Nex Ex Machina[1], or *Bringing It All Back Home*:

The Fallacy and Fantasy of Sacrificeless Warfare and Why It Will Never Work

By Aaron R. Duggan

At the beginning of the 21st Century, advances in war technology are outpacing the psychological capacities of those who operate them, causing and aggravating splits along fault lines within the human psyche at an accelerated rate. The creation and management of multiple personal identities or personas are not new, particularly when it comes to war. However, a new breed of soldier – a prototype, I would argue, for all future soldiers – is now expected to shift back and forth between wartime and peacetime attitudes, psychological states, and behaviors more rapidly and repeatedly than ever before because they are no longer physically involved in the reality of combat. Operators of Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) flying overseas combat missions thousands of miles away from the battlefield from "cockpit cubicles" here in the United States are experiencing rates of fatigue, PTSD, depression, social problems, and burnout much higher than their in-country counterparts who actually strap into an armed jet fighter and fly missions where they risk personal harm or death (Tvaryanas 2). This statistical fact is inexplicable and counterintuitive unless one's explanations and intuition take into account depth psychological and mythological considerations.

If, as Jung phrases it, "Unity and totality stand at the highest point on the scale of objective values," (*Essential Jung* 229) then expecting UAV operators to lead a civilian life half of their day while spending the other half engaged in lethal, wartime acts is a

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[1] Latin: *Violent death from the machine*

recipe for dissociation and fragmentation. And although our embrace of new war technologies may satisfy a collective desire to decrease human casualties by removing warriors physically from the battlefield, the notion that war can be waged without any sacrifice whatsoever is a fallacy doomed to failure. For myth has this to tell us: Ares, the god of war, demands a sacrifice. If blood will not be spilled, we can expect our future war casualties – our extracted sacrifice – to be primarily psychological and pathological in nature.

It may seem irrational at first glance but traditional warfare, through the action of storytelling and mythologizing, tends to unify much more than it fragments, both in terms of personal as well as collective psychology. Lawrence LeShan in *The Psychology of War* outlines how war often becomes mythologized into a moral showdown between the forces of ultimate good and ultimate evil where any constructive dialogue is pointless since the 'enemy' always lies – thus does consciousness become purged of moral ambiguity and achieve a temporary sense of contiguity and wholeness: We are always right, the Other is always wrong, and what hangs in the balance is nothing less than the fate of "our way of life." Some of the most polished examples of the mythologizing of war are the most recent: Iraq I & II and Afghanistan, owing to politicians and hired public relation firms using mass media to disseminate Manichean rhetoric in order to create common cause.

LeShan argues that, "During wartime, not only are there two sets of morals that allow us to judge our 'enemies' differently than ourselves and our allies, but also we never question this difference" (49). He is speaking of whole populations, but this is

especially true for those who surrender totally their individual identity to wear the archetypal mantle of Warrior.

      Traditional battlefield combat involves the creation and sustaining of a context of continuity. As war journalist Christopher Hedges describes it: "War forms its own culture," wherein it is endowed, "with qualities it often does not possess: excitement, exoticism, power, chances to rise above our small stations in life, and a bizarre and fantastic universe that has a grotesque and dark beauty" (3). Within the shared, exceptional, and temporary psychological context of the *physical* battlefield – Hedges' "fantastic universe" – the heroic extermination of moral ambiguity and the resultant "unity and totality" of consciousness can easily occur: one is *actually* being shot at, seeing comrades die in their arms or shot from the sky, death is one's constant companion and those present are at all times acutely aware that they are, both physically and spiritually, a long, long way from home. The sensate field of battle, containing as it does the extremes of violence and camaraderie that war produces and visits upon the psyche, serves as an alchemical vessel within which the insanity of war can be made sense of: war is hell and madness, however, in war everyone is mad, and so the collective madness is experienced as sanity.

      Jung, in his essay "The Spiritual Problem of Modern Man," argues that, "Wherever there exists some external form, be it an ideal or a ritual, by which all the yearnings and hopes of the soul are adequately expressed…then we may say that the psyche is outside and that there is no psychic problem" (CW10, ¶159). The physical and psychological act of "going to war," particularly when that war has been heavily mythologized, has always been one such "external form."

Today, however, the technologically saturated battle*space*, encompassing as it does virtual, as well as actual realms, is beginning to bear little resemblance to the traditional battle*field* and we are beginning to see some of the consequences of that "external form," that alchemical vessel formed over millennia, being tossed aside before a new one has been created. There is no space yet to contain the "part-time Warrior" for whom the madness of war is not shared, but rather internalized as an acutely individual experience. There is no continuity or contiguity to the madness. Exurban UAV pilots (in military parlance *"Remote-Split Operators"* – but what's in a name?) must learn to exist in two worlds every twenty four hours – one world where death, destruction, and dismemberment are beamed onto high definition television monitors in their cubicles and where they play an active role in the killing, and the other world of family dinners, small talk about fad diets, and the minutia of PTA gatherings and Homeowner's Association board meetings.

For today's soldier, the physical threat and fear that ensures psychic contiguity and puts to bed inappropriate doubts and moral ambiguities is vanishing – the dissociative mechanism required to simultaneously hold ludicrously differing personas is laid bare and open to examination. Pathological symptoms are what are *supposed* to occur in this circumstance because, as Jung states, "The role of the unconscious is to act compensatorily to the conscious contents of the moment" (CW10, ¶21). Lacking a physical battlefield, doubts and anxieties about one's violent acts in the morning are free to surface in the evening (In rush hour traffic? While doing laundry? In the moments before sleep?) and wreck havoc on the psyche because, again in Jung's words, "the self, the wholeness of the personality… cannot tolerate self-deceptions" (*Essential Jung* 230).

Surrounded by, and submerged in, the mundane minutiae of everyday life, one's carefully constructed rationalizations can seem flimsy indeed.

This then serves as an excellent example of the principle that archetypes are the supports upon which the individual and collective psyche is built: outside of the Warrior archetype, long associated with combat as an *embodied* act, the killing of others is proscribed. How then, though their killing may be sanctioned, is a soldier to make sense of "combat" when traditional, archetypal Warrior associations, such as gut-churning fear, the rush of adrenaline, and the sensory reality of actual human suffering and death, are weakened, set at a remove, or stripped away? Lacking an archetypal foundation, the psyche will become unmoored, putting the "split" in Remote-Split, and leave the individual unsure if the acts one commits are the (sacred) acts of a Warrior or the (profane) acts of a simple killer.

Our current level of consciousness balks at a virtual interface with something as embodied as war and death. War is erotic by nature and its power and horror can only be assimilated with help from Eros. A Warrior's physical presence on the battlefield is seemingly required in order for psyche to grasp war's reality and magnitude: the sight and smell of blood and eviscerated organs; the taste of aerosolized particles of jet fuel, gunpowder and cordite; the scream of fighter jets and children. And though the way war is waged may change, tending toward increased distance, dissociation, and fragmentation, the primordial Warrior archetype remains impervious and undamaged – the psychic tension and torsion are visited upon individual soldiers and present as psychological symptoms.

According to a study commissioned by the Navy Postgraduate Institute, Air Force UAV pilots almost without exception "experience a wide range of problems from acute disturbances of circadian rhythms and sleep to diminished family and social lives" (Tvaryanas 2). This has, apparently, been the case since the Air Force began flying combat sorties in Afghanistan (as opposed to observational sorties in Kosovo). Figuring that staring at video monitors all day was causing fatigue and sleepiness, the USAF restructured the shift schedule of the operators from twelve hour shifts to an eight hour nine-to-five as well as accommodating more contiguous days off in an effort to allow for a normal and familiar home life schedule. According to an online defense industry forum, "All those changes were supposed to help relieve the fatigue problem, but the research team for last month's follow-up study found that nothing had changed. Despite operating from a home base, Predator crews are still the most fatigued flight crews in the military" (Trimble).

It is easy to understand how "unmanned" systems must have sounded like a great idea: no more body counts, no more pilot burnout, no more combat-related psychological disorders – in short, warfare without sacrifice. But that this could be seriously considered as achievable, that a force as powerful and autonomous as war could be approached and engaged in without injury to *all* participants, is both a tragic fantasy of titanic proportions and a testament to how ignorant and unconscious the modern military is of the legacy they have inherited from Warriors past. Like all conveniences, war technology cannot escape the principle that, "Every good quality has its bad side, and nothing good can come into the world without at once producing a corresponding evil" (Jung CW10, ¶154). The evil is not inherent in our technology, but rather the degree to which we are

unconscious of how it affects us and alters or diminishes our sense of humanness. Unbridled enthusiasm to embrace new war technology because of the fantasy that war can be waged without sacrifice could push some of the worst tendencies of modern man to almost unimaginable proportions: the denial of the soul, the dehumanization of others, the inflation of ego and hubris, and a lack of cautiousness in rushing off to unjustified and unjust wars.

In *Wired for War,* P. J. Singer details the history of robotics and drone technology over the past century, arguing that in our current age and perhaps forevermore, war will drive innovation in the field of robotics and vice versa. According to Singer, the successful use of Unmanned Aerial Vehicles in the Balkan conflicts of the 1990s, and the public outrage over American casualties in Somalia during the same period, led the United States Military in the early 2000s to begin embracing what they had long resisted: robotic technologies being deployed on the battlefield (58-60). The enthusiasm of politicians and military planners has not waned. In fact, the 2009 fiscal year represents the first year where the Air Force will train more pilots to operate drone aircraft than traditional fighters and bombers (Brook). If the exponential trend upwards in the ordering and deploying of these units over the past six years is any indication (from 10 units in 2001 to over 150 today, flying 2,073 missions in one year alone) the 2008 fiscal year may well be the *last* year in USAF history where pilot training for manned aircraft exceeded that of UAVs (Singer 35). And certainly the political costs of war factor into these decisions. At a Senate Armed Services Committee hearing on February 8, 2000, it was mandated into the Pentagon's budget, according to Singer, "that by 2010, one-third of all the aircraft designed to attack behind enemy lines be unmanned" (59).

This is the way wars of the future will be fought: "warriors" (a.k.a. Remote-Split Operators) leave their homes in the morning, drop the children off at school, go to an office to kill people and watch American servicemen die all day from nine-to-five, and then return in the evening to their home in the suburbs, with potentially the most pulse-raising, "combative" situation of the day occurring should they forget to pick up a gallon of milk on the way home and incur the wrath of a disappointed spouse. One does not have to be a psychologist to see how a damaging fragmentation of the psyche is not only probable, but rather expected and unavoidable. The uncharted (and thus potentially dangerous) new territory we have entered with this highly dissociating war technology constitutes a new frontier that, far from being conquered and assimilated, instead "assimilates its conqueror" (Jung CW10, ¶103).

At least for the moment, that assimilation is something that, though not being discussed in the mainstream media or among those in the military establishment, is still recognizable as a pathological symptom. This would seem to be so because UAV operators have been steeped, through their military training, in what it means to be an archetypal Warrior – they have some sense of the gravity involved in killing other human beings – the conflict arising from being physically distanced (remotely-split) from the acts they witness and are engaged in, coupled with their inability to distance themselves psychologically.

But what happens individually and collectively when that symptom no longer presents as pathology? It seems altogether likely that the next generation of UAV pilots will not be pilots in the traditional sense at all; they may not even be people with military training. The fact is that it is very expensive to train people to fly airplanes. When the

operator no longer is required to have traditional "stick and rudder" skills and their remote-controlled vehicle can land and take off without human interaction, why, from a simple cost-benefit analysis, would the Air Force continue to spend several million dollars in training people to be "pilots" when there are people already suited to perform UAV operations in the larger population? Dan Kois reports in an article on *Slate.com* that Nintendo "PlayStation-adept grunts have proved to be excellent drone operators – one major told the Army News Service that one top [drone] operator is normally a cook."

This movement toward war operations as video game could ultimately lead to the perfectly rational but psychologically unconscionable decision to move non-military, highly-adept video gamers into UAV operations. Gone will be any semblance of the Warrior archetype and with it the gravitas of what it *really* means to kill – instead the focus will be on who can produce the highest score (read: enemy body count). One USAF Captain has already suggested just this in a thesis presented at Air University. Captain Triplett covers all of the bases in comparing traditional pilots to UAV operators and finds that video gamers meet all of the current criteria for UAV operations. Combined with the fact that most "stick and rudder" pilots view being transferred to UAV operations as a demotion, in addition to it being "reasonable to suggest that a fully qualified fighter or bomber pilot might actually be a misplacement of overqualified manpower," (3) Triplett's suggestion is that the USAF create a new career field for UAV operations, relaxing physical fitness requirements and eliminating costly (and now obsolete) basic training in combat skills and unit cohesion. This conclusion is echoed in a position paper written by Lt. Col. Houston R. Cantwell, USAF, an F-16 instructor pilot and operational planner at Headquarters, Third Air Force in Germany. Cantwell states:

"The last 10 years of Predator operators' assignment history demonstrate Air Force pilots' desire to stay in cockpits instead of ground-control stations…. The Air Force needs to aggressively target motivated people who will voluntarily pursue careers in [flying drones]" (5).

Should the armed forces move video gamers into UAV operations it seems possible, even perhaps probable, that the dissociative symptoms now seen in Remote-Split Operators will present with far less frequency and intensity then they do now. Indeed, the visceral reality of the violence occurring on the other end of the high definition video feed would likely have a much more subtle impact on the psychology of a civilian gamer/UAV operator. A generalized numbness may well replace anxiety and PTSD as the prevalent symptom among non-military drone pilots whose nine-to-five job is "alternative reality warfare," jaded by the excitement and safety of *virtual* killing. War, once a great psychic unifier and producer of totality and contiguity because of its undeniable and unavoidable reality, could easily become the ultimate expression of mass psychosis and dissociation.

What is the answer? To turn, as Jung says, "to the psyche with very great expectations" (CW10, ¶177) for this modern dilemma springs from the same ground as all of the rest of the problems that plague Modern Man: the psyche and our stubborn refusal to consider the unconscious as an actual thing with power and autonomy. Again Jung: "Whenever life proceeds one-sidedly in any given direction, the self-regulation of the organism produces in the unconscious an accumulation of all those factors which play too small a part in the individual's conscious existence" (CW10, ¶20). Accumulations lead to eruptions.

From a more mythic and archetypal perspective, we deny the gods with ever increasing fervor, but to our own peril. Technology, even war technology, is essentially morally neutral, but if our sense of what it means to be human (including, of course, the horror of killing and the fear of being killed) continues to recede and becomes further obscured by virtual interfaces, we can safely expect the collective psyche to mirror what we are seeing now in the individual: increased fatigue, depression, and burnout. A recognition of the vital role *conscious* sacrifice plays in warfare, a deference to the god under whose reign war unfolds rather than attempts to skirt the consequences of our interactions with that bloody realm – could keep the insanity of war from slipping below the surface of the personal and shared unconscious where it is free to transform and shape-shift unchecked into ever more pathological forms.

With an all volunteer fighting force and the insulation of a relatively robust economy, the notion that war involves sacrifice from the battlefield to the dinner table seems almost quaint by our modern standards. Lost now is the unifying power of war, the "we're all in this together" spirit that drove popular sentiment and the collective imagination during the great World Wars and fueled protests and outrage during Vietnam. War, for everyone at home, has become defined by expectations of conquest without cost. And for soldiers, the horror and sacrifice of war, once shared consciously on the field of battle, has become pushed into the shadow and localized in the individual unconscious. If, as a culture, we choose (consciously or unconsciously) to continue to drift toward a military comprised of cubicle and computer-bound "war gamers" rather than sensorily-connected, archetypal Warriors, we risk further diffusing the sacrifice that war demands into the larger populace in more transparent, but also more pathological

forms. The commander of all U.S. forces in Afghanistan was recently quoted as saying,

"Air power contains the seeds of our own destruction if we do not use it responsibly. We

can lose this fight" (Oppel).

War, through our recognition and in deference to its awesome and destructive

power, ought to inspire reflection and responsibility, ought to push us to confront, as Jung

would have it, "…the living facts of the psyche" (CW10, ¶38). Whether or not the myth

governing our modern military, outpaced psychologically as it is by our new

technologies, can be reimagined to include considerations of the psychological effects of

"killing from home" remains to be seen.

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