

# The Phantasm of American Greatness

On January 17, 1991, when the U.S. president George H. W. Bush initiated Operation Desert Storm as a response to Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait, the U.S. found itself putting to the test the principle of a 'Televised War'. As Jean Baudrillard famously observed, the entire Gulf War only took place as a televised simulation that was produced by the CNN and other major news networks, who reported from the battlefield as the conflict unfolded. Journalists were reduced to actors, action-oriented scripts guaranteed narrative when nothing was happening, cameras framed American war-machines flying above the desert as if they were about to save the world, and the *mise-en-scène* ensured exhibitionism of high-tech military gear. So extensive was the emphasis on machines and technology, one could have almost forgotten that this war was fought by and against human beings. Baudrillard's claim that "the Gulf War never happened" aimed precisely at the fact that the public perception of the war in question was completely configured by a certain televised *image* of war, which the media constructed through a goal-oriented production-process, and which served as an *Ersatz* for the real physical event that remained in the dark.

The simulated nature of the Gulf War *qua* televised event goes back to the main lessons the U.S. had learned from the disastrous effect of unregulated logistics of perception during the Vietnam War. In the late sixties, visual footage of reality too potent to be contained by any fiction, with horrific depictions of human suffering on both sides, led to massive mobilizations of pacifist movements and loss of popular support for the military intervention. The returned veterans were not received as heroes but as murderers, the reason being that the propaganda machine had failed and the power of collective phantasms of American greatness were temporarily disrupted by the despicable reality of war. The Gulf War represented in that regard the U.S. government's success in fine-tuning the public perception, and when General Colin Powell allowed himself to describe the conflict as a virtually bloodless "clean win" he did not meet any backlash on part of the socius.[1] The stark contrast with the Vietnam War can be seen at work in

the final sequence of the biographical war drama *Jarhead* (2005), which shows how the U.S. Marines returning from the Gulf War are received as heroes when suddenly a Vietnam vet jumps into their bus and manically praises them: “Semper fi, Marines! You did it! You did it clean; you made us proud!” With every word, his tone transits from ecstatic to melancholic, until his mood sinks into disappointment, and he asks whether he can sit down for a while—surely to catch something of the heroic reception that he was supposed to get but never received. And yet, as stark a contrast as it is between his homecoming back in the late sixties, and the return of the veterans from Iraq, the nature of war had not changed. When for instance the journalist Maggie O’Kane conducted her post-factum investigation into the Gulf War and asked Brent Scowcroft, the National Security Advisor to Bush, about how he thinks the American people would have taken it if they knew that the Iraqi troops were buried alive in their trenches by American forces, his response was a surprised “Look, this is war!”—which he uttered as if it was stupid on her part to ever think that the nature of war could be anything other than horror.

The reality which had been suppressed by the simulacrum of war was captured by the photographer Kenneth Jarecke, who independently documented the First Gulf War on the site of the battle. In the hours leading up to the ceasefire, Jarecke encountered a gruesome scene following an American airstrike and captured on film the unsettling image of a charred Iraqi soldier who was fossilized while still trying to get out of his truck. Unsurprisingly, the graphic photograph failed to enter the U.S. circulation after being censored by the New York offices of the Associated Press, only appearing once in the *London Observer*, upon which it caused a tremendous amount of controversy. The unrest resulted from the fact that the radical contrast between the photograph and the simulacrum of warfare exposed the fake/imaginary nature of a reality constructed by the media. What occurred, in essence, is that reality was covered up by the imaginary, upon which the imaginary structure became pierced by the real as affirmed in Jarecke’s photograph, and this breakthrough of the real exposed the simulacrum.

While the proposition that propaganda is fake amounts to a truism and hence a triviality, Jarecke’s photograph does more than simply expose. His photograph reveals that the images projected by the mainstream media were not just fake, but operated as mirrors or reflections of expectations, prejudices and self-understanding of those *for whom* the images were constructed—that is to say, the

American public; the simulacrum produced by the media did not simply substitute reality, but reflected or mirrored something, similar to how forged artworks can only succeed in fooling us to the extent that their production-process mirrors our expectations of what a work by Vermeer or by Picasso is *supposed* to look like. In that regard, the fake images that the media cast on their American audience were specifically constructed to reflect the *self-image* of that audience—and their credibility or acceptability depended on the extent to which those images were capable to resonate with the way the average American viewer of the televised war viewed himself.

Upon examining the available footage that remains from those days and is presently scattered around the internet, one can observe that the projected images gravitate around a specific theme that can be ‘unpacked’ into elements which provide a first and general sketch of how precisely the viewer of the televised simulacrum viewed him or herself. It is for instance clear that the U.S. is presented as the ‘liberators’ of the oppressed, which establishes the image of messianism. Further, the images contain a distinctly herculean character as regards the portrayal of American invincibility, manifested in terms of technological exhibitionism, which provides the simulacrum of war with the ‘tone’ of heroic scenes in Hollywood-produced action-movies. This ‘Action Man advertisement’-style is accompanied by the image of a hero going out of the way to fight the bad guy in the name of justice, even if there are no personal reasons to get involved in the conflict. Sure enough, such images were not put into the foreground, but are at all times ‘at play’ in what otherwise appears as a journalistic report on the state of affairs pertaining to a military intervention abroad.

While it is true that every aggressor in every war justifies their own actions by portraying themselves as the moral superior, the thought that there is something *singularly American* about these images can be shown by means of another contrast, this time with a nation that has an altogether a different self-understanding or ‘style-of-being’, namely Russia. When Putin was in charge of the military conflict in Chechnya during the Second Chechen War (1999-2006), the Russian media—which was strictly regulated by the Kremlin—projected images aimed at constructing a realist depiction of a rational operation, with emphasis on tactics, transforming war into a game of chess. The general image seemed to present the situation as if Russia was involved in a conflict that nobody wanted

but which was necessary to suppress the threat of Islamic fundamentalism emanating from the North-Caucasian region. But while the threat of Islamic fundamentalism *was* indeed a true problem, this truth itself was contaminated by something entirely cynical. To be sure, Russia had other geo-political and economic interests in keeping Chechnya in its original place, and Islamic fundamentalism was one of the side-effects of Russian suppression of Chechen independence in the first place. Indeed, the type of discourse exhibited by Russia here contains something paradigmatic, as it recurs in one form or another throughout all contemporary Russian war-discourse: it is profoundly realist and cynical—a conjunction which can also be recognized in the caricatures mimicking the singularly Russian ‘character’ in popular culture.

By contrast, when George Bush addressed the American nation in his announcement of the Gulf War on the 16<sup>th</sup> of January 1991, he stated that the war had started because “the dictator of Iraq invaded a small and helpless neighbor. Kuwait [...] was crushed, its people brutalized,” as Saddam Hussein waged a “cruel war against Kuwait”. The U.S. president’s speech then runs through a buildup in terms of demonization of Iraq and the victimhood of Kuwait before it introduces a heroic note: “tonight, the battle has been joined by the U.S.”— a war for “peace and justice” to make “Kuwait once again free”, after Saddam has “systematically raped, pillaged and plundered a tiny nation, subjecting its people, including innocent children, to unspeakable atrocities.” At one moment, Bush constantly repeats the phrase ‘while the world waited’, which he consistently follows up with some atrocity performed by Saddam, and this rhetorical device unsurprisingly leads towards his stern and determined exclamation that the U.S. will wait no longer and that it *will* succeed.

Such theatrical, self-aggrandizing, moralist rhetoric not only aligns with clichés contained in westerns that star the American icon John Wayne—who represents the unbeatable, tough man who does what is needed to see justice be served—but it also echoes the style and the aesthetics of the images involved in the simulacrum of war pertaining to the Gulf-conflict. To the extent that Bush and the media speak *through* those images, and insofar as they speak a language that was specifically designed to be understood by the singularly *American* spirit—Russians would not find such superficial and action-oriented drama convincing—we can say that these images are constructed to resonate with the

self-image of an average American, and to do so by mirroring its phantasmatic self-understanding. In other words, those images are chosen and presented in a way that was meant to resonate with an imaginary self-positing of 'we-the-Americans-as-the-brave-and-the-free', as well as anything along these phantasmatic lines of 'American greatness'.

## Phantasma

A phantasm is not the same as the image qua imaginary. When I imagine something, the result is not a phantasm, but an image as a correlate of an imaging-act of consciousness. The image is accessible to me, its structure and manner of appearing can be phenomenologically described. Suppose, on the other hand, that I am strongly infatuated with somebody—that is to say, I am obsessed in a quasi-pathological manner, similar to the cinematographic depiction of stalkers. In my obsession with this person, I keep producing images pertaining to our imaginary life together; I might for example imagine the future by imagining both of us doing all kinds of things, going to certain places, acting out erotic scenarios, and so on. Aside from the future, I also imagine the present: if somebody asks me to describe the object of my obsession, I will attribute to them qualities that are imaginary, in the sense that they are idealizations or 'projections' of what I *want* that person to be rather than anything else, in which case there is no reality that corresponds to those images, but the imaginary is instead superimposed on the real. Moreover, not only the future and the present but also the past as accessible through memory now becomes 'overwritten' by the imaginary: I might remember her saying things she never said, or I recall her looking at me in a suggestive way, with each of such false recollections testifying to the distortion of my memory by imagination. Yet even in this modification of perception and memory by imagination we are still at the level of image-production rather than the phantasm—indeed, all those images *presuppose* a certain phantasm, which shapes the manifestation of my obsession, and which itself never emerges as a correlate of an imaging act, but rather operates in the background so as to enable the production of specific images and their superimposition on the horizon of my experience. Conceived in this manner, the phantasm itself resists phenomenological description. The images which I produce gravitate around it—they are all instances for the phantasm to express itself—but we can only know the phantasm through its expressions and

modifications. Yet the fact that the phantasm is inaccessible to the first-person perspective of the one who is possessed by it does not mean that nothing can be said about it. Precisely *because* it is only accessible through its expressions and modifications, we can look at instances where these expressions and modifications pronounce themselves most explicitly, as such instances allow us to 'point' at a phantasm and to intuit its characteristics.

One such instance occurred during the presidency of Donald Trump, when the former U.S. president's supporters reflected a myriad of normative binary oppositions that play a central role in the American self-understanding. It becomes for example clear that the phantasms behind the whole movement 'to make America great again' dictated the sense of the opposition man/woman (Trump is taken by his supporters to be a real man, and his supporters claim Hillary cannot be president because she's a woman and hence not equipped for such task, which presupposes a specific idea of womanhood), American/Unamerican (Fox News persistently claims the democrats to be unamerican), authentic/fake (any information which aligns with one's views is authentic, while all contradictions are fake news), and so on. The phantasm does not only dictate the binary opposition, but it also spreads out over the conceptual satellites of the terms involved in the binary, thus establishing a whole chain of references between signifiers and fixing their meaning in one place: man, authority, leadership, family, and so on; in other words, by expanding its influence over the entire semantic network of a signifier, the phantasm establishes the 'world-view' of a Trump-supporter, coding the very manner in which the world appears to him or her.

While Trump's conduct has provoked many to compare him to Hitler or Goebbels, there is a significant difference between his propaganda and its traditional populist equivalents from the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The propagandistic procedure of Hitler and Goebbels consisted precisely in the necessity of having to first create a certain perception of reality in order to consequently exploit that perception. Although the Nazi-regime grew on the anti-Semitic soil of the Weimar Republic, the first task of Nazi propaganda aimed at extracting the seed of antisemitism from the dispersed areas it had affected, so as to spread that seed over the entire nation and *enable* the mobilization of crowds that were now propagandistically indoctrinated into receptivity for public anti-Semitic discourse. A significant part of Goebbels' principles of propaganda was engaged in the production of

phantasms which legitimized the corresponding discourse. Such principles included using the truth more often than a lie while twisting it to the Nazi advantage; shaping the people's perception by all available means, such as for instance extensive use of modern media of telecommunication; exploiting the aggression of the masses by attaching it to an external object which initially has nothing to do with that aggression, as was the case with the Jews; creating a narrative of mythic proportions so as to provide history with a destiny that leads back to the phantasm of the Third Reich; and so on. Trump's advantage, on the other hand, resides in the fact that his rhetoric did not require such prior indoctrination. Unlike the antisemitism of the Weimar Republic, the phantasms pertaining to American greatness were already at work in the minds of his crowd by the time he arrived on the political stage.

The phantasmatic 'being-at-work' which prepared Trump's presidency can be illustrated by an incident which occurred during a speech he gave while rallying in Oklahoma on the twentieth of June 2020. At some point, Trump's rhetoric engaged in a series of reproaches aimed at "the left wing anarchists." These "democrats", who at this point of Trump's presidency had irredeemably become the culprit of all things wrong in the eyes of his supporters, were now subject to a public trial for a series of alleged 'crimes'. Trump naturally assumed the role of persecutor, listing the felonies with the confident authority of a higher power, while his audience enthusiastically role-played itself into the position of the jury. The crowd was filled with fans wearing T-shirts and caps in support of Trump, who at this point increasingly agitated his audience by sardonically listing a series of incidents pertaining to vandalizations of statues devoted to the most sacred idols of his patriotic supporters: Thomas Jefferson, Christopher Columbus, George Washington. Each mention of symbolic offence against these names was met with soaring crescendo of disdain, clearly anticipating some sort of climax. And sure enough, as the pathos of his supporters seemed to reach the boiling point, Trump concluded the list by successfully driving the crowd into the most pronounced expression of its collective scorn, achieved at the mention of what seemed to be the most vile of all violations, namely the incident at which those 'left wing anarchists' burned the American flag.

The American flag, *qua* propagandistic image, differs from the Nazi swastika in that it does not call for a ritual on part of the Trump administration to become a totem, since it had already attained that powerful status long before Trump's

influence on American politics. This also explains why his followers are blind to factual contradiction: what matters to them is not the truth-value of his claims, but rather their ability to resonate with the phantasms of his following, even if the claims themselves are utterly absurd. Perhaps the most revealing sign of phantasmatic domination of his following is to be found in their desire to 'make America great again'. If the phantasm of some long-lost Eden—where the founding fathers laid the foundations of what is now 'the greatest country in the world'—drives many present-day Americans to desperately retrieve the lost paradise by making their country 'great again', it is because the past, in this case—and similar to the case of the obsessed stalker—is not something to be retrieved, but first and foremost something imaginary, since there never has been a time of American greatness in the first place.

### The origin of the phantasm

The phantasm of American greatness does not come *ex nihilo*, but has a *psycho-historical origin* as a response to a certain historical milieu. It's not irrelevant for instance that most foundations of what America is today have been laid only 150 years ago. All the binary oppositions mentioned earlier (i.e. 'expressions' of the phantasm) lead back to the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, specifically the period after the American Civil War (1861-1865), when the United States colonized the American frontier. This period is mostly known today from its popular depiction in movies such as those produced by John Ford and Sergio Leone, or any other 'Wild West'-themed movie, for that matter. The Civil War was essentially a struggle to decide on the very meaning of national identity as affirmed by the binary American/Unamerican—and the sense of these terms was established when the Northern Union and the Southern Confederacy ended the battle where each party sought to appropriate and fix the meaning of 'Americanness'. As Nietzsche sees it, the essence of a thing is defined by the force that appropriates it, and in this case the forces fighting the battle for conceptual appropriation unrolled between Ulysses S. Grant and Robert E. Lee, with the former emerging as a victor and consequently shaping the political, cultural and economic values that were to be considered properly 'American'. The rest of the 'American spirit' was further shaped in the aftermath of the Civil War: gender identity, the individualistically framed ideals of bravery/cowardice, the essence of authority and power—all of these received their content as a response to a harsh environment, where violent



wartimes were succeeded by just as violent times of peace and lawlessness. Many of the Southern fighters turned to plundering and robbing and everyone carried a gun; the iconic Jesse James, who is an American hero of mythical proportions, is an exemplary product of this *milieu*. Men were to put themselves in dangerous and violent situations while being able to protect their families from the hardships of their environment, which entailed dealing with vendetta's, robbery, corruption, etc. Meanwhile, womanhood was organically shaped through a dialectical relation to men, organizing itself in terms of household and domestic life—and although there are notable exceptions to such functional crystallization of 'womanhood'—one such exception is Pearle Hart, who committed one of the last stagecoach robberies in the U.S.—those exceptions acquired infamy precisely because it was generally expected of their gender to leave 'men's work' to men and to instead focus on taking care of their husbands and children. A genealogical analysis along these lines can be applied to other fundamental binary distinctions constitutive of American identity, and in all cases it can be shown that the American *milieu* of the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century did indeed prompt the genesis of a singularly American way of life.

So how did we come from a response to a certain milieu, which produced normative necessities and ideals grounded in the reality of a situation, to phantasma? The answer seems to be related to a *repetition* of ideals produced by the milieu, that is to say, their historical persistence through reproduction. The response to the historical situation initially insists as a way of life: handling things in a certain manner, anticipating certain dangers and tensions—in short, performing one's being-in-the-world in the way that one has been equipped towards it by one's *milieu*. This disposition—or, to say it with Aristotle, this "*hexis*"—is consequently transmitted to and repeated by the next generation, thus becoming a constitutive element of the American facticity: through discourse and tradition, every newborn American generation is thrown into a world where a singularly American way of being is conveyed to them, until they pass their way of life on to their children, upon which the cycle repeats again. Meanwhile, the milieu itself keeps changing and continuously presents new problems, and while it thus creates the need for a *new American*, the old *hexis* stubbornly persists in its inertia, facing the new milieu as if it were the old one. It is in this regard a significant fact that the speed of change of the American milieu from 1860's onwards is absolutely remarkable, which suggests that the new milieu came *too*

*fast* for the American spirit to adapt. Within this process, it is inevitable that the inertia of the original American self-image, now persisting in the absence of its own existential conditions, is urged to *(re)produce* its own conditions of possibility. For example, once the necessity to carry a weapon at all times is lost, the 'Wild West'-lifestyle loses its *raison d'être*—yet if the stagnated *hexis* is maintained and compulsively repeated in the modern milieu, it results in the contemporary American gun-fetishism and all problems related to it. Looking at such phenomena as the 'Proud Boys', one can discern multiple elements, including the excessive patriotism, which lead back to the logic of the Civil War. In essence, what it means to be American under the influence of the involved phantasm, comes down to being a sort of *Don Quixote* who, instead of having read too many novels of the past, is simply born into a lifestyle that has not yet adapted itself to the present, and instead reverses the vector of adaptation by forcing the present to live in accordance with its stagnated *hexis*.

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[1] Margot Norris, "Military Censorship and the Body Count in the Persian Gulf War", *Critical Critique*, No. 19, Autumn 1991,