GLOBALIZATION/REGIONALISM

VIRTUAL GEOGRAPHY: FOUR SCENES FROM THE GLOBAL MEDIA SPECTACLE

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1. A Geography of Vectors

We live every day in a familiar terrain: the place where we sleep, the place where we work, the place where we hang out when not working or sleeping. From these places we acquire a geography of experience.

We live every day also in another terrain, equally familar: the terrain created by the television, the telephone, the telecomunications networks crisscrossing the globe. These 'vectors' produce in us a new kind of experience, the experience of telesthesia — of perception at a distance. This is our virtual geography — the experience of which doubles, troubles, and generally permeates our experience of the space we experience firsthand.

This virtual geography is no more or less 'real' It is a different kind of perception, of things not bounded by rules of proximity of 'being there'. If virtual reality is about technologies that increase the bandwidth of our sensory experience of mediated and constructed images, then virtual geography is the dialectically opposite pole of the process (Rheingold). It is about the expanded terrain from which experience may be instantly drawn.

Rather than look at the 'normal' state of media flows from around the world, in this essay, as in my book *Virtual Geography*, I look at exceptional moments in the emerging world of globalized media experience. This is an essay composed of speculations upon four scenes from weird global media events. 'Event' in the sense of singular irruptions into the regular flow of media. Global in that there is some linkage between the sites at which they appear to happen and the sites where we remote-sense them. Some kind of feedback across national and cultural spaces takes place. They are 'weird' in that something about them seems to break out of our conventional mappings of the relationship beeen political, economic, or cultural events and their representation in the media.

If, as Nietzsche suggests, the more abstract a process one wants to describe, the 'more you must seduce the sense to it', then we might best explore virtual geography by beginning with the most tangible thing it has to offer — the televisual image (99).

2. A Pornography of Gestures

Dateline: Baghdad, Thursday, August 23th, 1990. Iraqi television shows President Saddam Hussein sitting in a television studio surrounded by fifteen British citizens. These people, now

hostages, were residents of Iraq and Kuwait when Iraq invaded its Gulf neighbour. Saddam Hussein appears in a suit and tie with a little white handkerchief neatly folded in his left breast pocket. The Iraqis allow the foreigners to talk to their families while the rest of the world watches on. They listen as Saddam explains that the Western media have misrepresented the situation. 'In the past few days', he says, 'I have come across articles published in the Western papers urging President Bush to strike Iraq and actually use force against Iraq despite your presence here'. Putting his hand gently on the head of seven year old Stuart Lockwood, he remarked, 'when he and his friends, and all those present here, have played their role in preventing war, then you will all be heroes of peace'. (Hiro 154)

While the broadcast appeared on Iraqi television, the program seemed entirely aimed at a Western audience. Western media picked it up quickly and broadcast it around the world the next day. It drew instant and predictable official and media responses. The British Foreign Secretary Douglas Hurd called it the 'most sickening thing I have seen for some time'. The American State Department called this event 'shameful theatricals'. A 'repulsive charade' said the British Foreign Office ('Child Hostages Shown On TV' and 'The Smile on the Face of the Tiger').

More than moral outrage at the hostage taking fuelled this response. Saddam Hussein unwittingly presented us with a repetition of an ancient and fearful superstition about Arabs, and what Slavoj Zizek calls the threat to our sense of national enjoyment. 'We always impute to the 'other' an excessive enjoyment: s/he wants to steal our enjoyment (by ruining our way of life) and/or has access to some secret, perverse enjoyment'(53-54). That most sacred libation of everyday enjoyment was at stake here: oil.

Until now, Saddam Hussein had in this scheme of things been 'our' Arab, a 'moderate', not an 'extremist'. As such he could be accommodated (Heikal 160, 167). But, when the Western television news and the front pages of the newspapers carried the close-up of Saddam Hussein's hand stroking the boy Lockwood's head, he changed characters in the 'Orientalist' vision the West has of the Middle East. Orientalism is a legacy of the colonial days, a collection of stories in which, as Edward Said says, it was axiomatic that the 'attributes of being Oriental overrode any countervailing instance' (*Orientalism* 231).

Saddam Hussein touching Lockwood forced Western viewers to place the gesture in a frame of cultural reference. He did not appear to be a Muslim 'fundamentalist', a denier of pleasure. In the absence of any other cultural memory of *images* of the Middle East, the focus on the gesture of touching encouraged the viewer to read it in terms of the other legacy of Orientalist story. His hand on that boy's head connects not to the prohibition on enjoyment enjoined by the cartoon fundamentalists of journalistic cliche, but its opposite. There is another string of stories of excessive enjoyment, of 'harems, princesses, princes, slaves, veils, dancing girls and boys' (*Orientalism* 190). Not least of which, the myth of the Arab pederast (Goldberg).

When Saddam Hussein opened a vector of communication to the West he obviously did not have these Orientalist fantasies and fears in mind. They are only absurd Western fantasies, after all. Akbar Ahmed, a Moslem scholar at Cambridge, reads the image in terms of how he thinks the dictator's own people would respond. 'In his culture an elder, or figure of authority, often displays affection to children by patting the child or tousling the hair. It is socially approved and appreciated' (238). The trouble starts when one opens a vector between cultures which are not usually in communication with each other and tries to tap the affective responses of peoples one knows only through other images, transmitted along other media vectors. The audience has to decide whether to read the image in terms of 'our' frame of reference, or in the frame of what we know about the other. What 'we' know about the other of the Middle East is mostly fantasy: images of our unspoken fears and desires, projected onto a few scraps of landscape and decor, costume and legend collected by long dead travellers of the imagination.

The problem compounds when an Arab dictator speaks to those Western populations brought up on Orientalist understandings of the Middle East of Western manufacture. As Said

says, 'The entire premise was colonial: that a small Third World dictatorship, nurtured and supported by the West, did not have the right to challenge America, which was white and superior' (*Culture and Imperialism* 359). It is not just that the other place is a refuge for our lost desires and fears. Built in to the spatial mapping is an assumption of the marginality of the Middle East, a zone beyond the bound of the only moral and reasonable law — 'ours'. This presumption is not as frankly spoken today as it was in the old world's colonial heyday. The vector creates enough contact between places to create a sort of narrative prudence. Underneath, the assumptions are much the same.

On that cold August night in 1990, there was already a strange familiarity about it all. With the unfolding of the hostage-crisis the Gulf war as an *event* can be said to begin. It is a difficult thing deciding the start and end of a media event. It is even more difficult still distinguishing the features of events that are purely media-effect from those that might come to have more lasting significance in quite other forms of discourse — in history, in diplomacy, in political struggles, in popular memory.

The most characteristic feature of media events is that they expose us to our own ignorance of the world. Events, willy nilly, thrust unexpected sense upon us from a new viewpoint. Faced with an event like the Gulf war, one can say, with Montaigne, 'I am free to give myself up to doubt and uncertainty, and to my predominant quality which is ignorance' (131). Of course, after the event disappears, it may seem to all make sense again. The hole ripped through the narrative fabrics and media swaddling will be gently patched up again. That is why it is important to recall exactly how it felt when Saddam Hussein appeared on TV with his 'guests'.

The global media vector does not connect us with just anywhere. It connects us most frequently, rapidly and economically with those parts of the world which are well integrated into the major hubs of the vector. The Gulf region has a long history of integration into the international media vector. At the turn of the century, Lord Curzon described British interests in the Persian Gulf as 'commercial, political, strategical and telegraphic' (Qtd in Mowlana 36). Some of the world's first international telegraph lines passed through there. British communications with India flowed along this route. With the recognition of the strategic value of oil for propelling the mechanised vectors of war from 1914 on, the region became important in its own right. The vector of communication developed in step with colonial administration and corporate trade until the rise of anti-colonial movements and the establishment of independent states. Proximity to a hub in the vector field is the first factor in the formation of a media event on the horizon of virtual geography. Its news value is the second.

There is yet a third factor, which has more to do with the swift and terse responses to Saddam Hussein's hostage talk show from Western diplomatic and political authorities. The latter want not only to impress upon their home audiences their energetic response to the situation, they want to communicate this to a world audience, using the international news vectors. This is because Lockwood's captivity is a small-scale event within a larger one. Iraq's invasion of Kuwait and any response to it affects not only the region, but a whole world of trade, investment, migration and strategic interest. Since the vectors of interest implicated reach out from Kuwait into the globe, powerful actors wishing to influence subsequent events must use the communication vector to publicise its public views and moves worldwide. This is why such a tiny gesture as patting a boy on the head resonates darkly in diverse cultural frameworks, of which I have mentioned only one. It draws responses also aimed along the global vectors of opinion and influence. It was a signal moment in the story of this weird global media event.

On the plane of virtual geography, an American aircraft carrier and a boy's head are exactly the same size. They are both the width of the screen. Things do not have scale here, although they do have duration, frequency, and can occupy greater or lesser moments in narrative time. This is not the least odd aspect of the ontology of what we experience as virtual geography. The media vent, as I define it in this essay and in *Virtual Geography*, is

something that unfolds within the *movement* of images along media vectors. These media vectors connect the site at which a crisis appears with the sites of image management and interpretation. Vectors then disseminate the flows of images processed at those managerial sites to the terminal sites of the process, so they fall from the sky into our lives. In this instance the vector connects a bewildering array of places: Baghdad, Riyadh, Washington, London, Paris, New York. The terminal site of the vector is the terminal in almost every home the Western world over — the television.

A word on this word vector. I've lifted it from the writings of Paul Virilio.[1] It is a term from geometry meaning a line of fixed length and direction but having no fixed position. Here it means any trajectory along which bodies, information or warheads can potentially pass. The satellite technology used to beam images from Iraq to America and on to London can be thought of as a vector. Media vectors have fixed properties, like the length of a line in the geometric concept of vector. Yet that vector has no necessary position: it can link almost any points together.

This is the paradox of the media vector: The technical properties are hard and fast and fixed, but it can connect enormously vast and vaguely defined spaces together and move images, and sounds, words and furies between them. While the matrix of media vectors grows ever faster, ever denser, cheaper and stronger, in sum more abstract, it does not do so evenly. Powers commerical, political, strategical shape the virtual geography that telesthesia shows to us, nighly on TV and daily in the papers. We no longer have roots, we have aerials; we no longer have origins, we have terminals.

3. A Videography of Sites

Dateline: East Berlin, 12th November 1989: East German workers tear down a section of the Berlin wall with heavy cranes, opening a crack in the wall at the centre of old Berlin, the Potzdamerplatz. Thousands of East Berliners poured through the gap, across the site of the old Potzdamerplatz, once a busy and historic centre of the city. West German authorities in Berlin hand out maps and shopping money to the Easterners. The Mayor of East Berlin, Erhard Krack and his West Berlin counterpart, Walter Momper push through the crowd on the Potsdamerplatz to shake each others' hand. Meanwhile many thousands climb the wall and party; champagne and music in the air.

The media quickly capitalised on this event. On the American television news program NBC Today, cold war veteran Arthur M. Schlesinger jr announced that the cold war was 'over'. Mikhail Gorbachev — remember him? — made a statement in Moscow: 'Not long ago we were at the crossroads — where was the world going? Towards further confrontation, the aggravation of ideological hostility, the whipping up of military threats; or towards co-operation, mutual understanding and the search for agreement? The choice has more or less taken place' (*New York Times*).

The curious thing here is the grammatical construction: Schlesinger did not say, 'we ended the cold war' but 'the cold war is over'. Gorbachev did not say 'we made our choice' but 'the choice has taken place'. Lines phrased in the passive voice. If the cold war has indeed ended, it had nothing to do with the rational decisions or dialogue between the parties. Events do not appear as the outcome of particular or definable leadership actions. The historical end has simply 'taken place'. The place history took was a stretch of wall running from Checkpoint Charlie to the Brandenburg gate in Berlin, via what used to be Potzdamerplatz. It ran, in other words, from the symbolic arch famous from the history books as the one Napoleon marched through victoriously, to a place made famous from spy movies of the cold war years as the site for those tense exchanges of agents with the enemy (Balfour; *Virtual Geography* 75-90). But it was not so much 'history' that took this place, but the 'angel of history' — the institutional television camera, and the particular storyline it makes take place — the event. The comsat angel forms an image out of the rubble blasted from the past into the present. It frames an image of the crash of moments.[2]

NBC news interviewed the Mayor of West Berlin. It turned out, conveniently enough,

that he spoke excellent English. His head and shoulders appeared on the screen with the wall in the background, and the caption underneath said simply: 'Berlin'. On closer inspection, it turned out that the Mayor wasn't actually standing in front of the wall at all, as pictured. NBC chromakeyed his image together with live footage of the wall, and mixed sound recorded at the wall with his answers to the off-camera reporter's questions. The Mayor was in a studio somewhere, presumably in West Berlin, while the image behind him showed the wall from the East side. The lighting of the Mayor's talking head was designed to match that of the wall, but did not succeed entirely in mimicking that singular second band daylight of Northern Europe.

The caption 'Berlin', placed underneath by NBC was not actually referring to the physical space of Berlin itself. It referred to an electronic space constructed in the studio, which mixed images made on the East and the West sides of the wall into a quite particular virtual geography. There was no great 'distortion' of the facts of the situation here. If anything, this simulated non-fact seemed a more appropriate rendering of the situation than a more straightforwardly representational image would have been. This was simply a matter of contriving the Mayor and the wall together to form an appropriate image in the easiest way possible. In the virtual geography composed by NBC Today, the wall had already come down, and images from both sides could be combined by the vision-mixer. NBC rearranged the furniture of the site to suit itself. The wall itself may still be standing, but it is no barrier to certain vectors and flows of information, if indeed it ever effectively was.

In its role as global vision-mixer, the various media were in a bit of a state as to which visions to mix. Three narrative lines dominated Western commentary on this event as it happened. The first of these three narrative movements of event-containment is 'the cold war' — a favourite with the American vector-brokers, and scintillatingly televisual. The good guys were the West and the bad guys were the Communists — and they had just collapsed as an antagonistic pole of power. Archival footage showed the wall going up...and coming down. The juxtaposition of some ghostly black and white stock footage of Hitler, Stalin, Roosevelt and of their tank divisions gave this cold war story the grain of media history. If the wall coming down was not the result of a discernible leadership action, at least the wall going up looked like it was.

The cold war narrative frame was the easiest to pronounce upon but the most difficult to grasp in any meaningful way. While the television coverage did not trouble itself with the details of this shift in the balance of power, it did inevitably pose a difficulty for itself in adopting a triumphalist stance. If the Eastern other has collapsed, how does the West define itself and the necessity of its massive armed response to the threat of the Eastern other? It took another catastrophe — the gulf war event — to untangle some of the narrative debris of the post-cold war power game. As Zygmunt Bauman argues, the collapse of the Eastern 'other' left the space of otherness to the West open (42). The combined power of military and media vectors showed in the gulf war that the other can become any state, and force, anywhere in the globe: Panama, Granada, Libya, Lebanon, Iraq, Somalia, Haiti. Stay tuned to CNN for ensuing episodes...[3]

Clearly, television cannot be credited all on its own with fomenting a social revolution. Yet its influence may be a clue to the peculiar place of the media vector in what otherwise looks like a classically popular and public uprising: 'It is not only sociologists who note that in the German Democratic Republic by about 6PM, even in city centres, the streets and squares have emptied...After work has ended, the media really come into their own' (Hanke 175-193).

In a relation with the other, everything depends on distance, not difference. Now that the vector keeps closing the distance, bringing whole worlds into view with the eye-blink of an edit on the evening news, maintaining the proper distance becomes a considerably more difficult task. The vector is like an asymptote, approaching closer and closer to the base-line it can never touch. Yet this infinitely closer yet still achingly untouchable relation to the other disturbs all those senses of being in the world that orient us, individually and collectively, to

others.

Imaginary projections of an other, held at an appropriate remove, are always a necessary step in determining who we 'really' are. This is what Peter Schneider meant when he argued that the wall was the only thing keeping the Germanys together. Each could fix an identity relative to the other because the barrier between them was a fixed point in a floating world, a rare point of stability, and hence something solid to dream of overcoming. The relationship of East to West had a firm boundary, and this could form a fixed, if mostly absent point of reference for the vector that passed over it.

When all that is solid melts into airwaves, people are forced to face, with delirious sense their real relations, and bring them into line with unconscious desires. False consciousness must be realised, actualised, lived — to be overcome. Irony is the wetnurse of history.

4. A Choreography of Flows

Dateline: Tiananmen Square, Beijing, 20th May, 1989. Things are at present tense. Martial law has been declared, yet the demonstrations in the heart of Beijing continue. This is more than a demonstration by workers and students, it is a carnival. For a few intense, electric seconds, Beijing has become the only city on earth, oscillating in a thrall of political furies. A teeming slo-mo dance, relayed via satellite around the globe. Beijing is 'on' and the whole world is watching. I write of these things in the present tense, for now that the spectacle of the Beijing democracy demonstrations is recorded and relayed around the world, it will now always take place in the present tense of media memory. Taut images from this wild scenario will now always be present, ready and waiting to be replayed, over and over....

The horror was a guest in our lounge-rooms, uninvited. On the screen, pictures of bodies and blood, and the light of a different day. Television news repeated one image, over and over: that of Wang Weilin, the 19 year old son of a factory worker, who stopped a whole column of tanks armed only with a carry-bag of defiance. This image has since become a metonymic substitute for the unrecorded and indeed unrecordable chaos of the massacre that took place in Beijing on the morning of the 4th June, 1989.[4] It is an image-trigger, exploding the memory of a narrative arc, broadcast via satellite to the private realms of many million lounge rooms around the world.

A man stands in front of a column of tanks. The tank stops, then starts, then stops again. The tank and the man do the two-step, jiving backwards and forwards, neither willing to enact their roles with any strong degree of finality. The man probably does not really want to sacrifice his life to stop a tank. The tank conunander probably does not really want to run him over in pursuit of his duty. For a moment, then, this *danse macabre*, performed in all innocence for the cameras. Where does it all end? For the tank conunander, disciplinary action. For his partner, jail.

I cannot watch this videotape routine anymore without focussing, even more metonymically, on the shopping bag the man holds in his hand. What was in that shopping bag? If the whole image of this insane dance now has to carry the whole weight and freight of meaning produced by the Tiananmen square events, it must be a very strong bag. In looking at the image, we ask, what does it all mean? What sense is carried by this image? I look at the shopping bag, and I ask, what is in the bag? It is ridiculous to ask what this man dancing with power, with death is carrying in his shopping bag. It is just as ridiculous to ask what the larger envelope of the image itself is carrying as the freight of meaning also.

Rather than look at the image and try to unpack it; it may sometimes be just as useful to look at the image and figure out where to send it. Not looking at and theorising images; but experiencing, preserving and passing them on. Images, like shopping bags, are readymade tools, but they need careful tending. Here they are: the man with the bag and the dancing tank. In a very special sense, images are the only tools we have in this world that are both readymade, but also ready to hand. The world of objects is vast and complicated and beyond my control; the world of images is vast and complicated, but at least I can make what I want out of them.

The world does not just represent itself as a profusion of commodities, as Marx famously put it. Rather, 'life presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles. Everything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation' (Debord epigram 1). As Guy Debord suggests, our experience of everyday life shifts from being to having to seeing. Or as Jean Baudrillard rephrased it, from use to exchange to sign value. Here, in the virtual geography we experience as telesthesia, there buzzes a restless spectacle of stories and images, edited out of the proliferating vectors and teeming archives of larval data.

If you think of any vector as a tool for moving images and stories, and theory as a particular type of tool for deciding the destination of certain flows of semiotic baggage, then this implies a certain *responsibility*. This was very clear in the media coverage of the whole of the June 4th movement's occupation of Tiananmen square. Journalists did not ask themselves where their reportage was headed. To the extent that it was headed around the world and straight back again, *back into China*, then this had two consequences. It would feed back into the struggle itself via radio and fax. It would feed back into the party and the state via the embassies and intelligence service. The neat analytics of liberal journalism still imagine the media in a compartmentalised public sphere, but this is clearly not the case. One has increasingly to ask about the destination of the vector.

5. A Telegraphy of Abstractions

Dateline: New York, 19th October 1987. The stock market crashes, as panic selling sweeps the Dow Jones industrials down 22.6%. This record decline far exceeds the drop on 28th October, 1927. By late afternoon, the transaction tape at the New York Stock Exchange, capable of handling 900 trades a minute, runs 2 hours 15 minutes late. Institutional and individual investors jam broker's lines, trying in vain to protect their investments. The computer-generated arbitrage and 'portfolio insurance' programs prompt surges of sell orders, which culminate in the Dow falling 100 points in the last hour of trading.   (Wall Street Journal; Financial Times)

One lesson of the stock market crash is that institutions and agencies, the collective cultures that they spawn, and the network of communication that threads them together do not simply reflect what happens in the economy. The economy is an ensemble of movements and flows, mostly tied more or less rigidly to the physical space of fixed assets that persist in time. The financial vector is a dynamic development that seeks to escape from commitment to such permanence. The movements of labour, capital, commodities make up second nature, which exists when and where the commodity has become 'the universal category of society as a whole' as Georg Lukács put it: 'Only does the commodity become crucial for the subjugation of men's consciousness to the forms in which this reification finds expression and for their attempts to comprehend the process or to rebel against its disastrous effects and liberate themselves from servitude to the "second nature" so created' (86).

The dynamic, open ended process of the self-reproduction of capital goes beyond the transformation of ancient territories into the space of the social factory, where all of social space and the vectors that traverse it are dedicated to the ceaseless making and unmaking of commodities.[5] Even before this process is complete, a 'third nature' begins to remake it over again. Where the growth of second nature over the landscape takes the form of private property, in Marx's terms it transforms *being* into *having*. Where the vector develops to the point that it can break with the surface and the tempo of second nature, in Debord's terms it further transforms having into *appearing* (epigram 17).

Now, the communication vector and capital are complicit in this, but the vector and capital are not identical. As I have tried to show, popular movements, repressive or bureaucratic regimes, despotic dictators, and especially the emerging 'military-entertainment complex' that is contemporary American global power, all reach for the double-edged sword of the vector when it appears ready to hand.[6] But of all these forms of power, capital drives the vector further and harder, forcing its technologies to innovate, and at the same time it tries to commodify the fruits of this development. The vector may have other properties, values that

escape the restriction of its abstract potential to the commodity form. That this potential may exist, latent within the vector seems indicated by the trouble the vector causes capital — the '87 crash, for example. The benefits capital derives from the vector is not without its side-effects. Velocity has its price. Nowhere is this more evident than in the momentary crises that the rhythms of second nature suffer when they fall out of step with the movements of the third.

The distinction between second and third nature can be expressed by thinking about two different Mondays. Both are the same day; 19th October, 1987. For some, this is simply another Monday. Whatever the big incidents of the day were for them, we don't know of them. They are episodes belonging to the territory, not to the international news vector. Maybe this was a Monday on which they went to work. Maybe they don't have any work to go to. Maybe personal survival was more important to them than the survival of vast immaterial fortunes. Maybe nothing much happened at all, besides the fact that the headline on the newspaper was 2 centimetres taller than usual. Imagine a regular day in the west: get up in the morning, go to work, come home again, watch TV, go to sleep. 'Another boring day in paradise' (Grossberg).

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Notes

1   See Virilio, *Lost Dimension*; Wark, 'On Technological Time: Cruising Virilio's Overexposed City'.

2   Whereas the fate of Benjamin's angel of history is recorded by Heiner Müller in 'The Luckless Angel'.

3   Reviewing *Virtual Geography* for *Thesis 11*, Ian McLean doubts whether this way of essaying global media events could apply to more recent examples that are more 'rooted', less virtual. But see my essay 'Fresh Maimed Babies'.

4   The massacre in Beijing, not in Tiananmen square. On the evidence and the debate on the ethics of the West's reporting of this, see *Virtual Geography*, 129-130.

5   On the concept of the social factory, see Antonio Negri, *The Politics of Subversion*.

6   For the beginnings of a cognate analysis of the 'military entertainment complex', see Wark, 'What Does Capital Want', 15-26.