

## CORPOGRAPHIES: MAKING SENSE OF MODERN WAR

BY DEREK GREGORY

*The work I ended up doing on the region and its wars [...] is rooted, as human geography should be, in an embodiment of the conflict.*  
Val McDermid<sup>1</sup>

In his seminal account of the production of space Henri Lefebvre argued that the triumph of abstract space involved a relentless privileging of visualization, an aggressive inscription of “phallic brutality,” and a repression, even a “crushing” of the human body. For Lefebvre, significantly, this “space of calculations” first emerged in the years surrounding the First World War, and although he did not address it in any detail, modern war clearly exemplifies these transformations: an intensifying reliance on an optical-cartographic imaginary, an excessive capacity for spectacular, masculinized violence, and an exorbitant violation of the human body.<sup>2</sup> But if we take Neil Smith’s injunctions about the (co-)production of nature seriously, the dialectic of modern war reveals a second narrative, in which what Lefebvre called “the practico-sensory realm,” comes to the fore. For in order to survive ground troops had to invest in modes of apprehension that extended far beyond the visual; they remained not only vectors of military violence but also among its victims; and their bodies have to be comprehended as intensely physiological and affective organisms.<sup>3</sup>

If the modern trajectories of the production of space and the production of nature coincided in the figure of the body — Walter Benjamin’s “tiny, fragile human body” locked since the First World War (so he said) “in a field of force of destructive torrents and explosions” — then, their coincidence in that butchered landscape abruptly recon-

1 Val McDermid, *The Skeleton Road*, New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2014.

2 Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1991. For an elaboration of these claims, see Derek Gregory, *Geographical Imaginations*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1994, 382-95.

3 Neil Smith, *Uneven Development: Nature, Capital and the Production of Space*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1984. I develop this argument in “The Natures of War,” forthcoming (draft available on [geographicalimagination.com](http://geographicalimagination.com)).



Stills from *Diary of an Unknown Soldier* by Peter Watkins (1959)

figured the human sensorium.<sup>4</sup> The conventional boundaries between 'culture' and 'nature' were persistently breached and, when Erich Remarque wrote that on the Western Front "our hands are earth, our bodies clay and our eyes pools of rain," he foreshadowed similarly transgressive experiences elsewhere.<sup>5</sup> As much as they struggled to detach and distance themselves from what increasingly seemed to be a malevolent nature — registered in the multiple versions of the claim that 'nature' was their real enemy — soldiers were haunted by the hallucinatory fear that they were being not only degraded but devoured by it: even absorbed into it. The boundaries were ruptured from both sides, by the intrusive presence and explosive violence of militaries that turned Edmund Blunden's verdant valley into "Nature's slimy wound with spikes of blackened bone," and by the obdurate and resistant forces of an inhuman nature — the deadly 'liveliness' of rain and mud and microbes — to produce a commingled, entangled and militarised nature.<sup>6</sup> This explains why the soldiers' senses were thrown out of place, why they registered the taste of mud, the smell of flesh, the touch of sound. The Enlightenment had disciplined the senses, and established what it was permissible to see, to hear, to *touch*, to *taste* or to *smell* and what it was possible to know from their apprehensions, but these divisions were unbuttoned and their epistemologies undone by the intensities of the battlefield.

It is that epistemological sense that I seek to sharpen here. The offensives of the First World War were planned within a cartographic imaginary. For military violence to be unleashed on such a scale, how could it have been otherwise? The war was, as Paul K. Saint-Amour reminds us, an intensely optical war that relied, above all, on aerial reconnaissance as the source of geospatial intelligence. Observations and photographs were projected onto the geometric order of the map, which was animated by the mechanical cadence of the military timetable.<sup>7</sup> The result was a remarkably abstract space in exactly Lefebvre's sense of the term, and yet for the infantry its contours had to be known and navigated through a different, complementary and even confounding imaginary that I call a *corpography*. This was war made flesh, a way of apprehending the battle space through the body as an acutely physical field in which the senses of sound, smell and touch were increasingly privileged in the construction of a profoundly haptic or somatic geography.<sup>8</sup>

4 Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller: Observations on the Works of Nikolai Leskov," in *Illuminations*, New York: Schocken, 2007, 83-109: 84.

5 Erich Remarque, *All quiet on the Western Front*, New York: Random House, 2013, 209.

6 Edmund Blunden, *Undertones of War*, London: Penguin, 2010, 107.

7 Paul Saint-Amour, "Modernist Reconnaissance," in *Modernism/Modernity* 10:2 (2003), 349-80.

8 Derek Gregory, "Gabriel's Map: Cartography and *corpography* in Modern War," in Peter Meusburger and Derek Gregory (eds), *Geographies of Knowledge and Power*, Springer, 2015. I thought I'd made the word up, but Joseph Pugliese's *State Violence and the Ex-*

Put like that, the observation is hardly original; you can find intimations of all this in classics like Eric Leed's *No Man's Land*, and once you start digging into the accounts left by soldiers you find supporting evidence on page after page.<sup>9</sup> But I emphasize the epistemological because this constituted more than a different way of *experiencing* war: it was also a different way of *knowing*, *ordering* and *navigating* the space of military violence. These knowledges were situated and embodied — 'local,' even — but they were also transmissible and mobile. On the Western Front, *corpographies* were an instinctive, jarring, visceral response to military violence. As one stretcher-bearer put it:

When sound is translated into a blow on the nape of the neck, and light into a flash so bright that it actually scorches the skin, when feeling is lost in one disintegrating jar of every nerve and fibre [...] the mind, at such moments, is like a compass when the needle has been jolted from its pivot.<sup>10</sup>

*Corpographies* were also improvisational, learned accommodations to military violence. This was not so much a re-setting of the compass, as the stretcher-bearer put it, as the formation of a different bodily instrument altogether. Alex Volmar provides a helpful gloss:

New arrivals to the front had not only had to leave behind their home and daily life, but also the practices of perception and orientation to which they were accustomed. With entry into the danger zone of battle, the auditory perception of peacetime yields to a [...] radicalized psychological experience — a shift that the *Gestalt* psychologist, Kurt Lewin, attempted to articulate with the term "warscape": for the psychological subject, objects lost most of their peacetime

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*ecution of Law* (New York: Routledge, 2013, 86.) uses "geocorpographies" to designate "the violent enmeshment of the flesh and blood of the body within the geopolitics of war and empire," which obviously complements my own project. I have since discovered that the term has a longer history and multiple meanings that intersect, in various ways, with what I am trying to work out. Perhaps not surprisingly, it also serves as a medical term: "cranio- *corpography*" is a procedure devised by Claus-Frenzen Claussen in 1968 to capture in a visual trace the longitudinal and lateral movements of a patient's body in order to detect and calibrate disorders of the "equilibrium function." More recently, *corpography* has also been used by dance theorists and practitioners, including Francesca Cataldi and Sebastian Prantl to describe a critical, creative practice: a "dance of things," in which the body is thoroughly immersed as a "land.body.scape," as Prantl puts it. Meanwhile, Allan Parsons has proposed a "psycho- *corpography*" — explicitly not a psychogeography — as a way of "tracing the experience of living-a-body." Elsewhere, Alex Chase attends to specific bodies-in-the-world, those of cultural 'figures' (Artaud, Bataille, Foucault, Genet, Jarman and Mishima among them), that resist normalization — hence emphatically 'queer' bodies — and which figure bodies as events. "I hope to develop a methodology of ' *corpography*,'" he says, "which would write between biography and textual analysis, material lived bodies and fictional work, life and representation, in order to work through other queer concepts such as temporality, space, and ethics."

9 Eric Leed, *No Man's Land: Combat and Identity in World War I*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979.

10 "A Corporal," *Field Ambulance Sketches*, London: John Lane, The Bodley Head, 1919, 21.

characteristics during wartime because they were henceforth evaluated from a perspective of extreme pragmatism and exclusively in terms of their fitness for war. [...]

In place of day-to-day auditory perception, which tended to be passive and unconscious, active listening techniques came to the fore: practices of sound analysis, which might be described as an “auscultation” of the acoustic warscape — the method physicians use to listen to their patients by the help of a stethoscope. In these processes, the question was no longer how the noises as such were structured (*i.e.* what they sounded like), but rather what they meant, and what consequences they would bring with them for the listeners in the trenches. The training of the ear was based on radically increased attentiveness. The subject thrust to the front thus comprised the focal point of an auditory space in which locating and diagnostic listening practices became vital to survival.<sup>11</sup>

To render this in even more vivid terms, here is “Ex-Private X,” A.M. Burrage:

We know by the singing of a shell when it is going to drop near us, when it is politic to duck and when one may treat the sound with contempt. We are becoming soldiers. We know the calibres of the shells which are sent over in search of us. The brute that explodes with a crash like that of much crockery being broken, and afterwards makes a ‘cheering’ noise like the distant echoes of a football match, is a five-point-nine. The very sudden brute that you don’t hear until it has passed you, and rushes with the hiss of escaping steam, is a whizz-bang... The funny little chap who goes tonk-phew-bong is a little high-velocity shell which doesn’t do much harm... The thing which, without warning, suddenly utters a hissing sneeze behind us is one of our own trench-mortars. The dull bump which follows, and comes from the middle distance out in front, tells us that the ammunition is “dud.” The German shell which arrives with the sound of a woman with a hare-lip trying to whistle, and makes very little sound when it bursts, almost certainly contains gas.

We know when to ignore machine-gun and rifle bullets and when to take an interest in them. A steady phew-phew-phew means that they are not dangerously near. When on the other hand we get a sensation of whips being slashed in our ears we know that it is time to seek the embrace of Mother Earth.<sup>12</sup>

As Burrage’s last sentence shows, *corpographies* were at once recognitions of a devastated landscape — even an “anti-landscape” that seemed to deny all sense — and reaffirmations of an intimate,

11 Axel Volmar, “In Storms of Steel’: the Soundscape of World War I,” in Daniel Marat (ed), *Sounds of Modern History: Auditory Cultures in 19th and 20th-Century Europe*, Oxford: Berghahn, 2014, 227-255. See also Kurt Lewin’s topological phenomenology of the battlefield, “Kriegslandschaft” (1917), translated by Jonathan Blower as “Landscape of war,” in *Art in Translation* 1:2 (2009) 199-209.

12 A.M. Burrage, *War Is War*, London: Pen and Sword, 2010, 78.

intensely sensible bond with the earth<sup>13</sup>:

To no man does the earth mean so much as to the soldier. When he presses himself down upon her, long and powerfully, when he buries his face and his limbs deep in her from the fear of death by shell-fire, then she is his only friend, his brother, his mother; he stifles his terror and his cries in her silence and her security.<sup>14</sup>

And *corpographies* were not only a means through which militarized subjects accommodated themselves to the warscape — providing a repertoire of survival of sorts — but also a way of resisting at least some its impositions and affirming, in the midst of what so many of them insisted was “murder not war,” what Santanu Das calls a “tactile tenderness” between men:

This must be seen as a celebration of life, of young men huddled against long winter nights, rotting corpses, and falling shells. [...] Physical contact was a transmission of the wonderful assurance of being alive, and more sex-specific eroticism, though concomitant, was subsidiary. In a world of visual squalor, little gestures closing a dead comrade’s eyes, wiping his brow, or holding him in one’s arms were felt as acts of supreme beauty that made life worth living.<sup>15</sup>

A hundred years later, I have no doubt that much the same is true in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria and elsewhere. “To understand Afghanistan,” one *Bundeswehr* officer insisted, “you have to see, hear, smell and taste it.”<sup>16</sup> My interest in *corpography* is therefore part of my refusal to acquiesce to the thoroughly disingenuous de-corporealization of today’s “virtuous war,” which, all too often, is made to seem distant and digital: a hyper-optical war waged on screens rather than in ruined towns and ravaged fields.<sup>17</sup>

In fleshing out these ideas I have been indebted to a stream of work on the body in human geography. Most of it has been remarkably silent about war, even though Kirsten Simonsen once wrote about “the body as battlefield,” but it is now difficult for me to read her elegant essay without peopling it with bodies in khaki, blue or field grey

13 Becca Weir, “Degrees in Nothingness’: Battlefield Topography in the First World War,” in *Critical Quarterly* 49:4 (2007), 40-55.

14 Erich Remarque, *All quiet on the Western Front*, New York: Random House, 2013, 43.

15 Santanu Das, *Touch and Intimacy in First World War Literature*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008, 118.

16 Marion Naeser-Lather, “Smelling Fire’: sensory experiences of German soldiers in Afghanistan,” paper presented to the conference “Sensing War,” London, June 2014.

17 The classic critique is James Der Derian’s *Virtuous War: Mapping the Military-Industrial-Media-Entertainment Network* (London: Routledge, 2001). Der Derian attributes the gap between the virtual and the virtuous to the rise of the M-I-M-E network, but I sometimes think it might be more accurate to think of a “military-academic-industrial-media” network whose acronym is equally telling. See also Christopher Coker, *The Future of War: the Re-Enchantment of War in the Twenty-First Century*, Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2004.

tramping towards the front-line trenches, clambering over the top, or crawling from shell-hole to shell-hole in *No Man's Land*.<sup>18</sup> That is partly down to the suggestiveness of her prose, but it's also the result of my debt to the work of Das, Ken MacLeish and Kevin McSorley, which directly addresses the corporeality of military violence.<sup>19</sup>

Like these three authors, I have treated *corpographies* in relation to the soldier's body, but as the (in)distinctions between combatant and civilian multiply and as I begin to work on medical evacuation from war zones I have started to think about the knowledges that sustain civilians caught up in military and paramilitary violence too. Some of them are undoubtedly cartographic — formal and informal maps of shelters, camps, checkpoints and roadblocks — and some of them rely on visual markers of territory: barriers and wires, posters and graffiti. Today much of this information is shared by social media (as the battle space has become both digital and physical), but it remains within a broadly cartography imaginary. It may seem abstract as representation, but once mapping is understood as a performative practice, then this too can become intensely corporeal.<sup>20</sup>

Indeed, much of this knowledge is also, as it has always been, *corpographic*. Peter Adey once wrote about what he called “the private life of an air raid,” drawing on the files of *Mass Observation* during the Second World War to sketch a geography of “stillness” even as the urban landscape was being violently “un-made<sup>21</sup>”:

Stillness in this sense denotes apprehending and anticipating spaces and events in ways that sees the body enveloped within the movement of the environment around it; bobbing along intensities that course their way through it; positioned towards pasts and futures that make themselves felt, and becoming capable of intense forms of experience and thought.

This was a corpo-reality, and one in which — as he emphasised — sound played a vital role: “Waves of sound disrupted fragile tempers as they passed through the waiting bodies in the physical language of tensed muscles and gritted teeth.<sup>22</sup>”

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18 Kirsten Simonsen, “In Quest of a New Humanism: Embodiment, Experience and Phenomenology as Critical Geography,” in *Progress in Human Geography* 37:1 (2013), 10-26.

19 Santanu Das, *Touch and Intimacy in First World War Literature*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008; Ken MacLeish, *Making War at Fort Hood: Life and Uncertainty in a Military Community*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2013; Kevin McSorley (ed) *War and the Body: Militarisation, Practice and Experience*, London: Routledge, 2013.

20 Rob Kitchin and Martin Dodge, “Rethinking Maps,” in *Progress in Human Geography* 31 (2007), 331-344.

21 Peter Adey, “Holding Still: the Private Life of an Air Raid,” in *M/C Journal* 12:1 (2009); “The Private Life of an Air Raid: Mobility, Stillness, Affect,” in David Bissell and Gillian Fuller (eds), *Stillness in a Mobile World*, London: Routledge, 2011, 127-138.

22 Ibid.

But, as he also concedes, this was also a “not-so private” life — there was also a social life under the bombs — and we need to think about how these experiences were shared by and with other bodies. These apprehensions of military violence, then as now, were not only modalities of being but also modes of knowing: as Elizabeth Dauphinée suggests, in a different but closely related context, “pain is not an invisible interior geography,” but rather “a mode of knowing [in] the world — of knowing and making known.<sup>23</sup>” During an air raid these knowledges could be shared by talking with others — the common currency of comfort and despair, advice and rumor — but they also arose from making cognitive sense of physical sensations: the hissing and roaring of the bombs, the suction and compression from the blast, the stench of ruptured gas mains or sewage pipes.

Those who inhabited the marchlands between the military and civilian, like air raid wardens, developed an intricate understanding of the choreography of an air raid in which they became attuned to the interplay between light signatures and what John Strachey called the “individual notes” of the anti-aircraft batteries:

First came the flash from behind the slightly bombed mass of Cooper's Garage buildings. Then five or six seconds later the quick wink of the shell bursts, well up into the sky. These sights were followed, in order, by their appropriate sounds. First the roll of the gun discharges, the up-whistle of the shells, and then the light crack, crack of the shell bursts. Flash, wink, boom, whistle, crack in that order, over an dover again.<sup>24</sup>

But for those crouched in cellars and shelters Steven Connor argued that air raids involved a “grotesquely widened bifurcation of visuality and hearing,” in which the optical visual production of a target contrasts with “the absolute deprivation of sight for the victims of the air raid on the ground, compelled as they are to rely on hearing to give them information about the incoming bombs.” Those crouching beneath the bombs have “to learn new skills of orientating themselves in this deadly auditory field without clear coordinates or dimensions but in which the tiniest variation in pitch and timbre can mean obliteration.<sup>25</sup>” What then can you know — and how can you know — when your world contracts to a room, a cellar, the space under the bed? When you can't go near a window in case it shatters and your

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23 Elizabeth Dauphinée, “The Politics of the Body in Pain,” in *Security Dialogue* 38:2 (2007), 139-55.

24 John Strachey, *Digging for Mrs Miller: Some Experiences of an Air-Raid Warden* in London: New York: Random House, 1941, 45.

25 Steven Connor, “The Modern Auditory,” in Roy Porter (ed), *Rewriting the Self: Histories from the Renaissance to the Present*, London: Routledge, 1996, 203-223: 210. On the visual economy of targeting see Derek Gregory, “Doors into Nowhere: Dead Cities and the Natural History of Destruction,” in Peter Meusburger, Michael Heffernan and Edgar Wunder (eds), *Cultural Memories*, Heidelberg: Springer, 2011, 249-286.

body is sliced by the splinters? When all you have to go on, all you can trust, are your ears parsing the noise or your fingers scrabbling at the rubble?

Here too none of this is confined to the past, and so I start to think about the “thanatosonics” of Israel’s air strikes on Gaza.<sup>26</sup> Sound continues to function as sensory assault; here is Mohammed Omer earlier this year:

At just 3 months old, my son Omar cries, swaddled in his crib. It’s dark. The electricity and water are out. My wife frantically tries to comfort him, shield him and assure him as tears stream down her face. This night Omar’s lullaby is Israel’s rendition of Wagner’s *Ride of the Valkyries*, with F-16s forming the ground-pounding percussion, Hellfire missiles leading the winds and drones representing the string section. All around us crashing bombs from Israeli gunships and ground-based mortars complete the symphony, their sound as distinct as the infamous Wagner tubas. [...] Above, the ever-present thwup-thwup of hovering Apache helicopters rock Omar’s cradle through vibration. Warning sirens pierce the night — another incoming missile from an Israeli warship.<sup>27</sup>

And yet, as before, sound can also be a source of knowledge. Here is Wasseem el Sarraj, writing during Israel’s previous assault on Gaza in November 2012:

In our house we have become military experts, specializing in the sounds of Israeli and Palestinian weapons. We can distinguish with ease the sound of Apaches, F-16 missiles, drones, and the Fajr rockets used by Hamas. When Israeli ships shell the coast, it’s a distinct and repetitive thud, marked by a one-second delay between the launch and the impact. The F-16s swoop in like they are tearing open the sky, lock onto their target and with devastating precision destroy entire apartment blocks. Drones: in Gaza, they are called zananas, meaning a bee’s buzz. They are the incessant, irritating creatures. They are not always the harbingers of destruction; instead they remain omnipresent, like patrolling prison guards. Fajr rockets are absolutely terrifying because they sound like incoming rockets. You hear them rarely in Gaza City and thus we often confuse them for low-flying F-16s. It all creates a terrifying soundscape, and at night we lie in our beds hoping that the bombs do not drop on our houses, that glass does not shatter onto our children’s beds. Sometimes, we move from room to room in an attempt to feel some sense of safety. The reality is that there is no escape, neither inside the house nor from the confines of Gaza.<sup>28</sup>

The last haunting sentences are a stark reminder that knowledge, cartographic or corpographic, is no guarantee of safety. Military violence is always more than a mark on a map or a trace on a screen, and the ability to re-cognise its more-than-optical dimensions can be a vital means of navigating the wastelands of war. As in the past, so today rescue from the rubble often involves a heightened sense of sound and smell, and survival is often immeasurably enhanced by the reassuring touch of another’s body. And these fleshy affordances — which you can find in accounts of air raids from Guernica to Gaza — are also a powerful locus for critique. For if we are to ‘make sense’ of war we need to recover the multiple bodily senses through which the brutalities and erasures of military violence are registered.

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26 The term is J. Martin Daughtry’s. See his “Thanatosonics: Ontologies of Acoustic Violence,” (*Social Text* 32:2/119 (2014), 25-51), where he develops the concept in relation to the Iraq war.

27 Mohammed Omer, “Report from Gaza: When My Son Screams,” in *The Nation* (July 15, 2014).

28 Wasseem el Sarraj, “The Sounds in Gaza City,” in *New Yorker* (November 19, 2012).