

The Poetry of Moans and Sighs: Designs for and against Evil

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Abstract

Can we think of war asubjectively? Today, the contours of warfare are expeditionary, spatially disembedded and temporally expansive. Broadly, these trends hint at an ontology of war exceeding identifiable subjects around which to attribute its origins and prevalence. War is coming to be seen in machinic terms, driving on and expanding regardless of our desires. These controversial conceptualizations radically challenge the basis of most social scientific understandings of war and profoundly disorder (international) legal understandings of justice, accountability and responsibility. In this essay, I begin by reading the asubjective nature of war through

an engagement with Ahmed Saadawi's novel *Frankenstein in Baghdad*, which depicts post-2003 Iraq as a warscape stalked by the "Whatsitsname," a monstrous presence stitched together from the bodies of those killed across the city by different political factions. Drawing on Donna Haraway's notion of response-ability, I suggest the Whatsitsname can serve not only as a metaphor for the asubjective ontology of war but also as a means through which to imagine new modes of intervening against that asubjectivity. I thus conclude by speculating on the possibility of developing what I term a material-aesthetic poetics of designing against war, evil and violence.

Act always so as to increase the number of choices.
—Heinz von Foerster (227)

In Iraqi novelist Ahmed Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad*, a monster emerges after the protagonist Hadi assembles the body parts of those killed under torture by suicide bombs, the missiles of occupying forces and other brutalities. Hadi names this monster the *shismu*: the "Whatsitsname." Quickly, the Whatsitsname begins a campaign of revenge against each of those who harmed the parts that make up its body. But, as a composition of everything and everyone made to suffer in Baghdad, the being's destructive path leaves none untouched as it moves across the blood-dimmed bridges of the Tigris. No one is safe. Everyone is an enemy—insurgents or occupying forces, Islamists or Communists, men or women. It makes no difference to the monster. Hadi insists on the appellation "Whatsitsname" because any other term—a "corpse" or a "murderer" or a "beast"—"suggested a particular person or creature, and that didn't apply in the case of the Whatsitsname" (Saadawi, qtd. in Najjar). Instead, the Whatsitsname reflects

our personal standards of justice, retribution, revenge and punishment. What is justice for one group is injustice for another. The Iraqi Frankenstein is made up of the body parts of victims who belong to different groups, each of which views the other as its enemy. Therefore, this Frankenstein will end up killing itself. In other words, the Whatsitsname is the fictional representation of the process of everyone killing everyone. This character is the visual representation of the larger crisis, rather than the solution. (Saadawi, qtd. in Najjar)

As Saadawi says, *Frankenstein in Baghdad* is fiction. But the representation it offers is not dissimilar to, nor an especially exaggerated analogy for, the reality of war. Consider a few examples. At Bagram Airbase, Afghanistan, detainees were told by occupying US troops that "if you don't cooperate, we'll have to get the monster" (Golden). That monster,

a “king of torture,” was “Specialist Damien M. Corsetti, a tall, bearded interrogator sometimes called ‘Monster’ [because] he had the nickname tattooed in Italian across his stomach” (Golden). And to shift to another continent, one survivor of the military regime that controlled Brazil during the 1970s described how, as he “was carried into the torture room,” one of the torturers, an army captain said: “Get ready to see Frankenstein come in” (Amnesty International 52). After those words the prisoner in question

saw a man come into the room, walking slowly and hesitantly, leaning on a stick, one eyelid half closed, his mouth twisted, his stomach muscles twitching continuously, unable to form words. He had been admitted to hospital between life and death after traumatic experiences undergone during violent torture. They said [...] ‘encourage him to talk, if not the “Gestapo” will have no more patience.’ (52)

And, finally, alongside the torturer and the tortured as the Whatsitsname, the Syrian writer and dissident Yassin Al-Haj Saleh once described the prison where his torture occurred as itself being “a monster” and—more than that—reflected on how:

It seems, to me at least, that we cannot tame this monster unless we adapt ourselves to it also. What I mean is that we need to accept the prison, and ourselves as prisoners, irrelevant of whatever we used to be outside of it. We must allow the monster [of prison] to compose us. (31, translation mine)

All these stories of war and its mutilations reflect the surreal nature of its becoming. Fiction is enmeshed with violence; death is injected with disorientating narratives. But they also reflect something else undergirding the aporia of war’s global ubiquity today, something about the nature of its cross-national and non-localized ontology.¹ Such stories hint at the ‘asubjectivity’ of war. When we turn to naming whole

¹ On such global conceptualizations of the ontology of war see Bousquet, Grove and Shah.

events (the ongoing Iraqi nightmare), people (whether perpetrators or victims of torture) or places (a single prison) as ‘monsters’ or, more generally, as extra- or non-human things, we seem to do so because of an intuitive awareness of the ways the processes these objects represent exceed human control or agency in a classical sense. It is not that individual humans or the collectives they comprise are not implicated in the emergence of war—war as something external to the subject (non-subjective)—but that war’s systemic complexity exceeds the reach of any single subject, human or non-human, effectively rendering its dynamics, once set in motion, ‘beyond’ sociality as usually conceived, something we are forced to allow to “compose us” (rather than vice versa). War as its own subject, rather than an object of control—it is this possibility that I explore in this essay. How can we reconcile the ways in which war and violence seem to ‘exceed’ human sociality with the vital political need to attribute responsibility, gain justice and build a less catastrophic world? Put more simply, how can we think about and come to social and political terms with war asubjectively when its contours are expeditionary, spatially disembedded and temporally expansive, when it operates through material and technological infrastructures beyond individual human control, when the perpetrators of its violence seem to be machinic objects without control over their actions and when everyone and everything has become a monster with whom no conversation seems possible?

These questions are usually avoided, at least when they are addressed not conceptually but vis-à-vis the lived and embodied reality of war’s mutilations, and for good reason. As Canguilhem has described, “the existence of monsters calls into question the capacity of life to teach us order” (28). As such, the intuition to ascribe the presence of the evils of war to monstrous non-human figures is strongly resisted. Thus, over time, the idea that evil and its representations exist beyond the human has been secularized. Indeed, the goal—in one sense—of the rise of core strands of international legal thought, social theory, biological science, psychology and political science has been to rationalize

the becoming of war, violence and suffering.² Moreover, this impulse to render war comprehensible is echoed in the words of the survivors of its predations, for whom the need to ascribe a fixed locus of responsibility for suffering is acutely psychologically important (Volkan). In a memoir of his many years spent in Syria's prisons, Louay Hussein thus asks:

Why don't linguists work towards producing a precise vocabulary, clarifying the exact meaning and role of things—like the words chair, ladder, electricity, and lock [...] Torture is a word, for example, that does not fit its meaning in this place [prison], because a lover can also say to her lover 'you tortured me,' and her to him, and a mother says that her son tortures her with worry. The solution to this dilemma is to produce a language that has no living or humane references to it. Here, we would have pure meanings unmixed with multiplicity or plurality. (19-20, translation mine)

This desire for “pure meaning” has been expressed in a multitude of statues, conventions and treaties that attempt to precisely define and forbid the infinite variety of violence once and for all. Likewise, it has been expressed in efforts to causally attribute the perpetration of war crimes to neurological defects, or—more simply—to an innately violent ‘human nature.’ But sentiments like Saadawi's continue to multiply. Indeed, his depiction of Baghdad echoes Michel Serres' view that “the cycle” of seeking to attribute blame for the violence of the world “is ending for the obvious reason that it has exhausted the list of possible accused parties [...] without there being any notable change in the ravages of evil” (191). From this perspective, “evil, hate, or violence has every object but no subject. Rain, hail, and thunder fall on everyone, without there being a hand that dispenses them or controls the electrical current. Active evil is conjugated like an impersonal verb: it is raining, it is freezing, it

² This is true, scientifically, in both positivist understandings of war, which typically see its emergence as a consequence of conflicting ideologies, economic interests, political systems, et cetera, and more critical social theoretical perspectives. For instance, Foucault's understanding of power is a distinctly ‘grey’ one in which its machinations are secularized as the consequence of distinct social logics of control. See Austin, “The Departed Militant.”

is thundering” (191). But if this is so then who is to blame? “Everyone and no one. From a permanent and fluctuating cloud, injuries fall on all heads and on every head, indifferently” (Serres and Latour 191). This indifference is captured succinctly in the figure of the Whatsitsname whose actions fall indeed “on everyone” without discrimination, following a quite different logic from what war is usually assumed (or hoped) to follow. One should be clear that neither Saadawi nor Serres ignore the ways in which the distribution of violence is self-evidentially unequal across spatial and social categories. The decades-long suffering of Baghdad is no political accident, but inflected through racial, gendered, imperial and geopolitical vectors. The argument here is that once the logic of war (or evil more generally) is active, it escapes the capacity for rational control, and implicates far more than those (human or non-human vectors) directly involved in its enactment. There is thus an inherent paradox in which the path of evil is both structured *and* unpredictable. This logic is captured, perhaps, in the words of a fictional newspaper columnist who appears at one point in *Frankenstein in Baghdad*:

There are laws that human beings are unaware of. These laws don't operate around the clock like the physical laws by which the wind blows, the rain falls, and rocks fall down mountains, or like other laws that human beings can observe, verify, and define because they apply to things that recur. There are laws that operate only under special conditions, and when something happens under these laws, people are surprised and say it's impossible, that it's a fairy tale or in the best case a miracle. They don't say they're unaware of the law behind it. People are deluded and never admit their ignorance. (Saadawi 131)

These words grasp at what—I want to suggest—the idea of war and violence operating asubjectively actually refers to, whilst also stressing the urgency of addressing this idea substantively if we are to better understand questions of responsibility for asubjective war and violence. The asubjectivity of war that I am discussing operates through “laws”

of a certain kind that we “are unaware of” and so, perhaps, not fully accounted for when we attempt to adjudicate questions of justice, responsibility and ethics. Unpacking their operations is thus not only a question solely of theoretical concern but also a crucial political task.

Let me begin to address this question by venturing the following idea: the ‘laws’ structuring war and violence “operat[ing] only under special conditions” (Saadawi 131) point to an ontology of the world grounded in complexity theory (De Landa; Barad). But, importantly for us, the ‘complex’ in complexity theory is not synonymous with ‘complicated.’ The latter refers to systems or phenomena that are—within the predominant contemporary model of science—presumed to be law-governed and deterministic but to which we lack the capacity in terms of measurement tools and theories to fully comprehend at present. Indeed, it is widely accepted that war is ‘complicated’ but that those complications might, eventually, be comprehended and overcome through more exact definitions, deeper understandings of human sociality and the deterrent effects of ‘holding responsible’ individuals or groups. By contrast, complexity theory explores non-deterministic systems, whose dynamics cannot be calculated in a law-like fashion and which are thus patterned only in a quasiperiodic manner. Closely linked to understandings of (social) emergence, complexity theory describes the ways in which a phenomenon like war, which is clearly a recurrent (and therefore patterned) event, emerges nonetheless through a fundamentally unpredictable process of relational entanglement. Again, Saadawi’s *Whatsitsname* analogically encapsulates that process. Being directly and indirectly related to everybody and every-*body* involved in Baghdad’s nightmare, fused into a single figure, the monster murders and inflicts suffering in a way that is patterned but unpredictable: nobody knows who is next. The *Whatsitsname* is an emergent mixture in complex flux.

More than being simply a representation of complexity, however, the *Whatsitsname* captures a paradox in which humans are both deeply implicated in and yet unable to control the asubjectivity of war. Indeed, the title of *Frankenstein in Baghdad* is not insignificant, despite the name Frankenstein being mentioned for only a handful of times in the text

itself. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* represented a radical shift away from (and a parody of) the naturalistic sublime of the romantic poets, which projected fears (including monsters) into something ('nature') presumed to be radically external to human being (Hansen). Replacing this classical conception, Shelley rendered a vision of the technological sublime in which the emergence of monsters could never be separated from the actions and ontologies of human beings and their technological praxis. In short: monsters are always partly our own creations, even when they exceed us, even when we do not mean them to emerge. They are intimately part of humanity. Recognizing war's asubjectivity in no way reduces human entanglement in its contours. On the contrary, it only intensifies it.

The figure of the monster thus grasps at the complexity of war as something intimately human and yet also something that radically exceeds it. Its image allows us to move beyond the current preoccupations of much theoretical, legal and empirical work on the consequences of 'extreme' instances of war's separation from the human, such as the rise of autonomous weapons systems (for example, see Chamayou). While important, these examples tend to reinforce an exaggerated vision of post-humanism as something entirely *non-human* and so risk occluding the inseparable entanglement of human and non-human and underestimating the degree to which war has always already been asubjective, with or without obviously autonomous weapons systems. Indeed, at the core of the relational ontology that complexity theory embraces is Karen Barad's view that *every* entity (human, animal, technological) lacks "an independent, self-contained existence. Existence is not an individual affair. Individuals do not pre-exist their interactions [...] individuals emerge through [...] their entangled intra-relating" (ix). These words stress that neither autonomous drones nor lone humans are ever 'pure' entities comprised of a particular ontological essence. And, if taken seriously, the ontology they express becomes particularly politically important when applied to war, a phenomenon that *has always* mixed, fused and meshed together a host of contradictory elements—emotions, technologies, ideologies, bodies, affects—in ways that intrinsically

produce a surreal—almost magically realist—event. Something that, indeed, draws us towards monstrous imaginaries.

However, if we step back from war as a generalized entity for a moment, we can now take this understanding to its final and most disturbing conclusion. The idea that war is asubjective does not refer only to its ‘meta’ emergence but also implies that the perpetration of violence by individual humans in wartime is also asubjective. Indeed, it is possible to see *every* perpetrator of violence as being akin to the Whatsitsname: a composition of forces largely existing outside themselves, but which are nonetheless crucial to what they are and do as a person, that push them towards extreme forms of violence. To see more clearly what this means, let me turn back to fiction. At one point in Emile Habibi’s tragicomic novel *The Secret Life of Saeed: The Pessoptimist*, the Palestinian protagonist Saeed finds himself arrested and imprisoned due to a series of unfortunate (and farcical) events. He then describes being mocked by a group of jailers for quoting Shakespeare, jailers who eventually begin to beat him:

I tottered toward first one jailer and then another until they got bored with punching me and began kicking me. Then I rolled around at their feet as they booted me again and again [...] I screamed but could hear nothing, just stifled noises coming from the beating, kicking, and punching. Then I could no longer feel the blows but could only sense them faintly, as if they came from somewhere far away. They had stopped repeating verses from Shakespeare and were *concentrating on the poetry of moans and sighs*. (130, emphasis added)

The “poetry of moans and sighs” that Saeed describes captures the ways in which violence *even at its most local, intimate and visceral level* appears to be driven through a series of automatic and unthought processes that resemble, indeed, the rhythmic structure of poetry (for a

less dramatic example see Wacquant's description of boxing).³ It is as if the perpetrators' complex relational entanglements within the matrix of war simultaneously 'smooth' the task of carrying out brutal violence and 'smother' the possibility of reflexive resistance to carrying those violent acts out, at least when Saadawi's "laws that human beings are unaware of" are afflicting us. For a real-world example, consider again Specialist Damien M. Corsetti, the 'monster' or 'King of Torture' from our introduction. Corsetti would later denounce his own actions and depict a situation in which he was caught by a similar rhythmic 'flow' of events, situations, and circumstances that constrained his ability to choose differently. Expressing a kind of (analytically if certainly not ethically) symmetrical impotence between prisoners and their imprisoners, Corsetti would thus later become friends with Mozzam Begg, a former prisoner of Bagram Air Base and the Guantanamo Bay, and gift him a copy of Joseph Heller's *Catch 22* (Begg). Taken together, then, examples like these reaffirm the much earlier insights of Franz Kafka into the machinic nature of evil. As Kafka wrote at the conclusion of *The Trial*, the men sent to execute the character *K*. "formed a unit of the sort that normally can be formed only by matter that is lifeless" and thus seemed to be devoid of the possibility of rational, emotional, affective and reflexive resistance to carrying out his (ostensibly) meaningless execution (162). It is this lifelessness that captures the aporia of war's seeming asubjectivity today and which—again—seems to attract all who suffer from it to the figure of the monster. But what—then—do we do?

The world was simpler when humans were bounded objects. Part of the task of modernity was precisely such a process of simplification. And much of our political, legal and social systems retain this myth as core to their functioning for that reason. With this stripped away, many questions emerge. If, as Arjun Appadurai has written:

agency in all its forms is democratically distributed to all sorts of individuals, some of which may temporarily be assembled as humans and others as machines, animals, or

³ For fuller descriptions of the 'automatic,' 'unthought,' and 'asubjective' ways in which violence is enacted, See Austin and Bocco; Austin, "Towards an International Political Ergonomics" and Clegg et al.

other quasi agents, then do we need to permanently bracket all forms of intrahuman judgment, accountability, and ethical discourse? (234).

Does Serres' image of evil being "conjugated like an impersonal verb" mean that the possibility of legal accountability of torture, ethnic cleansing and massacre must be forgotten? How can the world fight evil if it cannot 'pin it down'? Are not these understandings of war and violence—*even if they are true*—too dangerous to be accepted? Or can we think of attributing responsibility and reassembling the fight against political evil in quite different ways?

To approach an answer, let me turn now to Donna Haraway's discussion of Hannah Arendt's meditations on Adolf Eichmann. For Haraway, at the root of Eichmann's crimes was what she sees as having now become a global "surrender [of] the capacity to think" (35-6). As she writes:

In that surrender of thinking lay the 'banality of evil' of the particular sort that could make the disaster of the Anthropocene, with its ramped-up genocides and speciescides, come true. This outcome is still at stake; think we must; we must think! [...] Arendt witnessed in Eichmann not an incomprehensible monster, but something much more terrifying—she saw commonplace thoughtlessness. That is, here was a human being unable to make present to himself what was absent, what was not himself [...] Here was someone who could not be a wayfarer, could not entangle, could not track the lines of living and dying, could not cultivate response-ability [...]. (35-36)

Indeed, among Haraway's central theses is the idea of working to "cultivate response-ability" meant as the capacity to feel, be-affected and think-with the world. It is about cultivating "care and response" (35). This call is part of a broader "feminist ethic of 'response-ability' in which questions of [...] difference are always conjugated with attentions

to affect, entanglement and rupture; it is an affective ecology in which creativity and curiosity characterize the experimental forms of life of all kinds of practitioners” (Hustak and Myers 107). Haraway’s argument grasps crucially then at the slow diminishment of the capacity to be emotionally-affectively ‘moved’ by the world—to ‘resonate’ with its multitudes (Rosa). However, the way she describes Eichmann as having “surrendered” the capacity to think and be affected by the world risks framing this problem as too internally a part of human society, culture and subjectivity, and overlooks the ontology of war. For me, the core question we must ask is not whether Eichmann “surrender[ed] the capacity to think” but if—in fact—he was more simply *unable to think beyond the asubjectivity of war* (Haraway 35).

Asking this question is important because it moves us away from voluntarist arguments in which all we need to do is to ‘decide’ to become a “wayfarer” or “entangle” ourselves in the world differently in order to prevent phenomena like war. Such a voluntarist argument is incompatible with an asubjective understanding of war. Indeed, we should be clear that Eichmann did ‘think,’ but not ‘beyond’ the logic of war. Recall Al-Haj Saleh’s words that the logic of war or violence seems to “compose us,” rather than vice-versa (31, translation mine). The ways in which the logic of war composes individual human beings and their societies force a kind of thoughtless thinking: a thinking in terms of strategic reason dictated by the compositional logic of war itself. All that matters are the numbers, the grid references on a map, and the chimera of ‘victory.’ Or, for the human beings tasked with the actual job of killing and mutilating (rather than ‘planning’), all that matters is simplifying the material, aesthetic and phenomenological experience of war down to a set of automatic tasks to be achieved (firing a shot, digging a grave). As Arendt made clear, what is lost in this logic is the capacity of thinking affectively and emotionally or, simply, humanely.

If we are already trapped by a set of asubjective relations that enforce that kind of thoughtlessness upon us, the possibility of *choosing* to escape those relations is severely limited. This does not mean that perpetrators are absolved of their crimes, but rather that the extent to which we are constrained by these limits must be considered when discussing

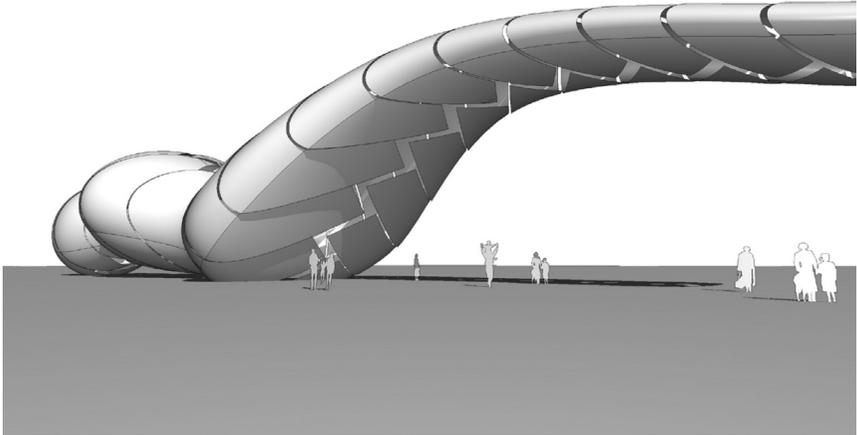


Figure 1. Stahl Stenslie. A ‘bombable building’ architectural sketch, pre-emptive architecture. Courtesy of Stahl Stenslie and MMW architects.

questions of retribution. As N. Katherine Hayles has described, we all exist within a complex “planetary cognitive ecology” that dictates what we can and cannot think (3). And, most importantly, that ecology is distributed across material and technological infrastructures, aesthetic objects of all kinds, as well as human beings themselves. This is especially and dramatically true *vis-à-vis* war. The externalization of war into objects that possess substantive agency, given their relational entanglement with our lives, makes us feel en-framed beyond the possibility of choice. It is this that makes us feel that it is impossible to think or, rather, to think differently (Ferraris). And it is this we must escape if we are to reckon with the question of asubjectivity and how we can recover a sense of political justice within it. But how might such an escape be imagined?

An example: Figure 1 depicts an odd-looking architectural sketch. Though abstract, we can imagine a body lying prone (a head, a torso,

a set of legs), under which pedestrians are strolling, but which is also ‘fractured’ by a series of geometrical lines appearing to break the building into pieces. The sketch was made by the artist Stahl Stenslie who has proposed an “inverse strategy” that could work to reverse “common thinking patterns about warfare” (1). Specifically, Stenslie proposes creating “bombable architectural structures that act as instruments of peace” (1). As he explains:

Building structures predestined for a constructive destruction becomes a creative act. Buildings are usually made to last forever[, but] we conceptualize and design structures made to be bombed. The project is planning and preparing for the dismantling and destruction we know will reoccur in the cursed areas of conflict and war. No matter how often such buildings will be bombed and destroyed, they can always be rebuilt. This inversion of architecture makes destruction pointless; the buildings become preemptive. (1, emphasis added)

In recognition of war’s seemingly purposeless continuation across borders, Stenslie’s preemptive architecture project seeks to work *within* the decerebrated asubjectivity of war, in order to challenge and interrupt it. The ‘bombable buildings’ described are designed 1) functionally, to ensure they can be rebuilt easily, adapting new materials and technologies to make them more amenable to quick and easy repair, as well as less susceptible to blasts through their use of curved architectures and 2) aesthetically, such that, as they are destroyed over time, they will ‘embody’ the violence they have been subjected to. For instance, the fractures seen in the sketch described earlier are designed such that the bombing of the building would result in those elements falling to the ground, creating new sculptural objects and public spaces that act as constant aesthetic reminders of the futility of war. The buildings become instantaneous memorial spaces. As Stenslie further describes:

Where logic, reason and intellect do not work [to prevent war and violence] other methods must be developed. The

project therefore makes use of inverse strategy and inverse technology. This turns current value-norm systems and common thinking patterns on the head with the intention of revealing why previous and well-intended solutions did not work. This technique is excessive, exaggerated and absurd to expose the extreme polarizing elements of extreme situations. Such an approach is not without irony, but the project is about [the serious] implementation of architecture as a positive way to counter violence and destruction. (1)

Recognizing that war is not governed by “logic, reason... [or] intellect” but rather through the kinds of asubjective entanglements described above, the goal of design projects like these is to find modes of intervention that work through affect, aesthetics, emotion and technology and so tackle the drivers of violence *on their own asubjective terms*. They promise the possibility of imagining counter-technologies, counter-objects and counter-aesthetic forms of intervening against the asubjectivity of war, violence and conflict in distinctly positive-political ways. The specific examples laid out by Stenslie are not quite as “excessive, exaggerated, and absurd” as he modestly claims (1). The architectural evocation of a human body lying prone might, from the birds-eye view of fighter or drone pilots, act as a kind of ‘interruption’ to the machinic flow of war. It might create a flicker of awareness—a moment of reflection—allowing for the possibility of choosing to act differently. Consider the testimony of one US drone pilot, Brandon Bryant, operating in Afghanistan who described releasing a missile before, unexpectedly:

a child walked around the corner [of the house being targeted] [...] Bryant saw a flash on the screen: the explosion. Parts of the building collapsed. The child had disappeared. Bryant had a sick feeling in his stomach. “Did we just kill a kid?” [...] Then, someone they didn’t know answered, someone sitting in a military command center somewhere in the world who had observed their attack. “No. That was a dog,” [...] They reviewed the scene on video. A dog on two legs? (Friedersdorf)

The pause and moment of introspection posed by suddenly coming face-to-face with the reality of war's inhumanity produced in this incident reflects how response-ability can be injected into our lives. In this case, that injection is a random one. But Stenslie's proposal is essentially that we endeavor to design such interruptions into the world actively, resisting the desire of disembodied voices to convince us that those destroyed by war are unmournable. By changing the synaesthetic taskscape of war, in Stenslie's case literally by evoking at a macro level the bodies about to be mutilated by its violence, such designs seek to jolt us into the reality of violence, to make us think not simply about 'what we have to do' (strategically, rationally, pragmatically, et cetera) but to think about *what we are doing*, affectively, emotionally, and—above all—reflexively. In doing so, such designs might help us respond differently to the world and war, acting as objects capable of jolting us out of today's thoughtlessness, gifting us back the chance to think and choose differently.

Examples like this provide us, then, with an image of what a form of response-ability looks like that takes into consideration the asubjective ontology of war embodied in external objects. Stenslie's sketches gesture at the task of building-*in* to the ecologies of world politics objects and infrastructures that overcome the smothering predominance of those that militate towards violence. They reverse the couplet: promising now to help 'smother' the frequency of our attraction to violence and 'smooth' our ability to resist that allure. These designs are focused on creating 'moments' or 'pauses' in which processes or actions that are usually automatically carried out are obstructed. In doing so they hint at one key way in which we might resituate questions of ethical, legal, moral and political responsibility for war and violence. Once it is recognized that war occurs in part through asubjective mechanisms, the question becomes whether or not we take up our responsibility to tackle those mechanisms on their material, technological and affective terms. Governments, scientists, artists and more are responsible for designing against evil. This means more than establishing chains of command, displaying the Geneva conventions and promising to prosecute perpetrators of war crimes. It means instead "thinking strategies

of composition” that would allow us to design *into* the world novel technological, material, affective and aesthetics objects that could encourage “basins of attraction” that draw us away from, rather than towards war (Bryant 289).

Back to Baghdad. Saadawi has suggested that *Frankenstein in Baghdad* represents the “larger crisis” of war, “rather than the solution” to it (Najjar). Indeed, the text can be read as a diagnosis of the asubjectivity of war, violence, and political evil and so as an implicit critique of the ways in which we usually attempt to overcome these problems. *Frankenstein in Baghdad* denies the possibility of attributing responsibility, of even naming who is to blame. As such it radically disorders our political sensibilities about how to tackle the problem of war. Nonetheless, the diagnosis it provides is radically productive. By resisting the desire to secularize and rationalize the becoming of war, *Frankenstein in Baghdad* and texts like it bring us closer to the dynamics of the poetry of moans and sighs that beset the world today. And in this act of coming closer to the true monstrosity of war, we recognize both the human and the extra-human in war more clearly. If the core problem—to return to Haraway—facing the world is human thoughtlessness amid the reality of war, then the literary continues, even when exploring things we usually avert our gaze from, to give us the possibility to pause—to pause and think, to pause and choose to act differently, to cultivate a little more response-ability. And so perhaps, to tackle the problem of war on more literary, even poetic, terms.⁴

⁴ I would like to thank the editors of *FRAME* for their generous and insightful comments throughout the process of writing this essay and, in particular, the assistance of Kaixuan Yao. Thanks are also due to Stahl Stenslie for the permission to reproduce the figure in the essay.

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