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Harun Farocki, *Serious Games III (Immersion)* (Review)

Natasha Eves

Immersion is the third of four documentaries by Harun Farocki that explores the use of video games in the U.S. military.¹ The first film demonstrates training software in which a young soldier called Watson is killed; the second, a live action role play training exercise; the third, virtual reality (VR) immersion therapy; and the final film compares these pre- and post-war simulated environments side by side.

The demonstration of the virtual reality software *Virtual Iraq* employed in Farocki's film *Immersion* will be reviewed here. *Virtual Iraq* is a software designed to facilitate and strengthen immersion in traumatic memory, intended to assist patients with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder to therapeutically repeat, retell, and relive key experiences.² This peripheral engagement with the *Virtual Iraq* software opens a line of enquiry into the role and function of therapeutic softwares in relation to the processes of subjectification in military training and the subsequent demands for "recovery."

In the film, plainclothes civilian therapists deliver a workshop to their camouflaged army peers at Fort Lewis in Washington. Reflecting on the project, Farocki found himself frustrated by his cinematic conditioning and the lacklustre performances from the military therapists:

On our first trip to Fort Lewis we filmed a lot. But most of the material was useless—mainly because the therapists were acting half-heartedly, incapable of using their own personal experiences. Some were chewing gum. I haven't seen a single film in which people are chewing gum during a therapy session.³

When considering technologies used in the military, it is difficult to not be nostalgic from the start. The technologies and drama in these films—

documentary or cinema—are to be assumed to have been fabricated, abandoned by researchers, or remodelled for ongoing or even future conflicts.

The film has three key sections, opening with a civilian therapist demonstrating the new features and audio capabilities of the *Virtual Iraq* software. Then the army therapists trial the software, one wearing the headset whilst another sits at the computer controlling environmental triggers. Each barks out a recollection, creating their own compositions of sandbox and progression gaming, collaborating with a colleague via voice, vision, and screen. Some do indeed chew gum.

Virtual Iraq produces images that never actually occurred. As an artefact it is fully imaginative and intentional, demonstrating the potential for an affective externalisation of traumatic memory. This digital synthesis offers an atypical perspective into the virtual sites of memory—non-human, algorithmic perspective(s) as empathic mimicry. These technologies are utilised to centre and subsequently neutralise specifically North American trauma, disregarding other affected bodies in the conflict.

Images “born digital” such as these tend to be perceived as “inherently duplicitous, and the signifier of a deeper pollution of the public sphere by the state,”⁴ to use Jonathan Kahana’s words. Unlike photographic media, digital media produces a lack of closure, with an identity that film philosopher D.N. Rodowick explains is “inherently multiple and open to virus-like mutations into ever-renewable series.”⁵ The potential contained within the self-refreshing, algorithmic-revision structure of the digital screen opens possibilities for trauma to transform rather than exhaust. However, the smaller budget for the therapeutic software in comparison to the training software demonstrates what the military prioritises: training over recovery.

Therapy is lucrative, if publicly underfunded. The limitations of the software become apparent in the film’s final demonstration, where Kevin, a civilian therapist, speaks of his “first assignment” with Jones. The VR falters, the tracking goes awry—either staring at the ground or spinning into the sky. In spite of this, the therapist’s performance never falters, delivering what is assumed to be a personal experience.⁶

Kevin hijacks this technical, political, and commercial document as a carrier for his own intense process, or performance, as traumatised soldier. His performance may not be false but, Rodowick writes, “the absence of the event is redoubled, for in the end Farocki reveals that we have all along been watching an actor simulating reactions to a simulation.”⁷ Through entertaining the notion of being a soldier traumatised by war, as demanded by his job, the full utility of this corporate warriorship is realised—the fantasy inspires his performance, his full investment in his investors.

Military training is designed to adapt the soldier to act calmly and methodologically in disturbing situations regardless of the psychological

impact. In contrast, the training of the therapist enables him to perform psychological distress in a contained manner. Kevin's closing jest that "some of the nausea was real" relates only to the faulty tracking and not to the recollected experience.

Precision operations are a smokescreen. Treatments are limited and developed based on statistical correlations towards improvement. For example, there are only two locations in *Virtual Iraq*, yet the virtual sites of the patient's memory must operate within its territories. Rodowick writes that this is to "make every contingency predictable and manageable—another way of holding injury and death at a distance in or through a picture,"⁸ attempting to provide an easily digestible, homogenised image of war with imperceptible collateral.⁹ The space of *Virtual Iraq* is engineered to be prescriptive, for example the entrenched racism wherein the game's "enemies" are clear racialised stereotypes. The plastic materiality of its generated surfaces bound by such inclusions and exclusions.

En route to filming at Fort Lewis in Washington, Farocki comments:

We were looking for signs of the current crisis, but in residential neighbourhoods not a single house was for sale. Nothing here indicated that America was waging two wars, with the war in Afghanistan in its eighth year.¹⁰

This is an "American stylisation" that increasingly appears to involve war at a distance. *Virtual Iraq* offers domestic, controlled environments in contrast to the original sites of trauma. The actual space beyond control becomes a virtual space of absolute control, both characterised by an exploded sense of potential.

This simulation demands that the war be fought on other grounds, away from U.S. soil, away from their buildings and actual-geographic spaces—instead into the virtual areas of the imagination, (soft/wet)ware, and the distant spaces which are little more than a memory or a barely surfaced news story.

VR software, even when used in a rehearsed role play exercise, doesn't have to make good on cinematic expectations inherited from typical linear films.¹¹ Instead, what is envisioned is always being amended, whether by mouth, by algorithm or media; adding details, diversions and aversions, which refresh and revise these intentional, generated landscapes of warfare and (self-)investment.

These transformations become coercive and habitual, a performance to be repeated by therapists selling a software. It intends to habituate military personnel to life after war, yet these are therapeutic tools funded by the same powers that helped create this trauma. It is important to reduce the stigma around mental health for those already broken by the constraints and violence that acts upon them. However privatised therapeutic imaginaries—the idea

being that all problems can be solved between a patient and therapist¹²—mean that debilitated life is extremely profitable, creating dependence through the demand to recover.¹³

The stakes here are not necessarily the elision between video games and military software, but rather the socioeconomic and geopolitical inequalities they demonstrate, and subsequently how it operates on the level of collective imagination as well as mental health. *Virtual Iraq* is an afterimage of geopolitical conflict that hopes to dismantle the social and psychic forces such conflict helped create. Throughout *Immersion*, Farocki immerses the viewer in the meta-narratives of capital and military processes of subjectification, laying bare their contradictory operations as well as the multiple functions of the poorly falsified and the fictional.

To close, a definition of SUDS appears on-screen: “Subjective Units of Disturbance Scale.” The film then tracks our vision forward through the screaming NPCs¹⁴ following a reverberating IED¹⁵ explosion. The synthetic sirens, screams, and gunfire imprint a lingering affect. Image and sound fade to black. The demonstration ends.

* * *

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Notes

¹ Harun Farocki, *Serious Games III (Immersion)*, 2009, 2-channel video installation, 20min.

² This is known as immersion therapy.

³ Harun Farocki, “Serious Games,” in *Visibility Machines: Harun Farocki and Trevor Paglen*, ed. Niels Van Tomme (Maryland: University of Maryland Baltimore County, 2015), 120.

⁴ Jonathan Kahana, “Evidence of What? Harun Farocki and Trevor Paglen Picture Homeland Insecurity,” in *Visibility Machines: Harun Farocki and Trevor*

Paglen, ed. Niels Van Tomme (Maryland: University of Maryland Baltimore County, 2015), 78.

⁵ D.N. Rodowick, *The Virtual Life of Film* (London: Harvard University Press, 2007), 169.

⁶ Farocki writes that “even the press officer who [permitted the shoot] believed that the ‘patient’ was describing a personal experience.” See: Farocki, ‘Serious Games,’ 116.

⁷ D.N. Rodowick, “Eye Machines: The Art of Harun Farocki,” *Artforum*, February 2015, 197.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Unlike a dead western civilian body, psychosis is invisible and therefore preferable. Grégoire Chamayou writes about drone pilots in a psychotic conflict as combatant-at-a-distance; “They epitomize the contradiction of societies at war outside but living inside as though they are at peace. Only they are in both worlds exactly at the hinge of contradiction. [They suffer from] a psychotic inability to connect actions with their results.” See Grégoire Chamayou, *Drone Theory* (UK: Penguin Books, 2015), 121.

¹⁰ Farocki, “Serious Games,” 115.

¹¹ See: Elisabeth Ainsley Sutherland, “Staged Empathy: Empathy and Visual Perception in Virtual Reality Systems” (Master’s Thesis, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Department of Comparative Media Studies, 2015), 61.

¹² See: Mark Fisher, “The End of Emo-Politics,” *Manchester Spring*, February 23, 2016. Accessed April 6, 2016. Original link broken: <http://www.manchesterspring.org.uk/2016/02/23/the-end-of-emo-politics/>. Alternatively accessible at: <http://freshnewanxieties.tumblr.com/post/141052796945/mark-fisher-the-end-of-emo-politics>.

¹³ See: Jasbir K. Puar, “The Cost of Getting Better: Ability and Debility,” in *The Disability Studies Reader*, 4th ed., ed. Lennard J. Davis (London: Routledge, 2013), 177-184.

¹⁴ Non-Player Characters (NPCs) are typically characters controlled by the computer via predetermined or responsive behaviour.

¹⁵ Improvised Explosive Device (IED).