

“Catching Sight of the Permanent Possibility of War:” Images of Totality and Words of Peace

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Introduction

In *Totality and Infinity* (1969), a landmark critique of the Western philosophical tradition, Emmanuel Levinas poses the provocative question: “Does not lucidity, the mind’s openness on the true, consist in catching sight of the permanent possibility of war” (21)? Levinas asks, in other words, whether knowledge of the truth—as truth has been “seen” in the western philosophical tradition? is in some fundamental way related to the war.

War for Levinas, a survivor of Hitler’s holocaust, has very particular conceptual and sensual associations and overtones. Above all, Levinas associates it closely with the cold, “harsh” light of objectivity or “objectifying thought” (24, 28). He also understands it to be related more specifically with the “neutrality” and “impersonality” of light and vision, and particularly with what he calls the panoramic, “synoptic and totalizing...virtues of vision” (43, 23). Using his own particular language and references, Levinas characterizes this as follows:

We do not need obscure fragments of Heraclitus to prove that being reveals itself as war to philosophical thought... In war reality rends the words and images that dissimulate it, to obtrude in its nudity and in its harshness (21).

The obtruding “nudity” and “harshness” that Levinas attributes to war are characteristics that reveal themselves most clearly through vision. Levinas also emphasizes in this passage how this revelation of truth through war has been a part of western philosophical tradition from its earliest days—from the time of pre-Socratics like Heraclitus.

However, Levinas’ philosophy does not simply dwell on the negative and war-like characteristics of the philosophical tradition that has come before it. Levinas’ thought is more concerned with peace, intimacy and what he terms “infinity” than with war, objectifying vision, and what he calls “totality.” Infinity for Levinas actually entails an understanding of “peace” which is associated much more closely with the spoken word rather than with “vision” (23). Instead of being a part of the “synoptic and totalizing...virtues of vision” Levinas sees infinity as being “produced as [an] aptitude for speech” (23).

Unlike vision, speech has the potential to open up a relationship of dialogue with others or with what Levinas terms more abstractly “the other.” The other is something that by its very nature cannot be comprehended in its totality, or reduced to some limited principal or frame of reference. It always “exceeds” or goes beyond these, and is precisely in this sense infinite. This “other,” as Levinas explains, exemplified above all in “the face:”

the way the other presents himself, *exceeding the other in me*, we call the face. This mode does not consist in figuring as a theme under my gaze, as a set of qualities forming an image. (50-51, emphasis in original)

Such a relationship, in other words, does not unfold through a series of prefigurations or predeterminations. It becomes manifest, as Levinas explains, in a “relationship of conversation” in which the other consistently “transcends” and “exceeds” calculation, control and even intentions or intentionality themselves (49-51).

It does not require a significant leap of the imagination to understand Levinas' conception of an all-encompassing, objectifying vision as manifest in recent wars ?perhaps especially those in the Iraq and the Persian Gulf: aerial images of "weapons factories" used as a *casus belli*, the lines of tracer-fire and armament explosions lighting up the night sky, video feeds from fighter jets or guided missiles, and the oft-repeated image of a captured Saddam Hussein and of his statue being pulled to the ground: All of these and other "visions" seem to speak simultaneously of the ubiquity and all-encompassing nature of the images of war delivered to us by the media, and also of their objectified, fixed, orchestrated and controlled nature.

This paper explores the themes of vision, control, war and silence (or the absence of speech or conversation) in the context of the most recent of the wars in the Gulf, and the context of the post-9/11 North America generally. It will consider these themes by looking at images purveyed by the media and by government, and by comparing these to the less formal and coordinated imagery visible in the form of street- and protest-art. It will contrast the visual attributes exemplified in the former with the potentially "conversational" characteristics of the latter, and provide suggestions of how these characteristics can be cultivated in student art work.

Wars and Visions of Wars

Levinas' association of vision with war can be further understood in terms of the characteristics of sight and hearing as everyday sensory phenomena. Such characteristics have been explored perhaps most compellingly by phenomenologists ?specialists in the theory and substance of "lived experience" or the "lifeworld." Irwin Strauss (1963), for example, describes the manifold nature of the senses of vision and hearing by examining commonplace phrases and expressions associated with them:

None of the modalities [of the senses] plays only in a single key. But in each of them the basic theme of self-and-other varies in specific ways... We "cast a glance" at something, "fix" something in our vision, let our eyes "rest on" something; but we "follow a call..." [we] "have to be told..." We say of someone who obeys us that he "listens to us." The unusual power of sound stems from the fact that sound can be divorced from its source, and that, following this separation, sounding and hearing occur for us simultaneously. We can flee from something which is visible in the distance. But that which is heard —be it sound or word— has already taken hold of us; in hearing we have already heard. We have no power over sound, word, voice, or "voices." (378)

In contrast to the enveloping yet intangible insistence of sound, Strauss emphasizes the cool, dispassionate objectification that is possible with vision. "The sense of sight," as Strauss explains, relies on a separation between the one who sees, and "that which is being seen;" it is, Strauss says, "the sense of identification and stabilization" (375). The "stabilizing" "fixing" and "identifying" qualities of sight tend to be of obvious importance in situations of war or where the vigilance of a "war footing" is sought. Perhaps more accurately, it is *technologies* which *augment* or *multiply* the power of sight that are especially valued in these situations. In *Downcast Eyes* (1993), an examination of the phenomenon of vision in modern French philosophy, intellectual historian Martin Jay writes:

historians of technology have pondered the implications of our expanded capacity to see through such devices as the telescope, microscope, camera, or cinema. What has been called the expansion of our "exosomatic organs" has meant above all extending the range of our vision, compensating for its imperfections, or finding substitutes for its limited powers. These

expansions have themselves been linked in complicated ways to the practices of surveillance and spectacle, which they often abet (3).

Examples of important "exosomatic" visual technologies used in the two gulf wars include satellite imagery, unmanned surveillance aircraft, night vision goggles, and video feeds from fighter jets or guided missiles.

Total Information Awareness

Similar extensions of the all-encompassing, surveying, identifying and fixing powers of sight are also becoming more familiar on the "home front" of the so-called "war against terror." These technological extensions include video and infrared surveillance at borders, the development and implementation of facial, gait, and other "biometric" identification systems (Economist, 2003), and proposals for mandatory picture identification cards.

These surveying and identifying powers are emblemized with remarkable clarity in name and logo recently chosen for an important American "homeland security" initiative (figure 1: Original Logo of the "Total Information Awareness" Initiative).



Undertaken by the "Information Awareness Office" (IAO) of the Pentagon, this initiative has been named the "Total Information Awareness Program" (TIA). It is perhaps significant that this initiative is being undertaken under the auspices of DARPA, (the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency), the organization that developed and incubated the Internet in its early stages. In the case of the TIA program, DARPA is harnessing technologies developed for new generations of public information services and for the World Wide Web generally. To the dismay of privacy and civil rights groups (e.g. epic.org, 2004), the TIA initiative proposes to use these technologies in an attempt to "break down the stovepipes" that separate commercial and government databases" (John Poindexter, as cited in Healy, 2003). This initiative is utilizing what are called "ontologies" to determine relationships between various data labels used in different databases. Though a variety of inferential-logic and other algorithmic procedures, the TIA intends to be able to identify the "patterns" or "signatures" that terrorists are said to leave behind through their actions and transactions (IAO/TIA, 2003).

The original logo of the Total Information Awareness program shows the "eye of provenance" or the "all-seeing eye" from the American great seal and dollar bill. The illuminated gaze of this disembodied eye is directed at the globe, which it is presumably capable of surveying in its totality. As a document from the IAO itself explains,

the eye scans the globe for evidence of terrorist planning and is focused on the part of the world that was the source of the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. "*Scientia est polentia*" means "Knowledge is power." With the enabling technologies being developed by the office, the United States will be empowered to implement operational systems to thwart terrorist attacks like those of September 11, 2001. (IAO/TIA 2003)

The TIA logo communicates not only a supreme confidence in the totalizing power vision and the efficacy of technology to amplify it; but it also says something important about visual communication itself: Namely, the ability of the visual to powerfully suggest and convey meanings. This is registered in the fact that the logo has, not surprisingly, created an uproar among those concerned with the protection of civil liberties (e.g. ACLU, 2004). As the IAO itself puts it, the logo has "become a lightning rod and is needlessly diverting time and attention from the critical tasks of executing that office's mission effectively and openly..." (IAO/TIA 2003; p. 6). As a result of these problems, the IAO has recently changed the name of the program to the "Terrorist Awareness Program," and significantly revised the logo design. (In addition, its director, John Poindexter has recently been forced to resign not as the result of the controversial efforts of the TIA, but as a result of his attempts to introduce a controversial "terrorism futures market" [CNN, 2003].)

Delusion and Deceit

Another important aspect of the power of the images to powerfully communicate certain types of meanings and significance is also highlighted in Irwin Strauss' consideration of everyday sensory experiences (1963). Strauss underscores the power of the visual to provide indubitable *evidence* and *proof*. To illustrate this point, he uses the example of an investigator, "visiting the scene of the crime." The investigator, as Strauss explains,

is convinced that he can look for and find the scene of previous events; he is just as certain that the words which were spoken there are forever gone. He does not expect, if he is "in his right senses," that he can make that which was heard in the past audible to him. Because the audible is evanescent, whereas the visible endures, we write up contracts and affix our signatures after everything has been discussed and agreed upon. (374)

The visual, in other words, is able to provide proof that is less evanescent and therefore more definitive than what is heard: It is not the sound of the shot, after all, but the smoking gun that is valued as evidence.

The power of the visual as incontrovertible evidence can be important not only for surveillance and targeting, for example, but it can also play a significant role in the manipulation of public opinion in times of both war and peace. The characteristics of images both as incontrovertible proof and as a powerful symbol are perhaps most powerfully illustrated in the most recent Gulf War in the oft-replayed images of figures or statues of Saddam Hussein being toppled and images of dead or captured political prisoners including Saddam himself. One of the most significant of these events and also perhaps the most symbolically fraught is one that occurred on Fardus (Paradise) Square in downtown Baghdad on April 9, 2003. As the reader may recall, the widely televised moments of the event began with the image of an American soldier momentarily draping an American flag over a head of a statue of Hussein. As the crowd's loud cheers reportedly faded "the Stars and Stripes was removed from the massive statue and replaced with Iraq's black, white and red flag" (ABC, 2003). What followed, of course, was statue itself being pulled down by an American military vehicle, and the alleged celebration in the streets by Iraqi civilians.

Despite the apparent indubitability of the photographic images of these occurrences, this sequence of events and the corresponding images have inspired widely divergent comparisons and interpretations. For example, some sources compared it favorably to the fall of "the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Iron Curtain" (Kellerhals, 2003) while journalist Robert Fisk has described it as "the most staged photo-opportunity since Iwo Jima" (2003).

Perhaps significantly, the grounds for Fisk's remarkable claim are provided by yet another example of photographic evidence from the same event. This evidence takes the form of a number of wide-angle shots—rather than more selective, telephoto images? taken of the square from an elevation, and distributed by Reuters newswire. (These photographs are still currently available from <http://www.informationclearinghouse.info/article2838.htm>.) These images tell a very different story than the narrative suggested by much more widely propagated photos: First, they show the square to be blocked off by American tanks and other military vehicles; second, they make it clear that there are no more than 150-200 people in the large, and mostly empty square. In this way, these images undercut both the veracity and the symbolic significance associated with the more widely disseminated photographs of the event.

But empirical questions regarding the details of the event aside, the nature of the photographs, and the conflicting impressions and interpretations they can support suggests further important characteristics of the visual in general: Namely, its ability to delude, deceive and manipulate.

Semiological Guerrilla Warfare

The question of how to address the manipulation and deceit that can occur through vision and its enhancement in photographic and video media has become a significant concern in recent thinking about images and the visual in general. Unlike Levinas' and Strauss' characterizations of vision, this thinking tends not to look towards a comparative combination of the senses, or towards hearing and the spoken word as a way of overcoming the dominance of the visual. Instead, this set of ideas—which is associated above all with the French philosopher Jean Baudrillard? emphasizes the dramatic force of the visual and specifically, the power and autonomy images from

advertising and mass media. These images, according to Baudrillard and others, tend not to be about any one thing in particular; instead, they invite their viewers to adopt a certain lifestyle, present themselves in a certain way, or to simply to *be* a particular kind of person and accept a certain "reality." Accordingly, Baudrillard argues that these insidious images have become autonomous of any reality that they might claim to represent. Collectively, he labels them "hyperreality," "simulation" or the "simulacrum." Using the semiotic and psychoanalytic terms of the "sign" and the "real," Baudrillard (1983) describes his notion of the "simulacrum" as follows:

It is no longer a question of imitation, nor of reduplication, nor even of parody. It is rather a question of substituting signs of the real for the real itself; that is, an operation to deter every real process by its operational double, a metastable, programmatic, perfect descriptive machine which provides all the signs of the real and short-circuits all its vicissitudes.... The image... bears no relation to any reality whatever: it is its own pure simulacrum. (167, 170)

This absolute order of the image—"the empire of signs" as one author calls it—was seen by many to be exemplified in the 1991 Gulf War. The careful control of media coverage by the US military along with highly orchestrated images of hi-tech weaponry and destruction led Baudrillard himself to publish an article whose title provocatively proclaims "The Gulf War did not take place" (1995).

In the face of this absolute order of the image, the only form of resistance that seems available is to fight "fire" with "fire." Not to appeal directly to the reality of exploitation, injustice or war, but instead, to fight this barrage of carefully constructed signs with other signs that are also constructed strategically to persuade, coerce and to present an alternate "hyperreality." Again using terms borrowed from semiotics,

or the study of signs, author Umberto Eco (1986) describes this oppositional strategy as "semiological guerrilla warfare:"

...for the strategic solution it will be necessary, tomorrow, to employ a guerrilla solution.... The battle...is not to be won where the communication originates, but where it arrives.... For the receiver of the message seems to have a residual freedom: the freedom to read it in a different way.... I am proposing an action to urge the audience to control the message and its multiple possibilities of interpretation.... The universe of Technological Communication would then be patrolled by groups of communications guerrillas, who would restore a critical dimension to passive reception (143, 142, 138, 143, 144).

Semiological Street Art

An approach such as the one suggested by Eco can be seen to be exemplified in informal street art posted in opposition to the war Iraq in Paris during the spring of 2003. The first example of this art shown (figure 2: Photograph by the author, March 16, 2003) depicts an American dollar bill



Significantly, this artwork utilizes a symbolic vocabulary similar to that referenced in the "Total Information Awareness Office" logo — namely, icons or signs officially representative of the American state and of American power. But instead of an all-seeing eye, or a portrait of George Washington, the piece presents the dark image of a tank, with its barrel protruding. The implications of this juxtaposition of a weapon of war with symbols of commerce are manifold. On the one hand, this juxtaposition suggests that the economic and cultural authority embodied in the currency is actually itself derived from force, and not from negotiation or international mechanisms of trade. At the same time, this juxtaposition of symbols also suggests that the underlying reason for the war is perhaps not so much to rid the world of "weapons of mass destruction" or of a totalitarian dictator, but instead, that it is motivated by power, avarice, and monetary gain. In this way, this piece of street art can be said to invert or subvert important signs or symbols of American control or hegemony, restoring (as Eco says) a "critical dimension" to an almost invariably "passive reception" of the "message." A similarly powerful set of symbols is combined in the second image (figure 3: Photograph by the author, March 16, 2003),



which shows a caged dove, with a closed lock protruding from the right side of the cage. The meaning of these two juxtaposed signs or symbols in this second image is perhaps less ambiguous than the image considered earlier: The bird of peace has been trapped, and is being forcibly confined and prevented from taking flight.

Although both these pieces of street art can certainly be effectively interpreted in terms of the "semiological guerilla warfare" suggested by Eco, they can also be understood in as having a somewhat different function. For their significance is hardly exhausted in the challenge they post to the "passive reception" of the unreal "simulation" or "simulacrum" that is said to surround us. They can be seen as doing more than simply "substituting signs of the real for the real itself," as Baudrillard would have it. For the signs or symbols in these images, of course, also refer to very palpable meanings and concerns in the current political-historical situation: These realities include the economic and cultural authority represented by the American dollar, the negative and confining effects of war, and the connection between brute force and economic (and other forms of) power. It might also be suggested that in referring to or evoking such meanings and issues, these images provoke a significant response from viewers asking them to do more than simply re-interpret or re-arrange the signs produced by the "perfect descriptive machine" of the simulacrum.

One might even make the case that these two images invite "dialogue" or "conversation" in senses that perhaps have something in common with what Levinas means by these terms. The words appearing beside the image of the caged dove, for example, indicate that there *are* dialogical possibilities already implicit in the image: These words ask "Who will stop Bush?" Such a question underscores the fact that the picture also in some way directly addresses the viewer whether this viewer is a passerby, a pedestrian or a tourist. Its address is a question that, like the plaintive look of the bird itself, implicates

the viewer in the current political and historical situation in the possibility of unlocking the protruding padlock, and resisting the likelihood of war.

By doing this, this image makes use primarily of the symbolic potential of images and vision identified earlier: It communicates its message through the careful juxtaposition of two symbols whose meanings are self-evident, but that can mean very different things individually and in combination. It should be stressed that in both the image of the caged dove and of the American dollar, it is not any kind of photographic precision or verisimilitude that is of great importance. In both of these images, vision is not operating in its capacity as irrefutable or corroborating evidence. Instead, the visual qualities that are most important are the immediate recognizability of the individual symbols, and the arresting or clarity the effect or meaning of their juxtaposition. In a certain sense, these types of symbols are in the same category as pictographic signs that can be found on highways and in airports: they derive their meaning from conventional associations and the combination of such meanings.

There are a wide variety of examples of sets of such "iconic" images, and of ways that they can be combined to produce different types of effects. Many illustrative examples are available online. One interesting example of the juxtaposition of such images is provided by the recombination of visual "safety" symbols used in the Department of Homeland Security's "Ready.gov" campaign (see: Snyder, C. 2003; <http://distributethis.org/beryllium/side/readygov/>). Others are the stencil art of "Banksy" (Art of the State, 2003; <http://www.artofthestate.co.uk/subpages/banksy.htm>) that has recently caused a sensation in London, and the posters of el Cartel in Madrid (http://pagina.de/el_cartel). Each artist mixes familiar elements in unexpected combinations to provoke and address the viewer, while at the same time referring to a clear and concrete political situation. In

the art classroom, students can be encouraged to construct similar images by (photo)copying images from symbol dictionaries (e.g., Modley, 1976) or from online sources (e.g. Ralph, 2003), and by exploring the sometimes-startling effects that their juxtaposition can produce. This can be done, of course, to create messages with a wide variety of political, cultural and personal meanings.

These same principals can be extended by also leveraging the power of vision and specifically, of *photographs*, as irrefutable or corroborating evidence. This generally involves the juxtaposition of closely-cropped photographic images or reproductions to form what is frequently known as "photomontages." It is perhaps not insignificant that some of the first, politically-motivated photomontages emerged with the Dadaist movement in protest of the absurdity of the First World War and the conditions of the interwar period. Perhaps the most powerful examples in this connection are the works of the German John Heartfield (Helmut Herzfeld). These aggregate images juxtapose likeness of Hitler, Goehring and other Nazi leaders with situations that showed their real motivations and inclinations ?Hitler's connections with big business and big money, or Goehring's role as "henchman of the 3rd Reich."

There are excellent educational resources on Heartfield's photomontages and the historical circumstances in which they were created. "Heartfield," for example, is a Website that provides lesson plans and other educational materials (Martens & Konick, 2000; <http://www.towson.edu/heartfield/4.html>) illuminating this remarkable artist. Another is "Cut and Paste: A History of Photomontage," which featuring images created by Heartfield alongside those of his contemporaries, as well as a number of the 1980's and the present day (Palmer, 2004; <http://homepage.ntlworld.com/davepalmer/cutandpaste/intro.html>). These and other resources can be used in the art class to show the potential of the photomontage to express political,

social as well as more personal meanings. Students can be encouraged use, combine and alter photographic images from other news and advertising sources, and to explore the new significances that their alteration produces.

By exploring the effects produced by juxtaposing images from different sources, the construction of students' own meanings can be directly facilitated. Students can explore multiple possibilities of interpretation, rather than being the passive recipients of constructed meanings criticized by Eco. However, unlike Eco's semiotic guerilla "warriors," students should be encouraged to create the kinds of images that ?through their symbolism, juxtapositions and other characteristics? put an end to the metaphorical silence that is a part of the visual and totalizing characteristics of "objectifying thought." Fighting a figurative semiological guerilla war in opposition to a literal one would seem only to affirm and entrench violence as the only means for effecting change. Taking such an approach might only strengthen Levinas' vision of the "permanent possibility of war." Instead images need to be facilitated and created that engender the "production" of an "aptitude for speech."

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