THE CULTURAL MEANING OF THE GULF WAR

“And we go to Happyville, instead of to Pain City.”
—Thomas Pynchon, Gravity’s Rainbow

I

The war began right on time. Between 6:30 and 7:00 p.m. Eastern Standard Time, the major networks were having their news broadcasts, as usual, and most of America was watching to see what would happen. They were not disappointed. Fifteen minutes into the broadcasts the network anchors switched to their men in Baghdad’s Al-Rashid Hotel, where reporters announced that the American bombardment had started. Baghdad’s anti-aircraft batteries began to go to work, lighting up the night sky in a martial celebration which, many American observers noted, reminded them of the Fourth of July, New Year’s Eve, or a Christmas tree. Streaks of upward-moving light illuminated the smoke-filled city, and the explosions of incoming and outgoing shells could be heard for miles around. Two hours later, when President Bush came on television to speak to the nation, consumers were watching as never before; the networks reported that the President’s ten-minute speech was the most widely-viewed event in television history.

Finally, the unpleasant little cold war that had followed the end of the bigger Cold War was over. The uncertainty, the waiting, the feeling of impotence and isolation were at an end. The real but unspoken longing for war which had been building up in the popular imagination for months in a sticky, claustrophobic atmosphere exploded with a burst of excitement and relief. One of the standard rules of dramaturgy requires that a revolver which makes its appear-
ance in the first act of a drama ought to be used by the end of the play, since otherwise the build-up of suspense is wasted. In the Persian Gulf, the U.S. Army was the revolver and the U.S. President the budding playwright, eschewing complicated modernisms, adhering to all the classic rules, and refusing to disappoint his audience. The initiation of war was the fulfillment of built-up expectations and tensions. Suddenly it was no longer necessary to dissimulate, to pretend an aversion to the inevitable. It was finally possible openly to say YES to war. The nation came together in a vast electronic Volksgemeinschaft, and every television viewer knew that he was no longer alone, that hundreds of millions of his fellow Americans were watching the very same thing at the very same time.

The sense of excitement, of community, ensured that on the war's first day neither consumers nor sponsors particularly minded the disappearance of advertising or popular television game shows and sitcoms from the major television networks, all replaced by a strict regime of total news. The eight-hour time difference between the East Coast and the Persian Gulf guaranteed that operations started in the middle of the night in the Middle East would make it immediately onto prime time at home. Europeans were less lucky. Deep in sleep at the beginning of operations, they could only wake up, rub their eyes, and listen to the news from their radios or read it in their newspapers and hope to see coverage on their evening television programs more than half a day after the events had begun. But listening about the news and reading about it were not the same thing as seeing it, live. It was not just in the United States that CNN's ratings skyrocketed 271 percent; orders for CNN boomed in Europe, too, and many European television networks were forced to buy newsreel coverage from American suppliers. It was a video war in more ways than one. Even in the early days of the war, the French philosopher Paul Virilio declared that it had already become a "world war, the first total electronic war. No one can become a deserter." Virilio said that the war represented the triumph of total news, news as pure speed, the defeat of democracy by "dromocracy" (the rule of speed).¹

Many observers said that the war reminded them of a video game, an arcade full of pale-cheeked male adolescents pushing buttons, pulling levers, destroying the enemy as they ran down their testosterone and adrenaline levels before dinner. It was the "made-for-television war," "Nintendo with high explosives."² Watching the war
on television, the viewer became a commander or a pilot himself, zooming in on the intersection of two lines on the radar for a direct hit. The war was curiously antiseptic. It consisted of targets, flashes, bulls-eyes, missiles taking off, homing in, exploding, all in the blueish glimmer of video light. The only human faces one saw were those of the boyish American pilots giving the thumbs-up sign as they prepared for take-off or saying, like their President, "We're gonna kick butt!" as they got into their planes. It would not be another Vietnam, Americans were assured.

This assurance was interpreted to mean not only that the war would be swift, successful, and relatively painless, but that it would not invade American living rooms with unpleasant details as had been the case twenty years earlier, in what reporter Tim Page called "the first and only war that could be reported openly." When, four weeks into the war, after tens of thousands of Iraqi casualties, network television finally did show brief coverage of the February 13 American bombing of a shelter in which hundreds of civilians were killed or wounded, including graphic and grisly detail, shock and anger were directed not so much at the military or even at the Iraqis as at Peter Arnett, the CNN reporter who had first broken the story and thus, according to his critics, played into the hands of Iraqi propaganda. Few made the opposite criticism, castigating reporters for their reliance on the U.S. military for war information. As for Iraqi military casualties, estimated at over 100,000 after the war, "It's almost as if you were turning on the light in the kitchen at night and the cockroaches begin to run, and we kill them," said U.S. Air Force commander Dick White about Iraqi troop movements in the south of Kuwait. But the cockroaches' death agonies were not considered newsworthy, either by the military or, for the most part, by news consumers. Asked after the war what images had stuck with them from their hundreds of hours of television viewing, most consumers had forgotten any images of death and agony and remembered only the pinpoint precision of the video target. The cockroaches had not just been killed, they had never existed.

In a report to the Pentagon issued many months after the war had finished, leading media organizations finally got up their courage to complain that the government's restrictions had "made it impossible for reporters and photographers to tell the public the full story of the war." Covering the war for one major newsweekly, retired Army Colonel David Hackworth, who had been the most decorated sol-
dier in the Vietnam War, declared, “I had more guns pointed at me by Americans or Saudis who were into controlling the press than in all my years of actual combat.” But such complaints were too little, too late. During the war itself there was virtually no outrage at the military’s decision to censor all news at the scene of operations. Even the transport back home of the remains of dead American soldiers, euphemistically called “body bags,” could not be covered; reporters were kept out of the Dover Air Force base where the remains were to come home. “That has no news value whatsoever, soldiers in pain and agony,” said Lieutenant Colonel Angel of U.S. Central Command in Dhahran. A War College textbook urged commanders to “seek out the media and try to bring them in to write stories and produce television shows or clips in support of the organization’s goals.” Reporters were organized in pools and told never to leave the company of their military “escorts.” The result was media reporting that fully served the military’s aims and presented a rosy, exciting picture of the war itself.

By and large, the public and even most members of the media themselves approved of these restrictions; the public did not want to hear about the war’s less pleasant aspects, and the media did not want to report about them. During the third week of the war ABC polled its viewers to inquire whether they found the network’s images of the war one-sided, and the viewers responded that they enjoyed the pro-American high tech videos and did not want critical journalism. Of course few media moguls were as honest as Germany’s Franz Josef Wagner, editor-in-chief of the newspaper Superl, who declared point blank, “Making newspapers is a drug.” But even during the war itself few would have contested the trance-like, spaced-out, drugged states of consciousness induced by images of the war. Ex post facto media recrimination proved a convenient way to foist off blame for a job that appeared, in retrospect, to have been botched. During the war itself, however, television reporters took great care in their military reports to assure viewers that they were complying with military censorship and revealing nothing of value, and in general their assurances were correct. Moreover, in spite of their complaints of military censorship, the media packed up and left the theater of war immediately after the first week of March, once the censorship was lifted and it would have been possible to present a more accurate picture of the war. “The game is over,” one pilot told CNN, and that was that. The media’s job was not to
report on events but to create them. As one communications theorist noted in the war's aftermath, "The idea of objective reality is an illusion with a rather large potential for pleasure and therefore quite widespread." The law of the media was not just the law of the land, it was the law of nature.

It was a vastly popular war. Before it began, Americans had been deeply divided in their opinions. In the months following the August invasion of Kuwait, it was not just Democrats, left-wingers, and representatives of most of the mainstream Christian churches in the United States who criticized the President's activist response; many in his own Party and on the far right criticized the response as well, asking why the United States should be concerned at all about the invasion of a small principality, democratic or not, with which the U.S. had no defensive treaties whatsoever. Congress had barely given the President the authority to use military force after the expiration of the January 15 deadline. The peace movement in the United States was growing. But once the war actually began, the yellow ribbons that had been springing up on trees and telephone poles throughout the United States began to multiply exponentially, filling entire neighborhoods in a sea of yellow, and Old Glory appeared on house after house. Twenty-first century folklorists will be certain to study the transformation of Tony Orlando and Dawn's 1970s hit about a girl tying yellow ribbons around an oak tree for her convict boyfriend into an instant tradition first for hostages and then for the military itself. In some vague way, the yellow ribbon seemed to mean support for the troops, and there was no one who did not support the troops.

As was reiterated again and again on network news, the men and women in the Arabian sands, well-trained professionals all, had a job to do, and they were going to do it. Some people were lawyers, some doctors, some teachers, some hit-men, some engineers, some prostitutes, some corporate executives, some plumbers, some electricians, some computer hacks, some bureaucrats; they all had a job to do. These people's job was soldiering. No one ever inquired too closely into what that "job" was, or what the soldiers were being trained to do. Killing cockroaches was one of the more direct metaphors. Like the civilian casualties, euphemistically referred to as "collateral damage," the troops' actual mission was one of the war's taboos. Even the peace movement, which, in spite of the war's popularity, managed to pull off a large demonstration in Washing-
ton on January 26, emphasized its support for the troops in signs and buttons that read “Support the troops! Bring them home now!”, along with the *de rigueur* yellow ribbons and American flags. Such intentionally paradoxical slogans reinforced the feeling that the peace movement was somehow duplicitous, that it was not saying what it really meant, not only with respect to the troops, but about the war itself. The public perceived the peace movement this time not just as unpatriotic but as composed of kill-joys, of wet blankets and Puritans who wanted to spoil the fun for everybody else while at the same time secretly enjoying the prurient pleasures of a good war to protest against. Like a dishonest priest, the anti-war movement seemed to be denying its own pleasure.

In this war, patriotism was definitely not only “in,” it was fun; lack of patriotism was as boring as it was hopelessly “out.” The troops, the country, the flag, the President—it all seemed to come together in one big happy emotional glob. T-shirts and buttons appeared that said “USA—THE BEST DAMN COUNTRY IN THE WORLD!” “USA—NUMBER ONE!” “GO, GO, GO USA!” and the like. Just as after the invasion of Panama, the President’s popularity, which, due to the oncoming economic recession, various scandals involving the financial industry, and the decision, in direct violation of a 1988 campaign promise, to raise taxes, had been at an all-time low in the summer of 1990, rose to new heights after the war’s debut, once again demonstrating the accuracy of Machiavelli’s doctrine that wars abroad always neatly cover up trouble at home. Immediately after victory, news spread that the President’s popularity rating was at 90 percent, the highest level for any President in half a century. Advertising executives expressed appreciation for the government’s professional-quality marketing of the war, declaring that the government had been able to develop such refined advertising techniques by continually testing and retesting its image and its concepts in the marketplace to discover what worked. By any measure, from Nielsen to Gallup, the war was a spectacular success.

Naturally, this war, which had its heroes and its forces of light, all out to get the job done, had its forces of darkness as well. The Prince of Darkness was the President of Iraq, referred to not as “Hussein,” but rather as “Saddam,” almost as if he were intimately known to those discussing him, an intimate little Satan. For some, “Saddam” was worse than Hitler; for others he was merely as bad as Hitler. But that he stood in some meaningful connection to that incarnation of
all evil few doubted. The good gray New York Times threw staid caution to the winds and published a quarter-page cartoon showing “The Descent of Man” from Clark Gable to ape to monkey to snake to “Saddam,” emerging from a morass with flies buzzing about his head. Even those usually queasy about comparing Hitler or the Holocaust to anything actually present in the world today, afraid that such comparisons might trivialize the memory of previous events, had no trouble making the comparison now, and by the time the Scud missiles started landing in Israel, two days after the beginning of the war, the sight of Israelis in gas masks was seen as evidence of a threatened new Holocaust. No matter that not a single one of the Scuds shot at Israel carried chemical weapons, or that the Scuds proved ineffective and inaccurate, or that the Purim antics of children playing with their masks in no way resembled life and death at Treblinka or Buchenwald. This was a Holocaust we prevented; this was a Hitler we conquered before he was able to work his will. This time it was not Hitler but we who would dictate the “new world order.”

II

In an anti-war speech on January 14 at Columbia University, Barbara Ehrenreich declared that the reason this war was necessary was that the Cold War was over. The end of the Cold War, she suggested, had caused massive uncertainty in America’s military-industrial complex, which was now threatened by a huge “peace dividend” and the loss of military contracts. Ehrenreich’s assertion connected up with a whole series of conspiracy theories circulating around what was left of the American Left suggesting that Saddam Hussein had intentionally been tricked into invading Kuwait so that his army could be destroyed, American military hardware tested, and domestic problems in the United States forgotten. Wolf Biermann, the quixotic and self-consciously cynical German leftist who surprised his fans by supporting the Gulf War, declared with relief that American motives were entirely self-interested and smutty, arguing that their very unsavoriness ensured their reality and firmness:

No blood for oil—that is the anti-American slogan now. O holy naïveté! Of course the Americans are interested in oil. Even
worse: the Pentagon has been hankering for a long time after a chance to try out its weapons. Even more perverse: the U.S. arms lobby desperately needs proof that the billions of dollars of tax money were not simply thrown away. The lucrative East-West conflict has been spoiled for them, but the stockholders of the arms industry want the arms race to continue nevertheless. . . . All of it the worst kinds of motives. And I say to myself: thank God! Because if it were a question of the holy principles of humaneness, of freedom and democracy, then President Bush would not let his boys fight. The USA was not bothered at all when Iran and Iraq tore each other apart. Saddam’s genocide of the Kurds was nothing but a footnote for America, and Saddam’s terrorization of his own people was but a totalitarian misdemeanor. The US has already had so many unhappy fascist love affairs all over the world. . . .

It will probably be another twenty years or more, if ever, before all the documents relating to the war are released, and so for the time being it is impossible to make an accurate, defensible judgment about the validity of the conspiracy theories. For the time being we must make do with ignorance. We simply do not know whether the United States government supported and armed the Iraqi government throughout the 1980s, telling it in July of 1990 that it was not concerned about intra-Arab disputes19 and providing it with equipment and materiel right up to the moment when the aerial bombing commenced, in order to create the conditions for the outbreak of war, or for other reasons. But Ehrenreich’s assertion, it seems to me, can be interpreted to go far beyond conspiracy theories.

If it is true that, all intentionality aside, this war was necessary because of the end of the (c)old war, then we have to ask ourselves what the nature of the (c)old war is, and why a new war had to take its place. These questions may involve the nature of the national economy and the arms industry, but beyond these they also involve the nature of modern post-war culture in general.

It is not a coincidence that American culture for the last half century has used a new reckoning of time, designating itself as the “post-war” period. The organization of time is always a function of a culture’s values, and an era’s zero hour always designates the crucial moment, the crucible in which identity is formed and time begins. Post-war time begins in 1945; that is the year zero of our era. This year is marked not by a birth but by a death: the suicide, on April 30, of Adolf Hitler.
Every year after 1945 is a post-war year. It is a year of war. Time, since 1945, is the constant refighting of the war which came to an end in 1945; and the constant attempt to definitively kill the false Messiah who killed himself in that year, thus transferring upon the whole world his sins and making any kind of a trial impossible. “His trial has never taken place,” says the narrator of Hans Jürgen Syberberg’s Hitler: A Film from Germany. For this reason Hitler becomes disembodied, filmic, omnipresent: our Hitler. He is “the greatest show of the century, the big business, the show of the shows,” as well as “the song of the songs” and “the history of all the histories.” The post-1945 period is a post-Messianic age. The central revelation of the post-war era is the revelation not of absolute goodness but of absolute evil. Worshippers are gathered together in a community of fear and hatred to oppose the false Messiah, whose body has disappeared and who is, hence, constantly being resurrected. Saddam Hussein was merely his most recent incarnation. In Don DeLillo’s novel White Noise, the central figure, Jack Gladney, is a professor and chairman of the Department of Hitler Studies at a small liberal arts college, and his obsession with Hitler is a function of society’s own obsessions. “In the middle of it all is Hitler, of course,” Jack says, and we suspect that “it all,” far more than just his own fascination with the great dictator, is the social pathology of postmodern society itself. As Jack explains in a discussion with his wife, “We couldn’t have television without him.”

I would like to suggest that what I am describing here is more than just a recurring social pathology; it is the central archetype of post-war culture. The Cold War was simply the old war, old not just in the sense of “previous” but also in the sense of “ageing.” There is a certain cultural integrity to the fact that no peace treaty was ever signed to put an end to World War II, because in the cultural sense it never did come to an end. It is an ongoing cultural occurrence: the constant battle against a foe who is never quite beaten. Hitler is an Antaeus. Post-war culture kills him and throws him onto the ground, and he springs up again, endlessly. The logic of the post-war runs in the following way: Hitler is alive, my enemy is alive, ergo my enemy is Hitler. Since all these sentences are equations, the commutative property holds, and they can be reversed at will: Hitler is my enemy, my enemy is alive, ergo Hitler is alive. The system is closed and self-sufficient. Everything in it refers to everything else, and all statements say exactly the same thing.