

# THEATRE OF WAR : HIGH CULTURE AND POPULAR ENTERTAINMENT IN THE SPECTACLE OF KOSOVO

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## Abstract

It is no accident that we speak of "Theatres of War," for war is surely the ultimate fiction. I have been hideously fascinated by the way in which, in the absence of any significant external threat to justify state violence, aggressive war has become a form of spin doctoring by other means. Postmodern war, like all other parts of the Spectacle, can no longer be understood as "politics by other means." Such conflicts do make sense, but only at another level of explanation — that of their consumption. They stand in a line of development that goes back to the earliest dramatic rituals and comes to us through tragedy, opera, film and TV drama. Like soap opera, they need no end, for their characters are equally plastic and universal. Only for the people whose homes, lives and deaths serve as the raw material for this production, have the actions any meaning beyond the Spectacle.

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## Introduction

... je réclame de vivre pleinement la contradiction de mon temps, qui peut faire d'un sarcasme la condition de la vérité (Barthes 1957, 10).

*The Spectacle, though an attraction, is the least artistic of all the parts, and has the least to do with the art of poetry. The tragic effect is quite possible without a public performance and actors; and besides, the getting up of the Spectacle is more a matter for the costumier than the poet (Aristotle 1940, 20).*

It is no accident that we speak of "Theatres of War," for war is surely the ultimate fiction. The first great work of fiction — the *Iliad* — is an account of war, partial in every sense (like all social science), falsified and sanitised, the story told by the victors. Telling stories is telling lies, as B. S. Johnson (1964, 1973) points out. Telling war stories is telling lies to our children (and to ourselves) about the bestial deeds we committed. War, indeed is only sustained on the basis of these lies. As Dave Grossman (1995, 262-80) explains, soldiers cannot tell the truth of what has happened to anyone, even those who were there, without powerful social facilitators, such as experienced veterans who can reassure them and validate their experience. Those denied this release, like most Vietnam vets, are condemned to live in denial — which, in Grossman's phrase "eats you alive from inside."

The war-myths of bravery, comradeship, gallantry and courage under fire are slowly unravelling as the nation state loses its validity. As old soldiers from the great wars of modernism grow old and need to release their closely hidden secrets before joining their youthful friends in the great silent majority, we begin to see a new consciousness of the reality of conflict. Recent examples include *Regeneration* trilogy Barker's (1991, 1993, 1995) and Spielberg's *Private Ryan* (1998).

These works draw much of their force from the graphic description of the sheer *ungallant* brute facts of combat — not only the grisly spectacles of wound and mutilation but also the profoundly unglamorous physical and physiological effects detailed by Grossman's study: the incontinence of bowel and bladder, the vomiting and uncontrollable tremors, experienced not as a *reaction* to battle trauma but as an everyday accompaniment of the job.

At the same time, the virtuality of war is transformed. The sword and honour war comic tradition gives way to a bland postmodern elision. First in the Gulf war, which didn't happen, and now in the Kosovan action which is not even a war, death, rape, mutilation are things that happen to other people (significantly, not even to "our" troops) but are also perpetrated by other people (definitely not "our" troops).

Just at the time that military psychologists and creative artists are confronting the gross and brutal physical conditions of infantry combat, war on TV has taken Rambo out of the equation and replaced him entirely with Star Wars. The air war, the screen war, the computer war are clean, clinical and electronic. Only the bad guys walk around on the ground with bodies making physical contact with other bodies. Our wars have become gnostic wars, neoplatonist wars of the pure spirit against the corrupt flesh, extropian wars of the Digital against the Meat.

I have been hideously fascinated by the way in which, in the absence of any significant external threat to justify state violence, aggressive war has become a form of spin doctoring by other means. The stealth bomber and the laser-guided

weapon have become a branch of the entertainment industry, neither more nor less an element of the circus than parties with pop stars or celebrity funerals. This is my attempt to come to terms with the fact that from now on, just like politics, war will only be explicable in terms of aesthetic production in the service of hegemony. In the course of preparing it, I have been pleasantly ambushed by the discovery that both Aristotle and Shakespeare are revealed through a particular and selective reading of the *Poetics* and *As You Like It*, respectively, to have been precursors of the Situationist International.

## Integration of Mode and Media

*The tragic fear and pity may be aroused by the Spectacle; but they may also be aroused by the very structure and incidents of the play — which is the better way and shows the better poet* (Aristotle 1940, 36).

In the *Poetics*, Aristotle offers his famous account of the function of tragic drama — the purging of the emotions through the vicarious experience of Pity and Fear. This discharge of pent-up emotion, the catharsis, did not, in an age untroubled by notions of original sin or of fallen mankind, need to be explained in terms of the release of buried memories of trauma, as it has to do in the age of psychoanalysis. Still, drama and fiction, then as now, had therapeutic functions. They enabled the audience to get rid of something unhealthy within themselves, analogously to the way a purge helps us vomit up a poison. And the strongest medicine around, for the Stagyrite as for the Viennese, was that monolithic monument to conformity, Oedipus. Ultimately and fundamentally it is the feelgood of conservatism.

The next great flowering of the European theatre, Renaissance drama, in contrast, reflected a society in turmoil and a world gone mad. The function of the play had now gone beyond the merely medical — like psychoanalysis, something that started out as a cure for one thing got turned into an attempt to explain everything. The theatre now combined the functions of university, brothel, propaganda machine and debating chamber. From the proto-Frankensteins of Marlowe, to the proto-yuppies of Ford and from Webster's gothic horror to Shakespeare's polysemic soap operas, writers, actors and audience struggled to disentangle the knots of history and fate. And though it all marched War, in full armour. The function of the medium had been traumatically problematised, but at least the drama was still about the war, rather than the war being about the drama.

Between seventeenth century drama and film came one of the most profoundly significant artistic syntheses — the opera. Music had always had a role in theatre, just as narrative had often had a function for music, but in opera neither is an accompaniment to or a substrate for the other, rather the work is precisely in their conjunction — the magic comes from a chemical wedding. Mozart knew clearly what was the power of the multimedia experience of opera and saw its value as a political weapon (see Braunbehrens 1986). It was Wagner (see Skelton 1991), however, who fully theorised the music drama as a revolutionary action, a way of transforming the world. The way was now open for politics and theatre to seek ever closer union and to become inextricably enmeshed in each other and in the popular imagination with the coming of film. When D. W. Griffith put thousands of extras in uniform to recreate the civil war for *Birth of a Nation*, it was clearly only a matter of time before the boundaries got blurred. While these were still only pre-

tending to stage a war in front of cameras for political ends, it was not so great a step to staging a real war for the cameras. Orwell (1950) predicted it in 1984 and now it is in your living room every evening. Except that when Orwell described it, it still made sense to talk about the difference between truth and fiction.

Thanks to the development of digital technology, we do not need to worry about that stuff any more. Telecommunication theorists have been talking for more than twenty years about convergence. Convergence happens at many levels. Hardware converges, as when the phone system and the computers became the Net. Software converges with hardware as in the Mac, where the user cannot tell where one begins and the other ends. Work and leisure converge as we use the same technology for both and often in the same place. Information and entertainment merge — famously into the worst neologism of the eighties — infotainment. An interesting piece of convergence that hasn't received a lot of attention is that between games and life.

When we got our first 1 or 2K home machines or saw the earliest arcade games, it was always clear that you had to bring a lot of concept with you. The suspension of disbelief you would have needed, while playing *Space Invaders*, to believe it was anything other than an electronic version of shooting at metal ducks in a fairground would have been colossal. Similarly the earliest text based adventure games were quite obviously some sort of word play or logic problem, more like a crossword than an event in life. Remember this stuff?

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YOU ARE IN A CAVERN  
THERE IS A BIRD IN A CAGE  
THERE IS A LANTERN
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>TAKE BIRD
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YOU'VE GOT  
BIRD  
DAGGER
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>GO WEST
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YOU'RE IN A DARK PASSAGE
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Twenty years ago this was state of the art cyber stuff. Today, a halfway decent playstation will give you a pretty good representation in 3-D of the environment with which you are interacting and real-time conversations with the people there. If you are in a MUD game you may well not be able to tell which characters you are talking to are other players and which are pure software.

Not only has the games tech got fancier, the real weapons systems have moved closer to the games consoles. There is not much difference between real cockpit footage, library material, computer-generated simulations and game screens. It cannot be long before play station is actually more exiting than real war. Played from your living room they share the characteristic that you do not ever have to deal with the uncomfortably non-virtual metal bits colliding with targets out there in the screen. With home electronic voting, it is entirely possible that we will soon have the opportunity to decide to "police" some distant bit of the world, watch live as the attack takes place and even take turns in driving the missiles remotely. How about that for a vote catcher? That is what I call convergence. Never mind infotainment, welcome to theatricide.

## The Spectacle

The interrelatedness of art, politics and war (the latter two being now, of course, both continuations of the former by other means) has been a noted theme throughout the twentieth century. In the first half of the century most artists, (like most of the citizens of the world) were involved one way or another in wars. Film, the paradigm theatrical medium of that period, has consistently dealt effectively with the subject. In the latter part of the century, the paradigm theatrical medium, television, has failed utterly to deal with war. It has recycled old films, thus perpetuating cobwebby old propaganda stereotypes, treated it as material for comedy (in *Dad's Army*, *'Allo 'Allo*, etc.) or simply, when given the opportunity to see some real stuff, become as supine a mouthpiece and recruiting sergeant as were the music halls in 1915. In this it has been facilitated by the predominance of aesthetic over moral criteria in the selection of appropriate material for broadcast. This has often been crassly culturally insensitive. It was acceptable, for example to identify Muslim rape victims on camera but not to show pictures of corpses mutilated by bombs paid for out of our own taxes. It is, of course, prohibited by law to identify rape victims within Britain, where the social consequences are less likely to include exclusion from ones own family and permanent unmarriageability. It is also, of course, perfectly OK to show African corpses mutilated by African forces, since this is supposedly in some way less disturbing than when Europeans do it.

*The tragic pleasure is that of pity and fear. And the poet has to produce it by a work of imitation; it is clear, therefore, that the causes should be included in the incidents of his story. Let us see, then, what kinds of incident strike one as horrible, or rather as piteous. In a deed of this description the parties must necessarily be either friends, or enemies, or indifferent to one another. Now when enemy does it on enemy, there is nothing to move us to pity either in his doing or in his meditating the deed, except so far as the actual pain of the sufferer is concerned; and the same is true when the parties are indifferent to one another. Whenever the tragic deed, however, is done within the family — when murder or the like is done or meditated by brother on brother, by son on father, by mother on son, or son on mother — these are the situations the poet should seek after (Aristotle 1940, 37).*

The complicity of mass media in mass enslavement and mass destruction was most thoroughly theorised in the 50s and 60s by the Lettrists and particularly the Situationists. The classic texts remain Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* (1983) and Vaneigem's *Revolution of Everyday Life* (1994).

*In societies where modern conditions of production prevail, all of life presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles. Everything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation (Debord 1983, 1).*

*The spectacle is ... an experimental theatre. The human-consumer lets himself be conditioned by the stereotypes (passive aspect) on which he then models his behaviour (active aspect). ... We thus see the return of the original conception of theatre, of general participation in the mystery of divinity (Vaneigem 1994, 128).*

The Sits were the bastard children of an illicit liaison between the artistic avant-garde of Europe — leading a drunken and sedated life in the aftermath of its messy divorce from the people, who had commenced a torrid affair with American culture at all levels — and revisionist Marxism as exemplified by Lefebvre, from whom they inherited an awareness of the significance for theory of everyday life. Perhaps as a consequence of their parents' age and dysfunctional lifestyle, they developed a visionary sense at once acute and distorted. The everyday experience of life under the yoke of advanced capital was, they proclaimed, inauthentic!

The genius of the Sits was to take such an unpromisingly banal insight and, apparently without ever acknowledging either that every critic of every society has employed some variation on it, or that there might be anything at all problematic about the very notion of authenticity, manage to fashion a reasonably workable theory of revolution as theatre which played to packed houses on the left bank throughout May 1968.

The theory is essentially a variation of the false needs critique of advertising and consumer culture — that mass communication persuades us to want things we otherwise would not and so traps us, through false consciousness, into complicity with our oppression. The neo-liberal version of the false needs argument falls at the first fence, since there is no way within its philosophical ground to authenticate “true” desires or identify “false” ones. Instead it has to rely on a profoundly naive and untheorised notion of human nature and desires that can bear no scrutiny. Unless and until advertising's critics are prepared to take on a whole-scale reconstruction of economic life, they can offer no alternative to the stimulation of the market to take up excess production, which is the essential rationale of advertising.

Marxist critiques overcome that objection precisely by taking on board the fact that advertising is inextricably bound in with the capitalist mode of production. However, in a sense, this leaves them open to a different version of the same defence. Logically, their attack is not on advertising at all, but on the economic system. It is no more a critique of advertising than of, for example, management science, production accounting, hire purchase or any other of the other devices by which modern capitalism survives and transcends (however temporarily) its contradictions.

Debord's critique is perhaps, still the most robust version of the false needs argument, precisely because his attack on capitalism is mounted simultaneously at the levels of the political and the aesthetic, at production and consumption and expressly addresses issues of desire.

*Both the real fulfilment of the individual and the fulfilment of what we believe to be a major breakthrough in the concept of culture are impossible without a collective take-over of the world. Until that happens there won't be any real people at all, only shadows haunting things anarchically given by others (quoted in Gray 1998, 13).*

Indeed, Situationism appropriated many of the techniques and some of the artefacts of advertising, detouring them into revolutionary slogans and acts. Copywriters might be justifiably envious of those marketing a product whose unique selling proposition was that all customers would have their own cathedral.

The inauthenticity of the life we lead in the society of the spectacle derives from our complicity in a banal soap opera of consumption, scripted by brand man-

agers, copywriters and spin doctors. This adds new menace to Jaques' retort to the Duke's hackneyed invocation of the fool's comfort that there is always someone worse off than yourself:

Duke S: *Thou seest we are not all alone unhappy:  
This wide and universal theatre  
Presents more woeful pageants than the scene  
Wherein we play in.*

Jaq: *All the world's a stage,  
And all the men and women merely players.*  
(Shakespeare 1975, 55-56)

The Society of the Spectacle mirrors the Panopticon of Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*. While the prisoner in the Panopticon can be seen but can't see his oppressors, within the spectacle we see only the roles we adopt and act out our scripts without knowing we do so. The abiding image of this fusion of audience and performer, of the production and the consumption of theatre, is in Orwell's *1984* (1948) whose 2-way television was derided for years and is now installed in every bank, building society and car park. In pop psychology the existence of the unconscious script is admirably detailed by Eric Berne's "transactional analysis" (1964, 1975). Recent cinematic treatments of these themes can be found in *Wag the Dog*, *The Truman Show* and *Pleasantville*. The beauty of the fusion of performer and audience, from the point of view of the scriptwriter, is that it eliminates criticism.

Like any soap opera, the Spectacle is generally concerned with the prosaic and vulgar moralities of quotidian life; work, sex, petty crimes and infidelities. Equally like any soap opera it needs at times to inject something extraordinary to enliven our interest or to recapture us from a competitor. The Gulf war and the Kosovo campaign are, on this analysis, the equivalent of the Jordache murder, Pam Ewing's fatal car crash or Grace Archer's immolation (these cases, from *Brookside*, *Dallas* and *The Archers*, respectively, were all melodramatic (or, more properly, spectacular) plot devices to maintain audience share).

## A Critique of the Spectacle as Art / Entertainment

If we are to respond, then to these events, we need to do so in terms of a critique of their function as drama. I believe we can discern a clear line of development, from classical tragedy, through renaissance drama, grand opera, film and soap to the Spectacle. All these forms employ highly stylised representation and eschew anything that could be considered as realism. They rely heavily on the complicity of their audience in the use of genre conventions. One of these conventions, in all cases is the polarisation of characters as good and evil. From the operas of the mid nineteenth century on, however, emerges a bifurcation between two traditions of villain. In *verismo*, the evil, while stereotypically emphasised, was seen to reside in otherwise ordinary characters. *Carmen*, for example, is accursed, but she is recognisably an ordinary woman aside from the fatality of her sexuality. *Rodolfo* and *Mimi* are monstrous — he in his jealousy, she in her self effacing masochism — but they are ordinary people made monstrous by their desires.

Another tradition took its monsters from an altogether less everyday gene pool. *Bluebeard* and *Golaud* are not remotely ordinary; they are characters from a dark

and bloody realm of fairy tale. At the end of a career devoted to the emotions of art students, cowboys and prostitutes, even Puccini succumbed to the pressure always inherent in opera — an art form that is in itself monstrous — to produce a character of mythological scale monstrosity — the killer princess Turandot.

It is not insignificant in this respect that Puccini's market shifted during his career from the East to the West of the Atlantic. The dichotomy between *verismo* and mythology in grand opera is mirrored in a similar dichotomy between the great soaps of Britain and America.

British soap is the heir of *verismo*. The Cafe Momus from *La Boheme* and Carmen's tavern of Lillas Pastia are reborn as the Rovers' Return and the Queen Vic (the pubs in, respectively *Coronation Street* and *Eastenders*). The Ewing Oil Building of Dallas, on the other hand stands in direct line of descent from the spooky castles of Bluebeard (*Duke Bluebeard's Castle*) or Arkel (*Pelleas and Mellisande*). In *The Archers* or in *Emerdale*, recognisable grotesques, of the sort you might meet at a bus stop, play out their schemes and are thwarted by the collective activity of (pedestrian and flawed but generally decent) communities. Dynasty's Alexis Carrington is more like Clytemnestra or Medea than she is like Bianca (*Eastenders*) or Shula (*The Archers*). JR (*Dallas*) is not from the same universe as Dirty Den (*Eastenders*) he breathes the same Olympian air as Hercules, Tamburlaine and Wotan.

Similarly, for Europeans the Balkans campaign was understood as a domestic drama in which many characters contributed to restore the dramatic harmonies. In America it was the *Battle of the Titans*. American culture, of course, as always, predominated. What had begun as an attempt to achieve a messy but workable compromise turned into the War Between Good and Evil. Milošević, like Saddam before him, was transformed by the magic of television from the rather seedy head of a minor state to the Great Beast whose number is 666. This enabled his opponent to acquire an equally elevated and mythological status.

Bizarrely, our own British cast seem to have been carried along with this and to see themselves taking part, not in a gangland squabble but in the timeless struggle for Justice. It is as though Sinbad had been abducted by aliens who revealed to him the full knowledge of the War in Heaven and then returned him to the Close, inhabited by the spirit of the Eternal Champion. In what other terms can we explain the apotheosis of George Robertson into the ermined Defender of the West?

## (Lack of) Conclusion

I have tried to show that postmodern war, like all other parts of the Spectacle, can no longer be understood as "politics by other means," at least in the sense that this implies that material or territorial advantage is sought directly through the action. On the contrary, many conflicts, or "interventions" by imperialist powers since the final betrayals of European socialism by the Stalinist bureaucracies of the late 1980s, have served no discernable geopolitical purpose. The Gulf War, for example, often depicted by gung-ho American Rightists or by lumpen Trotskyists as being a conflict "about oil" has, in fact *put up* the cost of oil to the West.

Such conflicts do make sense, but only at another level of explanation — that of their consumption. They are "consumed in the image" (Barthes 1973, 88) by the people who pay for them; the increasingly supine and acquiescent majorities of the bourgeois democracies who engineer and pursue them.



They stand in a line of development that goes back to the earliest dramatic rituals and comes to us through tragedy, opera, film and TV drama. Like soap opera, they need no end, for their characters are equally plastic and universal. Only for the people whose homes, lives and deaths serve as the raw material for this production, have the actions any meaning beyond the Spectacle.

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