattered islands or planets, the photos are shown moving into their places along a horizontal axis. This visually suggests that although the photos' place in time has been ascertained, other qualities remain unknown. The vertical axis of experiential knowledge that would intersect with the temporal moment of the photos is still in darkness.

Early in the film, Morris works to keep conclusions up in the air and to disturb

prevalent hegemonic opinions the viewer may have brought to the film. Film footage of the interviewees, letting us meet their eye and see their changing expressions, is intercut with graphic presentations of the notorious photographs, and also with Morris' own recreations of key moments in their stories. Morris films these recreations with a slow-motion camera called the Phantom V9, which records images at a rate of 1000 frames per second, allowing us to watch photoreality unfold at a rate twenty-five times slower than what we can see. Morris called the camera's images "the closest thing I could find to still photography that is still in motion"; its arduous yet elegant unfolding of movement provides a complement to the fascination of the scandalous still images at the center of his investigation. The camera's slow motion also gives a sense of suspension within an impossible richness of detail, which contributes to the film's determined inquiry into an unknown world. The camera highlights aspects of movement we can't usually see, and in keeping with the corruption of human relationships in the re-enactments of torture Morris films, the camera lets us see eerie contaminants in the scenes. Water is divided into molten droplets that seep everywhere. Smoke clings, slowly dispersing, around the shaft of a gun. Spit from the mouth of a snarling dog clings around its teeth and hangs in globs in the air. Sticky fibers of a bandage cling to skin. Blood drips sickeningly slowly. Motes of dust float suspended around everything. This strange quality of suspension lends a sublime aspect to the scenes: we are seeing something that is out of joint with our senses and with our sense. This quality helps to reinforce the film's message of suspended judgment by drawing the viewer into an unknown perspective, asking us to see and hear something our previous frames had prevented us from sensing.

Morris does not turn away from, but actually emphasizes the suffering captured in the scandal photos. His approach to suffering as central to the scandal is in direct opposition to Arendt's toward the suffering caused by Eichmann. Morris recreates scenes of torture to play in slow motion before his viewers' court of opinion; Arendt vehemently opposes the prosecutor's introduction of Jewish survivors' painful stories as evidence against Eichmann. For Arendt, the survivors' accounts of their suffering introduced a personal dimension of loss that was not relevant to the public court case. She gives a brief account of the testimony offered by a man who has taken on the designation "K-Zetnik" (slang for a concentration camp inmate) in place of his proper name, causing his own social presentation to commemorate the camps' denial of human particularity. Her description of his testimony and demeanor especially shows her impatience and discomfort at what she interpreted as an indulgent public performance of wounded narcissism. When attorney and judge interrupted to redirect this K-Zetnik's focus towards their own questions, as Arendt describes: "the disappointed witness, probably deeply wounded, fainted and answered no more questions" (224). K-Zetnik collapsed on the stand after offering a brief, intense, and poetic attempt to describe the camps' inhumanity through the figure of an alien planet. His sudden shift from passionate witness to quasi-inanimate body brings the expressionless signification of subjection into the legal proceedings and legal record. Arendt found this "testimony" (she put it in scare quotes) and its visual physical manifestation of passive suffering irrelevant to the court's task of deliberative judgment and verbal/written decree of a sentence. In her argument, the court's reach must not extend past the judgment of

Eichmann's deeds. Since the suffering of the Jews was already well known, and was not in fact the direct intention or personal goal of Eichmann's functional performance, stories of personal trauma did not belong in the court and should not influence its judgment. Yet Morris' film depends on the presence of trauma and shock in the viewers' response to the photos and in the soldiers' voices, gestures, and faces as they give their testimony.

Arendt's perspective on this issue is not the only possible one. In *The Juridical Unconscious*, Shoshana Felman argues that K-Zetnik's collapse allows expressionless trauma to appear within the legal framework of the court, signifying the trauma the court must translate into collective narrative, despite legal judgment's inability to fully contain its meaning (124). Morris' inclusion of photos, testimony, and re-enactments shows that he recognizes their signifying power. He uses his film to re-narrate and re-frame what the "justice" of the soldiers' courts-martial had contained as the embarrassing but otherwise meaningless behavior of criminals. Because the traumatic reality of torture has not, in this case, been publicly recognized and narrated, Morris makes its impact resonate throughout his film.

Morris employs Sabrina Harmon's letters as key testimony to destabilize the presumption of soldiers' guilt. Harmon reads from letters (to her partner Kelly) written the first two nights she spent at the prison. Her account shows the conditions of uncertainty the soldiers were working in. Since the prison was essentially in a free-fire zone (not far from Fallujah, an insurgency center before its siege in 2004), it was not a safe place for prisoners or their jailers. Her letters document her swing from shocked amusement at the harsh treatment of prisoners (nakedness, stress positions, hooding with

women's underwear for humiliation) to shocked identification with the suffering it causes:

I thought, okay that's funny then it hit me, that's a form of molestation. You can't do that. I took more pictures now to 'record' what is going on....Not many people know this shit goes on. The only reason I want to be there is to get the pictures and prove that the US is not what they think. But I don't know if I can take it mentally. What if that was me in their shoes....Both sides of me think it's wrong. I thought I could handle anything. I was wrong.

Despite her involvement in the scandal, Harmon's letters clearly demonstrate that she is devoid neither of sympathy nor of moral feeling. Morris positions them early in his film to upset the media's dominant representation of the soldiers involved in the scandal as "bad apples" spoiling an otherwise wholesome military campaign. The letters also offer a document temporally accompanying the photographs. Their dates show that, from very early on, Harmon's photography was motivated by her sense of justice, her feeling that this should not be this way and others need to know about it and help to judge it. Tangled up with this active purpose is an uncertainty about whether she can carry it through, and a division within "both sides" of her personality: an active, tough, soldierly side, and a sensitive side that identifies strongly with others (Morris and Gourevitch 114). The two sides are implicated in this problem. Harmon identifies with her role as a soldier, and with her fellow soldiers, as well as with the prisoners; but in identifying with the prisoners, she is failing in her role as a tough soldier. By acting to turn the photos over to the authorities or press she would again be defying orders and failing her fellow soldiers—again failing the soldierly side even as she tries to act for justice. While "both sides of her" felt that the prison's procedures were wrong, both sides also failed to find a solution to the problem. (Although her letters indicate that she planned to expose the abuse by

turning over her photos, another soldier beat her to it.)

Harmon's letters are quickly followed in the film by Lynndie England's account of how she came to be photographed holding a prisoner on a "leash." Her version of events, corroborated by Megan Ambuhl, who was cropped out of the sensational photograph, explains that Charles Graner asked for their help in moving a threatening and resistant prisoner out of his cell. They put a tie-down strap around his body as a (partially practical, partially threatening) tactic to get him to move without close and hard physical force, which might cause injury to both parties. Graner took the photograph to document the tactics used and to show that no one was hurt. Their initial tug on the strap pulled it up from his torso to the incriminating position around his neck, but they say it could slip in that way because it wasn't tight. Even when it was around his neck, England claims, the strap was slack and was never used to pull and drag the prisoner. England describes the actual events as devoid of the sexual domination the image suggests. Although their explanation cannot render the image innocent—the struggle of wills between prisoner and guard is still intense and humiliating—it is clear that these two participants did not feel themselves involved in something morally wrong. They just felt stuck in the day-to-day difficulties of the prison environment.

After introducing both ethical qualms and routine difficulties, Morris next works to emphasize the hellishness of the prison's day-to-day function. Soldiers eventually discovered that Gus—their name for the prisoner on the leash—had been picked up for drunken and disorderly behavior. Given his violent resistance and constant threats they had assumed he was a dangerous insurgent. Most of the prisoners in Abu Ghraib were



similarly misplaced. In desperate and counter-productive attempts at information gathering and “counter-insurgency,” the military conducted huge sweeps, in which most of the people in the targeted neighborhood might be “detained” and sent to Abu Ghraib for interrogation. Javal Davis, an MP at the prison, describes this problem and, in doing so, reveals Abu Ghraib as a de facto concentration camp: “Imagine someone coming to your town and taking all the men in it....They would come in [to the prison] on cattle trucks, like cattle....They’re like taxi-drivers and welders and bankers, and they’re at Abu Ghraib.” Janis Karpinski, formerly in charge of Iraq’s entire prison system, protested Military Intelligence’s practices at Abu Ghraib: there were no release procedures. Prisoners were to be held indefinitely, so the prison population quickly swelled to over 10,000 people crammed inside cells and in a veritable tent city outside. The pressure of controlling such a huge population fed directly into prisoner abuse on several occasions, as infamous humiliating schemes were enacted on supposed rapists or supposed rioters, for the purpose of threatening and intimidating the others. Morris accompanies soldiers’ descriptions of one such event with images of prisoners’ hands at the bars of their cells, as if they are watching the scenes of torture staged for them. It is clear that he is not trying to downplay the horror of the prison’s practices or to absolve the soldiers there of guilt; the film deplors a situation where policies relied on, perpetuated, and intensified these torturous standards and procedures.

Much of what became notorious through the prison photos, the soldiers insist, was simply what had been instructed by Military Intelligence (MI) for the purposes of softening up prisoners for interrogation. As Javal Davis puts it, “We got ‘promoted’ from

babysitters to condition setters.” Given the frustrating and repetitive daily work at the prison, initially this may have seemed like a promotion, a chance to do something more active and useful than just guarding cells and maintaining relative order. The scare quotes in Davis’ tone show this illusion didn’t last long. Standard operating procedure for pre-interrogation stress included programs of sleep deprivation and stress positions, and MI proposed and allowed the improvisation of elaborate methods for accomplishing these programs. Ambuhl explains, “Sometimes MI would come in and say ‘Get him out and you can start softening him up, scream at ‘em, yell at ‘em, handcuff ‘em in an awkward position for a while, completely strip them...have a female do it to humiliate them even more.” The famous photo of prisoner “Gilligan,” hooded, standing on a box with wires attached to his hands, was part of a sleep deprivation program in which MI said “do anything short of killing him” to keep him awake. His strange perch on the box was to keep him standing and awake—he was told he would be electrocuted if he fell asleep and/or stepped off the box onto a wet shower floor. Bizarre as it was, Brent Pack’s analysis for CID labeled the practice shown in this photo as standard operating procedure and not as a criminal offense. Harmon points out that aside from the sleep deprivation, the treatment didn’t physically harm “Gilligan”: “He was just very, very tired. It would have been crueler if the wires were really electrified....It was just words.” Threats rather than physical violence or sexual humiliation characterized the treatment, making it acceptable not only within the prison’s bizarre code, but within the military’s wider standards. Despite the menacing quality of the photo—the expressionless eloquence of the hooded figure and the outstretched but sagging arms—military analysis categorized

this invention as acceptable interrogation prep.

The gap between what shocks the public and what the military finds appropriate is wide, but this in itself should not be surprising; an institution tasked with the purpose of killing and destruction (banned to the civilian) operates according to different and far more permissive standards. But some activities depicted by the photos—dereliction of duty, physical injury of prisoners, humiliation and sexual abuse (which are not permitted under current military standards)—fell outside this wide margin, and were classified as criminal. Still, several soldiers—notably in Morris’ film—two women, defend their activities. Megan Ambuhl insists that these practices did not seem inappropriate when taking into account their wartime context and the goal of obtaining information that could save lives. Lynndie England puts it more emphatically: “We didn’t kill [the detainees]. We didn’t shoot ‘em. We didn’t cut their heads off. We didn’t cut ‘em and let ‘em bleed to death. We just did what we were told to soften them up for interrogation and we were told to do anything short of killing them.” Ambuhl’s justification employs the logic of means and ends. England uses a comparative logic: U.S. military practice is different from the insurgency’s terrorist practices. Both logics are ethically suspect. Ambuhl’s allows the disruption or destruction of civilian lives to serve as means to the U.S. military’s ends; England’s justification measures U.S. ethical practice against an outside standard rather than against its own professed values.

Notably, England actually worked in prison administration. It was not her job to be involved in softening up prisoners, and she didn’t have to be on Tiers 1A and 1B of the prison (where people were held for interrogation) at all. She came to the tier in her

time off to be near her then romantic partner, Charles Graner, who did work there. It is possible that her romantic involvement with Graner spurs a stronger identification with and justification of his work than that felt by others, and allows her to ignore the suffering he caused the prisoners. Megan Ambuhl, who also insists on the justification of extreme practices, also had an affair with and is now married to Graner.

But beyond this, the role played by women in the deranged games of stress and torture is significant. The women's presence was used to heighten the humiliation prisoners felt at their nakedness and their loss of freedom. The procedural taboo on sexual humiliation was clearly permanently broken. I would argue that the women's defensiveness about their activities guards against a sense of their own humiliation in being used toward such corrupt ends. Their sex was clearly exploited by the military to cause suffering for others. In defense, the women display what Harmon might describe as tensions between "both sides" of their personalities. They may be identifying all the more strongly with their position *as soldiers* in order to gloss over the fact that they were not in fact consistently treated as equal soldiers, but exploited according to their sexual difference. Insisting on the justification of the prison's procedure, they justify the structural violence between guard and prisoner and ignore the structural violence between male and female soldiers. England is aware of this problem and uses it to exempt herself from guilt even as she insists that none of the soldiers are guilty: "When you join the military—it's a man's world. You have to either equal a man or be controlled by a man." She avoids fully feeling the violence of the military's exploitation of women in the prison by emphasizing the fact that she was in love with Graner: she did what she did because

love clouded her judgment, not because she had to follow orders. Falling in love with a man allowed her to be controlled without feeling the military's impersonal, structuring, gendered dynamic of control and submission as the determining factor of her own subjection.

Not all the soldiers exempt themselves from guilt so easily or defend the military's procedure so insistently. Sabrina Harmon's letters show that she almost immediately felt divided between a sense of duty and of ethical obligation to challenge military abuse. Javal Davis gives chilling descriptions of the practice of improvised waterboarding in prison showers: "water running over burlap sacks over their heads—the wetness will stick it to your nose, stick it to your mouth, it makes them feel like they're drowning... [then] open the window—while it's like 45 degrees outside—watch them disappear into themselves." The shifting subject positions in his description (their heads, your mouth) suggests that Davis sustained a measure of identification with the experience of the prisoners even as he helped torture them. His speech patterns often show this shifting between second and third person pronouns. These changes in position suggest his own shifting experience and emotions in a way that draws the listener/viewer into his account. He uses the second person to mediate between himself, his listener, and the object of his description; the second person pronoun stands in between his personal experience and his listener, putting the listener grammatically into his story. These shifts are part of his testimony's effectiveness. He can draw another into his account; he can put himself in another's position. His perception that prisoners subjected to this abuse "disappear into themselves" shows that he sees the prison's practices destroying the

tenuous links between people. Clearly people were not treated as human at Abu Ghraib. The desperate valuation of possible information over the humanity of the people who could communicate it created an inhuman world of torture in which torture was just standard procedure. Davis is clearly not comfortable with the standards according to which he learned to tell the difference between screams of fear and screams of real physical pain; but he also points to the conditioning context of internal riots and external mortaring by insurgents—threats that, to him, made violence against prisoners seem justified.

Another soldier, Anthony Diaz, expresses his ambivalence about the prison's excesses as he describes the events of the night detainee Al-Jamadi was brought in, interrogated, and killed. A "ghost prisoner" captured by an "Other Government Agency" or OGA (not the U.S. military, possibly CIA, DIA, etc), Al-Jamadi's presence was not recorded in the prison log. It is possible that without Harmon's photos of his corpse, no one outside the prison would know that he was there and that his interrogators had killed him. Diaz explained that interrogators had taken Al-Jamadi to a shower room. They later called on him and another soldier, Jeffrey Frost, to help adjust his stress position (called Palestinian hanging) to a more extreme level. As Al-Jamadi's body gave no resistance, Frost and Diaz felt something was wrong and checked on his condition. Al-Jamadi was dead, and clearly had been severely beaten. The OGAs and prison authority placed bandages on the body to give an appearance of medical attention and covered him with ice. In an additional grotesque ruse, they later positioned the body on a stretcher with an IV so as to remove it from the prison without causing alarm. Diaz described the

incident with nervousness, and said—with understatement, yet clearly expressing his horror at the incident—“This whole time we were messing with this guy [Al-Jamadi], carrying him and lifting him, and the whole time the guy was dead... I even got some blood on my uniform because he was dripping. It kind of felt bad, because—I know that I’m not part of this, but it kind of makes you feel like you are.” Morris accompanies Diaz’s description with a slow-motion sequence a drop of blood dripping onto a uniform, emphasizing the close contact and contamination of violence. Diaz wasn’t involved in the killing; but his presence at the prison and his work there make him feel implicated in the extremes of its violence.

Morris’ commentary on this section of the film identifies with Diaz’s feelings; by their example we can extend the question across American society—aren’t we all in some way culpable for the actions and policies that our nation and our military undertake in the name of our security? We’re all part of it, even if we didn’t act directly. This is one of the most uncomfortable sensations and reflections called up by the Abu Ghraib photographs: the ambivalent sense of collective guilt and individual exemption from the torture and suffering represented in their images. The photographs call up a tension between belonging and rejection, a bad ecstasy of membership in a group whose actions we find shameful, a complex social entanglement between those who would justify and those who would condemn the images. Each side finds the other guilty and tries to exempt itself from guilt; each side feels pulled into guilt by membership in a larger unity that outdoes its own power of resistance. Against this tension, the photographs that show soldiers along with prisoners—like the photo of Harmon with the corpse of Al-Jamadi—

also make it easy to assign guilt to someone else, someone who betrayed the standards we would like to believe the group still holds. Showing that some of these soldiers also feel guilty/not guilty, Morris' film tries to open up ways to see the photos without escaping immediately into defensive and self-exonerating condemnation of those who appear in them.

One of the most crucial sequences exploring the inadequacy of the photographs as evidence for judgment is Morris' recreation of a shooting incident in the prison. Re-enacted scenes in slow motion are pulled together with photographs of the scene after the incident and with Megan Ambuhl's account of what happened. She also offers a key statement of the separation between photography and fact. The incident itself was dramatic: an Iraqi guard smuggled a gun to a prisoner, and the prisoner started a shootout. No one was killed. A guard was shot by the prisoner, but a bullet-proof vest prevented injury. The prisoner himself backed into a corner of the cell (almost completely out of reach) and survived the incident with a wound to his leg. Afterward, soldiers photographed the gory mess of blood in the prisoner's cell, creating truly unnerving images. Ambuhl describes the immediate aftermath of the conflict in contrast with the effect of the photos:

They rushed in right away to try to take [medical] care of this guy who'd just tried to kill us... but it doesn't appear when you see a picture that's what happened. Your imagination can run wild when you just see blood. The pictures only show you a fraction of a second, you don't see forward and you don't see backward, and you don't see outside the frame.

The intensity of the photos from Abu Ghraib gives them the effective impact of jumping their frames, or of pulling the viewer into the abyss within their frames. They intrude on



and shock the viewer's senses, so that the existence of any context outside the frame is easily overlooked or blocked, making it seem that the photo itself is the only evidence we need to understand its world.

The visual sequence accompanying Ambuhl's comment is a series of photos, centered on the black screen, bordered by white frames. As she finishes her statement, the image inside the frame fades to black. The white frame hangs momentarily, then itself vanishes into black. Morris' visual composition amplifies the claim that pictures may not reveal what we think. As the photograph fades into black, its content realigns with the unknown rather than the known world. Thus Morris visually argues that we don't actually know what we're seeing when we see a photograph. The known and unknown collide as the frame of the photograph also vanishes. Morris strips the photo of its content as knowledge. The photo's frame presents a discrete representation and gives the impression that this representation can be comprehended. In dissolving the border between the photo and the unknown context it belongs to, Morris moves the photo from the aesthetic paradigm of the beautiful, of representations that harmonize with our senses and knowledge, to the sublime—magnitudes and forces that we can't comprehend. Instead of rationalizing the image by assuming we know the soldiers that *appear* responsible in the images really *are* fully responsible, this text suggests that we look at the images *just as we see them* (as Kant claims we must look at the sea and sky just as we see them). Then, as the film does, we can recognize that they show incomprehensible fragments of the appearance of a wider unknown world. Rather than understanding the photos as documents of guilt, we need to ask what they meant to those still unknown

people who recorded them. Communication, building an interest that links people, is the only way to access the other world of the photographs' context. Visual and linguistic communication will have to be articulated with one another. This is a difficult task, and a far less appealing one than simply assigning guilt and excluding what seems corrupt from the social body. But it would be the only way to learn about the real extent of the corruption.

When the Army informed Janis Karpinski of its criminal investigation proceedings at Abu Ghraib, she says her first impulse was to hold a “mini-press conference” openly discussing the problem and sending a “clear message” that the military would discipline itself to correct any wrongdoing. The idea was rejected. U.S. Military Central Command did offer a press release noting the investigation, but it used the investigation itself as an excuse for withholding information, stating: “The release of specific information could hinder the investigation” (Getler, *The Washington Post*). In *Standard Operating Procedure*, Karpinski's outraged tone is followed by Javal Davis' disbelief:

When those photos came out, the infamous photos...Colonel Pappas [command authority at Abu Ghraib] issued a battalion wide amnesty period. Any type of evidence was destroyed. [Command Authority] just wiped out every single defense witness—in one day. After the amnesty period, who's going to want to come forward and say 'I know what happened?...' Find a way to make it go away—that's what they did.

This limitation of photo evidence to what had already been recovered by CID controlled the scope of the scandal and limited responsibility largely to those soldiers who appeared in the abusive scenes and bizarre group portraits recorded on the cameras of Sabina Harmon, Charles Graner, and Ivan Frederick. The amnesty period re-imposed certain

ordering frames on the chaos of the prison, reminded soldiers of certain official rules (which disallowed taking photographs and trophies but not the abjecting of prisoners), and neatly designated what the military wanted to know and allow to become known. Evidence of other criminal activities was shredded, burned, and erased. In closely guarding its investigation and limiting criminal prosecution to low-level soldiers at the prison, the military directed public attention to the acts depicted in the photographs and the *act of photographing* these activities. With blame for these activities pinned securely to those soldiers in the photos, the military (and the Bush administrators ultimately responsible for its misadventures) could focus public attention *within the frame* of the photos. Confined to this frame, the public gaze falls into the abyss of abjection inside the photo's borders and fails to question their wider context. By exposing the scandal, the military effectively managed to cover-up the scandal's pervasive scope. The abyss of torment and corruption reproduced in the photographic frame obscures the mechanically sublime, Kafka-like administrative relationships of the military's system of policy, command, and obedience that extends throughout the relationships outside the image. The strength of *Standard Operating Procedure's* sequencing of images and interviews is to point towards the chaotic fields operating on all sides of the photographic frames: the torment of the prisoners, the frustrated passions of the soldiers, the law of lawlessness that made torture into standard operating procedure.

Tim Dugan's comments, which Morris pairs with photographs of sunset and sunrise, form frames for the film's opening and conclusion. The first scene of the film shows Dugan, a civilian interrogator at the prison, saying: "It was a Charlie Foxtrot [a

cluster fuck] without a doubt. I've never seen anything like it. I never thought that I would see American soldiers so depressed, and morale so low, and it was just unbelievable, everything about it." His next comments are sequenced with three images of sunsets—one very bleak, with pale sunlight bleeding across the sky; then two with more color, clouds, and drama, suggesting the pairing and shifting of banal routine with conflict or intensity. Dugan is saying "[Y]ou got to consider yourself dead. If you come back, you're just a lucky bastard, but while you're there, if you consider yourself already dead, you can do all the shit you have to do and not be worried about it."

Matching these words up with their presence in Morris and Gourevitch's book, we know that these remarks address the mortar attacks that kept inmates and workers at Abu Ghraib continually on edge (83). While few attacks caused serious injuries or deaths, their frequency created a constant feeling of threat that fed into soldiers' violent humiliations of prisoners. Dugan maintains high disdain for the abusive interrogation tactics habitually employed at Abu Ghraib, and claims he never resorted to such measures or asked military guards to use them on his interrogation subjects. But his words makes it sound as if it was not only the shelling, but the compulsion to act within the prison's system, that caused a disjuncture between a living self and a dead one. "If you consider yourself already dead then you can do all the shit you have to do and not be worried about it": if you're not alive to the thought of what you're actually doing, then you can carry out any kind of task without concern for yourself or others. Morris' placement of these words at the opening of the film, before the context of the prison's vulnerability to attack had been set, emphasizes this possible interpretation of Dugan's account. This

extends the presence of a deadened subjectivity that is deprived of active potential and inter-subjective understanding throughout the entire film's narrative sequence.

The problem of diminished subjective agency recurs explicitly throughout the film. Already placed in conditions of reduced agency by their obligation to follow orders and exposure to violence, soldiers felt further stressed by the procedures they were told to use to stress their prisoners. Mainstream media often emphasized the public "outrage" over the torture images. The question of command and policy obliquely enter into this feeling of outrage as bafflement over why soldiers went along with these clearly corrupt practices or why authorities didn't stop them. The implication is that only bad people would do these things, but that only especially bad people would photograph or be photographed doing them. Only low-level soldiers appear in the photographs, so they must be the bad ones. Apparently the military's own investigation also took this tack. Jeremy Sivits claims "I was asked by CID 'Why didn't you report this? Did you not feel it was morally wrong?'" Investigators seem to have been working from the same narratives of military honor as outraged civilians, questioning Sivits as if his report would have changed policy. His own answer is to the point and recognizes his position: "I said, yes—but when you're in war things change." Sabrina Harmon describes her own perplexity even after deciding the procedures were wrong: "I guess reality hit... that what was going on wasn't right, which of course you know from the beginning but it's your job—there's really nothing... you can't just walk away and say 'I'm not coming back' or 'I'm not doing this.'" At Abu Ghraib soldiers were caught, as they often are in wartime, between a civilian sense of justice and the compelling force of military orders and

hierarchy.

The tension between wartime military orders and a sense of personal justice is not easily resolved. Harmon attempted to maintain a balance by following orders, while thinking of the photographs she took as evidence to expose and prove the military's corruption. But this also required a divided subjective stance. As she wrote in a letter, "If I want to keep taking pictures of those events...I have to fake a smile every time. I hope I don't get in trouble for something I haven't done." Harmon knew that, to the world outside, taking the pictures would make her complicit in the activities they represented, but she was compelled to keep taking them nonetheless. There is a self-destructive edge to her documentary activities and intention to testify against the military institution. Held against the images of her flashing a smile and gesturing with "thumbs up," this context provided by her letters gives her photos a jarring quality. Harmon's weird ethical impulse and reckless courage only become visible through her testimony, and this creates an uneasy tension with other images of routine subjection. But there were other attempts to question procedure. Ken Davis reported questionable activities at the prison to his commanding lieutenant and was told to "[s]tay out of MI's way and let them do their job." Several soldiers, including Megan Ambuhl, complained to officers above them about a night when guards stacked naked prisoners in pyramids, but got no real response, let alone change in policy (Morris and Gourevitch 199). The soldiers clearly felt their freedom and ability to act were constrained by military policy. Pressed by Morris' questions about what they would do differently, most are at a loss. Harmon eventually offers: "If I could back all the way up, I wouldn't have joined the military."

The constraint of orders, wartime stress, and the hope that the military institution could help defend American soldiers and the people of Iraq all seem to have made it very difficult for those working at Abu Ghraib to imagine the possibility of acting differently. As Morris puts it in his commentary, they were not without moral compass, but without the ability to act on it. Passively suffering the orders and stresses of routine in the prison periodically erupted into the cruelty and violence they unleashed on the prisoners.

The emphasis Morris allows the soldiers to place on their orders and their role in the prison hierarchy reveals them as functionaries of a corrupt system rather than as deranged individuals. This role of functionary is also a central theme of Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, but there is a rift between the positions of the functionaries these very different texts explore. As a bureaucratic functionary, Eichmann operated at a remove from the physical violence resultant upon the procedures he implemented. This remove was so wide that Arendt found it simply inappropriate even to allow the direct representation of the camps' survivors to enter as evidence in his case. The Abu Ghraib scandal, by contrast, involves those low ranking soldiers who directly imposed interrogation prep procedures on prisoners within the de facto concentration camp. While their crimes were not implicated—as Eichmann's were—in the intentional and procedural extermination of a people, their proximity to violence allows them to appear as embodiments of a monstrous cruelty much like the that the Israeli prosecutors attempted to attach to Eichmann.

The work of legal justice in cases involving the bureaucratic administration of violence is, as Arendt noted, very difficult. However, she locates the strength of the

Eichmann judgment in its recognition that, in such cases, “the degree of responsibility increases as we draw further away from the man who uses the fatal instrument with his own hands” (the court’s judgment, qtd in Arendt 247). Eichmann’s very distance from the actual violence entails his greater responsibility, as his authority stretches over the actions of many functionaries in the lower ranks. The Abu Ghraib decisions were not determined by a criminal code like that under which Eichmann was tried. In Eichmann’s case, Israel was able to evaluate the structure of command that had governed Nazi Germany, for which there was no question of the Israeli state’s own responsibility. In the Abu Ghraib cases, the law took advantage of the photos’ apparent concretization of guilt to deflect attention away from the responsibility of higher command. U.S. law and military policy did not allow itself to be implicated in the judgment of guilt. Morris highlights the soldiers’ continual references to their orders in order to point toward this larger command structure and to a form of responsibility that does not appear in the photos, but can be traced. The “lawless” practices within the prison are not the product of immoral individuals, but the visible function of the corruption of legal and administrative command.

Even Dugan, who wasn’t an enlisted man, described the Abu Ghraib situation at the film’s opening as a “Charlie Foxtrot.” Replacing the more direct term, cluster fuck, with politely functional military coding, Dugan points toward the chaotic prison policies that generated little besides humiliated confusion, hurt, and despair for anyone involved. Still, in his own language, he tries to replace Abu Ghraib’s profanity with a measure of decency. His words show his unfulfilled wish that the prison could have been different.



The film's last scene shows him still struggling to make sense of Abu Ghraib: "I'm still so fricking confused about the shit that happened there. I go over it in my head every day, and I dream about it every night." The scale and intensity of U.S. military violence in Iraq and especially in Abu Ghraib (the center that was supposed to supply intelligence and help facilitate the military campaign and the country's preparation for independence) appear to Dugan as a colossal failure that can't be adequately comprehended, reclaimed, or recuperated. His continued conscious and unconscious effort to make sense of its madness testify to the traumatic impact of his exposure to U.S. power within the prison: corrupt procedure and frustrated passions, not soldierly honor and duty, conditioned its operation. Even beyond this disillusionment, Dugan doubts whether the situation could ever have been contained:

You know, before, I used to think about breaking the...back of the insurgency, and how we could've fixed this shit and how we could've saved...lives. But really, there's not a snowball's chance in hell you could fix any of that. If we leave they're killing each other; if we stay, they're killing each other and they're killing us. That's the end result of this whole fucking debacle.

And what about us killing them? Even as he condemns the whole military campaign, Dugan avoids confronting the violence committed against the Iraqi people by occupying U.S. forces. Feeling as if he was already dead, because there was nothing he could do to change anything, Dugan dealt with the routine of the prison. But he also describes taking solace in a morning and evening ritual that shows him looking at the world outside Abu Ghraib as a natural world rather than as a battlefield. Morris uses Dugan's morning and evening ritual at the close of the film, sequencing his words with images of sunrise.

To the east side of Abu Ghraib was a huge date palm forest. Within five to ten minutes after sun-up millions of fricking birds took off out of the date palm forest and just blacked out the sun to the east where I'm looking. And they'd fly north/northwest over the top corner of the post. I'd try to get out of my booth or take a cigarette break around sunset because the birds came back about thirty to fifteen minutes before sunset every night and landed back in the date palms. So I started my day every day watching [the birds] take off, and thinking at least something in the world was still normal. They could fly away from Abu G. They came back every night, but they could fly away every morning.

The spectacle of flight shows Dugan coveting a measure of freedom and escape that feels lost to every person in the prison, but also comforted to see that the inhuman world of the prison can't cover the whole of reality. The birds' repetitive escape and return offers an emblem of freedom and constraint in a natural context and helps counter the ghoulish repetition within the prison. Even if every morning at Abu Ghraib brings its guards and prisoners a repetitive compounding of humiliation and trauma, every morning the natural world repeats its own rhythms, and the birds fly freely over and above the prison, undisturbed. Dugan plays the sublime idea of the world's "normal" harmonies against his experience of the negative sublime of the prison's trauma. Morris holds out this tension as the film's final frame. The sublime is held in tension between harmony and chaos. The prison workers are pulled taut between competing systems of ethics and identification. The final photo image of the film could be sunrise or sunset; we can't tell unless we know the prison's landscape, the world outside the frame. Photographs and testimonies combine to uncover something of the unknown world, but the result is more than can be explained in any single image or story.

Morris offers his commentary on the film's work of communication:

"Photography may be just a metaphor for how we all see the world in different ways,

how we only see part of everything, and how we all see it in our own individual way. Part of what I do is try to reach beyond subjective experience and try to understand something about the world out there.” In *Standard Operating Procedure*, Morris uses photographs and interviews to create an account of the scandal that is not subjective, not objective, but inter-subjective. This account works to rebuild the capacity for communication that atrocity traumatically disrupts. Morris uses film and interview not to generate information, which explains and distances an event, but to perform communication by giving examples of how the events were experienced. By articulating the visible, “factual” content of the photos with the accounts of the people who were there in the photos’ moment, before and after their moment, Morris re-frames the photographs themselves, allowing them to be seen as images that can either reveal or conceal reality according to our interpretation of their content. In this work of re-framing, Morris is relying on our common sense, our openness to communication, in its full political significance. Because we all see through our individual perspectives, no knowledge of the world can be created without multiple perspectives, an over-layering and interlacing of frames that is interrupted by war’s negatively sublime aesthetic. The repellent intensity of the images from Abu Ghraib make it tempting to seal them up within their frames, attributing guilt and victimization only to those who appear in the photos. *Standard Operating Procedure* refuses to let our gaze rest in this closed frame, but requires us to consider their wider context and to question whether the images represent individual cruelty or systematic abuse. We may then see, hear, and make sense of events differently.

Arendt's account of the Eichmann trial is famously subtitled "A Report on the Banality of Evil." Her unprecedented catch phrase describes Eichmann as she saw him, as a banal functionary. It also points toward the collusion between individual ignorance and administrative violence that allowed the Nazi genocide to assume its unprecedented form: stripping humans of their human status. In her opinion, the prosecution's attempt to show Eichmann as "the most abnormal monster the world had ever seen" (276) was a theatrical attempt to instrumentalize justice as a support for the Israeli state. By memorializing the tragic history of the Jewish people and identifying, capturing, and executing their enemy, the prosecution bent the legal proceedings toward Israeli prime minister Ben-Gurion's goals. The trial appeared as the performance of the Jewish people's strength through the heroic function of state law. Arendt wrote that while the judges rightly resisted theatrics, "Ben-Gurion, rightly called the 'architect of the state' remains the invisible stage manager of the proceedings" (5). She saw the story the prosecution attempted to unfold—a sublime allegory of collapse and recuperation—as literally the building of the Jewish state of Israel through an historical narrative of the state as heroic ideal. Arendt was bitterly critical of this drama because, for her, reality appeared to be the very opposite: Eichmann was not the embodiment of evil committed to the destruction of the Jewish people, but a banal functionary within a radically corrupt state. The banality of bureaucratic procedure formed the locus of the evil that justice should confront. Eichmann's flaw was not his evil essence, but that he "*merely...never realized what he was doing*" (287 Arendt's emphasis). Arendt diagnoses his propensity for evil in his "lack of imagination," an "inability to *think*, namely to think from the

standpoint of somebody else” (49). Because he could not imagine the position of anyone outside his bureaucratic world, he was insulated from any understanding of his own actions or of the reality they influenced.

Arendt is disappointed with the trial proceedings because they substitute a dramatic spectacle, the mythic trial of monstrous evil, for the law’s proper object of judgment: Eichmann’s deeds, however banal. For Arendt, this amounts to the substitution of reality with fantasy, a scandal in the place where human communities seek their law. Arendt views law through a Kantian outline. Law in her text is the ethical imperative that binds a community, and legal justice is the judgment through which the abstract form of the law is upheld within the community. A criminal must be punished in the name of the law, because his deed violated its imperative, not because of the suffering he has caused (261). The rational form of law must be emphasized, not the feelings caused by the criminal’s act. Tensions between the law, the state, the public, and trauma are all at play in Arendt’s resistance when the prosecution invokes the testimonies of survivors’ suffering and treats the courtroom as a theater through which their loss will be compensated with their enemy’s punishment. Law, for Arendt, is needed to re-establish public order, but it must not pretend to express feelings or heal individual wounds. The voices of the wounded are therefore superfluous to the law’s justice. Her critical stance on this point is absolutely unyielding because she sees the state as distorting law and as appropriating and manipulating the stories that belong only to its individual people. The aesthetic dimension of politics must lie between individuals; it is not to be generalized, mythologized, and instrumentalized by the state. Her reaction against the state’s

narration of the case, which had been enacted through individual survivors telling their stories, is so strong that it seems at odds with her commitment to imagination, common sense, and the vital meaning of stories.

Arendt does not allow the “shattering emotions” of suffering a place in court, but she refuses only their appropriation by the state, not their significance for communication between individuals. Even so, the power of one witness’s story makes her think—“foolishly,” because it opposes her own sense of law—“everyone should have his day in court” (229). The power of stories is out of joint with the court’s limited frame of decision. The story belongs to the greater public world and should be presented through art, not as a backdrop for state law.

Morris’ film, as a work of art, is able to present images and stories of suffering in a way that challenges the state’s appropriation of their meaning to consolidate its own power. He finds a way to address the “banality of evil” through the military’s own terminology, “standard operating procedure,” and uses photographs and testimony to show the procedure’s standard product: dehumanization. His observation and critique of the scandal and the courts-martial is articulated through communication with others. His skillful editing brings together a set of stories that are individually powerful and mutually reinforcing. The film provides a critique of the state’s spectacle of justice through collective narration. Viewers see that the daily function of the prison effected suffering for everyone involved, although each voice that speaks in the film expresses it differently. Instead of imposing a single interpretation on the scandal, Morris works to reopen its trauma and the need to communicate it. The film’s sublime effect is

accomplished in this representation of the world not as it is stabilized by state law, justice, or myth, but as it appears to others. The exchange of opinions, the willingness to imagine the world from another's standpoint, allows the film maker and his viewers to *think*, and to re-frame reality.

Throughout this project, textual objects have demanded an attention to ecstatic experiences. The pattern of sublime experience turns on an encounter that is out of joint with the subjective senses and imagination. It pushes us outside ourselves, toward the failure of our senses before a greater power. Kant saw such experiences, which push us to reflect on the limits of our own knowledge, as a painful subjection that gives an ambivalent pleasure. The sensory subjection to excessive forces engages our reason; we must think and reflect on what we've just experienced because the world is vast and vastly more powerful than we are. But thinking allows us to recognize our being. Reflecting on our passivity becomes our first action. And because all human subjects share a common sense, a capacity for feeling and thinking, we are able to think and act together. Kant saw our aesthetic nature, the blend of feeling and thinking in which human subjects recognize themselves and others and shift from passivity to activity, as central to not only subject formation but to community and politics. He placed so much importance on the capacity for communication, which is made possible by our shared frameworks for feeling and thinking, that he viewed it as creating a foundational contract allowing us to live in common.

This hypothetical contract is usually not honored. It depends on people's imaginative capacity to exchange opinions by sharing the world as it appears to them and

recognizing its appearance for others, and we are not always willing to do this. Kant proposed an ideal form for the operation of the sublime, which culminates in a reflection on self and other, but this aesthetic paradigm may fail. Where common sense has not built a framework supporting our action, ecstatic experiences take on a destructive character. Modern social networks erode or appropriate the human power of communicative action, and we often feel subjected to our social frameworks, with little possibility for active change. Our discourses, aesthetics, and politics—always interconnected—shift toward exclusivity, fatalism, and violence. These patterns of communication generate a negative sublime that destroys self-recognition and makes the encounter with the other hostile and aggressive. They erode the capacity for action that is not destructive. Myths and fantasies about our subjection become a substitute for action. We cling to reactionary opinions that provide meaning for this subjection, then unfold into violence against whatever group we exclude from our own in a traumatic exchange of antagonistic forces. The trauma of violence, even when it doesn't touch us directly, may only spur a displacement of violence onto others. Many of the texts explored in this document have displayed or offered a critique of these patterns of reaction.

But positive patterns of ecstatic and sublime experience exist as well. Some begin from trauma itself and attempt recovery through communicating its radical break with previous identities and understandings of the world. Stories, creating a link of interest and exchange between people, rebuild our ability to see from other perspectives without being swept away by them. Opinion, the imaginative ability to see from another's standpoint, is crucial to a power of thought that supports self and other, and sustains a



world in-between people.

Morris' film has provided the final example in this exploration of aesthetic discourses and contemporary wartime experience. His text offers an unusual expression of opinion: he shows us the world as it appears not just to him, but as it appears to others. He provides an exemplary opinion that allows viewers to think about the world not only as it has appeared, but as it could appear to others, and as it could be reshaped by action. The point of all the seeing that Morris' film exemplifies is this: by seeing the reality of others we may see that our reality inheres in the relationships between ourselves and others, in the plurality of our vision. This in-between is directly effected by our communication, and we can directly effect it through our action. Our world could be imagined differently; we could enact it differently. Perhaps we should not need models to help us see this—but, given the ease with which we fall into hegemonic opinions rather than thinking on our own, they are vital for our reflection and our action.

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