Invisible Culture
An Electronic Journal for Visual Culture

Leaflet Drop: The Paper Landscapes of War

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> War. The possibility at last exists that war may be
> defeated on the linguistic plane. If war is an extreme
> metaphor, we may defeat it by devising metaphors that
> are even more extreme.
> --J. G. Ballard, "Project for a Glossary of the Twentieth
> Century"1

Leaflets were first deployed as a tactical weapon of war by the Germans during World War I to announce their imminent descent upon Paris [Fig 1]. From that time forward, paper has rained from the skies during nearly every war (including the Cold War) to persuade the enemy to abandon its position.2 [Fig. 2] More recently, a storm of text inundated landscapes in Iraq, where millions of leaflets were routinely dropped by the United States military both prior to and during the war to demoralize soldiers and civilian workers. According to the *Guardian*, one leaflet warns Iraqis that by repairing damaged communication infrastructure: "'you are risking your life,'" because "'the cables are tools used to suppress the Iraqi people by Saddam and his regime, they are targeted for destruction.'"3 [Fig 3] The leaflets, which blanket the ground to ensure easy visibility, create a literal terrain of propaganda: an environment that destabilizes by surrounding the adversary. With a deluge of millions of leaflets, often in a single day, it seems the sky is nearly falling; in the littered, war-strewn landscape is the material register of engineered and endless doubts.

As missives of threat, information, or persuasion, leaflets are a critical medium in the U.S. military's Psychological Operations (PSYOPs). During the Gulf War almost 30 million leaflets were distributed, including the coveted "surrender passes," some of which were designed as full-color 25-dinar bank notes to attract soldiers' attention.4 [Fig. 4] Leaflets in the form of fake money were also littered on Vietnam, and in Afghanistan blue leaflets the size of dollar bills announced an award of $5 million for information on the location of Taliban leaders and al-Qaeda

allies. Since October 2002, in the months leading up to Operation Iraqi Freedom, the U.S. dropped over 33 million leaflets urging Iraqis not to support Saddam Hussein. A psychological campaign intended to destabilize and conquer opposing forces, these "weapons of mass persuasion" are part of an ongoing campaign to spread ominous information. The intent of psychological warfare, as the authors of *Shock and Awe* (an influential text focused on military strategies for psychologically disabling the enemy) indicate, is to "destroy, defeat, and neuter the will of an adversary to resist; or convince the adversary to accept our terms and aims short of using force." To neuter is to render powerless through amputation, where shock numbs and destroys the adversary's perception through "deception, confusion, misinformation, and disinformation, perhaps in massive amounts."5 Part of a wartime strategy of "rapid dominance," these attempts to deploy dubious communications capitalize on structures of doubt (as well as the capacity of media to render the real), where the unknown and unverifiable devise a contested terrain. The leaflet drop activates doubt at three primary levels: first, through its materiality—both light and easily distributed—which contributes to the construction of fact; second, through the forceful, direct and descending delivery of the leaflet, which renders information at once convincing and nearly mythical; and third, through the landscape, which as both battlefield and "outside" condition, challenges the authority of the text.

Idea Bombs

What has been called, "bombing the enemy with ideas," the leaflet drop is a carefully orchestrated campaign to cast doubt in enemy territory, and to force the surrender of troops by a bombardment of "facts." Indeed, leaflets are often accompanied by photographs that serve as forewarning or "proof" of destruction wreaked in nearby territories [Fig. 5]. The Federation of American Scientists (FAS) indicates, "credible and verifiable facts whether favorable or not, are the backbone of the leaflet message because they demand attention."6 While some leaflets document destruction, others attempt to goad soldiers into desertion and surrender by convincing them that their lives will improve under a new regime. Facts mutate in this context, where the basis for verification is thrown into disarray. "Verbal unanchoredness," as a condition of war, occurs by withholding and manipulating information, a strategy that Elaine Scarry describes where "the utter derealization of verbal meaning" may generate "the presence of fictions or, more drastically, 'lies.'" Lies are like wounds, an injurious strategy where the ability to "make real" is a sovereign operation used to define territory and ideology.7 In an effort to counter the endless air-dropped messages that define both the real and its landscapes, the Iraqi government has announced that the leaflets are contaminated with deadly chemicals, and to prove its point has sent out Iraqi soldiers in chemical warfare suits to collect the leaflets. At the same time, the Iraq Ministry of Information has

dropped its own leaflets in an attempt to discredit the U.S. military campaign and to play on the anxieties of American soldiers. A performance of fact takes place on the battlefield where the warring factions each attempt to discredit the other, going to elaborate lengths to manipulate the landscape of information [Fig. 6 & Fig. 7].

Within the context of war, text contains explosive possibilities, staking out a veritable minefield. Oscillating between fact and fiction, text expands the realm of the possible. As Scarry suggests, "each verbal utterance has at all times the explosive duality of being at once very possibly true and very possibly false."8 Yet the force with which information is conveyed is equally critical to its sense of certainty, which may explain why Paul Virilio argues that "news is dynamite, information explodes like a bomb, opinion polls or war propaganda are time bombs."9 [Fig. 8] While leaflets explode through the deployment of leaflet bombs, text verges on fulmination in other contexts. In fact, Peter Schwenger suggests this may have been a condition of language all along, where text often verges on "undecidability." When sentences burst, as he cites of Maurice Blanchot's *The Writing of Disaster*, truth is also thrown into question, a moment when "'knowledge becomes finer and lighter,'" and finally abandons its position of mastery to efface itself.10 Here are two sides to truth: a strategic dismantling and controlling to garner success in war and a suspension and revocation to arrive at creative possibility. This continuum, as will be discussed below, is not by accident. But as Blanchot indicates, before truth explodes it becomes lighter [Fig. 9].

Paper and print are ideal media for controlling space because they are "light, easily reproduced and disseminated, and quickly replaced." Jody Berland, expanding upon this concept from Harold Innis, writes that these media "enable the acquisition, transmission and control of information over an ever-expanding geographic space."11 Paper—with its loose and fast facts—is a communications technology that may be dispersed and distributed, and easily employed as an agent of empire to the extent that it may even take the place of war. The span of the territory corresponds to the reach of communication technologies, which are able to produce space littered with a rain of data. Within the "imperial fact factory," a phrase Cildo Meireles uses to expose how ruling entities render "information" real through circulation, doubt may be engineered through these same circuits. Moving between information and disinformation, Meireles stages "ideological insertions" by printing statements—often false—on bank notes, to suggest the generation of swerving truths. Using money as a structure of verification, Meireles notes that "the container always carries with it an ideology," and that "an 'insertion' into this circuit is always a form of counter-information."12 Like Marshall McLuhan's proposed "counter-environments," which reveal the dominant environment of operations, Meireles' insertions demonstrate how the materiality, speed, and distribution of information are bound up with its claims to

authenticity.13

Suspended Reality

> And now that internal subversion has joined the ranks of 'thinkable' topics in Vietnam and Santo Domingo (not to mention Harlem and Georgia) don't the departments of State and interior wish there existed some opinion-forming gizmo (guts by IBM and RCA, boxwork by Eliot Noyes, graphics by Paul Rand) that could be parachuted down, untouched by human hand, to spread sweetness and light and democracy and free-enterprise for fifty miles around ground zero. It would beat ugly Americans any day.
> --Reyner Banham, "The Great Gizmo"14

As leaflets drop, text swells and truth ruptures, we find in war the stirring and suspending of communication and information. This process, as Scarry writes, is part of the purpose of war as a "huge structure for the derealization of cultural constructs and, simultaneously, for their eventual reconstitution," where war decides what will become real. In this sense, "the declaration of war is the declaration that 'reality' is now officially 'up for grabs,' is now officially not only to be suspended but systematically deconstructed."15 Facts waver and become deliriously buoyant, shot through with holes. They play at immediacy, at once singular and direct. Walter Benjamin suggests in "Filling Station" that because facts carry more weight than convictions, our literary work should also be modified to take up the "active" form of "leaflets, brochures, articles, and placards." It is "only this prompt language," he writes, that "shows itself actively equal to the moment."16 Facts are fast and furious, and demand instant, light, and even airborne circulation. What we take for truth—and the lightness it acquires—seems to be located as much in the medium (and its porosity) as the message. While Innis argues that print, through its double capacity for realism and delusion, has thrown "truth" into disarray, Benjamin implies that truth is as much a product of our media as any divine decree. Facts in the form of leaflets cleave to paper arguably because their heavenly source affirms a sovereign vantage point [Fig. 10].

Surveying the view from on high, Virilio makes the illuminating claim: "One realizes that our own era, impious as it may be, has never stopped tarting up the power of its communication tools with the menacing attributes of a theocracy."17 This is, after all, a way of arriving at "the gospel truth." To prove this point, Virilio looks to Hermes as "the mediator whose job it is to convey messages and negotiate changes and transitions, but also, equally, to guide, mislead, redirect, and lead

astray."18 The god of messages and media is also the god of hermeticism, scattering cryptograms in the landscape to maintain a certain sovereign distance between the divine and the disciples.

Unpredictable Landscapes

Landscape as a term is host to an inherent instability, moving as it does between concrete reality and abstract concept. Like text, it also skims at explosion. In a way, "the employment of the word," as Tadeusz Rachwal discusses, is a way to give landscape a topography, so that it can "take place."19 Yet what lies beyond or outside the text is another truth—the "sublime terror" that language attempts to contain. At the moment when the leaflet is released and explodes, the text dropped on the landscape announces its solemn containment and limits, surrounded as it is on all sides by sky, earth, and battle [Fig. 11]. But the relationship between language and landscape cannot be easily contained. By virtue of its position in the landscape, "language creates speculation," Johanna Drucker notes, because "it can project a future that becomes convincing whether or not the claim is ever substantiated." Drucker refers to language in the landscape as enigmatic, which may "charge and activate the environment, sometimes undermining, sometimes reinforcing our perceptions."20 The question is: To what degree text acquires such a dubious position because of its situation? Does landscape facilitate this wavering? Does the "outside" as Blanchot terms it, become an explosive force, rupturing the seals around the interior logic of language?

When the artist Robert Smithson says that his "sense of language is that it is matter and not ideas—i.e., 'printed matter,'" 21we can clearly see how the materiality of text renders the notion of "information" suspect. For Smithson, text was matter that could be worked and shaped much the same as the physical landscape. The meaning of text is then subject to change based on its material presence and delivery. Writing about this disjuncture between "linguistic sense-data" and "rational categories,"22Smithson indicates that flight re-cast notions of speed, space, time, and meaning, throwing the basis for rational categories into question and reversing the meaning of objects through intensity of movement.23 Here, flight formulates fact, becoming the basis for meaning. It cuts between language and matter to cast doubt on the status of information. Similarly flight-bound, Alexander Graham Bell conceived and operated on language as "*linguistic objects*"—this Smithson references to show how "the site was joined to the sky in a structural equation."24 Bell's telephone and flight projects surpassed language as meaning to arrive at its imminent physicality. Similarly, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari find that the myth of information reveals a "language of sense" and intensities, which unbinds language to demarcate lines of flight, and suggests that movement may be a forceful strategy for recovering words.25 Read in the context

of Smithson, we could say this is a way of moving beyond information: making matter matter.

Rather than winnow discourse down to an interior "hidden core," Michel Foucault suggests that we should instead consider it within its "external conditions of existence."26 Statements always hold traces of an external field. They attempt to contain the "outside" within a finite logic of language. Yet this logic is never complete. As Foucault writes,

> The modern *cogito* (and this is why it is not so much the discovery of an evident truth as a ceaseless task constantly to be undertaken afresh) must traverse, duplicate, and reactivate in an explicit form the articulation of thought on everything within it, around it, and beneath it which is not thought, yet which is nevertheless not foreign to thought, in the sense of an irreducible, and insuperable exteriority.27

Within the finite space of what is spoken looms an unspoken exteriority, the space of the unthought. The outside is confined in the inside (of discourse), and thought attempts to extend and undo itself by containing all that it cannot say (of which it is constantly reminded in the form of imminent exteriority). The outside appears inside and outside at once; as Deleuze writes, "the unthought is therefore not external to thought but lies at its very heart, as that impossibility of thinking which doubles or hollows out the outside."28

Attempting to think beyond thought is clearly a situation always verging on its own impossibility, where thought constantly makes its finite limits known (doubting itself and doubting what lies beyond). Text is an (endless) operation of containment that bounds and makes knowable by making finite. Circumscribing the un-circumscribable, text at the same time is an incision and is itself incised by the exterior. Language ultimately constitutes an irruptive situation. It is an intermediary moment grasping at a larger field. In this sense, "a text is not the repository of knowledges or truths," as Elizabeth Grosz writes, "so much as it is a process of scattering thought; scrambling terms, concepts and practices; forging linkages; becoming a form of action."29 In its dispersions, scattered in the landscape, it assumes characteristics beyond the stripped relay of message theory. To this end, when Foucault asks how best to capture language—or "discursive formations"—he ventures that we should go about "describing the dispersions themselves."30

Doubtful Surrender

What the leaflet drop finally seeks to accomplish is a state of surrender. Even before the war began, the U.S. military bombarded Iraqi commanders and soldiers with information encouraging them to give up without a fight. The leaflets, distributed and coordinated with radio broadcast and email, gave precise instructions on how Iraqis should surrender [Fig. 12]. And initially, weapons were discovered abandoned in the desert, while at the same time demoralized and threadbare soldiers were found carrying the leaflets.31 In this state of surrounding assault, the leaflets attempted to promise and confirm. But this is unstable, war-shattered territory, marked by equally unstable language that explodes from airborne bombs with portentous claims. Is it best to abandon position in the wake of impending doom or hold to fortifications? War presents an amplified and dizzying landscape of doubt, and it is its "fiction-generating" capacity, as Scarry again notes, that makes it so effective in redefining territories, cultural and political constructs. While here doubt is deadly, the grand pronouncements raining from the sky may leave no other option but to persist, perversely, because we doubt not only the bases, but also the means of truth. Where information is myth, this is a way to survive: by taking count of the war-strewn landscape.

It is in this context that Scarry seeks to reverse the "destruction of creation" found in war to locate an ethical ground in the possibilities of creation.32 War makes and unmakes the world, yet as a mode of reconfiguring cultural constructs it proves to be limiting. By exploring the ethical potential of creation, we can move beyond war. Because "even if the self-recreation of a country, continent, or world as a whole requires a process that allows the periodic derealization of cultural constructs," as Scarry indicates, still this process should not be restricted to war, but should be replaced and opened up to other methods of reconstitution. If war is a procedure for re-creation, then she argues that the "importance of invention ultimately signals the importance of subjecting the substantiation process itself (war) to the same process of recreation."33 Here, the excess energy within this explosive world of war may be transformed. As Georges Bataille argues,

> We can ignore or forget the fact that the ground we live
> on is little other than a field of multiple destructions. Our
> ignorance only has this incontestable effect: It causes us
> to *undergo* what we could *bring about* in our own way, if
> we understood. It deprives us of the choice of an
> exudation that might suit us. Above all, it consigns men
> and their works to catastrophic destruction.34

The leaflet drop, as a site of explosion and surrender finally suggests a way to extend both creation and discourse by opening to the outside, to a surrounding landscape that moves the medium beyond its defined limits to realize expanded

possibilities. This momentum—the reinvention characteristic of war—can be re-understood through the process of expenditure, as Bataille argues, as a creative "squandering without reciprocation." Squandering becomes another way of surrendering: giving up the catastrophic in order to imagine in excess [Fig. 13].

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1.J. G. Ballard, "Project for a Glossary of the Twentieth Century," in *Incorporations*, *Zone 6*, eds. Jonathan Crary and Sanford Kwinter (New York: Zone Books, 1992), 279.

2.Like pennies from heaven, air drops occur in other guises, from food aid (including Pop-tarts) to fleas and prosthetic limbs. The mechanism of the airdrop (releasing manna, salvation), will be explored in an expanded version of this essay. For more on wartime flea drops, see Yoshio Shinozuka, "We Took Down Two Today," *Harper's* 306, no. 1835 (April 2003), 23-26.

3.Ewen MacAskill and Brian Whitaker, "Allies strive for Arab hearts and minds," *Guardian*[London], (Saturday November 30, 2002), http://www.guardian.co.uk/international/story/0,3604,850936,00.html.

4.*The Falling Leaf*, Journal of the Psywar Society, http://www.btinternet.com/~rrnotes/psywarsoc/fleaf/gulfapp.htm. According to CBC news online, over 98 percent of Iraqi prisoners of war carried surrender passes. See "Reality Check: Psychological Operations--Cheaper Than Blood" (March 26, 2003), http://www.cbc.ca/news/iraq/issues_analysis/realitycheck030326.html.

5.*Shock and Awe*, http://www.dodccrp.org/shockIndex.html.

6."Leaflet," http://www.fas.org/irp/doddir/army/fm33-1/fm33-1l.htm. Based upon "Psychological Operations Field Manual No.33-1" published in August 1979 by Department of the Army Headquarters in Washington DC; and "Psychological Operations (PSYOP) Media Subcourse PO-0816" by The Army Institute for Professional Development, published in 1983.

7.Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 134-140.

8.Ibid., 136.

9.Paul Virilio, "The Data Coup d'Etat," in *The Art of the Motor*, trans. Julie Rose (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 24.

10.Peter Schwenger, *Letter Bomb: Nuclear Holocaust and the Exploding Word* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 102.

11.Jody Berland, "Space at the Margins: Colonial Spatiality and Critical Theory After Innis," in *Topia* 1 (Spring 1997), 59. See also Harold Innis, *The Bias of Communication* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1951).

12.Cildo Meireles, "Statement," in "Conceptual Art under the Military Regime," http://www.brazilnetwork.org/statics/media/visualarts/texts/text2.htm. Reprinted from Paulo Herkenhoff, *Cildo Meireles* (New York: Phaidon Press Limited, 1999), 110-113. For more information, see "Ideological Insertions" and "Cédula Project" in *Cildo Meireles*.

13.Marshall McLuhan, *Counterblast* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1969), 4-5.

14.Reyner Banham, "The Great Gizmo," in *A Critic Writes: Essays by Reyner Banham* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 114.

15.Scarry, 137.

16.Walter Benjamin, "Filling Station" in "One-Way Street," *Reflections* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), 61.

17.Virilio, 26.

18.Ibid., 27.

19.Tadeusz Rachwal, "The Employment of the Word: Writing Topography and Colonial Landscapes," in *Technologies of Landscape: From Reaping to Recycling*, ed. David E. Nye (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999), 93.

20.Johanna Drucker, "Language in the Landscape," in *Figuring the Word: Essays on Books, Writing, and Visual Poetics* (New York: Granary Books, 1998), 97-99.

21.Robert Smithson, "Language to be Looked at and/or Things to be Read," in *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, ed. Jack Flam (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 61.

22.Smithson, "Towards the Development of an Air Terminal Site," in *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, 59.

23.Ibid., 52.

24.Ibid., 55.

25.Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, "What is a Minor Literature?" in *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, eds. Russell Ferguson, Martha Gever, Trinh T. Minh-ha and Cornel West (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1992), 59-67.

26.Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (New York: Random House, 1974), 229.

27.Foucault, "Unities of Discourse," in *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), 29.

28.Gilles Deleuze, *Foucault*, trans. Seán Hand (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998 [1986]), 97.

29.Elizabeth Grosz, *Architecture from the Outside* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001), 57-58.

30.Foucault, "Discursive Formations," in *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the*

Discourse on Language, 37.⬆

31.David Usborne, "Iraq's entire 51st Division surrenders as Allies advance,"
Independent (New York, 22 March 2003), http://www.independent.co.uk/.⬆

32.Scarry, 22.⬆

33.Ibid., 142.⬆

34.Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy*,
Volume 1, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Zone Books, 1991), 23-24 (emphasis in
original).⬆

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