‘vvv.nato.int.’: virtuousness, virtuality and virtuosity in NATO’s representation of the Kosovo campaign

Resist the probability of any image or information whatever.
Be more virtual than events themselves, do not seek to re-establish the truth,
we do not have the means, but do not be duped,
and to that end re-immere the war and all information
in the virtuality from whence they come.
Turn deterrence back against itself.
Be meteorologically sensitive to stupidity.¹

Introduction: reading preferences . . .

The Kosovo war did not take place. Jean Baudrillard’s diagnosis of the Gulf War also applies to this latest expression of organised violence in contemporary politics.² This is not to deny that death and destruction defined the reality in Kosovo and Serbia in the first half of 1999. After all, NATO planes delivered large amounts of ordnance upon targets in this area, destroying both military and civilian infrastructure; killing civilians as well as soldiers. And on the ground, Serb forces engaged in the mass expulsion and murder of the Albanian population in the province. To deny that a war took place therefore does not mean to deny the exercise of violence and the reality of human suffering in Kosovo. Nor, for that matter, did Baudrillard deny the suffering that was caused by the UN campaign against Iraq. His provocation that ‘the Gulf War did not take place’ needs, instead, to be understood as the articulation of two distinct, yet related, observations about the nature of organised violence in the new world order. Or, as this term is by now consigned to the dustbin of history, the post-Cold War order (perhaps best abbreviated as PoCoWO). Both observations are relevant for the critical engagement with ‘war’ beyond the case of the Gulf War. As I demonstrate in this essay, the Kosovo campaign lends further evidence to the suspicion that war as such no longer ‘takes place’, but that it has transmogrified into a different game with a different logic. There are two central
aspects of this strange state of non-war that Baudrillard captures in his own critical reflection.

First, the argument about the Gulf War not taking place expresses the insight that what happened during Operation Desert Storm was not a war in the traditional sense of a duel between two more or less equal antagonists, proceeding ‘from a political will to dominate or from a vital impulsion or an antagonistic violence’. For Clausewitz, war was the continuation of (national) politics by other means, a way in which to settle disputes between states. The Gulf War and NATO’s Operation Allied Force in the skies over Serbia and Kosovo, have changed this logic. Replacing the anarchical logic of war in which no side can claim to fight for more than its own interests, the ‘non-wars’ of the PoCoWO introduce a hierarchical rationale for the exercise of organised violence. Non-war ‘operates today on a global level which is conceived as an immense democracy governed by a homogenous order which has as its emblem the UN and the Rights of Man’. The Gulf War and, now, Operation Allied Force thus take on the nature of enforcement actions or police operations against (so-called) ‘rogue states’ violating the universal consensus which purportedly unites the ‘international community’ against such perpetrators. Moreover, Baudrillard argues that the hierarchical nature of the exercise of violence is reflected in the way these campaigns are actually conducted. Denying the other side the dignity of the ‘enemy’ by casting him as a rogue or criminal, ‘the Americans inflict a particular insult by not making war on the other but simply eliminating him’. Guided by the principles of precision or ‘surgical’ strikes, the air campaigns against both Iraq and Serbia do not engage the ‘other’ as an enemy on a common (battle)ground. Rather, the adversary is turned into the passive object of a methodical administration of violence. As Baudrillard adds: ‘We have seen what an ultra-modern process of electrocution is like, a process of paralysis or lobotomy of an experimental enemy away from the field of battle with no possibility of reaction. But this is not a war, any more than 10,000 tonnes of bombs per day is sufficient to make it a war.’

The second observation, expressed in the contention that the Gulf War did not take place, concerns the ‘virtualised’ nature of the conflict, its representation in a virtual system of signifiers. Unable to fix and localise the Gulf War, we are left with floating, intersecting, contradictory or mutually reinforcing bits and bytes of information ‘about’ an event, the reality of which itself can no longer be pinpointed and localised. As Paul Patton argues in his Introduction to Baudrillard’s *The Gulf War*, virtual war – the war over truth rather than territory – is by now an integral part of modern warfare: ‘state-of-the-art military power is now virtual in the sense that it is deployed in an abstract, electronic and informational space, and in the sense that its primary mechanism is no longer the use of force. Virtual war is therefore not simply the image of imaginary representation of real war, but a qualitatively different kind of war.’
Whatever real life ‘mudmoving’ took place in Iraq and in Serbia/Kosovo is only a part, and perhaps not the most important part, of a wider campaign in which the crucial battleground is the delocalised world of information networks, TV screens, newspaper articles and internet sites. It is on these grounds that the battles over the legitimacy, effectiveness and consequences are fought. Admissions of manipulated videos of Allied Force amount to defeats for NATO, while media reports about mass graves in Kosovo ‘confirm’ the legitimacy of the Alliance campaign *post facto*.

Some harsh criticism has been launched against Baudrillard’s pathomorphology as a typical example of postmodern excess. Christopher Norris, for instance, suggests that Baudrillard’s writings represent a kind of political theory characterised by ‘cynical acquiescence, ill-equipped to mount any kind of effective critical resistance’.9 To some extent, these criticisms can be understood as a response to the rhetorical hyperbole in the text and the polemical style in which Baudrillard tends to present his case. Yet this means only that much of the criticism focuses on the *means* of delivery, rather than the message itself, which, if we accept the above paraphrase, is far from revolutionary. The emergence of a hierarchical and discriminatory concept of war, as well as its inherent tendency to produce ‘total’ warfare, is an insight offered as early as 1938 by Carl Schmitt.10 Certainly, Schmitt could not possibly have anticipated the development of information technologies that make up the material infrastructure for PoCoWO’s virtual war. But he was acutely aware that such a discriminatory concept of war would project the conflict away from the battlefields of armour towards the battlefields of truth, on which the clash between ‘us’ and ‘them’, liberal democracy vs. rogue state, would take place. Moreover, Schmitt’s discussion of the legal and political consequences of discriminatory war makes it easier to place such critical reflections on the nature of war within an intellectual tradition. Above all, it becomes possible to place both the Gulf War and the Kosovo campaign within the context of a broader, more historically informed, discussion on the nature of liberalism and war. Most notably, Schmitt’s critique of the League of Nations and the criminalisation of war suggests that the most significant aspect of the Kosovo experience is not the extent to which the virtualisation of war has by now developed. Rather, the existing media and information technologies offer only a newer and more effective means by which to conduct such an epistemic war. The new quality of virtual war is but the latest phase in a centuries old tradition of conflict over knowledge and truth inherent to the liberal discriminatory concept of war. Obviously, this proposition deserves elaboration.

**Loading plug-ins: liberal truth against systemic anarchy**

To claim that the international system is anarchical is to give voice to a truism – a truism, however, that easily begs the question of what is meant by
‘anarchy’. The usual definition refers to the absence of any superior authority above and beyond the sovereign states that make up the international system. For neo-realists, anarchy is the quasi-objective structural constraint that forces states to maintain their independence and locks them into a perpetual state of war. For constructivists, anarchy ‘is what states make of it’, i.e. an intersubjective structure of mutually recognised state identities. Anarchy is thus the condition of possibility for a variety of relational complexes between states. In this definition, anarchy can be best understood as the absence of an authoritative voice that preordains the nature of interstate relations.

The notion of anarchy used in this chapter builds on the constructivist reading, and advances it. Constructivists ultimately cling to a realist epistemology within which they ground the proper, ‘scientific’ nature of their research projects by establishing the identity of states within a presocial atomistic realm. For the purpose of this essay, anarchy is understood as the absence of the very possibility of settling the question of a state’s identity beyond its sovereignty. More specifically, while constructivists emphatically assert the prepolitical identity of democracies and authoritarian regimes, the poststructuralist-informed approach, embraced in this essay, holds that the decision about ‘democratic’ and ‘authoritarian’ identities are, in fact, political decisions. In other words, they are contestable outcomes of knowledge/power games.

Anarchy as the absence of ‘voice’ entails the impossibility of any final depoliticised arbitration of claims to, and designation of, identities. The nature of war and its just (or unjust) character cannot be preordained. In an international system ruled by anarchy, wars are to be considered ‘just’ if they are conducted by recognised entities, i.e. sovereign states. As for the justness of the causes and purposes of war, the absence of ‘voice’ renders such judgement impossible.

To be sure, the United Nations Charter constitutes a significant intervention into this logic. Article 2.4 of the Charter postulates that states shall refrain from the threat or use of force in their relations. War, in other words, is a breach of international law, and the illegality of the cause and the identity of the perpetrator are ascertained by the UN Security Council, according to Chapter VII of the Charter. In its ultimate consequence, this delegitimises the traditional notion of war as the sovereign prerogative of states. Either war has become illegal as a breach of the UN Charter, or it becomes, as authorised by the UN Security Council, an execution, sanction, or enforcement of international law. War as a duel between states has been replaced by a discriminatory concept in which the warring state becomes a ‘criminal’ or rogue state.

Although the UN Charter constitutes a major modification of the law of war, the Western imagination goes much further: whereas the Charter allows only the post facto identification of a ‘criminal’ state (namely, after it has breached international law), institutionalised Western knowledge
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attempts to render judgement about the identity of states before they act. To simplify and exaggerate the argument found in democratic peace theory and NATO’s political discourse, as well as among strategic pundits on CNN et al.: some states are evil by nature, regardless of their actual conduct; and while those ‘rogue states’ cannot do right, the West, as the community that carries the beacon of universally recognised (if not always realised) values, cannot do wrong. The West’s intervention in Kosovo expresses this logic in a dramatic fashion: for the first time, a Western security organisation has taken military action against a sovereign country that has not attacked any of that organisation’s members. Moral and humanitarian standards, rather than national interest, were offered as the rationale for this campaign.

On one level, this has been discussed as a prima facie breach of international law. More relevant for the purpose of this essay, however, is NATO’s express claim to represent a superior ‘community of values’ which would authorise it to conduct such military acts of violence against other, ‘lesser’, states. NATO presents itself as an agent with a humanitarian purpose and moral values, untainted by politics, power and persuasion, which notions are now replaced by such concepts as morality, authority and force.

NATO has conducted an epistemic war to secure its privileged moral status, fighting against the systemic anarchy of the international system, the inherent ambivalence and undecidability that necessitates and demands the political designation of identity (a demand which even the UN Charter is unable to erase). The vehemence of the Alliance’s cyberwar, and its assertive retaliation against any doubts about the virtuousness of Operation Allied Force, should be understood in this context. Cyberwar (as the postmodern expression of epistemic war) is waged in ‘an abstract, electronic and informational space’, and provides the perfect strategy for this purpose. For power to remain virtuous and exemplary, it needs to be virtual. Virtuousness–virtuality–virtuosity constitute the Holy Trinity of information warfare, a war waged against the ambivalence and undecidability of the anarchical international system. In order to impose order – its order – upon the heterogeneity of the international realm of politics, the Western imagination pursues a doubletrack strategy in which ‘liberalism’ (or ‘liberal democracy’) is instated as the site and sight of knowledge. Liberalism provides the cognitive vantage-point from which to survey and map global politics, as well as the geopolitical space in which supreme political, social and cultural values and norms have been realised. Liberal theory (which focuses on democratic peace theory) provides ammunition for the first track, supporting the political or politicised representations of ‘the West’ in its claim to moral and political superiority.

Yet, politics is messy; war is messy. The first victim in war, it is (too) often said, is ‘truth’. But this insight should be deepened, since war also demonstrates the very impossibility of truth in the international system as that system defies the possibility of a totalising global regime of ultimate
knowledge. If truth is always indebted to power, then the boundaries of sovereignty delineate its realm. It also implies that the universalising impetus of the liberal project sustains a war against those forces that get in the way of its success. Any outside involvement in the messy realities of war has to be purified and made virtuous through virtualisation.

In the following section, I analyse NATO’s virtuoso campaign to virtualise Operation Allied Force in order to represent itself as the virtuous actor in the messy reality of war. This analytical strategy thus makes use of the weakest link in the triad of virtuousness–virtuality–virtuosity by appreciating and exploiting the obvious virtuosity of the campaign, its skilful performance in daily press conferences, in the media and, above all, on the internet. The focus of this investigation will be the site where the three V’s come together in the most unadulterated fashion, namely NATO’s internet site. The target of this investigation is, so to speak, the www.nato.int-site. Access is granted, however, only via the alias of vvv.nato.int-site.

Looking up host: www.nato.int

On NATO’s homepage, under the heading ‘NATO’s role in Kosovo’ and a colour map of the Balkan area with Kosovo designated by a red circle, we find an overview of briefings and background information made available during the air campaign (25 March–10 June) as well as up-to-date (11 June–) information on the UN-mandated international peacekeeping force (Kosovo Force, KFOR).

Host found; waiting for reply . . .

A click on the ‘air campaign’-link loads the main page http://www.nato.int/kosovo/all-force.htm. This page provides hypertext links to ‘operational updates’, ‘morning briefings’, ‘press briefings’, and to ‘maps and aerial views’; ‘video material and high quality photos are available separately’. More interesting than the listed dates of briefings, however, are the graphic illustrations that are scattered across the page. On top of the page, a banner provides the context of this and connected sites: NATO’s emblem on the left side is linked with an image of a stream of refugees on the right side.

Figure 1 NATO banner
Linking ‘NATO’ and the Kosovar refugees is a white arc against a blue background, reminiscent of fighter-jet trailers and hinting at the shape of a rainbow. At one end we find the disaster that took place in Kosovo, with the agent that came to set things to rights at the other. The imagery of the pageheader therefore already provides us with the general frame through which Allied Force is represented: the Kosovo crisis as a human disaster, NATO as a distant and aloof organisation working for the good cause, and air power as the means of intervention in the ‘Kosovo crisis’. Just below the header, the means of intervention and its successes are proudly displayed: an F-15 takes to the skies, pregnant with weaponry. Under the heading ‘Air Operations’ the challenge is described: ‘12 × SAMs Launched’; at the bottom of the picture we find the statement of ultimate success: ‘All NATO Aircraft Returned Safely.’

NATO is here represented by one of its finest pieces of weaponry and identified through the apparent impunity with which it was able to execute its strategy. (Although one should note that 12 surface-to-air missile launches as against 37,465 NATO sorties hardly seems to amount to a convincing challenge17). Further images depict the actors engaged in their ritualised briefings: Jamie Shea, NATO spokesman; General Wesley K. Clark, SACEUR; and Javier Solana, NATO secretary-general. On this page, NATO puts on its civilised, open face, delivering information rather than explosives, engaging the media audience, rather than its enemy. Its voice comes alive when we click our way through the hypertext links.

First in the offering is a ‘historical overview’ aimed at setting out NATO’s role in relation to the conflict in Kosovo.

Reading file . . .

Kosovo, NATO tells us, ‘lies in southern Serbia and has a mixed population of which the majority are ethnic Albanians’. Until 1989, there had been general peace in the area. However, ‘Serbian leader Slobodan Milosevic altered the status of the region, removing its autonomy and bringing it under the direct control of Belgrade, the Serbian capital’. This action by Milosevic, NATO suggests, was at the core of the conflict between the Serbs and the Kosovar Albanians, as the latter ‘strenuously opposed the move’. According to this text, the conflict became a matter of concern for the international community in 1998. The escalation of the conflict, its ‘humanitarian
consequences, and the risk of it spreading to other countries’, as well as ‘President Milosevic’s disregard for diplomatic efforts . . . and the destabilising role of militant Kosovar Albanians’, forced the West to pay attention and, ultimately, to become actively involved.

In light of these developments, in May 1998, NATO set ‘two major objectives’, namely, to:
• ‘help to achieve a peaceful resolution of the crisis by contributing to the response of the international community’; and
• ‘promote stability and security in neighbouring countries with particular emphasis on Albania and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia’.

As the conflict parties were apparently unimpressed by NATO’s concern, on 13 October 1998, ‘following a deterioration of the situation, the NATO Council authorised Activation Orders for air strikes’ in order to make the ‘Milosevic regime’ withdraw its forces from Kosovo. Under a heavy diplomatic barrage, Milosevic caved in and the ‘air strikes were called off’.

The rest of the pre-air-strike narrative provides a tale of institutional networking, with hypertext links to UN Security Council Resolutions 1199 and 1203, to the Contact Group, as well as to the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). NATO supported the OSCE by providing a military task force for use in a possible emergency evacuation of members of the Kosovo Verification Mission (KVM), and ‘supported and reinforced the Contact Group efforts by agreeing on 30 January [1999] to the use of air strikes if required’. These concerted efforts found their climax in the Rambouillet negotiations in February–March 1999, near Paris. The Kosovar Albanians signed the ‘proposed peace agreement, but the talks broke up without a signature from the Serbian delegation’. The NATO website argues that ‘[i]mmediately afterwards Serbian military and police forces stepped up the intensity of their operations against the ethnic Albanians in Kosovo, [and] tens of thousands of people began to flee their homes’. As a result the OSCE’s KVM pulls out of Yugoslavia and NATO aeroplanes take to the skies.

There is nothing intrinsically wrong with this rendition of the Kosovo crisis. But every narrative presents its subject matter in one version rather than another; every narrative is told from a particular perspective, emphasising certain features, while omitting others. In the context of political language, such narratives become resources of power, as they outline the context of political action, assign responsibility, designate identities and legitimise (and, ipso facto, delegitimise) certain political strategies. However, their effectiveness as power resources depends on the assumption that they refer to, and properly reflect, a given ‘reality’. In order to problematise this status and to highlight the power resources’ contingent character, it is ‘standard operational procedure’ in the critical approach to contrast so-called ‘ruling discourses’ with alternative ones. One of the purposes of this essay is to demonstrate that a particular narrative provides only one
'construction of reality', which inevitably distributes power, responsibility and agency within a single structure. This strategy is not without pitfalls, since the temptation exists to compile about an event a portfolio of narratives which may produce a meta-narrative of a rather dubious epistemic character. Alternatively, one might easily smuggle in assumptions about a closer proximity to reality when presenting alternative discourses and dismissing the investigated narrative as 'ideological'. To avoid such misunderstandings, let me say here that I do not intend to contrast NATO's narrative about the Kosovo crisis with a 'better', or more 'accurate', one. The following references to alternative texts should serve simply as the background which may bring certain problematic aspects of NATO's rendition of 'Kosovo' into stronger relief.

To begin with, there is the particular timeframe within which NATO's discourse places the events of 'Kosovo'. To argue that the conflict became a concern for the 'international community' in 1998, obviously omits the developments in and around Kosovo before that year, a period in which the 'international community' was heavily involved. One possible way to problematise this omission is to import a discussion of the effects of the Dayton Agreement in our debate about 'Kosovo'. Mark Danner, among others, has argued that the United States government was since 1992 aware of the impending crisis in Kosovo. In April 1993, Secretary of State Warren Christopher stated:

We fear that if the Serbian influence extends into [Kosovo or Macedonia], it will bring into the fray other countries in the region – Albania, Greece, Turkey… So the stakes for the United States are to prevent the broadening of that conflict to bring in our NATO allies, and to bring in vast sections of Europe, and perhaps, as happened before, broadening into a world war.

It appears that even before 1998, Kosovo had become a matter of serious concern for the 'international community'. Interestingly enough, the 1995 Dayton Agreement failed to address the issues which were so dramatically identified by Christopher. In Dayton, ‘the Americans were in a hurry: they needed a Bosnia agreement, only Milosevic could deliver it to them, and he knew it; and he would brook no diplomatic meddling in what was unquestionable “Serb land”’. Dayton's non-decision on Kosovo, and the willingness of the 'international community’ to reach an agreement with Milosevic at the cost of ostracising Kosovo from the negotiation agenda, proved to have severe consequences. As Noel Malcolm writes, the Kosovar Albanian leader Ibrahim Rugova had justified his insistence on a non-violent strategy against Serbia’s oppression by ‘telling his people, in effect, that they must be patient until the international community imposed a final settlement on ex-Yugoslavia, in which their interests would also be respected. But that settlement…left the Albanians of Kosovo exactly where they were’.
Consequently, the failure to address the Kosovo issue during the Dayton negotiations contributed to the instability of the area and the subsequent escalation of violence, not least through the strengthening of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA). From this perspective, the ‘international community’ was most certainly involved in the Kosovo crisis long before 1998 – and in a less than helpful fashion.

But there is another aspect of the temporal frame within NATO’s historical narrative which deserves critical attention. According to this text, the troubles began in 1989 when Milosevic ‘altered the status of the region’, taking away Kosovo’s autonomy and imposing direct rule from Belgrade. While one need not downplay Milosevic’s role in the Kosovo drama, this particular timeframe excludes the long history of friction between Serbs and Albanians in the region, as well as the centuries of Great Power games that have played a part in the region’s circumstances. By limiting the historical framework of the conflict from 1989 to 1998, Milosevic’s role and responsibility are blown out of proportion: Rather than being one actor in a longstanding conflict with its own dynamic and mythology, he is now rendered as the agent who directly brought about the Kosovo conflagration.

Apart from the temporal framing of the conflict, NATO’s institutional networking deserves attention. Although NATO’s website wants to create the impression that its air campaign was ‘linked’ to a United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolution and has received broad interorganisational support, it should be remembered that a broad consensus exists among legal experts that Allied Force was a *prima facie* breach of international law. To be sure, the UN had identified the situation in Kosovo as a ‘threat to peace and security in the region’ (UNSC Resolution 1199). Yet, it had also reaffirmed that ‘under the Charter of the United Nations, primary responsibility for the maintenance of international peace and security is conferred on the Security Council’ (UNSC Resolution 1203). NATO was authorised only to conduct an ‘Air Verification Mission over Kosovo’ in accordance with an agreement between Yugoslavia and the OSCE. However, even taken together, these resolutions failed to add up to a solid legal basis for NATO’s Operation Allied Force.

Finally, the sparse treatment of the Rambouillet negotiations hardly does justice to the political and diplomatic processes that are now known to have taken place there. NATO contrasts the Kosovar Albanians as cooperative signatories to the agreement, with the Serbian delegation stubbornly unwilling to come to an accord. We now know that this is offering a cartoon of what happened in Rambouillet, since from the outset there was very little room for genuine negotiation over the draft agreement presented to the conflict parties. As the representative of the European Union (EU) has declared: ‘80% of our ideas will be simply whipped through (*durchgepeitscht*)’. Nor did the proceedings resemble the usual negotiation process between sovereign states. The delegations from Kosovo and from Belgrade...
were 'interned', and contact with the media was prohibited; leaving without signing was forbidden. The Serb resistance to the Rambouillet dictate apparently centred on the military Annex B, which would have granted NATO forces 'unrestricted passage and unimpeded access throughout the FRY including associated airspace and territorial waters'. Bearing in mind this peculiarity in the set-up of the Rambouillet 'negotiations', the Serbian refusal to accept this agreement may be easier to understand. At a minimum, it raises questions about NATO’s own responsibility for the failure of the negotiations – questions made impossible by the rendition which NATO offers on its vvv-site.

So much for the prelude to Allied Force. The ‘historical overview’ goes on to provide hyperlinks to a day-to-day account of the actual air campaign, and a short summary of the aftermath of the Kosovo crisis. Here the narrative once again enmeshes NATO actions within an authorising network of international institutions in which the UN plays a privileged role. A number of UNSC resolutions are available via hyperlink, as are the ‘general principles’ of the G8 – a group which also includes the Russian Federation – and the ‘paper’ presented by the representatives of the EU and the Russian Federation in Belgrade on 3 June 1999. Perhaps even more interesting is the narrative’s efforts to frame Operation Joint Guardian (i.e. the deployment of military forces following the end of the air campaign and the re-establishment of order and security in Kosovo) as a ‘humanitarian effort’. NATO’s account of its post-bombing operations focuses on the efforts ‘to relieve the suffering of the many thousands of refugees forced to flee Kosovo by the Serbian ethnic cleansing campaign’. Moreover, NATO had ‘built refugee camps’, moved ‘hundreds of tons of humanitarian aid’, and coordinated ‘humanitarian aid flights’. These ‘facts and figures’ that conclude the ‘historical overview’ stand in sharp contrast with the atrocities committed by Serb forces. But, it might be remarked, NATO’s current efforts to alleviate the plight of the victims and refugees also stand in sharp contrast to its own earlier bombing campaign.

Again, the point here cannot be to ‘prove’ NATO wrong, or to present a ‘more correct’ account of Operation Joint Guardian. But for the purpose of this essay it is important to point out the way in which NATO is removing itself from the ambiguity of the Kosovo reality. To turn the operation into a straightforward humanitarian effort in effect depoliticises it: it bestows upon it a legitimacy that is not immediately available to a military intervention; it silences the political and diplomatic preconditions and consequences of the deployment of NATO-led military forces in a sovereign state; it pacifies the Kosovo population into passive recipients of international humanitarian aid, thus depriving it of political agency. And, finally, it ostracises from the plot the fact that some 500 civilians died in NATO’s air campaign, which makes it arguably a somewhat less than humanitarian action.
Cache clean-up . . .

The hyperlink to ‘Operation Allied Force’ within this narrative takes the reader to the transcripts of seventy-seven days of operational updates, morning briefings and press briefings, as well as the accompanying ‘maps and aerial views’. This page also offers access to NATO’s densely woven strategic construction of the Kosovo reality. In other words, this page records the daily battles on the frontline of NATO’s information warfare. To those interested in strategic discourse as practised at the end of the twentieth century, a plethora of rhetorical strategies, metaphors and analogies here offer themselves for critical study. My purpose here is to identify the distribution of responsibility and the designation of ‘evil’ in NATO’s evolving discourse on the Kosovo campaign. Especially important are NATO’s rhetorical gestures to extricate itself from responsibility for the death and destruction in Serbia and Kosovo in an effort to preserve its claim to the moral high ground offered to it by the liberal project. Only by maintaining this high ground can NATO legitimise its actions as the enforcer of humanitarian values that exceed the boundaries of political power and which therefore cannot be restricted or rejected by invoking the privilege of sovereignty. Yet, as Operation Allied Force has demonstrated, enforcing these moral standards by military force also kills innocent people and destroys civilian targets. The reality of ‘moral combat’ is never as clean as its purpose. This tension has to be resolved in order to avoid the former undermining and debilitating the latter.

One prominent rhetorical strategy used in the press briefings by NATO spokesperson Shea and the representatives of the military is to condense the ‘responsibility for evil’ within the person of Milosevic. This contraction of responsibility has been a central mechanism by which NATO has sought to morally justify its actions. Firstly, it has allowed the Alliance to blame Milosevic for the death and destruction that NATO has brought to Serbia and Kosovo. Secondly, it has sought to drive a wedge between the Serb people and its leader, allowing NATO to claim that in fact the Serbs themselves are victims of Milosevic. Finally, this individualisation of guilt supports NATO’s claim that it did not conduct a ‘war’ against Yugoslavia: ‘NATO is not waging a war against the Yugoslav people, to the contrary’ (press briefing [PB], 25 March 1999). NATO’s aim is ‘to stop the war and to guarantee that peace is a reality for a country that has been suffering from war for many, many, years’ (PB, 25 March 1999). Free of the onus of war, NATO’s action is the legitimate execution of the ‘logic of the UN Security Council’. Given this non-adversarial purpose, ‘the great majority of the Serbs would be only too happy to see NATO come in and provide security, stability, stop the fighting, guarantee basic human rights’ (PB, 28 March 1999).
NATO has sympathy for the people of Yugoslavia. Ten years ago, when the Berlin Wall came down, any economist looking at the map of Europe would have probably designated Yugoslavia as the country emerging in the post-communist period which was most likely to rapidly catch up with the Western European mainstream. It was a wealthy country. People had private bank accounts, they went skiing in Austria and Switzerland, it was a very civilised country indeed and many people obviously went there on holiday and enjoyed it.

In this reading of events, Serbia’s fall from grace was at the making of ‘Milosevic’, who single-handedly turned Yugoslavia into a ‘pariah state’. ‘It’s Milosevic who has isolated a great people from the European mainstream where it belongs and this is a tragedy of course for the whole region but first and foremost for the people of Yugoslavia themselves’ (PB, 4 April 1999). Thus, in fighting ‘Milosevic’, NATO is fighting for the Serbs too – even if the current situation has led to a temporary ‘upsurge of nationalism in Serbia itself’. However, once back on the track of rationality, the Serbs would come to realise that NATO will ‘help Yugoslavia emerge from this status of a pariah state and take the place in Europe which the people’s greatness and ingeniosiy [sic] deserves, quite frankly’ (PB, 7 April 1999).

The price for this prospect of peace and prosperity is to endure the ‘strategic bombing’ of civilian targets such as power plants and electricity supplies. However, the ensuing ‘inconvenience’ of power cut-offs ‘is nothing compared with the day-to-day misery of that kind of economic meltdown which we have seen at the hands of Milosevic since he came to power’. After all, between 1990 and 1998

Serbian industrial production shrank by 50 per cent . . . Unemployment, the official figure is 27 per cent . . . and more realistically is probably double that. We know that salaries and pensions are paid late . . . 72 per cent of the 1999 budget is planned for defence-related spending. By the way, these are World Bank and IMF figures, I haven’t made them up.

Shea could therefore argue that being bombed, day in, day out, was preferable to living a peaceful life in the misery of ‘Milosevic’s’ Yugoslavia.

But the price was paid not only by enduring power cuts and blacked-out TV screens. NATO killed civilians in its bombing campaign; or, in its own terms, NATO was regrettably unable to avoid ‘collateral damage’. As NATO explained from the outset, should civilian casualties occur, the responsibility is on the shoulders of President Milosevic for having manoeuvred, cornered – whatever you like to call it – the international community into a situation where it has had no alternative but to take action and whatever the situation, let’s not lose sight of the general context, we are acting because already there have been too many civilian casualties in Yugoslavia, thousands of them dead, and infinitely larger numbers of people who have lost their livelihoods, their incomes, their work, their families, through the violence
that has happened and it’s in order to prevent this overall situation of a humanitarian catastrophe within the borders, and outside the borders of Yugoslavia because of the refugee overspill, that we are acting, so yes of course and I again stress that we will do everything, everything we can to avoid civilian casualties, but let us at least not lose sight of the overall context which has made this necessary.30

The rambling presentation of this case already betrays the discomfort with which this challenge to the basic canons of ethics is being delivered. But NATO has continued to use this argument: the death and destruction caused by NATO bombs were to be blamed on ‘Milosevic’. As a consequence, NATO itself bears no responsibility for the death and destruction it has brought to Serbia and Kosovo. Freed of any presumption of malevolence, the ‘collateral damage’ produced by NATO pilots is represented as a victim of circumstances created by ‘Milosevic’. Given the limits of this essay, a discussion of a single case will have to do to demonstrate NATO’s strategies of ‘ethical cleansing’.

On 14 April 1999, some 70 Albanian civilians were killed and some 100 wounded when NATO pilots bombed a convoy on a road near Djakovica.31 After initial denials of responsibility and suggestions that this was yet another Serbian atrocity, NATO admitted one day later that one of its own pilots had caused the disaster. Responsibility for the deaths, however, was once again deflected. Firstly, the fact that the pilot was a NATO pilot absolved him from any element of evil. It was argued that he ‘dropped his bomb in good faith, as you would expect a trained pilot from a democratic NATO country to do’ (PB, 15 April 1999). His identity as a representative of the morally supreme institution obviously immunised him from any taint of responsibility. Bombing the convoy was an honest mistake – a mistake that, given the morally superior identity and purpose of NATO, had to be excused. Secondly, this ‘mistake’ is represented as a contingency of war. After all, ‘no conflict in human history has ever been accident free, or will ever be’ (PB, 15 April 1999). Regrettable as they are, such accidents will happen, they are part of any conflict. And, finally, culpability is established, as the original source of the evil is once again conjured.

But I would also like to ask in this connection two questions. First, why was a refugee convoy escorted by Serb military vehicles on the Prizren–Djakovica road at 3.00 o’clock yesterday afternoon in the first place? Why weren’t the people in their homes, at their jobs, going about their normal lives? Why were they en route to the border? Because they had been forced from their homes and because they were on their way to joining the 580,000 Kosovar Albanians that have already been expelled from Kosovo. My second question: why was a NATO pilot 15,000 feet up in the air yesterday afternoon over Kosovo? Because along with about 1,000 other NATO pilots, he was risking his life every day to stop human suffering in Kosovo and to allow these 580,000 refugees to be able to go back home.32
Responsibility for the deaths of some seventy Kosovar civilians is located, therefore, in the ‘force’ that drove them out into NATO’s bombsights, and not within NATO itself.

The three rhetorical strategies found in this case – the assumption of essential moral superiority; the reference to the contingencies of war; and the projection of culpability for NATO’s killings onto ‘Milosevic’ – represent the structure for NATO’s designation of responsibility during Operation Allied Force. Whenever ‘collateral damage’ threatened to taint the image of NATO as the moral agent in a humanitarian effort, these strategies are used to ethically cleanse the Alliance and to maintain the legitimacy of its actions. After all, in the vast majority of the attacks, legitimate targets were effectively destroyed. Or so the video images that appears hyperlinked in the seventy-seven-day narrative suggests.

‘All video sequences are available in MPEG’

NATO’s internet site collects 112 of these video sequences. During the daily Press Briefings, these videos were used to provide evidence of NATO’s ability to strike at Yugoslav forces in Kosovo and to hamper their genocidal campaign against the Kosovar Albanians.53 Taken out of this context and accessed via the internet, these videoclips produce their own peculiar narrative of what ‘really’ happened during the Kosovo war.

It comes as no surprise that the execution of military violence is cleansed of the mishaps and disasters that in the end cost the lives of about 500 civilians. Reminiscent of videogame simulations, NATO’s imagery produces the impression of hygienic effectiveness: only military targets are hit, and all targets are destroyed: Jeder Schuß ein Treffer.
As a matter of perspective, the videoclips show the exercise of a just violence in the deliverance from evil. The spectator is in the position of the pilot who is following the laser-guided missile to its target, its bright flash indicating successful delivery. The actual consequences of the attack, the destruction and death it wreaks, cannot be captured by this vantage-point. What we see are blurred and shaky images of tanks, armoured personnel carriers and planes, captured in the crosshairs of the bombsight. Seconds later, these instruments of genocide and death are destroyed. No ‘collateral damage’ taints the reiterated images of grey shades, crosshairs and the ultimate explosion.34

The video images reinforce NATO’s claim to have conducted a moral campaign in which ‘collateral damage’ is the regrettable, if unavoidable, exception to the rule of a just and hygienic war. As the video footage is supposed to prove, NATO aimed to destroy the tools of Milosevic’s genocidal campaign, and in the end forced him to surrender. Or maybe not? Perhaps what we see in many of these blurred images is the destruction of rubber decoys and fake bridge constructions. Perhaps Serbian cunning added another twist to NATO’s simulation of moral warfare, by also simulating the required destruction of its war machine.

Conclusion: vvv.nato.int: host not found . . .

The Kosovo war did not take place. What did take place was the enforcement of universally held humanitarian values by a morally privileged agent (known as NATO), against a rogue leader (named ‘Milosevic’). In this campaign, the lines were clear: liberalism confronted one of the last vestiges of autocracy and dictatorship in Europe; humanitarian values confronted genocide; virtue did battle with crime. And, in the end, morality triumphed over politics. No national or institutional interests, no concern for the balance-of-power or the supply of natural resources, drove NATO’s action. As the agent of a community of liberal and democratic states that defines the epitome of civilisational standards, NATO faces no equals against which it can wage ‘war’ in the traditional sense. Consequently, war is replaced by enforcement; diplomacy is replaced by ultimata; and politics is substituted by moral rectitude.

Yet, to maintain the virtuousness of NATO’s actions is only possible within the realm of the virtual. Only when its verbal representation is controlled, structured and disseminated by spin-doctors and clever spokespersons, only when the visual ‘evidence’ is presented in the form of videogames, only when we stay within the framework of this de-ontologised version of warfare, can NATO’s claims be sustained. Outside of this framework, confronted with the consequences of NATO’s inscription of universalist order upon Yugoslavia, a different reality emerges.
It was Friday, May 7, 1999, in the city of Nis, in southern Serbia, and Nato had made a mistake. Instead of hitting a military building near the airport about three miles away, the bombers had dropped their lethal load in a tangle of back streets close to the city centre. At least 33 people were killed and scores more suffered catastrophic injuries: hands, feet and arms shredded or blown away altogether, abdomens and chests ripped open by shards of flying metal. This had been no ‘ordinary’ shelling, if such a thing exists. The area had been hit by cluster bombs, devices designed to cause a deadly spray of hot metal fragments when they explode.35

It is this representation that NATO’s virtual simulation of virtuous warfare is supposed to suppress in order to maintain the legitimacy of its purpose and action. As Shea admitted: ‘This was the first media war: all journalists were also soldiers. Part of my task was to provide them with ammunition in order to demonstrate the sincerity of our motives and actions. After the bomb misses and the death of civilians, this became more problematic.’36

Virtuous warfare does not accept any responsibility for evil on its own part. Virtuous warfare is warfare against evil. Based on a totalising ideology that invokes universal values and norms as the justification for all its actions, this kind of warfare tends to become total in its conduct. Neither the death of innocent people nor the principles of international law can stand in its way. In this sense, Baudrillard is certainly right: We should be ‘meteorologically sensitive’ to this development.

Notes

2 Ibid.
3 Ibid., p. 83.
4 Ibid.
5 Ibid., p. 40.
6 Ibid., p. 61.
7 Ibid., p. 41.
9 Cited in ibid., p. 15.
12 Schmitt, Die Wendung zum diskriminierenden Kriegsbegriff, p. 42.
14 For instance, Dinner Speech by NATO Secretary-General Lord Robertson, International Institute for Strategic Studies, London, 22 March 2000, where Robertson condemns ‘the voice of revisionism’ in the media which dares to reject NATO’s representation of its Kosovo campaign as a full-fledged success. Text of the speech is available: http://www.nato.int/docu/speech/2000/s000322b.htm

15 Baudrillard, The Gulf War, p. 56.

16 The virtuoso nature of this campaign was aptly revealed by its main actor, NATO spokesperson Jamie Shea, in numerous speeches and presentations to think-tanks and PR agencies, where he discussed the problems of ‘communications strategy in modern warfare’, and ‘selling a war’. See, for example, Centre for European Policy Studies, ‘Lessons of the Kosovo Conflict: Communication Strategy in Modern Warfare’, available: http://www.euronet.be/ceps/Commentary/Webnotes/130300.htm (accessed 3 August 2000); and ‘‘Wie man einen Krieg verkauft’’; NATO-Sprecher Shea über sein Konzept’, Der Standard, 30 March 2000.

17 For the number of sorties, see Wesley K. Clark, ‘When Force Is Necessary; NATO’s Military Response to the Kosovo Crisis’, NATO Review, no. 2 (summer 1999), p. 14.


21 Ibid.


27 One should also point out that NATO did not kill anybody in this war: the Alliance ‘degraded’, ‘disrupted’, ‘devastated’, ‘knocked the stuffing out of’ and ‘destroyed’, but never killed. For a further discussion, see Pertti Joenniemi’s contribution to this volume.

28 NATO, press briefing, 4 April 1999.
29 Ibid.
31 Human Rights Watch, ‘Civilian Deaths in the NATO Air Campaign’, and Amnesty International, ‘“Collateral Damage” or Unlawful Killings?’
32 NATO, press briefing, 15 April 1999.
33 Subsequent reviews suggest that NATO was bombing more rubber than steel since it hit mostly decoys rather than real tanks. See John Barry and Evan Thomas, ‘The Kosovo Cover Up’, Newsweek, 7 May 2000; and Reiner Luyken, ‘Das Täuschungsmanöver’, Die Zeit, 4 May 2000. The video sequences can be accessed at: http://www.nato.int/kosovo/video.htm.
34 There is one notable exception to this rule: the video sequence accessed at http://www.nato.int/video/990413d.mpg shows the destruction of a train that crosses a targeted bridge at the moment of a NATO attack. Interestingly, NATO showed this video sequence at its daily press briefing at nearly three times its normal speed. At the same time, NATO’s Supreme Commander Wesley Clark explained to the audience that the video demonstrated how the pilot of the F-15E conducting the strike had aimed at an empty bridge and that the train appeared ‘too quickly’ for him to abort the attack. See Roberto Suro, ‘Bombing Tape Called Flawed’, Washington Post, 7 January 2000.
36 Quoted in ‘Der etwas andere Krieg’, Der Spiegel, 10 January 2000.