theories and methodologies

# Martial Art

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*A large crowd stood around, enjoying the dancing magic,*
*as in the middle two acrobats led on the dance,*
*springing, and whirling, and tumbling.*

—Homer, *The Iliad*

WESTERN LITERATURE'S MOST MAGNIFICENT OBJECT STAGES AN INTIMACY BETWEEN STRUGGLE AND TRANQUILLITY. A GIFT TO NO SOLDIER, but to his mother, requiting her ancient kindness, the shield of Achilles proffers a drama of war and of peace. The city of peace vibrates with the sound of flute and lyre, a wedding celebration, deliberations at assembly; the city of war quivers with well-armored soldiers, women and children perched atop the walls, beyond the walls an ambush laid along the river just where flocks of cattle come to drink (*Il.* 18.478–608). Homer teaches this truth about the object world: in the moment of their manufacture, weapons already manifest both prosperity and pain, technology and ceremony. Sweating, and longing, and grieving; springing, and whirling, and tumbling. The worlds inscribed on the shield figure those worlds out of which weaponry as such is forged. Could some new ekphrastic pedagogy disclose such worlds in the Hummer, the Abrams tank, the M-16, the B-52—revealing the quotidian histories they both congeal and obscure? If not, must we settle for Auden's lament, the mother pained now by what, for modernity, the god has wrought: "there on the shining shield / His hands had set no dancing-floor / But a weed-choked field" (294 ["The Shield of Achilles"]). Is the modern artifact so bereft of people?

It is not poetry but the new field of science studies that now singularly displays the human drama in the nonhuman, the animation of the artifactual, divulging hybrids, networks, and assemblages where, at the very least, the subject/object binary no longer makes sense and the object world comes to life, like the shield, vivified by the human aspiration, frustration, and aggression it also contains (Latour, *Pandora's Hope* 305). Bruno Latour has nonetheless argued that "sociologists have a lot to learn from artists" when it comes to

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recasting "solid objects" into "the fluid states where their connections with humans may make sense" (Latour, *Reassembling* 82). In his own case studies, which shed light on that "blind spot in which society and matter exchange properties," weaponry proves a rich resource (*Pandora's Hope* 190). His narration of Frédéric Joliot's work on fission (1939–40) shows how the history of science can hardly be sequestered from other histories, how national independence and nuclear chain reaction came to look like one and the same achievement, how "politics, law, economics, institutions, and passions" become utterly integrated with "ideas, principles, [and] knowledge procedures" (*Pandora's Hope* 84). The history of fission in France is a history of the "imbroglio of things and people": things such as uranium oxide and heavy water, people such as industrialists, scientists, and ministers of war (87). And as for the American question of whether guns or people kill people, Latour insists that the question as posed makes no sense: neither gun nor person is what the question takes each to be. "You are another subject because you hold the gun; the gun is another object because it has entered into a relationship with you" (179). People and things cannot be disaggregated; agency must be distributed among multiple actants: "B-52s do not fly, the U.S. Air Force flies" (182). The Air Force—its pilots and procedures, its ambitions, ranks, and regulations—already inheres in the object.

It may thus also be, as Latour argues, that you can't "study a military man" for more than fifteen minutes "before finding oneself in the laboratory" (111). And yet military men have struggled to sustain their autonomy, to render war as a conflict of impassioned persons, not lifeless things. They have struggled to resist any version of Herman Melville's "Utilitarian View of the Monitor's Fight," wherein, despite the recognition that war will persist, "warriors / Are now but operatives" (62). As late as 1926, Field Marshall Douglas Haig asserted that "aeroplanes and tanks" would always remain mere "accessories to the man on the horse"—the horse here unacknowledged as prosthetic technology (qtd. in Ellis 17).

Nonetheless, the time may have come when military men (among others) are content to imagine war fought on their behalf by machines, to have faith that human conflict can be conducted by nonhumans, and to delight in the aesthetic of "no American casualties" while ignoring the variously ungrievable loss of non-American life.[1] Amid the familiar declarations about the digital dematerialization of the world, there appears the hope that warfare might be conducted by matériel alone. The unmanned combat air vehicle (UCAV) has now been programmed not just to be commanded remotely but also—in the Boeing X-45, say, or the X-47 Pegasus—to fight autonomously, detecting and destroying enemy targets. As one Boeing news release put it in 2005, "Imagine having a stealthy military aircraft . . . ready to strike and destroy surprise threats immediately without any risk to American pilots." Field experiments showed such imagination realized: "Once alerted to the first threat, the X-45As *autonomously* determined which vehicle held the optimum position, weapons and fuel load to properly attack the target" ("Boeing X-45As"; my emphasis).

Just when a certain material turn across a host of disciplines (anthropology, art history, the history of science, literary studies, media studies, science studies) has finally drawn our attention to the import of the object world, some other reifying will seeks to reorganize war's object relations as the relation among objects. United States forces in Iraq now include twelve thousand robotic units; United States Predator drones have already attacked more than thirty al-Qaeda targets in Pakistan, with many more to come. As P. W. Singer makes clear in *Wired for War*, our new century will come to witness war unmanned. If, then, the United States military seems to be marching into the world of science fiction, this is not least because science fiction, over and over

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again, has informed the military imagination: the Navy's Professional Reading Program includes science fiction, as do syllabi at the Marine Corps University; the Naval Academy has an endowed Robert A. Heinlein Chair of Aerospace Engineering (150–69). (Why does *this* interdisciplinarity never seem to show up on the interdisciplinarity radar screen?) My point here is not to despair over some obscure and unwilled complicity between military and academic attention to objects but to pause in the awareness that, no matter how enfolded human and nonhuman may always be, we are now poised to recognize how the history of war is a history of thinking and rethinking the relation between persons and things. In *The Art of War*, only after prescribing drills in running and wrestling does Machiavelli admit that all youths should accustom themselves to "the arquebus, a new instrument" (45).

The history of a subsequent new instrument, the machine gun, provides a story of the contest between things and persons—a story where man resists being supplanted by machine, and a story whose first chapters read like an updated version of Machiavelli's argument that modern artillery is no substitute for ancient virtue (*Discourses* 163–65). For the machine gun, dislodging soldiers from any simple man-to-man structure, represented the "very antithesis" of the "desperate faith in individual endeavor and courage," as John Ellis has put it (175). Although metallurgy and mass production reached a stage where the machine gun was fully practicable on the battlefield in the 1860s, it was a "military non-starter" in England, Europe, and the United States (15); not even Colt could successfully market the inventions of Gattling, Bessemer, and Browning. That the nineteenth century did witness the deployment of the machine gun for imperial security in Africa, India, and Tibet lends credence to Walter Benjamin's claim that "imperialist war is an uprising of technology" (269). It was also used to secure the success of the American march up San Juan Hill: Lieutenant J. H. Parker had Gattling guns installed to support the soldiers during the Battle of Santiago, and he spent the next year publishing encomiums to the weapon. But not without reasserting what is effectively a Machiaevellian point. "The machine gun man must be hot-blooded and dashing," Parker writes. "He must have all the nerve and *élan* of the best light cavalry, all the resisting power of stolid and immovable infantry" (qtd. in Ellis 73). He must not, himself, be reified as a mere operative. But ancient virtue infamously succumbed to mere operation at the western front of World War I, where the machine gun paralyzed each army, sweeping away any infantry advance while generals commanded the charge of soldiers armed with rifle and bayonet, courage and will, and resignation. Only the invention of the tank could reinvent the army's mobility; only a new machine could release will and passion from their machinic arrest.

In military history, then, the story of the machine gun shows how authority (authorities) can struggle to maintain the hierarchy of person and thing. That struggle appears in many other histories as well—dramatically so, for example, when psychoanalysis (a diagnostic technology coinciding with other new technologies) relocates war in the drama of the psyche. Jacqueline Rose has shown how Melanie Klein's work—her capacity to identify and conceptualize aggression and a fundamental negativity—helps explain war, and the persistence of war, as the externalization of a destructive drive (ch. 5). Klein's treatment of war also illustrates how the empirical object world can be analytically obscured. Throughout her *Narrative of a Child Analysis*, which recounts her four-month treatment of a precocious and hypersensitive boy of ten in 1941 (Apr.–Aug.), the boy, Richard, keeps talking about the war and about Hitler; about England, France, and Russia; about planes, bombs, and U-boats. Klein, an Austrian Jew who has left Berlin to work in London and left London to escape

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danger there, is treating a boy who, with his German mother, was evacuated from his London home. But even though Klein writes that Richard "followed the news closely and took a great interest in the war situation" (16), the objects of war, in the analytic imagination, serve only an allegorical function. Jointly turning their attention to a drawing of his, she explains that "in the drawing the ack-ack gun had destroyed the German bomber, which represented the bad part of himself which had stolen Daddy's genital (the gun) and attacked Daddy with it" (74). Such explanation disables any insight into the extrafamilial psychodynamics that are likely at play: above all, the use of the family to process anxieties about the war. How can we imagine that war allegorizes the family without ever imagining how the family allegorizes the war? More to the point of my inquiry here, why should the imbroglio of things and people become a drama of people alone? Why must the inanimate object world—weaponry—be domesticated into the part-objects of the human body?

Rose's important understanding of how war externalizes the dynamics of the psyche complicates any account of war as an expression of politics. So does the anti-oedipal understanding of war as the materialization of the war machine, which Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari imagine as an idea "absolute" and "unconditioned" and which, more fundamental than war itself (taking the place, say, of fundamental aggression), has a variable relation to war (421–22). This abstract and heterogeneous disequilibrium, dynamic and autopoietic, is appropriated by the state, which "subordinates it to its 'political' *aims*, and gives it war as its direct *object*" (420). As with all the machines in the anti-oedipal project, this "machinic essence" is not an object; nonetheless, it is a figure drawn from the object world precisely because it must be understood as "assert[ing] itself as a non-human for-itself" (Guattari 38, 54). That origin of war in the unhuman finds its specular completion in an image of war's unhuman end, Paul Virilio's understanding of "pure war," the endless war of deterrence, of "infinite preparation": the "nuclear monarchy" insisting that "there will be no more man, there will only be weapons," that soldiers will "[disappear] in the technology and automation of the war-machine" (Virilio and Lotringer 104, 72, 33). War works out a posthumanism of its own.

This sense that war manifests something other than war and something other than the will of the state, that it channels some psychic aggression or some aboriginal disequilibrium, informs Terrence Malick's *The Thin Red Line* (1998), which also effects an ontological democracy, a sphere not of actors but of actants (human and nonhuman) that is a spectacle excised from history. The conflict at Guadalcanal (World War II) has been decontexualized and existentialized, like Stephen Crane's Battle of Chancellorsville, but with no consistent focalization, no hero or antihero, Malick having radically fragmented and dispersed the footage that would have produced a protagonist. The collagist "narrative" conveys the original novel's sense of the "terror both of unimportance . . . and powerlessness" and its evocation of "millions of men, doing the same on thousands of hilltops across the world" (Jones 41, 223). But there is no sense of "the modern State in action" (223) and no sense that war is a condition with origin or end. In the hypertrophy of the visual and aural, war becomes a set of relations among human bodies, artifacts, and earth—earth not just understood as "distances, great and small; danger and security; open ground and narrow passes; the chances of life and death" (Sun Tzu 1) but also rendered as an animate and suffering body, which is why the film can be described as "a meditation on the relationship of man to nature" (Whalen 163).

And yet the film, by dehistoricizing its action in and for 1998, has the effect of dramatizing the ongoing, postatomic impurity of war, the persistence of a certain kind of

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combat, which Virilio himself has come to recognize. "Twenty-five years" after the 1983 publication of *Pure War*, he is "forced to admit that things have changed" (Virilio and Lotringer 7). That change—the fact that nuclear monarchy does not eliminate men and women from the task of conducting war at close range—presents a particular problem for the United States. It is why Giovanni Arrighi can regard the conflict in Iraq as "the terminal crisis of US hegemony" (189). Without any participation from another superpower, the war poses a "far more serious problem" than the war in Vietnam because it demonstrates that thirty years of professionalizing the military and perfecting new technology do not add up to the achievement of efficient potency. Arrighi quotes Andrew Bacevich: "What's the point of using this great army if the result is Fallujah, Najaf, and Karbala?" (184). Such a question has encouraged the deployment of a different army, an army of drones, some no bigger than bats.

Even as the art of war has been captivated by these new things that might sideline persons from the combat zone, art itself has been captivated by reworking traditional arms to bring persons and things into a new proximity. This martial art is most visible as a refabricating strategy that, instead of dramatizing the life in weapons (the life elaborately animating Achilles's shield), stages the presence of weaponry in the city of peace, reminding us of how our daily lives are sustained by violence, while dislodging guns and ammunition from their roles as actants in a violent narrative. Al Farrow has sculpted a series, *Reliquaries*, welded from guns and bullets, meant to dramatize both the availability of weapons and the violence of three religions: Christianity, Judaism, Islam. His recent work—repeatedly lifting the veil from the nexus of ritual and technology, celebration and devastation—includes an elaborate scale model of a gothic cathedral, *The Spine and Tooth of Santo Guerro* (2007). In 2003 Chris Holden used some of the most notoriously indiscriminate munitions to produce his series *Cluster Bomblets, Iraq*, each bomblet inscribed with a quotation (e.g., "'TAKE GREAT PRIDE . . . YOU'VE DONE IT WELL'—RUMSFELD, with U.S. Troops, BAGHDAD, 30.4.2003"). In the same year Sasha Constable cofounded the Peace Art Project Cambodia, working with her students to transform the weaponry discarded by the Cambodia government (more than 100,000 guns) into material for making chairs, candlesticks, and glass-top tables. The point is to insist on a new mode of encountering equipment, dislodged from one regime of usefulness and relocated in another. Sandra Bromley and Wallis Kendal built *The Gun Sculpture* in 2000, a 3.5-by-2.5-by-3-meter, five-ton assemblage of deactivated guns and ammunition, at once marking the scale of firearms production (currently unable to keep up with demand in the US) and making arms available, outside the circuits of exchange and use, for contemplation. Accompanied by videos, *The Gun Sculpture* was exhibited at Expo 2000 (Hanover), at the Nobel Peace Prize celebration in Seoul (2000), and at the United Nations headquarters (2001), among other sites. In 1998, John Ricker founded Guns into Art (GITA), a campaign for beating swords into ploughshares, promoting local efforts to have the community contribute small arms that, melted down, are transformed into park benches, bicycle racks, and altars for homicide victims (Berton; see www.meltguns.com).

And there is Klara Sax, who in a fictional 1992, at the age of seventy-two, has reached the final stages of her massive desert installation of B-52 bombers. From atop a sandstone ledge one can see the "broad formation across the bleached bottom of the world": "two hundred and thirty planes, swept-winged, fanned like bottom creatures, some painted in part, some nearly completed, many not yet touched by the paint machines" (DeLillo 83). In a work meant to be seen as "a single mass, not a collection of objects" (83), Sax achieves the scale of the great earthwork projects, something on

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the order of the two vast trenches that Michael Heizer cut into the Nevada desert, *Double Negative* (1969–70), or his *City* (begun in 1972, scheduled for completion in 2010). But this woman, rather than reenact the heroism of transforming the earth, long ago abandoned painting to devote herself, like Louise Nevelson, to assemblage, working with bits and pieces—scraps—and then "saving" the artifacts of the cold war "from the cutter's torch" and asking, it seems, whether art can ever achieve the dimensions of war. "I am painting airplanes that are a hundred and sixty feet long with wingspans even longer and total weight operating on full tanks maybe half a million pounds." In her 1992 interview she says, "This is an art project, not a peace project. This is a landscape painting in which we use the landscape itself. The Desert is central to this piece. It's the surround. It's the framing device" (70). She also says, "Power meant something thirty, forty years ago. It was stable, it was focused, it was a tangible thing. . . . You could measure things" (76). Hers is not a peace project but a materialist project: the effort to preserve power in material form, to forestall its aesthetics of disappearance.

*Martial art* names the effort to calibrate the war machine differently. It does not aestheticize war in Marinetti's mode: "War is beautiful because it creates new architectures, like those of armored tanks, geometric squadrons of aircraft, spirals of smoke from burning villages" (qtd. in Benjamin 269). Nor does it subscribe to the conviction that "technology has become the last art" (Virilio and Lotringer 191). But it does show that, however obviously destructive, war is singularly productive: it produces economic recovery; it produces medical and technological discovery; it produces new objects in the world—not just B-52s and bombs and drones but also interstate highways and the Internet. Martial art points to the productivity of war by being, itself, reproductive.

Don DeLillo has become both critic and poet of the late-twentieth-century American object world: its buildings and dumps, its baseballs and radios, its station wagons, computer screens, and toxins. *Underworld* (1997) can be read as a late-twentieth-century *War and Peace*, in which the difference between war and peace is difficult to parse, or where, as Virilio put it, peace has effectively become war, "the infinite preparation which exhausts and will eventually eliminate societies" (Virilio and Lotringer 149). The man with whom Klara Sax once had a brief yet intense affair, Nick Shay, has become a waste management executive, overseeing an organization of "waste handlers, waste traders, cosmologists of waste" and making sure that other residues of the cold war remain out of sight, "entomb[ing] contaminated waste with a sense of reverence and dread" (88). For Sax is not exactly right, of course, to imagine power in the cold war era as a measurable, tangible, stable thing. The power of radiation can go unnoticed; scientific technology can remain out of sight. Nick's chess-obsessed brother, Matt, grows up to work on classified projects in remote locations; he is a "bombhead" living life in the Pocket (403), "somewhere under the gypsum hills of New Mexico" (401), a "self-enclosed and self-referring" region that is "inaccessible to others" (412). Indeed, the work is inaccessible even to the workers. "They didn't know how their arrays of numbers and symbols might enter nature. It could conceivably happen in a flash" (408). For Matt, this updated alienation proves too much to bear: "It's mainly that I feel I'm part of something unreal. . . . It's a dream someone's dreaming that has me in it" (458). Not the dream work of someone so much as the dream work of war itself.

Working on the desert, not beneath it, Sax has developed a project that drafts a new nomadology, attracting "teachers on leave and nomads and runaways . . . burnt-out hackers looking for the unwired world" (65). It may well be the case that subject and object, human and nonhuman, are inextri-

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cable, and that human life already resides in the weapon, be it shield or B-52 or drone. But Sax conjures up a very different imbroglio of persons and things: "See, we're painting, hand-painting in some cases, putting our puny hands to great weapon systems . . . we're trying to unrepeat, to find an element of felt life, and maybe there's sort of a survival instinct here, a graffiti instinct—to trespass and declare ourselves, show who we are" (77). Willing to admit that an "art movement can be a war machine" (422), Deleuze and Guattari never sensed how such a movement might begin with objects of war for which war is no longer the object—how the art of war might be refunctioned as art's own war to provoke a different state of unrest.

## Note

1. On the ungrievable, see Butler.

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