

The Bomb and the Bombshell: The Body as Virtual Battlefield

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Atomic and nuclear weapons are increasingly the subject of museums, memorials and tourist sites around the United States. These places form a matrix of sites that must be considered as part of the landscape of permanent war. Moreover, I argue that nuclear-themed spectacles form the backdrop for a new bodily politics of nuclear proliferation and counter-proliferation. With this context in mind, I examine one such memorial event, the Oppenheimer Centennial, and specifically my encounter with the hostess of the event, the beauty queen. The beauty queen as a site of desire and an object of spectacular attention literally embodies the processes of biopolitical capture transforming nuclear weapons into objects of excitement and patriotic pride. It is in this virtual sense, I argue, that nuclear proliferation continues unabated. It is the virtual body, I argue, that forms the new "front", one that is shifting and dynamic. Locating the body as the site of war both acknowledges the challenges and violence that the concept of permanence poses. Simultaneously, however, the body stages a new kind of politics of hope that can be harnessed, through an acknowledgement of the body's multiplicity, as a counterforce to permanence and capture.

Throughout New Mexico are signs of war's techno-boom. There are the secretive national laboratories, Los Alamos and Sandia, high-tech places where PhD's in chemistry, physics and geology think deep thoughts and create gadgets straight from the pages of science fiction. Most of these gadgets are designed to wage war in more efficient ways. The gadget has always been at the center of New Mexico's (and America's) war culture, right back to when "the gadget" was the nickname scientists gave "Fat Man", the plutonium bomb designed at Los Alamos during the Manhattan Project

and dropped on Nagasaki, Japan at the close of World War Two. Today these machineries of war are increasingly part of the recreational culture of capitalism in New Mexico, the subject of popular museums, memorials and tourist excursions in the state.¹ War, however, is increasingly difficult to identify or locate or identify.

In 2004, while doing fieldwork on the ways in which atomic and nuclear weapons were increasingly being turned into sites of spectacle and heritage in the United States, I attended the “Oppenheimer Centennial” which was being held to commemorate what would have been the one-hundredth birthday of J. Robert Oppenheimer, the leader of the Manhattan Project and the so-called “father” of the atomic bomb. A birthday party for the inventor of the gadget. It was not Oppenheimer I came away thinking of, however, but the beauty queen. The weekend of Oppenheimer Centennial, held in Los Alamos, New Mexico, was the same weekend that Ronald Reagan died. It was as if his death was not so much a disappearance as a spectacular eruption onto the scene amidst a spectacle going awry and a haunting encounter spinning out of control in all the wrong ways. For the Oppenheimer Centennial was not going so well. Specters of the past were returning in unexpected ways and the ghosts of nuclear catastrophe and threat, from Hiroshima to Yucca Mountain, refused to be quiet. But Reagan was not the only visitor on the scene trying to keep it all together. The Oppenheimer Centennial had been, from the beginning, the beauty queen’s show. The beauty queen was, to be precise, Miss Albuquerque 2004, who the centennial organizers had hired, crown and all, to act as the hostess for the two-day event. Oppenheimer was supposed to be the star of the show, of course, but it was the beauty queen who stuck. There she was taking down names for the afternoon bus tours or sitting on the dais with Governor Richardson, her crown perched proudly atop her head, as he spoke at the dedication of the house the Oppenheimer’s had occupied in Los Alamos during the Manhattan Project as a newly designated heritage site. And there she was posing for pictures with the atomic bomb nicknamed Fat Man, a replica of which sits just inside the lobby of the Bradbury Museum, one of the Centennial’s official locations. The bomb and the bombshell.

In this essay I examine recent discussions of permanent war and a different yet related set of literature concerning the virtualization of war in relation to the increasing spectacularization of nuclear weapons in everyday America at tourist sites, museums and other nuclear-themed events. I argue that the relationship between permanence and virtuality relies too heavily on narratives of the increasing technologization of war, a discourse that often proceeds as if independent from human will and action. In its place, I offer a notion of virtuality that is corporeal rather than technological, and I argue that the new battlefronts of war can be located in the shifting and dynamic spaces of bodily encounters. It is within this affective arena of bodily encounter that I locate the new politics of nuclear proliferation and counter-proliferation.

¹ A burgeoning “nuclear heritage” movement has emerged in the past fifteen years consisting of atomic and nuclear themed museums, memorials, tourist excursions to nuclear testing sites, storage facilities and missile silos as well as efforts to preserve sites key to the Manhattan Project. For example, the Oppenheimer Centennial, aspects of which I describe in this paper, was organized by the Washington D.C. based “Atomic Heritage Foundation” which is spearheading the effort to turn Manhattan Project sites in Los Alamos, New Mexico; Hanford, Washington; and Oak Ridge, Tennessee into a series of linked national parks. See Masco (Document); Wray; Zeman and Amundson.

Museums, memorials and tourist events have come to act in lieu of and as a replacement for actual weapons accumulation², they constitute the contemporary sites of nuclear proliferation that operates through the accumulation of bodies captured via the “State apparatus.” It is Deleuze and Guattari who provide the framework for capture, by which they mean the violent “encastment” or binding of bodies to the State, and the consequent appropriation of the war machine, via the coding and control of the affective life of the body (425). In the world of nuclear heritage and memorialization this operates through a double move to both seduce the spectator via the promise of being let in on the (state) secret of nuclear weapons and shock the body with the thrilling spectacle of state power, of whose secret the body of the spectator has just been let in on. Nuclear proliferation in this sense, then, functions through the capture and control of bodies anesthetized to nuclear threat and libidinally charged with the confidence of a patriotic intimacy that reserves a primary role for nuclear weapons in securing, both in the past and in the future, national prosperity, eminence and existence. Simultaneously, however, the affective body in its singular irreducibility provides platform for a kind of counter-proliferation. This counter-proliferation is rooted, seemingly paradoxically, in the recognition and *proliferation* of the body’s affective intensities, unassimilable moments of becoming that mark out a new politics of potential.³

Part 1: Proliferation and Counter-Proliferation: the Beauty Queen

The beauty queen’s body and the affective encounters it produced act, then, as a material jumping off point for a discussion of the new politics of proliferation and war. Through her I track the elusive fragments of war that is always disappearing into permanence and the liberatory possibilities of an insurgent politics of the body in the oscillation, on the one hand, of the beauty queen’s body as a site of hegemonic spectacle, a spectacle that demands the attention of the spectator and makes *sense*, and, on the other hand, of a body that always exceeds the roles it is meant to play, and subverts capture through the provocation of *sensation*.

As I sat in the symposiums offered at the centennial listening to others describe the importance of Oppenheimer, and what he meant to American history my thoughts ran adrift, the beauty queen became a fixation for me, and as I was to learn some time later, for others too, stealing Oppenheimer’s thunder at each turn. I daydreamed, “how does her crown stay on?” “what will she be wearing this afternoon?” and perhaps more importantly, “what is she doing here?” Sometime later I came to realize that it was precisely this kind of distraction that she was meant to produce. Oppenheimer, it seems, was never adequate to his own memorialization. It was in fact the Beauty Queen, that icon of the American way of life, that we were there to celebrate. In this context the beauty queen’s presence was not so foreign or so shocking. The beauty queen

² This marks a new stage of what Virilio has called pure war, a designation he originally attached to deterrence. Virilio argued that the stasis of “deterrence” marks not an alternative to outright war but its apotheosis or “purest” state.

³ An in-depth discussion of affect is beyond the scope of this paper. However, affect, in one form or another, has recently become a central preoccupation of cultural theory. Two prominent works that have staked out related yet divergent understandings of affect are Brian Massumi’s *Parables for the Virtual* and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s *Touching, Feeling*. This paper employs Massumi’s notions of the affective body, its relationship to the virtual and the ways in which this inaugurates forms of potential that disrupt majoritarian tendencies. A useful critique of both of these works is Hemmings.

represented the continuity of the American way of life that, in the logic of power, was guaranteed by the victory that the bomb afforded. In this way her presence reinforced the weekend's turn away from war as a difficult and unpleasant site of memory and replaced it with wholesome and legitimated feelings of desire and patriotism redirected towards her body. In this way the silent bombshell both represents and reinforces the amnesia on which the smooth functioning of the event as a celebration depends upon.

The Beauty Queen embodies the distraction that lies at the heart of the spectacle as a system of power – and as a distraction she was first rate, charming, gracious, pretty, but most of all anomalous. In a way not unlike a car wreck she was something that commanded the attentive and fascinated gaze. Or was it distraction? For Debord the heart of the spectacle lay in the erasure or destruction of historical awareness. “Spectacular domination's first priority was to make historical knowledge in general disappear; beginning with just about all rational information and commentary on the most recent past” (Debord). The beauty queen must be seen in this context, as a central aspect of the spectacle's amnesiac desires. She does so by providing a new locus for attention, by acting as a distraction both from the fragility of Oppenheimer's ghost to act as a normative and disciplined signifier of the nation as well as from the horrors of the atomic and nuclear bombs from Japan onwards, that produced and maintained this fragility.

Attention and its rebellious partner, distraction, first became a cause for concern in the context of spectacle and capitalism in the late nineteenth century. At the time, the desire to harness disciplined bodies appropriate to work in the factories of industrial capitalism then sweeping Europe was a key priority. However, just at the time when attention was finding its way to the top of the list in terms of social priorities, it was at the same time seen to be the victim of a reorganization of knowledge about and a reformulation of the thinking, seeing subject. As Jonathan Crary notes in his book *Suspensions of Perception*, attention emerged as a topic for study as a result of two related breakdowns: “the collapse of classical models of vision and the stable punctual subject those models presupposed and the untenability of a priori solutions to epistemological subjects which entailed the loss of any permanent or unconditional guarantees of mental unity and synthesis” (20). However, at the same time as industrial capitalism was demanding a new kind of productive attention from worker's bodies, an ever accelerating regime of capitalism aligned with a new kind of disciplinary governmentality meant the creation and maintenance of what Foucault (1977) called “docility” through an array of distracting mechanisms such as new forms of spectacles such as exhibitions and world fairs and a new array of consumptive pleasures on which to focus (Crary 29-30).⁴ The problem of attention became considerably more complex at this point, transformed as it was into a complex management of just the right amounts of attention and distraction, sometimes simultaneously.

Now, surveillance and spectacle, along with a number of other strategies of power, occupy similar and co-functioning footholds on the subject. Deleuze came to articulate the diversified and dispersed mediums of postmodern mechanisms of power as “control,” a system of power that, without a central locus, travels along and employs the

⁴ This combination of Foucauldian disciplinarity and Debordian spectacle may seem contradictory. Crary, however, argues compellingly for a perspective that recognizes the similarities and complementarities despite Foucault's famous dismissal of spectacle as an important factor in the operation of power. See specifically Crary, 74.

multiple and sticky networks of everyday life. Attention and distraction, in this context, work simultaneously upon the body, constructing multifaceted matrices of sensual awareness and anaesthesia that maintain the body in various states of easy compliance. Control, as Crary implicitly notes when he says that attention has remained a constant concern for modes of power even as they themselves have transformed, does not rely on attention and distraction as consistent and stable opposites which may be mechanically deployed (72). Instead, control offers a fluid micro-organization of attention and distraction, organized not along a static foundation, but, but attaching itself to the zigzagging technologies that temporalize daily life.

But we are getting ahead of the Beauty Queen and the Oppenheimer Centennial. Here attention and distraction were supposed to operate much more simply, flitting without pause and as if from antique era, between Oppenheimer and the Beauty Queen. But as we have seen, the fragile balance between attention and distraction always threatens to become a slippery slope feeding upon its internal dynamic. The system cannot, as the Centennial organizers had assumed or hoped, remain a stable binary, switching, as needs be, between dualities of the gaze and the averted, the felt and the impactless. This is what the organizers missed when installing the Beauty Queen as Oppenheimer's official distraction; distraction breeds other kinds of attention and vice versa. What was missing in this equation was an awareness, which Massumi has recently called attention to, of the affective body in movement. Yet as far back as the nineteenth century when various and competing theories of attention were at the forefront of scientific and philosophical inquiry, Crary observes that, "in almost all the various ways it was theorized, attention was inseparable from physical effort, movement, action" (42).

At the Oppenheimer Centennial, the Beauty Queen was the distraction that would make up for the inadequacy of Oppenheimer. But if Oppenheimer provided an inadequate object of attention, the Beauty Queen too was an inadequate object of distraction. Or put another way attention and distraction are always inadequate to themselves. This has nothing to do with the qualities of the Beauty Queen herself, of course, but rather with the fundamentally kinetic nature of the body of the spectator which wanders somewhere between the binary poles of attention and distraction, renders them dynamic and gets caught up in a circular and endless play of these states, moving, and producing new attentive states as with the "lines of flight" on which the body travels (Deleuze and Guattari).

The problem with the Oppenheimer Beauty Queen can be summed up thus: no matter how much she made sense, she was also a sensation. It was this sensation that didn't let go. And sensation, to be sure, is not the same as sense. Sensation is the felt bodily trace of intensity, the registration of the affective event (Massumi 14). Sensation operates on a different register than that of sense. Whereas sense seems to feed into the production of meaning and rational explanation, sensation eludes meaning in the singularity of bodily intensity or affect. Sensation or intensity, even if it is eventually territorialized (as it always is) and feeds back into sovereign logics, initially always exceeds them and so provides a zone that inevitably escapes coded structuring by keeping potential in reserve. Erin Manning puts it this way:

What is uncommon is realizing that even those Bodies without Organs that seek to organize their intensities around concepts such as reason are

themselves continually de-stratified in sensual relations to nonsense. You can never really escape sense.⁵ Even making sense senses (153).

Paying attention to the sensations as well as the sense that the beauty queen provokes and produces is noteworthy but nonetheless alienating. It is alienating in that it leads us astray from the normative protocols, the roots and the routes of practiced social scientific thought and yet this is precisely what makes it important. The intensity of the encounter with the beauty queen opens us up to the complexity of the event that coalesces, or flashes up in a moment of delirious paradox that is as much virtual as it is actual. It is this quality of being virtual, as Massumi says, of the “pressing crowd of incipencies and tendencies” that marks this moment of sensational encounter as one loaded with the exciting instabilities of potential (30).

Her presence preceded her, passing from ear to ear. People giggled nervously as she walked by, staring at her all the way. Her presence there became a sideshow that people were fascinated with but couldn't quite figure out. For no matter how much Miss Albuquerque's presence at the event can, retrospectively, be made to fit into the rational flow of things, she also interrupted this flow. Her presence as an icon of the slogan “America Undefeated” was too much, and exceeded the very thing it was supposed to cement. Instead, the beauty queen became a jumping off point for new kinds of sensations, memories and impressions, a place where the body could take off on unauthorized and unforeseen journeys. The bombshell, as well as serving as a distraction, pointed simultaneously and more fervently to the absent horror of the bomb. The beauty queen's presence at the event then served to remind –with a persistent and troubling traumatic repetition- of all the things that had been left out of the picture: war, the victims of the atomic bomb, and the disastrous legacies of the nuclear age.

The encounter with the beauty queen at the Oppenheimer Centennial marks out what I am describing as the new politics of nuclear proliferation and counter-proliferation. Her body simultaneously locates and demarcates the absent presence of war in the spaces of everyday life as well as calling attention to the trace of a radically insurgent politics attached to corporeal virtualities. It does the latter by casting light, if only momentarily before the gap is in-filled with sense, upon the absences, the hauntings, and the traumas that the spectacle attempts to relocate within the anesthetized and amnesiac body. The sensations produced by the beauty queen were significant because they simultaneously provoked or called to the surface the uncanny or the feeling of being “out of place”, feelings that were only intensified by the simultaneity of desire –desire for the national body– that the figure of the beauty queen provoked and was meant to provoke. In other words the body points to potential by marking out or signaling the spectacle as spectacle. I cannot think of a better example of the intertwined nature of bodies and power or a better argument justifying the centrality of the body in discussions of contemporary spectacle and sovereignty such as this.

Part 2: Virtual Bodies and Permanent War

Discourses of permanent war have themselves proliferated in the past few years.⁶ War, for reasons seemingly obvious in the post-9/11 era, itself increasingly (pre)occupies

⁵ Note where I have used “sensation” to refer to the affective moment of intensity, and “sense” to refer to those thoughts and feelings aligned with reason or logic. Manning uses the term “sense” for both.

⁶ See just as a starting point: Hardt and Negri; Shapiro (Perpetual)

the multiple scapes of everyday life. As a result war has become a persistent question in cultural theory as well. It is a question simply because war has undergone a series of profound shifts under the rubric of postmodernity (Gray). The combination of new information and communication technologies, as well as new technologies of mass death, have radically transformed the forms, understanding and perception of war. In this context, the contours and boundaries of war, as in everyday culture, seem to have eroded and a new concern with the seeming ubiquitousness of war has become one of the central questions of this field.

This question of permanence takes on an urgency and has manifested itself in a desperate search and theorization of the new locations of war. The urgency is, of course, a product of the erosion of the material and symbolic boundaries erected around war—such as those between war and peace, the battlefield and the homefront or between soldier and civilian—for, the fear is, once those boundaries have disappeared so goes our ability to identify and thus resist war's iterations.

For example, a recent issue of the journal *Social Text*⁷ examined the question of “the ends of war and the limits of war culture” (Deer). For Deer the issue of war's permanence is manifested in the ways it seems to simultaneously call upon the past while invoking the future in a kind of perpetual concretization of itself. While Deer's observations about the temporal insubordination of war, its arrogant grabbing manipulation of past memories and future desires, seems to invoke the possibility of permanence, the question that frames his introduction seems, at the same time, to discount it. What gives? How can war be at once permanent and have ends or limits? The rhetoric of permanent war is the source of an anxiety which the contradiction that Deer is caught up in well demonstrates. How do we grasp and make sense of permanence when, paradoxically, it challenges us with a foreboding impermanence of meaning such that the signifiers we attach to it lose all force and meaning?

One response has been to understand permanence as an eradication of the temporal framework of war but as otherwise continuous with traditional definitions of war albeit with expanded borders. This assigns academics of war a fairly straightforward task: cartographers of war's boundaries and frontiers, able to identify the eruptions and absences of war across the social field. Here the thinking goes: Sure war is now always with us, but where? In one sense this is a completely logical strategy in which to interrogate the condition of permanence as a concept now outside of time yet one still graspable and identifiable in a series of stable locations. In anthropology, for example, this approach has produced a number of important ethnographic studies of the “homefront” a previously ignored location of war (see for example Lutz; Gusterson; and Masco [Nuclear]). Yet as Michael Shapiro (Violent) has argued, analysts of war have displayed a remarkable obsession with nations, borders and places in their analysis of war, not above other conceptualizations of war, but in exclusion of them. Spatial conceptions of war are constrained by their allegiance to concrete notions of space, usually tied to vocabularies of statehood, an allegiance that, in a sort of negative feedback loop, imposes daunting limitations when it comes to identifying war in the first place, spatially or otherwise.

⁷ *Social Text* V.25(2):1-11.

A different effort to quantify permanence has focused upon the radical technologization of war through computers, new optical technologies and robotics (see for example: De Landa; Der Derian; Gray). These accounts tend to equate permanence with a technological virtuality intended to describe the alienation of war from the senses, from the body and from the Real because of the way in which it is increasingly mediated by technologies which then (re)present it back to the body in the form of data – as video, as statistics, as satellite imagery and as animation.

James Der Derian, for example, argues that the virtualization of war entails a simultaneous virtualization of violence and the means, at least for the United States and others similarly endowed with high-tech war machines, to conduct war from a distance with few or no casualties. For this reason the virtualization of war has allowed nations, he argues, like the US to orient virtual war with *virtuous* war (Der Derian 772, my emphasis). He describes it this way: “The United States...is leading the way in this virtual revolution. Its diplomatic and military policies are increasingly based on technological and representational forms of discipline, deterrence and compellence that could best be described as *virtuous war*. At the heart of virtuous war is the technical capability and ethical imperative to threaten and, if necessary, actualize violence from a distance” (772, author's emphasis). These narratives of virtual war though are relevant to our own inquiry. They mirror the representations of war found in museums and commemorations. “Unlike other forms of warfare, virtuous war has an unsurpassed power to commute death, to keep it out of sight, out of mind” (Der Derian 773).

Technocentric accounts of war seem understandably awed and perhaps a little overwhelmed by the technologies of war humans have developed in the last fifty years, a period unsurpassed, perhaps, in the imagination new types of war machines. Their accounts of war focus on the implications of this massive technoscientific intervention into military affairs. Specifically, this emerging body of work examines the consequences for war of technologies of virtualization that distance the reality of war, disconnects war from death and severs the links between killing and its moral implications and consequences. This work has proven enormously influential and useful in theorizing the new forms of war. Nonetheless, while they have called attention to what, in the vocabulary of the Pentagon, has been called the Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA), accounts of war focused on the supremacy of new forms of technology and virtualization still rely upon models of nation-states and their external, identifiable enemies as the contours of war's possibilities.

My encounter with Miss Albuquerque throws a wrench into the discourses of the “postmodern” war in which technoscience intervenes in and takes over both the waging and representation of war. While robots, cyborg soldiers and drones may represent the new means of battlefield violence, and may stretch previous definitions of the battlefield, they do not break them and are ultimately inadequate to explain the creeping permanence of war, a concept at once so haunting yet so elusive. In the brief space that remains I want to propose that the story of the Oppenheimer Centennial beauty queen offers a new way of to think about the warfront in the context of permanent war, one simultaneously material and virtual.

It is the Beauty Queen's body, I am arguing, that constitutes the new site of war, or becomes the locus for a new kind of war-story, one that emphasizes Morris' recent assertion that “war entails the libidinization of the entire social field” (104). In order for

this to be so we must understand permanence not just as an organic unfolding of war. Permanence is not a question or a factor of war itself but of sovereignty. In *Multitudes* Hardt and Negri⁸ argue that permanent war is a symptom of a sovereign system that now resides permanently in a state of exception. The overriding character of sovereignty in the exception is a dissolution of the forms of legal and social boundaries by which previous sovereign forms ruled and regulated populations. Consequently, as Hardt and Negri say, war has become a permanent yet indeterminate feature of everyday life such that it has now become a permanent social relation (12). The character of this social relation is fundamentally biopolitical in nature. As the new battlefield the beauty queen embodies the ways in which war is everywhere and yet nowhere, increasingly present yet hauntingly absent. The new war story glimpses the shadow of war precisely in the places in which it just couldn't be.

The beauty queen emphasizes that the body has now become the site of war, the terrain of its violence. Yet this libidinalization of the battlefield cannot help but reside in the excess that is the body. War's virtuality has much less to do with the ascendancy of technology than with the primacy of the body as its currency. But it is precisely this quality of virtuality that points towards gaps and moments of rupture in the umbrella of permanence. "Something that happens too quickly to have happened," writes Massumi, "is, actually, virtual, the body is as immediately virtual as it is actual. The virtual...is a realm of *potential*. In potential is where futurity combines unmediated with pastness, where outsides are infolded and sadness is happy (happy because the press to action and expression is life)" (31, author's emphasis). The Beauty Queen, as both spectacle and distraction, constitutes the fluid and dynamic push and pull of war's contemporary corporeal frontiers. A site of continual capture and release that cannot not exist in multiplicity, in aporia, in profound friction with the world -symbolic and material- around it.

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⁸ Hardt and Negri are perhaps only the most prominent to have recently described the relationships between sovereignty, the state of exception and war. See also cited works by Foucault, Agamben and Buck-Morss.

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