

Research Workshop “Depiction and Definition: Representing War Across the Disciplines,”  
March 7-9, 2008, Winnipeg, Manitoba

**Pre-Workshop Public Roundtable Event**

**Friday, March 7, 2008**

**Moderator:** Elena Baraban (Slavic, University of Manitoba)

**Roundtable participants:**

- Robert Calder (English, University of Saskatchewan)
- Helena Goscilo (Slavic, University of Pittsburgh)
- Alexander Hinton (Anthropology, Rutgers University)
- Brad Prager (German, University of Missouri-Columbia)
- Andreola Rossi (Classics, Amherst College)

**Questions to be discussed:**

1. Is there a specifiable “aesthetics” of warfare?
2. Is the representation of war *necessarily* political?

**Transcript Roundtable Discussion** (note: this is a slightly edited verbatim transcript – the oral and spontaneous character of the contribution has not been altered)

**Elena Baraban:** It is my pleasure to welcome everyone to the roundtable of representations of war. My name is Elena Baraban, and I am an assistant professor of Russian at the University of Manitoba, German and Slavic Studies Department, and I am also the coordinator of the Central and Eastern European Studies Programme. Today’s roundtable is the preamble to the workshop *Depiction and Definition: Representing War across the Disciplines*, which will take place tomorrow and also on Sunday. Both the roundtable and the workshop have been organized by the University of Manitoba research cluster “Representations of War.”

As a way of introducing the audience and the participants of today’s discussion, I would like to say a few words about the cluster and its activities over the last two years. Our research platoon was organized two years ago when I met two knights in shining armour, Stephan Jaeger, professor of German, and Adam Muller, professor of English, who share my interest in representations of war. And we were very lucky to find a number of colleagues at the U of M who were also interested in exploring scholarly and popular representations of war: of defeats, victories, death, suffering, valour and self-sacrifice, as well as other focal points in our

understandings of war. James Chlup is our classicist, Emily Muller, Michael Stack and Rob Shaver are our philosophers, Andrew Woolford is a sociologist, Lasha Tchantouridze is a political scientist, Myroslav Shkandrij is a specialist in Ukrainian and Russian literatures and cultures, and Monique Dumontet is a graduate student who is doing research on Canadian literature about the First World War. Occasionally, there were interventions from other scholars, including two talks by Dominick LaCapra, Cornell Distinguished Professor of Humanistic Studies, and by Serguei Oushakine, the Slavic anthropologist from Princeton University.

Our discussions have been very interdisciplinary and the chronological scope has also been quite great, so the discussions have been of WWI, WWII, Roman history, Iraq and Afghanistan, and a number of other conflicts. Methodologically, our discussions have been also wide-ranging, featuring analysis and taken within the framework of media theory, trauma studies, remembrance theory, ethics, narratology, strategic studies, etc. We asked a number of questions such as: What is a war, and how may it reasonably be distinguished from other forms of aggressive human interaction? In what way and to what extent does our present understanding of war depend on our interpretations of the past? In what way do representations of war change our understanding of the national caste? What narrative strategies are used in representing the other in literature and film and photographs? What narrative strategies are used in representing war as an ideological and cultural conflict, or as an ideological and cultural encounter? And a number of other questions.

Out of the range of questions that have been of interest, we have selected two for today’s roundtable. The first one is: “Is there a specifiable aesthetics of warfare?” And the second one is “Is the representation of war necessarily political?”

It is my pleasure to introduce our roundtable participants – who I call airborne troops – from a number of North American universities: Helena Goscilo (Slavic Studies, University of Pittsburgh); Alexander Hinton (Anthropology, Rutgers University); Bradley Pager (Professor of German, University of Missouri, Columbia); Andreola Rossi (Professor of Classics, Amherst College); and Robert Calder (University of Saskatchewan, Professor of English). We were supposed to also have a philosopher, Brian Orend, from the University of Waterloo. He cannot join us for the roundtable, but will probably join us later tonight. Without further ado, I would like to open the floor to comments and preliminary interventions by our guest speakers. I suggest that we proceed with the first question.

**Helena Goscilo:** I do not know about “specifiable,” but I do know that the question puts aesthetics in quotes. I take that it is asking whether there is an aesthetics in representations of war, and I would say that it is like everything, like Goethe, there is a commonality among genres but at the same time there are significant differences. As somebody who tends toward a deconstructive academic approach, I would say the differences depend upon all kinds of tendencies within a given culture. Overarching, there are certain things that appear in all representations of war. I would have started with the ideological question, because I do not think aesthetics can be considered without ideology.

**Andreola Rossi:** I agree. As a classicist, I would say that it depends because war is a big topic in the ancient world. Different genres do represent it differently. In a Greek or Roman tragedy, the voice of the defeated is usually involved in the representation of war.

**Helena Goscilo:** You could even be modern about this. Mikhail Bakhtin said “genre is a worldview.”

**Andreola Rossi:** If tragedy takes that the view of war is going to be somewhat different, it is different from an epic genre, which is focused in the ethos of the epic culture or the hero culture. It really depends what literary genre you are going to read. I would take what Bakhtin says: genre gives you the lens to see the world around you from a different perspective. It depends on what lens you apply, and reality is going to change. Reading all the papers for the workshop, I do not think that this issue came out. I felt that one specifiable aesthetics of warfare that is somewhat absent from the modern view of warfare that is quite interesting in the ancient world, and it is deeply embedded in the ancient view of war, and that is the connection between war and game. What is very interesting is that in Greek, the two terms are very interchangeable. All the vocabulary used for war can be applied to game, which is quite interesting. For example, for us the word for sport has nothing to do with war, so we have parted. If we believe, and I strongly do believe this being a philologist, that war and the words do reflect ideology deep down, this interchangeability does highlight the Agonic and ritual character of war that is envisioned as a contest. Herodotus wrote about the Persian War, and quoted, "and yet I am told these Greeks want to wage wars against one another in the most foolish way: through sheer perversity. For no sooner is war proclaimed that they search out the fairest and smoothest plane in all the land, and there they assemble and fight. Even the conquerors depart with great loss." It is true that the Greek and Roman world does contextualize war as really an agon, that is war as a game that takes the form of an organized competition in which rivalries must be played out in the framework of codified rules that are in many ways similar to that of a game. This is something you do not usually find in modern discussion of warfare, this comparison between war and game, which is essential in the understanding of the ideology of war in the ancient world.

**Helena Goscilo:** That is interesting because a football game as a metaphor for political battle is present, I can think of two Soviet books right away.

**Andreola Rossi:** It is entirely true. We do use military metaphors for football and you can import it. It is quite interesting that in the English language, though, we did adopt the word sport, which has nothing to do with the vocabulary of war or game in the ancient world. We have departed from that.

**Robert Calder:** If I can interject here, I was really fascinated by the idea of game and war because Harold Pinter, who, as you know, has been strongly opposed to the invasion of Iraq and the earlier Gulf War, has spoken very strongly about it, and wrote a poem about the First Gulf War under George Bush senior, I think it is called American Football, but what he does is take the metaphor and imagines the American soldiers strafing all the retreating Iraqi army back in 1991 or 92 when they were killing them all in the retreat. He portrays the soldier speaking, as American football players do, across the line from one another and it is really crude – really rough stuff about "I am gonna ram it up your ass" and whooping and yelling and screaming about it, and yet the last line is devastating because he turns and says "and now come on over and kiss me on the mouth." It is crude but powerful in using the game idea just to show the violence of it. That is certainly one example, because American football is very much a military operation. They are generals on the field and they capture yards. In Canada, we had a Canadian football league as early as 1900 and in WWI there was talk of abandoning football because it was seen as frivolous to play football when men were going overseas and dying, and the counter-argument was this is where you train your soldiers – if they can make ten yards bashing through the line, they are gonna make ten yards over in the mud in Europe somewhere. That was one of the arguments was that it is a good training ground.

**Alex Hinton:** In the United States, football is linked to a notion of Americanness as well. You have tensions between the individual and the collective in the game. In classes, students say “What is American culture? There is no such thing” and I say of course there is, and often I shall start talking about Thanksgiving as it plays upon notions of the family and people coming together. In the US, you watch football – you watch the Cowboys and it is a ritual. It is very much bound up with notions of Americanness and that transposes to the battlefield.

**Helena Goscilo:** It also plays into notions of manhood as well.

**Alex Hinton:** Absolutely, masculinity. To go back to the question, we all come from very different disciplines. Coming from anthropology, we do not really talk about aesthetics but we do talk about poetics. Ultimately it shifts over to those structures of understanding that mediate our interpretation of something. So that is where I immediately went with this. One thing that came up was the boundaries of what is permissible. If we want to start to unpack it, we have to look at what is permissible and what is not, and that is always a delicate line. In the war on terror, one thing that emerged was the debate about coffins and whether you should have the pictures in the newspaper. Or when you had three military contractors who were killed in Fallujah and they were hung up. That appeared in the newspapers, but there were immediately debates about why we publish this, so right away you are at that boundary of what is permissible. I am thinking of an aesthetics of what is possible and what is mediating – there is a moral envelope. If you go to other images, in the *New York Times* about a week ago, there was a picture of a desiccated body in Darfur. But you can never show an American soldier who was desiccated. So immediately you get into constructions of us versus them that get played out in aesthetics.

**Helena Goscilo:** It is also ideology. What you can show and what you cannot show, to discourage or make people feel. That has been ever since the beginning of war as to what can and cannot be reported. It is the cheerleader approach to war.

**Alex Hinton:** In terms of ideology, if you go to Abu Ghraib and the images there, again you have the construction of the technologically advanced, civilized place in contrast to the savages. You have it played out in images linked to Chokinov and embedded journalists. So again it is very ideological and cultural at the same time because those two dovetail, but as an anthropologist I like rounding it in specificities but I think about it as linked, but slightly different from other people.

**Brad Pager:** There is so much to pick up on between the ideology of sports and the boundaries of what we can or cannot represent but I shall just make some comments based on what I had prepared. I was pedantic enough to provide an illustration here. I was offering two separate models and this is a way of introducing my wishy-washy answer to the question of whether there is an aesthetics of warfare – which is that it depends, and there are many. On the one hand, I am offering this Albrecht Altdorfer painting which is much looked at and this is often referred to most recently in Sebald’s *Austerlitz* where he says that death hangs over us like a painting of the battle of Alexandria on the classroom wall. Sebald makes it current but it is also a historical depiction of Alexander the Great achieving victory over the Persian army in what is today Turkey, Southeast Asia Minor. It is generally notable for the lack of perspective in the sense that it gives an impossible position from which to view the battle. You can see this great distance which is actually a very false landscape with German cities in the background but also Asia Minor. It is from a point of view from which you could not generally see because we are on the ground in the foreground with the soldiers but at the same time we are somehow elevated and

look at the scene as if from a bird’s-eye view. It sort of forces you to ask on one level: From what perspective are we seeing this battle? Are we supposed to be seeing through the eye of God rather than through the soldier on the ground? And in a related vein, does it de-differentiate the soldiers on the battleground from one another so that you cannot really tell the armies one from another and that it approaches something like the mathematical sublime?

**Helena Goscilo:** What does the inscription say?

**Brad Prager:** “Alexander the Great defeating the last Darius after one hundred thousand infantry and more than ten thousand cavalry men had been killed amongst the ranks of the Persians.” Then we have the two-fisted tales from Harvey Kurtzman and there is really a comparison in that there is nothing of the sublime in this comic representation but it is this depiction of soldiers during the Korean War, the idea of the grunt as soldier forces you to see the soldier as victims of the war in which they are fighting. This goes back to *All Quiet on the Western Front* – it is not entirely new with WWII, Korea or Vietnam, although it came to public prominence during Vietnam with films like *The Deer Hunter* and *Apocalypse Now*. If the soldier is the victim of the war in which they are fighting, then who is the perpetrator? This question gets displaced. Not every soldier can be a victim of the brutality of other soldiers but I think this became the dominant paradigm, so I wanted to put these two models forward—the sublimity of battle, the attempt to see through the eye of God—there are many art-historical ways into that painting. But then ideologically what happens in the late twentieth century is the aesthetics of warfare becomes the gaze of the soldier. I gave this some thought when I had written about the German film *Das Boot*, in which we were forced to identify with German soldiers as victims of the war in which they are fighting. This was an unusual circumstance for Americans viewing a German film to go: “Wow! those guys really had it rough” and then step out of the theatre and go: “Hey, wait a minute, those are Germans, aren’t we supposed to hate them?” And so that film kind of challenged it but it did take up the Hollywood model that was taken from the Vietnam film. Some of the success of that model in a way also speaks to this other quote that is often cited that there is no such thing as an anti-war film or for the marine there is no such thing as an anti-war film, but this idea that somehow the representation of the battle, especially for the soldier who is in it, is always going to be aesthetically pleasing. That they can watch *The Deer Hunter*, which we consider the paradigmatic anti-war film, or *Apocalypse Now* in the case of *Jarhead*, and take the pleasure of the battle from watching that film, what is it in the aesthetics that is pleasing? I put forward three hypotheses. On the one hand, there is an exhilarating pleasure in destruction that goes along with any kind of representation of violence, the same thing that attracts us to *Die Hard*. The second hypothesis is this strange sort of haptic pleasure we get from identifying with the person conducting the war, such as in video games. The popularity of the first-person shooter game such as *Halo*, I think, would be that, would be a second model, is the actual physical pleasure that comes from inhabiting that space. And then the third would be somehow to posit a Utopian pleasure in complete destruction, that there is something about the idea of leveling a landscape that you find in Werner Herzog’s *Lessons of Darkness* where he takes the images of the Gulf War and it is just the oil fires and the landscape, and he would say it is a science fiction landscape, another world, but that is another way of saying Utopia, a complete clearing of the landscape. I think those are some possible ways in which it gets aestheticized and we get pleasure out of it. Also, to counter the claim about whether one can do this in an anti-war way, I think that all of those pleasures are associated with acts of war and not effects of war. So I think that is a nuance or a differentiation I would want to set up which is to say if you want to do an anti-war representation, maybe the way to do it is to talk about the

effects rather than the acts, to show the effects of destruction rather than the explosion itself. Because in the explosion there is going to be a pleasure regardless of whether we want it there or not. It is unavoidable, so to show destruction and not explosion, or ashes but not fire, would be another example because there is a pleasure in the flame but not necessarily in the consequences, and wounds without wounding. That last one, the real anti-war film, we can think of films that show the wounded bodies after the fact, not the wounding of the bodies, like *Coming Home* as an idea of a film that shows very little if any representations of battle and its pleasures but rather the after-effects or even *The Best Years of our Lives*, which is an anti-war film not a war film. Some of these pleasures are involuntary in a way, so one needs an aesthetic strategy to avoid that.

**Helena Goscilo:** Why do you think the pleasures are aesthetic rather than psychological? It strikes me that what you have been talking about is psychological, probably an inner-psychological naming that takes so much pleasure out of it, but why is it aesthetic?

**Brad Prager:** Well, the classicists among us could probably answer the question better, the origin of the word aesthetic being 'of the body'. So much of it is a bodily experience, but one could also argue it is the psychological satisfaction from destruction, but I think there is something corporeal in watching, say, my little nephew play the video game. There is a physical response that I would want to call of the senses and move it into aesthetics.

**Alex Hinton:** That moves you into the second question in a way.

**Robert Calder:** I am fascinated by much of what you have just been saying. You mentioned your nephew and the videogames. When I was a boy in the 1950s, nothing was better for my brother and me than to go on Saturday afternoon to the double feature at the theatre of two war movies, whether it was a battle of spitfires over Britain or John Wayne at the town or whatever, that was our ultimate pleasure. And if there was any talking or kissing we were not very happy about it. We really got excited when the guns started going off, whenever they had five or ten minutes of destroyers firing at each other. You talked about a physical thing – almost physically got excited about it. There was an aesthetic thing about it. I was reminded of that when the current invasion of Iraq occurred in 2003 and CNN and other networks were in Baghdad as the rockets were coming in and one of the announcers looked up and said "it is the rockets red glare". I could not believe he was actually going to quote the national anthem with a certain sense of awe as these things were coming down, because they were coming down on people and blowing up buildings. And I thought he had the same kind of excitement, as a reporter supposedly a neutral recorder of what was happening, awestruck at the physical beauty of these rockets coming down. And then of course the embedded journalists who would report periodically driving across the desert in modern tanks and being quite excited by the sheer sophistication of the equipment being used. So it seemed to me that there was quite a lot of aesthetic reaction to something, and you are quite right, not seeing the result of it but just the enactment. One of the things I wondered when I saw the context of this conference was whether it meant warfare, the actual battles that take place, or war time war experience because you are talking about the results, which are often civilians. In my field, in English literature, a lot of what people have been writing about since WWI to the present have been the effect on civilian populations. Elizabeth Bowen, for instance, the Anglo-Irish writer, wrote *In the Heat of the Day*, a novel in which she explores the effect on personal relationships of people during the Blitz in London. There is very little about the actual fighting, that is in the background, but she is talking about the effect on people. You get Katherine Mansfield, D.H. Lawrence, Graham Greene and others talk about the effect on human life, damaging mainly, of wartime. I do not know whether

this conference would touch on that more than the actual warfare or battlefield scenes, but that is where I think the effect really is. Those soldiers coming home and the families that have to deal with them broken, mentally and physically.

**Andreola Rossi:** Can I ask you a question about something that came up in my class? When you were young and found pleasure going to the movies, I think a lot of people can relate to this. I asked my students, when you could go on the web and see real people beheaded, I asked how many people clicked and actually watched it. A lot of people said "we did." I asked if they found it troubling knowing it was real, and people honestly said no, we did not find it troubling. Then I asked if they were physically present there and had to see somebody beheaded, and then said our reaction would have been extremely different. So I am just wondering, clearly a reenactment, when we are the spectators, even if we know it is true but are at a safe distance, for us it is fine. But when you are physically there everything probably changes. I am just wondering up to what point do we really take violence?

**Robert Calder:** For us, back in the late 40s or 50s, watching those films, it was even more sanitized. I remember sometimes the best friend of the hero would be killed and there would be a death scene and we would be somewhat moved by it but not especially involved. Usually a nice neat little bullet hole would go here or they would get knocked down by an explosion, but really it was not the way men or women die in battle at all. When you get to *Saving Private Ryan* that first half an hour, on that beach when they are coming up and you actually see people getting disemboweled and getting their face blown up – as my brother pointed out recently, you come out of that with post-traumatic stress yourself even though it is artificial and remote from our lives. But that put us closer than anything we ever experienced when we were kids. I think the same with *Letters from Iwo Jima* or *Band of Brothers*, which had some scenes that were really graphic. But even then I suppose we can still sit in a theatre and realize we are not there, having to pull the triggers.

**Alex Hinton:** You are also playing football, it is like a sport. You are watching the Redskins and enacting a battle, people are being shot like somebody running down the field. There is also a difference in terms of what people play. I do not know how many people have seen the level of violence in videogames and the amount of blood, but the level of desensitization is dramatic. I have seen the stuff my nephew plays and I read and write about genocide and some of those videogames are highly disturbing. The military as well – people are being trained in terms of that. But it seems to me that also maybe part of the response to the beheadings – I think Johnson was the first one and I was asking that in some of my classes as well – but maybe it is that it is far away and people are now used to it in a way.

**Andreola Rossi:** I thought maybe it is the medium. My first question was "Why do you want to see it?" You can clearly see that somebody is weeping and they are about to cut off their heads. "What is there to see?" First of all, it was fascinating that a lot of people wanted to see it, and you are seeing someone in the last moments of their lives in what is a very private moment. And they thought they could just go eat lunch afterwards.

**Alex Hinton:** I am saying that it is like the videogames.

**Andreola Rossi:** Yes, it was the medium. They could not connect with it as the real thing.

**Helena Goscilo:** I think the mediation is critical. Sometime, I think it was in the 1970s, Koshinsky who had gone through the Holocaust in Poland and afterwards committed suicide did

an experiment in a classroom. He had a colleague come in and pretend to beat him up. He did it to see how the students would respond. At the same time that this was happening, the events in the class were being filmed on a TV screen. What happened is the fellow came in and pretended to beat him up; the students totally ignored what was happening on the television screen. You can say that you can get off on watching something that is dangerous, but it is not dangerous to you. This is going to be really offensive, but I think a lot of that is much more a male thing than a female thing. These things are much more a male occupation than female.

**Robert Calder:** I think that is probably true.

**Alex Hinton:** Before we go into male/female essentialized categories ....

**Elena Baraban:** I wanted to give the audience a chance to ask questions with regard to the discussion of the first question, but we are short of time for the second question. We will move to the second one and then open the floor to everyone. “Is the representation of war *necessarily* political?”

**Alex Hinton:** I did not find this as productive of a question in a certain sense. It seemed to me that the answer was *often* but not *always*. Even if you go to the representations of the coffins of soldiers, yes, it is highly political but what does that mean to the families of the soldiers who have died? You move to a much more personal level that detaches from politics. It depends who you are talking about in what context in what time, but I found the first question more productive.

**Helena Goscilo:** I find myself agreeing with Alex. I think it depends upon your level of address and how close you are to a war and who is responding to it. I feel this way about both questions – subjectivity is so varied that to come up with something objective is impossible. It depends on the point of view.

**Andreola Rossi:** I would say that yes I do agree with the first two speakers, but again coming from a classical point of view I do believe that war is mainly political and not only it is read in a political way, but it does shape the identity of a nation at peace. As an example, there is the East/West dichotomy. The first time that the war is thought of the West versus the East is, believe it or not, *The Iliad*. That is the paradigm. It is no longer a war of the Persians against the Greeks. It is a war of the West versus the East in which the West conceptualizes itself in a way that is male, rational, the one, and the East is the female, the many, and having no identity, a minus. You can see that same paradigm in the Persian War and in the movie *300*. The West also becomes frugal and the East becomes the embodiment of lust, which is both sexual and love for wealth. What is interesting in this is that the same paradigm is brought into the Roman World and the boundaries can be shifted. The Greeks are trapped in their own paradigm. Once the Romans are the westerners, the Greeks become the easterners. I find it ironic that now that the paradigm is almost inverted. They even used that paradigm to picture their own civil wars. You can wage a war but you need to justify it. The two Roman principles are that the war must be right and useful. You de-Romanize your enemy. That is a wonderful paradigm that can be used for every season and that has shaped the identity of the nation at peace as well. The representation of war is always political but it is not only waging a war, you have to sell the war. In order to sell the war, you need to make it political in a broader sense.

**Brad Prager:** To come back to Helena’s earlier point about whether we are talking about war or representations of war, I am sure we shall quote this aphorism in the next couple of days – that



war is politics by other means, as Clausewitz said. The war itself is of course political and sadly that is repeated both in pro and anti-war contexts but there is truth to it and that is undeniable. The second part would be "Is the representation necessarily political?" and there I would have to say I have developed an allergy to the idea that it might not be when I was working on the film *Das Boot*, because Wolfgang Petersen, the director, constantly reiterated: "No, I was just trying to show the horror of war in itself," as though war were a thing in itself that we could talk about apart from any other context. Not only does the war have a context, the war that he is representing, but the film itself has a context into which it comes. So it is always redoubled, the war itself and its representation. I would just add as a final note is that *Troy*, the 2004 film – I had a hard time not seeing the context in which that film emerged, just after the start of the Iraq War, to see Achilles' resistance to fighting the war in somebody else's name as the soldier saying "For whom am I fighting this war? Why should I go to war for somebody else's interests?" And so for me it is very hard to say that it became an apolitical representation – it had a context.

**Elena Baraban:** I agree, but during WWII, Hollywood produced about 400 films about the war. Most of them were deemed completely useless by the American government for building up morale of the nation. So unlike the films done by the British directors during the same time, they were not as political and engaged; they were not as political as Soviet films either. In other words, the Bureau of Information was disappointed that having asked Hollywood to participate actively in the war effort, they did not see the results to be that impressive. If we talk about good films, could there be apolitical representations?

**Helena Goscilo:** When you say the Bureau was disappointed, surely it was not in the aesthetic aspects of the film, it was not sufficient.

**Elena Baraban:** Yes, it was just entertainment – a way of making a quick dollar.

**Helena Goscilo:** Well, it is Hollywood.

**Andreola Rossi:** I do not know any of the films you are talking about but could it be that that is really political, to make war movies that are just placid? Isn't that political?

**Helena Goscilo:** To keep audiences happy?

**Andreola Rossi:** Yes, it is like a love story; it is highly political because the message is that life goes on as normal, that war does not change anything. That seems to be a very political message.

**Helena Goscilo:** I agree with that because the same thing was going on in the Soviet Union. Not in film, but there were a lot of cabarets and a lot of other things going on during WWII which was supposed to be the fluff that would keep the population happy.

**Elena Baraban:** If you take this position then you take stories, narratives that are not about the war, as representations of war. We are talking about representations of war, films or stories that do actually depict war events.

**Alex Hinton:** And who are we talking about in terms of when there is an evaluation made, something is political? Is there some type of inherent quality in *Das Boot* or something? I do not think so – that is an interpretation made by someone. So when we are talking about this, I think we should be careful about how we are speaking about it, as opposed to there being some reified quality that is inheres in it automatically. I think there are multiple levels.

**Helena Goscilo:** Are you talking about teleology and reception? The use to which something is supposed to be put and also how people receive it.

**Alex Hinton:** That is the interpretation – what makes it political. There have to be people to make it political.

**Robert Calder:** I am surprised to hear that the American government was disappointed with the films because it seems to me that many of the films reinforced stereotypes of the enemy. I remember a very suave Chinese-American actor called Richard Loo who made a lot of films in that era because he always played a Japanese naval or army officer and he had a very smooth, lugubrious voice and he always smoked a cigarette and there would be some American being tortured to death and he would always say that the Imperial Japanese navy is going to win. And he was surrounded by very stereotyped Japanese figures. Disney made all those cartoons which now cannot be shown. Some of them, in terms of art, are extremely well-done, but you do not dare show them because they had all these stereotypes. So it seems to me that they certainly helped the war effort. One film that I do know helped the British was *Mrs. Miniver*. The Americans made it in 1940 and Roosevelt himself said it was one of the key films that swayed the Americans toward the British and Churchill said the same thing, so in that case the film had profound influence.

**Elena Baraban:** Let me clarify – we are not talking about Disney cartoons – they are indeed wonderful. We are not talking about films that everyone remembers because they were successful. We are discussing the question of whether there can be a picture or a representation which is apolitical and we’re also discussing the issue whether this has something to do with the quality, the inherent quality of the picture. At this time I would like to open the floor to the general discussion. Everyone in the audience is welcome to make comments and ask questions.

**Adam Muller:** I want to pick up on Alex’s point – you reject the idea that the political can be inherent in the work, it manifests itself in the pragmatization of the work, the way it is received and deployed and re-worked. Is that more or less what you were saying?

**Alex Hinton:** No, what I was saying is that there is always a level of interpretation. For example, when we all receive this image, is that political? Before we knew anything about it? Maybe a little bit, but we have no context. What we bring to it is what makes it political or apolitical.

**Adam Muller:** It seems to me that collapses the epistemological and the ontological. There is this question about what we know when we experience a work in the moment, and we shall have imperfect knowledge – the more decontextualized the work is, the harder time we shall have making sense of it. But that seems a separate kind of concern from what is political in war. And I think there is something potentially revolutionary politically about form, for example.

**Alex Hinton:** My first answer was that images often are, but do not have to be, political. Is there a political component that can be taken out? Sure, in many cases absolutely. But it is not necessarily. That is the question that we are addressing. That is the word that I am addressing. No, it is not a necessary inherent quality – it depends on what we bring to it and what we are talking about.

**Helena Goscilo:** Such as, for example pacifism at a certain point can be a very political stance. You know, it is the Bishop Berkeley argument. The tree in the forest if it is not heard – what significance does it have?

**Adam Muller:** I think part of the problem lies in the elasticity of the concept ‘political.’ And the same thing with ‘ideology’ too – you can push it and pull it every way. And I guess in my heart of hearts I would want a really great argument that could show that inasmuch as it is possible for there to be something ontologically political about a work that does not depend on what we make of it or how we use it, but is part of the process of its manufacture.

**Alex Hinton:** I would say no. Maybe for the person who is creating that object, sure maybe there is a political dimension, but it is not something that necessarily inheres when other people come to it. Just like when we hold a picture up without a context. The person who did it sure may have had a very politicized meaning, but if you are talking about it in general, it depends on what we are bringing to it. What structures of understanding we have to bear.

When you read it, you looked at it in a completely different way.

**Brad Prager:** I cannot even conceive of it existing without someone to receive it. We are always going to be part of the process of interpretation and reception; there is no work in itself.

**Alex Hinton:** Well we have all seen a ‘dead photograph,’ right? One where you do not know who is in it, you are not sure what is going on, and you could go back and try to construct it and that is true, but there are different degrees of resonance. And maybe in some way that resonates back to that these do not move people. But the way you are using ‘ontology’ in that specific sentence – no, it does not inhere at all. It may have been involved in the manufacture of it for the person who is doing it, but it does not mean that people later will come by and interpret it the same way. It can become a dead artifact.

**Adam Muller:** That is so presentist. I find that unpalatably presentist.

**Alex Hinton:** I guess I am an anthropologist. So by definition I like people, I like the present, and I do not like vague abstractions that have inherent qualities assigned to them. Especially considering that many people interpret things in different ways and that is certainly true on a comparative level. This is why we are here – different disciplines, different approaches – disagreements will emerge.

**Robert Calder:** Alex, I may be misunderstanding you but it seems to me that anybody who creates a work of art has got to have an element of politics in it given where they are from, the age, their environment, or even the intention that they have for it. If you say it is entirely the receiver of the goods that determines and you take something like Eastwood’s film *Flags of our Fathers*, and if you get a WWII veteran, especially somebody who was in the South Pacific, say in Iwo Jima. If he sees that film he might get very angry and say that was one of the great moments and look what Eastwood’s saying about it and what they did with it. And then there could be a fifteen year-old kid who is watching it and does not know anything about it and who is influenced by it and takes some point out of it, aren’t they both being affected politically towards some point of view?

**Alex Hinton:** They can be but it is not necessarily so. I also do not want to reify artistic creation in some sense. Artists have interpretive understandings. It is an act of translation of interpretation when they create a work of art. They are using the same thing as people who will come to it – it will be different but there will be a set of understandings that mediates that process.

**Elena Baraban:** How about children’s drawings of war? Are they political?

**Alex Hinton:** Are you talking about kids in Darfur?

**Elena Baraban:** Children in the United States.

**Helena Goscilo:** I think it depends so much on what you bring to it. Let me take an extreme example – *The Bible*. In the church, it is a holy text. In a literature course, it is a text to be analyzed in a historical perspective. If you are alone in the desert you go and pee and it is the only paper you have – it serves a different function. It is very vulgar and very crude and therefore expected, I am sure, but I just think that you cannot discuss things outside of a specific context. I shall give you an example. A contemporary Russian worked with a woman who I believe is an art instructor. She put together, the woman who was in a labour camp, put together the children’s various drawings and paintings. When I look at them knowing where they were from, I look at them one way. If I had not known they were from a labour camp – what if I had been watching them in the context of Monty Python – it would have a very different effect. Without a context it is very difficult to ascribe certain essential things to the phenomena, not to mention the fact that however similar our upbringings are etc... We all bring different baggage to what we see and read I think.

**Elena Baraban:** That is true, but at the moment of production, a child is not well-versed in politics or aware of the state of the country or the nation he or she belongs to. Robert was mentioning manufacturing and that it is already influenced by the politics of the creator, but what if the creator is a child?

**Alex Hinton:** The question I would pose to people is why do we want something to inhere? Why are people so attached to this? I do not understand the investment? It seems a reified aesthetic way of talking about things. What does that say about us?

**Adam Muller:** I think it is the gateway to intellectual humility. It assumes that at least some of the things we need to know about a work of art are not up to us entirely. That in fact we have to, at some level, prostrate ourselves before other people in the act of trying to understand what it meant for a certain work of art to come into existence in the world. In a way it seems way too easy to me to say a work of art is or is not what we take it to be. There is something ‘de facto’ true about that. In a purely pragmatic sense of course it is going to be what we make of this but on the other hand, should I have that power? What makes me so special? What makes us so special?

**Alex Hinton:** I would say you are already starting to reify a certain mode of artistic production when you are doing that. I am sorry if I have a crude anthropological view, but the extreme would be if I take something that is highly political in one context and bring it to another context, people would have no clue what it means. That would be an extreme version of this. They have no way of interpreting it because they do not have the set of understandings. They do not have the symbolic holds, they look at it, and they have no clue.

**Helena Goscilo:** Adam, the subjectivity you bring to something does not mean to say that is the only thing there. I do not think we are arguing for just rampant subjectivity as operating in reading and watching texts; that is not the only thing there is. Even given subjectivity, there are very often better informed and more intelligent or more revealing, richer readings and viewings.

**Adam Muller:** Works on genocide: there is a way in which I want to know if you are comfortable with the idea that the kind of tragedy represented in the photographs of Cambodian citizens who were executed in the genocide, if there isn’t something worth reifying in those images.

**Alex Hinton:** No, they have actually been taken completely out of context and it abstracts them away. I was talking about this earlier today – those photos have been used in many different ways in many different moments of history and they are about to be used in another way. Do I find photographs, knowing the context, deeply disturbing? I have all sorts of understandings. The question is, is it *necessarily* political. That is the question that I am answering. That does not mean that I do not like art or appreciate art.

**Stephan Jaeger:** I have a question which continues a bit with the relation to *Das Boot* and the argument that it is more war in itself and not political. My question is: Isn't there the possibility of representing war experience – in *Das Boot* the context is clear, we know who the actors are and the German side – it is easy to make a political conclusion if you see it. That is not necessarily the case if we take, for example, an experience of war, either someone active or passive, you do not necessarily have to know the context. If we go very close in the perspective, which is similar to the argument that Alex was making for the kind of non-contextualized picture, would we lose the political comment or would it still be there? Obviously the viewer or the reader could always bring it to the text and make some identifications, but what about if the text simulated this kind of close-up experience that did not include the political?

**Brad Prager:** I think about that on two levels: on the one hand, I think there is something good that you are driving at, which is can we be forced to look at the horror of war and does something good come of that? But I cannot think of a circumstance in which that would not be political or controversial. You wrote about Jörg Friedrich's text where he talks about the consequences of the bombing raids and he also does a companion volume to this which is a book of photographs, and so we would then really look at the destruction caused by the Allied warfare and he wants us to look at the destruction but we know how controversial that is. Also Friedrich thinks Churchill was a war criminal who had long been hatching this plan to destroy Germany and turn it in to a desert and how controversial that later came out to be. So then he wants to force us to look at these images but in the end that is hard to do. And then my second response is that you can think about abstracting the image of war from context, so if I wanted to write a novel about a war on an unnamed planet between unnamed people and just show you the horror of war, even that would emerge in a context. It would be written by somebody in 2007 who was from the United States who was dealing with not wanting the US to be in the war in Iraq but feeling somehow implicated in it. And I think there is a context of production that is going to be inescapable. So just looking at war itself – I cannot imagine a de-contextualized representation.

**Stephan Jaeger:** But you could imagine a destructive narrative or aesthetic drawings of tragedies that would draw the reader in. And I agree with you there – that is a very controversial book about the bombing on Germany that is very political on several levels. But the novel does not have to be on another planet, it just has to draw the reader into somehow re-experiencing the horrors of war, even though it is going to be a different experience, and going away from the political. You can obviously distance from it and then say who is the author and so on and then we are back to the political.

**Andreola Rossi:** Can we go back to Alexander because I was trying to understand: you were saying that if there is no context—we can all make it whatever we want?

**Alex Hinton:** I said the author invests meaning.

**Andreola Rossi:** Your perspective was from the recipient point of view and Adam's was from the author's point of view, let us simplify it in that way. The audience response to something – let us say that a person has no context but they are seeing two people beating each other up.

**Alex Hinton:** You have already imputed meaning to it by framing it in that way.

**Andreola Rossi:** You are right.

**Alex Hinton:** You have imputed meaning – you are using your frame and you are assuming a set of common assumptions about what is going on. But I guarantee you I could take that image and find another context where it does not mean that. But I also said the author, the artist, imputes meaning.

**Andreola Rossi:** So you would not think that two people beating each other up ....

**Alex Hinton:** I can take that picture to people and show it in different contexts and there will be different interpretations of it.

**Andreola Rossi:** My point was I think that the audience always, even if they have no context, they are always trying to impart meaning in what they see and trying to see who is the good guy and who is the bad guy. They make it political in this sense.

**Alex Hinton:** They can. Human beings trying to interpret and make meanings of things but to necessarily say "Oh, it is a war image, necessarily."

**Andreola Rossi:** Then I can see, but it is the public, even if they have no context, even at the basic level they make a political interpretation of it, even at the level of who is right and who is wrong.

**Alex Hinton:** 'Not necessarily' would be my response to that.

**Andreola Rossi:** I think that the public, the first type of understanding is what is going on, who is doing it, and is it right or is it wrong. That makes it political.

**Alex Hinton:** I mentioned at the beginning the coffins coming back – that is a highly political image for some people but it also could be something that is not very or even at all political for other people who have had their child die or what have you.

**Andreola Rossi:** I was really thinking about two armies fighting.

**Alex Hinton:** Are you talking about this? I am not sure what that is until I get the context. We are at a conference dealing with war so I guess everyone automatically levels the frame as we come to it. But until you provide a context then suddenly we have read it in different ways. I meant it could be pageantry if you look at it really quickly and you are not sure, well we have the title and we would have to take that away.

**Dimitrios Dentsoras:** War like anything else can be political but it does not have to be. You can get the insignificant difference between the war and other things and make them political. Is there something about war that makes it more likely to be political? Because it seems that more than landscapes, war warps the things that are political.

**Helena Goscilo:** As far back as the Greeks, love was portrayed in terms of the hunt for the battle.

**Robert Calder:** I was going to say that I think there is so much more at stake in war than most other endeavors that we have. To give a slightly different spin on this question, I think you have the wars and you have very politicized art, propaganda in other words, that is used and all sorts of artists and writers giving up that detached critical position that they usually take and joining in the cause and manipulating their art and their audiences to win the war. And then what you get ten or twenty years after that is a deconstructing and a revising of that to come at what some people might call a kind of truth, but even that is political. We even have an example in this country. We had about ten or fifteen years ago a Canadian filmmakers’ series called *The Valour and the Horror*. One of the programs dealt with the Canadians who were part of Bomber Command in WWII bombing civilians in Germany and killing many of them. There was a huge outcry when this appeared on Canadian television – a lot of veterans actually went to the Canadian senate and demanded that this be pulled and the people be punished. They said ‘we did not do anything wrong, we did not do anything like this.’ Well the filmmakers were simply trying to show that this is what we did, and this is what war makes you do. You know, you firebomb Dresden or Berlin or Tokyo. This is what makes it do. So that became contested battleground. And more recently, we have a new Canadian war museum that opened about a year ago. One of the exhibits among the many exhibits celebrating the Canadian heroes of war was one panel dealing with Canadian participation in Somalia where a Canadian airborne division brutally beat and killed a Somali teenager. It happened and it became a well-known Canadian thing. The museum decided that we are a museum and we have decided to present these things as accurately as we can. And again, the veterans went wild over this thing. It seems to me that what we are getting often is political battles over what actually happened and it changes from the really heavily politicized wartime experience to the detachment that you hope you get the further away you get.

**Dimitrios Dentsoras:** Okay, perhaps not necessarily political, but I guess *prima facie* you would expect any representation of war to be political. You expect it to be political. If you did not know anything else about it and you just see people killing each other, you want to look at the political aspect of it. It is not art for art, it is something more. And that is a pretty natural reaction that sets war apart from anything else I can imagine, even love which can be brutal.

**Helena Goscilo:** Why *even*?

**Dimitrios Dentsoras:** Because it is as personal as it gets and war gets more personal than that.

**Elena Baraban:** It is curious that nobody on the panel seemed to be quite excited about the second question and yet we have spent a lot of the discussion period just talking about the second question and leaving all of these exciting questions that arose from the first part out. So we are about to interrupt this and move to a more relaxed context and have a reception and continue the discussion there. Before we leave, may I ask each of you to formulate a question rather than a comment that emerged out of this discussion session and that you believe is worthwhile pursuing further?

**Alex Hinton:** It seems to me when we use terms, maybe we could talk a little bit about what the terms mean that we are using like ‘representation,’ ‘aesthetics,’ ‘politicized’ – to me that was something that came out of the discussion.

**Helena Goscilo:** I would also avoid using words like ‘necessarily,’ ‘always,’ ‘inevitably,’ naturally, unless it is in quotes.

**Brad Prager:** My only left-over interest was why we hardly used the terms 'victim' and 'perpetrator' at all. In reference to why are the stakes different in war, I think part of it is our investment in *who* the victims and perpetrators are.

**Helena Goscilo:** Is the term 'the perpetrator,' because I always associate that with criminal minds and they refer to the people who murder as perpetrators, it is not usually victim and aggressor.

**Alex Hinton:** Maybe again, those are terms we should think about on the list.

**Brad Prager:** Yes, because it already implies a judgment.

**Helena Goscilo:** A question that is very interesting is: Why is it that this seems to be a part of a national insistence of various countries to either see one's self as a victim or vehemently deny being a victim. I tend to see Eastern Europe embracing victimology with a passion and Anglophones tend not to.

**Alex Hinton:** And 'heroes' is another.

**Andreola Rossi:** I was wondering whether as humans we can find a common definition of what is war. Okay different cultures may see it differently, but is there a common denominator that defines war. I think that humanely speaking, and I could be wrong, but a sentiment of love is different from a sentiment of animosity and it could be shared by the entire human race. I could be wrong but is there a sort of common denominator on which we could find common ground?

**Alex Hinton:** No, I think if you talk about love and the concept of emotion there is nothing natural about emotion at all. In fact, if you go to different places, what we call emotions are constructed in very different ways. The Western concept of emotion tends to be something that is internal, naturalized, linked to biomedical discourses. If you go somewhere else those things tend to be linked socio-relationally.

**Andreola Rossi:** I was talking on a really basic, basic level. Because if there is no basic agreement among humans, then we can just throw a term like war out of the window because every culture is going to view it in a different way.

**Alex Hinton:** We could come up with an operational definition or we can say that this is something that has meaning for us here in this space and we share it, so we can talk about it in a certain way. Those are ways we can proceed with the discussion.

**Andreola Rossi:** I am always very skeptical about this definition where at the end you just arrive at the conclusion that each of us understands something very different about the work. So how can we have a meaningful discussion when we do not even understand this concept or understand it differently? Even we who are all living in a similar cultures – it is different in other cultures, so why do we even do it?

**Alex Hinton:** Again, that is a basic question but I guess for me, it is a social science construct or what have you, it is a construct that people have used. But I am sure that if we went around the room we would have a lot of different understandings. A different way to phrase it is what are the different senses of war that people use when talking about it?

**Andreola Rossi:** I was just thinking that maybe we should really go back to the basics and say how we define war.



**Robert Calder:** It is a very good question because one of the problems is that the word has been so devalued – people are using war all the time, the ‘war on terror’ is a ridiculous phrase. What kind of war is going on, who declared war and what tanks are going to win it? People talk about the war on illiteracy, the war on drugs, things like that. The World Wrestling Federation used to use war as one of their catch phrases. It is immensely devalued. I thought about it the other day when Mitt Romney backed out of the race to McCain and said we are at war. And I thought: what war? There is no war going on. There is an occupation going on. And yet he throws that word out and expects to get tremendous sympathy, but he is just abusing the word just like anyone else.

**Helena Goscilo:** I think it is exactly politicians who do.

**Robert Calder:** So I am wondering if even the word carries as much weight as it should.

**Elena Baraban:** We can leave this room and proceed to the University College and continue our discussion there. Thank you so much for participating in this round table. I think that it is an exciting beginning to the weekend.