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Sight Machine. War Machine. Truth Machine: Unstable Media and Verifiability in Military Conflict

By Agustin de Quijano

In 1999, the Next Five Minutes conference was dominated by all things digital: from videos to Internet sites and television to discussion lists, tactical media was digital media. But, especially when it comes to video activism, the roots of this conference series delve deep into analogue media. In the light of the ensuing crisis in ex-Yugoslavia, which has so forcefully reasserted the legacy of cinematic narrative in warfare, Agustin de Quijano suggests we should re-examine their role.

This is Europe in 1999. Once again, compliant, lazy minds and paramilitary propagandists claim that history is simply repeating itself: the film will not last long. Human development is a looped video tape, and at the end the goodies will prevail. We now live in one of those periods when, briefly, the consequences of the way in which our global society is structured become all too apparent, and the under-informed population are more able to cut through its repetitive lies. In times like these, governments have a temporarily increased need of the semantic and audio-visual war machine, with its replay and re-enactments of the old cinematic battles that are imprinted in most Westerners' terrifyingly Utilitarian concept of history.

There have been significant changes in the use of the media for war purposes since the Gulf War, when the US military/entertainment complex dubbed over the brief, but massive onslaught with an extremely effective disinformation campaign. Although Western propaganda is currently legitimising the killing of State journalists for the first time, more space is being apportioned to those who criticise a further escalation of the war (but, of course, not to those that oppose it altogether). We are also seeing the increasing use of the Net for propaganda purposes, which will soon be exhaustively used as another audio-visual weapon.

[IMAGE]

>>Image: Damage to buildings in Kosovo, Bela Crkva, Serbia

Andrej Tisma is an 'artist' living in Novi Grad, a city in a Serbian province with a Hungarian majority. As NATO started bombing Serbia, the N5M3 debates list received the first of his several postings:

"Mon, 22 Mar 1999 21:14:01 – WE HAVE BEEN BOMBED. (Message from Serbia, in expectation of NATO bombing. Could be my last sending. But I don't worry. If I die, my web site will remain.)".

It sounded melodramatic, but then I have never been the target of a military bombardment. Yet, in one click, his testamentary website revealed some very poor anti-NATO pop-art collages and a collection of genocidal, xenophobic rantings. I thought that such a poor attempt at disinformation wouldn't go far. Two days later, he posted: "Congratulations to the NATO democracy. I don't know how long the link will work. So 'til next opportunity. Save my web site, Andrej".

And then, "We fuck mother to Clinton, Solana, Clark and other scums for their lies and threats. I am getting much e-mails daily, so I am downloading it between staying in shelter, and I have no much time and energy to reply. But it is good it is still functioning, and I am glad hearing from you".

A simple idea: empathise with your audience by showing what you have in common; in this case the use of the Net and a poor command of English. To the detriment of his strategy, the "fuck mother" gave away the mindset necessary for the effective killing and raping in the Balkans since 1991. Not such a good propagandist after all.

I soon noticed that the man carried on posting these messages to dozens of mailing lists, reaching an important audience. He was also interviewed online by ABC News where, once again, his views went almost completely unchallenged. It would be unthinkable for a major US network to allow an Iraqi civilian to talk live on the phone during a US bombardment, yet the fascination with the immediacy of the Net is creating new exceptions to our tried and tested propaganda model.

Just like the remote human interface of a Cruise missile, Andrej Tisma directs his attack through a screen, capable of reaching targets almost immediately. Yet, in today's wars where the political rationale of the population is forged with images and sound, an information missile that carries only text is almost obsolete. Some of the next wars will undoubtedly be fought with radio and machetes, but in others we will be able to have real-time video chats with those on the receiving end of our governments' bombs.

[IMAGE]

>>Image: Armored vehicles U/I camouflaged bunkers

We are also seeing how the increasing use of documentary techniques on the Net could challenge the reigning propaganda models. As usual, the first creative impulses come from the 'right people', although they could easily be reclaimed by the war machine.

The videos on B92's website are very powerful documents: the silent, strangely beautiful, broken 'real video' footage of the streets of Belgrade under a quiet sun, the time and name subtitled; an interview with an American, resident in Serbia on the same streets: "I don't believe in politics... I believe in people.(...) and if I have to die here I cannot think of any better people to die with". These documents are potentially far more effective than the propaganda that they seek to counteract. They illuminate the human urge for co-operation that by nature and intelligence oppose the illusions underpinning power and statehood. They have been accessed by millions of people, and are already an important and welcome part of cinema history.

However, a far greater number of people are entertained by Serbian TV, CNN or NATO's website. The latter offers high-definition video clips of the bombing of 'Possible Mobile Commando Posts', 'Railway Bridge I' or the 'Orb Airfield Petrol-Oil-Lubricant'. NATO, the most heavily subsidised propagandist that history has ever known, does not believe in copyright and only asks for a mention if their 'work' is used.

Like a documentary film-maker facing miles of old archive rushes, NATO's multimedia library has carefully chosen the shots for maximum narrative and spiritual impact. The reproduction of these shots, downloaded and then broadcast or printed all over the world, has a more important strategic value than the real about-to-be-blown-up targets that they depict in pixels, or the human beings who die behind the special effects.

These films serve as a reminder to prospective foes of the might of the Pentagon, and provide excellent marketing for Western arms manufacturers: "People used to die for a coat of arms, an image on a pennant or flag; now they die to improve the sharpness of the film. War has finally become the third dimension of cinema (Paul Virilio, *War and Cinema*, 1982). Video cameras peering from the nose of missiles and travelling at high speeds offer higher resolution images than some of the best (static) professional zooms. Yet, when we were recently shown the clip of the bombings that killed Kosovar refugees or Serbian civilians, the quality was extremely poor.

NATO's propaganda office explained that its planes bomb from a high altitude in order to avoid air defences. The resultant loss in resolution, and hence the fatal potential of the pilot's split-second decision meaning that those people were, literally, killed by film-making that went wrong. After the Vietnam War, "all these weapons systems resulted in a new staging of war, massive use of synthetic images, and automatic feed-back of data. They also rise to chemical defoliation, whereby it [becomes] possible to empty the screen of parasitic vegetation." (Paul Virilio op.cit).

However, Virilio, who believes that cinema – as a tool for creation and liberation – very soon lost the battle against its use for killing and/or terrorising adversaries has ignored the crucial role that the same technology played in the rise of the massive antiwar movement during the Vietnam war. The barely mediated media use of documentary images depicting US military actions against Vietnamese civilians was one of the first real threats to the State's monopoly on cinematic representations of war. It was a threat that was on the way to being successfully overcome by 1991, when great restrictions were imposed on the range of coverage for non-military cameras. Today, one wonders in horror if the Serbian commanders whose troops are massacring Kosovars also take into account the angles and visibility of satellite cameras.

[IMAGE]

>>Image: Popovac Highway bridge over railroad, Serbia

When illustrating Milosevic's degree of guilt, Western leaders and propagandists often mention the banning of B92 and the murder of journalists. B92 were banned because they dared to be independent, and the NATO bombings provided Milosevic with the perfect excuse for this measure (their other statements aside, public apologists for the Serbian State's massacres are right in claiming that there would be nothing even approaching an independent media were London or New York under bombardment), just as diplomacy then and bombings now 'predictably' put Milosevic in a position to start the Balkans war in 1991 and the expulsion or murder of Albanian Kosovars today.

The British government's 'attacks' on John Simpson's BBC reports from Belgrade are nothing more than one of the many disinformation darts that distract from the increasing control and repression of the independent media in Western Europe. Here 'our' media is seen to be performing its task of impartiality, with the inevitable governmental criticism merely serving to highlight the good health of our democratic system. ...Let's see.

In 1996, the same John Simpson, together with Stephen Bedesley – War Studies lecturer at Sandhurst (the UK's top military academy) – spoke on 'Censorship and Control' at the International Newfilm Conference in London. Most speakers had been showing off their archive finds – reels of rare footage of historical importance. The journalist, playing in friendly territory, was to appear after the Ministry of Defence spokesman and thus had the chance to reply to his military counterpart. Bedesley, an ironic man, explained how he "was, but he wasn't" representing the military's point of view. He then gave a brisk order for a film to be projected on the great screen of the National Film Theatre. The audience was treated to 'never-been-seen-before' British Army footage of the charred corpses of German soldiers in Normandy in 1944, which he compared to a similar photograph published by The Guardian after the end of the Gulf War.

In the continuing silence, and pausing theatrically as the lights came on, he explained how, at the time, that footage was deemed 'inappropriate' for screening. War, he added, though necessarily horrible, must be won (by his country, I supposed). He concluded that the military necessity to control information during a conflict over-rides the media's demand for open reporting, and that the public, as during WWII, wanted such restrictions. It is amazing how these people, whose perverted sense of empowerment is often based on the knowledge of criminal information denied to the same public that

pays their salary, always know better.

Nobody, in a 300-strong audience, had any questions about this sincere apology for the totalitarian control of information when killing is being done in our name. It was Simpson's turn. He spoke of regretting his participation in the filming of events staged by the Iraqi government for the international media, yet made no critique or comment whatsoever on the views of the military man.

Rhetorically, I asked him if he thought that the WW2 parallel was a legitimate one or a strategy by which potential public resistance to the war was smothered. As I was speaking, I looked over at Bedsley. With amusing gesticulations, he was openly and fraternally encouraging me to question Simpson, who began his long, uneasy reply with "I'm British, of course, and I would not want to see British lives put at risk because of my reporting." Bedsley loved every moment of it.

In the post-cold war era, those in power no longer need to allow a successful and varied independent media. As a result, we are witnessing the increasing erosion of independent reporting and documentation at the same time that new technologies are making it almost impossible to stop the flow of information.

There will soon come a day when the Western equivalents of B92 start to seriously compete with corporate and military media through the combined use of the Net, illegal local radio stations, projections and low-cost print media. Whether that information is effected into social and environmental change will depend on many other factors outside the scope of this article.

But as regards the all-too-important sound and images, the increasing use of digital formatting with its inherent potential for manipulation in all aspects of filming, recording, editing and storage, is resulting in the demise of their documentary value. A situation that is making those in power rejoice, and which they are playing a very active part in bringing about.

There are ways in which this devaluation can be avoided by those who can do something about it, such as tactical media workers, factual photographers and documentary-makers (I use a broad definition that includes all of those whose work claims to represent reality through documents that can be historically verified). The decisive factor will remain the credibility that an audience gives both to the original source and to the ethical position behind the editing of the images and recordings.

It is crucial to create ideologically – which often means financially – independent media work that time and time again proves its devoted commitment and respect in the handling of documentary images and sound recordings. To increase a general awareness of how those images are obtained and edited is also indispensable. Conveniently, and to avoid doubt, many might well 'return' to pre-digital formats, such as celluloid, Hi-8 video, traditional photography or even digital cameras and sound equipment, which record on to linear, unfalsifiable masters before the editing process – which itself will undoubtedly remain digital.

During the n5m3 conference, B92 screened a film composed of a sequence of unedited clips from Serbian TV during the current Balkan War. An unbelievably comic presenter roamed across the fronts, interviewing characters such as Danny the Red, a big bearded Serbian soldier who explained to us how the evil enemies would quickly be defeated by the brave Serbian forces. It is too easy to forget that both the presenter and Danny had probably been to school with those enemies.

The room was packed with independent media workers from around the world, who could not help laughing at this excellent, subtle piece of honest counter-propaganda. I will never forget the expression on the face of B92's Sonja Radenkovic, who had presented the video. As it played, she was sitting under the screen while facing her audience in the dark, smiling, neither vindictively nor victoriously,

but comforted that, at least in that moment, they were not alone in the truth.

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