Improvised Explosive Designs
The film-set as military set-up

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To coincide with a September 2009 forum on Canada’s military role in Afghanistan the Canadian Embassy in Washington DC announced plans to stage a series of Taliban-led attacks on a mock Afghan village to be erected in the embassy compound. Twice daily, simulated IED blasts were to reverberate throughout the embassy courtyard spurring Canadian Forces personnel and medics to the scene where they would battle insurgents and attend to civilian casualties. While this proposed PR campaign was unique in terms of its stated function to engender greater respect for the efforts of Canadian Forces in Afghanistan, the building and destruction of ersatz architectural sets for playing out the theatres of war is not. Moreover, the utilisation of cinematic modes of production, specifically the design and creation of such provisional architectures (better known as film-sets), has been inextricably linked to the operations of tactical-training and warfare from WWII onwards. The collusion between cinema’s architectural expressions—its set designs—and the spatial strategies that attend the management and control of conflict is the broad subject of this essay.

“We intend to base the theater upon spectacle before everything else, and we shall introduce into the spectacle a new notion of space utilized on all possible levels and in all degrees of perspective in depth and within this notion a specific idea of time will be added to that of movement. Thus, theater will be utilized not only in its dimensions and volume but, so to speak, in its undersides [dans ses dessous].”—Antonin Artaud

In September 2009, the Canadian Embassy in Washington, DC announced plans to stage a series of Taliban-led attacks on a mock Afghan village to be erected in its compound. Twice daily, simulated IED blasts were to reverberate throughout the embassy courtyard
located halfway between the Capitol and the White House; an event that would likely send unsuspecting tourists and passers-by fleeing in terror down Pennsylvania Avenue. As Lieutenant-Colonel Douglas Martin, a military attaché at the Canadian embassy described it: 'It should provide the full flavour of hyper-realistic training. Absolutely, you are going to hear it out on Pennsylvania Avenue' (Koring 2009, p. A11). Already duped earlier that year by an unannounced White House media tactic which saw thousands of Americans relive the fear of 9/11 as one of the Boeing 747s used by Barack Obama flew across the Manhattan skyline pursued by two F-16 warplanes. Neglecting to warn New Yorkers that the incident was actually a photo op staged by the White House, emergency services were flooded with calls by panic-stricken residents.


The Canadian Embassy version of their own military/PR campaign consisted of three buildings, a mini souk, and a small group of Afghan actors cast as village locals. This proto film-set was designed by the same companies (Lockheed Martin and Strategic Operations Inc.) that specialise in creating hyper-realistic combat-training simulations or as one soldier put it ‘stress inoculators’ for US and Canadian troops prior to their deployment overseas. Although focused upon delivering military and law enforcement training scenarios, Strategic Operations Inc. or ST/OPS is, in fact, a division within a larger film and TV production company based in San Diego, California. As a staging ground for a series of rogue military strikes, the bombing of the Afghan village at the embassy aimed to highlight the humanitarian and combat role of the Canadian Forces in battling Taliban insurgency in and around Kandahar province. Upon detonation, role-playing Canadian Forces and their medics were to arrive on the scene just in time to try and save a Pashtun civilian ravaged by an improvised explosive device. Martin explained the intention behind recreating the violence of Afghanistan in the following manner: ‘If this works the way I want it to, more Americans will know what Canada is doing in
Afghanistan. Unfortunately there are still a lot of Americans who don’t know about how great the Canadian commitment is’ (Koring 2009, p. A1). These elaborate preparations were all part of a two-day conference hosted by the embassy to bring top-ranking American military personnel, members of Congress, and Afghan regional experts together. ‘Between scheduled IED attacks at noon and 2 p.m. on Sept. 23, the first day of the conference, there will be an Afghan luncheon hosted by Kabul’s envoy to Washington, Ambassador Said Jawad’ (Koring 2009, p. A11). As one might well imagine, news of this dramatisation did not go over well when Canadians received their morning papers on September 4 only to read about the planning of such diplomatic high jinks at the embassy. With Canada’s reputation as a nation of peacekeepers already vastly eroded and their combat role in Afghanistan a source of ongoing public contestation, the idea of ‘faking the war’ for sympathetic purchase and/or to garner attention in Washington confirmed that a serious lapse in judgment had occurred yet again on the part of the Department of Defence. Fifteen days later, news that the ‘village component of the Afghanistan Forum has been dropped’ appeared in papers nationwide. No further explanations as to the sudden cancellation of the conference’s main attraction—its cinder-block-buster—were ever forthcoming. The ire and incredulity of the Canadian public had, it would appear, diffused the staging of a pyrotechnical spectacle in the Washington embassy compound.

While this incident was unique in terms of its dubious function to engender greater respect for the efforts of Canadian Forces in Afghanistan, the building and destruction of ersatz architectural sets for playing out the theatres of war is not. Moreover, the utilisation of cinematic modes of production, specifically the design and creation of such provisional architectures (better known as film-sets), has been inextricably linked to the operations of tactical-training and warfare from WWII onwards. The collusion between cinema’s architectural expressions—its set designs—and the spatial strategies that attend the management and control of conflict is the broad subject of this essay. Nowhere is this elision made more explicit than in the promotional materials of Strategic Operations Inc., contracted to design the village environment and fireworks for the Canadian Embassy.

Strategic Operations, Inc. provides Hyper-Realistic™ training environments for military, law enforcement and other organizations, using state-of-the-art movie industry special effects, role players, proprietary techniques, training scenarios, facilities, mobile structures, sets, props, and equipment ... Strategic Operations is part of Stu Segall Productions, one of the largest independent TV/movie studios in the country. ST/OPS introduced ‘The magic of Hollywood’ to live military training by employing all the techniques of film and TV production integrated with military tactics, techniques, and procedures. The result has influenced how live, military training is currently being conducted in the military. Hyper-Realistic™ is now an often-stated goal to be achieved in the
borderlands 9:2

Reviewing their video footage is akin to entering into the portal of an online gaming community or stumbling onto the back-lot of the latest Hollywood action film, replete with extras in ethnic garb and the ricochet of explosive special effects. It is both fascinatingly perverse and disturbing to watch, but ultimately the ironic stance so favoured by cultural critics and artists alike is an indefensible subject position to occupy when confronted with the real-life implications of what is truly at stake. As I write this essay, *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2* was released at midnight yesterday (10 November 2009) by its California publisher Activision Blizzard. The video game has recorded the highest number of presale orders ever, a statistic owed in part to its $200 million advertising budget. However its most recent plot-lines have already garnered controversy: ‘This latest edition of the *Call of Duty* revolves around a complicated plot of Russian ultranationalists, terrorist cells and scenes of fighting in Afghanistan. . . . There has also been some criticism focused on an early scene, in which civilians in an airport are killed by bad guys. Activision has been quoted as saying that the scene in the game’s storyline is meant to convey the urgent need for the good guys to prevail’ (Dixon 2009, pp. R1-R2). At yesterday’s launch, Activision Blizzard also announced the establishment of the *Call of Duty Endowment* (CODE), a non-profit foundation aimed at combating the issue of mass unemployment amongst returning veterans. ‘Recognizing that Infinity Ward’s *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2™* is expected to be one of the biggest entertainment properties of the year, and that the Call Of Duty(R) game is extremely popular among troops, Activision chose to give back to veterans by using the proceeds from Modern Warfare 2 to fund the *Call of Duty Endowment* and raise awareness for this important issue’ (‘Call of Duty endowment created’ 2009).

In the Mojave Desert of California, 150 km from Los Angeles, there are 13 fully functioning Iraqi villages where upwards of 1600 role-playing troops and civilians (men and women) act out various scenarios aimed at preparing US troops for deployment.

> We live over here, we sleep over here, we eat over here, we cook over here, we do everything just like we are in Iraq. Sometime I believe I’m in Iraq. I can’t even tell my wife, but after three years it’s more like home. (Bassam Kalasho, Iraqi Role Player #3214, quoted in *Full Battle Rattle* 2008).

> When I first got this job I called my mom [in Iraq] and I told her ‘mom I’m wearing dishdasha’ and she was like ‘what the hell’. I’m like yah, imagine I’m an American and I’m wearing dishdasha. (Azhar Cholagh, Iraqi Role Player #4491, quoted in *Full Battle Rattle* 2008).

Covering 1600 square kilometres, the National Training Center (NTC) at Fort Irwin is by far the most elaborate set designed to-date to
simulate the various conditions troops will encounter in Iraq. Complete with goat herders, shopkeepers, distraught women who have lost their loved ones, a mosque with minaret, an Iraqi cemetery, and a field hospital, the set even includes its own TV network INN: One World, One Source whose news-desk and frontline reporters offer commentary on the various counter-insurgency operations currently underway in Irwin, Iraq. 'The battlefield we’ve created here at the National Training Center can be seen as a giant stage, it can be seen as a giant set with several different stages being the towns or it can be seen as one big large reality TV show.'

When Heidegger most famously stated in 1938 that: ‘the fundamental event of the modern age is the conquest of the world as picture’ he looked into a future in which the world figured as mediatic surface effect was already beginning to lose its critical purchase with the real through its operations of mimesis (Heidegger 1977, p. 134). The wholesale abduction of the real by the cinematic imaginary that underwrites spatial products such as the NTC, suggests that it is no longer possible to critique this annulment even via Jean Baudrillard’s thesis of simulation, which still requires the baseline of the ‘real’ as a separate but distinct reality by which the hyper-real or imaginary can be discerned. In the words of Giorgio Agamben, ‘the state of exception’ has ‘become the rule’ (Agamben 1998, p. 187). For the residents of the Fort Irwin military base the simulations at the NTC have, for all intents and purposes, become synchronous with actual events occurring more than twelve thousand kilometres away. Many firsthand accounts confirm this collapse in perceptual and cognitive distance. In filmmaking, continuity editing is crucial for maintaining narrative coherence between different takes of the same scene; a wristwatch out of place, an accidental change in wardrobe, and the lure of cinematic illusion is destroyed. The meticulous stage direction by the NTC’s simulation consultants has similarly sutured the military training camp to the theatres of war in Iraq in what appears to be one seamless and continuous take. The interface between training, weapons development, and warfare has now become the technologised domain of special effects engineers, with the munitions expert transformed into a CGI wizard, and the soldier cast as an extra.

Agamben’s writing on ‘exception’ is structured in part around the notion of the camp as a space of enclosure within a sovereign territory in which juridical order has been suspended. This thesis has most notably been attached to the analysis of the US military base at Guantánamo and even more recently to the stadium enclosure or Centroplex in New Orleans wherein acts of extreme lawlessness were perpetrated against the victims of Hurricane Katrina in 2005 as they awaited government rescue (Kisner 2007, p. 224). It does however have echoes in earlier manifestations of ‘statelessness’ during the past century in North America. For example, the forced relocation of indigenous populations to remote and economically unviable reserves throughout Canada and the US as well as the internment of naturalised and native born Japanese in POW camps in Western Canada and California during WWII. The camp, according to
Agamben, has ceased to exist as a site external to the nation but has been repatriated and internalised as a normative spatial dimension of its ongoing state of affairs. The spaces of ‘rights’ have in turn become the feigned spaces of law and order as the distinction between the camp and military enclaves, exemplified by the training village, dissolve. From ideological narratives originally scripted by nation-states, warfare has increasingly become privatised; conducted by commercial enterprises and free-market musketeers, accountable primarily to a small percentage of the people, namely stockholders of entertainment conglomerates and military contractors.

With Agamben’s reformulation in mind, I think it is legitimate to argue that what we are witnessing is indeed the emergence of new kinds of image-events that in turn require the development of new critical concepts if we are to meaningfully register their effects within the social and political field. Agamben is trying to rethink the space of the political within a Western teleology that has historically maintained a distinction between ‘private life’ and that of ‘political existence’, a classical distinction that Agamben insists is no longer tenable. However, his thesis can be usefully adapted to reflect upon the materialisation of new kinds of military/media events in which previous categorical distinctions between natural rights and legal rights, between media as providing a record of an event (criminal and otherwise) and media as an enabler of such acts likewise no longer applies. Media coverage was formerly a by-product of conflict, which included firsthand documentary accounts of war, often from an intimate perspective on the ground, whereas media today plays a central role in the shaping and managing of conflict. Recent examples include the CNN coverage of the aerial night-time bombing of Baghdad during the First Gulf War, the embedding of reporters in Iraq and video-game training simulations such as those offered by ST/OPS. Director of Bard College’s ‘Human Rights Project’ Thomas Keenan points to an analogous situation in his article ‘Mobilizing Shame’ (2004) wherein he describes the live media coverage of the US Marine Reconnaissance Units and Navy Seals as they landed on the beaches of Mogadishu, Somalia during the night of December 8, 1992. When the first wave of the eventual 25 000 units arrived from out of the murky depths in their wetsuits (to oversee the delivery of emergency relief and secure transport routes for humanitarian operations), the bewildered Marines were accosted by lights, cameras, and reporters, all of which had been set up in predatory wait for their aquatic entrance. Apparently the covert nature of the operation was only a matter of military secrecy whereas media networks had been dutifully dispatched on cue, having been alerted to the date and time of the landing by the Pentagon. Once again a photo op was in the making.

For a military establishment acutely conscious of its vulnerability to post-cold-war budget cutters, the landing at Mogadishu was the ultimate photo opportunity. But having finally secured an elusive spotlight, the marines discovered that they had too much of a good thing. As Navy Seals and Marine reconnaissance teams came
shore [sic] under the glare of television lights, the spotlights and flash attachments gave away their positions, interfered with their sophisticated night-vision equipment and gave night blindness to commandos who wanted to have their eyes fully adjusted to darkness in case they were attacked from the dunes and scrub.

The dispute that took shape today was not over the rules for news coverage but the absence of arrangements for covering the landing. The military seemed to have planned for every possible contingency except for the teams of reporters on the beaches ... The Pentagon did not ask the networks to refrain from using their lights on the beach until after the Seals had been photographed coming ashore and digging their foxholes in the sand, the [Pentagon] correspondents said ... After the live television pictures of the commandos were beamed back to Washington, Mr. Williams arranged a conference call with network bureau chiefs in Washington about 6 P.M., asking them to turn off their television lights before the first wave of the assault force landed. (Gordon 1992, p. 18)

In the wake of changing relations between the camera and human rights discourse Keenan poses a series of questions that are also prescient for my discussion. In particular, he notes a shift in the ways in which situations of crisis are captured by the media apparatus. A shift from the camera as historically attending to the representation of events, thus prompting intervention on the part of NGOs, relief agencies etc. when confronted with images of horror/famine/strife, to the camera as actively participating in the production of crisis. The example he offers to highlight this change is that of Serbian looters waving to a BBC TV crew as they ransack an Albanian home in Kosovo in March 1999. Unlike in previous times when the presence of a camera was used effectively as a ‘shaming device’ to quell vile actions and/or initiate an intercession, this time the perpetrators performed directly for the camera in the full knowledge that their actions were being recorded. Their brazen on-camera performance seemed to suggest that the efficacy of the camera as an indexical device capable of witnessing events and thereby testifying to history had been supplanted by the realisation that the camera was little more than an instrument of mediac transmission aligned with the spectacle regimes of TV and mass entertainment. Keenan asks:

What would it mean to come to terms with the fact that there are things which happen in front of cameras that are not simply true or false, not simply representations and references, but rather opportunities, events, performances, things that are done and done for the camera, which come into being in a space beyond truth and falsity that is created in view of mediation and transmission? (Keenan 2004, p. 435)

The indiscernability between architecture as spatial product and architecture as image-event can likewise be mapped onto this shift; between acts captured by media systems and acts performed
expressly for media distribution. The militarised film-set, I contend, has itself become a kind of space of exception, that is, an architecture of contingency that temporarily takes siege of an existing space, intervenes in its socio-economic organisation, redistributes its ecologies, and consequently produces a series of radical displacements all the while operating under the sanction of the law: the special permit. While this essay will locate this triangulation between cinema, architecture, and conflict in part via earlier articulations dating back to the Second World War, its primary aim is to examine the mobilisation of cinema’s knowledges in the production of sets for military testing and training. It must be underscored that my use of the cinematic in this particular context has been expanded to include the moving-image forms of video and gaming, just as the film-set has been extruded out of the meta-category of architecture. Conceptualised as such the makeshift architectures of film cannot be considered a benign feature of narrative staging, or merely a design-process whose resources and means can be rallied in the service of an altogether different end. The film-set as a series of mediatic forces must be understood as integral to determining the ways in which military strategies are visualised, designed, and implemented; in short the ways they are performed.

Consequently the idea that the Canadian Embassy would restage the ‘war on terror’ in the heart of Washington is less exceptional if considered within Agamben’s framework. Rather than a bizarre aberration on the part of Canadian Forces officials, the mock village with its playbook lifted directly from the special ops of both the US military and Hollywood is a continuation of a tradition in which many of the experimental dynamics of warfare have long been scripted by architects, industrial designers, and special effects engineers. Architectural theorist Keller Ing Easterling likens these kinds of simulated spatial products (entertainment complexes, vacation resorts, golf courses, retail malls etc.) to ‘the Teflon formats of neoliberal enterprises’. In emphasizing their seemingly benign surface features, she argues that they perform a kind of ‘political masquerade’ that gains them entry into all kinds of situations, allowing them to ‘slither through juridical shallows’ all the while concealing their collusive, persuasive, and aggressive underbelly (Easterling 2005, p. 1). The aborted Canadian mission in Washington is a troubling reminder that enactment of the legal dynamics of the camp as a suspension of a civil and just society had already been fully operational here. Manifestations of which can be found in the aberrant spaces of internal incarceration: reservations, internment camps, military detention centres, and even repurposed sports stadiums. To trivialise its significance was the real issue that galvanised opposition to the building of such an architectural doppelganger. Designed to curry favour with Washington insiders under the auspices that the project had the moral support of the Canadian people who had lost troops in Afghanistan, it tried, in effect, to ‘slither’ beneath the radar of our collective public consciousness obscuring the fact that such a political masquerade was being perpetrated in our name.
At the same time enlisting the technologies of ‘movie magic’ in order to rehearse the operations of war is not actually a novel occurrence specific to our times. For example, during WWII the fabrication of ‘test villages’ at the Dugway Proving Ground (DPG) in Utah was an important facet of military strategy as the construction techniques and building materials of the Axis powers were subjected to the incendiary capacities of American and British bombs. In order to achieve reliable data, which was crucial for determining the effectiveness of the various bombs being developed by the National Defense Research Committee, full-scale furnished replicas of German and Japanese working-class housing blocks were built in the Utah desert. Writer Tom Vanderbilt has meticulously detailed the history of abandoned military installations in his book *Survival City*, which examines the remains of American Cold War and atomic infrastructure still littered throughout the mid-west. I refer to some of this research as well as that of Mike Davis in *Dead Cities* with the proviso that my understanding of these ‘test villages’ also aligns them with the history of counterfeit architecture that subtends my larger discussion.

While the Allies had initially resolved not to inflict mass civilian casualties by bombing cities this position was reversed over time so that by 1943 cities were the primary targets of interest. The decision to use anti-personnel bombs was coupled with the decision to focus primarily upon the destruction of high-density working-class sectors of German cities, in particular Berlin and Dresden. As Deputy to the US Secretary of War Robert Lovell put it, ‘If we are going to have a total war, we might as well make it as horrible as possible’ (Glancey 2003, p. 2). A sentiment echoed by Churchill’s own scientific advisor, Professor Frederick Lindemann (Lord Cherwell), who insisted that ‘the bombing must be directed essentially against working-class houses. Middle-class houses have too much space around them, and so are bound to waste bombs’ (Glancey 2003, p. 2). By the time Germany surrendered to the Allies in May of 1945, 45% of all German housing had been demolished by US and British bombing raids, much of it socialist housing built in the utopic spirit of 1920s modernism with its decided empathy for the living conditions of the working-class. As Mike Davis notes, few if any Nazi strongholds were actually destroyed (2002, p. 68).

Aerial reconnaissance photography provided limited visual references with respect to German and Japanese building techniques and no information on the specific type and density of materials used, nor the typical configuration of furniture within such dwelling spaces, all of which were determinant factors in the speed and spread of fire. Lacking sufficient knowledge as to how allied bombing campaigns would fare against the domestic urban architecture of Germany and Japan, Standard Oil and the US Army Corps of Engineers turned to German Jewish émigré architects Erich Mendelsohn and Konrad Wachsmann, and Czech architect Antonin Raymond for his expertise in Japanese construction, to design model villages on which to test various incendiary techniques (Vanderbilt 2002, p. 70). By all accounts Mendelsohn has never spoken publicly about his
participation in the design of the lethal German Village which many have observed runs counter to his celebrated light-filled architectural commissions (the Metal Workers Union building, the Universum Cinema on Kurfürstendamm, and the Columbushaus/Galeries Lafayette in Berlin). Fleeing Germany after Hitler’s rise to power in 1933, Mendelsohn worked briefly in the UK prior to settling in the US in 1941. Realised in just forty-four days, Mendelsohn, Wachsmann and Raymond’s tests villages at Dugway were built to exacting design specifications, taking great care to use the same construction methods and sourcing analogous building materials to the indigenous timber of the European spruce or rice used in the making of Tatami mats (Vanderbilt 2002, p. 70). This scrupulous attention to detail included the placement of furniture and objects within their interior spaces in order to assess how efficiently bombs would penetrate roofing and attic structures as they rained their fire from on high. ‘Unlike Japanese or American construction, the typical German structure utilizes little wood as framework or trim below the attic ... for this reason a thorough study of typical furnishings was made so that proper fire severity would be reproduced in the floors beneath the attic’ (Standard Oil Company n.d., p. 6).

What is particularly noteworthy about the construction of the simulated German Village at Dugway is that experts from the ‘Authenticity Division’ of RKO, a major American motion picture studio that had produced the German film-sets for the 1943 film Hitler’s Children were called in to assist with designing the village and ensuring its Teutonic rigour.

Using German-trained craftsmen, they duplicated the cheap but heavy furniture that was the dowry of Berlin’s proletarian households. German linen was carefully studied to ensure typicality of bed coverings and drapes. While the authenticators debated details with Mendelsohn and the fire engineers, the construction process was secretly accelerated by the wholesale conscription of inmates from the Utah State Prison ... The entire complex was fire-bombed with thermite and napalm, and completely reconstructed at least three times between May and September 1943. (Davis 2002, p. 67)

Evidence as to film’s use-value in the war effort turned a corner at the Dugway Proving Ground with the direct involvement of filmmakers in the development of weapons testing. From patriotic pictures to newsreels, the set designers at DPG prepared the ground for the coming of a new kind of cinematic treatment. It surely comes as no surprise to discover that Building 8100, the only remaining tenement block of the German Village, has today been repurposed as a ‘training centre for tactical offense against domestic terrorism’ (DEES n.d.). At the same time measures are also underway to preserve its heritage status by shoring up its structural integrity and developing interpretative materials for education and tourism, once again blurring
the lines between utility and leisure. The proposed Afghan village in Washington, DC finds its historical precursors in the screen tests conducted at Dugway with its credits shared equally between the military, corporate enterprise, architecture, and show business.

As the Second World War progressed the US slowly came to realise that American cities might themselves be the targets of military reprisal. Erecting and destroying enemy villages for the sole purpose of testing fabrication techniques and their relative resistance or compliance to aerial attack was eventually reformulated as a tactical defensive strategy with the infamous construction of an American suburb at Yucca Flats. Better known as ‘Survival City’, this subdivision was an implicit architectural acknowledgement that American cities were in potential danger. Unlike Dugway before it, Yucca Flats was largely an experiment in preemption, that is, a testing ground for exploring the effects of radiation by atomic attack in order to reassure Americans of their tactical first-strike capabilities. But also like Dugway, Yucca Flats too was subject to its cinematic treatment. As a set for evaluating the threshold conditions of an atomic blast upon the physical infrastructure of an average American suburb as well as upon its human inhabitants, Survival City became itself the subject of cinema, in that film (amongst other techniques) was used to document the effects of radiation upon the exteriors of buildings and their mannequin inhabitants frozen in eerie tableaux of plastic domesticity oblivious to their immanent oblivion. Although these particular crash-test dummies were discharged into the air like projectiles from their suburban launch pads, the fact of their relative post-blast integrity was considered evidence as to the capacities of humans to survive an atomic attack—a dubious conclusion that bolstered the moral position of the US with respect to detonating two such atomic devices over Japan.

Moreover, in contrast to earlier weapons testing that was strictly off-limits to non-military photographers, the atomic spectacle was opened up to the mass media as journalists from publications such as *Time*, *Life*, and *Newsweek* literally had front-row seats at Yucca Flats. One of the enduring images that has been seared into our collective memory is that of people watching the atomic tests in the distant Nevada desert as though they were bathing in the afterglow of the latest Hollywood film release.³ These radiological observers, wearing no protective gear save their ‘special’ glasses, recall the filmgoers in their 3D glasses pictured on the cover of Guy Debord’s landmark book *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967). Both make explicit the evolution of a new kind of image-event organised around the spectacle of capitalisation and its attendant aesthetico-military category of ‘shock and awe’. The coming of the nuclear age converged seamlessly with the increased capacities for live televisual transmission and the growth of commercial media networks.⁴ The presence of filmmakers and photojournalists at Yucca Flats was not incidental to the atomic tests being carried out, but was as carefully stage-crafted as the building of the sets themselves in Survival City. The media with their movie cameras at the ready and the observers
seated dutifully in anticipation in their Adirondack deck-chairs bear witness to the fact that the locus of representation has shifted and dispersed from a singular event (an atomic blast test) to the detonation of a proliferating global media spectacle. It was as if the atomic event only comes into being after the fact, that is, after its image has been captured and relayed.

Philosopher Brian Massumi (extending Gilles Deleuze’s discussion of the event in *The Logic of Sense*) maintains that media transmission is both a necessary condition and field of potential out of which an event emerges (Massumi 2002, p. 81). For Massumi events do not exist in a prior state of actualisation uncoupled from the networked intricacies of the world—they never simply just happen as self-evident or autonomous occurrences. When Massumi states that ‘media is the becoming of the event’ he is referring to a metaphysics of transmission in which the event’s diffracted modalities are still in a state of contingency having yet to attach themselves to idiomatic and localised expressions. For an event to register, its virtualities must be transmitted and eventually connected to a signifying regime that brings it [the event] into being as a real occasion whose affects can now be discerned. The event ultimately ‘transpires’ out an entangled performance between a multiplicity of conditions and situations that must come together in a particular way for it to take hold and assert its presence. As an actualised historical occurrence the atomic testing at Yucca Flats had both a local and temporally-specific validity as well as a virtual dimension, given that radiation (with its 10 000 year shelf-life) has the transmissional and chemical capacity to reactualise the catastrophic event over and over again for years to come.

The preceding discussion sketches out two brief accounts of the development of the military ‘test village’ and its intertwined relationship with that of both cinema and architecture in its most instrumental form. While many of the rhetorical vectors of architecture are also operative in the typology and organising principles of the film-set, what is of specific interest here is an investigation into the ways in which aspects of film and media production have colluded with architecture to create a series of ‘political masquerades’ both new and old. At this point however I think it may be useful to make a few remarks about the ways in which the film-set is generally tackled from within film studies in order to signal how my particular ‘take’ might assist in opening up some alternate access points into a broader set of debates. Although the tradition of on-location shooting has a long history dating back to the advent of portable lighting and camera systems, which permitted crews to work outside of the studio back-lot, little critical attention has been paid to the film-set’s intervention into actual existing spaces or its parasitic attachment to host structures and sites. Conceived largely as an architectonic device to anchor the mise-en-scene and forward the plot, film studies has tended to focus upon the intrinsic aspects of the set as it relates to the narrative dimensions of the film. The study of cinema, particularly its classical narrative iterations, has generally turned its attention towards those aspects of film that are evident only in its final output as a strip of
celluloid-encoded information. While Structuralist film analysis adamantly refused to consider anything that fell outside of the organisational schema of the picture plane, post-modern film criticism does consider the intertextuality of cinematic projects and has been able to make connections across representational realms. And yet in most of the critical debates around film, the design and fabrication of the set is still considered wholly in relationship to the actual finished cinematic product and not as a dynamic process that can transform extra-diegetic space. Even though the architectural expression of a film’s narrative or symbolic content is integral to the execution of any cinematic project, it is at the same time a form of spatial articulation capable of producing real effects in the world and as such should itself be available for independent critique and assessment.

A notable exception in film history is the consideration paid to the elaborate staging and set design of the infamous film *The Fuhrer Gives a City to the Jews* (1944) shot in the Theresienstadt concentration camp by fellow prisoner Kurt Gerron. Produced as a cinematic hoax to counter evidence of Nazi atrocities, the concentration camp under Gerron’s coerced art direction was reinvented as a Jewish holiday camp replete with coffee houses, cabaret theatre, and even a swimming pool. Contemporary discussions of this film (surprisingly few) have focused almost entirely upon the radical disjunction of the film-set as a space of deception within which the horrors of the camp were wilfully concealed. This extreme example of a ‘political masquerade’ highlights the argument being made throughout this text, namely that the film-set conceptualised as an architectural staging ground for a series of actions is not the proprietary domain of cinema. It is rather an adaptive technology in which the real conspires with the imaginary to produce a spatial subterfuge.

A more recent illustration of a film-set’s extra-diegetic agency is offered by the on-location shooting of the World War One epic *Passchendaele* (2008), a name and a place that has become ‘synonymous with the misery of grinding attrition warfare fought in thick mud’ ('Wiki: battle of Passchendaele' n.d.). In order to replicate the intolerable conditions of trench warfare, the film’s set designers repeatedly flooded vast swathes of the prairie landscape of Western Canada, consequently damaging its delicate ecosystem. This incident of ecological ruin relates to a much more extreme, albeit equally little known aspect of environmental manipulation (save for photographer Allan Sekula’s documentary intervention) related to the filming and set design of the Hollywood blockbuster *Titanic* (1997).

Seeking to profit from lower Mexican wages, Twentieth Century Fox built the set next to the poor fishing village of Popotla, on the Baja California coast about forty miles south of the U.S. border. The production facility features the largest freshwater filming tank in the world. The neighboring village, just to the south of the walls and guard towers of the set, has
no running water. Efflux from the filming tanks has lowered the salinity of the coastal tide pools, damaging the traditional mussel-gathering livelihood of the villagers. (Sekula 2001, p. 26)

Against the spectacular aquatic backdrop of the industry’s most lucrative film ever launched, a rusting film-set still leaks its environmental toxins across the Mexican coast. For some, the three years of Titanic production signalled temporary prosperity while for others it signified economic plight forced as they were to find their meagre income elsewhere. The elaborate floating set of the Titanic was too expensive to be continuously exposed to the damaging effects of salt water and so the ecosystem was simply altered to accommodate its transient filmic populace. No environmental assessment as to the long-term effects of decreasing the salinity in its tidal pools was necessary in this poor coastal town grateful for the temporary influx of foreign capital.

While my broader discussion is concerned with the film-set as military set-up, the impact that both of these films had on their immediate environment helps to concretise the ways in which the set as a form of architectural expression can produce enduring effects with sometimes devastating consequences. Perceived as an innocent feature of film production due to its temporal nature, the film-set can in fact violently rupture existing networks and organisational systems. Once the last take has been shot and the production company airlifted back to their home base, sets often languish, too costly to dismantle and recycle. The tagline for Tom Vanderbilt’s book is ‘adventure among the ruins of atomic America’. In it he too follows the trail of decommissioned military installations that are slowly crumbling away, much like the shrinking towns that once organised their thriving labour markets around these now decaying installations. As was the case with the rusting Titanic film-set, it is cheaper to simply leave these military sites to perish and post a road-sign declaring the territory ‘strictly off-limits’ than to bring the site back to its pre-Cold War conditions. While local ecologies—economic, environmental, social and otherwise—often fail to recover, the set effortlessly migrates to attend to the casting calls of other newly minted global trouble spots. Yet in many cases these abandoned testing grounds remain hazardous, often concealing their lethal detritus of preemptive warfare far below ground. Unexploded and abandoned ordnance is the subterranean legacy of many war torn regions throughout the world. In actively transforming its sites of deployment, the film-set cum military set-up testifies to the reverberating effects and collateral damage that occurs when different systems of spatial articulation collude and/or collide.

In 2008 two filmmakers went to the National Training Center at Fort Irwin and shot a documentary Full Battle Rattle (FBR) that focuses upon the daily operations of Medina Wasl, one of the 13 Iraqi villages set up by the US Armed Forces in the Mojave Desert. The film chronicles the various training scenarios being played out at Median
Wasl from sectarian violence, death squads, and IED explosions. Behind-the-scenes footage and interviews with the soldiers/actors is strangely congruent with the bonus features that are available on feature film DVDs to provide insight into the making of the film from its set design to narrative structure. The commentary even includes soldier’s evaluations of their on-camera performances and their stated difficulties in separating their attitudes towards militant Iraqis from the knowledge that they are all in fact role-players in a fake war.

Everyone that arrives at the NTC knows they’re coming here for training. By the second or third day of the training that kind of disappears. The soldiers get into the reality of what they’re doing and even though they are out here in the middle of the Mojave Desert in a simulated Iraq it gets real and they get lost in the scenario. (Kramer, quoted in FBR 2008)

At Medina Wasl each scene is carefully scripted in advance by ‘simulation architects’ who provide the role-players with fully developed characters and personal biographies that account for their specific behaviour within the larger framework of the plot. Their training as method actors includes their immersion into complex simulated environments that are designed to prepare them for the real-life roles they will play upon deployment to Iraq. ‘You never go out of role, you never break your role’ (Simulation Consultant, FBR 2008). In a reversal of cinematic form, it is the illusory domain of the war game that provides the soldiers with the authenticating resources for creating convincing characters in the real. As Lt. Col. Cameron Kramer, Chief of Plans and Operations at Fort Irwin states: ‘For this brigade combat team, when it leaves here, is going to go to theatre and do it for real’ (Kramer, FBR 2008). Certainly the comprehensive preparations at the NTC suggest that such simulated spatial products are in actuality placeholders for a version of the ‘real’ to the extent that we understand that this new mediatic real is itself subject to the same contractual logic that maintains the suspension of disbelief in cinema. But unlike cinema, the ‘reality’ incarnated by these training and test villages is of a different nature given that the effects they produce are intended to prevail well beyond their diegetic unfolding. Rather than a momentary cinematic respite from the harsh realities of the world, the test and training village is the standard by which the reel-yet-to-come is to be measured—an elaborate dress rehearsal for what will likely be a single and violent take somewhere in Iraq or Afghanistan.

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(Stockholm) and Second Nature (Melbourne) and is a member of the Photo-Lexic research group based in Tel Aviv.

Notes


2 Lt. Col. Cameron Kramer, Chief of Plans and Operations (Fort Irwin) quoted in the film Full Battle Rattle (2008), directed by T Gerber and J Moss. Likewise a daily newspaper reports on the training simulations at the Afghani village in Fort Polk Louisiana. In Britain similar test villages have been constructed at Thetford and Norfolk; the latter, a $30 million training facility for coalition forces, employs over 100 actors.

3 Upwards of 5 800 civilians and military personnel witnessed the A-Bomb tests in the Nevada desert.

4 Although commercial television was introduced in the United States in the late 1920s, the first regular transmissions began in 1941 with Germany and England preceding the US by 6 years.

5 Examples of architectural inflections in film-set production include the design and fabrication of the set, the adaptation, modification, and renovation of extant structures, the symbolic role of the façade, and the reorganisation of temporal and spatial systems, for example the redirection of automobile and pedestrian traffic flows.

6 Christine Sprengler’s 2009 book Screening Nostalgia: Populuxe Props and Technicolor Aesthetics in Contemporary American Film offers a limited corrective to this somewhat bereft area of cinema studies in that she explores the capacity of representational strategies, especially the use of props and set design, to activate critical debates within society at large. I say limited only because her particular emphasis is not on film’s spatial re-articulations. Nor by extension would I include the kinds of viral marketing that attends to media products such as the TV show Lost as critical expressions of extra-diegetic filmic staging even though real-word scenarios are connected to the networked aspects of the show.

7 For example, in 1999 Veit Demolition received a $12.1 US million contract to demolish the 150 Minutemen missile silos that were still scattered throughout North Dakota (Vanderbilt 2002, p. 8).

Closing Credits:


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