

by Eva Diaz

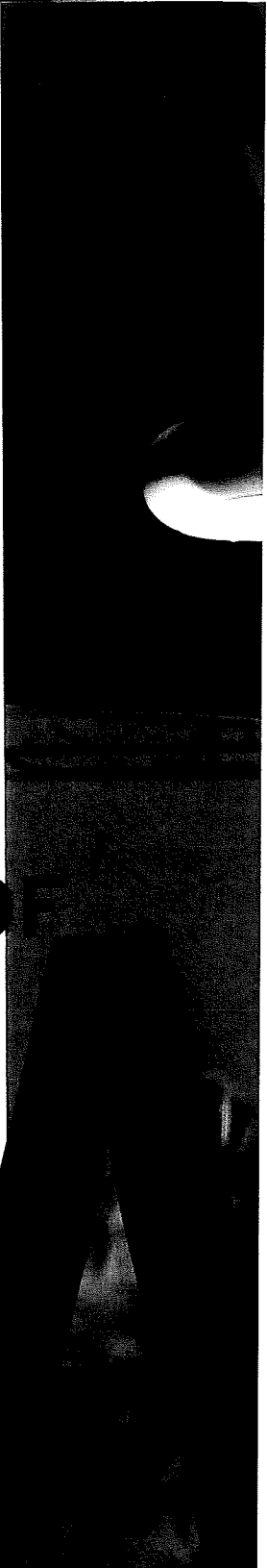
In the days after September 11, 2001, U.S. President George W. Bush invoked the specter of a holy war, calling for a “crusade” against terrorism’s “evil-doers.” The specific historical reference to Christian crusades against the Muslim world, in which the eleventh century Pope Urban II inaugurated a two-century long series of campaigns waging “holy war” against infidels,¹ was itself tremendously fraught. But surprising also was the way in which a Manichean language of absolute good and absolute evil was honed from a selective interpretation of Christian doctrine.² Bush echoed this dualism in his post 9-11 statement, “This will be a monumental struggle of good versus evil, but good will prevail.”

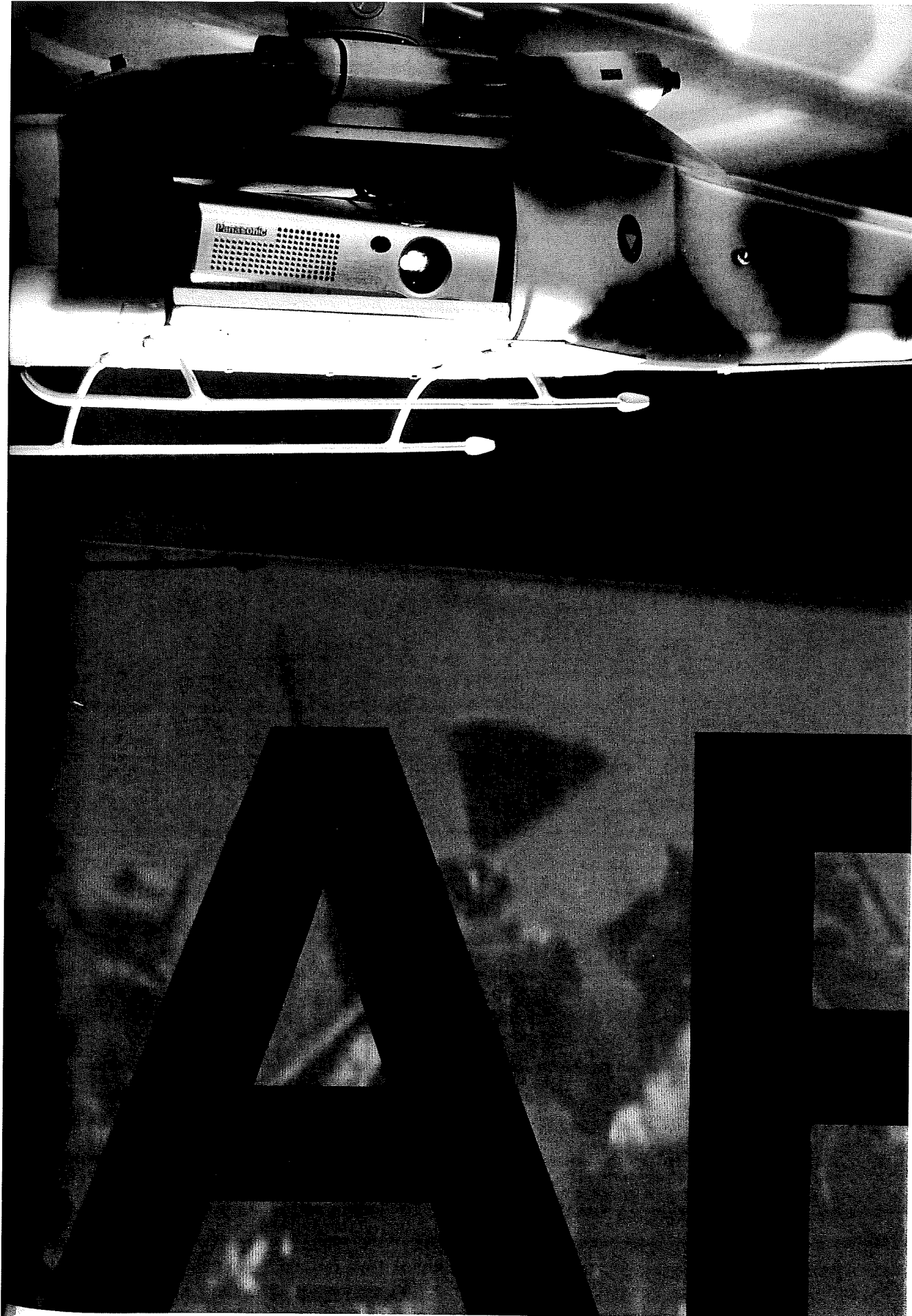
Like that of the medieval crusades, the language of a just and righteous battle against evil is in part substantiated by biblical passages in which God’s will is effected in acts of war.³ One of the more violent and contentious of these retributive passages is found in the Bible’s Book of Revelations, in which the breaking of the first four seals of a holy scroll unleashes forces of conquest, war, famine/pestilence and death which mark God’s wrath and initiates the final judgment of life on earth.

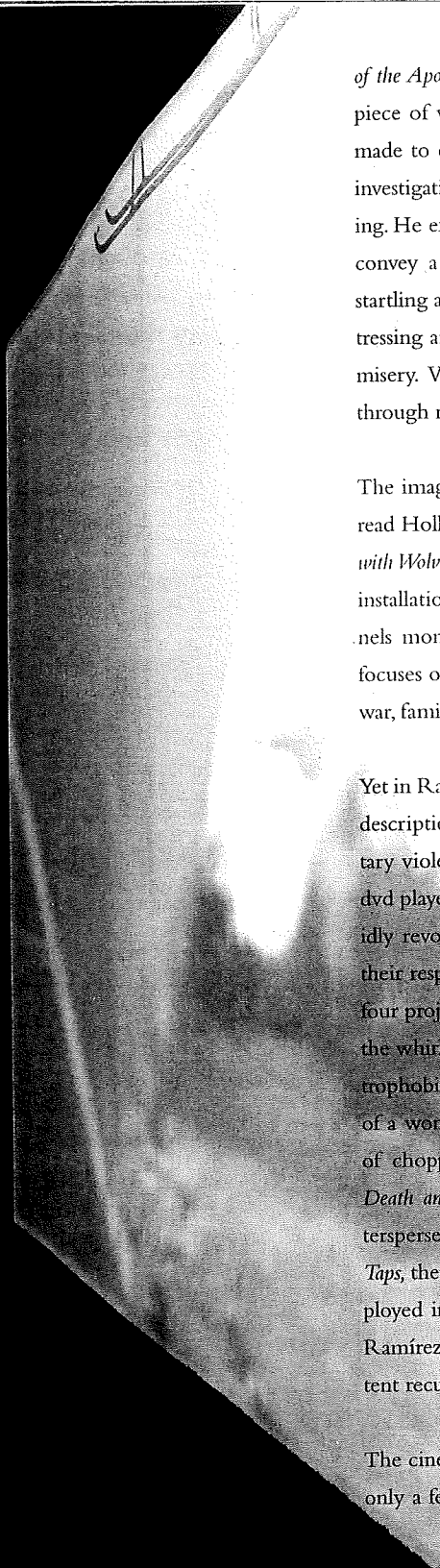
THE OPERATIC VIOLENCE OF

The so-called four horsemen of the apocalypse are part of a much larger eschatology in Revelations, only one element in a detailed description of the events leading up to the end of the world. Yet among their four attributes are some of the most dreadful elements of human experience. The horrific punishments meted out against non-believers and evil-doers, and the sheer hyperbole of tortures inflicted in order to vindicate the good have long been cause for theological debate. For if God is wrathful against His enemies, how can belief be sustained in His goodness? If He is unforgiving in His reckoning of humanity, if He torments and causes suffering in a vindictive manner, how is He different from His counterparts on the side of evil? How can a God loved for His benevolence and compassion come to annihilate His wayward, less powerful human creations?

Marcos Ramírez ERRE enters this complicated and seemingly intractable fray with a striking four-channel video installation titled *The Four Pilots*







of the *Apocalypse* (2005). Ramírez's work makes no claims, nor does this piece of writing, to resolving the theological quandary of how good is made to contradict itself when cruelly punishing evil. What Ramírez is investigating is more mundane⁴ and common, and therefore more pressing. He explores how certain *representations* of war, destruction and death convey a brutal fascination with violence and suffering, and how the startling accumulation of these representations in our culture make a distressing argument about the inevitability and ubiquity of aggression and misery. Violence is seen as not merely inescapable, but its use is justified through repeated representations.

The imagery of *The Four Pilots* is drawn exclusively from mainstream—read Hollywood—epic films of the last two or so decades such as *Dances with Wolves*, *The Last Samurai*, *Platoon*, *Braveheart* and *Gladiator*.⁵ Ramírez's installation is composed of four, approximately four-minute long channels montaged from segments of the original films, and each channel focuses on the blight instigated by its eponymous “horseman”: conquest, war, famine and pestilence, and death.

Yet in Ramírez's rendition, the horsemen have mutated from their biblical description as cavalry to a more modern and familiar harbinger of military violence: the Black Hawk helicopter. Each channel emerges from a dvd player housed in a miniaturized chopper that is outfitted with a rapidly revolving blade. The suspended projector/helicopter hybrids shoot their respective images across the space to target the opposing walls. The four projections completely fill the walls of the gallery and together with the whirling helicopters hovering above the darkened space craft a claustrophobic denseness. This sense of intensity is abetted by a soundtrack of a woman's wordless and haunting vocals overlaying the loud staccato of chopper blades. Periodically the melancholic melody of Wagner's *Death and Funeral of Siegfried* from the opera *Twilight of the Gods* is interspersed. Lending an elegiac martial quality to the proceedings (think *Taps*, the U.S. military's funerary hymn), Wagner's anthems are often employed in Hollywood films to particularly bombastic effect; in contrast, Ramírez's use of the dirge is both familiar and estranging in its intermittent recurrences.

The cinematic moments Ramírez appropriates are abbreviated, generally only a few seconds long. Each channel's clips, edited as they are to their

respective theme, depict a particular set of behaviors or gestures. In the *Conquest* section, troops and their technological accoutrements—tanks, fighter planes, and, of course, helicopters—amass and group in formations. Soldiers are shown rousing themselves with the pumping of fists and the beating of shields, issuing threatening, though here muted, cries. The montage is trans-historical and weaves through various cultures—for example, a stunning, wide-angle frontal shot of perfectly arranged Chinese imperial battle lines precedes a scene of Mohawk warriors in tense readiness. This is intercut with an elegant formation of fighter jets swooping through the sky, followed by guerrilla warriors slinking through a misty jungle, tracked in a sweeping dolly shot.

Each cut is a moment from its source material of maximum tension and expectancy, a mood exponentially heightened by the montage of dozens of such instances. The cumulative effect of *Conquest* demonstrates that intentional and stylized military preparations towards battle have long been a trope of films about war. The rigid organization of battle lines, the symmetry and order of troops marching or planes in pattern are surely overwhelming when captured in the crisp detail of big screen Cinemascope. The long preparations for battle mirror filmmaking practice itself, in which months of preparation provision a few-seconds-long explosion. In Ramírez's work, conquest is the period of premeditation and calm before blood spills, the attention and tension prior to the spectacle of slaughter.

It is not uncommon for movies of recent years to contain scenes depicting such graphic brutality and violence that even the most inured viewer is repulsed.⁶ The *War* segment of *Four Pilots* collects many such scenes—the gross out moments of decapitation, arrows through the head, axes through the back, immolation, bodies blown apart—and strings them together in an almost unwatchable riot of carnage. The logic of the sequence is intentionally warped and

irrational, as the artist states, "So you have scenes where a medieval knight kills a contemporary soldier, or [where] a Vietnam helicopter kill[s] American Indians or soldiers of the Roman Empire. Time, places, races, conflicts and historical references are all mixed and united in a sole common thread: war, death and devastation." Through the relentless montage another common thread emerges: cinema's enthrallment with bodies made vulnerable or utterly destroyed, and the perverse pleasure taken in filming the torment and pain of war. An operatic violence in cinema triumphs. Purged of signal director Sam Peckinpah's nihilism and overarching sense of futility,⁷ the sweeping panoramas and slow-motion havoc are easily recuperated as an exhilarating spectacle of bloodshed and butchery. Intricate choreography and a heightened sense of drama are key features of this operatic violence. Ethics, political accountability, and a sense of the social stakes about representing ever more explicit violence are not.

In considering the effects of technological innovation it is sometimes more interesting to speculate about what was never invented, or what has not been widely applied, than what is now ubiquitous and therefore seems unremarkable. Weapons can be triggered from remote locations to destroy human and infrastructural targets thousands of miles away, yet there are roughly two billion people without electricity worldwide. Or, conversely, one can consider the unintended effects of technologies that are presumably positive. Machines easily perform the repetitive and tedious tasks of assembly line work, but millions cannot find needed jobs. People whose labor has been made obsolete in the interest of the watchword "efficiency" are thus relegated to the highly inefficient condition of impoverishment.

Ramírez's installation indicates that technological innovations in warfare have multiplied the scale of the horror while certain visceral facts of violence remain unchanged. Regardless of the period depicted, blood is shed

with weaponry expressly designed to inflict bodily harm. And in the fine line between memorialization and glorification, sophisticated cinematic props and techniques convincingly reproduce the carnage. One should ask, are these representations cautionary or do they merely reproduce the violence?

The *Famine/Pestilence* portion takes up cinema's habits of depicting the most ineffable moment of transition: life into death. Suffering, illness, and starvation are summarized in brief episodes of excruciating absorption, with famished bodies prone and naked, damaged victims of devastation huddled in vulnerability. Ramírez's installation juxtaposes the forced migration of war's refugees with grisly medical attempts to save victims of disease. Of course, the toll of organized violence extends far beyond the battlefield. Innocents suffer—children are shown wracked with pain and sickness—and civilians are displaced, and often maimed or killed.

After the chaotic action of war, *Death* is a slow calm descending on the battlefield. Ramírez first compiles aerial shots showing casualties strewn through combat zones. Jarringly interspersed, however, are scenes of animals feeding on corpses, a reversion to the barbarous order of animality in which human bodies enter a state of mere materiality, of bare flesh. The piling up of the dead, sometimes roughly tossed into ditches or heaps, confirms this abject state of total and final passivity. For the body killed in war even death offers no rest. Mass burials, mounds of corpses set on fire; these are the gruesome consequences of strife, and the camera's interest in sweeping panoramas of destruction is counterposed with agonizing details such as severed limbs and gored bodies. *Death* is the summation of its three precursors, but the consequences of death make it a torment of its own class.

In an essay on violence and cruelty, the philosopher Etienne Balibar explores the paradoxical relationship between

ideals such as non-violence, justice or goodness, and the need for dominance expressed in ideologies like fascism. A phrase such as "I hate violence," he points out, embodies aggressions that oppose its attempt to escape violence. He argues that it is impossible to short circuit the violent threat that supports a "civilized" society's prohibitions against, for example, insurrection or disruptions of order. As he states, "There are certainly *degrees* in the amount of violence which goes along with civilizing ideals; but nothing like a *zero* degree."⁸ The ruin of war, in which a type of socially sanctioned violence takes place, is also the site of its most *extreme* degree. As Balibar states of the physical and psychological sites of violence such as war, "Social and territorial borders are privileged places where codified violence borders on cruelty."⁹

This cruelty, this excessive violence, is particularly insidious when it adopts a language of righteousness. The contradictions of cruelty posing as goodness become particularly evident as photographs from Abu Ghraib prison render ominous Bush's benediction that "good will prevail." Ramírez's work is an eloquent reminder that as a certain type of violence becomes ubiquitous in the public realm of film, so too does it pervade brutal private images and souvenir snapshots.

Although the war being fought in the Middle East is subject to a marked prohibition against publicly disseminated images of death and loss, the blood lust is already present in fictional representations of war. Ramírez's *Four Pilots* is a difficult but necessary intervention in debates about how war imagery and ideology reinforce one another in a relay of absences and excesses. ■

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¹The non-Christian Turks.

²Manichaeism was considered heretical in early Christian theology, although elements of its dualistic philosophy were integrated into Christianity by its most famous apostate, St. Augustine, who described his years as a Manichean in *Confessions*.

³The fighting cry of the Crusades was "Deus vult" (God wills it).

⁴Mundane in its meaning of earth-bound and secular.

⁵The word "pilot" also refers to television pilots, in which a new show is shopped for wider distribution with an initial episode.

⁶Although one can, at a certain level, distinguish cinematic recreation, however realistic, from actual violence, the lurid interest in presenting that which is truly gore shows no signs of abating.

⁷Sam Peckinpah, director of films such as *The Wild Bunch* (1969) and *The Getaway* (1972), pioneered (though Arthur Penn's 1968 *Bonnie and Clyde* was a key precursor) a cinematic style heavy on graphic violence, shot in a lingering, slow-motion technique. Yet in Peckinpah's movies, violence was often both fruitless and self-defeating and therefore utterly unheroic.

⁸Etienne Balibar, "Violence, Ideality and Cruelty," in *Politics and the Other Scene* (London: Verso, 2002), 145.

⁹*Ibid.*, 138.

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN:

WAR

NOTES

MARCOS RAMÍREZ ERRE

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