Playing War

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Conventional political philosophy and liberal critiques of violence tend to equate war wholly with state aims and actions, to conceive of it as a second-order instrument of politics. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari offer an alternative framework, one in which the "war machine" arrives from "elsewhere," is only partially and imperfectly appropriated by the state for the exercise of sovereignty, and only through this sovereign appropriation comes to have war as its object. This essay combines analysis and reminiscence in a sort of asystematic meditation on Deleuze and Guattari's "war machine" and the notion of war as a game or a form of play. It attempts to see such play, as it emerges in odd and idiosyncratic forms in everyday life, as something more than simply a form of discipline or ideological indoctrination, as something with its own tendencies and potentialities that are implicated with but not reducible to the violent exercise of sovereign power. It is a gesture at the lived complexity and the multiple "fronts" of this implication.

> Axiom I: *The war machine is exterior to the state apparatus*.
> Proposition I: *This exteriority is first attested to in mythology, epic, drama, and games*.
> —Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*

Someone told me this story a while back; it really happened. The storyteller is from a small town—about 1,500 people—in the desert near the Mexican border. Small and isolated—no grocery store until a couple of years ago. The town had recently claimed the highest proportional rate of overseas American military fatalities in the country, three dead in recent months from a tiny population of young people, over half of

whom join the service. From such a place, at ease in its own remoteness, the distance to Iraq and Afghanistan—and to Kuwait City, Doha, Landstuhl, to aircraft carriers in the Persian Gulf and all the other places where the young people are—is doubly inconceivable. Elsewhere and still elsewhere.

Imagine the surprise, then, of leaving the house one day to see a tank rolling down the street, a squad of Marines—American Marines—following behind it: rifles and digital print desert fatigues, goggles, body armor, gesturing, covering, surveilling, moving tactically past your house, your yard, the post office, the gas station, like it was the middle of battlefield, like you might be the enemy. People were terrified. What did they think was happening? I asked. They thought it was a Border Patrol raid. Because that was the familiar form of the State, of course: regulation, enforcement, white SUVs and metal badges and handcuffs. Everyone knew someone who had to run, to get out of sight, when *they* showed up. Or even uniformed National Guard soldiers and flatbeds full of camo-painted construction equipment, "securing the border." No tanks though—no battlefield. Tanks are of a different order than the machinery of mere infrastructure or the bland, humiliating menace of enforcement. That was all normal enough, but war is foreign, is what people go away *to*—how is it that it just shows up in front of your house one day? And what do you do when a tank is outside? Stay at home in your room all day and wait for it to leave? Some people ran, presumably. I don't know where to.

The story only makes less sense with explanation. The Marines were conducting an exercise. The town looks like Iraq, said the storyteller, where these Marines were headed: small, low buildings, farms, one highway, flat desert in all directions. The exercise had been planned by a local son who was now a Marine officer. And this guy—that was why there was the shock and awe, the total lack of warning. He had something to prove, people said. People gave him a hard time in high school and now he had a chip on his shoulder when it came to his home town. Said in the tone of shaking heads, shrugs, rolling eyes. He had always been crazy, and now he was a Marine, and they are the craziest, the toughest, the most masochistic and the most sadistic. He said so himself a couple days later—emailed his high school friends and bragged about it on his myspace page: he *was* tough, he *was* crazy, and he would be back to conduct more exercises. Semper fi!

The day after it all happened a letter from a more senior Marine officer appeared in the paper thanking the people of the town for their "cooperation." Ha! Again shrugs and rolling eyes, knowing laughter. And soon enough it was forgotten, and there was something else to think about.

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For a child to play war, toys are important. The play unfolds and dwells somewhere between these objects' doubly articulated heads of dumb matter and magical fetish. They may seem like mere placeholders—the anonymous, identical green and brown plastic army men packaged by the sackful, or the random objects appropriated to serve as guns. But they hold their places so well because of the potentials they embody—the angle of the toy rifleman's injection-molded limbs, the bend of a branch that suggests a barrel and butt stock. Playing war depends on the creative, hallucinatory imagination that imbues these props with life. Though to state the relationship in too strongly causal terms would misunderstand it, would obscure the life that for the kid at play is already immanent in the toy, no matter how crude or representationally abstract it

is, no matter if it *is* just a stick. The imagination seizes on it, unlocks it, unleashes some potential in it, puts it in motion. It is relayed through the possibilities packed into these tiny forms, sprung from blister packs or picked up off the ground, and outward, into the surrounding environment. This imagination magnifies the scale of the familiar physical surround, makes it into a dramatic landscape to be filled in and dominated. The lines on the rug are highways. The rock wall in the yard is a mountainside. The tress are still trees, but fantastic, tropically gigantic. Alternatively, imagination transforms the familiar in a second way, suffuses a normal-looking environment with the exciting possibility of imminent conflict, repurposes the objects in it to that end. This tree is a watchtower, this hollow beneath it where you hunker down hidden on the dry pine duff is a fort, a place to be sheltered and to observe secretly.

Always there is the presumption, if not the enactment, of an enemy, of imminent attack. Sometimes it actually arrives, other times it is simply prepared for—the play can be good either way. Arrange the green army men tactically on the armchair, which is a massive escarpment: scouts perched out on the edges, mortars and radios toward the rear, protected by lines of riflemen. Now arrange the tan ones in two flanking columns on the floor below. Can their tanks establish fields of fire over the green position? What if they provide supporting fire from behind that revetment of old catalogs by the end of the sofa? By the time all this has been worked out, the pleasure of strategy and spatial domination, you might be obliged move on to something else—dinner, homework—before you have a chance to let the bullets fly, advance the attackers, send captains and machine gunners cartwheeling through the air. Or the setup might just be too good to wreck immediately. The joy is in the anticipation, in the generative envisioning of antagonism rather than its enactment. Forts are the same way. Playing alone, the minute you find a spot that is protected, concealing, you want nothing more than for someone or something to try to find you there. Let them try! And hollow it out inside in the meantime, clear out the brambles and dead limbs, build up walls and camouflage them. These exercises serve no point without an enemy, one who is coming soon but not before you are prepared, really ready. And that enemy, and that terrain of battle, are only possible with that eye that sees everything as a landscape on which the most fantastical war is about to break out.

But why this satisfaction and pleasure in making the world a battlefield? And what kind of war is this? One without politics, without motives, without causes. It is as much fun to be the good guys as the bad guys—each is just a position that needs to be filled. When there aren't enough people to play the bad guys you make them up, you play everyone yourself, because you need them; you need them so you can kill each other and fall to the ground and then wait a while and get back up and kill each other again. Without them there is no contest, the contest of absolute war, the contest that in its waging unmakes and remakes the world (Scarry 1985). The weapons of confuse or meld destruction with creation: this cushion is a bunker, this pebble is an artillery shell.

Two games, chess and go, provide two contrasting examples of playing war (Deleuze and Guattari 1987:352). Chess is highly coded, built around pieces with identities, intrinsic properties. It is limited by those things, too—the knight, the rook, can only move along their particular paths. Go, on the other hand, is played with anonymous, identical pieces that move in morphing constellations, pieces that mount attacks and capture enemies by forming extrinsic relations with one another, not as a property of inherent characteristics; the individual units are unimportant (ibid.). The play I am

describing, however, cares little for the rules governing the movement of chess pieces and finds little to delight the imagination in the bland monochrome go lozenges. It is concerned chiefly with aesthetics and with rules only to the extent that they suggest the pleasures of arrangement, control and movement. Think again of the plastic-bagged green and tan army men: in each lot twelve kneeling, twelve standing, ten crawling scouts, six crouching with mortar tubes or shouldering bazookas, another six radiomen with massive square backpacks, three captains holding binoculars, one tank. They are divided by color into two easily distinguishable and opposed sides, not at all unlike a pile of chess pieces. But then you put them where you want them, and anything can happen.

A variation: Kant held the warrior in higher esteem than the artist because the former, like God, shaped the world decisively, while the latter only reproduced it imperfectly (Buck-Morss 1992). Does this hint at some incubating fascism in this play, a contamination of primordial innocence by an encroaching ideological State that says you are only in the world by dominating, by destroying, by killing? Isn't that our good liberal instinct, the one that says no violent movies and no toy guns? We bombed Libya when I was a kid, and we played Bomb Libya. How embarrassing for the parents!

In Umberto Eco's *The Mysterious Flame of Queen Loana*, the main character relives his fractured memories of growing up under Mussolini, "in a cult of horror" in which valiant death for the nation was the ultimate virtue (Eco 2005). As an adult he stumbles on an often reread story in his fifth-grade reader of a heroic Fascist youth fighting in the Spanish Civil War. The young man is only a few steps from conquering a fortified hilltop when a Communist's bullet takes him down.

> Then, darkness. Valente's face lies in the grass. The darkness now grows less black; it is red. The eye of our hero that lies closest to the ground sees two or three blades of grass as thick as stakes. …Now that he is dying, and knows it, he feels neither heat, nor cold, nor pain. […]
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> I understood from the tremor that accompanied the adult rereading of those pages that they had offered me my first vision of actual death. That image of blades of grass as thick as stakes seemed to have inhabited my mind from time immemorial, I could almost see them as I was reading. […A]s a child I had often repeated, as a sacred rite, a descent into the garden, where I would lie prone, my face flattened against some patch of redolent grass, in order to really see those stakes. (ibid.:208)

Here the fascism is literal, a warrior who transforms by killing and dying, who materializes a transcendent and righteous cause in the matter of broken bodies (Scarry 1985). The play-as-fascism reading means playing death, playing the glory and invulnerable anesthesia, for it is the warrior's heedlessness of his own senses' warning signals that makes him strong (Buck-Morss 1992)—"he feels neither heat, nor cold, nor pain." He merely takes in the image before him, the looming blades of grass a landscape uncannily altered.

In this reading, this practice, war is constrained: it is only the enemy, only the state, only the greater end served by combat—defense of the territory, of the arboreal roots, of a truth that arrogates itself by the annihilation of competing truths. This is not

the war I remember playing, though I can't but think it must have crept in around the edges (the spectacle of the ranks of toy soldiers, the strong and repeated lines of their weapons and uniforms and machines), just as the smell of the grass and the pressure of the earth crept into Eco's narrator's vision of glorious death. These things are the only ever partial and imperfect appropriation of the war machine, which is not the state itself, but "another species," a force that arrives from elsewhere (Deleuze and Guattari 1987:354). That appropriation is powerful enough that strong traces of it linger in sensation and memory. But the play I'm talking about is ultimately uninterested in the real world, in unmaking and remaking it. I'm talking about—trying to remember in writing—a play that is the labor of remaking the world just by looking at it and moving through it, over and over again, a practice of suffusing it with fantasy. The eye active, a motor organ like the hand, acting *and* sensing. It does not settle. It can return, but it has to keep moving. The hand and the body seeing, likewise affecting and affected, making images by a sort of enchanting movement through space as you duck into this hollow to hide from no one twenty times in a single afternoon. Perhaps in this sense the play is similar to what Eco describes, even if the war is not: the compulsion to return, to repeat, "like a scared rite," and to seek something from the world at the same time as one makes something of it—makes a battlefield of the living room floor, makes towering stakes of blades of grass.

A Civil War reenactment: it is at a heritage festival in central Texas, a town named for the spring that made it a waypoint for the stagecoach route across scorched hills and scrub brush, but only years after the war. People sit at on a small set of bleachers and gather behind sawhorses facing this landscape at the edge of the fairground to watch the battle unfold. Directly in front of us is a cannon manned by a crew of Confederates, pointed away and up a gently sloping meadow toward another cannon and its complement, small in the distance but their dark Union blues distinct against low clutches of post oaks, cactus and limestone boulders. It is a gorgeous, warm day. There is nowhere for the ersatz soldiers to hide from the mid-day light on this landscape so open to the sun, though of course the whole point is precisely for them to be seen.

Just in front of me on the near side of the barrier sits a woman from another fair feature or attraction who is in period costume herself, an accidental reminder the mid-nineteenth-century gentlemen and ladies picnicking on hillsides who were the spectators to the sport of early Civil War battles. She explains to the young boys who look at first uncertainly and then excitedly out onto the scene what is happening, how the whole thing works. The reenactor "commanders," she says, decide beforehand among themselves who is going to win each battle, but only they, not even the costumed soldiers on each side, know in advance. The pleasure comes in playing the whole thing out—three times over the course of this holiday weekend, to be exact. They shoot blanks at one another with the shared understanding that if you judge an enemy "shot" to have hit you, you are obligated to "die," and to do so convincingly. There is no account of why they are fighting, or would have been fighting. It matters only how they do it, *that* they do it. This does not eliminate the needs for sides, of course. One of the boys in front of me keeps turning to his dad for verification of who the good guys and bad guys are and to clarify which side is winning. "Well," says the dad, "it's kind of a matter of opinion." Like me, they are transplants from the North. "I guess for us the Union would be the good guys."

Before us a handful of infantry from each side advance toward one other through the high grass. The Northerners have their regular uniforms, mostly: navy blue tunics, lighter blue trousers, brass buttons, gold braid, tall boots. The Rebels are more motley clad, a militia: some sport grey kepis with insignia, others wear bright paisley shirts and floppy, round, broad-brimmed trapper hats in earthy hues. The soldiers trade occasional shots with revolvers and muskets as they form into loose ranks. Their lines seem impossibly close. They look to be no more than ten yards apart when they finally halt and hunker down, the volume of fire increasing now, on each side an officer standing with a sword or pistol held high as he gives orders: "Ready! Aim! Fire!" There are taunts, menace alloyed with bravura and quaint whimsy: "Twenty dollars to the man who brings me that lieutenant's hat!" The lines are oriented so that the Union soldiers are facing straight toward us, the audience, so that we gaze directly into the dark, open ends of their gun barrels. The volleys have a particular sound, the hint of a burning, hissing "whoosh" that quickly accelerates into the explosive crack of the shot and then leaves a long, diminishing tail of sound behind it, again and again and again. It is a sound as though these imagined bullets, play bullets (presumably there are no actual bullets), are traveling things that arrive from elsewhere—not just from across the field, but somewhere far off—and leave us with their percussive bang! as they pass by. Smoke squirts from the barrels and breeches with every shot. With no breeze to dispel it, it clings to the reenactors, accumulates in tendrils around them. We inhale its sulfuric tang as it drifts, only slowly, in our direction.

As the soldiers shoot and shoot to no visible effect, the bystanders seem to regard the scene increasingly unrealistic. People crack jokes about the fighters' apparent poor marksmanship. Though perhaps this thing that we think should be so decisive and dramatic, as we look on from the future, really is (was) absurd, awkward and drawn-out, shooting your enemy in the face over and over again and missing? Or are they simply drawing it out for their sakes and ours, to ensure that the play and the spectacle are commensurate with all that effort—the overnight travel, the antique accessories and practiced old-timey language, the sweating in wool britches? Finally one of the Rebels—a refined-looking man with dark hair, gold spectacles and a waxed moustache—takes a hit, gives a theatrical cry and falls to the ground. He lies less than ten yards from us, at first limply and with his eyes shut. But after a couple of minutes he opens his eyes and cranes his neck to peer over the grass at the action unfolding, and then, to escape the uncomfortably hot sun, he gets up, affects a pained and limping walk, and collapses again in a slightly shadier spot a few yards away. I wonder if he contemplates death as he stares at the stalks of grass in front of his face.

The battle proceeds. The lines shift. More men on both sides fall. A little boy next to me exclaims over and over again, excited by the gravity of it, "Men are dying out there!" Confederate reinforcements emerge from the other end of the meadow. Suddenly, an incongruous sound: a helicopter comes in low over the ridge above the meadow. It banks low directly over the battlefield—red enamel carapace, green glass, black snap and blur of rotors—and its noisy presence is overwhelming. The downdraft kneads the grass into whorls; people out on the field and in the audience grab hold of their hats and turn to watch as the thing settles on a square of parking lot directly behind us. It is another fair attraction, it turns out, the medevac from a local hospital; it was dispatched to deal with an emergency somewhere off in the real world earlier in the day and is just now

returning. The spell of the battle feels broken by this turning of heads away and back toward the present, toward the sight of this sleek and noisy and modern intruder. For a moment we are lost, unsettled, perhaps slightly embarrassed at our own indulgence in fantasy. But we turn back to the staged scene and it is continuing unperturbed; we are reenchanted within moments. A cavalryman gallops across the field, then another. The cannons fire, the Union soldiers begin to surrender. The battle ends and we wander away up the hill, past the helicopter, where a new crowd is gathering, to an old-fashioned canvas tent where you can buy handmade boots, a bowie knife, a powder flask or a reproduction belt buckle, so that you too can pretend.

The mode of fantastical perception that the childhood play of war entails is so easy to recall—vivid, even—and yet impossible to conjure. For my adult mind anyway the world can't be made to appear that way. It beggars the reliability of the senses, which of course can still show and feel and hear the same objects for us, but those objects nevertheless don't seem how they once did. I can remember the feelings and pleasures, the sense of sensory and bodily *implication*, but I cannot actually feel it.

It is a reminder that the biological circuit of perception, cognition and reaction is an open one, discontinuous at the smallest level in the "bindweed" and "brambles" of the neurons (Deleuze and Guattari 1987:15), and at the highest level to the wide world of stimulus and experience and action through which it must arc to complete itself (Buck-Morss 1992). "The discontinuity between cells, the role of the axons, the functioning of the synapses, the existence of synaptic microfissures, the leap each message makes across these fissures make the brain a multiplicity, … a whole uncertain, probabilistic system ('the uncertain nervous system')" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987:15). Like anything else, the fantasy of playing war gains coherence by firing off out into the world of matter and history and images, completing the circuit again and again. For better or for worse it becomes thoroughly involved with whatever it encounters out there, and the character of its involvement is not a foregone thing.

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