WAR

TRANSCENDENCE AND THE END OF IMAGERY

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"War," writes Jean-Paul Sartre in his war diary for December 1939, "makes everyone feel his historicity." This momentousness is diluted, Sartre points out, by the trivializing necessities of everyday life, in his case — as a meteorological observer — by the "stupid, petty fatigues imposed by some warrant-officer's idiocy." But peace would return, Sartre assured himself confidently, and with it would return a certain permission for everyone to feel "achronic." "All peaces to date," he writes, "have been mere dispersals."

What is most absorbing about Sartre's musings during the period of the so-called Phoney War and during the earliest days of World War II is his swooning ambivalence about the ornate awareness war could confer upon the individual, as opposed to a respectable serious-mindedness one ought to have been generating for oneself all along, thereby perhaps avoiding war, Sartre suggests, in the first place.

Sartre was writing this particular diary in the same year Freud died and it is tempting to see it as one of the texts produced at a poignant moment of cultural shift in modern history — that moment just before the total absorption of psychoanalysis into culture and just before what a more recent French philosopher, urbanist Paul Virilio, calls "the great transparency of the world" brought about by the invisible but oppressive cloak of information coverage thrown over civilization by television and satellite working together.

Because we now live in an era of total and continuous imaging, the way fish live in water (Marshall McLuhan once suggested that fish knew nothing about water because they were entirely immersed in it all the time: no vantage point), there is no war imagery to speak of. That is to say, there is a continuous scan of war-tinctured atmospheres (a function of our constant living within what Virilio thinks of as the "space of war"), but there are precious few

Benjamin West
The Death of General Wolfe *(detail) 1770*
Oil on canvas 60 1/2 x 84 in.
Courtesy: National Gallery of Canada

epiphanic moments. What are the lingering images of the Gulf War? One scratchy-looking stretch of video, shown over and over on all of the TV networks, of the night-bombing of Baghdad — a moment of bleak fireworks so indistinct and graphically ungenerous it conveyed the same feeling of coy transgression released by inept pornography — and the frantic, claustrophobic flailings-about by the CNN staff in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv as they attempted to don their gas masks in front of their own live cameras.

The war in the Gulf was imagistically unsatisfactory. But then everyone knew it would be. It was just ongoing content for the endlessly omniverous maw of the television camera. Live coverage of the war consisted mostly of long hours of the live coverage of the commentators whose job it was to cover the war. And there was something peculiarly comforting in this. Familiar faces set up against changing backgrounds.

But because there were no epiphanic moments, there was no way to celebrate anything and there were no mechanisms through which to conduct mourning. Just an everyday sense of tension and loss. In previous, pre-Freudian wars, there were good guys and bad guys and there were war artists because there was something for war artists to do. The war paintings of F. H. Varley, for example, were the productions of a highly colored sense of historicity through which had come a mythic vectoring that turned loss into sublimity. Varley's ***The Sunken Road*** (1918), for example, shows a sunlit battlefield nestled beneath the arch of a beneficent rainbow and a sheltering mackerel sky. The fallen dead have been painted into the landscape in such a way that they can be seen to have returned to an earth that is somehow mothering and for some reason grateful for their sacrifice. Maurice Cullen's ***No Man's Land*** (1919) is scenery for Wagner. J.W. Beatty's ***Alblain Saint-Nazaire*** (1919) is a stately dance of blasted trees and ruined buildings that makes the destructiveness of war seem cleansing and meditative. Even Charles Comfort's ***Dieppe Raid*** (1946), with its flak bursts and explosions on the beach, is a stop-action hymn to heroism, the whole bathed in benediction gold. Clearly, what appears to be going on in war painting up until World War II is a strident and committed externalization of war events. War artists have invariably seen war from the outside and have given it form, design, coherence and, unfailingly, a species of unearthly beauty.

And then we met the enemy, during the Cold War, and he was us and there was no longer anything

F.H. Varley
For What? *(detail) 1919*
Oil on linen 58 1/4 x 72 1/4 in.
Collection: Canadian War Museum
Photo: Bill Kent

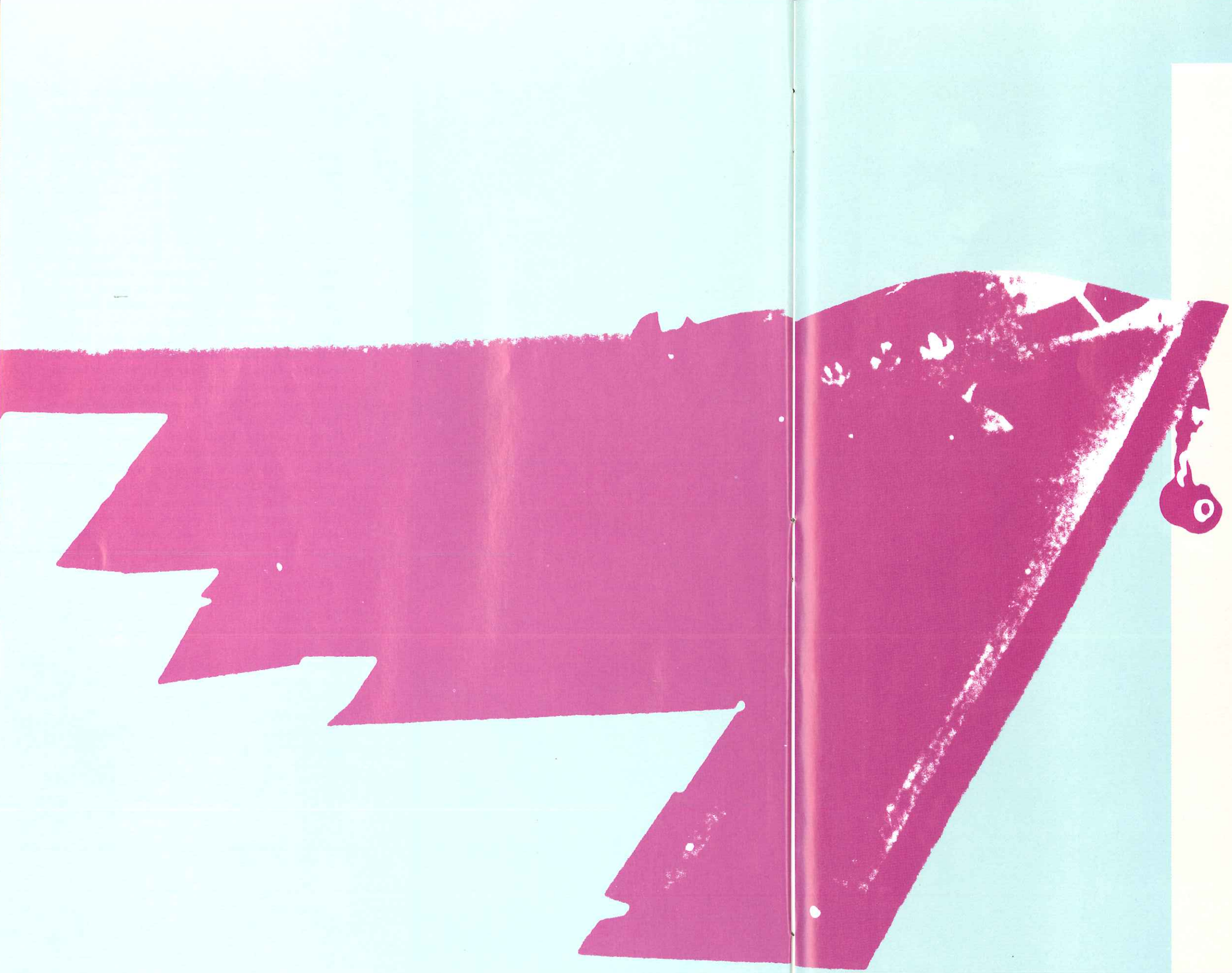
to paint. There are no Korean War paintings; there is only the memorial of *M*A*S*H*. The Vietnam War was full of rock posters because the transmission of images flowed from here over to there and not vice versa. War art now would have to take the form of endless self-portraiture. Since Freud, war has come to be seen as a struggle between the death instinct, Thanatos, and the life instinct, Eros — a struggle located within each individual.

By the time he wrote the majestic ***Civilization and its Discontents***, however, Freud himself had come to see mankind's aggressive, self-destructive instincts as predominant, with Eros taking a back seat in the psyche as a merely reparative force. By the 1960s it was analytic orthodoxy to see war as the result of the outward deflection of the death instinct (in the wake of paranoiac recognitions that we are all capable of killing, even likely to kill those whom we love) and a resulting transformation of society into a culture-wide weapon wielded against external aggressors. All of us, according to Franco Fornari in ***The Psychoanalysis of War*** (1966), are visited by a self-generated sense of absolute danger about to befall our loved ones (as, for example, in nightmares). The crystallization of these fantasies Fornari refers to as the "Terrifier." For Fornari, war is a "security organization, not because it permits us to defend ourselves from real enemies, but because it succeeds in finding, or in extreme cases, in inventing, real enemies to kill; and that if it were not for war, society would be apt to leave men defenseless before the emergence of the Terrifier as a purely internal foe." This leads us through the maddening paradox, Fornari suggests, that our most important security function is not to defend ourselves from an external enemy "but to find a real enemy."

In this we have succeeded very well. Fornari goes on to point out that it helps a lot if the enemy we decide on is in some way foreign to us, "other," incomprehensible. Thus the North American refusal, just at the moment, to attempt any understanding of the apparently unfathomable Moslem mind. It is the "otherness" of the Moslem people that has transformed George Bush into the Good Father successfully protecting his family against displaced fantasies. Had the conflict in the Gulf become a nuclear one, however, Bush would then have become the Bad Father, having led his people into an unsolvable and unstoppable Armageddon. Being a good politician involved knowing when to get off.

If there were to be war artists now, they'd have to be neo-surrealists, busy painting our collective

CHARLES COMFORT
DIEPPE RAID (DETAIL) 1946
OIL ON CANVAS 36 X 60 IN.
COLLECTION: CANADIAN WAR MUSEUM
PHOTO: BILL KENT



dreams and dreads. Or perhaps it might be enough that they merely show us the shape and stance of the war instruments we have designed for our paranoiac conflicts. Isn't a single look at the black bat that is the F117 Stealth Bomber the beginning and the end of contemporary war art? Are not dark, sinister old B-52s and state-of-the-art tanks merely projections — visions as personal as Jung's UFOs?

Psychoanalytic discoveries of the last half century related to the analysis of infantile sexuality have provided a number of fertile implications of sexuality in the war phenomenon, the most obvious of which is probably an exploration of the unconscious through the agency of weapons as phallic symbols. In an utterly gripping study called ***Love, Sex and War: Changing Values 1939-45***, published in 1985, author John Costello quotes an American tank commander who wrote about his armored vehicle as an extension of his own sexuality: "The tank. It is ceaseless destruction, unstoppable except by another, even more infernal machine. It protrudes shafts of cold metal with which to fuck a landscape and, by fucking, raze it. After the tank came Hiroshima and the bomb — a cock so huge we can't even use it. I'm an old man, but sometimes I feel like the last stud left on the face of the earth."

This was the tank of World War II, the hairy beast of a tank depicted with such hallucinatory anthropomorphism by Lawren P. Harris in his ***Tank Advance*** (1944), in which the mad, blunt vehicles have become, because of their camouflaging, something like Wookies with erections. The tank is puerile, a displaced male carapace, Wilhelm Reich's armored man — that is to say, the stiffened and unyielding and unfeeling man held captive by his own defenses, unable to risk softness or, tankwise, detumescence (detumescence in a tank is death, after all). You get thinking back to the TV images of the dreaded Land War in the Gulf and all you can bring to mind are gormless, bureaucratically deadened young men standing beside their sandblown tanks, anxious to get on with it, to get inside that rolling identity, to become the absurd homunculus rattling around inside the hardened projection. A tank commander on CNN talked about how the grit of the desert ruins a million dollar tank in about four days. No time here for foreplay. And what kind of a conflict was it, this Land War? What you remember are the tanks dug into the sand, buried and burning like scorpions. Nature mobilized and mineralized and set against Saddam Hussein, the Bad Father, all these bewildered sons scratching around for some Oedipal kill.

R. Hamilton
U.S. Spy Plane
Courtesy: Camera Press, London, Ont.