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Stacking the Deck on Iraq: Playing Cards as Generative Metaphor

The assertion that playing cards have enjoyed a long and prolific relationship with pedagogy, semiosis and the dissemination of meaning may come as quite a surprise to most people. Although cards have been referred to as a 'trivial thing' since Pope's *The Rape of the Lock*, closer examination reveals fairly straight-forward reasons as to why playing cards have and continue to play an important role in communication and education. Because playing cards are small and portable, their capacity to circulate information to a wide audience of bridge players, snap players or gamblers is nothing short of formidable. Moreover, cards convey the notion of 'fun' so that even laborious tasks such as the memorization of multiplication tables and foreign words can be given the luster of entertainment if dressed up as a card game.

The first instance of an applied use of playing cards for educational purposes is to be found in the mid 17th century when Cardinal Mazarin and Jean Desmarests of the *Académie Française* devised a series of card games "pour l'instruction du Roy" – for the education of the very young Louis XIV.[1] With this new and exciting toy the child monarch learned the kings of France, famous queens, geography and fables including mythology while pleasantly engaged in play. The academicians' clever system soon became enormously popular, paired as it was with the slightly dangerous attraction of playing cards which were still relatively new on the European continent. Decks were issued on a number of difficult subjects including one printed in England in 1676 with a tract on their proper use, in which we read: "For as your cards are entitled Hearts, Diamonds, Spades, and Clubs, so ours are to be called by the names of Orthographie (Spades), Etymologie (Clubs), Syntax (Hearts), and Prosodie (Diamonds)."[2]

One of the more popular varieties of these seventeenth-century educational decks was the military genre, which depicted famous battles and the like for the instruction of children in military strategy and history. These included the *Jeu de Blasons* of 1658, *Jeu de la guerre* of 1660, *Jeu des fortifications* of 1710, or the *Jeu de drapeaux* of 1814. In the 16th century in Spain moreover, there existed a sort of parallel literary genre which used [end page 231] playing cards as a generative metaphor for political satire. Here, poets exploited cultural

associations of court cards and card games with war, incorporating them into allegorical verses known collectively as *Los folletos*. These verses were distributed in town centers and composed on readily recognizable contemporary political figures, thinly designed as court cards.[3]

Similarly, nineteenth-century military historian Clausewitz drew on the example of card games to articulate military strategy, and in his book entitled *On War* he concludes that of all games, card games resemble war the most. This is because card games include *tactics* (“acts, each complete *in itself*”) and *strategy* (“planning and executing these engagements themselves”), the two principle axes of nineteenth-century military logic (Clausewitz 172-9). The association of card games with war has been further reinforced through the customary distribution of small, inexpensive playing cards to soldiers as a means of increasing solidarity. As legend has it, this practice began with Napoleon, himself a great military theoretician.[4] It would seem then, that there exists a sort of metaphorical symmetry between playing cards – emblazoned with rich heraldic imagery – and war, so that card games have been taken up as the perfect pastime for soldiers awaiting their fates in the real military game ahead.

Playing cards then have a long shared history with war both as a suitable pastime for soldiers and as means of disseminating lessons in strategy and famous battles to future soldiers. (see, for instance, Chardin’s *Chateau de cartes*). This association has been reinforced in literary traditions such as the *folleto* and of course in popular culture through novels and films like *The Manchurian Candidate* (1962) or *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1929). It is perhaps therefore only natural that even the Bush administration seized on popular metaphorical associations of card games and war in 2003, when they published their very own military deck entitled the *Iraqi Most Wanted Playing Cards*. Given the Bushes’ demonstrable delight in the colorful use of metaphor in convincing the nation to go to war, it is not surprising that G.W.’s political unconscious suggested concretizing the culturally reinforced association of war/game in this fascinating deck of cards. In what follows I will investigate the possible meanings and ramifications of designing a deck of cards as a means of encouraging people to identify terrorists, proceeding from the preliminary observations I have just made concerning the cultural and metaphorical associations of playing cards, war and military strategy.

Let me begin by discussing metaphorical descriptions of war as a game and their possible implications in somewhat greater detail. In an article on the first gulf war George Lakoff opens by observing that “[m]etaphors can kill” and that “[t]he discourse over whether to go to war in the gulf was a [veritable] panorama of metaphor” (Lakoff I.1). One of the **[end page 232]** reasons that metaphor is powerful enough to kill and important enough to be mobilized as a means of convincing a nation to take up arms is that we think in metaphors, using them to explain abstract concepts and to articulate difficult thoughts. More significantly, according to Lakoff, metaphors are part of “unconscious complexities and abstractions,” so that they have a tendency to glide into everyday language where they remain embedded and uncontested (ibid). What this means, of course, is that metaphorical descriptions are taken for granted and not questioned, so that their potential danger is immediately diffused by a veneer of normalcy (Kennedy 3). Furthermore, when the enemy becomes a ludic rival, as is, for example, “the Joker of Baghdad,” to quote a Bush moniker, “the ‘other’ becomes little more than a dehumanized target....” (Sandikcioglu 9).[5] At the same time metaphors restrict descriptions of war and what can be thought about it by “limiting the perspective from which [a given situation] can be seen” (Kennedy 3).

Lakoff and a number of other authors following him have identified a whole constellation of metaphors commonly wielded by Bush Sr. and Bush Jr. when they have addressed the world on the topic of war. First, there is the familiar and time-honored Clausewitzian metaphor, namely “war is politics pursued by other means” (Lakoff II.2). The ‘war-is-politics’

metaphors are connected to another all-too-familiar category of metaphor, namely 'politics is business' and, by extension, to 'war is business.' From here, Lakoff goes on to identify a number of 'metaphor systems' such as the 'state-as-person' system (Saddam Hussein is Iraq, ergo Saddam must be defeated, controlled, etc.), and the 'fairy tale of the just war,' which involves allegorical representations of good and evil that invariably favour the United States. Together, these systems have enabled the Bush administrations to identify Americans and Iraqi citizens as the *victims* of Saddam Hussein's *villainous* regime and provided an ostensible reason for having him 'removed.'

These systems are further connected to the 'causal-commerce' system which "turns purposeful actions into transfers of objects," and includes exchange metaphors of value. This system supports the logic of talking about whether going to war is 'worth' it, as well as the 'well-being-is-wealth' metaphors which describe war in terms of losses and gains including soldiers, who are known as 'assets' (Lakoff II.2). Employing this same constellation of metaphors, the first gulf war was reported in the "*New York Times* Business Section as having been a 'bargain'," since casualties and other losses in assets were few for the United States (ibid.). And finally, this system includes the 'war-as-medicine' metaphors, which allow one to speak of 'surgical strikes' and 'cleaning out' enemy fortifications. **[end page 233]**

For my purposes however, the most significant of these systems involve the 'risks-and-gambles' metaphors and metaphors that treat war as a competitive game. This in fact is a system of metaphor in which the Bush administrations have and continue to excel. For example, in the first gulf war, commanding officers in the US army referred to the gulf as "our Super Bowl" in which George Bush senior repeatedly stated that the US would "kick ass" (Lakoff I.10). This use of metaphor also serves to legitimate an entire media discourse constructed around 'stakes' that one can 'lose,' hence Bush senior's references to the gulf war as a giant "poker game" wherein he declined to "show his cards" after upping ante (Lakoff I.7). It is important to note that the logic subtending the former category of risks and gambles feeds neatly back into the 'causal commerce' system so that the tremendous risks of war maybe characterized as a 'financial gamble' wherein "causal commerce [metaphors allow] one to see positive effects [...] as 'gains' and negative effects as 'costs'" (ibid). Moreover, 'war-as-gamble' metaphors draw with them the repulsive notion that there is a mathematics of gambling, namely probability theory and that, therefore, military gambles belong to a rational, probabilistic logic.

As Esra Sandikcioglu has shown in his essay on metaphor and the gulf war, the cluster of pernicious metaphors surrounding both wars carries with it an 'unhealthy dose' of orientalism. Such metaphors involve constituting one's other as effeminate, weak and irrational as in: "logic in the Arab world is often eclipsed by emotion," and statements in which Iraq is portrayed as an 'impotent' nation obliged to 'flirt' with those more powerful (Sandikcioglu 18; 15). What I find interesting about this is that playing cards, which are deployed in the 'game' and 'risk' systems of metaphor, are in and of themselves entirely oriental. As playing card historians know, cards originated in China or India whence they began their slow journey westwards, ultimately entering the European continent late in the 13th century. Europeans were introduced to cards and other oriental innovations – such the compact and readily manipulable Sanskrit numbers including the zero – by Arabic traders and gypsies who brought their wares and culture into Europe across the Mediterranean. And just like the concept of zero, cards were met with considerable resistance right up to the 18th century (and arguably in some sectors even today) because they were seen as pagan instruments of the oriental 'infidel.' This is why playing cards were long known as the Devil's Picture books or the Bible of the Gypsies. [6]

In this light the *Iraqi Most Wanted* deck, used as a sort of concrete metaphor intended to generate information for the current administration, begins to seem like an ironic,

unconscious form of orientalism. As such the cards are quite at home alongside the wave of oriental trends in pop [end page 234] music and fashion that have been appropriated from the East since the war on Iraq began. Hence, while the US has tried to 'modernize' and 'help' Iraq by exporting neo-capitalism and piping in Jennifer Lopez tunes while conducting air strikes, there has also been a parallel movement to plunder Eastern culture. This trend, as Edward Said pointed out, is entirely typical of the mechanics of orientalism and the dynamics of unconscious or naive appropriation of the repudiated culture of the 'other.' Consider, for example, how the infusion of Ud riffs has provided a real shot in the arm for a tired-out Western pop music industry that endlessly remixes old tunes. Eastern beats and oriental stylings have been used as hooks in everything from Shania Twain's *Ka-Ching*, to Britney Spears' *Toxic* or *I'm a Slave 4 U* and Christina Milian's *Dip It Low*, not to mention just about anything by Beyoncé.[7] And while fashion trends such as Arabic mules enjoy continued popularity, even the Gilmore Girls find themselves making adorably glib remarks about being held hostage and ground strikes. Importantly however, in the case of the *Most Wanted* cards, appropriation is predicated on the publishers' ignorance of playing cards' oriental origins so that they may be circulated as all-American, familiar and reassuring as poker, and therefore as the ultimate tool for routing out otherness.

If this seems oddly warped, Said has explained that in order for orientalism to work it is not necessary that the logic behind any given appropriation be accurate and indeed the less cohesive the logic the better orientalism works. Hence, "we need not look for correspondence between" objects and "language used to depict the Orient [...] because it is not even trying to be accurate. What it is trying to do [...] is at one and the same time to characterize the Orient as alien and to incorporate it schematically on a theatrical stage whose audience, manager and actors are *for* [the West] and only for [the West]" (Said 2). In essence, what the Bush administration has done is to appropriate a self-contained system of signifiers which originated in the Orient and then to circulate it as 100% all-American replete with photographs of the most wanted Eastern terrorists. Uncannily enough, this amounts to the return of signifiers of oriental otherness to their point of origin, not unlike Derrida's notion of the postcard that always reaches its destination however circuitous its path may be.

This brings me to a rather remarkable observation about the construction of rationality and notions concerning the nature and constitution of gambling and speculation from the last several centuries. As Marieke de Goede has argued, considerable energy has been invested in the construction of speculation as rational and Western as opposed to gambling which has been constructed as Oriental and other since the 14th century.[8] In the Bush 'war-as-game' and 'war-as-gamble' paradigms however, gambling is considered rational and taken to be structured by [end page 235] probability as I noted earlier on. Thus the West operates through a system of *informed risk* as opposed to the metaphor of the oriental bazaar where supposedly "everything is subject to negotiation or [...] haggling and there are no certainties" (Sandikcioglu 23). According to *Time* magazine then, any bid on Saddam Hussein's part in an attempt to negotiate is "to be taken little more seriously than a bazaar merchant's opening price quotation," whereas the kind of gambling in which the US engages is "characterized by a set of rules known to and obeyed by every player" incorporating players' skills and "leaving no uncertainties or room for arbitrariness" (ibid. 24). At the same time *Newsweek* tells us that Iraq also gambles; only when this occurs "Saddam Hussein or Orientals in general [are] conceptualized [...] as losers" or bad players who do not adhere to *Western* rules, as in "Saddam is a dreamer, a gambler who backs his wagers with the blood of his people" (ibid).

The fact that both the US and Iraq are both seen as gamblers is, of course, of a piece with postmodern logic and economics wherein gambling, after centuries of being constructed as Oriental, other and completely irrational, can now be aligned with rationality and Westernness without having to parade as speculation. Furthermore this brings to mind Judith Butler's

observation that “answering the symbolic attack [of 9/11] with literal violence directed against an irrationally selected enemy [has produced] a grotesque mix of metaphor and reality, incompetent both symbolically and practically” (Butler 142). This is to say that the Bush administrations have produced a smorgasbord of borrowings and insane gambles packaged in truly bizarre, media-produced trappings that absorbs anything in its path, spitting out a logic-defying trail of metaphor.

As I have been arguing then, the *Iraqi Most Wanted* deck belongs to game metaphors employed by both G.W. and Bush senior as a strategic means of describing and rendering anodyne the attacks they have conducted on Iraq. The Bushes’ politicized use of ‘fun’ game metaphors is clearly intended to communicate positive, can-do thinking and to mask the real casualties of war. In other words the kick-ass football metaphors which the Bushes use to describe aerial bombings in which thousands are killed; the playing cards they have produced as a means of gathering intel; not to mention the computer generated illustrations of strike sites in Baghdad that looked remarkably like video games, are all part of what might be described as a postmodern, ludic vision of war and the construction of the war on Iraq as a media event.[9]

As I mentioned at the outset of this paper, playing cards have been circulating now for a very long time as an effective pedagogical tool and mnemonic device. It is probably worth mentioning as well that as early as the 17th century merchants seized upon playing cards as cost-effective means of **[end page 236]** advertising – a practice which has persisted to the present.[10] As Carta Mundi, Europe’s largest manufacturer of playing cards, tells its customers, “No other object so often meets the eye, cards are passed from hand to hand [and] what is printed on them is more penetrating because cards are not played casually” (Carta Mundi 2). That this is the case attests to playing cards’ subliminal capacity to register whatever message they carry on the player’s brain, hopefully for as long as it takes to remember that $7 \times 3 = 21$, to buy Heineken Beer or to identify a terrorist. Playing cards also possess the singular advantage of being inexpensive manufacture so that the benefits reaped far out-reach the costs of mass producing this paper ephemera.

Given playing cards’ perceived effectiveness in communication and semiosis, it is not surprising that countries like The Netherlands have taken a cue from the United States and are following suit with their own identification decks for local criminals. More encouragingly however, the Réseau Voltaire in France and activists in England have taken advantage of low production prices for cards and are distributing decks entitled *Le jeu de cartes du régime Bush* (www.reseauvoltaire.net) and *Regime Change Begins at Home* (www.thenewpress.com/books/regimechange.htm).[11] That the word ‘Regime’ figures prominently in the titles of both decks, identifies the Bush regime squarely within the paradigm in which the orient has been cast, a paradigm that would ultimately include irrationality and weakness. And if the title of the English deck proclaims that regime change must begin at home, the French deck goes one step further. For the very first court card in the French Bush regime deck is Osama Bin Laden, implying that the ‘other’ is at the very heart of a system which has constantly constructed it as foreign, irrational and deviant.[12] These last two decks then serve as a powerful metaphor, and an important reminder that the other is always already within.

Notes

[1]. See Hargrave 58.

[2]. See Van Rensselaer, *Prophetical, Educational, and Playing Cards*, 304.

[3]. See Etienvre, passim.

[4]. See Hargrave 68.

- [5]. The reference to Hussein as a joker if from *Newsweek* of February 4, 1991 and quoted in Sandikciolgu.
- [6]. See Van Renselaer, 1908: 45-75. **[end page 237]**
- [7]. This, of course, parallels musical borrowing in the heydays of orientalism in the 19th century to which Debussy was perhaps the most substantial contributor. Earlier examples include Mozart's *Die Enduring aus dem Serail* and *Die Zauberföte*. On this point see Scott 3-15.
- [8]. On the history of thinking gambling see also Reith, *passim*.
- [9]. On football metaphors and the Bush administrations see Parrish 2002.
- [10]. Cf. Hoffmann, "c'est au cours du 18^e siècle que les industriels se sont rendu compte que les cartes à jouer pouvaient servir d'instrument de publicité" (10).
- [11]. Lest this intervention be dismissed as minor and ineffectual, I would like to follow Marieke de Goede in arguing that small, punctual carnivalesque interventions into global politics are possibly one of the most effective strategy for resistance. See her article "Carnival of Money: Politics of Dissent in an Era of Globalizing Finance," *passim*.
- [12]. It is also worth noting that since I began writing this article, three more decks protesting the Bush administration have been published: *Bush Cards: A Carefully Stacked Deck* (www.bushcards.com) *TV News Lies: Bush Cards* (www.tvnewslies.org/) and *Lies & Deceptions* (www.TRUTHMOVEMENTI.com).

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Metaphoric thought Stage plays, Bacon, beans / God is a Lobster: Towards a Poetics Of. October 2017. Kaitlin Gotman. Read more.

Article. Over the past 30 years, the term the 'glass ceiling' has come to be known as a metaphor for vertical segregation, symbolising an invisible barrier that prevents women from progressing in their careers. Increasingly women are found in higher level positions and mentoring has often been touted as an important way to help women break through the glass ceiling. This paper explores the continued [Show full abstract] relevance of the glass ceiling and the use of mentoring programs as a means to help women to overcome it. If a card contradicts the rules, the card takes precedence. Be prepared to encounter house versions of this game when you play someone you haven't played before. These rules are a framework from which to start; after you know how to play, your play group may develop local rules, new ways to play particular cards, or other variations. Just be sure before you start that everyone is playing the same game. During the course of a game, a dispute that you cannot solve by referencing the rules may occur. Two, that the basic concept of what the card is doing is graspable despite understanding specifically what The Stack is. Time Stop ends the turn now, and Split Second lets you play a spell so fast that nothing can respond to it. The grokkability of these cards allows us to sneak in reference to the Stack.