The Territory Resists the Map

Geolocating Reality and Hyperreality in the Russo-Ukrainian War

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Some time ago it became quite fashionable to speak of a "conflict of narratives". The militaristic terminology was diverse and quite broad. Thinkers, scholars, and practitioners spoke about wars of narratives, wars of interpretation, clash of representations, and even narrative battles. I would refrain from providing obvious references – suffice it to say that I myself partook of this trend through my own contribution, "Narratives at War".[1] The idea behind it was simple: apart from bombs and tanks, words and texts are also wielded as weapons, and in this our 21st century the emphasis often shifts to the latter. Today – when no longer words and texts – bombs and tanks litter all of Ukraine, and the world customarily decries the lack of dialogue – I would like to look at it differently: war as a form of dialogue and communication in the first place.

And I would be merely following in the footsteps of one of the greatest authorities on the subject, Carl von Clausewitz, who famously defined war as continuation of politics by other means. His idea is usually interrupted here with a period. However, after that period, Clausewitz continued:

> Do political relations between peoples and between their governments stop when diplomatic notes are no longer exchanged? Is war not just another expression of their thoughts, another form of speech or writing? Its grammar, indeed, may be its own, but not its logic.[2]

What the great strategist tried to say here, is that the logic of war belongs to politics or, to be more precise, that war is governed by political logic. In this sense, it is really only a continuation of politics. What makes war different is its grammar: the exchanges of volleys, the turns of phrase, or returns of fire.

War does not merely involve representation. It is intimately, inseparably intertwined with it, wired by it. War *is* representation, to use the well-expounded philosophical pun involving communicative and political meanings. The clashing armies are words that form sentences in the dialogue of war. They stand for the polities that send them into battle against each other and, by extension, they stand for the nations whose flags they carry, much like national football teams. Perhaps here lies the root of the idea of shared responsibility that Ukrainians tend to extend to all Russians. We know that the genocidal war crimes committed by rank-and-file Russian soldiers in Bucha, Irpin', Hostomel', Mariupol', Volnovakha, Motyzhyn, Chernihiv, Kharkiv, Nova Basan', Kherson, Bakhmut, Soledar, Kreminna, and countless other towns and villages are the expression of a widespread hatred shared by a broad cross-section of the Russian population – we know this better than anyone because we are the object of that hatred. And, speaking from my own personal experience of being under a missile strike, I can testify that it does feel like a rhetorical act, a very powerful one roughly signifying that, "your presence in the world is unwanted, to the extent that we are ready to take extreme measures from a great distance to ensure this, mobilising all of our military skills, scientific knowledge, technical excellence, industrial complex, culture and ideology".

As an extreme act of dialogue, the writing of war involves many other representation forms. One of such tools inherent to modern war is the map. Warfare is determined by space and time, is dependent on manoeuvre, and as such requires spatial awareness. Yet it is with the arrival of scientific cartography and industrial warfare, impossible without large-scale intricate coordination, that wartime maps became indispensable, either as a representation of the actual situation on the ground desired to be as detailed and objective as possible – or as a summary of a plan, an algorithm to be enacted by the army, and a representation of the desired situation to be achieved through it.

Such was the situation of advanced, industrial, modern warfare. However, towards the end of the Cold War, a new tendency began to emerge. Non-state or para-state actors entered the stage bringing with them the concept of "new wars" – bloody conflicts between weak paramilitary groups, such as those in the former Yugoslavia. Meanwhile, the West achieved the so-called "Revolution in Military Affairs", or RMA, that favoured "those who fully exploit and operationalize the latest technological developments".[3] The result was a series of wars between completely unequal combatants, such as the Gulf War, or insurgencies.

It was the Gulf War that prompted Jean Baudrillard to famously conclude that "it did not take place".[4] What he meant is that the war was not so much a war as a mere extermination of inferior Iraqi forces while, as experienced by global audiences via mass media, it had very little to do with actual developments on the ground but was rather a collection of spectacular images that created a simulated version of it. It was not a war but a simulacrum thereof.

A simulacrum is a key concept that can even explain current Russia's war on Ukraine and why it turned out so unexpectedly. In Baudrillard's writings, it is defined as a representation that has no relation to reality whatsoever. It represents something that does not exist. It is not simply a misrepresentation; it is a representation that has completely and aggressively broken up with reality. Baudrillard begins his explanation of the concept of simulacrum with a fable by Jorge Luis Borges in which the Empire embarks on creating a map of its territory so detailed that it ends up covering everything on a one-to-one scale, devouring that territory in the process:

> It is nevertheless the map that precedes the territory – precession of simulacra – that engenders the territory and if one must return to the fable, today it is the territory whose shreds slowly rot across the extent of the map.[5]

This is the postmodern idea that Russia's intellectual milieux were so fascinated by for three decades. It became the motherboard on which Russian society itself has run. It cries out from Viktor Pelevin's sophisticated novels and from the crudity of Pervyi Kanal's most heinous fabrications. It has become a mantra for Vladislav Surkov's intellectual travesties and the leading doctrine of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the notorious *MID (Ministerstvo inostrannykh del)*. There is no reality at all, there is only a sum of contradictory perceptions. Perceptions can be tampered with and thus change reality. Moreover, tampering with perception is the only way to change reality (which does not exist anyway). There is no truth and objectivity is not just impossible but is even undesirable as an ideal. Everything is relative, and what does not seem so, must be relativized. Nothing is true and everything is possible, to quote the ingenious title of Peter Pomerantsev's book on Russian television.

It was television – Baudrillard's unmistakably "favourite" medium – that created the world for ordinary Russians and populated it with endearing and threatening figures. Aggressive and emotionless Baltic nationalists. Stupid Central Asians. Lazy and cunning Ukrainians. Bloodthirsty Banderites. Azov battalion Nazis. Decadent fags from Gayropa. All conspiring to corrupt Mother

Russia and rob it of the last remnants of Soviet glory. And good-natured, all-forgiving Russians led by a stalwart leader against this motley crew of delinquents and degenerates. All these were visualized with believable images, some of which may have been staged but many undoubtedly true, inserted into the frame of the narrative I have just outlined, and connected with each other, all pointing in one direction. Thus, the real and fictional were smoothly blended into the hyperreal, "the model of a real without origin or reality".[6] And thus, Russians lost the ability to distinguish between reality and the simulation of reality.

During the military buildup for the invasion, simulation was mobilized and deployed with full force. In February 2022, the Winter Olympic Games broadcasts were interspersed with heartbreaking reports from the Russian-occupied eastern Ukraine, populated with the simulated entities of the so-called "Donetsk and Luhansk people's republics". Dramatic footage of explosions, the sound of cannonade, agitated voiceovers, and even an evacuation of the local population, followed. When checked with independent sources, the picture looked absurdly different: it is Ukraine that was shelled, and many of the evacuees were driven only to the edge of their town and then told to go home by foot. In fact, it was an exercise in creating a Hollywood version of reality.

And then spoke Putin himself. On February 21st, he addressed his television audiences with a speech lasting over an hour. He insisted that Ukraine and other post-Soviet states were an artificial creation by Lenin and the Bolsheviks, that they were thus fake while Russia was perennial and real. Putin held that Ukraine – once again, unlike Russia – was corrupt in a unique, unheard-of way, and that this country, perhaps the only state in the world, apart from Israel, whose president and prime minister were for a while both Jewish, was filled with ethnic and xenophobic nationalism. He said that Ukraine was being militarized in preparation for a military attack on Russia, a nuclear power with a superiority of military numbers many orders of magnitude greater than that of its western neighbor. He also alleged that Ukraine is mired in extreme and ever-growing poverty.

It is possible to fact-check this speech, no doubt. But what would remain after this fact-checking? Perhaps only the atmosphere of hatred and thinly veiled threats, that I, as a Ukrainian in Kyiv at the time, felt with extreme clarity. It was the only point during the entire crisis that I genuinely felt fear.

As sad and unjust as it sounds, had Russia won an easy victory, the world would have remembered Putin's simulacrum as truth. Not just that: Putin would have *made* his simulacrum into truth. And this was a simulacrum that

was meant to replace reality. It was a map projected onto the actual territory of Ukraine with the intention to replace it. Before, and during the early days of, the invasion, Russian television talk shows discussed maps that illustrated various visions of Ukraine's post-war destiny. While admitting the flexibility of their goals, all of them entailed a division of the country into several parts. Some were to be absorbed into Russia, others would be kept as puppet buffer territories leaving only the few westernmost regions as a rump Ukrainian state the size of Estonia, and a convenient object to continue projecting simulacra onto. The territory had to be altered to match the map that they had in mind. This was to be done in particular, through the necropolitics of genocide.[7]

So, Russian soldiers launched their missiles and went into Ukraine armed with this map that they had to make a reality, like an expedition corps in the darkest days of colonialism. Essentially, this was the moment when the postcolonial approach to Russo-Ukrainian relations has been fully and finally vindicated. Russia was now openly behaving as an imperialist conqueror, and Ukraine has left its postcolonial condition and engaged in a very concrete anti-colonial struggle that could certainly inspire a 21st century sequel to Franz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*.

But it also became a moment when something unexpected happened. Something that became a turning point: the simulated map has met the territory it sought to modify with brutal violence. The soldiers met an army that, in spite of alleged corruption, did not fall apart and run away as had happened in Afghanistan. They met towns that, despite the narrative of poverty and degradation, instilled in Russian soldiers an irresistible urge to loot everything from flatscreen TVs to lingerie, because those towns had living standards these soldiers could never dream of at home. And, most importantly, they faced a land and a nation that in spite of everything they had been told was real and genuine and not at all willing to give up.

It is here that we part with Baudrillard and the postmodernist hall of mirrors and enter something new. For the first time in our contemporary era, we are witnessing a true war waged between combatants that turned out to be comparable. It is no longer the Gulf War butchery of an inferior enemy or a murky "new war" of clandestine insurgents and illegal organizations. For the first time we saw reality fight back against hyperreality. This reality itself became the ultimate and the best possible fact-checking of Putin's speech and the map he handed out to his nation. And, oh what a surprise, we got to see that the real is real.

In the current Russian invasion of Ukraine, part of the Russo-Ukrainian War that has been raging since 2014, the map was meant to precede the territory, but in fact the map no longer precedes the territory. On the contrary, the map recedes before the territory. The key statement in this great dialogue of war, in the writing of war, has been the Ukrainian response to the Russian statement: "Nothing is true and everything is possible", is met with "Some things – ourselves included – are true and not everything is possible, certainly not our new colonization".

I can also see this in the empirical aspects of my current research project where I study how the Ukrainian military has used mobile phones on the frontline in Eastern Ukraine. This frontline now extends throughout the entire country. The results I and other scholars of media and technology use, such as Olga Boichak and Tanya Lokot, have collected reveal how modern technologies and their infrastructures blend into activism and grassroot self-mobilization. While my focus lies on the military uses, I could see how mobile phones and the networks of base stations serve to fill gaps in the military infrastructure. Back in 2014, Ukraine had no secure and reliable military communication system, prompting soldiers to turn their civilian phones into one, despite the risks. This subsequently became a network that has supported Ukrainian resistance.[8]

So, it is no wonder that the Russian army made it one of its priority targets. Russians have developed sophisticated radioelectronic warfare systems, such as the Leer 3 that launches two drones and can suppress mobile communication up to 100 kilometers away. It is capable of creating fake, virtual base stations that imitate your operator and can siphon data off your phone while also making it disseminate false messages and malware. We saw them in use during protests in Belarus and Kazakhstan, where they successfully subverted mobile communication for days and thus suppressed protest coordination. It was only logical to see them in Ukraine. From interviews with refugees from Irpin', Kherson, Mariupol' and other areas, that I conducted in Lviv in March and April 2022, while working as a volunteer with a medical and psychological service at the train station, a picture of the Russian tactic arises. First, they try to destroy physically through shelling as many base stations as possible. The population is forced into shelters and cellars with weak, or no, signal. Then they activate their radioelectronic devices that suppress the remaining signal, this typically happens around 9 am and lasts through the day. At night, the signal improves and allows at least some communication. Another solution for civilians is to climb the top floors of high-rise buildings to catch a signal from

the more remote base stations but this comes with extra risks. It is this "radiosilence" from the occupied areas that allows mass killings such as those in Bucha and Mariupol to happen in the quiet. It is a tool of genocide and Russian necropolitics.

However, the territory and the infrastructure it hosted do fight back even here. The Armed Forces of Ukraine have greatly increased their communication capacity. The Russians, by contrast, turned out to be lacking in it to such extent they must resort to using civilian mobile phones with Ukrainian simcards looted from the population. As a result, they fall prey to the lack of infrastructure they themselves destroyed and to Ukrainian wiretapping, resulting in a permanent flood of recorded conversations with their families where shocking subjects are discussed such as looting, rapes, summary executions, and other war crimes. Reportedly due to the use of civilian phones, a lot of senior Russian officers, including generals, have been killed. And, in many cases, technicians working for Ukrainian mobile operators have risked their lives to repair the damaged infrastructure as quickly as possible.

The Russian dictator put his society into a hall of crooked mirrors where they spent so much time that they started believing their crooked representations. The map to replace the territory was confused with the map to represent the territory – and no wonder Russians came armed with outdated, Soviet era maps rather than the high-tech navigation that Ukrainians are using. As we observe this spectacular breaking of these crooked mirrors, I would like to end with a question. The Ukrainian resistance was met with surprise not only in Russia but here in the West as well. Western media and academia have created their own simulacra of both Russia and Ukraine to which us experts were often too tolerant. What will be the responsibility of those who have made and spread these simulacra? And what will be the new paradigm for understanding Ukraine, Russia, and Eastern Europe that we need so much now? What will we see when the last shards of the shattered mirrors hit the ground?

Notes

1 Horbyk, "Narratives at War."
2 Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 252.
3 Jordan et al, *Understanding Modern Warfare*, p. 53.
4 Baudrillard, *The Gulf War*
5 Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, p. 1.

6 Ibid.
7 Mbembe, "Necropolitics."
8 Horbyk, "The war phone."

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