

**Ludic Training for the  
Situationist Revolution**

*Richard Barbrook*

**The Game of Eternal Return**

*Nicolas Hausdorf*

**Imagining Catastrophe :  
The Politics of Representing  
Humanitarian Crises**

*Roland Bleiker, Emma Hutchinson  
and David Campbell*

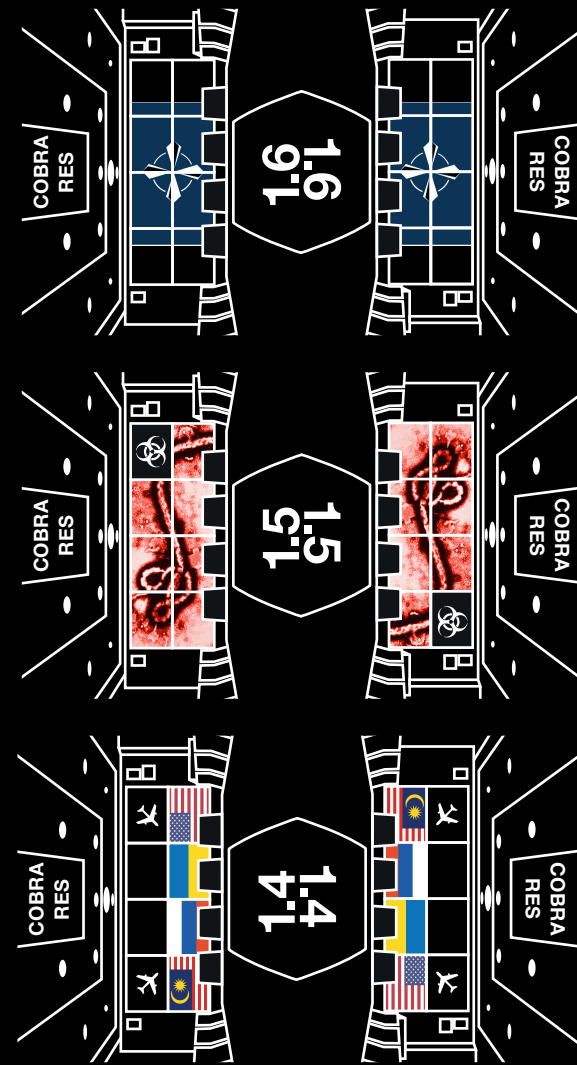
**The War on Ebola**

*Derek Gregory*

**Triolectical Materialism and  
the Beautiful Game  
of Three-Sided Football**

*Strategic Optimism Football Club*

COBRA RES 1.4 1.5 1.6





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## COBRA



COBRA is the British Government's emergency response committee set up to respond to a national or regional crisis. Standing for Cabinet Office Briefing Room A, the COBRA Committee comes together in moments of perceived crisis under the chairmanship of either the Prime Minister or the Home Secretary. At COBRA meetings, decisions and a possible response, sometimes simply a press conference, are made under real or imagined conditions of emergency and/or crisis. \*

The committee can evoke emergency powers such as suspending Parliament or restricting movement. Such emergency -based responses have ranged from tackling Ash Dieback disease to the deployment of military hardware on civilian rooftops during the London Olympics.

Emergency and crisis-based politics are becoming increasingly common as modes of contemporary governance in an age of hyped terrorism and economic and environmental crises.

\* As far as we are able to clarify, COBRA has been meeting since 1984 and has met in recent years in response to:

<b>2007</b>	Car bomb explodes at Glasgow airport.
<b>2007</b>	Two car bombs found near Tiger Tiger nightclub, London.
<b>2007</b>	Foot and Mouth outbreak.
<b>2009</b>	15 British Naval Crew are captured in Iranian territorial waters.
<b>2010</b>	Eyjafjallajökull Volcano eruption in Iceland.
<b>2010</b>	Discovery of bombs in ink cartridges on UPS airplanes bound for the U.S.
<b>2011</b>	No-fly zone over Libya.
<b>2011</b>	Summer riots in London.
<b>2012</b>	London Olympics.
<b>2012</b>	Ash Tree Dieback disease.
<b>2013</b>	British and international hostages held in Tiguentourine gas plant in Algeria.
<b>2013</b>	Lee Rigby killed in Woolwich, south London.
<b>2013</b>	British hostages held in Westgate shopping centre, Nairobi, Kenya.
<b>2013/2014</b>	Mass floods and tidal surges across United Kingdom.
<b>2014</b>	Seven 'suspect packages' sent to Army Recruitment offices in United Kingdom.
<b>2014</b>	Malaysia Airlines Flight MH17 shot down over Ukraine.
<b>2014</b>	Continued outbreak of Ebola disease in West Africa.
<b>2014</b>	Islamic State (IS) captures large parts of Northern Iraq and Southern Syria.



COBRA RES offers a mirror up to the official COBRA as a way of producing different information, new perspectives and alternative narratives, while existing in a mimetic relationship to the emergency committee itself and the situation it is responding to. COBRA RES aims to re-frame the response from an aesthetic perspective, while operating as an active- archive that follows, traces and maps the constantly changing tide of emergency politics.

COBRA RES is a collective of artists and writers who aim to ask critical questions of COBRA through a series of creative responses. Reflecting and mimicking the structure of the COBRA Committee, the artists, writers and filmmakers are chosen for their relevance to the given context of the COBRA meeting. The artists and writers are given nine days from the initial COBRA meeting in which to respond to either COBRA or the context it is meeting under. For the process to work, it is important that pressure is applied to the artists and writers so as prevent too much consideration, with limited facts available, in an attempt to re-create a parallel action of response.

Since the start of the project in January 2013, COBRA and COBRA RES have met five times:

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## **COBRA 1.0**

Our first response was an exhibition after COBRA had met when hostages had been held in the Tiguentourine gas plant in Algeria.

## **COBRA 1.1**

The second response was a book of artistic and written responses to the COBRA meeting following the killing of soldier Lee Rigby in Woolwich, south London.

## **COBRA 1.2**

Responding to the situation in Nairobi shopping centre, secret postal responses were submitted to COBRA RES by a selection of artists. The work will not be viewed or opened until the final COBRA RES exhibition in 2018.

## **COBRA 1.3**

DVD of artist films with accompanying book of texts, which responded to the extensive flooding to hit large parts of the United Kingdom.

## **COBRA 1.4**

## **COBRA 1.5**

## **COBRA 1.6**

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All three events happened within one week of each other, prompting COBRA RES to combine all three responses into one set of three reappropriated card games and a booklet of text based responses to the shooting of Malaysia Airlines Flight MH17 in Ukraine, outbreak of Ebola in West Africa and the advance of Islamic State in Iraq and Syria.

**COBRA RES** will continue responding to COBRA over the next three years until 2018.

For more information see:

*[www.cobra-res.info](http://www.cobra-res.info)*

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## **Preface**



Confronted with three consecutive COBRA meetings over three separate incidents all within three weeks of each other, exposed the limits of not only artists' ability to respond to a string of emergency events, but the COBRA RES project itself. With no funding and few resources, compared with our official counterpart, the project was placed into its own crisis. Our normal command over the ability to administer the daily management of the creation of emergency responsive art was quickly hampered by the bureaucratic red tape of our own project dogma. How could we cope with such a flood of three 'major crises' simultaneously?

This new level of emergency required our own emergency committee response committee to form a *another* committee. A response committee that would shadow the shadow committee by springing into action from the slumbering darkness when the current tide of emergency events was too great and our normal governance of the project was too slow, laborious and cracking under the pressure. The quick succession of emergencies demanded that we mimic the COBRA committee even more closely and reduce our inclusive, democratic approach and aim for a more dictatorial avenue to art production. We needed to get rid of the usual committee meeting altogether and keep this response specialised, executive and secretive.

An emergency emergency alliance was formed with the Berlin-based collective H+Corp to design and produce COBRA RES 1.4, 1.5. and 1.6 in one emergency bundle. We gave ourselves the legislative power to ban artists from contributing, cancelled the planned meeting and held our own private committee in an undisclosed location...

Triggered by the announcement of a COBRA committee meeting, a scrambling production process begins of rushing to gather content, complete designs and get it printed before the event topic leaves the daily news. Due to this, it is impossible to thoroughly analyse and discuss these difficult situations via such an accelerated process. Instead the games, like the daily news itself, provoke an instantaneous reading of the events from germinal ideas and loaded perspectives. What has emerged is a collection of cards created by COBRA RES and H+Corp in a rough and rapid mode of production, creating simple games from highly complex situations.

Owing to time constraints, the authors of the texts were unable to view each others' submissions, or the card games themselves, and have therefore created a diverse selection of viewpoints from separate locations, each speaking for themselves and not the collective as a whole. The authors had no input into the overall process and simply acted as 'experts' submitting ideas from within their own fields. All of this has come together to provide a valuable and critical set of perspectives on emergency politics and its COBRA committee.

*Theodore Price*  
COBRA RES

*'In dealing all the cards to itself,  
the system forced the Other to  
change the rules of the game. And  
the new rules are ferocious,  
because the game is ferocious'.*

*Jean Baudrillard -  
The Spirit of Terrorism*

*'Many of you are exhausted.  
You have been in this game  
for six or nine months'.*

*Margret Chan -  
Head of World Health Organisation  
(WHO) talking to WHO workers in  
Geneva during the Ebola outbreak.*



## **Introduction**

*by Theodore Price and Nicolas Hausdorf*



Summertime, the ‘silly season’, a parliamentary recess and a lack of newsworthy content. July and August this year however, produced a bumper crop of newsworthy global incidents. The apocalyptic narratives of Hollywood blockbusters and video gaming seemed to have finally made the leap from pixel to newsprint. Each new(s) event brought a new COBRA meeting, leading to a total of three separate crises within three weeks:

**17<sup>th</sup> July** Malaysia Airlines Flight MH17 is shot down over Ukraine.

**30<sup>th</sup> July** Ebola outbreak in West Africa.

**8<sup>th</sup> August** Islamic State takes control of parts of northern Iraq, pushing Kurdish people to seek refuge atop Mount Sinjar.

Three times end-times scenarios and barbarians at the doorstep of the empire. Fearful citizens cower in fear from century-old media archetypes ranging from Cruel Ivan, disease-ridden Africans, to the bearded cutthroat Moor. Three all-star threats reinserting the thrill of possible death (nuclear war, pandemic extinction, terrorist attack) into the stale banality of everyday bus rides to the office. What remains obscured by the hysteria of the ‘firm resolve commentariat’ defending the holy values of the West against the onslaught of catastrophe, is the *modus operandi* of a cool processing of catastrophe and its reinsertion into the political by governments. In the service of a permanent extension of the state of exception, the secret, elusive and temporary administration consisting of the usual suspects within varying compositions and constellations – ministers, civil servants, and experts, convene in the cosy security of Cabinet Office Briefing Room A. Catastrophe, interchangeable in form and content, is their fuel for 21<sup>st</sup> century statecraft, projected to the world via aesthetic and performative considerations of brand building.

Each event thereby is also a product of its own means of production, the channels through which it is disseminated and the systems of exchange it circulates within. The frame, the constructed narratives and the totemic individuals who fill it are crafted into digestible clichés far from the locus of the event.

The spectator is always a participant.

Issuing a set of card games, with an accompanying book of texts, COBRA RES has invited the *reader* to become *player*, moving towards an active participation within the grand narrative of each separate emergency episode. Asking the player/actor to confront his own passive-dynamics and disconnected participation in the global political arena, bringing to light the individual's appropriation as game-piece: top hat<sup>01</sup>, pawn piece<sup>02</sup>, avatar<sup>03</sup> or hostage.

The plight of the individual is the political and media hook used on all sides to broker moral and ethical investments for the military and economic interventional portfolio. During such moments of opportunistic political expansion, the numbers of those dead, or suffering, become quasi-stocks and shares to be traded on a global moral index - the individual has value in exchange for its worth as political power. These risk adverse populations rise and fall on the back of media presentation and consumer confidence.

The convenience and ease of the production of local morality tales, with individual personalities at their centre, are exchanged for international political power gains, not simply for the benefit of the populations or individual at risk. Due to the three emergencies happening simultaneously, we can examine how such

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[01] Monopoly

[02] Chess

[03] Computer game

narratives differ in form, content and style; the profiles of each European individual victim within a plane crash, compared to the faceless mass of numerical figures of those in West Africa facing another epidemic. The use of hostages by Islamic State(IS) as political leverage to draw military action into Iraq, has changed the rules of the game, forcing the west to show its hand. All of these figures, both physical and numerical, become pieces within the larger political game.



**Black Box Top Trumps -**  
Informational Surenhère  
for the Entire Family



Collective H+Corp have re-appropriated the traditional card game, constructing an Airplane Black Box Top Trump version. Vaporised bodies of civilians and presidents, the ghosts of political aspiration blended with plastics, metal and jet fuel are not only mirroring the decay and recession of the current economic order in contrast to the mirror-polish and integer machine images of the 50s and 60s. But also the Black Box is a process of researching and compiling of dispersed fragments of information surrounding the often mysterious accidents and their implications; collages of human error, possibilities of covert operations, political assassinations and industrial sabotage. The politics of the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century has been played out in the skies above our heads; condensed demographics of pollsters travelling at over 600mph into the future, each ticket holder ready to represent their nation in an airborne United Nations of the dead.

As a 20<sup>th</sup> century mass-produced technological iconographic collection, the game of Top Trumps for past generations had been the first approximation for the consumer to the war machine it would later be fused into, to be consumed on the frontlines of elite-provoked warfare and games of brinkmanship. The cards would summon boyish desire for the machines, later transformed into the driving force of labours' compliance in industrial society that has currently seen its peak and is in the process of liquidation, along with the social milieus that helped to sustain it.

With Black Box Top Trumps, it is no longer a comparison between indicators of industrial engineering but rather which victims are worth the most in the game for political instrumentalization. It trades, commodifies and evaluates information on official causes, diverging evidence and political victims, mirroring the sensitivity of the post-industrial stock markets to these more or less newsworthy events.

## Pandemic Snap -

Biological memory  
game between the  
global north and  
the global south.



Africans in an emergency, again. Placed in a position of exception, this will continue, not get better with time. Neoliberal policies and the profit of NGO's confirm this. Is there not something recurrent about the pandemic threats permanently evoked, seeping towards our own individual doors? No summer without the threat of sustainable extinction, maps of spreading viral or bacterial disaster and multi-billion responses of the pharmaceutical cartels with mass vaccination programs.<sup>04</sup> Recall training for the deteriorated short-term memory between representations of the invisible and global political cartographies.

The invisible become visible via the *invisible disease* as the viewer registers the existence of the Other. From a safe distance in the West, the individual expresses concern through cash donations and then changes channels, the guilt now relieved. But the actual physical component, like terrorism, are seemingly invisible until it is too late, allowing for greater levels of fear to spawn in the shadows of a population's psyche. The fear felt by the singular is powered by the mass.

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[04] Naomi Klein has written an assessment of Donald Rumsfeld's role as US Secretary of Defence while simultaneously chairman for Gilead Sciences, the pharmaceutical company that produces Tami-flu- a treat-all drug for many kinds of influenza and preferred drug for treatment of avian flu. *The Shock Doctrine - Naomi Klein* (Penguin 2007).

The disease travels up the veins of global capitalism towards its very heart, along shipping routes, across borders and through airport security, undetected. A subverted, cyclical process of exchange for the centuries of African exploitation that continues to fuel wars and instability in return for the cheap extraction of the rare metals lacing the smartphones upon which we read the latest news of the outbreak. As if wanting to be heard, Ebola is a gasping cry through the only event the West notices – *emergency pandemic*.

The Other individual is still seeking representation in the Ebola crisis. The media coverage looks at the meta-data, “4000 infections, 10,000 infections, 1000 a day ....” the localised narratives are not to be discussed. It is simply another epidemic, ongoing since 1976, in an infrastructurally poor backwater of Africa. There is no interest until the disease looks like traversing the porous barriers of Fortress Europe. The only individual to bring it to the news was a British aid worker who was infected and then recovered only to return to the scene to continue to help – *victim becomes individual becomes named-character becomes avatar within the game*.

Testing our powers of recall, Pandemic Snap, asks the player to combine speed, memory and luck. The simplicity of the game mimics the simplicity of contracting each disease which does not adhere to distinctions of age, race or ethnicity. It is a basic game with disastrous results. These diseases are the *permanent emergency*, more devastating on populations than a bomb and or a plane crash. They are the *slow disaster*, normalized by years of ineffectual health programmes and avoidance by nation states. These old diseases decimate populations when simple, inexpensive solutions are available – especially for malaria, cholera and polio. It is a clear sign of the disparity between the global north where some pandemics, such as cholera and polio were eradicated in the ‘developed world’ almost half a century ago, and the global south where both are still rampant.

## NATO Happy Families -



The illogical game of illicit bedfellows.

NATO Happy Families draws attention to the continuum of alliances and illicit affairs, some permanent, others strangely counter-intuitive (but common sensical) and temporary, between individual states and players in the recent NATO response to IS. The lipstick traces of the West's current bedfellows is nothing new, but now it is seemingly more public as it attempts to avoid another counterproductive '*West is best*' narrative within the Middle East.

The 'special relationship' becomes the 'open relationship' as Britain and America seek to seduce Iran, the PKK is armed and Hezbollah becomes an ally by proxy. These shifting alliances fade and reconfigure like border lines drawn in the creases of bed sheets by British, French and Russian colonial powers in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Is this ongoing situation the genetic offspring of this old marriage of convenience?

Two individuals caught in the act of adultery must be witnessed by four others to make it punishable under Sharia Law. IS, like the West, interprets the law to suit their own gains. Death is cheap but powerful within IS as they reappropriate the narrative of the individual with professionalised PR skills, placing be-headings on YouTube, forcing the West to take notice by commanding that the spectator become active. This is a counter-intuitive use of the individual to affect public opinion. Terrorism is learning the value of making visual, individual suffering and in doing so uses the same media strategy as the West. The 'barbarians' and 'the uncivilized' are just as savvy as their multibillion pound media machine counterparts in swaying public opinion in the direction of their own needs. IS controls the message from within the media blackout, while NATO holds allied meetings in the dark - so no one can look into the eyes of their enemy-allies and see the other blink.

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*IS promotional image recuperating the narrative adopted in video game: Call of Duty*

All of these RETRO games, long-time rendered obsolete by the shock effects of video games, are revisiting the industrial period through a delayed recuperating of the means of production. Perhaps however, they also constitute a way to bring back together what has been set apart by the 'network' technologies of individualism, alienation and loneliness. Information is the name of the game, but so is luck and who you know. Industrial society's programming devices are becoming an approach of abstracting, sharing and subverting knowledge. Let us still not forget that they are the pastime of the captured soldier modifying his dream of anticipating revenge.

The game of international politics has always been designed from the boardrooms of state and corporate entities, a safe distance from the bloody battle lines that scare the earth and skin. The COBRA committee is no different. The secret deals and hidden agendas are performed in comfort and security, with little chance of the puppet master being killed or injured in their own lair. These games replicate that structure of distance,

of once-removed orchestration while reinstating in the individual player a certain false agency via a rudimentary overview of our current emergency.

Individuals are used on all sides of the game to harness pressure upon the mass, to gain support and political leverage, while in other cases the individual is easily ignored, depending on its political value. Actions overseen by COBRA, do not aim to resolve the issue permanently by sustainable infrastructural support for basic sanitation, justice in intentional courts or investing in countries post-invasion. The emergency is temporary and so too is its response, but they will continue to return until the permanent political crises are solved with permanent solutions. With increased repetitious wars abroad, the cycle of renewed pandemics and the 'terror threat' levels continuing to rise in time with sea levels, the victorious will become the victims once again in the cycle of winner loses all.



*IS promotional image recuperating the narrative adopted in video game:  
Grand Theft Auto*

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## **Ludic Training for the Situationist Revolution**

*by Richard Barbrook*



*'I have studied the logic of war. Moreover, I succeeded, a long time ago, in presenting the basics of its movements as a board game: the forces in contention and the contradictory necessities imposed on the operations of each of the two parties. I have played **The Game of War** and, in the often difficult conduct of my life, I have utilised lessons from it – I have also set myself the rules of the game for this life, and I have followed them. On the question of whether I have made good use of such lessons, I will leave to others to decide.'*

Guy Debord  
Panegyric



On a wet autumn evening in 2007, the members of Class Wargames assembled for a training session in ludic subversion at the Occupation Studios in London. Having discovered its rules in the back of Len Bracken's biography of Guy Debord, we'd utilised my teenage collection of Ottoman and Hapsburg figurines to build a homebrew version of his almost forgotten military simulation: *The Game of War*. Our enjoyable task for

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the next few hours would be manoeuvring these toy soldier armies to victory or defeat across its gridded terrain. Above all, our objective on that evening was to find out why Debord - the commander-in-chief of the Situationist International - had promised that playing his game was learning how to put proletarian theory into revolutionary practice. In our lives as artists, academics and activists, the founders of Class Wargames had all been heavily influenced by the practical innovations and theoretical insights of this iconic New Left movement. Five decades earlier, the Situationists had defined the avant-garde techniques of provocation, remixing, drifting and participatory creativity which still provide the tactical manual for left-field art in the early-21st century. They were the original version of the punks, ravers and hackers. Crucially, as the smartest wisdom of the French May '68 Revolution, Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle* remains unsurpassed in its fierce critique of the political chicanery, economic alienation and solipsistic tedium of today's media-saturated capitalist societies. He was the New Left prophet who never sold out for the tawdry neo-liberal trinkets of celebrity and money. Placed between Pop Art and Fluxus in the Tate Modern's avant-garde timeline mural, the International is given due respect for its impressive aesthetic and theoretical innovations between the 1950s and 1970s which have helped to shape the contemporary imagination. Whether they know it or not, everyone nowadays is a bit of a Situationist.

What had initially brought the members of Class Wargames together earlier in 2007 was our common curiosity about the puzzling absence of any detailed discussion of Debord's *The Game of War* in the increasing number of laudatory journalistic and academic accounts of the International's inspiring achievements. For these admirers, his ludic experiment was nothing more than a poetic metaphor for Debord's pugnacious attitude to life. Serious grown-ups would never waste their valuable time actually playing this frivolous diversion. For many Left

intellectuals, Debord's military simulation also reeks of the imperialist aggression and masculine competitiveness of bourgeois society. Wargaming is a weird hobby of history nerds with dodgy politics. However, as he emphasised in the quotation from his 1989 autobiography which begins this text, Debord believed that *The Game of War* was his most important legacy to the future generations: a ludic meditation on the Situationists' many years of hard fighting against the class enemy. Yet, when we read the contemporary hagiographies of the International, we could find only the briefest mention of the long hours that he'd dedicated to designing and refining his board game. Unconvinced by this dubious rewriting of history, we formed Class Wargames to investigate why Debord had been so convinced that his military simulation was the culmination of his life's work as an artistic and political revolutionary. Fulfilling this ambition, on that 2007 evening in Occupation Studios, the rival teams of North and South enthusiastically engaged in head-to-head combat for mastery over the game board. The two miniature armies advanced towards each other, both trying to seize the centre while simultaneously moving around one flank. Attacks were followed by counter-attacks. A fort was taken and lost. The cavalry charged, lines of communications were cut and one team's arsenal was destroyed. Even a bravura display of tactical moves now couldn't change the final outcome. The initiative had been seized and would be doggedly retained until the enemy was routed from the battlefield. As our training session drew to a close, the players of North and South took satisfaction that we'd all been winners of *The Game of War*. If only for a few hours, the Situationist fusion of avant-garde art and revolutionary politics had been experienced in dialectical unity. Enthused by this insight, the members of Class Wargames were now ready to launch their campaign of ludic subversion against spectacular capitalism. With the name of Debord written on the wall of the Tate Modern, every intelligent person must try playing *The Game of War*

at least once. They weren't educated if they hadn't. Class Wargames had discovered its world-historic mission. By hosting participatory performances of *The Game of War*, we would enable people to experience Debord's simulation of the Situationist insurrection for themselves. Class Wargames had issued the orders of battle to the turbulent multitude: Play-It-Yourself!

In the seven years since that training session took place in autumn 2007, the members of our group have gone on to host participatory performances of *The Game of War* and other political-military simulations at art galleries, cultural festivals, academic conferences and bohemian hang-outs across Europe, Brazil and Russia. During this hard-fought campaign of ludic subversion, our goal has been to encourage our audiences to move beyond a contemplative admiration of Situationist ideas. As Debord realised, playing games is learning by doing. At our events, competing in mock combat becomes training for cooperative action against neo-liberal domination. In these troubled times, this Situationist ludic enlightenment is urgently required. The squabbling tendencies of today's Left are nothing more than a bunch of historical reenactment societies: the Bolsheviks are stuck in Petrograd 1917; Anarchists fantasise about Barcelona 1936; and Autonomists hark back to Milan 1977. There are even some Situationist groupies who think that they're living in Paris 1968! Taking our cue from Debord, Class Wargames has an entertaining remedy for this debilitating determination to fight contemporary struggles with old strategies. If you want to reenact the heroic moments of the revolutionary past, we have an extensive collection of board games which will allow you to become Leon Trotsky, Buenaventura Durruti or Toni Negri in their prime for a few hours. Most wonderfully, by putting these dramatic events back into play, the dogmatic certainties of the Bolshevik, Anarchist and Autonomist sects are soon revealed as temporal contingencies. With cleverer moves and better

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dice throws, the fixed course of history can be changed on the game board. There is not - and never has been - one infallible method for securing victory in all times and places. Like its predecessors, this generation must also devise its own unique combinations of strategy and tactics for fighting the capitalist enemy. The players of Situationist games are already experimenting with new formations and innovative manoeuvres for successful combat on the spectacular battlefields of the early-21st century. By making the past mutable, they're learning how to conquer the future. Inspired by the Situationists' vision of a truly human civilisation, Class Wargames proclaims that the revolutionary watchword of the insurgent proletariat is now the proud boast of Guy Debord: 'I'm not a philosopher, I'm a strategist!'

*Richard Barbrook*  
London, England,  
8<sup>th</sup> November 2014.

Check out the Class Wargames website for forthcoming events, photographs, publications and movies: <http://www.classwargames.net>

Richard Barbrook's *Class Wargames: ludic subversion against spectacular capitalism* can be bought as hardcopy or downloaded as a free PDF from the Minor Compositions website: <http://www.minorcompositions.info/?p=636>

**Imagining Catastrophe:**  
**The Politics of Representing Humanitarian Crisis.** ►  
by *Roland Bleiker, Emma Hutchinson and David Campbell*

*“Like people around the world I’ve been watching the images on our TV screens. They are truly shocking. This is a major disaster...”*

Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard<sup>05</sup>

Images play an important role in conveying the meaning of humanitarian crises to distant audiences. By drawing attention to catastrophe and human suffering, images can also mobilize political action. So much is this the case that when crises emerge commentators commonly urge photojournalists to produce more images, particularly of those atrocities that seem to exist in silence and demand urgent action, such as the genocide in Darfur or the systematic rape of women in the Congo.<sup>06</sup> A common refrain among humanitarian activists is thus the urgent need to visualize the unspeakable, to diffuse it through various media outlets, and to rally the global community in a way that generates political action. Scholars largely confirm these patterns. They speak of

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[05] Julia Gillard comments on images of the catastrophic 11 March 2011 earthquake and tsunami that struck Japan. Julia Gillard, ‘Transcript of Doorstop Interview’, The Prime Minister of Australia Press Office, 11 March 2011. Available at <http://www.pm.gov.au/press-of-fice/transcript-doorstop-interviewnew-yok> (last accessed 15 March 2011).

[06] Linda Devereux, ‘From Congo: Newspaper photographs, public images and personal memories’, *Visual Studies*, 25, 2, (2010), pp. 124-134; Jan Pronk, ‘We Need More Stories and More Pictures’, 50 Years of World Press Photo, 8 October 2005. Available at <http://www.janpronk.nl/speeches/english/we-needmore- stories-and-more-pictures.html> (last accessed 14 March 2011).

a visual iconography of humanitarian crises and point out that images are essential for audiences to feel for and subsequently respond to those in need.<sup>07</sup>

The key question then is: how exactly do images influence our moral and political obligation to assist people in need? The purpose of our chapter is to address this question. We do not pretend that we are able come up with definitive answers to the complex issues at stake. But we highlight two points that are important for understanding the linkages between images of humanitarian crises and the subsequent practice of providing humanitarian aid. First, we draw attention to the pivotal role played by the intensely emotional nature of photographs of humanitarian crises. Understanding emotions is all the more important since they have largely been side-lined in political debates and policy analyses. Prevailing approaches tend to view emotions as irrational and private phenomena, and thus of little relevance to political deliberations. Second, we show how the increasingly global circulation of images leads to changes in humanitarian space. If a crisis becomes visualized in media networks then there is also a chance for a humanitarian response to gain momentum. We thus agree with Don Hubert and Cynthia Brassard-Bourdreau that humanitarian space is – contrary to widely held pessimistic opinions – not necessarily shrinking.<sup>08</sup> There is, for instance, little evidence that the so-called compassion fatigue syndrome is as widespread as commonly assumed. People often give generously when asked for help, as was amply demonstrated in the

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[07] David Campbell, 'The Iconography of Famine', in Geoffrey Gidley et al, *Picturing Atrocity: Reading Photographs in Crisis*, London: Reaktion Books, 2011; Arthur Kleinman and Joan Kleinman, 'The Appeal of Experience; The Dismay of Images: Cultural Appropriations of Suffering in Our Times', *Daedalus*, 125, 2, (1996), pp. 1, 7.

[08] Don Humbert and Cynthia Brassard-Bourdreau, "Is Humanitarian Space Shrinking" in *Negotiating Relief: The Dialectics of Humanitarian Space*, Michele Acuto (ed.), Hurst Publishers, London, 2014.

aftermath of the Boxing Day Tsunami, for instance. But there is always power, interest and politics in all visualisations of humanitarian crises. We draw attention to the need to be aware of the ensuing ethical dilemmas.

## The Power of Images ►

We live in a visual age. Images shape our understanding of the world. This phenomenon is so persuasive that influential scholars speak of a “pictorial turn”, stressing that people often perceive and remember key events more through images than through factual accounts.<sup>09</sup> We illustrate the issues at stake by focusing on photographs. They are, of course, not the only visual sources. Moving images on television and in new media outlets are probably more influential. But photographs offer unique insights. At a time when we are saturated with information stemming from multiple media sources, photographs remain influential for their ability to capture social and political issues in succinct and mesmerizing ways. They serve as “visual quotations”.<sup>10</sup> As opposed to moving images, photographs can also be shared easily across a range of different media and for a range of different purposes – from print and online news to humanitarian aid campaigns and informal networks.

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[09] W.J.T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essay on Verbal and Visual Representation*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994.

[10] Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003, p. 22.

Photographs are powerful because they seem to authentically reflect what they depict.<sup>11</sup> More than other mediums, photographs appear to give us a genuine glimpse of “reality”, a snapshot of the world as it really is. They provide us with the seductive belief that what is revealed correlates exactly with what was happening at a particular moment in time. Barbie Zelizer speaks of a kind of “eyewitness authority”.<sup>12</sup> This is why it was for long assumed that a documentary photographer, observing the world from a distance, is an “objective witness” to political phenomena, providing accurate representations of, say, war or poverty.<sup>13</sup>

Few if any scholars today still believe that photographs objectively represent the world. Representation is meanwhile recognized as an inevitable aspect of politics. Photographs depict the world from a certain angle and are inevitably part of a range of political processes. But it is precisely the illusion of authenticity that makes photographs such powerful tools to convey the meaning of crises to distant audiences. Jonathon Friday writes of photographs as generating a near-compulsive draw to view the horror and spectacle of crisis: a kind of “demonic curiosity”.<sup>14</sup> Spectators view and re-view a humanitarian crises through various media sources until the enormity of the event seems graspable. In doing so, photographs not only shape an individual’s perception but also larger, collective forms of consciousness.

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[11] See, for example, John Tagg, *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories*, London: Macmillan, 1988.

[12] Barbie Zelizer, ‘Death in Wartime: Photographs and the “Other War” in Afghanistan’, *Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics*, 10, 3, (2005), p. 29.

[13] David Levi Strauss, *Between the Eyes: Essays on Photography and Politics*, New York: Aperture, 2003, p.45; David D. Perlmutter, *Photojournalism and Foreign Policy: Icons of Outrage in International Crises*, Westport: Praeger, 1998, p. 28.

[14] Jonathon Friday, ‘Demonic Curiosity and the Aesthetics of Documentary Photography’, *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 40, 3, (2000), p. 365.

Some scholars go as far as stressing that images are so effective in recalling political events that they often become “primary markers” themselves.<sup>15</sup> This is to say that over time an event is recognized publicly not primarily by its political content but by its photographic representation. The representation then becomes content itself. Consider two well known examples of iconic photographs that have come to stand for the humanitarian crises they depict. First is Nick Ut’s Pulitzer Prize winning Vietnam War image of 1972. It depicts nine year old Kim Phuc, naked, badly burned and fleeing from her South-Vietnam village after it was napalmed. At the time this photograph directed public gaze to the atrocities committed against innocent civilians. It transformed public and political perceptions of the war, so much so that it contributed to further eroding the war’s legitimacy.<sup>16</sup> We do not represent the photograph here precisely because it is so well known. In fact, four decades later the image still stands as a metaphorical representation of the Vietnam War and the suffering it brought. The second well known example is another Pulitzer Prize winning photograph, taken in 1983 the famine-stricken Sudan, by Kevin Carter.

Carter’s photograph depicts a starving child in an unfathomable manner: kneeling helplessly on the ground, her head in her hands, while a vulture watches over. It was an image that “made the world weep” and stood – as it continues to do – as a powerful marker of the problem of poverty in the developing world.<sup>17</sup> Hardly

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[15] Barbie Zelizer, ‘Finding aids to the past: bearing personal witness to traumatic public events’, *Media, Culture and Society*, 24, 5, (2002), p. 699.

[16] See John Hariman and John Louis Lucaites, ‘Public Identity and Collective Memory in U.S. Iconic Photography: The Image of Accidental Napalm’, *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 20, 1, 2003, pp. 35-66.

[17] Scott Macleod, ‘The Life and Death of Kevin Carter’, *Time*, 12 September 1994. Available online at <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,981431,00.html> (accessed 15 March 2011).

a day goes by without photographs depicting some type of humanitarian crisis to audiences world-wide. A recent example is how, in March 2011, an earthquake and tsunami devastated large parts of Japan's northern pacific coast. Here is a photograph that appeared in the Australian newspaper the *Sydney Morning Herald* and was subsequently featured in a special web-site devoted to visual representations of the catastrophe.<sup>18</sup>



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[18] Sydney Morning Herald, "Big Pictures: Disaster in Japan," <http://www.smh.com.au/environment/bigpics/japan-disaster> (accessed 25 April 2011).



*Image 1: March 2011, The Earthquake/Tsunami in Japan in the Sydney Morning Herald*

This particular photograph symbolizes the tsunami's physical destruction – here in Ofunato, Iwate Prefecture – more so than any text possibly could. It provides viewers with a sense of how terrible the disaster must have been for those who faced it and, most likely, did not live to tell their trauma. This image is one of many – still and moving – that captured the world's attention. And here too, it is not just individuals who are being influenced by these visual representations: they shape both public debates and the political leaders who address them. The Australian Prime Minister, Julia Gillard, noted that she received the news of the disaster like everybody else around the world: through images. And she adds, in several separate statements, how much she was “truly shocked by what I have seen.”<sup>19</sup> It is inevitable that she, just as other leaders around the world, was influenced by the images she saw and by the politics that was inevitably associated with them: media networks and newspapers trying to capture the moment

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[19] Julia Gillard, “Transcript of press conference, Canberra, 13 March 2011. Available online at <http://www.pm.gov.au/press-office/transcript-press-conference-canberra> (accessed 25 April 2011).

and attract viewers or readers with the most spectacular images. These images, in turn, are part of a long history of representing humanitarian catastrophes. They are also part of a long history in which governments, humanitarian agencies and other organizations rely on images – either explicitly or implicitly – to gain public support and attract donations that are meant to save those in need.<sup>20</sup> We now try to shed light on some aspects that shape this form of humanitarian engagement.

## The Emotional Nature of Communicating Catastrophe Through Photographs ▷

Photographs of crises are inherently emotional in nature and impact. They represent some of the most horrendous situations: war, genocide, famine, natural disaster. They often depict individuals in an utter state of need and despair. Emotions are in this way central to the communication of catastrophe. Indeed, crisis photographs are powerful not only because of the surreal manner in which they bring distant catastrophe into the homes of people far away, but also because they have an uncanny ability to capture that which is difficult to say: the intimately emotional nature of suffering.<sup>21</sup>

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[20] See, for example, Murali Balaji, 'Racializing Pity: The Haiti Earthquake and the Plight of "Others"', *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 28, 1, (2011), pp. 50-67; Henrietta Lidchi, 'Finding the Right Image: British Development NGOs and the Regulation of Imagery', in Tracey Skelton and Tim Allen (ed.), *Culture and Global Change*, London and New York: Routledge, 1999, pp.87-101; Liisa H. Malkki, 'Speechless Emissaries: Refugees, Humanitarianism, and Dehistoricization', *Cultural Anthropology*, 11, 3, (1996), pp. 377-404, at pp. 385-390; Kate Manzo, 'Imaging Humanitarianism: NGO Identity and the Iconography of Childhood', *Antipode*, 40, 4, pp. 632-657; Anke Strüver, 'The Production of Geopolitical and Gendered Images through Global Aid Organisations', *Geopolitics*, 12, 4, (2007), pp.680-703.

[21] Ulrich Baer, *Spectral Evidence: The Photography of Trauma*, Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2002, pp. 10-14; E. Ann Kaplan, *Trauma Culture: The Politics of Loss in the Media and Literature*, New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2005, pp. 95-100.

Photographs may, as such, capture crisis in ways that words cannot. Words may be used to speak of crisis, but unlike a photograph words cannot capture the visceral and strangely visual nature of catastrophe.<sup>22</sup> Photographs thus provide a poignant medium through which to represent the suffering and trauma ensuing from humanitarian crises.

Vividly depicting pain, shock and horror, photographs can influence public, political perceptions and procure humanitarian sentiments precisely because they resonate emotionally with viewers.<sup>23</sup> Underpinning this argument is the idea that emotions pervade ways of seeing. Emotions are inseparable from both the representational and interpretative processes used to communicate and make sense of crises. They must therefore be seen as central to how photographs can (and can also fail to) elicit particular humanitarian meanings consonant with an impetus to provide aid.

Consider, as an example, a photograph of another recent humanitarian natural disaster: the Boxing Day tsunami of December 2004. It was featured on the *New York Times* front-page just two days after the wave struck. Set against the unprecedented natural catastrophe, which claimed the lives of more than 275,000 people, the photograph shows the trauma of one mother upon finding her dead children. It is a confronting depiction of the loss of life and corresponding grief.<sup>24</sup>

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[22] See Elizabeth Dauphinee, 'The Politics of the Body in Pain: Reading the Ethics of Imagery', *Security Dialogue*, 38, 2, (2007), pp. 139-155.

[23] Stanley Cohen, *States of Denial: Knowing about Atrocities and Suffering*, Cambridge: Polity, 2001, pp. 182-183; Nancy K. Miller, 'Portraits of Grief': Telling Details and Testimony of Trauma', *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, 14, 3, 2003, pp. 112-135.

[24] *New York Times*, 28 December 2004, p. 1, original caption.



*Image 2: December 2004, The Boxing Day Tsunami in the New York Times*

There is little doubt that the photograph is emotive. And it is emotive in two interrelated ways. It depicts a highly emotional situation: a woman in an utter state of despair. But the image is also very likely to generate an emotional response from viewers. Indeed, the photograph challenges audiences with the reality and tragedy of so many young lives lost. A number of powerful techniques are employed to bring the tsunami's tragic human toll into a viewer's focus. The depiction of a mother, distraught and powerless, amidst so many tiny and now lifeless children, presents not only an arresting picture but also invokes a well-recognized symbol of sympathy and humanitarianism. Representing the scope of death in such a manner is key to the photograph's emotional appeal. Indeed, not only does it communicate the tremendous sorrow and loss but also, crucially, it helps to produce the idea that the tsunami is an unprecedented catastrophe for which viewers should feel compassion and be drawn into some form of humanitarian response. David Perlmutter suggests that photographs are politically persuasive because of their ability to incite

“outrage” – an emotional response he defines as loosely based on anger, agitation, sympathy and fear.<sup>25</sup>

Photographs that are circulated and viewed around the world give meaning to a humanitarian crisis. The emotions involved in viewing and remembering images are not just individual, but inevitably collective: they create emotional bonds between immediate victims and distant viewers. Some commentators believe that emotions have a negative impact on humanitarian operations. For instance, proponents of the “compassion fatigue” argument maintain that emotions will inevitably err on the side of apathy and inaction rather than those associated with a genuine concern and corresponding will to help those in need. The main point such scholars make is that an overexposure to images of suffering eventually renders the viewer numb and indifferent.<sup>26</sup> We believe that there is no evidence to support such a gloomy view. Humanitarian space is not necessarily shrinking. While individuals and societies often block out or even deny images of human suffering,<sup>27</sup> there is ample evidence that the public reacts generously when charity organizations appeal for help.<sup>28</sup> If images of a humanitarian crises circulate in global media networks then they can reach a world-wide audience, thus creating the potential for a significant humanitarian response. But even scholars who recognise the importance of this expanding humanitarian space acknowledge that crises photographs pose “troubling options” for viewers: they generate compassion and even a sense of shared suffering while, at the same

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[25] Perlmutter, *Photojournalism and Foreign Policy*, pp. xiv-xv, 4-5, 20-29.

[26] Susan D. Moeller, *Compassion Fatigue: How the Media Sells Disease, Famine, War and Death*, New York: Routledge, 1999.

[27] Cohen, *States of Denial*.

[28] David Campbell, “Horrific Blindness: Images of Death in Contemporary Media,” *Journal of Cultural Research*, Vol 8, No 1, 2004,

time, also eliciting “cynicism and despair.”<sup>29</sup> There is, then, a need to investigate the precise politics involved in visually representing humanitarian crises

- a task we will now take up during the remaining part of this essay.

## The Politics of Representing Humanitarian Crises ►

One thing is clear, then: politics and human interest are an essential element in how images, and the emotions they engender, shape our understanding and responses to humanitarian crises.<sup>30</sup> We would like to illustrate some of the key issues at stake through a concrete example of a humanitarian crisis image: a widely circulated iconic HIV/AIDS photograph, taken in 1986 by Ed Hooper.<sup>31</sup> It depicts a Ugandan woman, Florence, and her child, Ssengabi, sitting outside their home in Gwanda, Uganda.<sup>32</sup> When the photograph was taken both Florence and Ssengabi were visibly ill.

Taken during the early period of western public awareness about HIV/AIDS, this photograph provided a “face” that could symbolize the crisis in Africa. It was subsequently published widely in the international media, including *Newsweek* and two years later in the *Washington Post*. The Hooper photograph illustrates how

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[29] James Johnson, “‘The Arithmetic of Compassion’: Rethinking the Politics of Photography’, unpublished manuscript, pp. 5, 6. See also John Berger, “Photographs of Agony” in *About Looking*, New York: Vintage, 1980, pp. 41-44.

[30] See Jane Bennett, *Empathic Vision: Affect, Trauma and Contemporary Art*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005; Kaplan, *Trauma Culture*.

[31] For a more detailed elaboration, see Roland Bleiker and Amy Kay, ‘Representing HIV/AIDS in Africa: Pluralist Photography and Local Empowerment’, *International Studies Quarterly*, 51, (2007).

[32] Edward Hooper, *Slim: A Reporter’s Own Story of HIV/AIDS in East Africa*, London: The Bodley Head, 1990.

an image can have a tremendous impact on raising global awareness of a pressing humanitarian issue. But the very prominence – and success – of this photograph also illustrates the deeply political aspects involved in crisis photography. Four issues stand out.



*Image 3: 1986, Ed Hooper's Ugandan portrait in Newsweek (later also in the Washington Post)*

First: the image illustrates the use of a persistent aesthetic style in crisis photography: the use of individual subjects to “put a face” to a larger catastrophic event, thereby encouraging viewers to identify with and feel for the distant suffering being depicted. Michael Shapiro has called this technique a “personal code”: a representational strategy designed not only to centre the viewer’s attention but also to capture an overall issue or crisis.<sup>33</sup> While humanitarian emergencies tend to be complex in origin and nature, such a “personal code”

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[33] Michael Shapiro, *The Politics of Representation: Writing Practices in Biography, Photography and Policy Analysis*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988, pp. 129–130.

compresses the complexities into a schematic, readily identifiable picture. It simplifies – and supposedly humanizes – the situation for distant audiences. The objective here is to simultaneously convey the personal details of an individual life and to in doing so provide enough context to allow viewers to generalize widely about the nature and impact of the crisis. The plight of Florence and her child thus comes to stand for the far more complex and far more political “HIV/AIDS crisis in Africa.” The result is inevitably inadequate, perhaps even dehumanizing. Look at the Hooper photograph: it depicts a dying mother and child, sitting alone in an open doorway somewhere in Africa. No other people are visible, nor are there any features that can be recognized as part of a particular society or culture. Hooper displays Florence and Ssengabi passively, as if they were unable to do anything but wait for death. They are seen in one function only, as sufferers. Indeed, Florence and Ssengabi are entirely defined by their suffering. But this was, of course, not their only identity, even though they were facing immanent death. One could have just as well presented them in different ways, as being integrated in their surroundings, or as pursuing an activity.

Second: the image employs a powerful humanitarian icon, namely the image of mother and child. Numerous scholars argue that women and children are commonly used international “symbols of distress”.<sup>34</sup> For some, images of mothers and child call to mind the *pieta*: the Madonna mourning the loss of her child, a universally recognized icon of compassion and grief. Lisa Malkki goes further to suggest that there is an “international expectation of a certain kind of helplessness” associated with images of women and children. So much is this

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[34] See, for instance, David Campbell, ‘Imaging Famine’, Available online at <http://www.imagingfamine.org> (last accessed on 29 May 2008); Malkki, ‘Speechless Emissaries’, p. 388; Manzo, ‘Imaging Humanitarianism’, pp. 649–651.

the case that they have become a “conventionalized” mechanism for the representation of tragic humanitarian situations. Women and children – like this picture of Florence and Ssengabi, presented as helpless and vulnerable – can call to mind a pressing humanitarian message: that victims not only need (your) help but they need it fast.

It is thus not surprising that photojournalists often employ particular recognized icons to represent humanitarian hardship and distress. These are the representations viewers are most accustomed to: images of passive and powerless mothers and children, usually staring big-eyed into cameras, of destitute refugees represented en-mass, and of the spectacular devastation that both natural and human-made crisis can reap.

Third: the Hooper’s image of Florence and Ssengabi’s displays a deeply “colonial” perspective, invoking stereotypical perceptions of life in the developing world.<sup>35</sup> With the camera tilted down and Florence and Ssengabi sitting silent, the image voids Florence and Ssengabi of independence and agency. It stresses the misery, vulnerability and seemingly inactive nature of their situation – and by extension of the developing world more generally. In this way the image taps into existing assumptions about Third World dependency, effectively communicating that victims are desperately reliant upon outside aid. Survivors are depicted as victims; the helpless and needy recipients of aid. The audience, by contrast, is the humanitarian provider. This is why photographs do not stand alone but, rather, are part of a “system

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[35] See Manzo, ‘Imaging Humanitarianism’, pp. 632-657. On the notion of ‘colonial’ photography, see Anne Maxwell, *Colonial Photography and Exhibitions: Representations of ‘Native’ People and the Making of European Identities*, London: Leicester University Press, 1999.

of representation”.<sup>36</sup> The meanings attained by crisis photographs are inevitably intertwined with the context in which they are viewed. Simply put, the understandings and the knowledge produced by photographs are at least partially contingent upon the particular historically-developed cultural, aesthetic and affective sensibilities of those who view them. Photographs are in this way part of a much wider set of representational practices that bestow often distant humanitarian crises with social, political and humanitarian meanings.

Fourth: the very fact that Hooper’s shocking image shows Florence and Ssengabi close to death means that any kind of humanitarian help will come too late, at least for them. This is, indeed, one of the key dilemmas of crises photography: the media is, as David Campbell points out, often a “late indicator of distress, not an early warning agency.”<sup>37</sup> The challenge for humanitarian organizations and the media then is to actively engage the politics of representation and to find a way of visualizing crises before they escalate. This is also why Campbell believes the problem is not compassion fatigue but “official indifference and the media’s entrapment in that indifference until it is too late.”<sup>38</sup>

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[36] Stuart Hall, ‘The Work of Representation’, in Stuart Hall (ed), *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, London: Sage and the Open University, 1997, p. ?

[37] David Campbell, “Stereotypes that move: The iconography of famine,” [www.david-campbell.org](http://www.david-campbell.org), 20.10.2010.

[38] Manzo, ‘Imaging Humanitarianism.’

## Conclusion ►

We cannot take the politics out of pictures. Any form of representation involves making choices. It is a form of power and thus inevitably political. But the issues at stake are particularly vexing when it comes to political responses to humanitarian crises. Dominant forms of crisis photography often focus on the horror, desperation and neediness of distant others. And although they often come late, at a time when a crisis is already in its final stage, such images also provide those viewing them from a distance with the motivation to help.<sup>39</sup> There are mixed motives in these media representations: commercial interests as well as seemingly more noble humanitarian intentions. Robert Hariman and John Lewis Lucaites have demonstrated that these types of crisis images lie at the heart of a particularly troubling conundrum: while the dominant iconography of crisis is in many ways problematic it also seems to be the most powerful in procuring international aid. Dominant images are blatant in their humanitarian appeals. They tap directly into established meanings of charity and goodwill, particularly in the liberal West.

As scholars we need to understand and critique how images of crises use shock, horror and cultural stereotypes. We need to deconstruct the politics involved in this process: the moment when a crisis is visualized, the simplifying mechanisms involved in it and the manner in which iconic images often hark back to and feed into highly problematic and often colonial power relations. But as human beings we also need to recognise that such images, problematic as they might be, can be a powerful tool to mobilize humanitarian

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[39] John Hariman and John Louis Lucaites, *No Caption Needed: Iconic Photographs, Public Culture, and Liberal Democracy*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2007, p. 21.

relief. Finding the fragile balance between these two poles – and searching for alternatives to them - is as difficult as it is imperative. Our essay has sought to make a small contribution to addressing this inevitably political humanitarian challenge.

X

**The Game of Eternal Return**  
*by Nicolas Hausdorf*



*“Aside from the trifling witchcraft of country sorcerers, there are tricks of global hoodoo in which all alerted consciousnesses participate periodically”.*

*Antonin Artaud*

(1)

“And how many times did we have this conversation, detectives?” Rustin Cohle, one of the main protagonists in the HBO hit series *True Detective*, disgustingly stares into a set of beer cans he has emptied and sliced up one by one in the course of a conversation with two of his investigators. At the end of the conversation he will reposition them into a circle resembling the satanic rituals he had been investigating. The concept of *eternal return* weighs heavily on this continuously smoking and drinking ashen protagonist. Believing in reincarnation and the ceaseless repetition of his lifecycle, every moment attains infinite weight and meaning as it will be repeated endlessly. Cohle’s noble intentions as a former police officer who aimed at stopping the crimes surrounding him, are paralyzed by this thought.

(0)

Palo Alto constructivism is the philosophical background to contemporary *Silicon Valley* tech civilization. Its main theme is the principally unlimited alterability of the human form and a most fundamental critique of traditionalism and experience. Constructivists like Rupert Riedl questioned the very concept of causal thinking. Once one liberated oneself from this idea, one could realize that anything could happen at all times. People meanwhile limit the occurrence of novelty by self-fulfilling prophecies: enacting what they are expecting through learned habits and limited expectations, reality actually attains inertia and predictability.

(1)

Historian of the atomic age, Robert S. Norris, writes that at least 5,000 people were taking part in the Manhattan Project based in the middle of New York City. Although working in unison in a highly compartmentalised effort to build the atomic bomb, the greater number of the people involved in the project were nonetheless unable to understand the reach of the project let alone the consequences of their compiled efforts for world history. In all, the project in this way employed more than 130,000 people. Once finished, military superiority became less dependent on manpower, thus offsetting Soviet superiority in conventional forces. In order to convey this point, the American military turned the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki into examples.

(0)

“Oh they’re just playing”. Games oppose themselves to the serious by a *limitation of physical intensity*. In sports, rules prevent physical intensity from escalating into uncontrolled violence. Even the game of Russian roulette in this way differs from brute fighting. In video games, players can die and start again. Similarly, according to *catharsis theory*, scientists estimate that the popularity of several contemporary games is due to the possibility of channeling violence without carrying the actual consequences.

(1)

Apart from constituting a successful case study in the maintenance of secrecy through compartmentalisation, the atomic bomb is also a turning point in the history of military-labour’s bargaining power. The development of the nuclear bomb has been to the soldier what robotisation has been to the automobile factory worker. From this point on, the possibility of total warfare and total destruction of the enemy in a complete absence of military, let alone popular consent increasingly existed,

especially with the largely automatized warfare scenarios starting with the development of intercontinental ballistic missiles in 1957. War propaganda in such a world in last resort thus becomes a luxury.

(0)

Philosophers of Palo Alto constructivism, base their observation partly on the experiments of 20th century behaviorist psychology researchers such as by B.F. Skinner. In his so-called 'Skinner boxes', pigeons were randomly rewarded with food. Erroneously believing they had initiated the rewards with their own action, pigeons started developing neurotic sets of behaviors (tilting their head in one direction etc.,) believing they would in this way reinitiate the dispersing of food.

(1)

The development of large-scale nuclear bunker complexes and automatized 'remote controlled' warfare have made nuclear wars winnable. Costs of such a scenario may include annihilation of the great part of the population. Mao Zedong is popularly quoted as having told Nikito Khrushchev in 1957 that since China had a population of 600 million he was not afraid of nuclear war... because he could afford to lose 300 million.

(0)

Christian culture is about the transcendental presupposition of a duality of the world between good and evil. Football, a game where two teams are playing each other, is the most popular sport in great parts of the world. Identification with one of the teams always also facilitates identification with the structure of the game.

(1)

The current Ukraine crisis pitting against one another NATO and Russian forces in a proxy civil war offers the spectre of accidental total nuclear war to the background of an increasing apathy, disinterest and disengagement of the concerned populations. German mainstream online papers have increasingly abandoned the commentary function for their online articles on such controversial subjects. Public opinion having proven contrary to the opinion of the Commentariat, the press prefers simply not to ask for it anymore.

(0)

The psychologist Martin P. Seligman in 1965 advanced and altered the famous Pavlov psychology experiments: instead of providing food while ringing a bell, Seligman gave electroshocks to trapped dogs. Later on he would put the conditioned dogs in shuttle boxes from which they could easily escape. After ringing the bell however, he observed that the dogs would merely resort to a passive position while normal dogs would escape the box before being shocked. The experiment coined the basic constructivist notion of *learned helplessness*.

(0)

A good game easily links up with Testosterone, solidarity, Oxytocin, free-time. Contemporary games are cybernetic. *Gamification* describes the proliferation of games into non-leisurely spheres of life, i.e. to induce certain economic, military, social behaviours. Soldiers' reflexes (unconscious reactions through the repeated interlinking of two sets of neurons firing at the same time) are trained in the absence of physical harm, in the hope that they are still functional when deployed in 'real time' situations.

(1)

The current *Playmobil* toy sets are pedagogic devices not only to children but also for observers of the self-

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understanding of populations. In the space of twenty years, the observer of an average Playmobil set can thus witness friendly and harmless looking policemen turn into Robocop-like figures in full riot gear.

(0)

In his 1963 book, *The Nerves of Government*, the political scientist Karl Deutsch investigates communication and control with respect to governments. He defines power as “the ability to afford not to learn”.

(1)

Russians are playing chess. Americans are playing poker. If the public is disgusted by the elaboration of chess strategy by President Putin, it may also be because the public does not like or understand chess and therefore may prefer the gamble and ruse of the ever stoically smiling American poker face.

(0)

One of the strands of the story in the series *True Detective* ends with the two protagonists killing a scar-faced ritual child abuser. The death of this character replays the narrative structure and catharsis of average Hollywood movies, always heavily focused on the role of the individual. The death of the individual, however, contradicts a plethora of clues the series has provided which point to more systemic criminal action and a larger set of well-organised perpetrators. Since only a symptom had been liquidated, the phenomenon therefore was bound to reappear.

(1)

In 2010, French journalist Thierry Meyssan, based upon an anonymous witness testimony provided to him, accused Martin Seligman, the author of *Positive Psychology* to have overseen the torture experiments at Guantanamo Bay. Part of the torture allegedly involved the torturers wearing Robocop-like riot gear throwing prisoners

against the wall to demonstrate absolute superiority, the claim was subsequently refuted by the psychologist.

(0)

In the current renewal of the Cold War, please take your position. The intellectual replies that there's a third pill. Swallow it, but remember that in times of war, states of emergency, and the black sites of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, *traitors will be shot*.

(1)

“And how many times did we have this conversation, detectives?” Power's supreme violence may consist in its traumatic capacity of forceful re-enactment.

X

## **Triolectical Materialism and the Beautiful Game of Three-Sided Football**

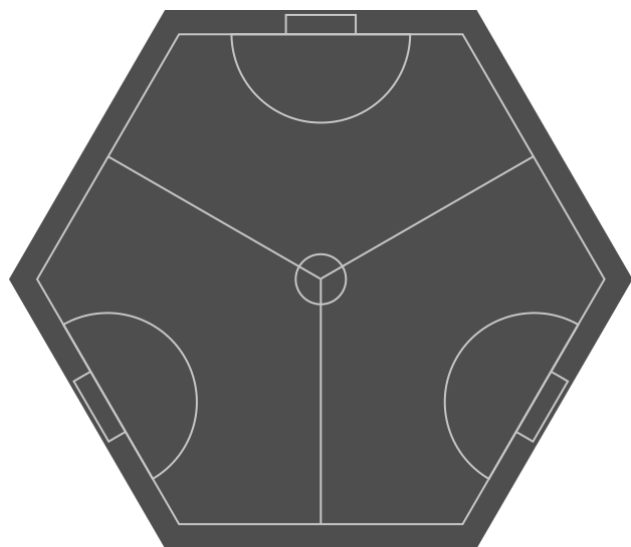
*by Strategic Optimism Football Club*



Since the 1990s both artists and activists have turned to the playful tactics of the Situationist International (SI) for inspiration in combatting the listless inertia of an utterly commodified art world and an ever more ossified and ineffectual political system. The SI has thus become well-known for championing a certain idea of play against the spectacular division of time and space into compartments of work and leisure. Play, not simply as a form of free activity, pre-existing the abstractions and mediation of the commodity form, but also the diversion of existing, already mediated and abstracted activities in new directions. In this sense, despite the way it has been interpreted by many of its more recent interlocutors, play for the SI is less some positive, authentic state, or an escape to a vital “outside”, but more a negative dialectical move, towards the supersession of both work and leisure into a higher form of living - to live without dead time, as they famously proclaimed. This is something evident throughout the SI’s programme: from psychogeography to *détournement*, to the construction of situations.

At least that is one version. But this story is unstable, depending on the perspective one adopts it can begin to break down. For just as there is more than one way of looking at the situationists, there is more way of looking at their notion of play.

One can expand upon this problematic, appropriately, by turning to something play and games have traditionally been seen as particularly good at – that is modelling and rehearsing so-called real world scenarios within a temporarily fictionalised setting, one in which the unidirectional logic of consequence is for a short time suspended. Although this particular use of games, as pedagogical models, appears to contradict the SI’s call for a supersession of alienated living, removing life once more into mediation, the SI did in fact devise examples of just such games.



This invention of more formalised games has generated increasing attention in recent years, Guy Debord's *Game of War*, which he once described as his greatest achievement, is one such example. It has gained growing recognition as a pedagogical tool for the playing out of strategic questions. Debord's *Kriegsspiel* has been proposed as a kind of *détournement*, of those imperialist, so-called "war games" one imagines being undertaken in the bunkers of military strategists somewhere, as they model various scenarios for carving up continents between competing powers - it is not for nothing that in the nineteenth century, the struggle between the British and Russian Empires for control of Central Asia was known as "the Great Game". Debord's game, it is held, functions as a similar kind of modelling exercise, in which the universal is made to appear within the particular, and macro-strategic machinations are metonymically played out upon the microcosmic terrain of the game board. In this sense, quite in keeping with Debord's Hegelianism, his game can be seen as fundamentally dialectical. It is interesting to note that Clausewitz played cards with Hegel.

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In 1962, another one time situationist, Danish artist Asger Jorn proposed the metaphor of three-sided football in order to illustrate his theory of “trialectics”: a response to what he saw as the restrictions of dialectical materialism. In doing so he unwittingly invented another situationist game, but one that provides a fascinating contrast to that of his former comrade. Far from describing the game as his greatest legacy, Jorn never actually envisaged it being played at all. For him it was a purely theoretical model, describing already existing dynamics as he observed them.

Yet in the 1990s a number of post-situationist groups in the UK and Italy began to ascend from the abstract to the concrete so to speak, as interest grew in reviving and reinterpreting situationist ideas such as psychogeography and *détournement* in order to critique the current state of both art and leftist politics. It was at a Glasgow anarchist event in early 1994 that some of these groups came together with various artists, students and anarchists to put Jorn’s footballing thought-experiment into practice. Since the 1990s the game has been played around the world, with a number of tournaments and leagues being set up. In May 2014 the first three-sided football World Cup took place in Jorn’s hometown of Silkeborg, Denmark.

The game is played on a hexagonal pitch and consists of three teams contesting three roughly twenty-minute “halves”, during which the object is to concede as few goals as possible. Games are characterised by their fluidity, swift reversals of fortune and the rapid formation and dissolution of alliances. This open, yet strategic dimension has led to the game being described as a cross between conventional association football, chess and poker.

In line with the SI’s uneven historicisation, Debord’s game has become relatively well known, Jorn’s less so. Yet

Jorn's accidental game opens a number of fascinating questions upon games in general, particularly with regards to the way they are used in modelling the world, with the attendant implications for conceptions of strategy.

Whilst it would certainly be overly simplistic to claim that the structure of Debord's game clings to a certain Leninist vanguardism, it is true that one must play the role of general (although perhaps in Gramsci's sense of the Revolutionary Party as Prince rearticulated with the revolutionary class itself cast in this role). Likewise one's command of one's forces emanates directly from these leaders and is relayed through uninterrupted, vertical lines of communication. Debord's game could thus be argued to model a certain form of strategic conflict, via Clausewitz and Machiavelli, Lenin and Gramsci, one which it is arguably vital to at least recognise and understand, but which likewise, despite its epistemological claims to totality, cannot exhaust the complexities of the undecidable. It was to Debord's own self-confessed frustration that his game could not be 'subject to external accident. Neither wind nor weather...'.<sup>40</sup> Jorn's theory of triolectics however, demurs from such notions of strategic mastery, its strategy is rather a necessarily optimistic one: it must be characterised by a certain openness to contingency, externality and the intervention of otherness.

Interestingly, Jorn was not the only member of the situationist milieu to develop a theory of triolectics, their estranged collaborator Henri Lefebvre would also expound the idea in his own directions, ones later built upon by the geographer Edward Soja in his notion of "thirdspace". For Jorn, triolectics stemmed from theories of quantum physics and the ontological destabilisation

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[40] Roberto Ohrt, 'If I wasn't Alexander I would like to be Diogenes', in *Durch* (3-4), Nov 1987, pp. 27-48 (p17).

they suggest: the ultimate undecidability and relativity of competing states of being. In this sense it deconstructed notions of unidirectional dialectic progression and introduced the notion of perspective, externality and contingency to the formerly seamless dialectical totality. Likewise for Soja, the “thirling” of thirdspace is a deconstructive move, it functions as an introduction of the Other. It could be argued that the triolectic, as played out in the game of three-sided football, operates in precisely this way, undoing not only the dualistic, ontological oppositions of classic formal logic - as indeed the dialectic itself does - but also, at the same time, destabilising the forward progression of the dialectic’s inherent motion, and thus the attendant concept of totality. One can see how this arises from Jorn’s interest in physics, and in particular, Niels Bohr’s theory of complementarity. Yet for Jorn, triolectics was arguably as much pataphysics as quantum physics. Thinking triolectically is a game in which former categories of thought break down. This is evident in three-sided football, which took Jorn’s thinking and refracted it through the anarchic approach of a milieu steeped in the “guerrilla ontology” and “quantum philosophy” of Robert Anton Wilson and the magical thinking of Thee Temple ov Psychick Youth.

In this sense three-sided football builds upon surrealist games, which took the assumed triviality and childishness of games and turned it against serious bourgeois rationality in a negative dialectical move. This was an attempt to supersede and sublimate both categories: into a new trivial seriousness or serious triviality that they labelled “surreality”. Like Lefebvre, Jorn goes beyond surrealist games. The introduction of the triolectical third point makes surreality not a progression to be attained, but a constant, unstable negotiation of positions, a study of situology in flux. In this sense it draws out the relation of triviality and seriousness that is actually latent in all games: a serious playfulness

activated through the entry of the undecidable – the suspension of fixed consequence and the opening up to externality.

Thus the thought-experiment - or “war game” if you like - of three-sided football, unlike Debord’s dialectical game, does not so much express the universal within the particular, rather Jorn’s accidental game contains a dialectical uplifting only in the partial sense of a complexifying, but at the same time destabilising its implied directionality. It attempts to go beyond a traditional dialectic, in order to further strip metaphysics from a materialist programme. This, perhaps, is triolectics: a multidirectional, incoherent dialectical process, which introduces externality and undecidability and thus allows for, arguably, an inherently more “playful” form of game.

Strategy is no longer the illusion of mastering a totality. Rather it is the negotiation of undecidables that removes both the binary fixity of formal Aristotelian logic and the teleology of dialectical change at once. One is presented not with the binary and fixed categories construed by media-imposed ideology. Rather one can glimpse an externality - the larger matrix of general emergencies that contain and triangulate the particular emergency. This is the poverty and inequality, the imperialism and enclosure, racism and colonialism, binaries of gender and sexuality and, ultimately, the class divisions of global capitalism that contain and triangulate any particular situation. The particular is not so much always an expression of the totality, but is certainly triangulated and mapped by its proliferating and shifting vectors.

If it is not anathema, perhaps one might observe that in this respect Jorn’s triolectics appears in some ways to anticipate a nascent structural Marxism more closely than it stands by Debord’s firm Hegelianism. And yet Jorn’s system in fact escapes this all too convenient

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compartmentalisation as well. Thankfully it is far too incoherent. It was never meant to be coherent. It escapes the rigid and counter-productive specialisations of structuralism and instead mixes elements of dialectics with premonitions of a deconstructive approach. It fails to stand up as a “coherent” philosophical system in any conventional sense, for ultimately, it is a game. In this way, and undoing Hegel’s teleology, it is arguably as much a work of art as a philosophy. It turns in on itself, somewhat poetically, an ouroboros, a trielectical wheel, destabilising its own definition, undermining itself with its own humour and self-effacement. Its form and content converge into an unstable, and importantly playful, artistic, philosophical and political gesture. Of course it is also just a game of football.

**The War on Ebola**  
*Derek Gregory*





We've been here before – 'wars' on this and 'wars' on that. It's strange how reluctant states are to admit that their use of military violence (especially when it doesn't involve 'boots on the ground'<sup>41</sup>) isn't really war at all – 'overseas contingency operations' is what the Pentagon once preferred, but I've lost count of how many linguistic somersaults they've performed since then to camouflage their campaigns – and yet how eager they are to declare everything else a war.

These tricks are double-edged. While advanced militaries and their paymasters go to extraordinary linguistic lengths to mask the effects of their work<sup>42</sup>, medical scientists have been busily appropriating the metaphorical terrain<sup>43</sup> from which modern armies are in embarrassed retreat.

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[41] *Boots on the Ground* – Derek Gregory, [www.geographicalimagination.com/2014/09/20/boots-on-the-ground/](http://www.geographicalimagination.com/2014/09/20/boots-on-the-ground/) accessed 10.11.14

[42] '*Cleansing the stock*' and other ways governments talk about human beings' by Gerooge Mobito's [www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/oct/21/cleansing-stock-doublespeak-people-killing](http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/oct/21/cleansing-stock-doublespeak-people-killing). accessed 10.11.14

[43] *The war against war metaphors* By Melinda Wenner [www.the-scientist.com/?articles.view/articleNo/24756/title/The-war-against-war-metaphors/](http://www.the-scientist.com/?articles.view/articleNo/24756/title/The-war-against-war-metaphors/) accessed 10.11.14

Yet all metaphors take us somewhere before they break down, and the ‘war on Ebola’ takes us more or less directly to the militarisation of the global response. In an otherwise critical commentary, Karen Greenberg draws parallels between the ‘the war on terror’ and the ‘war on Ebola’:

*‘The differences between the two “wars” may seem too obvious to belabor, since Ebola is a disease with a medical etiology and scientific remedies, while ISIS is a sentient enemy. Nevertheless, Ebola does seem to mimic some of the characteristics experts long ago assigned to al-Qaeda and its various wannabe and successor outfits. It lurks in the shadows until it strikes. It threatens the safety of civilians across the United States. Its root causes lie in the poverty and squalor of distant countries. Its spread must be stopped at its region of origin — in this case, Guinea, Liberia, and Sierra Leone in West Africa — just as both the Bush and Obama administrations were convinced that the fight against al-Qaeda had to be taken militarily to the backlands of the planet from Pakistan’s tribal borderlands to Yemen’s rural areas.’<sup>44</sup>*

There are other parallels too, not least the endless re-descriptions of terrorism and even insurgency as life-threatening diseases, ‘cancers’ on the body politic. And, as Josh Holmes shows<sup>45</sup>, there is also an entirely parallel (geo)politics of fear in both cases (see also Rebecca Gordon on the racialisation of ‘the fear machine’<sup>46</sup>). Given the threat supposedly posed by ‘the enemy within’, it’s not surprising that US Northern

[44] *Will the U.S. Go to “War” Against Ebola?* By Karen Greenberg, [www.tomdispatch.com/post/175910/tomgram%3A\\_karen\\_greenberg%2C\\_will\\_the\\_u.s.\\_go\\_to\\_%22war%22\\_against\\_ebola/](http://www.tomdispatch.com/post/175910/tomgram%3A_karen_greenberg%2C_will_the_u.s._go_to_%22war%22_against_ebola/) accessed 10.11.14

[45] *Nothing Spreads Like Fear: The Securitisation of Ebola*, Josh Holmes, [www.rhulgeopolitics.wordpress.com/2014/10/17/nothing-spreads-like-fear-the-securitisation-of-ebola/](http://www.rhulgeopolitics.wordpress.com/2014/10/17/nothing-spreads-like-fear-the-securitisation-of-ebola/) accessed 10.11.14

[46] *Ebola & Immigrants and Muslims, Oh My! Operating the Fear Machine*, Rebecca Gordon [www.juancole.com/2014/10/immigrants-operating-machine.html](http://www.juancole.com/2014/10/immigrants-operating-machine.html) accessed 10.11.14

Command has already set up a 30-person ‘military rapid response team’<sup>47</sup> for domestic Ebola cases, and that the Department of Homeland Security has been issuing Biosurveillance Event Reports on the Ebola outbreak in West Africa from the National Biosurveillance Integration Center.

But as I’ve said, Karen’s is a critical commentary and so, before the military metaphors carry us away, her conclusion bears repeating:

*‘The United States is about to be tested by a disease in ways that could dovetail remarkably well with the war on terror. In this context, think of Ebola as the universe’s unfair challenge to everything that war bred in our governmental system. As it happens, those things that the U.S. did, often ineffectively and counterproductively, to thwart its enemies, potential enemies, and even its own citizenry will not be an antidote to this “enemy” either. It, too, may be transnational, originate in fragile states, and affect those who come in contact with it, but it cannot be stopped by the methods of the national security state.’*<sup>48</sup>

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[47] *Military’s Ebola Rapid Response Team Starts Training*, Richard Sisk, <http://www.military.com/daily-news/2014/10/22/militarys-ebola-rapid-response-team-starts-training.html> accessed 10.11.14

[48] *Will the U.S. Go to “War” Against Ebola?* By Karen Greenberg, [www.tomdispatch.com/post/175910/tomgram%3A\\_karen\\_greenberg%2C\\_will\\_the\\_u.s.\\_go\\_to\\_%22war%22\\_against\\_ebola/](http://www.tomdispatch.com/post/175910/tomgram%3A_karen_greenberg%2C_will_the_u.s._go_to_%22war%22_against_ebola/) accessed 10.11.14

To make sense of all this, I think we need to stand back and start with four general observations:

(1) **Modern military medicine** has long involved more than evacuating and treating the wounded from the field of battle. It has always had a substantial public health component. Until the early twentieth century, ‘infectious diseases unrelated to trauma were responsible for a much greater proportion of the deaths during war than battle-related injuries’<sup>49</sup>. As militaries started to pay much closer attention to hygiene and disease prevention, Matthew Smallman-Raynor and Andrew Cliff estimate that the ratio of ‘battle deaths’ to deaths from disease amongst the military population fell from 1:0.4 in the First World War to 1:0.1 in the Second World War; then it rose to 1:0.13 in the Vietnam War but in the first US-led Gulf War (1991) it fell to 1:0.01.



[49] *History of Infections Associated With Combat-Related Injuries*, - Clinton K. Murray, MD, Mary K. Hinkle, MD, and Heather C. Yun, MD <http://afids.org/publications/PDF/CRI/Prevention%20and%20Management%20of%20CRI%20-4-%20-%20History.pdf> accessed 10.11.14

(2) Modern militaries are no strangers to **biowarfare** either. Both sides in the First World War experimented with chemical weapons, and although the US Army's explicitly offensive Biological Warfare Weapons Laboratories closed in 1969 the commitment to 'bio-defense' and bio-security has ensured a continuing military investment in the weaponisation of infectious diseases. I don't subscribe to the view that the Ebola epidemic in West Africa is the result of a rogue US biowarfare program – see for example the claims made by 'Robert Wenzel'<sup>50</sup>, and if you want to know why his name is in scare-quotes, appropriately enough, read Chris Becker's takedown<sup>51</sup> – nor to the fear that what *Scientific American* calls 'weaponised Ebola'<sup>52</sup> is poised to become a 'bio-terror threat'. But I do think it worth noting the work of the US Army Medical Research Institute of Infectious Diseases<sup>53</sup> which has had field teams on the ground in West Africa since 2006, and the importance placed on surveillance and monitoring.

(3) I also think it is necessary to think through the **biopolitics** of public health in relation to military and paramilitary violence. This takes multiple forms. Its become dismally apparent that in many conflict zones hospitals, doctors and other health-care workers have

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[50] *The US Military and the Ebola Outbreak*, Robert Wenzel, <http://www.economicpolicyjournal.com/2014/08/the-us-military-and-ebola-outbreak.html> accessed 10.11.14

[51] *Who The Hell Is Robert Wenzel From EconomicPolicyJournal.com Really?* Chris Becker <http://chrisbecker.com/2013/04/15/who-the-hell-is-robert-wenzel-from-economicpolicyjournal-com-really/> accessed 10.11.14

[52] *Weaponized Ebola: Is It Really a Bioterror Threat?* Dina Fine Maron <http://www.scientificamerican.com/article/weaponized-ebola-is-it-really-a-bioterror-threat/> accessed 10.11.14

[53] *USAMRIID Supports Ebola Virus Outbreak in West Africa*, Caree Vander Linden, [https://mrmc.amedd.army.mil/index.cfm?pageid=media\\_resources.articles.USAMRIID\\_supports\\_ebola\\_virus\\_outbreak\\_in\\_west\\_africa](https://mrmc.amedd.army.mil/index.cfm?pageid=media_resources.articles.USAMRIID_supports_ebola_virus_outbreak_in_west_africa) accessed 10.11.14

become targets: in Gaza<sup>54</sup>, to be sure, but in Syria and elsewhere too. The treatment of disease has also become a tactical vector: think of the CIA's use of polio vaccination campaigns as a cover for its intelligence operations<sup>55</sup> and – the conjunction is imperative – the Taliban's manipulation of polio vaccinations in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas<sup>56</sup>. Think, too, of the way in which the Assad regime has inflicted a resurgent, even counterinsurgent geography of polio on the Syrian people.

As Annie Sparrow shows.

*'This man-made outbreak is a consequence of the way that Syrian President Bashar al-Assad has chosen to fight the war—a war crime of truly epidemic proportions. Even before the uprising, in areas considered politically unsympathetic like Deir Ezzor, the government stopped maintaining sanitation and safe-water services, and began withholding routine immunizations for preventable childhood diseases. Once the war began, the government started ruthless attacks on civilians in opposition-held areas, forcing millions to seek refuge in filthy, crowded, and cold conditions. Compounding the problem are Assad's ongoing attacks on doctors and the health care system, his besieging of cities, his obstruction of humanitarian aid, and his channelling of vaccines and other relief to pro-regime territory.'*<sup>57</sup>

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[54] *Gaza 101*, Derek Gregory, <http://geographicalimaginations.com/2014/07/21/gaza-101/> accessed 10.11.14

[55] *CIA organised fake vaccination drive to get Osama bin Laden's family DNA*, Saeed Shah, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/jul/11/cia-fake-vaccinations-osama-bin-ladens-dna> accessed 10.11.14

[56] *The Taliban are winning the war on Polio*, [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2014/02/12/why\\_war\\_itself\\_is\\_the\\_problem\\_with\\_the\\_war\\_on\\_polio\\_afghanistan\\_kabul](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2014/02/12/why_war_itself_is_the_problem_with_the_war_on_polio_afghanistan_kabul) accessed 10.11.14

[57] *Syria's Polio Epidemic: The Suppressed Truth*, Annie Sparrow, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2014/feb/20/syrias-polio-epidemic-suppressed-truth/> accessed 10.11.14

Late this summer she provided this update:

*'... nearly all the cases of polio have occurred in areas of northern Syria under rebel control, where the government is seemingly doing everything in its power to prevent vaccination. The Syrian government has appealed to the UN for hundreds of medicines for areas of the country it controls, while largely ignoring the far more dire needs of opposition-held areas. Many children, especially newborns, still do not have access to polio immunization. Daily government airstrikes target the very health facilities that should be the foundation of vaccination efforts, as well as the children who should be protected from polio, measles, and other preventable childhood diseases. As Dr. Ammar, a doctor from Aleppo, said to me bitterly after an April 30 airstrike killed twenty-two schoolgirls, "The government's polio control strategy for children is to kill them before they can get polio"'.<sup>58</sup>*



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[58] *Syria: The Other Threat*, Annie Sparrow, <http://www.nybooks.com/blogs/nyrblog/2014/aug/12/syria-threat-polio/> accessed 10.11.14

(4) Finally, biopolitics threads its way from the sub-national and the national to the trans-national and so to what Sara Davies calls, in a vitally important essay, ‘Securitizing Infectious Disease’.<sup>59</sup>

In her original essay, Sara Davies shows how powerful states in the global North joined forces with the World Health Organisation to construct infectious disease as an existential security threat that demanded new rules and protocols for its effective containment.

Crucially:

*‘The outcome of this has been the development of international health cooperation mechanisms that place western fears of an outbreak reaching them above the prevention of such outbreaks in the first place. In turn, the desire of the WHO to assert its authority in the project of disease surveillance and containment has led it to develop global health mechanisms that primarily prioritizes the protection of western states from disease contagion.’*<sup>60</sup>

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[59] *Securitizing infectious disease*, SARA E. DAVIES [http://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/public/International%20Affairs/2008/84\\_2davies.pdf](http://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/public/International%20Affairs/2008/84_2davies.pdf). Accessed 10.11.14 See also Sara Davies ‘The international politics of disease reporting: towards post-Westphalianism?’, *International politics* 49 (2012) 591–613, and the collection she has edited with Jeremy Youde, *The politics of surveillance and response to disease outbreaks: the new frontier for states and non-state actors* – due out next year). accessed 10.11.14

[60] *Ibid*

This has a genealogy as well as a geography (or what Alan Ingram once called a ‘geopolitics of disease’<sup>61</sup>). Peter Dörrie notes that on 18 September 2014 the UN Security Council declared the current Ebola outbreak in West Africa ‘a threat to international peace and security’, and that this was ‘the first time the UN had taken this step in a public health crisis.’<sup>62</sup> (In fact the Council had previously expressed similar concerns about the impact of HIV/AIDS on ‘stability and security’).

Under Chapter VII of the UN Charter this declaration has significant legal implications, as Jens David Ohlin has noted<sup>63</sup>, but what most concerns Peter Dorrie is how long it took for the Security Council to stir itself. It issued its statement 180 days after the WHO confirmed the outbreak, and over a month after the WHO had declared Ebola a ‘Public Health Emergency of International Concern’, and in his eyes the international system ‘ignored the problem until it was too big for any solution other than full-scale military intervention.’ But as I’ve already suggested, it’s wrong to treat the militarisation of epidemic disease as somehow new. Of direct relevance to the present ‘war on Ebola’ is this passage from Sara Davies essay:

*‘The United States has been a keen participant in disease surveillance and response since the mid-1990s. The United States Department of Defense (US DoD) has had overseas infectious disease research laboratories located in over 20 countries for nearly ten years. The Global Emerging Infectious Surveillance and Response System (DoD-GEIS) mobile*

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[61] *The New Geopolitics of Disease: Between Global Health and Global Security*, Alan Ingram Geopolitics Journal Volume 10, Issue 3, 2005

[62] *The Military Is the Worst Organization to Combat Ebola*, Peter Dörrie, <https://medium.com/war-is-boring/the-military-is-the-worst-organization-to-combat-ebola-75383fee54ab> accessed 10.11.14

[63] *Ebola will be a Chapter VII issue* by Jens David Ohlin, <http://opiniojuris.org/2014/10/19/ebola-will-chapter-vii-issue/> accessed 10.11

*laboratories were set up for the purpose of ‘responding to outbreaks of epidemic, endemic and emergent diseases’, and their location in the DoD, as opposed to the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) or Centre for Disease Control (CDC) demonstrates how seriously the United States views the response to infectious disease as a key national security strategy.’<sup>64</sup>*

So, four observations about the military-medical-security nexus that provide a context for the ‘war on Ebola’. There are two other issues that should also be on the table before proceeding.

The first involves the imaginative geographies circulating in the global North that (mis)inform public response to the epidemic. Many of them can be traced back to colonial descriptions of the coast of nineteenth-century West Africa (and Sierra Leone in particular) as ‘the white man’s grave’, a form of what in a different context Dan Clayton calls a ‘militant tropically’. The contemporary reactivation of these tropes is clearly a serious concern because it corrodes an effective political response. As geographer Kerrie Thornhill writes,

*‘African and diaspora scholars, already accustomed to the ‘thousand tiny paper cuts’ of casual racism, demonstrate how these (metaphorical) cuts escalate into real fatalities. Writers such as Nanjala Nyabola and Lola Okolosie point out the abundance of racist tropes depicting West African societies as inherently unclean, chaotic, uncooperative, ungrateful, and childlike. This racism reinforces a global culture of disregard for black African lives, and the perception that they are a source of social and biological contamination.*

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[64] *Securitizing infectious disease*, SARA E. DAVIES  
[http://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/public/International%20Affairs/2008/84\\_2davies.pdf](http://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/public/International%20Affairs/2008/84_2davies.pdf), accessed 10.11.14

You can find much more on this in *Cultural Anthropology's* brilliant *Ebola in Perspective*<sup>65</sup> series.

The second is the precarious condition of health care systems in West Africa (*Ebola in Perspective* is good on this too). Brice de la Vigne, the operations director of Médecins Sans Frontières, reminds us that ‘both Sierra Leone and Liberia were at war ten years ago and all the infrastructure was destroyed. It is the worst place on earth to have these epidemics.’<sup>66</sup> Other critics suggest that these uncivil wars were not the only culprits. In their view, it was the neoliberal economic model forced on West Africa by the global North that was primarily responsible for gutting public health systems:

*‘While years of war played a role in weakening public systems, it is the “war against people, driven by international financial institutions” that is largely responsible for decimating the public health care system, eroding wages and conditions for health care workers, and fueling the crisis sweeping West Africa today, says [Emira] Woods. “Over the past six months to a year there have been rolling health care worker strikes in country after country—Nigeria, Sierra Leone, and Liberia,” said Woods. “Nurses and doctors are risking and losing their lives but don’t have protective gear needed to serve patients and save their own lives. They are on the front lines and have not had their voices heard.”’<sup>67</sup>*

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[65] <http://www.culanth.org/fieldsights/585-ebola-in-perspective> accessed 11.10.14

[66] *World leaders ‘failing to help’ over Ebola outbreak in Africa*, <http://www.theguardian.com/society/2014/aug/19/western-leaders-ebola-outbreak-africa-medecins-sans-frontieres> accessed 10.11.14

[67] *‘Assassination’ of Public Health Systems Driving Ebola Crisis, Experts Warn*, Sarah Lazare, <http://www.commondreams.org/news/2014/10/16/assassination-public-health-systems-driving-ebola-crisis-experts-warn> accessed 10.11.14

So – back to the front lines. Despite the geopolitical-military-security back story, it was Médecins Sans Frontières that made the first public call (on 2 September) for military assistance in combatting Ebola.

*'States with biological-disaster response capacity, including civilian and military medical capability, must immediately dispatch assets and personnel to West Africa...*

*'Many countries possess biological threat response mechanisms. They can deploy trained civilian or military medical teams in a matter of days, in an organised fashion, and with a chain of command to assure high standards of safety and efficiency to support the affected countries...*

*'In the immediate term, field hospitals with isolation wards must be scaled up, trained personnel must be dispatched, mobile laboratories must be deployed to improve diagnostics, air bridges must be established to move personnel and material to and within West Africa, and a regional network of field hospitals must be established to treat medical personnel with suspected or actual infections.'*<sup>68</sup>

Ten days later Peter Piot, the Director of the London School of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene and the microbiologist who helped identify the Ebola virus in 1976, also called for a 'quasi-military intervention'<sup>69</sup>. Although he spoke about a 'state of emergency', he too wanted to reverse the response prefigured by Giorgio Agamben in such situations and contract the spaces of exception that were multiplying across West Africa. He had in mind 'beds, ambulances and trucks as well as an army of clinicians, doctors and nurses.'<sup>70</sup>

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[68] <http://www.msf.org/diseases/ebola> accessed 11.10.14

[69] *Scientist who identified Ebola virus calls for 'quasi-military intervention'*, Lisa O'Carroll <http://www.theguardian.com/society/2014/sep/11/scientist-identified-ebola-quasi-military-intervention-peter-piot> accessed 11.10.14

[70] *Ibid*

What materialised was rather different.

On 16 September President Obama flew to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta to announce *Operation United Assistance*<sup>71</sup>. He committed 3-4,000 US troops and \$750 million in defence funding to the mission, which is being orchestrated by US Africa Command (AFRICOM) through US Army Africa in concert with USAID. The focus of the US military-medical mission is Liberia. There are close historical connections between the US and Liberia, which originally offered to host AFRICOM's headquarters in the capital Monrovia; now a Joint Force Command has been set up there. The US deployment is complemented by the deployment of UK forces to Sierra Leone (Operation Gritrock) and French forces to Guinea. In both cases there are also close, colonial connections, and the British-led International Military Advisory Training Team Sierra Leone has been on the ground since 2000 (since last year this has been re-tasked as the International Security Advisory Team Sierra Leone).

'Our enemy is a disease'<sup>72</sup>, declared Lt Col Brian De Santis, echoing AFRICOM's operational order – but it was quickly made clear that the vast majority of troops will not come into contact with the enemy or any of its victims at all. This is just as well; most of the soldiers have minimal medical training – just four hours from the US Army Medical Research Institute of Infectious Disease – and the Pentagon's Press Secretary Rear Admiral John Kirby explained that there is 'no intention right now that [troops] will interact with patients or be in areas where they would necessarily come into contact with patients':

'They're not doctors. They're not nurses. They're not trained for that and not equipped for that. That's not

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[71] <http://www.africom.mil/operation-united-assistance> accessed 10.11.14

[72] <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-29546162> accessed 10.11.14

part of the mission. They will be kept in locations where they can do their jobs without coming into contact with patients.<sup>73</sup>

Andrew Bacevich thinks all this absurd:

*'It's like the city that spends all its money to raise up a formidable police force only to discover that what it really needs is a bigger sewage treatment plant. Of course, you can always put cops to work burning human excrement but there are better — that is, more effective and cheaper — ways to solve the problem.'*<sup>74</sup>

In effect, this is another case of the military preferring remote operations.

Major Matt Cavanaugh, from the US Army War College, has made an unofficial, back-of-the-envelope calculation of what a successful 'containment strategy' for Ebola would require. The figure he arrives at – somewhere between 36,600 to 73,200 troops – is derived from the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and suggests that, for some commentators at least, the Ebola crisis is an opportunity to deepen AFRICOM's investment in what Jan Bachmann calls 'policing Africa':

*'The spectrum of [AFRICOM's] activities can be understood most comprehensively through an analytical perspective of policing, in which the aim of establishing 'good order' through an expansive regulatory engagement in issues of welfare is applied to contexts of 'fragile' statehood and 'ungoverned spaces'.*<sup>75</sup>

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[73] <http://www.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=123217>  
accessed 10.11.14

[74] <http://www.spectator.co.uk/features/9336261/the-us-military-should-be-winning-wars-not-fighting-ebola/>

[75] *Policing Africa: the US military and visions of crafting "good order"*, Jan Bachmann *Security Dialogue* 45 (2) (2014) 119–36]

This is not a uniquely American view. The *Daily Mail* (where else?) reports that one of the options being considered by Britain's Chief of the General Staff is a full-scale military lockdown of Sierra Leone:

*'From a military perspective Ebola is like a biological warfare attack and should be countered accordingly. There needs to be a clampdown on human movement inside Sierra Leone and possibly to and from the country between now and late 2015 when it is hoped that an antidote will have been developed.'*<sup>76</sup>

It is hard to know how much credence this should be given, of course, though the very existence of proposals like these suggests that the 'soft power' which Joeva Rock sees in the militarisation of Ebola conceals an iron fist<sup>77</sup>. And Niles Williamson believes that the military-medical missions are a smokescreen:

*'The main purpose of this military operation is not to halt the spread of Ebola or restore health to those that have been infected. Rather the United States is seeking to exploit the crisis to establish a firm footing on the African continent for AFRICOM.'*<sup>78</sup>

That may be one of the objectives, but I think it's a bridge too far to claim it as the main purpose: as I've tried to show, the militarisation and securitisation of Ebola has many other geopolitical and biopolitical dimensions. And Nick Turse has revealed that

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[76] *Ebola lockdown: British plan to send 3,000 UK troops into Sierra Leone to set up military blockades to restrict movement in attempt to stop the virus spreading*  
<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2798713/3-000-uk-troops-germ-warfare-style-ebola-blockade-plan-sierra-leone.html> accessed 10.11.14

[77] *Militarizing the Ebola Crisis*, Joeva Rock, <http://www.truth-out.org/news/item/26465-militarizing-the-ebola-crisis> accessed 10.11.14

[78] *US exploiting West Africa Ebola outbreak to establish military foothold*, Niles Williamson <http://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2014/10/04/ebol-o04.html> accessed 10.11.14

AFRICOM, far from having a 'light footprint', has already achieved a remarkably rapid tempo of operations across the whole continent.

Still, even in its less extreme versions, the 'war on Ebola' clearly raises urgent questions about the militarisation of humanitarian aid, about what Kristin Bergtora Sandvik calls a 'crisis of humanitarian governance'<sup>79</sup>, and about the violence that is involved in the production of the humanitarian present.<sup>80</sup>

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[79] *Ebola: A Humanitarian Crisis or a Crisis of Humanitarian Governance?* Kristin Bergtora Sandvik <http://www.odihpn.org/the-humanitarian-space/news/announcements/blog-articles/ebola-a-humanitarian-crisis-or-a-crisis-of-humanitarian-governance> accessed 10.11.14

[80] see *The humanitarian present, humanitarian reason and imperialism*, Deerk Geriogy <http://geographicalimagination.com/2012/09/13/the-humanitarian-present-humanitarian-reason-and-imperialism/> accessed 10.11.14

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**Biographies**



**Richard Barbrook** is Senior Lecturer in Politics at the University of Westminster and a trustee of Cybersalon. He is author of *Class Wargames: ludic subversion against spectacular capitalism*; *Imaginary Futures: from thinking machines to the global village*; *The Class of the New*; and *Media Freedom: the Contradictions of Communications in the Age of Modernity*.

**Roland Bleiker** is Professor of International Relations at the University of Queensland. His current research examines how images shape responses to humanitarian crises. Recent publications include *Aesthetics and World Politics* (Palgrave 2012) and, as co-editor, a forum on “Emotions and World Politics” in *International Theory* (Vol 3/2014).

**David Campbell** is a writer, professor and producer who analyses visual storytelling and creates new visual stories. His research is on documentary photography and photojournalism, the disruption in the media economy and its impact on visual journalism, in addition to his long-term commitment to understanding international politics. David is Honorary Professor in the School of Political Science and International Studies at the University of Queensland.

**Derek Gregory** is Peter Wall Distinguished Professor at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver. His research focuses on genealogies and geographies of later modern war from the First World War to the present, including targeting, killing spaces and war from the air and the evacuation of combatant and civilian casualties from war zones. He was awarded the Founder’s Medal of the Royal Geographical Society in 2006, and is currently completing two new books, *War Material* and *The Everywhere War*.

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**Emma Hutchison** is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow in the School of Political Science and International Studies at the University of Queensland. Her current key research projects examine trauma and emotions in world politics, as well as how the emotional dimensions of disaster imagery enact and shape humanitarian practices. Her research has appeared in a range of scholarly journals and books, and she is currently completing her first book: *Affective Communities in World Politics: Collective Emotions After Trauma*, which is under contract with Cambridge University Press.

**Strategic Optimism Football** are a three-sided football team playing in the Luther Blissett Deptford League. They were formed when members of a former autonomous and nomadic university - the University for Strategic Optimism - triolectically inverted Marcel Duchamp's infamous gesture of "definitively abandoning" art in favour of chess. In their case, giving up politics to play three-sided football. However, SOF's first game was played under the banner of an international day of action against gold mining in the Roşia Montană region of Transylvania - undermining their own futile gesture from day one. It was therefore from this game that one of three-sided football's key tactical dissimulations - the so-called "Rosia's (Triple) Cross" - obtained its name. "The Optimists" play in a multi-coloured kit, triolectically derived from industrial painting, occult magick and splashing. They function as a home team for all those with no home, where all the shirts read Blissett.

**Theodore Price** is an artist, writer and curator of COBRA RES. His recent books include *The Right to Be forgotten* (Longhouse 2012), COBRA 1.1 (ed. 2013) and COBRA 1.3 (ed. 2014). He is currently working on a new film and book documenting a series of conversations on aesthetics and emergency politics (funded by A:N). Price is visiting lecturer at Goldsmiths University of London and The American University of Beirut, Lebanon. [www.theoprice.com](http://www.theoprice.com)



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