Sanja Domazet[1]

Faculty of Political Sciences University of Belgrade

Maja Vukadinović

Faculty of Contemporary Arts, Business Academy in Novi Sad

The concept of militainment: war as media spectacle

Abstract

▼

The start of the 21st century marked the beginning of interactive warfare and the birth of "militainment", that refers to the presentation of war as an entertainment and the influx of military discourse into the entertainment sector. As the distinctions between real and media war become even more hazy, entertainment and spectacle play a bigger part in how conflicts are portrayed. It is claimed that the war now invites audiences to enter the spectacle as interactive participants through a variety of channels, from news coverage to online video games to reality television. The article examines Stahl's theory on „militainment" and the logic of spectacle applied to media simulation of armed conflicts. War simulation in video games is disscused in context of the glamourization of war, which raises numerous concerns as emotionally engaging games have the potential to have a significant negative impact on young people's attitudes towards conflicts.

Keywords

▼

militainment, media, war, simulation, video games

[1]   Kontakt adresa autora: sanja.domazet@fpn.bg.ac.rs

The media has an important role in twenty-first century wars. We observe the expansion of media formats as well as the media's apparent desire to depict and describe conflicts. Media representation of violent conflicts is vital as the very meanings citizens assign to these events can be largely influenced by spectacular media images and stories.

Academics are aware that there are two distinct wars: the real war and the media war. Media images, tropes, themes and myths of war often bear little resemblance to war itself. The real war and media war are and should be seen as separate, but throughout the twentieth century, they grew closer as a result of the ability of new communication technologies – radio, TV, and computers – to visually integrate the home front and the battlefront, local and global.

In contemporary political and media circumstances, the concept of militainment introduced by R. Stahl becomes important for understanding of new relationship between war, media and spectacle. The start of the 21st century marked the beginning of interactive warfare and the birth of "militainment", that refers to the presentation of war as an entertainment (Stahl, 2009:6). Generally, the war now invites audiences to enter the spectacle as interactive participants through a variety of channels, from news coverage to online video games to reality television. The development of interactive warfare and the influx of military discourse into the entertainment sector are the subjects of Stahl's theory. In essence, military discourses are defused through the "military-industrial-media-entertainment complex" (Der Derian, 2009:1).

The idea of militainment is mostly related to American politics and the media, although its logic nowadays could be applicable to other countries and media systems. Throughout recent history we could see the effect media had on armed conflicts and how the media changed attitudes towards realities of war. For instance, conflict in Vietnam is known as the first „television war" because the dramatization of stories in the news distorted the public's perception of what was actually happening

The concept of militainment:
war as media spectacle
[Sanja Domazet, Maja Vukadinović]

55

in the field. The visual qualities of television as medium were extremely powerful, and it played an ever more important role in defining the public's perceptions. While images of war began to fade from news and broadcast media, the enormously popular Hollywood film industry continued to drive the logic of war-as-spectacle, enabling observation of war with a disconnection from the military. Numerous film directors applied spectacular techniques to bring a kind of realism to the cinematic representation of war. This resulted in what Stahl (2009) describes as a citizen "purged of political connection to the military" and who experienced war in a "choreographed privatized consumption" (Stahl, 2009: 22).

The notion of militainment is closely related to infotainment as contemporary practice of the news media and more specifically to the discourse of fear. The news media is using fear in specific ways. The captivation viewers get out of the more sensational and dramatic news is not always perceived in the right context. To observe fearful events such as conflicts brings a sense of safety, which people get out of the comparison from their position (their living room) – to the dramatic happenings in the news about the outside world (Griffin, 2010). Besides, there is a knowledge based protection that knowing what is happening gives its own security, and being aware of the most dangerous crisis in the world – while being safe, deliberately gives people a sanctuary. This usage of fear as an entertainment or so called infotainment becomes a great force in the creation of our perceived reality. Ultimatelly, by creating uncertainty, the news media provide safety in knowing and safety in comparison to the horrific events presented.

„The Video Game War" in the age of simulation

This logic of spectacle had the effect of turning the citizen into a "submissive, politically disconnected, complacent and deactivated audience member" (ibid). In other words, this logic of spectacle distanced the citizen's conception of war from its political reality. Stahl argues that this logic of spectacle truly came to light during the 1991 Gulf War, demonstrating how "the civic relationship to the military changed dramatically between the Vietnam War and Operation Desert Storm." (ibid) The 1991 Persian Gulf boosted the public image of the American military, which "institutionalized the press pooling model on a grand scale during the 1991 Persian Gulf War" (id:23). Learning the lessons of the Vietnam War and the impact of the media-entertainment network on the audience, the Pentagon revised its relationship with the entertainment industry. Indeed, at the wake of the Gulf Persian war, the Pentagon had its grip on the news "in both agenda and language" (id: 24).

As a result, the Gulf war gave birth to a "new military media arrangement" between the Pentagon and the media industry, one which, unfortunately, compromised democracy (id, 24). Learning from Vietnam,

during the Gulf War, the Pentagon "delivered a war that both satisfied its public relations interests and remained television-friendly" (ibid). The Gulf War was a media war par excellence. As a result, "the new symbiosis positioned war as a dramatic screen production increasingly at home amidst the usual menagerie of televised consumables and amusements" (ibid). As American society became more and more consumer-focused, the "consumer war" turned the citizen into a mere consumer-of-content, who could sit back and "enjoy the show" (id:25). With these structural changes, the audience's perception of war on screens became as important as the waging of war itself (ibid). The logic of spectacle therefore became fully ingrained during the Gulf war.

Moreover, as Jean Baudrillard noted, the Gulf War was not a real war in the traditional sense of the word and he called it a "non-war" and a "war that never began" (Baudrillard, 1994). The way it was shown to the American public through the media also heightened its disconnection with reality. Much of the footage from the front consisted of first person views from aircraft flying high over targets or bombs speeding down quickly to their destruction. These videos were in black and white and often inverted infrared imagery with military overlays of target reticules and streams of informational numerals. It presented the engagements that were occurring in a format that felt like the public was watching a video game being played, not actual death and destruction occurring on actual land half a world way. This strange viewpoint caused the Gulf War to be nicknamed "The Video Game War" because of these daily broadcasts of bomber footage. Even these footages, which had an actual recording of the events, conveyed an unreal impression of the war since the public often saw a view from a bomb streaking down that ended right as it got there. Sometimes a brief view of the explosion was shown, viewed from the plane high above, removed from the actual shock and horror of the event on the ground. This disconnect is amplified in today's methods of warfare by unmanned drones where pilots that are raining down destruction of people and facilities and whose pilots don't even have to be located in the same country but can be sitting in "cockpits" that resemble a flight simulator or very advanced home entertainment computer game system far from the battlefield.

This method of fighting wars perfectly illustrates Baudrillard's reference to the Jorge Luis Borges' fable, "On Exactitude in Science," in Procession of Simulacra where an empire's territory is completely covered by a 1:1 ratio map that completely covers the land upon which the people live, so exact that the people take it for the land itself, only once it begins to erode away in certain areas is some of the original reality of their home is revealed and it turns out that realm they thought they knew had descended into wasteland, no longer recognizable as the world in which they thought they lived, but was now so mixed with this partially eroded simulated map so that they couldn't truly tell what was real and what was simulation.

The concept of militainment:
war as media spectacle
[Sanja Domazet, Maja Vukadinović]

57

The interactivity of war and the consuming citizen

The notion of "spectacle" was first coined in 1967 by Guy Debord in Society of Spectacle in which Debord relates to a social relation among people, mediated by images that influence our lives and beliefs. By "de-activating the masses", the logic of spectacle does not seek to engage the citizen into a way of thinking but rather to efface the political power of popular debate (Stahl, 2009:31). As a result, "the spectacular war does not examine the legitimacy of military action so much as it inserts itself into the momentum of an inevitable conflict" (id:32).

The idea of 'war-as-spectacle' became important even prior to the Gulf War, as French philosopher Paul Virilio wrote that "a war of pictures and sounds is replacing the war of objects – projectiles and missiles" (Virilio, 1989:26). The place for the waging of war was no longer so much on the battlefield but more in visual communication. Virilio claims: „In a tehnicians' version of an all-seeing Divinity, ever ruling out accident and surprise, the drive is on for a general system of illumination that will allow everything to be seen and known, at every moment and in every place (Virilio, 1989:4).

However, the discourse of the citizen-spectator passively consuming war mutated at the start of the 21st century following the dramatic events of September 11, 2001. After these terrorist attacks, President Bush declared war not on a state, group or entity, but on a noun, the so-called "War on Terror". Consequently, the act of declaring war on an abstract concept greatly facilitated the mass integration of the war in the media-entertainment network. That shift was so significant that "war flooded the social field" (Stahl, 2009).

This new war invited the audience into a new mode of consuming war. The relationship between war entertainment and the citizen became interactive (id:30). As noted by Stahl, "the logics of spectacle thus gave way to those of interactivity" (id:38). However, the notion of spectacle had not disappeared, as the events of September 11th were so spectacular that they "occupied virtually all eyeballs simultaneously, pushing the screen closer to the center of war." (id: 38). Whereas in the past, the logic of spectacle meant that the citizen was a passive subject in this interactive war, the citizen was now participatory subject of war. This new approach to war was so important that it "thrust the citizen through the safety glass of the television screen into the new war zone'' (id:40). This new "participatory war" invaded the social sphere, and "represented a military colonization of civic space" (id: 40). Another important aspect of Stahl's theory on the glamorization and sensationalization of war is his impetus on the employment of Information Warfare, the use of information to win the advantage over an opponent. Thus, with the invasion of Iraq in 2003, the Pentagon intensified its use of information warfare (id: 34).

It is from that point that Stahl notes the birth of "militainment" (Stahl, 2009:44) which designates the extensive infusing of military discourses in the entertainment industry at the start of 2003. In this logic of militainment, the interactive war reshaped the model of the consuming citizen: war is to be consumed with pleasure and participation from the citizen who is thrown into a "fantasy of a first-person, authorial kinetics of war" (id:42). Following this first-person participatory approach, the interactivity of war means that the citizen virtually occupies the soldier's body (id: 43). This virtual occupation has the direct effect of positioning the citizen into the role of the soldier thus giving him/her a role to play in the war. Thus, the Militainment gave birth to a new status for the citizen, who becomes a "virtual" citizen-soldier, a third sphere which combines the dimension of the citizen and of the soldier (id:126). Not only does the interactive war reposition the citizen's relationship with war, it mutates and reinforces military discourses already found in the logic of spectacle.

Virtualization of war

Nowadays, drone technology reflects this weaponizing of the civic-gaze, the virtualization of war and this shift to the logic of the citizen-soldier. Stahl argues that the drone camera acts as a "medium" between the gaze of the citizen-soldier and the perceived image (Stahl 2013: 662). Once again, through consumption in this interactive war, "drone vision" (Stahl, 2013) paves the way for a "visual discourse" (663). Virilio notes that "weapons are not just tools of destruction but also perception" (Virilio, 1989:35). Clearly, as the drone becomes this weapon of perception, it succeeds in weaponizing the civic gaze (Stahl, 2013:665). In short this gives birth to "a first-person relationship with the drone's camera" as war becomes more real and palpable to the virtual citizen-soldier (id: 665). As a result, this relationship with the drone contributes to the domesticating of war as the virtualization of war and the emergence of drone technology creates "a remote, controller war" (id:670).

War simulation is also largely present in video games that are now among most popular forms of enterntainment. It could be argued that boundaries between reality and virtal world are almost erased in gaming and video games must be analysed within the context od media. War can seem uniquely suited to exploration through gaming since the challenges of combat or command can both be powerfully evoked in gameplay, while war also offers a natural setting both for competition and cooperation among players. The horrors of a real-world battlefield are a long way from their virtual versions, no matter how much games have evolved in recent years. However, the gaming industry's relationship with the military has been getting closer – whether through the technology used to train officers, the tactics to change public perception, the close ties to veterans, or the simple fact that soldiers love to play (Powell, 7.2.2023).

The concept of militainment:
war as media spectacle
[Sanja Domazet, Maja Vukadinović]

59

The realities of war are represented in the virtual world through immersive gunfights and introduction of first-person shooters games (FPS) that feature a combination of fiction, historical and factual elements mixed in with their original design. These militaristic games have deeply engaged millions of young players around the globe. In this highly popular gaming genre, conflict and war are transformed into unserious, playable interactive entertainment. The glamourization of war, which is achieved by stimulating visuals and heroic myths of army life, raises numerous concerns as these emotionally engaging games have the potential to have a significant negative impact on young people's attitudes towards conflicts.

The media have evolved rapidly over the past three decades, and continue to develop in novel ways. The role of the media during armed conflicts is becoming increasingly important, particularly with the development of new and different kinds of communication technologies. Additionally, as the distinctions between real and media war become even more hazy, entertainment and spectacle play a bigger part in how conflicts are portrayed. Live media coverage of military actions have been significantly developed since Gulf War and now technological conditions determine how wars are communicated. As we watch history and future methods of conflict unravel before our eyes, it is not possible to ignore the fact that the media has been weaponized and will contunue to play a crucial role both in and outside the theatre of war.

Bibliography

Anderson, Robin and Mirrlees, Tanner, Introduction: Media, Technology, and the Culture of Militarism: Watching, Playing and Resisting the War Society, *Democratic Communiqué*: Vol. 26, Iss. 2, Article 1, (2014), pp. 1-13

Baudrillard, Jean (1994). "Precession of Simulacra." *Simulacra and Simulation*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994. 253-281.

Der Derian, James, The Desert of the Real and the Simulacrum of War: *International Affairs*: Vol. 84, No. 5, (Sep. 2008), pp. 931-948.

Der Derian, James, The Simulation Syndrome: From War Games to Game Wars, *Social Text*: No. 24, (1990), pp. 187-192.

Griffin, Michael, Media images of war: *Media, War & Conflict*: Vol. 3, No. 1, (2010), pp. 7-41

Ottosen, Rune, Targeting the Audience: Video Games as War Propaganda in Enterntainment and News: *Bodhi: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, Vol. 2, No 1, Serial No. 2 (2008), pp. 14-39

Powell, Steffan (7.02.2023), „War games: the military's deep affinity with gaming", BBC: https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-61229305

Spigel, Lynn, Enterntainment Wars: Television Culture after 9/11, *American Quarterly*: Vol. 56, No. 2, (Jun. 2004), pp. 235-270.

Stahl, Roger (2010). *Militainment Inc.: War, Media and Popular Culture*, New York and London: Routledge.

Thussu Kishan, Daya (2007). News as Enterntainment: The Rise of Global Infotainment, London: SAGE

Thussu Kishan, Daya and Des Freedman (eds), War and the media: reporting conflict 24/7, SAGE

Virilio, Paul (1989). *War and cinema: The Logistics of Perception*, London: Verso