

Stéphane Degoutin and Gwenola Wagon

Dance Party in Iraq

Video installation. Video triptych, colour, 4/3, mute

A strange, viral trend appeared during the wars in Iraq and in Afghanistan: soldiers began to film themselves dancing to pop music, both on the battlefield and in the barracks. For a number of years we have been collecting all the videos we could find of these dancing soldiers.

The images before us are images of war, but they're not the images we would expect. They never show any form of violence or conflict. On the contrary, on some of them—almost a third of all the videos we could find—the dancing seems to be used as a peaceful way to interact with the local population. On other videos, though, the behaviour of the soldiers seems despicable.

Dance Party in Iraq shows these opposing situations, which are sometimes troubling or disturbing.

Marines Go Home

Dance Party in Iraq is a film made up entirely of videos gathered from the Internet. A strange, viral trend appeared during the American-led wars in Iraq and in Afghanistan; soldiers began to film themselves dancing to pop music, both on the battlefield and in the barracks.

For a number of years we have been collecting all the videos we could find on the Internet of these dancing soldiers serving in Iraq and Afghanistan. Initially, such videos were rare, but gradually a trend took off. Many of the films imitate music videos. One of them in particular, Dance Party in Iraq, experienced enormous viral success and inspired further amateur video-makers; music video remakes are very common. We decided to reuse the title of this viral video for our project.

The images before us are images of war, but they're not the images we would expect. They never show any form of violence or conflict. On the contrary, in some of them—almost a third of all the videos we could find—the dancing seems to be used as a peaceful way to interact with the local population. On other videos, though, the behaviour of the soldiers seems despicable. We edited the sequences to show these opposing situations, which are sometimes troubling or disturbing.

The images are real and striking as a result of this. Yet, at times it feels as though we are somewhere else, far away from the battlefield. One might almost think the videos were filmed at some party in the USA.

Most of the videos show American Marines, but sometimes also the British Armed Forces. For the most part the videos are first published on Facebook, then copied several times from one server to another before they emerge on a public server, usually YouTube. The name of the YouTube user is rarely connected to the original maker of the video, making it very difficult to identify the source. All too frequently the images tend to be misty, jumpy, and grainy, owing to blurring from compression artifacts.

Some of these videos have been watched by millions of people, some have been seen only by a few dozen, whilst others have been removed from public servers, most likely because of their offensive nature. By collecting all the videos we could find, we have attempted to provide a comprehensive view of this strange phenomenon.

The videos display all the tools of the best-equipped army in the world: cannons, machine guns, assault tanks, helicopters, bazookas, Kalashnikovs, grenades, mortars, missiles, and technical clothes. The outdoor scenes are set in cities in ruins, deserts, Afghan mountains, and fields tilled by peasants, while the indoor scenes are staged in barracks, tents, dormitories, showers—even inside tanks and helicopters, allowing us a glimpse into the day-to-day lives of the soldiers.

Pop Music = Home

These images have nothing in common with the idea of heroic war, nor with the mechanical violence praised by Marinetti, nor with the horrors of Guernica, but rather more with films like MASH or Apocalypse Now.

In *This is How We Win Wars*, the video camera captures a fragment of the desert in the full sun. Some soldiers are beginning to move their bodies, they light a fire, then another group joins them and they start to dance and gesticulate all over the place. They throw off their equipment and clothes, and dance around and jump over the fire, half naked in front of the camera. Then, as the excitement dies out, they put their clothes back on, while some of them continue to jump over the fire.

The conflict in Afghanistan is the longest in which the US Army has been involved since the Vietnam War. Speaking of his intentions in making *Apocalypse Now*, director Francis Ford Coppola explained that he had wanted to film a rock-and-roll war: to film the cohabitation of war and rock and roll. This is evident from the monstrous effects of dissonance upon which the film relies: napalm bombings set to the music of Wagner or massacres with added rhythm provided by the Rolling Stones' *Satisfaction*. In much the same way, war may seem strangely unreal and distanced for the American recruits in Iraq or Afghanistan.

The video titles speak primarily of boredom: *Bored in Afghanistan*, *Bored Marines*, *Bored Bored Marines*, *Bored as Hell*, *Lonely Nights in Afghanistan*, etc. They tell of the days spent waiting, of empty time and deserted spaces where the soldiers try to move, to fill the space with their frenzied dances. It's an attempt to occupy time and space, as expressed in the telling title of the following video: *1 Month Left Dance in Afghanistan*.

The soldiers find themselves disconnected from the territory into which they have been projected, disconnected from the history and culture in the midst of which they find themselves, stuck in static wars of attrition whose official images remove all trace of blood and violence.

Separated from their country for extended periods, they seek to recover an extension of themselves from the music. The nostalgia for pop culture felt by these young dancers is palpable. It is thrown back at us in the false hilarity of music video parodies. They dance to Michael Jackson, Britney Spears, Justin Bieber, Lady Gaga (*Bad Romance* *Marines* and *Lady GAGA Repeal Don't Ask Don't Tell*). Playing a hit song which takes them back home, all the while a million miles away, dancing their culture to reassure themselves.

Dance of Death and Transgression

In some videos, the soldiers perfectly imitate female pop stars. They adopt their moves in displays verging on the burlesque and featuring evocative gestures. They shake about like teenage girls. In an environment of intense stress and anguish, dance seems to be the ultimate transgression, the last mission. It is the moment where they can play at something other than war in order to pass the time, which has grown oppressive and, even, unbearable.

Some scenes seem crazy, insane to the point of obscenity, almost unreal, and impossible. What seems mad is just as much the act of dancing in the face of explosions as filming and transmitting these actions. The war, in these lands, seems to border on madness.

Some videos vanish, either because they are compromising for the soldiers, or because they have been flagged (reported) because the music has been broadcast without the rights. Other videos remain and replicate very quickly. These videos can also work as commemorative tributes to a soldier who has died in combat. A filmic trace of what was perhaps his last dance, in uniform, remains.

We Are Here to Dance With You

Here, the army, which is normally a model of order, compliance, and combat, reveals its murkier side; release, chaos, drunkenness, and gender transgression. These ambiguous images also display emotions that we would not normally associate with war: joy and fraternity with the enemy. At times, dancing can be a way of communicating with rural Afghans or with Iraqi police officers (*American Soldier Dancing With Iraqi Troops Funny*). It's a dance-off. They engage in a kind of battle which bears some resemblance to those one might witness on the streets of great metropolises, but with a difference: they're dancing with loaded weapons.

In the video *American Soldiers Dancing With Afghan Kids*, small children are dancing with the Marines. In some videos, a soldier will teach them his dance; in others, they take up these dances, as with the child copying Michael Jackson. One ends up wondering whether the US Army might not be more suited to transmitting its pop culture than to carrying out its official mission to secure the territory.

These films show, above all, the complete disjunction between these men and the situation in which they find themselves—or rather, with the situation which we imagine to be theirs.

During the first Iraq war, television news programmes broadcast black-and-white images taken from Scud missiles. These images, showing automated bombings, resembled basic video games. War took on a distance and an abstract dimension which inspired Jean Baudrillard's contentiously-titled book *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place* (1991).

During the second Iraq war and the war in Afghanistan, strict control was exercised over the images going out on television and over the news teams authorised to document the conflict. This had the effect of producing a highly unusual media depiction of the war. The only images were spectacular ones. More images of this war were televised than of the Vietnam war, but infinitely fewer of these images were violent, almost as though there was neither blood nor death. Yet this war was almost completely filmed: the video camera was part of the standard equipment of all American soldiers. Like computers fitted with webcams, they all had cameras fitted to their helmets, with which they filmed what they encountered on missions.

These films of on-the-ground missions can also be found on YouTube. They are also very different from common images of war; those of reports or fictional films, whose montages remove the moments of inaction and turn war into something more spectacular. The spectacular and densely-composed rhythm is no more and the cadence is broken. We come to understand that the majority of the time is spent waiting. We see striking sequences of waiting in the trenches, machine gun battles filmed from the perspective of the combatant, where the wait and fear are tangible. The helmet-mounted camera offers an unprecedented view. This is war in real life, directly inside the head of the fighter.

These are striking images, all the more so because we had never seen them before and yet somehow they felt familiar to us: they were the perspective of the 'first-person shooter' in a category of video games where the player progresses in their mission to shoot as many enemies as possible.

All the while, another war is underway from a distance. This war is operated automatically, via guided missiles, robot mine-detectors, and laser-guided bombs, or by GPS from the control centres based in Nevada, where pilots operate drones hovering thousands of miles away, using joysticks, multi-screen displays, and a real-time interactive map programme. The programme resembles a more detailed version of Google Earth. The interface and the operating joysticks are the same as those of a video game. Quite simply, this is a means of killing from a million miles away without putting boots on the ground. The soldiers adjust the position of the drone to launch a strike. They can precision-target people hiding in caves, or beneath bushes.

The dances in Iraq and Afghanistan speak of an expensive conflict, the enormous price of which has pushed the United States heavily into debt. An on-the-ground presence is progressively being superseded by operations at a distance, of piloting, confirmation, and surveillance. The US Air Force now trains more drone operators than combat pilots.

Soldiers on the ground find themselves in a position where they are caught between physical presence and their relation to automated systems. They themselves, moreover, are so kitted-out and equipped with protective gear (protecting their legs, arms, head, etc.) that they resemble cyborgs, halfway between human and a futuristic scientific robot killer. When they dance in these outfits they look like deep-sea divers or astronauts, or Martians come to clown around on another planet.

Disconnected and instrumentalised, the soldiers seem more and more useless in their role. As the image of free human bodies, in spite of the dozens of kilos of equipment they are carrying, they dance to escape their cyborg condition.