ARTICLE

Weaponizing Affect: A Film Phenomenology of 3D Military Training Simulations During the Iraq War

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Abstract

This article critically considers the relation between simulation design and human experience through the analysis of three-dimensional military training simulation scenarios developed between 2003 and 2012 at the Fort Irwin National Training Center in the Mojave Desert of California. Following news reports of torture at Abu Ghraib, the US military began to implement “cultural awareness” training for all troops set to deploy to the Middle East. The military contracted with Hollywood special-effects studios to develop a series of counterinsurgency warfare immersive-training simulations, including hiring Iraqi-American and Afghan-American citizens to play villagers, mayors, and insurgents in scenarios. My primary question centers on the military technoscience of treating human bodies as variables in a reiterative simulation scenario. I analyze interviews with soldiers and actors, my own experiences videotaping training simulations at the fort, and the accounts of many other visiting journalists and filmmakers across time. From this, I contend that the stories participants tell about simulation experiences constitute one key outcome of the simulation itself, blunting dissent and aiding the fort’s long-term efforts to retain clout and funding in the face of wars whose intensity fluctuates. I treat the ongoing cinematic performances on
the fort as a kind of “simulation body” unbounded by skin, a theoretical framework drawn from Vivian Sobchack’s (1992) film phenomenological concept of the “film body” and affect theory grounded in the work of Kara Keeling (2007), as well as Eve Sedgwick (2003), Sedgwick and Adam Frank (1995), and Lisa Cartwright (2008), by way of American behavioral psychoanalyst Silvan Tomkins (2008).

Introduction

Figure 1. One of three camera operators records a training simulation at the Fort Irwin National Training Center in 2012 (left). Simultaneously, a technician in a media center nearby (right) records video streams for later review by soldier trainees. He also follows a director’s commands to emit smells, broadcast sounds, and ignite small explosions as the scenario unfolds. Recorded by the author, with permission from Fort Irwin National Training Center.

The US military has long envisioned the Mojave Desert, two hours east of Los Angeles, as the ideal place for simulating otherness. This Rhode Island–sized swath of desert, site of the army’s Fort Irwin National Training Center (NTC), has served as a sort of screen upon which the army projects the image of its enemy—a uniquely three-dimensional “film body,” to adapt the term of film phenomenologist Vivian Sobchack (1992)—in response to particular historical circumstances across time. The iterative nature of these changes resembles an affect system, a concept named by American behavioral psychoanalyst Silvan Tomkins (2008) to describe a living being’s mechanism for adaptation and survival in response to shifts in mood, circumstance, and feeling. Before the United States entered World War II, Fort Irwin served as the training
grounds for General George Patton’s tank battalions. During the Cold War, the US Army simulated battles here across dozens of miles of desert against the “Krasnovians,”—the name given to a US regiment that replicated the tactics and armaments of Soviet land forces—in preparation for tank warfare against the Russians on the plains of Germany. After the fall of the Soviet Union in 1989, the army vacillated among an amorphous amalgam of potential foes that happened to have purchased Russian weaponry, including the “Hamchuks” (North Korea) and “Atlanticans” (Cuba), before settling on the “Sumerians,” who represented the Iraqi Republican Guard (John Wagstaffe, personal communication, 15 April 2007).

In the midst of the occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan after 2003, however, the US military overhauled its “force on force” training paradigm to emphasize counterinsurgency and “cultural terrain.”1 “Despite the fact that cultural knowledge has not traditionally been a priority within the Department of Defense (DOD),” argued Montgomery McFate, a trained cultural anthropologist who became a key architect of the military’s turn to culture, “the ongoing insurgency in Iraq has served as a wake-up call to the military that adversary culture matters” (McFate, 2005, p. 43). The army introduced “cultural awareness training” to a new manual in 2004 that was guided by the “warrior ethos,” meant to instill in each soldier the autonomy and quick thinking capacities needed to negotiate the uncertainties of urban, insurgent warfare on behalf of US interests (US Dept. of the Army & US Marine Corps, 2007). In response, the NTC disbanded the Sumarians and constructed thirteen mock Iraqi and Afghan villages that simulated locations, social conditions, and everyday life practices. These sites came to serve as the final training grounds for American soldiers before they deployed to war zones in Iraq and Afghanistan. For two weeks, the army and contracted special-effects technicians and scenario writers from the Hollywood film industry orchestrated simulated improvised explosive device (IED) attacks, suicide bombings, beheadings, sectarian infighting, protests, raids, and sweeps for 4,000 soldiers finalizing their preparations for deployment. Army forts
and Marine bases across the country began to build such simulation sites, all hiring Arabic-speaking Iraqi-American actors (and later Pashto- and Dari-speaking Afghan-Americans) to play mayors, villagers, police chiefs, mothers, aid workers, and so on to enhance the cultural realism of their scenarios (Wagstaffe, personal communication, 15 April 2007). In effect, a staged, embodied enactment of support for America’s invasion of their native countries was extracted from these subjects.

Rather than expanding upon the obvious irony of this scenario, I examine the complex experiences afforded by the site simulations among these civilian subjects, as well as the troops in training, the mix of military and civilian staff members who manage the sets, and the media and academic visitors (including me) who have documented the Fort Irwin simulations. I contend that when the army began to operate embodied training simulations focused on cultural awareness and counterinsurgency, it was almost “hardwired” to adapt old instincts for domination and control to this new, intersubjective context, raising a series of questions about culture, learning, and critique. What do troops learn about culture and cultural exchange through a “cultural awareness” training regime that still treats “the enemy” as embodied subjects? How do different role players make sense of their experiences in the training simulations in relation to their prior life experiences, and what meaningful patterns emerge from their accounts? And why would the public-affairs office in this fort welcome—and even cultivate—visits from journalists, television news reporters, artists, and documentary filmmakers to assess “worst-case-scenario” training that on the surface makes visceral the failure of US military policy in Iraq and Afghanistan?

In many journalistic accounts, scholarly studies, and documentaries about the fort, somewhat incredibly, the spectacular display of violence, blood, chaos, and bodies serves as evidence of progress rather than failure within the military in the wake of Abu Ghraib (see Gerber & Moss, 2008; Filkins & Burns, 2006; Magelssen, 2009).“I sensed a genuine desire on the part of Army and Iraqi staff to make things right,” concluded one performance-studies scholar after spending a day immersed in
rehearsals of IED attacks at the fort (Magelssen, 2009, p. 68). My analysis, however, is not an endorsement of the training. I reject the conclusion that such manifestations of “cultural awareness” in simulation training demonstrate that the US military is becoming a progressive institution. Rather, I propose below that the manufacture of media fascination and positive reporting is part of the simulation’s design—and is significant to the survival of this particular fort. Finding new ways to cooperate with reporters on military-friendly terms is in keeping with strategies since Vietnam for controlling journalism about US wars (Stahl, 2010). In the context of pervasive cameras in the United States and abroad, the military’s vision of a future of endless small-scale urban warfare against insurgent enemies facing poverty and environmental collapse, the routines of torture in secret military prisons, the rise of “militainment” news and video games, and the pervasive use of drone strikes that kill civilians, I argue that it is imperative to see the military’s experiments with managing affects in immersive, cinematic simulation performances as a new kind of weapon executing old ends, and not a new iteration of clean, “virtuous war,” in the ironic phrase of military-simulation scholar James der Derian (2009).

At its center, this is an article about the cinematic mechanics entailed in weaponizing affect. Like the “shock and awe” campaign in miniature, the war-movie “cultural awareness” spectacles at Fort Irwin are intended to disorient and soften those immersed within them—troops and visiting journalist-filmmakers alike—so that they are primed for official explanations on hand to account for “the real” of their intense affective sensations. Central to my account is Kara Keeling’s (2007) theory of cinematic clichés, which she argues can be internalized and projected upon the world as “common sense” filters for perception and attention. At Fort Irwin, the cliché of the stoic, masculine action-film protagonist who must harden himself to sadness and grief also centers troop learning priorities and teaching methods, limits the range of soldiers’ encounters with Iraqi and Afghan role players, and offers a familiar schema for visiting journalist-filmmakers to follow in their own documentary stories. Action-
cinematic narratives in the movies and simulation-training scenarios alike typically end before the aftermath of urgent action, short-circuiting the need to process suffering, remorse, and loss. In addition to their supposed role in simulating “adversary culture” and facilitating troop learning, in other words, cinematic techniques also serve a military public-relations strategy to mitigate dissenting journalism and subvert critique amid disastrous wars.

**Film phenomenology with cameras and the simulation body**

Cameras and performance have played a key role in war campaigns, dating to Matthew Brady’s photographs of corpses on battlefields arranged before his lens during the American Civil War, but the Iraq War featured an unusually wide array of camera operators who created photographs, moving images, and spectacles to be photographed for very different ends. Photographs of atrocities have not necessarily communicated dissent or moral indignation. Below I offer an account of how the visual records of bloody, violent displays at Fort Irwin have in fact undermined possibilities for their use in critique. I draw on film theorists of affect and intersubjectivity (Cartwright, 2008, 2011; Keeling, 2007; Laine, 2007; Marks, 2000, 2002; Sobchack, 1992, 2004) to think through the centrality of cinema-industry tropes in the construction of the training simulations and the porous boundaries between action-film depictions of war and the subjective perceptions of participants in the training simulations as to the real and the fake of their experiences. Laine argues that the orientation of the cinema viewer to the screen epitomizes the ephemeral, yet continually reconstitutes space “where the ‘outside’ of the collective experience becomes the ‘inside’ of the subject’s psychic life” (Laine, 2007, p. 10). My research on Fort Irwin suggests that many young soldiers who have not yet gone to war have internalized these cinematic “outsides” and have drawn from their viewing experiences as a basis from which to judge the affective realism of their military training. In this light, the cinema is not exactly an ideological apparatus of mechanical reproduction or an illusion
machine playing on insatiable unconscious desires, but rather “a matter of affects,” in Laine’s terms, that drives those in charge of Fort Irwin to conform the landscape to their trainees’ common-sense orientation to the world (Laine, 2007, p. 10; Keeling, 2007). I intend to emphasize, however, that it is not just soldiers who understand war imagery primarily from the clichés of entertainment cinema.

My analytical approach draws from the film phenomenological method pioneered by Sobchack, who adapted the insights of French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1962) to the study of cinema. Across years of writing in the film phenomenological mode, Sobchack came to treat her own flesh as a kind of recording device in the midst of watching a film, partly as a materialist critique of the nihilistic writing on simulation by theorists following Jean Baudrillard (1994). Sobchack kept track of the sensations she experienced while viewing cinematic material for later, more considered structural analysis of genre and film form. While Sobchack writes from the position of a viewer in a cinema theater, however, I write from my experience as a cameraperson in the midst of a three-dimensional, cinematic, war simulation space inhabited by various actors. I visited Fort Irwin in 2007 and 2012 to document and observe training simulations. I return to my footage here to help recall events that I might otherwise have forgotten, failed to notice, or needed to analyze further, but also to reflect on the performativity of being a documentary cameraperson in the context of this intersubjectively produced simulation experience. I embodied the “variable” of the visiting journalist-documentary filmmaker, a cinematic trope that the simulation scenario seemed well prepared to manage.

I situate my phenomenological analysis in a historical study of 250 news reports written about the fort over a period of roughly twenty years (1989 to 2012), as well as three articles published in performance studies journals and a feature-length documentary film titled Full Battle Rattle (2008). Like Suchman (2016), I thought about this digital archive as a field site. These stories illuminated patterns in narratives about military training at the fort and revealed shortcomings—or perhaps intended effects—in
my thinking about the up-close experiences of intensely graphic simulation scenarios that had played out before my camera, which were then immediately interpreted for me by military personnel serving as my guides. In this way, my approach differs from previous scholarly treatments that have focused exclusively on up-close ethnographic observation of performance in relation to official military policies. I also analyze interviews I conducted with a former soldier who rotated twice through Fort Irwin and with a white Barstow resident who donned a burqa to play an Afghan woman to draw out key points about affect and realism in the simulations.

In the tack and yaw between phenomenological description of camerawork and archival-historical analysis, I have come to frame Fort Irwin as a kind of “simulation body” with an affect system, akin to Sobchack’s (1992) notion of the “film body.” Merleau-Ponty grounded his understanding of experience in the human body’s capacities to perceive stimuli and express intention, qualities that Sobchack ascribed to the “film body” that emerged in the space between a film and a viewer in the midst of a screening. Likewise, what I am calling the “simulation body” denotes a spatially distributed system that perceives stimuli and expresses intention in the midst of performance, here in performances that change slightly over time to keep the fort relevant and funded. The human bodies, communications networks, scenario scripts, vehicles, mock towns, and so on constitute so many variables for the simulation body to manage toward the aims of its own economic, political, and cultural reproduction. I consider the traces left by the simulation itself across time in the archive of film and journalistic reports, the desert landscape in the transition from force-on-force combat to counterinsurgency war, and accounts of participants who have passed through simulation training as indicative of the ongoing development of this particular affect system. To sharpen the implications for my central point here, I treat the journalist-documentarian as a variable to be controlled by various other elements within the distributed simulation body, not as an observer to be more or less ignored. The simulation itself, in other words, always-already accounts for the
journalist-documentarian who attempts a neutral evaluation of training simulations.

Though it is unbounded by skin, the simulation body, I claim here, consistently executes an affective strategy centered on avoidance and mystification of the feared object, here “the enemy” that the military constructs, defeats, and then augments across time like an endless and increasingly elaborate action scene. Suchman (2016), citing Judith Butler, refers to the figure of the enemy in US military-training simulations as a limitation to cultural awareness: “The intelligibility of the body includes always its ‘constitutive outside,’ those unthinkable and unlivable bodies ‘that do not matter in the same way,’” she observes (p. 8). In the military, the two terms for “those unthinkable and unlivable bodies” are “enemy” and “civilian,” with the former category figured as threatening and immoral and the latter as antithetical to the disciplined, hypercapable, action-oriented soldier body. This institutional hubris is in tension with the fact that the US military remains somewhat accountable to civilian oversight, which can constitute an existential threat—especially during a messy counterinsurgency war rife with mistakes and scandals, like Abu Ghraib. Public-relations strategies since Vietnam have aimed to lead US civilians to identify with US soldiers and the activity of soldiering, as opposed to the civilians and enemy combatants they have killed (Stahl, 2010). Part of this strategy has entailed attempts to control journalism, which I tether below to my account of stories about Fort Irwin. The simulations serve as training for troops about to deploy, but they also seem to function as a quickly recognizable, close-to-home, “good enough” story for visiting US writers and filmmakers who cannot or would rather not undertake the hard, expensive, controversial, and dangerous accounting needed to really assess the efficacy of such methods in Iraq and Afghanistan. This is a devil’s bargain. Starting from my phenomenology of documentary camerawork at Fort Irwin below, I come to suggest a more general problem for documentary practice and reportage in the context of simulation, one with particularly urgent stakes in times of war.
“Stitch Lane” 2007

“Turn the camera off,” the army sergeant tells me. Several unscripted flames are searching for unconsumed materiel on the driver’s side of a mangled charcoal Humvee spattered with red stains. This army officer, known at Fort Irwin as a tactical controller (TC), is about to veer from standard protocol to fix the problem. The TC grabs a plastic container filled with fake blood and uses it to douse the fire as twelve other TCs, a Fort Irwin public-relations guide, and several members of the media look on. Satisfied, the TC politely informs me that I can resume videotaping. Smoke continues to billow into the air from three canisters hidden behind the wheels of the “bombed” Humvee—canisters designed for use in scenes like this one.

We are at the closest training site to the public-affairs office at Fort Irwin NTC: Medina Wasl, a mock Iraqi village comprised of thirteen cargo containers fashioned with faux siding to resemble homes in rural Iraq, as well as a mosque, a pen with goats, and a market, all aligned along a central dirt road. The Humvee serves as the focal point of the most often observed and practiced training simulation here, dubbed “Stitch Lane” by the army. The simulation depicts the aftermath of an IED attack—complete with $60,000 “SimMan” medical dummies dressed with bloody lacerations and scattered across the street, Iraqi villagers wailing over an injured family of three in a black sedan struck by shrapnel from the explosion, and a confused army private stumbling through this scene, alternately calling for a medic and his mother. Troop trainees must “stitch” and evacuate the wounded quickly and safely.

My shock at being immersed in the dimensionality and chaos of this environment blends with a perverse sense of fascination, familiarity, and even comfort at the resemblance it bears to a Hollywood action-film set. I wind my way through this action-film documentary with a video camera of my own, both impressed and confused by my access to the damning scene as an early-stage graduate student. Troops in training are tasked with quickly securing the area around the blast, assessing injuries to
soldiers and civilians, stopping massive bleeding while warding off insurgent sniper attacks and car bombs, and evacuating the injured to a secure forward operating base set up in the desert several miles from the village. During their two weeks at Fort Irwin, troops practice this scenario three to four times, with TCs observing their performance and stage-managing insurgent attacks based on the soldiers’ failures to follow proper procedures. TCs try to “kill” all the new troops in early renditions of this exercise should they take more than ten minutes to carry out the evacuation. All participants in the simulation wear MILES laser-tag vests, which perceive signals emitted from guns or roadside bombs that approximate the ballistics and physical trajectories of actual weapons. When a suicide bomber detonates within close proximity of the American soldiers, a TC with a “God Gun,” a light blue physics calculator fashioned after a handgun, “shoots” each casualty to assess the extent of their simulated injury or death. This time a suicide bomber drives a truck through an unprotected alley to the scene and detonates, killing all the soldiers and civilians.

At the end of a simulation, the troops gather in a communal space in front of a television screen—the central courtyard of the village “mosque”—as a TC shows video of their performance and leads a discussion about how to improve the next time. The emphasis here is on procedure (how to secure the perimeter of the IED site, identify wounds, apply a tourniquet efficiently, load bodies into the medevac truck, and so on), but unspoken is the development of positive affective sentiments among the soldiers who learn together. The soldiers bond through this ritual before a mainstay of domestic architecture, the television, which functions not as a window on reality but as a mediator of their relations with one another. Video viewing in this spatial arrangement is a historical practice and form of expressive experience they all share. Performance before cameras is vital to their mission as the executors of empire in an age of ubiquitous media, as the scandal of Abu Ghraib ironically suggests.

The significance of performing affective qualities before the camera is exemplified later, when the army arranges for two particularly
charismatic and friendly Iraqi-American actors to sit with me for interviews. They say that they try to play a role in “saving lives” in their native and adopted countries by teaching young American soldiers about the cultural nuances they will encounter once in theater. “Sam,” a Chaldean Christian liquor store owner from San Diego who immigrated to the United States in the 1970s and last visited Iraq in 1986, states that “this is reality, we’re not playing games with it. We’re using real Iraqis”:

We act like them, we get mad like them, we yell out just like the Iraqis, we tell them get the hell out of my country, ’cause you’re not helping—we do everything just like in Iraq ’cause they should know. That’s what they’re gonna face. I talk to lieutenants who have been in Iraq already when they come here. They say, hey, flashback. This is the same. We give them the same thing. (“Sam,” personal communication, 8 April 2007)\(^9\)

I later discover that he has conducted more than fifty interviews for the press. He also appears in many photos on a wall at the public-affairs office, including one with President George W. Bush. I see this wall on the day I am leaving the fort and pan my camcorder across the photographs of other journalists who have passed through this place, labeled by name and institutional affiliation: Market Road Productions, Australian TV, a Berlin newspaper, Armed Forces Info Services, Christian Broadcasting Network, Danish National TV, History Channel Modern Marvels, Deutsche Welle Television, French Radio, State Dept. Press Tour, Sacramento TV, the BBC, and dozens of others. Six to twelve media institutions visit for every rotation, the public-affairs officer tells me. “Then they go on my wall of shame,” he quips. I am surprised when he points out the newest image, a photograph he had taken of me, unaware, the day before. He tells me that keeping photographs on the walls helps him remember all the people he has met, and he reiterates again how much he likes journalists. I like him, too. He has told me many good stories today about the history of the fort, his own life as a military reporter, the Iraqi-American actors he has met, and the pedagogical aim of all the simulation scenarios that we watched together. But as I leave the office and begin the thirty-mile drive
through the desert between Fort Irwin and Barstow, I cannot shake the thought that all of us media visitors hang there like so many hunting trophies.

Being trapped in the “desert of the real,” as Baudrillard (1994) had thought to call the social condition of the United States while driving through this same Mojave Desert, is a confusing sensation (p. 1). It is not clear, after all, that visions of chaotic violence, civilian death, and physical destruction like those I had just documented should function to promote a war effort. Noor Behram’s haunting forensic photographs of the rubble and innocent victims of US drone bombings in Pakistan, for instance, testify to the ongoing significance of documentary representation of atrocity for raising awareness, indignation, and momentum for protest. “I want to show taxpayers in the Western world what their tax money is doing to people in another part of the world,” he explains (Ackerman, 2011). The US military, applying similar ideas about the power of documentary images to opposite ends, has pressured journalists in Iraq not to publish graphic photographs of the actual dead. But at Fort Irwin, the explicit depiction of violent events that the army treats as emblematic of actuality and predictive of future experience—gory, bloody, and merciless throughout—in fact seems to short-circuit energy for dissent and anger in the near term: my own and that of the other journalists on the “wall of shame.”

Over months of reflection, I come to understand the scenes of violence at Fort Irwin, the accounts of Iraqi-American actors, and the public-affairs officers’ explanations, which seemed to anticipate my strong affective responses, as aligned with incremental policy changes dating to the 1960s designed to control depictions of American wars and suppress dissent. Stahl (2010), for instance, argues that the rise of military-industrial-entertainment collaborations since the Vietnam War, and especially since the early 2000s, co-opts war imagery for pleasurable, interactive “militainment” products and military recruiting. Economic pressures on news organizations wrought by the rise of cable and twenty-four-hour news channels incentivizes media to produce low-budget talk
shows and relay the stories of Pentagon public-relations personnel over independent reporting. Publishing graphic war photographs could endanger ongoing access to these officials, so most news organizations did not. The unfortunate result has been the ceding of war imagery almost entirely to the entertainment industry, where images of killing and the killed tend to drive action and plot rather than reflection on suffering. Narrative films about masculine war heroes who successfully solve problems through violence and first person shooter games “invite one to project oneself into the action,” in Stahl’s phrase (2010, p. 3). Building on such trends, Fort Irwin produces immersive environments designed to arouse strong affective responses from participants, including those of journalist-documentarians. The codes of action-entertainment cinema—complete with reductive depictions of the culture of the Other—are then deployed to define interpretations of graphic violence. In other contexts or historical moments, such scenes might have served to discredit a war effort or show a lack of cultural knowledge. But here and now, the circulation of intense affect functions as an evolving weapon—one calibrated, as I explore below, by narrative cinema techniques.

**Awareness of cinematic culture**

A film spectator may comment about the experience of seeing a film as believable or convincing without articulating the assumptions from which this sense of the real emerged, sometimes even in the full awareness that their sense of this reality directly contradicts social facts. In the context of “Stitch Lane,” participants’ experiences of realism play on broadly shared understandings of Hollywood action tropes for manufacturing drama, affect, and audience investment, even if—or perhaps especially because—the immersive scenario references war events that spectators and participants alike imagine to have had mortal corollaries in Iraq or Afghanistan in the recent past. In this light, the drama of the simulation scenario affectively stitches together the trauma of the IED explosion as an actual world phenomenon, the narrativization of such events through Hollywood techniques, and the training of anxious troops in the present
who know movies but not war for the contingencies of a future that may bring actual wounds. These three sutured temporalities function to solidify bonds of camaraderie in troops who must confront the specter of bodily harm through performances in which they stand at once as subjects and objects for their fellow performers, including Iraqi and Afghan role players. All function simultaneously as subjects and objects of the cinematic realism operational in the simulation, a style of realism vested in the visualization of the wound above all.

Embedding such visualizations within narratives affects soldiers and actors, as I show below, but also visiting observers to the fort, like me. How are we new arrivals to make sense of a training spectacle designed to overwhelm the senses? Military spokespersons stand at the ready to offer explanations for the shocks: Train like you fight; inoculate against stress; weed out the bad-apple troops who might kill civilians; teach troops cultural awareness so they don’t misunderstand gestures, expressions, and gender norms; and so on. Over time, Medina Wasl became not just a site for training soldiers, but also a showpiece for the army’s new, public-relations-oriented framing of itself as a progressive cultural institution in the midst of insurgent war. This has been an effective strategy.

In articles about the training simulations at Fort Irwin, invocations of realism are both pervasive and ambiguous in ways that are instructive about what cultural awareness might mean here. Descriptions in reports and comments from military interviewees typically identify landscape, climate, the presence of Arabic-speaking Iraqi bodies, and the occasional inducement of traumatic symptoms in trainees to signify realism. Across the transition from “force-on-force” to “cultural awareness” training, stories about the fort increasingly focused on the journalists’ sensory experiences of being present to the simulations. Their narratives read like a cross between phenomenological description and Hollywood script: “Pop-pop-pop-pop-pop-pop-pop! BOOM!” wrote one. “Toomer popped off a round—and then his gun jammed, at the worst possible time, just like in the movies” (Thevenot, 2004). A New York Times feature published in 2006 likewise connected the action-cinematic ethos at the fort to realism, authoritatively
demonstrated in this account by soldiers’ embodied responses to their new training regimen:

With actors and stuntmen on loan from Hollywood, American generals have recast the training ground at Fort Irwin so effectively as a simulation of conditions in Iraq and Afghanistan over the past 20 months that some soldiers have left with battle fatigue and others have had their orders for deployment to the war zones canceled. In at least one case, a soldier’s career was ended for unnecessarily “killing” civilians. (Filkins & Burns, 2006, p. 1)

The figure of the soldier who “unnecessarily” kills civilians plays an important part in this particular story and many others—a peculiarity worth analyzing. I interpret two meanings to the recurrence of this figure. First, it implies the narrative of the progressive army, monitoring its troops for “bad apples” who may misrepresent US interests in theater by committing atrocities. The army will not deploy a soldier who demonstrates an unnerving lack of calm in the midst of a simulation. This narrative bears little relation to the pre-2007 policy of not counting killed civilians in Iraq and Afghanistan, judging from reports that I address below. Second, and more to the point, in the news story the soldier who kills civilians functions as evidence for this visiting journalist that the cultural-awareness training simulations are working properly. The public-affairs officer at the fort tells the reporter that the simulations are so realistic that they have induced “battle fatigue” and killing sprees to prove that the training approximates an intense war experience. The reporter then conveys this juicy information to readers.

Somehow, across the institutional transition from “force-on-force” training to “cultural awareness,” the figure of the puking, pathological, traumatized soldier body remained the index of functionality in journalistic evaluations of military training, though as an index for different modalities of troop suffering. Quotations from senior officers offer rationales for extreme training of this sort that shift over time away from environmental conditions and toward culture. In 2004, when the US Army still emphasized force-on-force training, Brigadier General Robert Cone of Fort
Irwin stated:

> We want our commanders to say that it’s harder at the National Training Center than in war. . . . We put them in a tent where it’s 100 degrees, there’s dirt in their computers and they haven’t had a shower for a week and see how they function. We want to put them under stress and see how they cope. (Santschi, 2004)

Cone emphasized the realism of the training in terms of the soldier’s bodily response to the harsh desert conditions, but he did not mention culture as part of this environment. Four years later, comments from Fort Irwin commanding officer General Dana Pittard emphasize sensations of alterity (which we may hesitate to characterize as culture) over the physical environment: “The kind of towns, the urban towns we’re creating, the signs, it must hit all five of your senses. You must see Iraq and Afghanistan. You must smell it. You must touch it” (Rather, 2008). A feature published in 2007 affirmed that this kind of affective realism was key to the new regime of cultural-awareness military training—and to writing about such training. “It’s realistic to the point where soldiers pass out, throw up, turn white and start shaking,’ said Sgt. Mark Ramsey, an Iraq War veteran and Hollywood stuntman who helps plan the training mission” (Vargo, 2007). Ramsey was referring to the sensations of fear and shock that troops experienced amid referents to the sensorial environment of Iraq and surprise insurgent attacks, not simply the heat of the desert. “You’ve got to train like you fight” (Vargo, 2007). The way to ensure the survival of the simulation body economically and institutionally, ironically, hinged on its capacities to create images that could induce in its human components the affects associated with looming death. Strong affect grounded the approach to teaching at the fort.

**Strong Affect**

An ex-Marine Corps noncommissioned officer, “Greg,” who rotated through Fort Irwin on two different occasions while on active duty, reflected in an interview with me that the training he received
overwhelmingly intended to make soldiers fearful, suspicious, and on edge. “The commanders want to instill a certain fear in you to keep you sharp, to keep you edged, to keep you ready,” Greg explained. Pedagogy emphasizes that no procedure or action carried out by troops deserves a commander’s positive praise. “Bottom line is that it’s just never going to be good enough, no matter what,” Greg said. “Their reward system is through negativity. . . . I didn’t realize that until I stepped out of the military and got into this profession, fitness, which is more about positivity” (“Greg,” personal communication, 3 February 2012). He recalled one incident in particular in which a janitor rolled an IED in a trashcan into a room of soldiers undetected, a simulation meant to reenact an IED attack that had killed a number of marines in a mess hall in Iraq the week before. “It was an eye opener for everybody. It was like, I don’t think we’re ready for this. It’s an intangible kind of thing, a fear . . . almost like a feeling where you just want to tuck up in a cave and hide,” he reflected (“Greg,” personal communication, 3 February 2012). When this simulation event occurred at Fort Irwin, it indexed a specific moment of the recent past, while also suggesting an emergent strategy being deployed by insurgents that would likely impact this unit of marines deploying to Iraq soon. The relatively brief duration of time between the actual IED explosion in the mess hall in Iraq and its simulation at Fort Irwin was key to its affective power for this group of marines. This was a reenactment of current news and a training simulation simultaneously. In this context, the bodies of these marines in training touched something of the bodies of those who had died in the bomb attack affectively, if not literally. It could have been them. Greg’s response, “I don’t think we’re ready for this,” was perhaps the desired pedagogical outcome of the bomb simulation. One can never be vigilant enough.

The visible evidence of stress, fear, and disgust at Fort Irwin were made central to claims about improving the survival rates of soldiers. Such images suggest to visitors and evaluators that the fort can habituate soldiers to the intense affects of war, thus limiting the power of affective response to gore and fear that can impede judgment in actual battle. The
Fort Irwin simulation body must also anticipate war scenarios of the future, or at least make a case that their training paradigm remains relevant in times of peace. Images at Fort Irwin thus have a dual aim, a dual purpose in relation to the fort’s survival. By coincidence, Tomkins (2008) in fact names the aims of consciousness within the affect system as Image (p.10). The aggregate of sensory, memory, and affective imagery processed through consciousness comprises the organism’s Image, its understanding of purpose and direction.

Spokespersons for the army—stewards of the institutional Image—argue that simulations like “Stitch Lane” and the one Greg described above “inoculate [soldiers] against stress” and thus allow them to function more effectively in scenarios where lives may be at stake (a conceit of this training that I examine at length below) (Lavell, 2003). It is also the case that phenomena that arouse intense affects, particularly those that routinely defy explanation and trigger fear, force those who experience them to undertake particular coping strategies, to search out explanations for feelings of humiliation and contempt. In Tomkins’s affect system, this is one way to theorize the recursive relationship between affect and consciousness. The subject produced by repeated exposures to humiliation and contempt, in Tomkins’s description, resembles the archetypal action hero as well as the military’s avowed ideal of the good soldier, “learn[ing] to have contempt for those who surrender too easily and to avoid defeat at any cost lest he suffer self-contempt” (Tomkins, 2008, p. 481). Tomkins suggested that there is a monopolistic tendency in the affects of contempt and humiliation if they are not confronted, assuaged, or worked through. Repeated experiences of these negative affects produce in the subject what Tomkins calls a “strong affect theory” that serves as the foundation of ideological thinking: “It is the repeated and apparently uncontrollable spread of the experience of negative affect which prompts the increasing strength of the ideo-affective organization which we have called a strong affect theory” (Tomkins, 2008, p. 460).

“Strong theories” about how the world works harden over time into what Eve Sedgwick, building on ideas of Sigmund Freud (2001) and
Melanie Klein (1946), calls the “paranoid position” (Sedgwick, 2003, p. 123). This corresponds most closely with the principle of avoiding negative affect, the defining strategy of military training and defensive infrastructure. Avoidance strategies inevitably cut the subject off from a range of encounters with potentially shaming, humiliating, or misunderstood objects that have in the past overwhelmed the psyche, and so further mystify the objects. This leads a strong theory position to claim more and more objects as applicable within its purview over time, because power to control affective experience is defined increasingly by avoidance. It seeks almost automatically to expand its power through boundary marking, and this can be contagious with others who follow a similar affective strategy of avoidance that is not counterbalanced by positive affective experience, like fellow soldiers forced to endure drill and then threat. Moreover, positive affect can actually come about in the process of working to counter the negative affect by avoidance or anger, as was the case with the soldiers’ staging of photos at Abu Ghraib. In these cases, ironically, the object associated with the strong affect theory of avoidance becomes central as well to the experience of a restrained positive affect. Total and complete destruction of the source of negative affect leaves a kind of vacuum at the center of affective life.

We might ask after the implications of avoidance in relation to images that tend to arouse negative affects. Keeling (2007) argues that cinematic structures extend outside the theater once they are internalized by spectators and turned on the world itself. Those who regard what they encounter through the logic and needs of cinematic structures become “living images,” their perceptual world an extension of theatrical experiences as well as a reflection of the world on screen (p. 25). Keeling points to the example of the Black Panther Party, whose members appeared in public with guns in the late 1960s as a part of a strategy to draw television cameras to their new defiant, revolutionary image of blackness. While Keeling praises the way this gesture challenged dominant schemas for understanding the image of blackness, she notes that this action also reproduced the reductive cinematic cliché that “it takes
masculine tactics to effect political change”—a staple trope of Hollywood action films that troubled female Panthers in subsequent years (p. 79). In many cases, for Keeling, projecting cinematic perception onto the media-saturated world outside the theater is a short-term survival strategy always in danger of reproducing the logic of capitalism over time. New ideas are folded into dominant notions of common sense.

Materializations of cinematic affect accumulate upon the land in places like Fort Irwin. Cinematic structures here homogenize processes of identification and becoming for the ends of military capital, “even to make that violation feel good,” in Keeling’s terms (p. 25). Certainly for soldiers, the strong negative affects of training reinforce boundaries between “us and them” and work against the notion of openness in intercultural exchange one might think to be central to cultural awareness engagements. Performance scholar Zack Whitman Gill (2009) argues that this kind of training in fact reinforces a “martial heterotopia” defined by a “warrior ethos” parallel to but set apart from (and above) civilian life:

While an Army soldier demonstrates the qualities that comprise the Seven Core Values [loyalty, duty, respect, selfless service, honor, integrity, and personal courage], a civilian is constructed as the opposite. Every moment of a recruit’s existence in the Army affirms this absolute difference, through a series of performances that immediately and visually discard the lax and disorganized lifestyle of the civilian. (p. 144)

Gill’s analysis of the training at Fort Irwin as a permanent rehearsal, detached from and contemptuous of civilian life at home and abroad, would seem to dovetail well with Keeling’s theory about the projection of cinematic common sense and Tomkins’s writing on strong affect theory. Military scripting does not produce a value-neutral simulation in which participants can envision future scenarios by tweaking abstract variables. This is a simulation, rather, that intends to encode through cinematic techniques a set of values and presuppositions into its human variables for an ideological outcome. Whereas Sobchack likens cinematic consciousness to plastic surgery (“We have all had our eyes done,” she
quips), the Fort Irwin simulation body aims to colonize the sensory-affective organization of individuals within its space. And visiting journalists and filmmakers who follow the norms of neutral reportage are easily subsumed as variables within this system, time and again moved by the affective force of witnessing simulation scenarios and interviewing soldiers to then reproduce as “consciousness” the military-friendly explanations on hand.

**Critique of affective realism**

Bonnie Docherty, a researcher at Human Rights Watch who specializes in questions of disarmament and limiting civilian casualties during war, published the most detailed study of the training simulations and their relation to the practices of soldiers once deployed in theater. Her account “More Sweat…Less Blood” (2007) throws into question the recourse to affective realism in public-relations material and news reports about the efficacy of training at the fort. Docherty positions herself as a spokesperson for improving military training to reduce civilian casualties, and was allowed unusually extensive access to the fort and its personnel. She visited the fort three times over the course of four years of research and pored through 40,000 pages of training manuals and documents about army lessons learned (pp. 5-6). In line with the reports of other visitors, Docherty emphasizes the importance of realism in her study, but she found it lacking at Fort Irwin. The towns were too small and the Iraqi role players too few to simulate the sense of threat that they engendered for troops once deployed (p. 4). She says it was a problem that only American soldiers stationed at Fort Irwin play the insurgents, as soldier trainees quickly learn to distinguish between Arabic speakers who play cultural roles and “insurgents,” none of whom speak Arabic (p. 6). The simulation scenarios themselves were not varied enough in intensity or goals. Encounters with Iraqi role players were still minimal (p. 7). And the rules of engagement taught and practiced at Fort Irwin did not always overlap with international humanitarian law, in her estimation. She insists
that “troops must receive reviews that consider not only military success but also civilian casualties,” a factor not evaluated in army engagements in Iraq until September 2007, four and a half years after the start of the war (p. 4). While Docherty quotes veterans who experienced flashbacks to their combat experience in the midst of participating in simulations, she avers from accepting these comments as evidence of the kind of realism she deems most important to cultural-awareness training. “The different views of NTC’s realism are in part attributable to whether or not a trainee had been to Iraq,” she observes. Her field research corroborates the views of one battalion commander she interviewed, who said that “those who had not been in theater were ‘relatively unfazed [by the realism]. [To them, it’s] a training exercise’” (p. 20). She concludes that the realism advertised by the military as its training product, and relayed by most visiting journalists and filmmakers in their representations of the simulations, remains elusive. “The new trainees’ lack of reaction is disconcerting since NTC’s role is to awaken them to what lies ahead,” she concludes (p. 20).

John Wagstaffe, the public-relations officer at Fort Irwin before 2011, reflects on the dilemma the army faces in getting the attention of its young trainees. “If it’s not on video,” Wagstaffe says, “then it didn’t happen” (John Wagstaffe, personal communication, 11 July 2011). Wagstaffe explains that for a generation of recruits who grew up playing video games and watching war films, the baseline standard of assaultive sounds, smells, and actions that could induce the sensation of affective realism—the stated key to pedagogy at Fort Irwin—is extreme. This problem is partly of the military’s own making. In military-sponsored video game series like America’s Army, Call of Duty, and HALO, recruiting depots set up in public schools, advertisements aired during sports broadcasts, Hollywood action movies endorsed by the military like G.I. Joe (2009) and Ironman (2008) (González, 2010, p. 16), and the controversial “Army Experience Center” opened in a Philadelphia shopping mall (Cousineau, 2011, p. 519), extreme, graphically depicted, reactive violence predominantly functions as a form of exciting entertainment.
Offering gaming experiences as part of the Army brand, in addition to suggesting that army life might lead to such adventures, aids recruiting within the army’s key demographic of poor, frustrated young men. It is also an ethos at odds with the notion of cultural awareness. As one sergeant noted in unnerving frustration in the midst of the transition to cultural awareness in 2004, “You train a guy to kill, and then you tell him to go hand out water and not to shoot anybody unless he’s shot at” (Thevenot, 2004). Within this context, it is not surprising that some of the soldiers view the embodied training simulations as just another drill to endure. Moreover, and perhaps more to the point, commanders’ assumptions about such preexisting attitudes lead them to develop “worst-case scenario” simulations, to perform simulated gore and violence that exceed what soldier trainees would likely see in combat. To achieve the affective realism that would open the space for soldiers to feel the consequences of their actions and the possibilities for their own deaths, in other words, would mean creating scenarios that were not representative of their future lives.

It is worth saying a bit more about the kinds of realism claimed as operational at the fort and the problems that these claims pose for evaluation by outsider journalists and filmmakers. Visitors have no way to judge whether or not this kind of training is effective at reducing civilian casualties, facilitating cultural exchange, or saving the lives of American soldiers during deployment. Beyond this, the evaluators who most matter, Iraqis and Afghans living through wars who must deal with the distant presence of American troops in their home countries, are not available for comment about the realism of military training. Instead, Iraqi-Americans who mostly left the country in the 1970s; soldier trainees who have not deployed but have played video games; and veteran soldiers whose traumatic experiences of war lead them to experience flashbacks in the midst of much more mundane, everyday sensations stand as authorities on realism in reports and films about the fort. While these participants may be well intentioned and open, they are also following orders. They manage procedural realism: the reality of written military codes about how
to move down a narrow street as a unit, perform guard duty, inspect cars at checkpoints, and “kick down doors,” to use the phrase of one army mechanic. While these concerns are practical and relevant to the everyday activities of soldiers, and useful to see and improve upon through the use of video, they have little to do with Iraqi or Afghan culture.

Figure 2. Video stills of the “Wounded Private” (left) and Afghan role players (right) acting in the Stitch Lane training simulation, 2012. Recorded by the author with permission from Fort Irwin National Training Center, Barstow, CA.

What is significant here is the relation between the affective experiences induced by the simulation scenarios and the official interpretations on hand to account for them. Military spokespersons use the term “culture” to describe differences in customs, belief, and behavior that troops will encounter in Iraq and Afghanistan, but in practice the sensory experiences of otherness produced in the simulations are very much about the conjuncture of army and cinema customs, beliefs, and behaviors. Viewers and participants who have not been exposed to graphic depictions of violence tend to have more pronounced visceral responses to the training simulations. One middle-aged white woman from the nearby town of Barstow, whom I will call Jane, accepted a job as a part-time role player at Fort Irwin around 2008. I interviewed her in 2012. In rotations of troops who were destined for Afghanistan, she wore a burqa and played the second wife of a rural Muslim Afghani man (his actual wife, Jane’s actual friend, played his first Muslim wife in the simulation). Though Jane knew very little about Afghanistan or Muslim culture, the army allowed her and other local American women to play these roles because, according to script, they said nothing in public,
remained anonymous beneath the burqas, and simply followed their husbands (“Jane,” personal communication, 15 February 2012). Arabic- and Pashto-speaking role players are more expensive to contract, so as many roles as possible are played by enlisted army members and local civilians who need part-time work. As a result, role players like Jane enter the simulations with a very different set of experiences of war imagery and expectations about war representations than most army trainees. Jane recalls seeing for the first time one of the amputees who played a bomb victim in the Stitch Lane simulation (Figure 2). “To me it was so realistic that I just started crying,” she says:

He was yelling where was his leg, and the next thing I know I’m just crying because I’m wondering where his leg’s at. Just sitting there, and you’re like, oh my god, it’s how they must feel when they’re out there and they lose their leg. . . . My dad didn’t really let me watch war movies, so my first time out here, I didn’t know we had amputees, so I cried a lot my first rotation. They made me stay over there because I really was. . . . I was devastated. I don’t know a lot about war. So when I’d seen it, it was very scary. (“Jane,” personal communication, 15 February 2012).

Jane says she gradually learned how to cope with the display of violence and blood because she needed the job and because she accepted her officers’ interpretation of what she had seen: Many soldiers had lost limbs in Iraq and Afghanistan, so it was crucially important that they experience something of what these moments are like before deploying. Here, again, the simulation body of the fort brought Jane’s strong negative affective response into line with the position of the overall military mission. Repeated exposure to simulations of traumatic events—here an odd parallel to the logic in therapy for “prolonged exposure” explored in Brandt (2016)—blunted Jane’s potentially political, visceral reaction to the visage of the aftermath of an IED attack as devastating, scary, and sad. By hardening herself to the intense affects of fear and disgust that overwhelmed her at first, Jane came to believe she could help soldiers better perform their jobs. “I got to where I understand that the concept out
here is to help [American soldiers] come back alive,” Jane explains:

I have to learn to do it because it’s my job. And so I waited a couple days and I came back, and the more you come back and you see it, you see you’re helping soldiers. They come in, and you know that hopefully what they learned while you were here is going to bring them back alive. So that made me feel really good about what had first freaked me out (“Jane,” personal communication, 15 February 2012).

Jane’s reaction to the horror of seeing an amputee and her subsequent acceptance of the military’s interpretation of its meaning, mimic the logic at the center of many documentary and journalistic interpretations of the training simulations.

Absent their own critical intervention, these reports convey a message sympathetic to the military mission. In his article “Rehearsing the ‘Warrior Ethos,’ ‘Theatre Immersion,’ and the Simulation of Theatres of War” (2009), for instance, performance theorist Scott Magelssen foregrounds interviews and observations that he gleaned from his one-day visit to the fort as representations of its reality as a reformed, newly progressive vision of American military norms. While he acknowledges that he saw nothing that the army did not want him to see, he nonetheless judges the training simulation positively:

I sensed a genuine desire on the part of Army and Iraqi staff to make things right by teaching the troops about the changing face of the cultural and political landscape in Iraq, and a deep resentment toward those who act poorly, as in the case of the alleged Blackwater massacres. (Magelssen, 2009, p. 68)

Like the embedded reporters who “objectively” relate sympathetic stories about humble and patriotic American soldiers on the ground in Iraq, Magelssen in effect assumes what digital-media theorist Elizabeth Losh has described as a pragmatic rhetorical stance. Losh ascribes this position to critics of the US wars who nonetheless accept military contracts to program virtual-reality training games like Tactical Iraqi and Virtual Iraq (Losh, 2006). These programmers argue that the games’ missions to
teach the Arabic language and Muslim culture and aid treatments of PTSD respectively outweigh the fact that the military funds the games and might misuse or reappropriate their work for other ends in the future. While I appreciate the nuance of this position for the designers of such programs and scholars who write about military affairs, it is not the place from whence to evaluate training outcomes. Perhaps Magelssen was intending to give pause to an audience of academics who would regard military activity as a de facto negative component of collective life in the United States, or perhaps he was acting out what he saw as ethical ethnographic practice by affirming the legitimacy of the pragmatic position of his Iraqi-American subjects. This is, indeed, the dominant framework in journalistic accounts of the fort, and Magelssen’s article offers a more detailed account than most from which to draw such conclusions. But in focusing on the present of his visit as opposed to the longer history of the fort itself or the potential ramifications of the shift from conventional warfare to “cultural awareness,” Magelssen overestimates the truth-value of his proximity to the cinematic events and people he describes. He writes as though he had not been a part of the show, and yet his conclusions uncannily resemble the public-relations material that the military itself has generated around these training simulations.

The same could be said about the nationally televised feature documentary about the Fort Irwin training simulations, Full Battle Rattle (2008) by Jesse Moss and Tony Gerber. While the filmmakers state in material about the film that they are against the war personally, and while it is the most comprehensive treatment of the experiences of individuals in the training simulations (soldiers and actors alike), it foregrounds intimacy with subjects employed by the military, presence to simulated performance events, and the stories of participants over structural critique. Thus, while the style of the film retains faith in the camera to communicate the phenomenological experience of fake war and all the complexities the endeavor entails, it also by design gives a great deal of control over the production of affect and the interpretation of its political import to military spokespersons, who orchestrate both for the participants in the simulation,
the filmmakers, and the spectators of the finished film. Absent a story from
the perspective of Iraqi civilians that follows soldier trainees once they are
deployed (a far more difficult, hazardous, and expensive project to
undertake), the filmmakers must acknowledge a measure of complicity in
the military campaign and its continuance, in spite of their stated intentions
to the contrary. As of 2012, the public-relations office at Fort Irwin still
showed the film in its entirety to introduce the look, feel, and rationale of
the simulations to groups of tourists who visit the fort to see a live training
exercise.¹³

Conclusion: “Stitch” Lane 2012

Figure 3. Video stills of the staging ground for the Stitch Lane training simulation, 2007
(top row) and 2012 (bottom row). The explosion that initiated the simulation in “Medina
Wasl” in 2007 can be seen in the top right frame; the explosion in this same space,
renamed “Ertebat Shar” by 2012, can be seen on the bottom left. Recorded by the author
with permission from Fort Irwin National Training Center, Barstow, CA, 2007 and 2012.

Like the US economy as a whole, the Fort Irwin simulation body seems to
equate survival in an era of “cultural awareness” with growth. When I
return to the fort for a second visit, I am again taken to this area—Medina
Wasl, now reimagined as an Afghan village called Ertebat Shar—to
witness the performance of “Stitch Lane” from a press box above the now-
paved central street. The village has more than 200 structures and has
become by far the largest on the fort (Figure 3). Concrete barricades line
the street, and buildings feature more elaborately detailed facades and
awnings. Hooded men push carts of plastic toys and melons through the
street, occasionally followed by a figure in a burqa or a goat. A statue stands in the center of the town, a replica of the Princess of Hatra erected in 238 CE in the city of Al Hadr, Iraq, to protect it from Persian invaders. Though the town is now meant to simulate Afghanistan, the statue remains. Because the circumference of the statue’s base and the concrete barricades that surround it prevent anyone from standing too close, TCs and their contracted pyrotechnicians can hide large gunpowder charges there and detonate them safely, a sensory-story element they are loath to give up (Figure 4). A plaque at the base of the statue indicates that it was constructed “in appreciation of the American Soldier, the true protector of democracy” by Strategic Operations, a San Diego based action/softcore-porn film-production company saved from near bankruptcy following 9/11 by entering into the military simulation business.

Supplying Iraqi role players, amputees, and pyrotechnics expertise to the army became a cottage industry in Southern California during the Iraq War years, when Strategic Operations grew around 60% per year (Vizzo, 2011). In lieu of the medical dummies, civilian amputees adorn latex suits that squirt fake blood from their missing limbs and play soldiers who have just lost limbs in IED attacks. Professional army videographers record the training events from three different angles using large cameras with expensive zoom lenses. Their footage is compiled, marked, and integrated for use in after-action reviews at a communications center hidden in the village. Soldiers will watch selections from the footage later
at a newly built, climate-controlled movie theater instead of the interior of a faux mosque. Two contract employees monitor the feeds on a computer screen and cue the sounds of gunfire, the call to prayer, livestock, screams, and so on at the command of the lead TC. They can also release smells into the center of the village, including burning flesh, “dragon’s breath,” coffee, roast beef, jasmine, sewer, apple pie, gunpowder, and vomit (“Technician,” personal communication, 15 February 2012). All the footage that they record is sent wirelessly by way of microwave transmission to a larger communications center and server on the post. Through a radio lavalier I attach to the head TC, I hear stage directions before they unfold in the town as the action begins. He conjures snipers out of myriad windows, summons a suicide bomber to the center of the city street, and directs insurgents to fire from their locked-down positions until they are hit. “Give them a Hollywood ending,” he says to one. The insurgent stands in a window and shoots as many of the American soldiers as he can before the receptors on his laser-tag vest beep to indicate that he has been killed. The duration of the firefight stretches on, nearing forty-five minutes as a host of civilian tourists on an “NTC Box Tour” look on with me from the covered platform. Confined to the space for our own safety, it is as though we are pioneer spectators to a new form of hypermasculine super-CinemaScope filmmaking.

Immersion in action-cinematic simulation, however, is a difficult place from which to explore adversary culture or offer a critique of military activities already visible within the simulation itself. Indeed, media visitors to the NTC became a key variable within the simulation and, over time, an asset. The public-affairs office at the fort anticipated the norms of journalistic practice, the allure of cinematic display, and the influence that their interpretations could have on the stories their guests would tell about simulation training. In the midst of shocking and disorienting simulations of “worst day ever” scenarios, public-relations officers, TCs, and particularly gregarious Iraqi- and Afghan-American actors offered quick, on-message explanations of the need for such scenarios to save lives and the virtues of the military’s new, culturally aware approach to warfare.
Reporters, scholars, and documentary filmmakers visiting the base have reproduced both the phenomenological novelty of cinematic spectacle at close proximity and the military’s explanation for these innovations as emblematic of enlightened, virtuous warmaking, although they are inappropriate indices for the efficacy of “cultural awareness” in theater. This consistently reproduced result—one way in which the military is weaponizing affect in an era of counterinsurgency war—foregrounds a difficult dilemma for documentary practices in the context of increasingly ubiquitous simulation technologies. The ethical documentarist can be anticipated by the simulation and enfolded within its logic. Cinematic performance is here a weapon that short-circuits the oft-assumed power of documentary exposure to bring about social change. Rather, the rules by which ethical documentary practitioners play—faith in following subjects or foregrounding their statements over voice-of-God narration, belief in proximity to subjects as a route to truer representation, discerning organic narratives in subjects live lives to allow their nuanced characters to emerge—are easily subsumed into this simulation body.

Notes

1 For an incisive critique of the cultural turn in military training, including a chapter on “cultural terrain,” see González, 2010.

2 To foreshadow a point to which I return at length later in the article, many of the reports and films I consider here position the cinematic gore and violence in simulation training as tools for hardening troops to the realities of battle, as well as reining in impulses to abuse prisoners or kill civilians. The visage of Iraqi dress, décor, and everyday activity serves in these stories to emphasize the seriousness with which the military is taking culture in the midst of chaos, a connection I will critique.

3 Stahl (2010) identifies the formation of the all-volunteer army, official press conference, embedded reporting scenario, and interactive first-
person presentation of troop experiences as entertainment as parts of a sustained effort since the 1960s to blunt dissent, decouple citizenship from soldiering, and create “large scale press integration into a system of Pentagon public relations” (p. 23). Fort Irwin welcoming reporters to observe training fits into Stahl’s critique of “militainment,” and I touch on his larger argument below (Stahl, 2010, pp. 15-16).

4 Looking back from the perspective of 2016, The U.S. Army Field/Marine Corp Counterinsurgency Field Manual of 2008 articulates scenarios that have in many respects come to fruition in the Middle East–North Africa region, among others. The manual ruminates on the fact of 9/11, the failing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the specter of 2.8 billion young, jobless city dwellers living in poverty throughout the globe by 2015, coping with “overcrowding, pollution, uneven resource distribution, and poor sanitation,” and ostensibly recognizing an allure in radical ideologies that identify the United States as a key culprit. The introduction of the manual predicts a long low-intensity war against an entity like the Islamic State: “America is at war and should expect to remain fully engaged for the next several decades in a persistent conflict against an enemy dedicated to U.S. defeat as a nation and eradication as a society” (US Dept. of the Army & Marine Corps, 2008, pp. viii, 1-2). However, there is little critical reflection here on the military institutions that would benefit financially and politically by reproducing such a state of affairs.

5 For a consideration of the production process of Brady’s photographs and its relationship to the industrialization of war, see Trachtenberg, 1985.

6 Baudrillard (1994) uses the term simulation to describe a social condition in which the copy, instrumentalized toward the ends of profit and empire, precedes the possibility of a preexisting original. Sanitized of archaic, ritualistic, and mystical qualities, these copies simply reproduce a normative code, stretching lifeless in all directions and annihilating meaningful cultural and political differences over time. He argues that the mechanically reproducible photographic images that constitute movies,
television, and print advertising, especially since the 1960s, function to amplify desires for the real while simultaneously cutting off possibilities for engaging with a “profound reality” (p. 6). Baudrillard’s tendency to write about bodily experience as a theoretical rather than a lived phenomenon in the era of the image, however, has left him open to feminist critiques like those of Sobchack (1992, 2004), who theorizes materiality as enmeshed in idiosyncratic phenomenological experiences of cinema and other everyday encounters rather than absent from them.

7 I relied extensively on the NewsBank: Access World News database for news stories about simulation training, which I accessed in July 2011 and downloaded and analyzed in intervening years.

8 When I visited the fort in 2007, these trainers were called “operational controllers.” In 2012, the army referred to them as “tactical controllers.” To avoid confusion in this chapter, I refer to them throughout as tactical controllers, but this is not necessarily the case in other works about the fort created before 2011.

9 The rhetorical emphasis on realism is ubiquitous in my interviews, a point to which I return in my analysis below.

10 The case of photojournalist Zoriah Miller, who published images of marines killed in a suicide bombing in 2008, highlights the complexities entailed in press access, representation of war, and embedded reporting. Spokespersons for military units have embraced embedded reporters’ positive stories about the everyday lives of soldiers. However, they claim that published photographs of Americans killed in action provide their enemies with intelligence about the effectiveness of their attacks, violate principles of informed consent, and offend soldiers’ families. Miller argues, conversely, that the images are vital to communicate to American readers about the physical and emotional cost of the war. The fact that his photographs shocked viewers when suicide bombings happen every day, he concluded, “says that whatever [the military is] doing to limit this type of
photo getting out, it is working.” Since the publication of the photographs, no military unit has permitted Miller to embed. As war casualties increased, fewer US units allowed embedded journalists to accompany them to battle sites (Kamber & Arango, 2008).

11 Ien Ang’s seminal reception study Watching Dallas (1985), for instance, discusses the phenomenon of “psychological realism” in relation to European fans’ responses to the American television soap opera Dallas. Audience members identified with the dilemmas of the show’s protagonists even though they were aware that the degree of wealth and drama it portrayed were not representative of American society on the whole.

12 The $12 million center, which closed in July 2010, offered visitors 80 gaming stations, helicopter and Humvee simulators, and a space for managing enlistments. Located between an arcade and a skate park, the center became a flashpoint for protesters troubled by the army’s endorsement of graphic violence in first-person shooter games targeted at children. See Cousineau, 2011, pp. 518-20.

13 A public-affairs officer communicated this information to me during my visit to the fort in 2012. Every month, the army leads several “Box Tours” for members of the public to see the “worst day ever” a soldier might encounter in Afghanistan. The “show” very much resembles a Hollywood war movie, as I suggest in the conclusion of this article.

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**Bio**

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