

War and Cinema

The Logistics of Perception



PAUL VIRILIO

Translated by Patrick Camiller



VERSO

London · New York

flashes, here and there, today and yesterday . . . Already evident in the flash-back and then in feed-back, this miniaturization of chronological meaning was the direct result of a military technology in which *events* always unfolded in *theoretical time*. As in cinema, what happens is governed not by a single space-time principle but by its relative and contingent distortion, the capacity for repressive response depending upon the power of anticipation.

Abel Gance understood this perfectly in 1914.

6

*Sicut Prior est Tempore ita quo Potior Iure**

Rest never comes for those transfigured in war. Their ghosts continue to haunt the screens or, most frequently, find reincarnation in an engine of war – usually a ship, like the *Tirpitz*, which sank in a fjord in 1943 and whose technological metempsychosis was celebrated in a feature film. Admiral William Nimitz, the American commander-in-chief of naval aviation in the Pacific from 1942 to 1945, gave his name to a nuclear aircraft-carrier which featured in another recent film, Don Taylor's *The Final Countdown* (1980). In this work of science fiction, whose theme is war across time, the Japanese fleet is steaming towards Pearl Harbor when it is detected by the *Nimitz*, which has been carried back half a century by a disturbance in the space-time vortex. The ship's commander faces a dilemma: whether to let history take its course, or to block the attack on Pearl Harbor by using all the fire-power at his command.

The most interesting thing in this film is the new crisis of decision-making that results from the non-peaceful coexistence of different technologies. Where are the orders to come from? From the commander of Pacific forces who, in 1941, knows of no vessel by the name of *Nimitz*? Or from the commander of US Defense, in 1980? As with the planned film *Narvik*, we can see here a determination to extend military power on both sides of a hypothetical 'time centre' by using relativity as a military manoeuvre. In the film, the nuclear carrier *Nimitz* acts as a watchtower across historical time: the means of communication and identification employed in modern warfare become ways of blocking history. The new media allow the viewer to sense the *differential time-span* borne by each technological object. The effect is a startling temporal relief, such that the

* 'Priority in time gives priority in law.' Roman adage.

engine of war restores the material war-time of military-industrial propaganda in which we are the involuntary protagonists.

The British, who had invented the 'Fleet in Being' to rule the waves as well as vast continents, allocated enormous sums during the inter-war period for research into communications and detection, and were particularly receptive to this kind of retro-prospective effect. In 1930, the British actor Leslie Howard had made a strangely premonitory film, *Outward Bound*, in which a number of passengers find themselves on board an aeroplane without knowing the destination. Eventually it becomes clear to them that they are already dead and that the craft is simply transporting them into the next world. Thirteen years later, on 1 June 1943, a DC-3 Ibis on which Leslie Howard happened to be travelling also vanished without trace.

Back in October 1939 Howard had a hard time persuading Whitehall to help him make propaganda films in Britain. 'Why don't you do that in the United States?' he was asked. 'We're short of everything here.' Instead, he was offered a liaison job similar to Noel Coward's work for the French government on the interpretation of Nazi propaganda.¹ Howard turned this down and submitted a proposal of his own:

The first film that I want to make is a documentary of the British White Paper on the outbreak of war. I want to put it out as a film record, using some news-reel stuff, but acting the real parts. There is a theme I want to bring home. Let me explain - I am working on a simple principle: that the mind will always triumph over brute force in the long run.

When he was asked which role he would play, he replied:

Oh, acting Hitler for a start, and then I want to play Sir Neville Henderson myself. The last bid for peace against the tactics of Ribbentrop. . . . You see, nobody abroad wants to read official documents now. They won't buy your White Paper. But they will crowd into the cinemas to see an official documentary.²

Howard's attempts at persuasion ended in failure, but they led to the conception of Pimperl Smith - the absent-minded professor who bamboozles the Nazis - which demonstrated Howard's ideas in a rather flippant style that he did not particularly like. Howard went on to make a number of propaganda films, including *The First of the Few* which featured some of the best pilots from the Battle of Britain (Townsend, Bader, Cunningham) in an account of the life of Spitfire designer R.J. Mitchell.

In 1943 Lubitsch presented *To Be or Not To Be* to American audiences - a film which, though largely inspired by Howard's misfortunes, aroused

considerable indignation in the United States. For this was the year of Roosevelt's declaration of total war, and people preferred to see Hitler vanquished by Superman than by some unknown and rather shabby-looking Shakespearian actors. The film had an equally bad reception when it was shown in France in 1954, and yet this 'disrespectful fantasy' was really a serious war film - disturbing, too, in its exposure of the philosophy of the Allied Special Services. British defence secrets, protected by a censor's office that was to remain in place for more than thirty years, really did reside as much in Shakespearian theatre as in the headquarters of the armed forces. For example, the plan for Montgomery's famous victory over Rommel at El-Alamein was drawn from *Macbeth* by a film director, Geoffrey Barkas, and a music-hall magician, Maskeline, the two men reproducing Malcolm's action at Birnham Wood. Over the hard sand of the desert, virtually devoid of landmarks, the British army moved so slowly that the enemy's sharpest look-outs, equipped with the best field-glasses, could detect no real advance.

The British were soon to have another stroke of genius. Since the chronophotographic reconnaissance of the First World War, information had greatly depended upon central analysis and interpretation, and Whitehall well knew that German Intelligence, reconstituted in the thirties by Theo Rowehl, a close friend and ex-naval colleague of Admiral Canaris, had an insatiable appetite in such matters. The Luftwaffe's bombers and reconnaissance aircraft were at once engines of destruction and engines of cinema, movie producers, as it were, filming not only the battlefield but also the territory of the United Kingdom itself. Rather than attempt to interfere with this, the Allies therefore decided to take part in the *mise en scène* of Hitler's newsreel and intelligence films. Their main technique was not classical camouflage but, on the contrary, overexposure. Enemy cameras were offered sight of scenery, matériel, troop movements - all part of the almost limitless repertoire of visual illusions in real space.

At the crucial point when massive preparations were under way for the Normandy landings, the East Anglian countryside came to resemble an enormous film lot complete with Hollywood-style props. Men with imagination, such as the architecture professor Basil Spence, were assisted in their work of visual disinformation by a mass of painters, poets, theatre and cinema technicians. Famous studios like Shepperton near London went over to producing phoney armoured vehicles or landing ships.

Smoke coiled from [the landing ships'] funnels, they were surrounded by oil patches, laundry hung from the rigging, motorboats left wakes from ship to ship, and intruding aircraft could see their crews - over-age or unfit soldiers of units such as the 10th Worcestershires and the 4th Northamptonshires. Thousands of carefully shielded truck lights indicated the presence of large

convoys, and lights over 'hards' gave the impression of intense loading activity after dark. And behind this 'invasion fleet', which was large enough to 'land' the entire 1st Canadian Army, which did not as yet exist, the fields of East Anglia and Kent were crowded with tanks, guns, half-tracks, ammunition dumps, field kitchens, hospitals, troop encampments and fuel lines. They, too, were fakes.³

The sound-track was also well worked out, with all the care of a film script. It contained various brief, misleading, dialogues that could be picked up by German radio-operators across the Channel – apparently part of the normal run of military signals. And to add a final touch of authenticity, public figures, including King George himself, and Generals Eisenhower and Montgomery, were invited to visit the spurious docks, ships and building-sites. At other key moments, look-alikes of Churchill and other military leaders embarked on aeroplanes to undertake bogus trips.

This relationship between actors and statesmen, like the grotesque substitution scenes of *To Be or Not To Be*, clearly reveals the kind of war strategems thought up by the Allies to mystify Hitler and the German high command about the real course of operations against the Third Reich, to leave the enemy bewildered as well as beaten.

After 1945, Britain's wartime services kept up their role of monitoring the varied scripts of international propaganda, with their attention now turned to the countries of the Eastern bloc. Technicians easily switched from special army measures to special cinema effects, and the old studios at Shepperton continued to house scale models and science-fiction devices.

During the summer and fall of 1978, a visitor to England's Shepperton Studios might have found that making the forty-five minute drive back to London would be easier than trying to get past the main gate. Four of Shepperton's massive sound-stages – one of them is amongst the largest in the world – were housing the sets for *Alien*. Twentieth Century Fox wanted to make sure that the sixteen weeks of principal shooting would only be witnessed by authorized eyes . . . The movie's biggest secret would be kept.

Roger Christian, the film's art director, adds: 'Ridley showed us *Dr Strangelove* and he kept saying, "That's what I want. Do you see? Not that it's a B-52 in outer space, but it's the military look." I knew what he was saying because I had done it in *Star Wars*.'⁴ Like many cinema ships and vehicles before it, *Nostramo* in *Alien* contained a host of real features from World War Two battleships, tanks and bombers: 'For instance, we made a control panel out of airplane junk and about a million switches.'

On screen, science-fiction vessels become bright and sonorous plastic, a

kind of thorough technological mix which, as with real military equipment, was designed to give the effect of synthesis to a variety of more or less anachronistic components. 'Film criticism no longer has any meaning,' Hans Zischler, one of Wim Wenders's actors, recently said to me; 'it is *reality* that we have to analyse in a cinematic way.' Evidently verisimilitude is no longer assured with the new engines of war: military technology has advanced too far out of our sight, its secrecy revives for us the attraction of faraway lands, and the wish for proximity is repeating the old imposture of immediacy. With its dreamlike design, its much-caressed contours, the machine's body pursues the derangement of its appearances. The most intense hope seems to have moulded its particular form – a hope in which aerodynamics suddenly loses its value as a science of air flow and becomes a logistical pantheism of time flow.

Back in the forties Orson Welles once said: 'For me, everything that's been called direction is one big bluff. Editing is the only time when you can be in complete control of a film.'⁵

Francis Coppola, a great admirer of Abel Gance, shared his passion for the techniques of military commanders and their way of eliminating random factors. After the seventies' vogue for electronic effects, which allowed a considerable reduction in the 'natural', objective uncertainties of scenery and machinery, Coppola and quite a few others began to use the electronic prerecording of both sound and image to suppress any element of chance. Thus, shooting no longer involved the rigorous placement in time and space of the old *Kammerspiel*. As in radio productions, the actors played out their roles in the studio, and the director then worked ad lib on his editing table shuffling and inserting the various shots. 'In this way,' Coppola remarks, 'he gets the most sophisticated possible result for the least price.'⁶

Coppola has developed in an interesting direction since the partial disappointment of *Apocalypse Now*. In fact, the emotional *One from the Heart* is more of a war movie than *Apocalypse Now*, and it is quite clear that this new film art in which actors and sets vanish at will is an art of extermination. Coppola directly uses military equipment like the Xerox 'Star' naval computer system, and his cost-benefit approach is like the attitude of a modern army to miniaturization or automation, which is seen as 'transferring the possibility of human error from the point of action to the design and development process'.⁷

Thus, the last power left to the director, as to the army officer, is not so much to imagine as to foresee, simulate and memorize simulations. Having lost material space, the bunkered commander of total war suffers a loss of real time, a sudden cutting-off of any involvement in the ordinary world. Like the new opaque cockpits which prevent fighter pilots from

looking outside, because 'seeing is dangerous', war and its technologies have gradually eliminated theatrical and pictorial effects in processing the battle image, and total war followed by deterrence have tended to cancel the scenario effect itself in a permanent technological ambience devoid of any substratum. With the new composites, the world disappears in war, and war as a phenomenon disappears from the eyes of the world. Crew members on the aircraft carrier *Nimitz* recently told a journalist from *Libération*: 'Our work is totally unreal. Every now and then, fiction and reality should get together and prove once and for all that we are really here.'

Total war takes us from military secrecy (the second-hand, recorded truth of the battlefield) to the overexposure of live broadcast. For with the advent of strategic bombing everything is now brought home to the cities, and it is no longer just the few but a whole mass of spectator-survivors who are the surviving spectators of combat. Nuclear deterrence means that there are no longer strictly 'foreign wars'; as the mayor of Philadelphia put it twenty years ago, frontiers now pass through the middle of cities. Berlin, Harlem, Belfast, Beirut, Warsaw and Lyon . . . the streets themselves have now become a permanent film-set for army cameras or the tourist-reporters of global civil war. The West, after adjusting from the political illusions of the theatre-city (Athens, Rome, Venice) to those of the cinema-city (Hollywood, Cinecittà, Nuremberg), has now plunged into the transpolitical pan-cinema of the nuclear age, into an entirely cinematic vision of the world. Those American TV channels which broadcast news footage around the clock – without script or comment – have understood this point very well. Because in fact this isn't really news footage any longer, but *the raw material of vision*, the most trustworthy kind possible. The extraordinary commercialization of audiovisual technology is responding to the same demand. For videos and walkmans are reality and appearance in kit form: we use them not to watch films or listen to music, but to add vision and soundtracks, to make us directors of our own reality.

Even back in the fifties and sixties, when people were asked why they flocked to pop concerts or festivals like Woodstock, they used to say it was because they didn't want to hear themselves think, or because at such events there was no longer any real distinction between spectators and performers. Hundreds of thousands of actor-spectators went to stadium cycloramas, where the cameras and lasers illuminated not just the stars but also the wildly excited crowds. Those who came to watch also exhibited themselves, in a way heralding such spectacular actions of the seventies as the assassination of John Lennon.

Today, directors (and politicians) have lost all prominence, and are

swallowed up in technical effects, rather like Nicholas Ray in *Win Wenders's Lightning Over Water*. 'We get our energy from chaos', the Rolling Stones once said. And from everyday terrorism to live-broadcast assassinations, the living pan-cinema is spreading before us that chaos which was once so well concealed by the *orderly* creation of war. Even if our actions are suddenly slipping out of their usual frames of reference, they are not *actes gratuits* but cinema-acts.

With the neutron bomb, urban populations have lost their ultimate value as nuclear hostages and have been abandoned by military planners. There are no more 'immortals of the City'. And cinema itself has lost its initiatory value and ceased to be the black mass of martial aboriginality which can offer cinematic Valhalla to the children of the fatherland in a communion of the quick and the dead. For the commercial distribution of video and audio equipment is destroying the extraordinary technical capacity of the old cinema to shape society through vision, to turn a thousand film-goers into a single spectator.