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Attackability

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War has become a regime of biopower, that is, a form of rule aimed not only at controlling the population but producing and reproducing all aspects of social life.

—Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude*

Spring time is war time—all eyes to the crime boss.

—Sonic Youth, “Peace Attack”

Abstract: As its title indicates, this essay undertakes to conceptualize and to critique *attackability*—the legitimating logic yet also the underlying weakness of pre-emptive warfare. The recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have tended to script an inevitability of imperial attack in terms of the putative enemy’s incapacity (whether because of enmity, or vulnerability) to avoid being attacked. Yet to the extent that the term “attack” bears within it a sense of attachment, this understanding of warfare involves not just a means of laying claim or seizing control or obliterating, but also an interminable failure to let go, a corrosive compulsion to hold on. The argument investigates the significance of such debilitating dynamics with reference to two films that address, in strikingly different ways, the first US-Iraq war: Sam Mendes’s *Jarhead* (2005) and Werner Herzog’s *Lessons of Darkness* (1992).

Keywords: attackability, *Jarhead*, *Lessons of Darkness*, Iraq war, pre-emptive warfare

Résumé: Comme son titre l’indique, cet essai vise à conceptualiser et à critiquer la possibilité d’*attaque*—légitimer la logique et en même temps la faiblesse sous-jacente de la guerre par anticipation. Les conflits récents en Iraq et en Afghanistan ont eu tendance à bâtir un scénario sur l’inévitabilité d’une attaque impériale, en établissant l’incapacité de l’ennemi putatif (que ce soit en raison de l’hostilité ou de la vulnérabilité) afin d’éviter d’être attaqué. Et cependant, tant que le terme «attaque» est porteur d’un sentiment d’attachement, cette idée qu’on a de la guerre ne porte pas seulement sur le fait de réclamer un territoire ou d’en prendre le contrôle ou de l’écraser, mais aussi sur le fait de ne jamais lâcher prise, une compulsion corrosive à s’accrocher coûte que coûte. L’argument

analyse la signification d'une telle dynamique débilatante en ce qui a trait aux deux longs métrages qui portent, de façons frappantes et très différentes, sur la première guerre entre les États-Unis et l'Iraq: *Jarhead* (2005) de Sam Mendes et *Lessons of Darkness* (1992) de Werner Herzog.

Mots clés : possibilité d'attaque, *Jarhead*, *Lessons of Darkness*, guerre en Iraq, guerre par anticipation

Eight months after the first bombs of Operation Iraqi Freedom fell on Baghdad, *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition (EM:HE)* made its network debut. On 3 December 2003, viewers watched as Ty Pennington and his renovation brigade surprised the Powell family, distraught and distracted by their daughter's leukemia, with the offer of home improvement sponsored by ABC and Sears. By episode two, the juxtaposition already implicit in the show's premiere had become explicit: when Dawna Wolsum and her three sons returned from an *EM:HE*-staged trip to Disneyland, they found more than just an overhauled bungalow—husband and father Trent, a sergeant in the California National Guard, was home from Iraq to greet them. The plot line established the subtext alongside the template for subsequent episodes in the *EM:HE* franchise: revamped houses help to repair the nuclear family; homeland security requires the latest in kitchen appliances. Renovation at home thus supplements régime-change abroad—come see the harder side of Sears.¹

On 14 February 2004, a day before the Wolsums's story hit prime time, Paul Bremer, then chief US administrator in Iraq, announced the opening of a new Iraqi Ministry of Human Rights, housed in the building where, under Saddam Hussein, the notorious Ministry of Defence had resided. For Bremer, the makeover would be extreme, signalling nothing less than "Iraq's emergence from the darkness of tyranny to the light of the modern world" ("Bremer Opens"). "Ladies and gentlemen," Bremer concluded, "Iraq is back." The brutal ironies in such a return quickly materialized: under two months later, as the Abu Ghraib scandal exploded into mass-mediated visibility, modernity's capacity to illuminate reached its limit, exposing as it did so the bankruptcy of human rights as an imperial export. Cynically enough, the US military soon razed the prison where shock-and-awe rehab had been practised, replacing it with "Camp Redemption," a state-of-the-art detention facility more consistent with the optics and ideology of invasion for liberty.

Reports indicate that the torture of prisoners continues there unchecked (Enders).²

Takeover makeover in the imperial style presupposes and perpetuates *attackability*: a presumption of authority and agency (the capacity to attack) projecting enmity or vulnerability (the incapacity not to be attacked) within the doctrinal framework of pre-emptive war. As this definition will suggest, attackability can seem brutally straightforward, giving the calculus of military invasion a keenly predatory cast. Things start to get more complicated, however, when we admit the core term's supplemental sense, one tacitly present in the primary definition—"attack: to fasten or fall upon with force of arms; to join battle with, assail, assault" (*OED Online*)—and fully alive in the derivation from the Italian *attaccare*, to attach. Etymology thus vexes the concept, if not so readily the practice, of attack: attacking folds into attaching, such that attackability insinuates attachment, in all its remarkable ambiguity. What if attackers cannot help but be attached to their targets? The drive to attack, to wage war, will lose the appearance of coherence, becoming not just a means of laying claim or seizing control or obliterating but also an interminable failure to let go, a corrosive compulsion to hold on. Invasive assault as violent embrace: might attackability, a prime sign of imperial power, turn out to be a symptom of vulnerability after all?

In what follows I approach these questions obliquely, focusing my analysis on a cluster of attackability's recent reflections. The perspectives at issue engage, one way or another, with violent spectacles of unknowing. The aim, in their analysis, is to help to inspire modes of thought and feeling with which to counter the amnesiac subterfuge of perpetual war.

Broadcast worldwide on 9 April 2003, the spectacle of US soldiers helping Iraqi civilians to topple a statue of Saddam Hussein in central Baghdad seemed to confirm the most idealistic predictions about Operation Iraqi Freedom: that pre-emptive war would tap liberty's well-spring, causing democracy to overflow the streets. In this version of events, US military power did not intervene in Iraq but only served the irrepressible outpouring of Iraqi popular will. Imperial armament was pure *techné*: a kind of prosthesis with which to banish the phantom limb of frustrated democratic desire,

reconcile political reach with political longing, and pull the tyrant down. So imagined, the breathless drama of a crowd with hammers, sticks, and the help of an armoured car overcoming monumental repression by smashing repression's monument—every bit as sublime as the celestial fireworks of missile-borne shock and awe—offered something like liberation's primal scene.

The fact, as it subsequently emerged, that the US military had stage-managed the event in service of mass-mediated propaganda—with an unnamed corporal reportedly inspired to orchestrate the statue's take-down serving as Ty Pennington to the Iraqi citizens' once-disconsolate, now-euphoric homeowners—seems significant both in exemplifying what the Retort collective calls "the struggle for mastery in the realm of the image" (19) and in illustrating attackability's attachments more broadly. Some of these attachments are unsurprisingly transparent: the love of theatre and a weakness for performative politics (such that democracy, in the version supplied by American mythography, enacts itself into being); the investment in image-magic; the use of sound-bite populism to short-circuit genuine expressions of popular will; the need to dream of invasionless invasions and bloodless, because invisible, military hands. Others among the attachments at stake remain harder to discern, though, and more unexpected, even contradictory, when reckoned. Especially telling here is the mid-removal decision of one Marine to cover the face of the statue of Saddam with an American flag (a gesture that, striking the crowd as excessive, too nakedly a display of triumphalist sentiment, caused a PSYOP sergeant to substitute an Iraqi flag for Old Glory). In its very excess—the truncated intensity alongside the hurried reversal—this Stars-and-Stripes moment concentrates the larger incoherence at issue. In one sense, the event dramatized the logic of régime-change, with an abstract symbol of democracy blotting out the tyrant. In another sense, however, it exposed defacement as facialization, with the veiling of Saddam rendering visible, for a global mass audience, the true, truly American face of tyranny. In this reading, the gesture managed to reveal what the whole process of pre-emptive war was arguably intended to obscure: that the face of Saddam was, in important respects, the face of America; that the US security state had, through years of overt and covert action, cultivated one Saddam after another, whether ally or antagonist, in the shadow-play of Middle East geopolitics. From the start of his régime, Saddam Hussein was continually remade in the image of America—which is to say, continually remade in the image America needed him to bear. The dynamic

offers a telling instance of Slavoj Žižek's claim that neo-liberal powers get, because they *make*, the monsters they deserve.³ At stake is the legitimacy of perpetual warfare: as Hardt and Negri observe, "[T]he constant presence of an enemy and the threat of disorder are necessary in order to legitimate imperial violence" (30). Hence the ironies of attachment: the necessity of monsters will render the necessity of their elimination nearly unbearable, sustained only when, through the dynamics of surrogation, their monstrosity has been refashioned and refacialized elsewhere. In this respect, one might say that attackability in Iraq entails régime-change not from tyranny to democracy but from Baathism to al-Qaeda.

Necessary for the sort of attachment I have been describing is a particular form of politicized amnesia: not simply forgetting but instead a relentless remembering to forget.⁴ Thus, for the spectacle of régime-change in Iraq to signify with maximum force, its audience must, among other things, be trained to remember not to remember the first Gulf War (Desert Storm), so as not to see or learn how the failure of régime-change in the early 1990s might actually index continued US attachment to the Baathist mode of monstrosity. Such training in amnesia obviously starts with Operation Desert Storm and the notorious management of battlefield optics through smart-bomb technology and televisual discipline, but it also persists, in retrospect, through the agency of cultural texts that ostensibly serve to remember the first Gulf War.

Sam Mendes's 2005 film *Jarhead* offers a provocative, ambiguous instance of such politicized amnesia. Based on the 2003 memoir of ex-Marine sniper Anthony Swofford, the film aspires to give a corrosively absurdist look at the wartime experience of US soldiers. The film's action entails inaction; warfare for Swofford and his compatriots is all about frustration, the inability to find release through combat. Yet, in its satire of the boredom of war, the film lets amnesia take hold.

Jarhead begins with a parable of weaponry that serves to lay attachment bare. "A story," recounts the Swofford character's disembodied voice:

A man fires a rifle for many years—and he goes to war. And afterward he turns the rifle in at the armoury, and he believes

he's finished with the rifle. But no matter what else he might do with his hands—love a woman, build a house, change his son's diaper—his hands remember the rifle. (00:27–00:54).

Swofford's story is a horror story: independent of mind and will, remembering hands have a brooding consciousness that discombobulates personality and threatens to pull the body apart. Such automatic autonomy menaces the integrity of flesh as well as mind. The warrior's hands recall Homer's hands in *The Day of the Locust* (West), or the nightmare image of hands with brains invoked by Kirby in *Life in the Iron Mills* (Davis)—two antecedents that underscore the alienated brutality habitual, habituated violence entails. As the *Jarhead* parable suggests, attackability entangles habit with will, rendering belief inconsequential in the face of bodily recollection. Weaponized memory comes to supplement domestic affection in ways that complicate even as they constitute homeland security. Here warfare's habitus, expressed in the dynamics of attachment, is installed directly into the body (see Bourdieu, esp. 128–205).

The film set in motion by this parable follows Swofford, played by Jake Gyllenhaal, as he becomes—is fashioned into—a Marine sniper and then tracks him through the interminability of his deployment (almost 200 days waiting in the desert, but only “four days, four hours, one minute” of combat action [148:47–148:53]) in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait during the first Gulf War. Sniper training, for Swofford and his colleagues, has as its mantra the rifle prayer: “This is my rifle. There are many like it, but this one is mine. Without my rifle, I am nothing; without me, my rifle is nothing” (16:25–16:46). Offering a quasi-liturgical correlate of the story about hands remembering the weapon they have held, the rifle prayer consolidates sniper sensibility through a structure of dependence. The levelling equivalence of soldier and weapon mechanizes the soldier while bringing the weapon, uncannily, to life. At stake is a devotional ideology in which armament enables soldier-being by eliminating independent identity.

In tandem with such ideology, routine abuse serves to mould aspiring soldiers. Military subjection, *Jarhead* suggests, cannot do without viciousness as a principle. And the film is relentless in depicting the brutalities that constitute military life. Thus, from the start, we witness the violence directed at new recruits by their commanders. The officer who introduces Swofford and his cohort

to military culture, seeking to strip away any sense of difference (“You are no longer black, or brown, or yellow, or red—you are green, you are light green or dark green! Do you understand?” [00:55–01:08]), cannot help but drive home the arbitrary cruelty of military authority: he degrades Swofford for not having drafting skills he has never claimed to possess and responds to Swofford’s protest at such treatment by driving his head into a wall. Swofford’s inability to draw well enough to serve as scribe merely supplies the opportunity to affirm the real aptitude at issue: his potential for abuse.

A brutality comparable to that imposed from above emerges from within troop culture, as another early scene makes clear. Arriving at his quarters for the first time, Swofford witnesses the branding of another Marine and then—identified as “fresh fucking meat” (05:34–05:35)—is swarmed by his compatriots. They tie him to his bed, heat the brand, and move to apply it to his leg, causing him to pass out. On regaining consciousness, he finds himself uninjured, and learns that the attack was pantomime, “a little fuck-fuck trick” typically pulled on new recruits (06:55–06:57). Perversely enough, the trick makes the brand a mark of honour: violation must be earned. Within such an economy, the prospect of seared flesh converts fear into longing. As torture constitutes ritual initiation, the sign of an exclusive membership, so *hope-for-torture*—brutality’s promise—serves to kindle new forms of militarized desire. Here attachment to “the brand” literalizes the sort of corporate, corporeal subjection active within the military manifestation of what Mark Seltzer calls “wound culture.”

These opening scenes work to establish military brutality as ontological, not tactical—the inevitable, irrepressible condition of soldier-being, at once ethos and instinct. Yet the episodes also aim, quite deliberately, to provoke the film’s audience with the givenness of military typology: every soldier, whether officer or grunt, is at root a psychopath. The caricature of the sadist sergeant, in particular, epitomizes a tendency in *Jarhead* to taunt viewers with the grinding predictability of character, circumstance, and theme. Depressingly familiar, characters of this kind serve to intimate the impossibility of new knowledge about—or, more frighteningly, original critique of—military culture. A film about the tedium of military deployment takes pains to foreground the tedium of its genre’s representational repertoire. Cinematic self-evidence offers its own assault on the audience: one measure of the film’s unsettling

power comes from the redundancy of the brutality it insists on depicting.

All the more disconcerting (when, for viewers, a cliché familiarity intensifies the brutality of *Jarhead's* brutality) that the military culture depicted in the film channels abuse through desire. In the *Jarhead* world, marine attachment to degrading forms of violence constitutes an erotics as well as an ontology. If, as Swofford's voice-over tells us, the term "jarhead" names an empty vessel (05:03–05:04), the process of cranial evacuation nonetheless involves the incitement of desire. Staff Sergeant Sykes (played by Jamie Fox) encapsulates this dynamic when, training Swofford's cohort to shoot, he invokes "the pink mist," that spray of blood and brain snipers long to see and to cause (14:15–14:16). So named, the outcome of the kill shot is evidently orgasmic, a violent (if also displaced and distended) release. More to the point, the phrase conflates emptying heads with satisfying desire in a way that complements, in the negative, the making of jarhead subjectivity. Becoming empty-headed makes marines long to empty the heads of others. And the fact that this increasingly unbearable (because continually deferred) desire can also be associated with what Sykes calls "the JFK shot," and so with the ultimate anti-Americanism of presidential assassination, will suggest that it has very little to do with conventionally nationalistic modes of affiliation, overwhelming the distinction patriot/traitor with a more unruly, more visceral feeling (14:12–14:13). Attackability, in this model, empties the head so as to fire up groin and gut.

While the military culture on view in *Jarhead* thus manages to instill an attachment to the attack, the logistics of the first Gulf War ensure its perpetual frustration, a circumstance from which the film's events devolve. Among the snipers who make up Swofford's cohort, desire for "the pink mist" is not just constant but also fruitless. The war for which they have prepared frustrates the brutal longing they have acquired. There are no real targets—"the enemy" is a phantasm. Trained to kill others, they now struggle to kill time. "This is our labour," Swofford laments. "We wait" (30:29–30:32). The film drives home the tedium, yet also the trauma, of such waiting, through a sequence of surreal episodes: a surprise drill for gas attacks, followed by a punitive exercise wearing gas masks in the desert; target practice that involves shooting at nothing; the creation of a photo-wall of betrayal, real or supposed, by lovers back home; a photo-op football game in chemical suits,

organized by Sykes, that devolves into simulated mass sex; the resulting punishment of pointlessly piling up sandbags in the pouring rain, only to pull the pile back down. Even attempts at release offer no release, as a scene in which Swofford cannot masturbate to climax makes bleakly clear. And later, after a party with contraband alcohol goes awry when a munitions tent catches fire, Swofford, who has outsourced his watch-duty in order to join the fun, receives as his punishment demotion from corporal to private and the nauseous job of burning shit from the toilets with diesel fuel. The consequences of such abject degradation are predictably violent: Swofford first threatens to kill Fergus (played by Brian Geraghty), who took over his watch, for messing it up, and then demands that Fergus kill him: “friendly fucking fire—shoot me, fucking pussy!” (103:12–103:15). Given the implosive brutality on view in these episodes, one might imagine that the lessons of the early branding scene epitomize, as they anticipate, the subsequent dynamics of wartime service. For these Marines, at least, battlefield deployment itself constitutes an interminable “fuck-fuck trick.”

At stake, we come to recognize, are the specific conditions of modern imperial warfare: the sniper, as a kind of fighter, is all but obsolescent within the contemporary theatre of combat. The sort of quick-strike elimination traditionally performed by snipers can now come from the sky; smart-bomb technology launched from planes has made sniper fire superfluous. A scene near the end of the film drives the point home. Chosen (because they are Sykes’s best) to target officers of the Republican Guard, Swofford and his partner Troy (played by Peter Sarsgaard) lock in their kill shot and receive clearance to take it, only to be interrupted at the last minute by their commanding officer, Major Lincoln (played by Dennis Haysbert), who instead orders bombers to destroy the building in which the Iraqis hide—an aerial spectacle that will, he avers, “blow your fucking minds” (141:12–141:14). Denied this chance at producing the pink mist, Troy voices the inevitable, unsettling question, “[A]re we ever going to get to kill anyone?” (144:01–144:02). The episode demonstrates the outmodedness of the sniper as military subject. Although the rifle prayer produces cyborgs, they are antiquated ones—hybrids formed from redundant technology and residual logistics. Such is the ultimate abjection: these snipers, relentlessly abused in the course of their training as cold killers, prove to be merely the cast-offs, the detritus, of the new war machine.

Thus attentive to details—not to mention contingencies—in the contemporary practice of war, *Jarhead* would seem to affirm the power of historical nuance and, with it, historicized comprehension. Yet the kind of memory work advanced by the film is conflicted: striving to modulate the historical particularity of modern wars with combat's elemental repeatability, *Jarhead* tends instead to sacrifice the former for the latter and treat war in existential terms. Swofford's concluding commentary epitomizes the tendency. "Every war is different; every war is the same" (150:25–150:33), he remarks, flattening history to highlight the nation's aimlessness—or perhaps its abandonment: "[W]e are still in the desert" (153:33–153:37). The phrasing creates contradiction without tension; its sequence makes sameness the truth that underlies differences. The fatalistic diagnosis occludes any sense of the dialectical pressures within modern warfare. Superficially a phenomenon in history, war, in these terms, is fundamentally a condition beyond time. The implications of such temporal eclipse will recollect and recast the problem of politicized amnesia introduced at the start of my discussion of the film.

This problem emerges in *Jarhead* not just through its depiction of combat logistics during the first Gulf War but also through the spectres it raises of earlier US warfare. Crucial, here, is the war in Vietnam—not to mention its remediation in Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*. The most explicit reference to this film occurs early on in *Jarhead*, immediately before Swofford's cohort is sent to the Gulf. In a memorable scene, Mendes literally embeds a bit of Coppola's film within his own: on the eve of deployment, the Marines find diversion—or perhaps morale?—in the notorious napalm episode from *Apocalypse Now*. As the Wagnerian soundtrack swells and, on the screen within the screen, helicopter gunships begin to obliterate a Vietnamese village, these post-Vietnam soldiers thrill, boisterously, to the spectacle of indeterminate slaughter.⁵ It's almost as if, for modern military subjects, Coppola's film has come to enable a kind of ritualized subculture, replete with an elaborate repertoire of comment, gesture, and affect—a *Rocky Horror Picture Show* for the camouflage crowd. The implications are dire: the signature scene from the paradigmatic modern indictment of the absurdity of war now assists in the project of producing soldier-subjectivity by inciting blood lust. The somatic interface of the military-industrial complex manages to colonize—or, indeed, to weaponize—even the most stringent critique. Arguably, the episode undermines the very concept of the anti-war film, jeopardizing the

presupposition that some films can critique the wars they recount; at the same time, it illuminates the capacity of the war machine to turn critique to its own advantage. The episode gives a striking instance of the modern military's reliance on immaterial production—the biopolitical currency of perpetual war—precisely because it demonstrates the value of affect as a means to, and as a mode of, military labour. At the same time, it raises unsettling questions about *Jarhead* itself: for if military culture subsumes even the most inventive critiques, what does that fact mean for the film we watch? Can cinematic critique do anything to avoid co-optation?⁶

Having thus invoked Coppola's satire of war in order to dramatize the omnivorousness of the military machine—yet also to trouble the very idea of anti-war film—*Jarhead* subsequently insinuates its own fixation with *Apocalypse Now*. Resonances with Coppola's film emerge throughout, in terms of action, image, and mood. When Swofford and his crew encounter Bedouin in the desert, avoiding a fire fight only because Swofford turns out to speak Arabic, the scene recollects with a difference the episode in *Apocalypse Now* in which the high-strung soldiers on Willard's transport slaughter everyone on a boat they meet on the river. When the Marines come across firebombed corpses, the moment recalls the sort of surreal carnage that erupts again and again in Coppola's take on Vietnam. And when, near the end of *Jarhead*, Swofford and Troy, fearfully anticipating enemy soldiers, instead come across their own company celebrating war's end in the desert, the gas masks mounted on rifles in the sand offer a fractured recollection of the trophy-heads in Kurtz's compound. Swofford's exasperated complaint, midway through the film, about the "Vietnam music" being played by helicopters overhead ("That's Vietnam music—can't we get our own fucking music?!?" [130:22–130:25]) supplies a knowing ironization of *Jarhead's* investments, alongside a measure of the difficulty of leaving the legacy of Vietnam behind.

The sequence that features the complaint about "Vietnam music" is, arguably, the conceptual and critical heart of Mendes's film. It connects the company's discovery of charred bodies in the desert with the subsequent discovery of burning oil wells. The damage, we learn, has elemental significance: as Swofford observes, "[T]he earth is bleeding" (128:50–128:51). While some among the cohort remain intractably brutal—most notably Fowler (played by Evan Jones) who endeavours to cultivate corpses as trophies, proposing to offer photos with one at five dollars a shot—others, including

Swofford, Troy, and even Sykes, seem rehumanized by their encounter with terrestrial wounding. Shocked into suspending their habitual brutality, they attend the dead with care and observe the landscape with an awe-struck melancholy. In what is likely the film's most symbolically overloaded scene, Swofford, undertaking to bury the corpse Fowler has tried to claim, encounters a horse drenched in the crude that showers the desert—and apologizes to the animal for the damage done by war. The episode recasts the climactic sequence in *Apocalypse Now*, in which Coppola, looking for some way to save his film, cross-cuts Marlowe's killing of Kurtz with shots of the ritual sacrifice of an ox by indigenous tribespeople.⁷ Notwithstanding the obvious differences between these scenes, both reckon the horrors of war through the affective anguish that animal tropes can convey—through the use or indeed rendering of what Nicole Shukin terms "animal capital." Lost in such concern for an elemental animality is any sense of the more fully historical costs of war.

Put another way, what *Jarhead* (even more than *Apocalypse Now*) cannot manage to capture is the material, social effect of war on an embattled populace. The peoples of the Gulf are mere ciphers in the film: at best, exoticized Bedouin encountered by the Marines in the desert; otherwise, charred remains found amid a bombed-out convoy. Such depictions serve as place-holders, establishing the narrative backdrop needed for Marine viciousness, or anxiety, or sorrow to emerge. The narrative logic recalls (and indeed reproduces) an absurdist absence imported by *Apocalypse Now* from *Heart of Darkness*: first in Conrad's novel and then in Coppola's filmic adaptation, scenes in which well-armed boats furiously shell the jungle serve to convey the futility of imperial war by de-realizing its targets.⁸ Yet by insinuating the phantasmatic tendencies of imperial adventure—no more than projected paranoia, lobbed as so many shells at nothing—such episodes dramatize the bankruptcy of empire only by diminishing the materiality of its violence.⁹ To comparable effect, *Jarhead* invites its viewers to understand the first Gulf War—and by extension war as such—as, absurdly, a conflict without an opponent and so a conflict ravaging the imaginary of the occupying power. While arguably this strategy can work to de-legitimize imperial warfare, it fails to confront invasion's full complexity or, for that matter, to imagine Iraqis and Kuwaitis as living historical subjects of war's trauma. Indeed, by attaching so furiously to the critique of brutality within Marine

culture, the film manages to forget that the trauma of war is only incidentally about the damage invaders inflict on themselves. Such is *Jarhead*'s "privilege of unknowing" (Sedgwick): its savage satire of soldier-trauma works to occlude the capacities of attack to devastate the invaded.

Werner Herzog's 1992 *Lessons of Darkness* offers a very different version of the first Gulf War—yet, like *Jarhead*, it cannot escape vexed questions of memory and forgetting. Where Mendes's film probes the labour of waiting before combat begins, *Lessons of Darkness* screens the incomprehensible aftermath of warfare. Unfolding over twelve sections—or what get called, in a kind of bibliographic homage, "chapters"—the film depicts environmental apocalypse as the monumental legacy of the war. In recording the devastation, though, Herzog strives to de-realize its historical referent, presumably in order to disorient perspective and unsettle knowledge. The film's narrative intimates an alien consciousness; we are to infer from the voice-over that the camera-eye offers the airborne perspective of an extraterrestrial visitor to some unknown planet. It is as if, looking through alien eyes, we have never seen this landscape or these scenes before—a conceit that ironizes the intense mediation of Operation Desert Storm by CNN, yet that also (if obliquely) captures something of the condition of *not-seeing* enforced by televisual discipline during the war. The conceit reconstitutes the privilege not to know and, with it, the import of amnesia: alien consciousness has no grounds on which to comprehend—but also no preconceptions through which to occlude—war's horrific legacies. The film thus intensifies by defamiliarizing our perceptual response to the geopolitical record of warfare. Crucial in this respect is the matter of scale: the scarred landscape of post-war Kuwait appears at such a distance that it seems beautiful. The abundant signs of devastation are strangely abstracted, aestheticized, sublime. As in Edward Burtynsky's monumental eco-disaster photography, however, the effect of such abstraction is not simply abstract: rather than mystifying the import of war, it sharpens attention by forcing us to confront the shocking disjuncture between how things look and what they mean.

The moments when the film comes down to earth, offering more intimate shots of the mechanisms and mechanics of war, only

compound and intensify such shock. Among the grimmest of these moments is the sequence in which the camera surveys a collection of torture instruments, presumably used by the Baathists on their opponents. Here, the condition of alien consciousness becomes the burden of alienation: knowing what these tools must be for, we cannot imagine yet cannot *not* imagine their use. The brutally inert state of the collection (merely instruments) intimates, by contrast, the obscene excesses of the torturer's imagination (never merely instrumental). A comparably visceral revelation occurs in the sequences concluding the film. Offered a sustained view of burning oil wells and of the harrowing labour involved in their capping, we are shocked to discover, at film's end, that the crews extinguish the flames only to rekindle them. The strategy is perverse, but hardly absurd: epitomizing what Naomi Klein has since termed "disaster capitalism," it perpetuates infrastructural and ecological catastrophe in the interests of maximum profit. Those employed to repair the devastations of war—to redress some of the damage done by the Baathist régime—manage instead to compound that damage, thereby dramatizing the scope and scale of attackability's attachments.

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This reading captures the force of Herzog's defamiliarizing strategy; yet it also underplays his quite tenacious refusal to reckon the specifics of Operation Desert Storm. Like a modern-day *Bartleby*, Herzog insists on preferring not to admit that *Lessons of Darkness* is in any way about the first Gulf War: "In 300 years' time, it will still be unimportant for [viewers] to know the historical facts behind this film. *Lessons of Darkness* transcends the topical and the particular" (*Herzog on Herzog* 245). Nadia Bozak finds, in such "stubborn refusal to contextualize" the film's subject matter, both critical power and continuing relevance: to her, the film avoids or indeed eclipses the merely artefactual in order to achieve a kind of perpetual revision and redeployment of contemporary warfare's cinematic weaponry—what she terms "firepower"—against military hegemony itself (25). But such an interpretation abstracts what I would call amnesia's double bind—those eventualities in which forgetting the particular serves to advance the aims and ends of imperial attack. In *Lessons of Darkness* as in *Jarhead*, the conditions and perspectives of the attacked populace remain largely immaterial; indeed, the lessons in question tend to posit the untranslatability (and thus reify the otherness) of the war's Kuwaiti and Iraqi survivors. The effort to transcend the particular makes war metaphysical—as in *Jarhead*, a condition beyond time. In this respect,

at least, art-film risks reinforcing the amnesiac tendencies of the media culture it appears to critique.

Against the metaphysical abstraction of war, a more insistently materialist reckoning of the dialectical pressures of contemporary warfare will need, among other things, to ask what attackability enables in the present moment and how, exactly, it reverberates across late capitalism's social and political fields. Indispensable, in this regard, is the analysis offered by the Retort collective in *Afflicted Powers*. For Retort, "[w]ar ... is modernity incarnate" (79)—not merely an alternative to politics but the very fullness of politics under capitalism. The practices, the logistics, and the damages of warfare together serve to advance what Marx called subsumption.¹⁰ As Retort observes with regard to the arc of modern US history,

[D]espite often inchoate rationales and uncontrollable specific outcomes ... each military intervention is intended to serve an overall strategic project of pressing American power—and the potential for Western capital entrenchment in 'emerging markets'—ever further into vital regions of the globe. (81)¹¹

The Retort authors give a devastating account of US militarism, showing that the "structural template of American imperial expansion" has, despite considerable variations in tactics, remained constant over two centuries (93). They use this history to demonstrate the insufficiency of any single explanation—whether the need for oil, or domestic politics, or commitment to Israel, or Bush family pride—for the current war in Iraq. The drive to attack is, instead, systemic, inextricable from the fuller history of imperial war. Rather than attempting to transcend the particular, Retort excavates its conditions of possibility.¹²

In so doing, they show that "peace, under current arrangements, is no more than war by other means": "States are deeply war machines, and the peace they make is the peace of *pacification*" (94). The violence at issue is historical rather than elemental: perpetual war is not at all an existential or metaphysical absolute; it is, instead, an entrenched, enduring component of capitalist production and reproduction. And as a result, the imposition of peace through state terror animates, for Retort, the contradictions

of capitalism. “[W]ar’s service to capital is to set the stage for the trinity of crude accumulation: the enclosure and looting of resources; the creation of a cheap and deracinated labor force; and the establishment of captive markets” (100)—aims that need not succeed in the present, so long as they keep alive some subsequent potential for investment. Hence attackability’s prospective tendency: the will to attack requires a violent market in futures; the permanence of permanent war entails less the grinding constancy and more the looming possibility of combat. In effect, attackability names an incipience. The argument helps to illuminate the perpetuity, yet also the precariousness, of attackability’s attachments: empire quite literally cannot afford to give up the volatile business of war.¹³

The emphasis here must fall on the volatility at issue. Although, according to David Harvey, neoconservative militarism emerged in the present moment to correct the unruliness attending the implementation of a neo-liberal ideology (81–6), attackability’s destabilizing power remains difficult to ignore. Indeed, in the current global moment, attackability seems more and more to compel and be compelled by what Neil Smith calls “disastrous accumulation.” Warfare provides one means of producing and reproducing those crises on which neo-liberal economics thrives, decimating infrastructure and eviscerating sociability in advance of corporate takeover. In “Baghdad Year Zero,” Naomi Klein offers just such an analysis of the current war in Iraq, suggesting, in an argument that resonates with the one made by Retort, that in bombing Baghdad, the Bush administration sought to create a lab for a nakedly free-market economics, complete with a whole population of abjected, compliant test subjects. (As Klein goes on to argue, the plan failed to envision what proved to be its alternative: full-scale insurgency.) More broadly, the open-endedness of empire’s contemporary state of emergency—in which the spectre of jihad serves to legitimate or, indeed, *instinctualize* attackability among the peoples of the global north—effectively serves to naturalize war’s event, turning war into a force of nature. And, as Smith notes, “What gets to count as natural is one of the most deeply political questions in any society” (771)—not least because the political production of such modes of nature manifests the amnesiac conversion of history into inevitability.

At stake is a pedagogical process of habituation, the kind of training theorized so incisively by Bourdieu: educating a body of citizen

(or indeed corporate) subjects to be alive to the supposed necessity, and dead to the manifest outrage, of the incipience of attack.¹⁴ Such habituation—the naturalizing manufacture of attackability’s instinct—tends, in the contemporary moment, to occur spectacularly, through visual mediation. The objective, though, has little to do with distraction in any simple sense. Instead, as Jonathan Beller demonstrates, under capitalism, to look is to labour: attention to spectacle entails a decisive mode of biopolitical production, harnessing human consciousness, sensation, and affect to the relentless circuits of capital. No surprise, then, that, as capitalism increasingly puts human attention to work, so attackability mobilizes looking to ensure its attachments. Yet the workings of spectacle can still confound the aims of empire. As the 9/11 attacks and, in a different register, the Abu Ghraib atrocities both dramatize, image-control is hardly total and sometimes has the capacity to undo itself.¹⁵ As a result, it is more and more urgent to learn to look askance at empire’s spectacles—or, perhaps more accurately, to learn to look through them, so as to gauge their spectral vacuity.

Notes

- 1 *EM:HE* began as a TV special, with the result that its early schedule was erratic—only subsequently did it turn into a regular series. The inextricability of “home” from “empire” implicit in the *EM:HE* example is hardly new—it has had a long life in US politics and culture. For a superb theorization of some origins of the interface, see Amy Kaplan’s analysis of “manifest domesticity” (25–50).
- 2 Seymour Hersh’s *Chain of Command*, bringing together investigative reports first published in *The New Yorker*, remains an indispensable resource for understanding the fully systemic cast of the US military’s torture culture. This culture, and especially the function of photography within it, may be taken to exemplify the operation of traumatic spectacle within what Seltzer calls “the pathological public sphere” (27).
- 3 Žižek’s immediate subject involves NATO’s bombardment of Bosnia, but his argument is prescient with regard to Iraq. The facialization I’m describing finds its compelling counterpoint in the montage that opens the recent *Frontline* documentary on the Iraq war—a sequence moving from the falling statue of Saddam outward through a montage of images from the war and resolving, finally, into a portrait of George W. Bush (see “Bush’s War”). The face behind the face of Saddam’s régime is, graphically, Bush’s; the sequence recollects the claim advanced by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari that “the face is a horror story” (168).

- 4 Michael Rogin is a touchstone for my understanding of amnesia; see also Sedgwick's theorization of "the privilege of unknowing."
- 5 Ironically enough, the film screening is interrupted before the episode in Coppola's film plays out—another instance of the frustration of catharsis in *Jarhead*.
- 6 The question is less surprising in view of Paul Virilio's definitive theorization of the importance of cinema to modern warfare. As he argues, "[W]ar consists not so much in scoring territorial, economic or other material victories as in appropriating the 'immateriality' of perceptual fields. As belligerents set out to invade those fields in their totality, it became apparent that the true war film did not necessarily have to depict war or any actual battle" (7). When any film is (potentially) a means of waging war, the "war film," as such, becomes a redundancy. The problem of immateriality Virilio describes has become increasingly central to theoretical debates since the publication of *War and Cinema*; see, e.g., Hardt and Negri's analysis of the importance of immaterial labour to the contemporary moment and of the capacity of capital to colonize every dimension of human attention; also Beller's bracing theorization of the cinematic mode of production, to which I refer in my conclusion. It's worth noting that the seeming critique of imperial adventure in *Apocalypse Now* is compromised by the fact that the helicopters used in the episode were borrowed from the Marcos régime, which had received them in turn from the US military.
- 7 That Coppola presumes the substitutability of Ifugo (Philippine) for Montagnard (Vietnamese) tribespeople only compounds the difficulties in the episode.
- 8 Theodore Roosevelt's *Rough Riders* uses the same trope to make the opposite point: for Roosevelt, the invisibility of the enemy serves to highlight, by contrast, the unrelenting embodiment—and so the vitality, not the futility—of the imperial warrior (54).
- 9 Alternately, the shelling of a "wilderness" that may or may not conceal human combatants could be said to indicate the biopolitical extremity and ecological catastrophe—and thereby what Bill Brown would term the material unconscious—of imperial warfare. I am indebted to Mike Epp for this insight.
- 10 See Marx's analysis of the formal and real subsumption of labour under capital.
- 11 The argument helps to identify and historicize the rise of private military contractors—the Blackwaters and Haliburtons—as symptomatic of capital's neo-liberal incarnation, yet also to expose the simplicity of moralizing rants against such contractors precisely by showing how every era of capitalism features the combination and calibration of military modes (nationalist or mercenary, statist or

corporatist) proper to its dominant tendencies. The point, to paraphrase Richard Ohmann's argument about mass culture, is not to declare that privatized armies are better or worse than their national counterparts; it is rather to comprehend in what ways and to what ends each serves the historical interests of capital.

- 12 The simultaneous emphasis placed by Retort on war in capitalist modernity and in US history may be taken as a tacit rejoinder to the branch of globalization theory, epitomized by the work of Hardt and Negri, that associates the contemporary moment with the eclipse of the state form. Whereas in *Multitude* Hardt and Negri tend to emphasize the dynamics of imperial (or networked) as opposed to state-driven warfare, Retort seeks to track the passage of capital's imperial power through the militarist membranes of the US state. Ellen Meiksins Wood goes even further, arguing that the imperial ambitions of contemporary capitalism cannot do without the military capacities signal to the state form. As my citations indicate, I draw inspiration from theorists on both sides of this debate, which interests me most in indicating that, whether eclipsed or not, the state remains a problem, and an urgency, within cultural critique.
- 13 Wood makes a similar argument, noting that "[i]t is [the] endless possibility of war that imperial capital needs to sustain its hegemony over the global system of multiple states" (165).
- 14 Margrit Talpalru has shaped the way I understand the concept of corporate citizenship; her doctoral research, when completed, will supply an indispensable resource on the topic. For a useful analysis of pedagogy in the contemporary moment, see Giroux; for a trenchant history of the pedagogical program of imperial terror, see Gill.
- 15 Retort goes so far as to suggest that the 9/11 attacks rendered visible the prospect, the spectacle, of imperial defeat in the image realm (19).

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