Has the Gulf War taken place yet?

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Shortly after the NATO intervention in Kosovo in 1999,Michael Ignatieff published a book called 'Virtual War'[1]. In it he argued that Kosovo was a new type of conflict,marked most particularly by the ability of Western nations to wage what he called 'war with impunity'. This impunity had two defining characteristics. Firstly, 'the citizens of the NATO countries… were mobilized not as combatants, but as spectators. The war was a spectacle… The events in question were as remote from their essential concerns as a football game' (p.3). Secondly, the sheer wealth of the West means that, even with relatively small defence budgets, we can afford to fight wars and not suffer noticeable changes to our standard of living. Both these conditions, Ignatieff argued, were new, and fundamentally altered the nature of global power relations. 'If Western nations can employ violence with impunity, will they not be tempted to use it more often? The answers… are not obvious. For the future depends not on us but on our enemies. They, like us, are drawing their own conclusions from the way we seek to avoid the mortal hazard of war' (p.5). Contained in Ignatieff's words is a warning: as we continue to enjoy such absolute asymmetry of power, we find ourselves inexorably drawn into other asymmetries: the only options available to the 'enemies' of such nonchalant belligerence are terrorism and guerilla warfare.

So it is that only three years after the book's publication, its prophesies having come to pass, we must yet again find new theorisations of the global order, even whilst that order is still mutating. It has been suggested that we should put our deliberations to one side until the sandstorm abates and the vista becomes clear again; however, is it not possible that this new state of flux *is* (for some time to come, at least) the new world order? 'Stability' is supplanted by contingency, impunity by uncertainty, war without end, Amen.

If we return to Ignatieff and consider the way in which he describes the nascent phenomenon of 'virtual war' at the end of the twentieth century, we might find some ways of drawing out historical threads that can reconnect us with the world before September 11th 2001, when Ground Zero initiated an American Year Zero every bit as all-consuming as that of the Khmer Rouge or the Jacobins. We might trace some background to current crises in conceptions of 'democracy' and 'society', in addition to offering some correctives to what may be an occasionally deterministic or premature account on Ignatieff's part. This is a complex investigation,however, since we're dealing with two sets of schismatic events; first the 'virtualisation' of war, as Ignatieff sees it, with all the changes concomitant to that, and subsequently the attacks on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon, and the commencement of the War on Terror. We therefore have to address two mutually interdependent determinisms, both of which are claiming, to a greater or lesser extent, to have witnessed the end of the world as we previously knew it.

Virtualities

Most of Ignatieff's book is composed of articles and essays republished from other sources; only the concluding chapter (also called 'Virtual War') was written specifically for the book. It's this chapter and its contentions that I want to consider in detail here, and to follow up. Before I begin that consideration,however, I want to examine some of the different potential meanings of the term 'virtual'; Ignatieff uses it pointedly, in a specific context, but it has a variety of resonances that we should not overlook. These days, the word is most often used to refer to concepts and technologies connected with cyberspace and 'Virtual Reality' (a technology which,significantly, is almost always considered in terms of video games). Underlying all three of the meanings or connotations described below is a sense of some schism between the 'real' and the 'simulated'[2]. War, it is routinely and blithely asserted in the media and by philosophers, political theorists and strategists, is now little more than a computer game[3]; Ignatieff comments, 'The bombing of Baghdad was the first war as light show and the aerial bombardment of Iraqi forces was the first battle turned into a video-arcade game' (p.168). Bear in mind two things, as you read on. Firstly, the phrase 'shock and awe' was briefly registered as a trademark by Sony, before they decided that this was in 'bad taste' (does this mean that the war in Iraq will not be coming to a Playstation™ near you soon? Of course it will, they just decided to do it with better taste). Secondly, the ubiquitous web video provider, Real.com, made this the first pay-per-view war. It 'offered' users of American media websites such as CNN.com and ABC.com the 'opportunity' to pay a subscription to view their live video streams from Baghdad.

Most immediately, then, 'virtual' refers to the way in which not only the everyday citizenry, in the West,are now removed from the fighting (mobilised, in the overwhelming majority, as spectators, rather than as conscripts or munitions workers), but so also are the military leadership themselves.According to the rhetoric of 'precision bombing' and 'smart warfare', war is fought remotely, with computer- and satellite-guided armaments.

The second level of virtuality concerns the increasing mediatisation / mediation of the war, the manner in which it has been delivered to 'us' spectators—as in a recent history of war reporting, from Vietnam to Qatar, Basra and Baghdad. Following the significant impact that images of the fighting in Vietnam had on public opinion in the US (and remember here the UK and US governments' contrived dismay at Al Jazeera's broadcasting of images of civilian casualties[4]), Western governments knew that, as communications technologies developed, much tighter control of the media would be required during wartime. The Falklands war took place only twenty years ago, and yet at the time footage still took two weeks to make its way back to TV studios in London. Reporters in the Falklands,'embedded' as they were with the military, were generally much more compliant than their colleagues had been in Vietnam, taking a clearly 'patriotic' line rather than raising issues about the worth, or conduct, of the conflict (hardly surprising when even Michael Foot, then Labour leader, was falling over himself to express his support for the war). For the military, the Falklands was a media success, questions concerning the sinking of the Belgrano only emerging some time after the war.

It was not until a decade later, however, that the so-called new technologies started to change fundamentally the manner in which war was covered; nor was it necessarily in the way that is so often described. War reporters in Kuwait were the first to be able to take advantage of new satellite transmitters portable enough to be used in the field, meaning that live pictures of a war could, in theory, be beamed around the world; in addition, CNN was the first broadcaster to be able to offer twenty-four hour coverage of a war[5]. However, military concerns about what live TV coverage might potentially mean for the execution of a war strategy led to tight controls,such as the pooling of sanctioned video footage. Thus the news networks had all the technology required to cover the war as it happened, but were able to say almost nothing about it. What we were offered instead was the war as a pyrotechnic display, at a safe distance, even when, paradoxically, the images might be coming from the nose of an airborne Cruise missile.

Successive technological developments in the ten years since the Gulf have accentuated this dichotomy between filling the schedules of rolling news channels and extended bulletins and actually finding something to report.Sony made an earlier appearance in the virtualising of war when it transpired that their walkman-sized DV editing decks were a great favourite with the Kosovan Liberation Army. The KLA became extremely adept at turning out propaganda and handing it, broadcast-ready, to journalists desperate for a story. It seems that US and British forces have taken this tactic into the mainstream with some relish in recent weeks; and now, of course,the journalists are conveniently placed within the army, ready to receive the story 'as it happens' (or perhaps, as it is 'helped into happening').

Finally, there is a sense in which the war in Iraq is virtualised simply because the political systems which justify (demand) it are themselves no more than the simulation of politics. In a supposedly 'post-industrial','post-ideological' age, we are denounced as naïve if we even lament this turn. Thus Baudrillard famously described the Gulf War as 'the absence of politics pursued by other means'. Public political life no longer exists in the neo-liberal even-newer world order, where pragmatism rather than principle dictate policy. A simulated politics gives rise to a rolling war with no clear justification or endpoint (currently the choice is between régime change and the destruction of weapons of mass destruction, and there's no clear indication yet where the roadshow will visit next).

Debunking the myth of isolationism (a further aside)

Isolationist exceptionalism—the sense of the United States being a city on a hill, safe from the fratricide of Europe—runs deep in the American electorate (pp.178-79).

It's become a cliché to describe the way in which September 11th roused the US from its slumber, forced it to slough off its isolationism, to re-engage with global politics, and so on. The truth of these statements is usually seen as self-evident,but should proof be required,America's former unwillingness to commit even to humanitarian and peacekeeping missions around the world (or at least to commit its infantry) is cited.

The idea that America pursued anything approaching an isolationist policy in the decade after the end of the Cold War is blatantly untrue. The 1980s saw a series of both covert and open interventions in Latin America, and continued US support for friendly despots elsewhere. Following the implosion of the communist bloc, the US Army did not abandon its many bases around the world, nor did the CIA cease to seek to influence the geopolitical order on the basis of US self-interest. That the US assists the continuing illegal Israeli occupation of Palestine is but one example of this, although Israel is one of very few steady themes in what is otherwise a capricious and opportunistic foreign policy.

The point of all this is simply to reiterate that 'virtuality', in all the above senses, has not delivered us into a 'post-territorial' age. And whilst there seems to be an overwhelming urge in the media and in political circles to describe the way in which everything changed after September 11th,such that the rupture threw up 'new realities', this is also misleading; what we find, in fact, after September 11th are persistent themes made more clear. One is that the physical presence of US forces in bases around the world is not only more important now than it was before (indeed the US can only conduct its wars with such impunity by both maintaining and strengthening these commitments), but that this global presence never really went away just because of the onward march of virtuality. Furthermore, even though openly illegal unilateral wars may have been frowned upon by the Clinton administration,the idea that before September 11th the US was a sleeping giant, a benevolent superpower reluctant

to interfere in the affairs of others, is quite clearly and demonstrably a myth.

Precision bombing, virtual armies, propaganda, lies and the new nation state

Ignatieff claims that 'precision weapons', armaments that could be remotely guided and controlled, were first developed in Vietnam, a war definitely not fought with impunity. He describes the way in which new conventional weaponry became a necessity due to the nuclear stalemate of 'Mutually Assured Destruction' (MAD):

> The beauty of such weaponry was that, unlike the nuclear arsenal, they could be used. But only in a certain way. To make the use of these politically and morally acceptable, it was essential to increase the precision of their targeting;... and to reduce, if not eliminate, the risk to those who fired them... (p.164).

He goes on to state that Western advances in computer technologies, often explicitly led or commissioned by the military, finally sealed the fate of the Soviet Union. As Moscow clung to an industrial economy of scale, the US responded by committing itself to the new technologies. Ignatieff cites Mikhail Gorbachev, who described evidence of Star Wars (Reagan's short-lived space-based Missile Defence System, recently revived by Bush Jnr.) as the one development which forced the Soviet Union's capitulation[6].

Ignatieff goes on to describe some other attributes of precision warfare, noting that 'the aim of post-modern warfare' is not 'attrition and destruction', but 'to strike at the nerve centers—command posts, computer networks—which direct the war-machine… Command and control can be attacked both by direct missile bombardment and also by information warfare: electronic jamming, release of computer viruses, disinformation and propaganda' (p.169). This is virtual warfare in nearly all senses of the word.

'Cyberwar' is just an extension of the old-style propaganda warfare that Psychological Operations (PsyOps) teams have been churning out for decades. It's notable, however, now that journalists are on the battlefield and able to send their stories back instantaneously, how the propaganda war is much more consciously waged on the Home Front. Surely this is a central part of the 'post-modern war'? David Leigh, writing recently in the *Guardian*, highlighted three types of 'disinformation'.[7] He summarises these as follows. 'Level 1: Unconfirmed false reports presented as fact to make exciting news stories… Level 2: Disputed events presented as fact for propaganda purposes… Level 3: Military disinformation.' There are many ways in which news agencies and embedded journalists conspire, whether consciously or not, to assist in the propagation of these various levels of lying. Into what category, for example, would we place the infamous ITN pictures of Bosnian prisoners at Trnoplje? In that case, ITN camera crews, journalists and editors conspired to give the false impression that prisoners at Trnoplje were kept behind barbed wire in a 'concentration camp' (the barbed wire behind which prisoners were seen actually comprised the animal pen into which ITN had placed their camera)[8]. Much more recently, the toppling of the statue of Saddam in Fardus Square (conveniently just outside the Palestine Hotel where the international press were staying) has been shown to have been a stunt organised by the US military and its 'official' Iraqi opposition, flown in by the Pentagon a few days previously. No more than around 75 non-US personnel were present at the event, and the square itself was sealed off by US Marines while the stunt went ahead[9]. An equally important level of disinformation, which requires a great deal of complicity between reporters and the military, is that of simple omission. In recent arguments about the ethics of embedding, journalists have striven to assert that their integrity, their ability to smell a rat, to maintain their cynicism, remains intact. What the military realised early on, however, was that, so long as the *agenda* was set by them, it didn't really matter how it was reported. Could this be why 'non-embedded' journalists in Baghdad were labelled as the mouthpieces of the Iraqi régime by David Blunkett? (The vague accusations made by Blunkett were almost certainly directed most categorically at the *Independent's* Robert Fisk.)

The arguments surrounding precision bombing themselves come into the frame of the propaganda war:

> While precision guidance weaponry is supposed to reverse the twentieth-century trend towards ever greater civilian casualties, warfare directed at a society's nervous system, rather than against its fielded forces, necessarily blurs the distinction between civilian and military objectives. The most important targets have a dual use. Television stations transmit military signals as well as information. Power stations run military computers as well as water pumping stations and hospitals. There is no guarantee that war directed at the nervous system of a society will be any less savage than war directed only at its troops (p.170).

After the negative publicity generated by the bombing of the TV station in Belgrade[10] during the Kosovo campaign, the British government in particular was anxious to be seen to prosecute this war in as 'sterile' a manner as possible: this was the war in which the lights would be left on, demonstrating that in the four years since Kosovo precision warfare had once again advanced immeasurably. At the time of writing, the power and water are still off in Baghdad after several days (this no doubt due to the dastardly machinations of the otherwise invisible Ba'ath régime). This often repeated intention of the government, to strike at the régime and somehow leave the Iraqi people unmolested, alerts us to another 'new reality' that Ignatieff does not address. Whilst the government and media (and large, particularly hypocritical parts of the anti-war movement) assert that 'we' are fighting this war, collectively, as a nation, 'we' are not fighting 'them' (the Iraqi people, collectively, as a nation). So what entity, exactly, are we at war with? What is nationhood if it is not nation states who fight wars? Is it too now virtualised, in some way? The people of Iraq, we are told, are glad that the United Kingdom and United States—us—have liberated them, because 'we' have taken on their régime. Then again, the people of the United Kingdom clearly did not approve of this conflict before it started. This is, we learn, a new, oxymoronic phenomenon: an *imperial war of national liberation*. This should alert us to some profound difficulties in our understanding of what exactly the nation state is in this virtualised, post-September 11th world. It seems infinitely mutable; on the one hand, the 'democratic' nations who wage this war presume that the executive is entirely inseparable from the people who confer its legitimacy; on the other, the despotic 'rogue states' against whom this war is waged have an exclusively parasitic relationship to their subjects. Unfortunately there are plenty of good despots whose relationship with their people is as yet undetermined. In all cases the same dictum seems to apply: the Leader is the People.

Having won the Cold War by virtue of its high-tech, post-industrial economy, the West is now caught in a peculiar paradox of the 'virtual war'. Even though they allow servicemen's and women's lives to be saved and wars to be fought 'with impunity', the military resists the wholesale adoption of the new technologies and the new warfare, simply because it, like the old Soviet Union, depends on economies of sheer scale. A large army is 'reassuring' precisely because it mobilises, by implication, the threat of attack. As long as this cycle continues, the army can be confident that its future is guaranteed. A scaled-down, technological army, even if it possesses all the firepower and might of its predecessor, *appears* to be an acknowledgement that the 'threat' has diminished, and thus one of two things must happen: either people start to feel less secure, or, conversely, they understand that their security is no longer dependent on a large national army, and the armed forces' insulation from the vagaries of the information economy disappears. Ignatieff takes up this theme: 'If you have Cruise missiles, why do you need all those airplanes? If you have precision guided weapons launched from submarines, why do you need all those aircraft carriers and destroyers?' (p.172)[11].

Kosovo, then, was not really the 'virtual war' that it might have been, because the military did not want to adopt all the new technologies that the administration wanted to deploy. And in many ways, the war in Iraq has been both 'more new' (politicians now realise that they must at least make the appearance of wanting to kill fewer civilians, however credible that may be) and 'less new' (ground forces with heavy artillery were deployed, and tanks laid roads behind them in order to establish supply lines). Ignatieff highlights a previous conflict between generals in the army and defence chiefs in the Pentagon:

> ... the central claim of the new technological gospel was that computers, battlefield sensors and spy satellites could dispel the 'fog' of war—the chaotic uncertainty in which battles unfold; and eliminate the 'friction'—adverse terrain, climate, equipment failure, troop morale and other incalculable factors—standing in the way of military victory. Generals like Norman Schwarzkopf were skeptical: they had bitter combat experience of both fog and friction in Vietnam. They also knew that the 'systems analysts' of the Pentagon had promised then that new technologies married to new tactics... would dispel the fog and grease the friction of warfare. And they hadn't.
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> Vietnam veterans like Schwarzkopf were also angered by the argument... that putting troops on the ground was no longer necessary... Sooner or later, they argued, the army would need to put its soldiers on the ground to fight their way in and take and hold ground (p.173).

The very recent and open disagreements between General Tommy Franks and Donald Rumsfeld about the size of force that would be needed in Iraq are only the most recent example of a conflict that has been continuing for at least the last fifteen years.

Kosovo, Ignatieff maintains, occurred 'in mid revolution'. 'America… has not yet reorganized its troops around the strategic doctrine which the revolution in military affairs makes possible: air-lifted maneuver-based warfare by lightly armed squads, working in and around enemy lines, to call in high precision fires from naval and space based assets[12]. To some extent, America and its NATO allies fought a virtual war because they were neither ready nor willing to fight a real one' (pp.175-6). This throws up some confusion. After September 11th, should we conclude that the 'revolution' has been completed, since the tactical pattern Ignatieff describes sounds very much like that deployed in Iraq (at least those parts we know about); or is there a certain amount of 'fog' surrounding this too? Was this war more 'real', in that it (eventually) was waged in the most part by large infantry and Marine battalions, or more 'virtual', in that it deployed tactical airstrikes and 'precision bombing'?

Virtual democracy, virtual humanitarianism, 'virtual consent' and other hollow noises

According to US Marines, the US flag that was put on the face of Saddam on 9/4/03 was the flag that was flying over the Pentagon on September 11.

Writing only three years ago, Ignatieff was able to claim that '[l]eaders… address their electorates and afterwards pollsters consult samples of citizens to see just how far they support what the leader has in mind… When leaders call for more risk than an electorate will support, the polls pull them back into line' (p.177). Not this time. The government of the United Kingdom very nearly unseated itself, such was its determination to go to war in the face of public disapproval of such an action (including the largest demonstration ever held in the United Kingdom).

In a section entitled 'Virtual consent' Ignatieff writes that '[t]he power to give or withhold consent to war is an essential element of the freedom of citizens' (p.176), but goes on to note that in the years since the Korean War, no formal declaration of war has been made by either Congress of the Houses of Parliament.

> This bypassing of the constitution is assisted by linguistic subterfuge. Since constitutions state that war requires a declaration to be legitimate, the word 'war' never passes a leader's lips... The word 'humanitarian' figures prominently (p.177).

In the recent simulation of political dissent that immediately preceded this war, both on the streets and in the House of Commons, what actually happened? Tony Blair was able to override the wishes of the British people on this issue, not in spite of, but *because* we live in a 'democracy'. The question we should be asking is not 'how could this happen in a democracy' but 'what does democracy mean'. Members of Parliament were able to enter the House and vote on a government motion, and on various amendments, not on the basis of what their constituents might have wanted (those whom they are elected to represent), but solely on the basis of their consciences (and career ambitions). Thus 'consent',such as it was, was given to an illegal conflict, and this was not anti-democratic but *part of our democratic system*. There is surely yet another irony in the fact that our own democratic system allowed the clearly-heralded wishes of its citizens to be over-run in the name of providing 'democracy' to someone else. 'Our vision for the future of Iraq is of a country free of repression able to live peacefully alongside its neighbours and develop in a way its own people choose. I believe it is a progressive vision.' So wrote Tony Blair in a letter emailed to all Labour Party members after the vote in the Commons.

But if war in the future is sold to voters with the promise of impunity they may be tempted to throw caution to the winds. If military action is cost-free,what democratic restraints will remain on the resort to force?... Democracies may well remain peace loving only so long as the risks of war remain real to their citizens.If war becomes virtual... democratic electorates may be more willing to fight especially if the cause is justified in the language of human rights and even democracy itself (pp.179-80).

What has become apparent from the rhetoric that preceded and has accompanied the war, is that we are entering a new era where 'democracy' needs constant protection from a vaguely mobilised terrorist threat. That this is a circular argument should hardly need reiterating by now. Nor should it need to be said that 'humanitarian warfare' has delivered us—and this time quite without irony—to a state where peace is literally war. It's just so *easy* that way.

Ignatieff describes how the Anti-War campaign in the States helped to bring the Vietnam War to an end. One lesson of the virtual war is that, once it has started, it cannot be stopped by 'public disapproval'. This war, which needed no public approval to begin, could theoretically have been prevented by a sustained anti-war campaign, had that very clear mandate been reflected in the House of Commons. If parliament had voted against British involvement in the war, it is doubtful that American troops could have fought the war alone, from both the north and south of Iraq. However, once hostilities began, it was clear that the pretense of seeking approval was over.

Inconclusion

Some of Ignatieff's own conclusions can be held up and re-examined in the light of subsequent developments. Whilst they remain useful, there are a few points that are striking now for their premature obsolescence. 'Virtual war,' he writes, 'proceeds to virtual victory' (p.208). This is clear enough. When we consider the conflict in Afghanistan, can we say for sure when it ended, or even whether it has ended? The Gulf War never really ended, since US and UK planes carried on bombing Iraq in the subsequent twelve years.And what was the effective outcome of Kosovo? 'Wars fought in the name of the human rights of other nations' national minorities are bound to be self-limiting. We fight for victory and for unconditional surrender only when we are fighting for ourselves' (pp.208-9).

But this time round,according to one of the excuses at least, we were fighting for ourselves,to protect against the threat of Saddam's weapons of mass destruction. Or were we fighting for the human rights of the Iraqi people? Or to topple a régime that was no longer useful? At least this much is certain, there appears to be no way this war can ever really end, since there is no-one to surrender to the occupying army ('George Galloway', suggested one wag in the House of Commons). And the power vacuum which immediately followed 'liberation' has not gone away, despite the assertion that US and UK forces are now policing the streets of Iraqi cities.

For Ignatieff, of course, the concept of régime change *as an overt policy* was still a distant and unlikely possibility (even though, as I have pointed out, the US has been changing régimes covertly for many decades).

A rogue state is judged to be better than no state at all. A Serbia and an Iraq that remain intact, under despotic leadership, are both preferred to societies dissolving into civil war. And since—a further contradiction—Western nations believe in self-determination,they are unwilling to occupy these defeated states and rebuild them from the bottom up in a properly imperial fashion (p.209).

Yet this is precisely what we find ourselves confronted by now: virtual victory, for sure, in that it remains as inconclusive as any of the campaigns that Ignatieff lists; but for different reasons.'We' have toppled the régime, and 'we' will set about installing a new one, but in the interim 'we' do not want to take responsibility for the anarchy that ensues. And the transition will be long, and complex, and uncertain, and 'we' may not even get the régime we wanted in the end…

Ignatieff's arguments are tainted by a kind of determinism, an 'endism' (linked to the arguments propagated originally by Francis Fukuyama that we had reached the 'end' of history with the collapse of the Soviet bloc), that we should always be careful to avoid. This applies as much to prescriptions concerning the 'post-9/11 world' as to Ignatieff's pre-September 11th arguments about virtual war.

We can close by reconsidering one of the themes with which began this essay, that of terrorism. Conor Gearty, an expert on the way in which Western nations use the threat of terrorism to curtail civil liberties, wrote in 1997 on some paradoxes that this threw up[13]. After signing the Oslo Peace Accords with the PLO in 1994, the Israeli government was in a precarious position: it could not simply walk away from the White House saying that the terrorist threat was no more, since the fear of it had been so carefully fostered for the preceding 45 years. Nor could it admit as much. Thus, by agreeing peace, the 'moderate' Israelis effectively ensured their own downfall. The terrorist threat had to be re-articulated, but the 'people' refused to credit this re-articulation[14].

So the current terrorist threat must be kept alive, not diluted, if the same fate is not to befall the neo-conservative administration in Washington. 'If Western nations can employ violence with impunity, will they not be tempted to use it more often? The answers… are not obvious. For the future depends not on us but on our enemies. They, like us, are drawing their own conclusions from the way we seek to avoid the mortal hazard of war' (p.5). This is one of Ignatieff's prescient insights that remains unchanged by subsequent events, indeed it is substantially proven.

Speaking recently in Paris, Jean Baudrillard, who got into so much trouble for stating that the Gulf War 'would not take place', 'was not happening' and then 'did not take place', described a variation of this interrelationship[15]. Re-animating the 'Master:Slave' dialectic of Hegel, Baudrillard suggested that terrorism was now victorious. The Master, he said, was always that which 'gave life' to the Slave, 'he who has no right to his own death'. The suicide bomber, however, reclaims their own death, and thus unseats or deposes the 'Master'.America,however, still engaged in the work of mourning September 11th, is unable to control or 'own' its 'death(s)' and so becomes the slave. As US forces wander around the globe in search of retribution,they merely act a part which has already been written for them. But this revenge can never be exacted; if it were, if terrorism were 'defeated', 'we' should have to stop fighting it. Western governments gave life to the logic of the terrorist threat, but it surpasses their control, and cannot be readily extinguished,as Yitzhak Rabin discovered.

Perhaps this argument seems to overdramatise the effect that any informal or guerilla resistance can have against the only global superpower: there is really no 'dialectic' to speak of, we could argue,such is the asymmetry. Furthermore,the threat presented by Saddam Hussein, al-Qaeda, and whoever else may come into the frame,is massively overstated, for economic and political ends.Baudrillard does not mention (as Gearty implies) that if terrorism didn't exist,governments would have to invent it, so convenient is the 'threat' in justifying the withdrawal or curtailing of civil liberties. Whichever way we choose to approach this problematic, it seems 'we' have got ourselves into a quite intractable predicament by attempting to virtualise a world that, every so often, insists on asserting its own reality.

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Notes

1. Michael Ignatieff (2000) *Virtual War* (London: Chatto & Windus)
2. This is intensely problematic; virtuality is nothing new. Enlightenment ontology and epistemology, by constructing the sovereign subject *prior to the world*, also constructs the technological drive for mastery over the world that is at the heart of Virtual Reality. The world is objectified, turned into usable data,or 'standing reserve' in Heidegger's terms.VR,which places us literally at the scopic centre of a fantastic universe, fulfills the aims of modernity, rather than surpassing them. See Martin Heidegger (1977) *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays* (London: HarperCollins)
3. Bizarrely, one of those who has most recently criticised the media for turning war into a 'spectator sport' and a 'reality TV show' is none other than the gamesmaster himself, commander of British forces Air Marshall Brian Burridge.
4. See also www.informationclearinghouse.info
5. See TBN, 'Video from the Battlefield', http://www.umich.edu/~newzies/main/satellite/satelitevideo.html
6. Star Wars operates as a very efficient 'virtualisation of the threat'. Since governments rely on cultivating fear (of the threat of terrorism, or of hostile states,or of economic instability) to justify war (and thus maintain their power),Star Wars, a virtual weapons system if ever there was one, itself escalates the conflict, rather than pre-empting or preventing it.It is thus an offensive, rather than a defensive, weapon,as Gorbachev surely recognised.
7. David Leigh (2003) 'False witness', *The Guardian*, April 4th 2003, p. 19
8. See www.spiked-online.com/Articles/00000002D0E3.htm for an account of how *LM* magazine was shut down for daring to report this fabrication.
9. For a wide-angle shot of the square during the 'toppling', go to http://www.informationclearinghouse.info/article2838.htm
10. See http://www.srpska-mreza.com/library/facts/bombed-RTS.html for a contemporary account of the bombing from a Serbian political website.
11. He notes that in the decade after 1989 defence spending in the US fell from six to three percent of GDP (although after September 11th this has begun to climb again). In a recent lecture,he comments that even the reduced spending on defence (latest figures, for 2002,are $336 bn,or 4% of GDP) represents an enormous amount of money: only such a rich nation can put so little of its budget into defence and still fight wars without feeling the economic effects at home.
12. What Donald Rumsfeld, with no discernible trace of irony, called 'lightning war'. See http://www.rferl.org/nca/features/2002/02/01022002104506.asp
13. Conor Gearty (1997) *The Future of Terrorism* (London: Phoenix). See also Gearty, ed.,(1996) *Terrorism* (Aldershot: Dartmouth)
14. Interestingly, the foremost theoretical proponent of the terrorist threat was none other than Benjamin Netanyahu, precisely the figure who stood to gain from the downfall of the Oslo Accords.
15. For a French report on the discussion between Baudrillard and Jacques Derrida in Paris on the 19th of February, see http://www.humanite.presse.fr/journal/2003/2003-02/2003-02-21/2003-02-21-058.html