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## Training the eye for war: A politics of spatial fictions

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Medina Wasl is the name of a small Iraqi town in the middle of the Mojave Desert in California. It is a mock village that forms part of the United States Army Fort Irwin National Training Center, through which troops transit before departing for theatres of operation such as Iraq or Afghanistan. The village was built and is operated by Hollywood professionals. The extras they employ to play the role of its inhabitants are largely part of the Iraqi Diaspora in the United States. In July 2009, I received permission from the Army Public Affairs Officer (PAO) to visit, film, and conduct interviews at Fort Irwin, which became the focus of my film *Mirages*.<sup>[1]</sup> As I understood later, the reason why I was authorised to access this military facility is because the PAO decided to give me the status of a journalist since he could not find, as he explained, any article in the Rules of Procedure of the camp regulating the presence of artists and filmmakers. The circumstances due to this ‘misunderstanding’ allowed me to experience the way journalists are treated by the military.

Medina Wasl offers a fine example of a Military Operations in Urban Terrain (MOUT) training facility. Usually far away from the actual terrain, these facilities reproduce the architecture of a given war or conflict zone, so that police or army forces can learn and rehearse combat techniques. The MOUT training facilities are conceived in an ever-greater effort to be as cosmetically close to reality as possible, allowing soldiers to familiarise themselves with the environment in which they will intervene during their missions.

## A new image regime

When *mise en scène* is attached to the representation of political or military events, it often evokes suspicion about a potentially deceptive process. This is paradigmatic of what I will provisionally call the *old regime* of representation. In this regime, staging political or military events is always about deception. It maintains a dichotomy between truth and fiction: on one side of the spectrum there is everything that is not staged, which would be considered as reality as it is; on the other side stands what is staged, manipulated, or invented, therefore not genuine. A *new regime* of representation is one that allows fiction and reality to collide and conflate.[2] Before I describe how the theatre enacted in Medina Wasl belongs to this new regime of representation, I would like to consider a few examples from the old regime, in order to apprehend what it is that differentiates both regimes from one another.

Saying of a regime of representation that it is old does not mean that it is not in practice anymore. It means rather that it relies on a dichotomy that used to have much more efficiency than it has now. Truth on one side, fiction on the other, and swapping positions to have fiction appear as truth is a very different operation than conflating both, which defines the new regime. The old regime is in fact still very active. When journalists want to report on the detention camps at the US military base on Guantánamo for example, they have no other choice than to participate in a tour organised by the military several times a month. A *New York Times* reporter has described the conditions in which those tours are conducted.[3] At the end of each day, the PAO sits down with each photographer and reviews each photo. Those that violate the (numerous) rules are simply deleted. If they are not, they might remain under strict embargo.[4] The remaining images show only a glimpse of what life in the detention camps actually looks like. What is written is also closely scrutinised by the authorities: in May 2010 four reporters were barred by the Pentagon for printing the identity of an Army interrogator, even though that information had already been disclosed.[5] The reason this way of proceeding belongs to an older regime is because the military fiction at Guantánamo does not conflate with truth, but only replaces it. When US Army officials declared that torture was not practiced at Guantánamo, this had nothing to do with the framing of reality, it was simply a deceptive statement.[6]

Another example brings us closer to the shifting point from the old to the new regime of representation. In the introduction to the speech he gave to the UN Security Council in February 2003 (Fig. 1) and which is now seen as

the speech that initiated the war against Iraq, Secretary of *State* Colin Powell said:

Every statement I'll make today is backed by sources, solid sources. These are not assertions. What we're giving you are facts and conclusions based on solid intelligence. [7]

He produced voice recordings, satellite images, and computer images (Fig. 2) as evidence that Saddam Hussein was in possession of weapons of mass destruction threatening the stability of the world. We now know that there were no such weapons to be found in Iraq, and that Powell's evidence was fabricated, based on intelligence reports that were deliberately misread, ignored, or contradicted.



Fig. 1: Video still from a CNN live broadcast, 5 February 2003. US Secretary of State Colin Powell addressing the UN Security Council to demonstrate that Saddam Hussein is in possession of weapons of mass destruction. Source: YouTube/CNN.

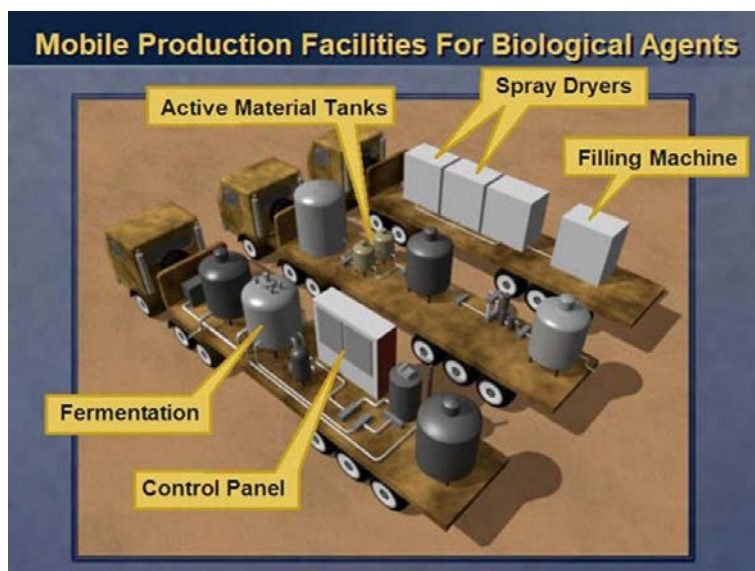


Fig. 2: One of the images from the presentation Colin Powell made to the UN Security Council on 5 February 2003. This computer image shows what would resemble the 'Mobile Production Facilities for Biological Agents' Saddam Hussein was supposed to be equipped with. Source: Washington Post

The images resulting from this presentation – those presented by Powell himself, but also those of his performance as broadcast by various media around the world – belong to both the old and the new regimes of representation. They belong to the old regime in the sense that they were deceiving by imposing a fictitious story in the stead of reality. But they represented at the same time a new kind of image-event for their proven capacity to create a new reality, resulting in a war that caused the death of half a million people between 2003 and 2011.[8] As a senior adviser to President Bush once declared: 'When we act, we create our own reality.'[9] Following this guideline, Medina Wasl is not just a training centre preparing its users (soldiers, journalists, viewers) for an already existing reality, but it is also including them in the process of inventing a future reality. The invention of a future reality has nothing to do with any kind of deceptive process. The framing operations conducted in Medina Wasl are not about imposing lies in the stead of the real or about misleading the viewers, like propaganda does. On the contrary, what is shown and told is never imposed, but as any fiction, it is rather formulated as a proposition. In that sense, it is a potentiality of a reality yet to come.

Furthermore, Medina Wasl at Fort Irwin National Training Center functions as a device of total vision, in which everyone is called and trained to

watch everybody else watching: soldiers are taught to recognise the enemy, Iraqi role players learn to look at America as a land of assimilation, and viewers, through the journalists' gaze, are trained to become spectators of wars. This optical training device functions with different ends for each of these groups, and it rearranges the assemblage and interaction between them, helping to produce a new discourse on warfare.

## The soldiers: What Iraq looks like

Fort Irwin is a training facility; it is used to teach soldiers how to conduct urban warfare, but also as a device to guide their gaze. They are trained to recognise the enemy, to differentiate those they call the 'good people' from the terrorists, and taught that every Iraqi is a potential danger. They go through a thorough visual training as much as they learn to fight.



Fig. 3: Medina Wasl, Fort Irwin National Training Centre. The mock Iraqi/Afghan village is built from shipping containers, and its aspect is enhanced by set designers who come from the Hollywood film industry. Photo: Emanuel Licha, film still, *Mirages*, 2010.

What the soldiers must first learn is what Iraq looks like – or rather, what it should look like. This apprenticeship takes place in a fictionalised landscape, which is nevertheless presented as 'realistic' to the soldiers (Fig. 3). As Brian Howe, the manager of Fort Irwin's training operations, said during an interview he gave me:[10] the goal is to 'make [the mock village] as real as possible,

so that when the soldiers actually get for the first time into Iraq or whatever theatre they go to, it's not new, it's familiar'. When asked if the set was built by or with the collaboration of Iraqi experts, architects, or urban planners, he answered there was no need for this type of collaboration, since the set builders already had direct access to US military personnel who had previously been deployed in Iraq. Their visual expertise is considered reliable to give indications as to what Iraq looks like. There is even room left for improvement, and the designers might enhance some aspects of the set to make it correspond to what they think it should look like. This very particular and obviously skewed interpretation of Iraq is what soldiers expect to find when they get there, especially since they are insistently told during their training that when they are at Fort Irwin, it is as if they were already in Iraq. It is as if the situation in which they will find themselves once in Iraq had been pre-narrated before they depart. It is unlikely though that the events in Iraq bother to follow the California guideline. Still, Howe emphasised the fact that the aim is to 'make the soldiers believe that they're not in America, that it's not just a training exercise, that it's real'.



Fig. 4: Medina Wasl', Fort Irwin National Training Centre. View of a training exercise involving a convoy of soldiers and various extras playing the role of Iraqi locals. The photograph was shot from the observation deck on the main alley of the village. Photo: Emanuel Licha.

The results of the set designers' choices are dubious caricatures of Iraqi architecture, dress codes, and customs. When the facility manager says that

they 'put together a model of what [they] think *it* should look like' (my emphasis), he is most probably referring to the way they want the mock village they are about to build to look like. But what if 'it' stood for Iraq itself? The model they build would then represent an imaginary Iraq and exist in the stead of its reality. The model would then not represent an Iraqi-village-as-it-is, but rather what this village shall be according to the military. If we follow this hypothesis, the mock villages built by the military are not only simulations of Iraqi villages, or an attempt to copy what they look like in reality, but rather an idealised version of the reality towards which the US authorities strive. It is Iraq as they would like it to be: understandable, manageable, controllable, and docile.

It can be politically hazardous for any regime to state openly how it wants and plans to transform the reality of a foreign country and to enunciate imperialist views publicly. In the case of the United States of America, a country known for launching its armed forces without much restriction in the recent past,[11] it is certain that any such agenda would always encounter opposition, nationally and internationally, especially in the context of a widespread and growing distrust of American foreign policy.[12] Hence, the fictionalisation and staging of this ideal version of reality is far more acceptable, especially since it is officially done for the training of soldiers and for their acquaintance with the culture of the country they invade. During the interview she gave for *Mirages*, Michelle Crampton, who is the acting coach for the non-Iraqi extras working at Fort Irwin, said that their goal is 'to interact with the soldiers in the most realistic and culturally correct way possible'. She added that to achieve this, all the new employees go through a 'cultural training', during which they are taught 'the basics of Arabic language'. These efforts to learn something about the Iraqi culture are also facilitated by the presence of so-called 'Foreign Language Speaker' (FLS) role players.

## The role players: Gazing at and from America

Of a total number of about 1,800 role players at Fort Irwin NTC, approximately 250 are FLS. Most of them are Iraqi-Americans who come from the area of San Diego. They live inside the mock village during an entire rotation of 15 days, unlike the American role players who do not sleep in the village. The FLS have converted the shipping containers the set is made of into their



temporary homes. In these they live, cook, and gather, forming a heterogeneous Iraqi community in the middle of the Mojave Desert.

For them as well, Fort Irwin NTC functions as an optical machine, albeit of a different sort. What they are incited to see is the grandeur of their host country. In a further step, they are encouraged to convey the message to their community, and abroad to their homeland. Their roles consist in personifying the different characters that constitute the Iraqi society, reduced to a few categories such as ‘innocent civilians’, ‘terrorists’, or ‘collaborators’ such as Iraqi police officers (Fig. 5). One of the Iraqi-American role players I interviewed summarised what he saw as his duty by stating: ‘I do my best to help out, to prepare US, so when they go to Iraq they are ready to deal with the situation.’



Fig. 5: Medina Wasl, Fort Irwin National Training Centre. Two role players are posing for the camera, in front of a mock Al-Sadr office. Photo: Emanuel Licha, film still, *Mirages*, 2010.

A local television network broadcast featuring Fort Irwin provided interesting material to understand some of the FLS commitments (Fig. 6).[13] The overall tone of this live report from Fort Irwin is one of glorification of the training activities of the Army, as the journalists insistently emphasise the fact that training in this simulacrum is an ideal way to get ready for the reality of the war in Iraq. The journalist states that it is ‘maybe the best classroom the US Army has ever had’. This report stands as a good example of what would probably be considered by any PAO as a successful outcome of his framing operations. The journalists were embedded in Fort Irwin, and it is

from within that they reported. They interviewed military personnel and role players, among whom some are Iraqi-Americans. To the questions asked by the reporter, they provide answers such as: 'I've been in this country for the last eight years, and I think that what this country's done for me is a lot, and what I'm doing is gonna be just a small part'; or 'we have to help the soldiers over here so they can help our country build a country'; or 'I met President Bush, and he said "Honoured to meet you. What you guys are doing is unbelievable."'

The FLS role players' collaboration with the US Army is a way of pledging allegiance to their new country. It is done through a caricature that could be read as a kind of symbolic betrayal of their home country. Their collaboration consists essentially in looking at the actions of the militaries. While they are paid to look, their gaze becomes a tacit approval of what they see.



Fig. 6: Video still from a news report broadcast on KCAL9/CBS television network, Los Angeles, live from Fort Irwin NTC, 19 October 2009. Journalist Paul Mager is interviewing an Iraqi role player. Source: YouTube/KCAL.

## The viewers: Training the gaze

At Fort Irwin, there are also actors playing the role of embedded journalists, so that soldiers can get used to their presence on the battlefield. These fictitious journalists follow the troops on the training field the way war reporters

do on the battlefield. When actual journalists visit Fort Irwin, they are accommodated in a hotel that is part of the decor and they are immediately taken upon their arrival to an observation deck situated along the facility's main alley, providing an overhanging position on the theatre of operations (Fig. 7). While these two architectural details (the hotel room and the observation deck) were built to facilitate the work of visiting journalists, they also orient it by taking part in the operations of framing their gaze. They are pivotal in understanding how Fort Irwin operates as an optical device used for visual training.

The expression 'theatre of operations' acquires a literal meaning in Medina Wasl as the audience – journalists as well as any visitor – watches the military training exercises from a box. The village is the set and the alley is the stage where the play is enacted. As Alain Badiou observes, 'theatre is bound to the State; it is a public mediation between the state and its exterior – the crowd, gathered together'.<sup>[14]</sup> The State takes the shape of a theatre to announce publicly what its actions consist of.<sup>[15]</sup> Theatre, just like choreographed military parades organised to show off the state's military power, needs spectators in order to exist. If it does not have a public, it becomes a mere rehearsal while losing its demonstrative capacity. At Fort Irwin, the fact that journalists and other visitors are allowed to walk in the set and talk to the soldiers and to the role players underlines the attempt to blur the line between the audience and the stage. However, the absence of a stage does not mean that it is not theatre anymore. For Badiou, 'there is theatre as soon as there is a public exhibition, with or without a stage, of a desired combination of bodies and languages'.<sup>[16]</sup> In this regard, it is important to note that the observation deck is the first place where the PAO takes journalists. Even if they eventually step down from it, everything they look at bears the mark of this initial configuration. Everything that happens in this mock village was conceived to be looked at, filmed, and photographed, as well as talked about.

The other architectural detail that contributes to framing the journalists' gaze is the hotel room where journalists are invited to stay, and more specifically its window (Fig. 8). The hotel is situated in the centre of Medina Wasl, and as such, it is part of the set. Two friendly soldiers wearing a dishdashah are the receptionists of this hotel whose functional decoration resembles what one could expect from hotels hosting media workers in war-torn areas. As places from which conflicts are analysed and enunciated, hotels used by journalists in conflict zones are important elements of the warfare land-

scape.[17] As such, it is important that soldiers get accustomed to their strategic role. The presence of a media hotel in the training camp contributes to reminding them that journalists are likely to scrutinise their actions once they get on the battlefield.



Fig. 7: The observation deck to which visitors, including journalists, are immediately taken upon their arrival at the camp, and from which they are encouraged to film/photograph the theatre of operations. Photo: Emanuel Licha, film still, *Mirages*, 2010.



Fig. 8: View of the mosque from one of the rooms of the hotel where journalists are staying. There are no curtains, and the window frame has the proportions of a 16:9 television/cinema screen. Photo: Emanuel Licha, film still, *Mirages*, 2010.

This importance of the hotel justifies the fact that the building housing it is, alongside the mosque, the tallest in Medina Wasl. It is also the only one to be decorated inside – all the others are just empty containers, except for those that have been turned into private spaces by the Iraqi role players who live in the village during the entire period of a 15-day rotation. Even the mosque, whose design has received the most attention, is not decorated inside. Instead, it has been turned into a gym. The hotel is rudimentary but functional. It offers comfortable beds and it has an efficient air conditioning system. The rooms are well decorated, with prints on the wall. There are only two inconveniences to this hotel room: there is no running water and no window curtains. About the latter, one is left wondering if the omission is meant to give the occupant an unrestricted access to the stunning view (right on the main square, where all the action takes place) or to ensure visual control from outside over what is happening inside the room. In either case, the absence of curtains draws attention to the contour of the window. A precise measurement confirmed what had initially been an assumption: the proportions of the window are exactly those of a 16:9 television screen. What journalists see from their hotel room, as the window frames it, are the tip of a rootless palm tree in the foreground and the dome of the mosque in the background. Between the two, all the important and spectacular events of the mock village take place. Within this carefully framed composition, events are effectively ready to be filmed and photographed.

The frame is then active, and as Judith Butler suggests, it is ‘both jettisoning and presenting, and [...] doing both at once, in silence, without any visible sign of its operation’. She adds that ‘what emerges under these conditions is a viewer who assumes him or herself to be in an immediate (and incontestable) visual relation to reality’.[18] The same live report from Fort Irwin by KCAL9/CBS Los Angeles provides an interesting example of this double action.



Fig. 9: Video still from a news report broadcast on KCAL9/CBS television network, Los Angeles, live from Fort Irwin NTC, 19 October 2009. Journalist Paul Mager is in Fort Irwin, in discussion with two journalists in the studio, with a split-screen effect. Source: YouTube/KCAL.



Fig. 10: Video still from a news report broadcast on CNN, live from Baghdad. Date undetermined. The journalist in Baghdad is in discussion with the journalist in the studio, with a similar split-screen effect as shown in Fig. 9. Source YouTube/CNN.

Although the journalists never hide the fact that they are dealing with a mock-up environment, they reproduce the same configuration or visual dispositif (Fig. 9) as the one used by journalists reporting on an actual war (Fig. 10). Usually in a news report, we see a journalist live from the battle scene. Text appears on the screen; it indicates the location from which the journalist is reporting, and the word 'live'. This sequence is usually followed by a discussion between the journalist in the studio and the journalist in the field, and the two are shown with a split-screen effect. The chosen graphic design is usually dramatic. This is the journalistic dispositif the spectators are now familiar with, easily identified and immediately interpreted as a well-informed and reliable source of information on the outside world.

What is the status of the image on the right (KCAL)? Is it a rehearsal for the image on the left (CNN)? Reporting from Fort Irwin could then be considered as a real-scale training exercise for journalists, technicians, military, and spectators. A somewhat disquieting feeling to this exercise lies in the fact that this operation of resemblance is done in silence. This subtle resemblance between a report from a mock Iraqi village and a report from what the military call 'a real-world situation' might be a way to accustom viewers to the fact that they are both the same, that they are both framed, and that any relation to reality – and to the realities of war – is probably not to be found inside either frame, even though it is the premise that underscores the latter.

## Fictions prepare new realities

Medina Wasl functions as an optical device used to train the viewers watching the reports on Fort Irwin to become proper spectators of wars. Looking at images of the preparation for war at Fort Irwin is like being admitted to the backstage; it brings a greater complicity with the actors of the play. One feels privileged to be authorised to look at what precedes the images of actual wars. The inclusion of the viewers in the preparation for the battle is a way to strengthen their empathy for the soldiers. Empathy comes partially through identification with what one sees, making it more difficult to be critical of a situation in which one is emotionally involved.

In that respect, Fort Irwin works in a somewhat similar fashion to an online war game developed by the US Army and available for free download.[19] *America's Army* was initially conceived as a means to target potential Army recruits.[20] Indeed, a 2008 study by MIT researchers found that '30%

of all Americans age 16 to 24 had a more positive impression of the Army because of the game and, even more amazingly, the game had more impact on recruits than all other forms of Army advertising combined'.[21] Fort Irwin's theatre does not seem to have such a straightforward goal though. While fictionalising the real and therefore contributing to create new realities, it remains difficult to quantify the effects of Fort Irwin's dispositif on viewers. Without speculating too much though, we could say that one of them consists in a trivialisation of war. Looking at representations of wars that look so much like real wars prepares the ground for the moment when it will be inevitable to look at the latter. A possible consequence of that would be to dismiss the images of real combats and casualties as mere fictions, discarding their ethical dimensions. It is of course hard to estimate that aspect, but what we do know is that the conflation of fiction and reality has already started to operate in the minds of witnesses of catastrophes. Susan Sontag suggests that '[a]fter four decades of big-budget Hollywood disaster films "it felt like a movie" seems to have displaced the way survivors of a catastrophe used to express the short-term unassimilability of what they had gone through: "It felt like a dream".'[22]

That is what fictions do: they prepare (for) new realities. Jacques Rancière's proposition in that regard is that 'a new fictionality is about giving meaning to the empirical universe of actions'.[23] Fiction is often considered the work of imagination, something that is initiated by reality but goes beyond it. It is seen as something that occurs from reality, but also after it. First, there would be reality, then a reflexive pause from which fiction could emerge. Rancière's idea is that fiction is intertwined with the reality of actions, or in other words that fiction does not emerge *after* actions but rather *with* them.

Categorising a *mise en scène* of a political event as an attempt to deceive would prevent us from perceiving the full array of possibilities offered by the actual media ecology. We may have reached a certain maturity in the production and the reading of images that makes it untenable to expect that they provide us with a strict and faithful representation of reality. Naturally, images are still used to fabricate fictions that are presented in the stead of the real. But these belong to regimes of representation that forbid access to complex realities that build as much on facts as they use fiction for their very definition. What is happening at Fort Irwin belongs to a new kind of image-event: by insisting upon having access to the theatre of operations and to the military's intimate preparation, media have forced the latter to adapt and to



learn how to present their actions within a certain frame. If they were a little clumsy in 1992 during the Operation Restore Hope in Somalia,[24] and are still not mastering all the techniques forcing journalists to report docilely from Guantánamo, it seems that in Fort Irwin they managed to reach an equilibrium – the media are cooperating by mentioning the Army's training activities while tempering their tendency to formulate criticism. The narrative tool that is Fort Irwin seems to produce some fascination, resulting in media workers tending to rave about this place. The inconvenience of this fascination though is that it short-circuits criticality.

### ***Mirages: Fictionalising the fiction***

I first heard of Fort Irwin through the media. It was one of these numerous television reports that records a military training exercise in a mock-up environment as if it were real, showing soldiers firing at snipers, breaking in and searching houses for explosives, etc. After long minutes of such epic scenes a voiceover was heard: 'Did you really believe we were in Iraq? No, we are at Fort Irwin.' When I started research on Fort Irwin for my film *Mirages*, it soon became clear that I did not want to adopt a similar stance, consisting in warning viewers that fabricated images can easily take the appearance of real images. This somewhat moral statement appeared as an impasse, unable to deal with the complexity of the new image regime that mixes both reality and fiction without any sense of a hierarchy or relevance. Thus, I decided that I would not show images of the training itself, or of any other kind of simulated scene without describing it for what it was. The direction the project then took was toward a description of the apparatus, or what is happening behind the stage. The decision to interview only those who work behind the scenes – the set designer, the make-up artist, the pyrotechnic artist, the acting coach – as well as actors and extras, to have them evoke their perception of the reality they are helping to create, imposed the model of the DVD bonus as a formal reference for the film.

The contact I had with the PAO during the preparation confirmed the impression that this place was all about simulating, and not only in the re-enactment of warfare. As I knew it would be difficult to get my interviewees to distance themselves from the official rhetorical formulas, I decided to fictionalise the interviews through a conflation of fiction and reality. At the end of each interview, I asked the interviewee to read two sentences I had written

on a sheet of paper while looking at the camera. The two sentences were: 'I'm glad to be here' and 'It's like being in a movie'. During editing, I was later able to merge their quotes with other spontaneous statements they had made. Emphatically reiterated in all the interviews throughout the film, these two sentences are able to cast doubt on the veracity of everything that is said. The spectator of the film is left wondering if these interviewees, who otherwise seem authentic, are not acting it all out for the camera.



Fig. 11: Excerpt of *Mirages*, directed by Emanuel Licha.

*Mirages* premiered at SBC Gallery in Montreal in May 2010 on the occasion of a solo exhibition titled *Why Photogenic?*<sup>[25]</sup> Within the gallery space an architectural dispositif was built in reference to the actual site of Fort Irwin, and more specifically to the observation deck. It was also made of plywood, and it forced the spectator to go through the exhibition in a pre-defined sequence. Conceived as a viewing device, it created a *mise en abîme* allowing the spectator to perceive herself watching. Fort Irwin's reality could be approached through the filter of three different kinds of media: mass-media, cinema, and architecture. These added to the experience of watching implied by the exhibition space itself.



Fig. 12: View of the exhibition *Why Photogenic?* at SBC Gallery, 2010. Photo: Ron S. Diamond / SBC Gallery.

## Disseminating the images: A (reluctant) contribution

It is clear that *Mirages* participates fully in the dissemination of the images of Fort Irwin. In that regard, it seems the film is in total accordance with the project of the Army of having images of their theatre of operations circulate in a variety of media. The PAO said he accepted my request to shoot the training camp because he believed my images were means by which people would hear about Fort Irwin and the work of the Army. He said they might even reach unsuspected audiences traditionally opposed to military actions, as one would be tempted to imagine gallery and museum visitors or film festival spectators. Are my images contributing to making what this Army does more acceptable? Is agreeing to show what the PAO wanted me to film a way of collaborating? Is there really a difference between *Mirages* and a news report singing the praises of the training techniques of the Army?

Commenting on the work of Harun Farocki, Georges Didi-Huberman states that

a critique of images cannot dispense with the use, practice and production of critical images. Images, no matter how terrible the violence that instrumentalises them, are not entirely on the side of the enemy. [26]

The question of the ownership of the images as outcomes of Fort Irwin's theatrical *mise en scène* remains difficult to answer. Are those images available to tell something different than what they were meant for? It is certain that the use of fiction in the construction of *Mirages* allowed me to reappropriate these images. In the process of editing the film, I had the clear impression that the more I manipulated the images, the more I was freeing them from their initial meaning and purpose. This manipulation acted as a way to remap the territory to which they initially belonged and to reframe them in accordance to what I believed they were producing as undeniable images of violence. This deconstruction of the frame in which those images are normally contained gives way to new possibilities of interpreting them.

### 'Why are they telling us?'

Some questions remain partially unanswered: they concern the stakes involved by these military strategies. They might not demand immediate or definitive answers, particularly since these might not yet be fully available. Nevertheless, they are questions that need to stay in mind while we are observing and describing this new type of image event. One nagging question I had in mind while researching for this film and establishing the first contacts with the PAO, but also during and long after my visit at Fort Irwin, was why they let me record their training. As I was aware it could become a mesmerising question that could prevent me from playing the game, I decided to leave it on the side. I knew they were using me and my cameras, although it was not clear for which exact purpose. They had something to show which I wanted to record, and we therefore had a tacit agreement for the time being. While the decision to suspend this question when preparing and shooting the film was productive, it came back forcefully at the time of editing. It is also an underlying question throughout this text. How does what is happening in this camp and the fact that it is made available to record affect what is happening in Iraq and Afghanistan?[27]

Of the 13 mock villages used for training at Fort Irwin only two are systematically mentioned by the media when they report from this facility. My own experience there confirmed that visiting the other locations was not a possibility. It seems that these two are sort of model villages conceived specifically to welcome media workers. The fact that the other simulated villages

are not shown gives way to the assumption that these two contain all the elements the Army wants to display and to be photographed. Indeed, photographers do come to take images of this highly photogenic environment, and with their images they are contributing to the training of the viewers. What they can see are the different users of this facility engaged in an action that also involves their gaze. Soldiers are taught to recognise the enemy and the Iraqi-American role players to contemplate their new country. These otherwise unrelated events are happening at the same moment in a fictionalised space. Fiction is capable of connecting actions that are otherwise distant in space and/or time. This new ensemble, this fictionalised landscape, can then be looked at as a single, coherent image.

Machines for creating fictions such as *Medina Wasl* act literally as bridges between the virtual and the actual. They allow the emergence of a new type of image event with effects and consequences that are palpable. They are not participating in an agenda of deception, and their force, which is also the cause for the feeling of uneasiness they produce, is in the conflation of reality and fiction. However, one pernicious effect that the images that result from this conflation could have is that we let our attention wander over them. That is why, as Thomas Keenan puts it, ‘we have a responsibility – ethical and political – to attend to them’.[28]

## Author

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## Notes

- [1] Licha 2010.
- [2] Jacques Rancière demonstrates that history ('what happened') and stories ('what could happen') belong to the same regime of truth. He establishes that a new fictionality would be about giving meaning to the empirical universe of actions and that an ability to invent stories might have an influence on history. See Rancière 2004, pp. 38-39.
- [3] Peters 2010.
- [4] Savage 2017.
- [5] Peters 2010.

- [6] Lewis 2004.
- [7] Powell 2003.
- [8] Sheridan 2013.
- [9] Suskind 2004.
- [10] All the interviews were conducted at Fort Irwin NTC between 16 and 18 July 2009.
- [11] Grimmett 2010.
- [12] Bortin 2007.
- [13] KCAL9/CBS 2009.
- [14] Badiou 2007, p. 22.
- [15] Badiou 2008, p. 207.
- [16] Badiou 2007, p. 22.
- [17] Licha 2017.
- [18] Butler 2009, p. 73.
- [19] *America's Army* is a video game that was released by the US Army in 2002, initially to encourage recruitment. Its official website describes it as 'one of the ten most popular PC action games played online. It provides players with the most authentic military experience available, from exploring the development of Soldiers in individual and collective training to their deployment in simulated missions.' <http://www.americasarmy.com> (accessed on 15 April 2017)
- [20] Kennedy 2002.
- [21] Edery 2008, p. 141.
- [22] Sontag 2004, p. 19.
- [23] Rancière 2004, p. 38.
- [24] Keenan 2002.
- [25] <http://www.sbcgallery.ca/why-photogenic> (accessed on 13 December 2016)
- [26] Didi-Huberman 2009, p. 46.
- [27] Slavoj Žižek posed a similar question when commenting on the act of disclosing sensitive information in the context in which American officials admitted the use of torture in some '*legitimate*' cases: '[s]ome argue that at least the US is now more open and less hypocritical about its behaviour towards terrorist suspects. To this, one should reply: "If US representatives mean only this, why are they telling us? Why don't they silently go on doing it, as they did it until now?" [...] The act of publicly revealing something is never neutral; it affects the reported content itself.' Žižek 2006.
- [28] Keenan 2004, p. 448.