5 War becomes academic

Human Terrain, virtuous war and contemporary militarism. An interview with James Der Derian

Anna Stavrianakis and Jan Selby

James Der Derian is Research Professor at the Watson Institute, Brown University. His work spans international theory, international security and media studies. His most recent work, Human Terrain (Der Derian et al., 2009) is an award-winning documentary film about the US military’s shift towards a strategy of counter-insurgency and cultural awareness in Iraq and Afghanistan. This interview, conducted shortly before the screening of Human Terrain at the Frontline Club in London in June 2010, discusses the film, its relationship to his earlier work, in particular Virtuous War: Mapping the Media-Industrial-Media-Entertainment Network (Der Derian, 2009a), and what a critical theoretical approach can contribute to the study of militarism.

ANNA STAVRIANAKIS (AS): Your new film, Human Terrain, is an investigation into the ‘cultural turn’ in the US military. Could you tell us a bit about the film, and why you made it?

JAMES DER DERIAN (JDD): Well, there’s a dirty little secret about film-making: you never end up with the film you started. We started off making a film about the American way of war, how it was transformed on the outskirts of Fallujah as the insurgency took off in Iraq. Marines were coming back from their rotations in Iraq saying ‘this isn’t working, we need to find a new strategy’. In response, they staged some primitive war games at a decrepit, decommissioned Air Force base on the outskirts of Riverside, California, which they had turned into a mock Iraqi town. I got wind of this and got access through some old contacts. I shot one very full day of the exercise, edited it overnight in my hotel room, and screened it the next day at a conference at University of California-Irvine. Based on the reaction it received, I thought there might just be a documentary here. That was the start.

JAN SELBY (JS): And how did the project develop?

JDD: It became part of the Military Cultural Awareness project which my colleagues, Cathy Lutz and Keith Brown, both anthropologists, and I started that year at the Watson. I was interested in how the new strategic doctrine of counter-insurgency would play out when ‘the rubber hits the road’, as the military say. I had learned from researching Virtuous War and observing war games that there can be all kinds of doctrinal declarations but there’s a
big difference between what’s on paper and what shows up in the field. You have to get up close to see how the new strategies are – or aren’t – implemented, to judge whether real change was happening or was even possible. Early on in my research I decided to take a ‘filmic’ approach. After my experience at Riverside I enlisted the Udris brothers, whom I had worked with on two earlier films. We got access to ‘Mojave Viper’ at Twentynine Palms, which was the first fully fledged cultural awareness exercise that the Marines were staging for troops heading out to Al-Anbar province – at the time just about the most dangerous place in Iraq. We hired Michael Bhatia, a former Brown undergraduate who had gone on to Oxford for post-graduate work, as a post-doc to help on the project. The pivotal moment was Michael’s first research trip, to the Air University in Alabama, where the new ‘culture clan’ of the military were holding their initial meeting. A lot of the key players were gathered there. It’s where Major General Robert Scales delivered his speech marking the shift from network-centric to culture-centric warfare. It’s also where Michael started being recruited by the very people he was observing, the people who created the ‘Human Terrain System’ (HTS).

JS: And Michael was tragically killed in Afghanistan.

JDD: Yes, after he joined HTS. He never really talked to me about joining. He did reach out once, in an email, referring to some kind of training. I thought he was going to observe some training – but it turned out he was actually going to training, at Fort Leavenworth. The next email I got from him was a mass email: he was in Afghanistan, a member of a Human Terrain Team attached to the 82nd Airborne Division at a forward operating base outside of Khost. After that we exchanged a series of emails, mainly seeking to get approval for a skyped interview with him. But before that could happen we got the phone call from Michael’s mother, saying he’d been killed.

JS: The film is very much framed around Michael, with each of the four sections of the film beginning with statements or reflections from him. Presumably this is not just a way of honouring Michael, but also because, in your view, he represents some of the crucial quandaries about Human Terrain?

JDD: Yes, definitely. There are two things operating when you bring a character into a film. One is that it makes it easier for the audience to identify and to understand a complex issue. Academics love abstract discussions, but we wanted to reach more than the dozen or so colleagues who might read a journal article about HTS. The other consideration was that Michael became the living embodiment of the contradictions and tensions about the programme itself: the question of whether or not you can do good while being a member of a forward operating team; the fact that he was becoming less of an academic and more of a soldier. There was also the matter of serendipity: we found some video footage of Michael, including his debriefing to our group when he came back from the Air University conference. Footage from that informal seminar introduces each of the four ‘chapters’ of the film.
AS: This question that Michael embodies – of whether you can do good as part of a forward operating team – raises a wider issue. Proponents of HTS argue that engaging with culture helps reduce kinetic engagements and thus fewer people get killed – although critics say that such claims have not been verified. But at the same time, you have Abu Ghraib, in which some of the forms of abuse turn on the supposed cultural difference of the Arab and Muslim world. One of the things we’re interested in is the kind of productivity that can go other either way in the ‘turn to culture’.

JDD: Abu Ghraib broke in the middle of our very first Military Cultural Awareness workshop. The idea of an ‘Arab mind’ was surfacing at that time, that Arabs are afraid of dogs, that Arabs don’t like having naked women paraded in front of them, ideas that are brilliantly taken apart by Philip Gourevitch in the film. Culture was being used as a way of ‘enhancing’ interrogation techniques, to the point of breaking just about every known international law. Those breaking events could not help but colour our interpretation of how the Human Terrain was using ‘culture’.

JS: Philip Gourevitch suggests that it’s not merely coincidence that the turn to culture and Abu Ghraib happened on the same watch.

JDD: Absolutely. I think his work, and the work he did with Errol Morris in ‘Standard Operating Procedure’ (Morris, 2008) is the best on Abu Ghraib. They focus more than we do on the personalities involved and on the power of representation itself, how the representations of torture, of human depravity, were intended to manipulate the prisoners and to leverage confessions: ‘Take a look what happened to your fellow prisoner, look at these photographs’. From the guards’ perspective, they were just compiling a scrapbook of their wartime experiences. This is something new, because everybody had their own digital cameras. This kind of inhumane treatment happens often in prisons, but now there was tell-tale evidence. Images, and then moving images – only the sound was missing – clearly heightened the impact of Abu Ghraib, making it the symbol of cultural abuse. It showed up on jihadist websites very quickly, you could find it everywhere.

JS: Can we come to this question of ‘culture’ in more historical perspective? The film is understandably focused on Afghanistan, Iraq and the contemporary era. But, of course, there is the question of how much ‘culture’ has been at play during wars in previous eras. One of the things that is said repeatedly in the film is that culture is now the ‘killer variable’, as you yourself put it. A number of other people say that, for example, HTS is the Manhattan Project for the twenty-first century, or that after the physicists’ wars, we now have the social scientists’ wars. So there is quite a strong narrative running through the film that culture wasn’t important in the past, but now it is. This raises many questions: not just Vietnam, but the British in India, and a long history of imperial wars.

JDD: In this case we are just repeating what other people at the top are saying, for instance, the quotation from Major General Robert Scales (2006) when he says that the first World War was a chemist’s war, the Second World
War was a physicist’s war, ‘World War III’ was the information researcher’s war and ‘World War IV’ and future wars will be psycho-cultural wars, where social science will be central. So it’s not something that we invented, it’s something that was official and central to the doctrinal shift.

JS: But you don’t contest that narrative in the film. In fact, to some extent you confirm it by saying that culture is now the new ‘killer variable’.

JDD: Something that you learn very quickly in film-making is that it’s not what you keep in but what you must leave out that most often becomes subject to criticism. With only an hour and a half to work with, we had to leave out a lot of the historical perspective that you are talking about. This is a film about a particular moment, a pivotal shift in the American way of war, through the experience of one individual. It’s not a history of the success or failures of counter-insurgency.

AS: Isn’t there a risk though that, in cutting out the historical material, you overplay the ‘newness’ of contemporary American warfare?

JDD: Well, we do have various critics, like Fred Kaplan, saying that after Vietnam the US military did not want to get involved in another counter-insurgency. That’s why Vietnam was followed by the Powell Doctrine, and then the Rumsfeld Doctrine. The fundamental principle was not unlike a bar-room brawl: ‘get in, get out quick’. If political circumstances don’t allow the use of overwhelming force, you fight war from a distance. You try to intimidate through ‘shock and awe’, or through coercive diplomacy, as Wesley Clark attempted in Kosovo. So you see a great reluctance in many quarters about the use of force: some call it the ‘Vietnam Syndrome’. This debate is not over; there’s an ongoing civil war within the military as to what strategy to adopt.

AS: Keith Brown has argued that there’s an institutional division in US military thinking about culture (Brown, 2008). The regular US Army operates with a static model of the ‘culture of the “other”’; but the Special Forces and the counter-insurgency arm have a much more fluid, dynamic, emergent understanding of culture.

JDD: Exactly. What does it mean when President Bush brings back from retirement the former commander of Special Forces to be his Chief of the General Staff? This policy shift is continued by President Obama, who is boosting Special Operations and giving General Petraeus much more authority. So in that regard it is a return to a policy first instigated in the Kennedy administration.

AS: Let’s explore some of the claims that have been made by the Network of Concerned Anthropologists. They say that HTS is likely to be used for kinetic warfare or intelligence purposes. They also claim that the fieldwork conducted by HTS teams falls short of anthropological or ethical standards, so participation in HTS is inappropriate for anthropologists (Network of Concerned Anthropologists, n.d.). What’s your take on such claims?

JDD: I generally resist making the kind of blanket statements begged by this question. I’m a co-director of a film in which extensive effort was made
to allow many voices to speak to this issue. I am also opposed to making an authorial statement that would pretend to trump or exhaust all other meanings that an audience might attach to the film. That goes against all my post-structuralist beliefs about the role of the author or director. I’ve been asked this question many times, and I try to remain agnostic on the political aspects of it. I obviously have a viewpoint that comes out in other ways, in my other writings; but I don’t want people going into the film thinking they’re going to get a pat answer to this question. We allow everyone to speak, including the most vocal opponents from the Network of Concerned Anthropologists as well as the founders of the HTS. I’m not ducking the question; I’d just rather leave it for the audience to decide on their own.

AS: And yet, whilst there are a range of criticisms discussed in the film, there are also criticisms that aren’t engaged with – around poor management, incompetence, waste, alleged sexual harassment, death threats, and the ‘grubbi ness’ of HTS. Certain military critics have argued that the military was already ‘doing culture’ before the HTS and that it is just a massive waste of money, allowing corporations to ride the gravy train (Stanton, 2011). Did you come across such criticisms; and if you did come across them, why don’t they feature in the film?

JDD: My first response is that I don’t see such problems as unique to HTS. I think this has been the history of any large-scale organization that lacks true civilian oversight. And I don’t think our documentary is a piece of investigative journalism; that’s another documentary. Eugene Jarecki’s Why We Fight (Jarecki, 2005) does that pretty well, as do Alex Gibney’s films (e.g. Gibney, 2007, 2010). You can go to some websites, and such criticisms of HTS are all they focus on. People within the military know this goes on. It goes on in practically every hierarchical, command authority structure. Why should HTS be any different?

AS: Precisely, but it raises the possibility that maybe culture isn’t the issue – that actually there is a more general problem of military, militarism or institutional politics that doesn’t get addressed through the focus on culture.

JS: For instance, could one not argue that HTS is one of a very large number of programmes and projects that were born in the context of the huge increase in military spending under Bush, and that the driving force behind it has been the desire to get in on pork-barrel politics?

JDD: HTS is actually a very small programme. So why is it getting such attention, both from academics – obviously partly because obviously academics are involved in it – but also from the press? Partially I think it’s because, as Foucault said, every new form of power produces new forms of resistance and resistance produces new forms of power (Der Derian, 2009b: 4). In some ways the Network of Concerned Anthropologists have, through their critique, elevated HTS. I think it would have just been a little sideshow otherwise. What if there had never been this strong reaction to HTS, would it perhaps have died of incompetence, malfeasance and misappropriation of
funds? But now there’s investment in it, and its proponents don’t want to allow external critics to stop them. Without the criticism, I think [HTS programme manager] Steve Fondacaro and [HTS senior social scientist] Montgomery McFate, and funders, would have walked away a long time ago. Of course, this is conjecture.

AS: Do you think that the Network of Concerned Anthropologists has got the right target? They’re operating at the level of academic ethical standards. But when you make the transition into the policy world, you’re operating in a different realm, where knowledge is used in very different ways. So perhaps this debate shouldn’t be about academic standards. What’s your sense of how the Network of Concerned Anthropologists have pitched their arguments?

JDD: You’re asking me to critique my own colleagues? That’s a trick question, isn’t it? I think, first of all, that there’s been an important airing of the issues that has helped bring the discussion into the public sphere. But then there’s another group that actually empowers HTS by saying ‘HTS can do no right and is equivalent to war crimes’. It gives HTS more power than it actually has. I think both the military and academics need to pay more attention to the complexities. When an issue becomes polemicized, nuance and complexity go out of the window. We try to avoid that in this documentary. People have come out of the film saying ‘I had no idea it’s so complicated’. I take this as an appreciation; others might consider it a criticism.

JS: Looking at the intervention in Afghanistan more broadly, there are a range of non-military forces, especially associated with reconstruction and development, working alongside the military. Academics are heavily involved in much of this ‘post-conflict development’ work. Most international development workers are in Afghanistan as part of this broader mission, and they’re not doing politically neutral work. Don’t many of the same questions and problems that apply to HTS also apply more broadly? What’s so special or problematic about HTS?

JDD: A lot of it has to do with how information is being used. This is the recurring controversy: are there firewalls, so that the information that the HTS teams collect will not go up the chain of command and be used for intelligence or even targeting? Now, you have read all the materials. Michael in his emails says that HTS information is not being used for this, but there is evidence on both sides.

JS: What I am trying to get at here is whether the ethical quandaries at stake in relation to HTS apply more broadly to ‘civilian’ involvement in Afghanistan. Are you suggesting that they don’t?

JDD: Any foreign intervention, be it military or civilian, is going to create resentments. Who’s going to get the aid, and who’s not? Are local customs being violated? Are internationals saying that women should have certain rights that the local tribal groups, or warlords, deny? Religious beliefs are always going to be an issue. But let’s face it, an armed intervention is going to produce an armed reaction. There will be costs, casualties and kidnappings.
And the fact that a lot of HTS team members wear uniforms and carry guns means that they’re not differentiated from the military as far as the Taliban or the remnants of al-Qaida are concerned.

JS: In *Virtuous War*, you emphasize that contemporary militarism and military power are highly diffused across industry, the media and entertainment – what you label the ‘Military–Industrial–Media–Entertainment–Network’ (MIME-NET). From this perspective, one can’t draw sharp lines any more between military and other types of power. Presumably, that type of argument has spill-over in relation to Afghanistan and the question not just of academics embedded in the military, but academics involved with institutions which are part of a broader military venture. It seems to me that you are trying to draw quite sharp boundaries in your discussion of HTS, but not in relation to MIME-NET.

JDD: You are absolutely right that power is now more diffused, and therefore that if you want to defeat militarism, anti-militarism won’t do. You have to find ways of countering the information-operations aspect of militarism – the media, entertainment, everything from jihadi videos to US recruitment videos. But academic complicity on these other fronts is another documentary. In IR we’re taught that it’s traditional, even expected, for academics to advise the Prince. Machiavelli is one of our canonical readings. It’s considered to be a sign of success if you become the next Kissinger. That said, my issue is not with academics who become advisors. It’s with academics who believe or claim they can still be objective, that they can conduct critical inquiry while they’re advising the Prince. This is a fundamental lesson I learned from Hedley Bull.

JS: I’d like to ask you about the film as a critical practice. You’re a proponent of ‘critical practices’ in IR, and producing a film is very different to writing a book. *Human Terrain* is also a particular type of documentary film: it’s not an Adam Curtis or John Pilger-type documentary in which you develop a strong thesis or denounce your enemies. In what sense, then, is this film a critical practice, and what explains the choice of style?

JDD: I break down ‘critical’ in the way that Barthes does: the etymology of crisis is ‘calling into question’ (Der Derian, 2009b: 3). So I take widespread assumptions – for instance, that HTS is God’s gift to the military, or that its sole purpose is to assist targeting of enemy forces – and call them into question. ‘Critical practice’ should not simply stake out a position and then critique the other side. Rather, it’s about calling into question all assumptions, including your own. That was probably the toughest part of making this film because Michael Bhatia was a friend, and I had to accept partial responsibility for helping to put him into a situation that got him killed. In some ways that critical distance was harder for me to achieve because of his death. I had to close that distance between me and my subject matter, and yet make the film that needed to be made about HTS. So it was a case of getting close, but not too close; of being empathetic yet telling the story from all perspectives, not just Michael’s or the military’s or my academic colleagues’. 
AS: How does your work on culture wars and Human Terrain relate to your earlier work on virtuous war and the MIME-NET? In some ways they go in quite different directions. MIME-NET makes the claim that networks and information are the key principles of contemporary warfare, whereas the film seems to go a step further and say that they are no longer the key principles – culture is. But on the other hand, there are also parallels between the film and book relating to the centrality of simulation, for instance.

JDD: The turn to culture and counter-insurgency represents a loss of faith in the RMA [revolution in military affairs] to deter and if necessary destroy our enemies. What links network-centric and culture-centric warfare is the continued reliance on military simulations and public dissimulations, where the model produces and engenders a new reality. In the film we get into the new cultural wargames, and we see how both supporters and critics of HTS talk about the ‘theatre of war’ and ‘theatre dynamics’. One critic says that HTS is really an information operation, all about public relations. The staging of cultural awareness is almost as important as the actual implementation of it.

JS: MIME-NET is about the Media–Industrial–Media–Entertainment Network. You start the book with reference to President Eisenhower’s Military–Industrial Complex speech, but you end up with MIME instead. Why those four key elements? Does this imply that the term ‘Military–Industrial Complex’ is anachronistic?

JDD: I don’t think it’s anachronistic, it’s just not sufficient. Political economy explains a lot. It gives you the critical question of ‘who benefits?’ Military industries obviously benefit from war. But given changes in warfare, these industries don’t benefit in the way they once did. And they’re not all based in the US. War is no longer conceived, executed, represented and defended through linear systems or industrial models; most of it happens through networks. So you have to consider what the most powerful networks are. The ‘Iron-Triangle’ that Eisenhower warned against (Eisenhower, 1961), which originally included Congress in his speech, is still operating, but nowhere is a new ‘force-multiplier’, the Media–Entertainment, part of the equation. The US military realized early on that winning wars is not simply a matter of seizing the centre of gravity on the battlefield; they must also seize the centre of gravity at home, which is increasingly determined by popular culture and the news media (itself increasingly another form of entertainment). As usual, the military was ahead of the curve, acting as a kind of avant-garde for innovations in the media. For instance, they created a production studio in the basement of the Pentagon that would bypass the prime-time networks and go directly to local networks. They made ‘full-spectrum dominance’ the central tenet of war-fighting, ranging from heavy-duty kinetic operations to hearts-and-minds information operations. This goes beyond propaganda or disinformation: it’s a full-scale production of simulacrum, where the intent is to win a war without fighting a war. That’s the acme of battle according to Sun-Tzu (Der Derian, 2009b: 287). But as Virilio points out (Der Derian, 2009b: 54–6), we now have the tools to make
that happen, to substitute the Pentagon’s reality for all others. From public diplomacy to coercive diplomacy, network-centric warfare to shock-and-awe, this spectrum brings together the military, industry, media and entertainment, hyphenates it, produces a synergy, which is obviously more powerful than the constituent parts.

JS: I want to push you a bit more on the nature of these synergies. What’s special about the Military, Industry, Media and Entertainment? There are various other letters that we could add to MIME, creating a different acronym. We could add in an A for Academic, F for Finance, or P for Prisons. Does your acronym, MIME-NET, capture something special that other acronyms wouldn’t?

JDD: Well, they were the most powerful actors when I began my investigation. As for academics, I’d like to believe I’m more powerful than I actually am, in the vein of the ‘heroic intellectual’. But there are only a few individuals from universities who have actually shaped political discourse in the recent past, like Kissinger on the right, or Chomsky on the left. For the most part intellectuals have minimal impact. By contrast, popular culture, Fox News, the latest Hollywood film, have a real public impact. That’s going to shape mass consciousness in ways that nothing I produce in a documentary, or somebody produces in an article, could ever do. As for finance, after the economic meltdown, I would say, yes, it was an omission on my part and on the part of many of us in the universities. Inspired by Virilio, I did write early on about the dangers of cascading effects and negative synergies produced by densely networked systems like Wall Street. But unlike many of the academic economists who enabled this disaster, mine was a sin of omission, not commission.

AS: Jan pushed you on the MIME part, and I’d like to pick up on the NET element, the difference between a military industrial ‘complex’ and a military–industrial–media–entertainment ‘network’. You’ve written that you are interested in the mimetic power that travels along the hyphens of the MIME-NET; and today you’ve said that political economy can explain a lot, but there are certain questions it can’t answer. Some of the military industrial complex literature can be instrumentalist or functionalist, while this idea of the network and the mimetic power that travels along hyphens is a more open, productive, messy way of thinking about power. How do you understand the idea of the network and the character of power and agency?

JDD: We need to understand how network power or the virtual means of information differs from economic power or materialist means of production. We have to move out of linear, causal models – where the arrow always goes in one direction, where there are cause and effect, dependent and independent variables – to what happens in networks, where the arrows go both ways and, to take a page from complexity theory, to try to understand what happens when you have opposing tendencies operating, some towards entropy and others towards self-organization. This introduces an ethical tension, because it’s very hard to designate responsibility in network
models. Witness the financial crisis we just went through: who’s to blame? Is it the CEO? The Chief Financial Officer? The shareholders? The automated programmes that made the trades? The bad mortgages? The credit default swaps? Is it a network that went out of control, because of high-speed trading? When power becomes so diffused it’s much harder to assign responsibility. We love to bring people in front of a Senate Committee and point a finger at them; but this disaster has clearly gotten too big for that. When people say an institution is ‘too big to fail’, it’s not really about this industry or that one; it’s about the whole matrix. And that’s what I’m worried about. There’s a negative as well as positive synergy operating in complex systems, in which the cascading effects mean you can lose control very quickly, when one network goes down, or bad information goes through the network.

JS: The other key terms in *Virtuous War* are the conceptual pair, ‘virtual’ and ‘virtuous’, and also the notion of ‘simulation’. Tell us about these.

JDD: The revolution in military affairs was never just about technology. It was also about culture and ethics. Technology enabled a conceit, helped make a universalist virtue out of a particular self-interest. Technology made plausible the belief that through use of remote, precision munitions, you could fight a virtuous war, achieve political ends through military means, avoid the fog in the friction of war, achieve all of the things that Clausewitz warned us against. A revolution in military affairs would resolve political and ethical issues: war would once again become virtuous. ‘Virtue’ and ‘virtual’ shared a similar etymology, both conveyed the same meaning up until the Middle Ages, of producing divine effects at a distance, just as Jesus Christ did. But now we have a new *deus ex machina*, network-centric warfare, producing the omnipotent effects of an alien power – Washington, DC, 6000 miles away – perfectly targeting and taking out bad guys with Predator drones and Hellfire missiles. These are much more vengeful agents than Jesus Christ ever was. But it is all based on simulations and public dissimulations; it has never worked as advertised, and has lost much of its deterrent value as a result.

JS: So virtuous war is high-tech war fought from a distance?

JDD: In both spatial and ethical senses, it is fought from a distance. As a humanitarian intervention it is not about seizing territory; its aim is to win over a population, to fix a disaster, to stop ethnic cleansing. Nowadays, there must always be an ethical purpose to justify an intervention or war, which I guess is an improvement. Geopolitics is no longer the primary criterion of warfare. Geopolitics might still be operating beneath the surface, but increasingly wars must be presented as virtuous – the 1990–1 Gulf War was, as was the 2003 Iraq War.

AS: Is this just a matter of presentation? Geopolitics might be operating ‘beneath the surface’ but Kosovo and Iraq were not unanimously accepted as ethical interventions, either in intention or effect. I wonder whether you take the idea of technology ‘in the service of virtue’ at face value, accept too easily the claims to ethicality that are being made.
JDD: My book opens with two epigrams (Der Derian, 2009a: xxiv–xxv). One is from Eisenhower’s famous farewell speech warning about the Military–Industrial Complex; the other is Nietzsche’s warning against politicians and intellectuals who speak the language of virtue. Nietzsche ‘smells the swamp’ in such talk; he says it is usually just an excuse to let in the police. When people talk about virtue, a knock on the door soon follows, telling us what to do, and what not to do. That’s the policing aspect of virtuous discourse. Nietzsche thought the two foremost thinkers in international politics were Thucydides and Machiavelli, because they didn’t dress up their intentions in virtue. They said it like it was: the weak must do what the strong require. Nietzsche saw them as the ‘real’ realists, as opposed to the pseudo-realists who flee into the ideal (as Plato did). If you’re going to go to use violence, tell us the real reasons. It’s increasingly hard to get mass acceptance for violent actions. Patriotism no longer suffices, some kind of international legitimacy is also needed. Fear is a pretty good way to mobilize a population, but post-9/11 even that has its limits. There is a reluctance to keep the troops abroad, to pump more money into foreign wars. One result is the revival but also a distortion of ‘just war doctrine’.

JS: ‘If you’re going to go to use violence, tell us the reasons’, you just said. Is that what you would like to see happen?

JDD: I believe in civilian, democratic oversight over the means of violence, as well as transparency in decision-making, none of which we had in the Bush–Cheney years. But because of that debacle it will now take a great deal more for the US government to acquire public support to send or sustain troops abroad, even more so in our current states of permanent war and financial crisis. So, two things could happen in the future. One is that politicians will rhetorically hype up crises even more than they did in the past. The other is a return to isolationism, where the government holds back even when there might well be a good reason to intervene, say if a genuine crime against humanity is taking place. This is Mary Kaldor’s point in her latest book, Human Security (Kaldor, 2007a). It’s too easy for human security and humanitarian intervention to become the justification for violent actions like the Iraq War. This was the argument made by good liberals, like Joe Nye and Michael Ignatieff.

JS: Your ‘tell us the reasons’ line sounds very realist. It sounds to me as if you’re saying that actually, there are real reasons, and you’d like to see less simulation.

JDD: What I would like to see – and to help create – is a critically informed world picture, one that allows people to distinguish between what’s more real and what’s less real without relying upon some external and ultimately unverifiable reality principle, like ‘God and country’, or ‘universal human rights’. I think that’s possible, now that so many of the old verities have been debunked and new interpretative communities are emerging around the question of what’s accurate, verifiable and true – without resorting to command ethics, a higher authority or truth claims based upon simulacra or
transcendental ideals, whether patriotism, God or something else above and beyond human deliberation.

JS: In my reading of *Virtuous War*, you move between statements that are quite realist and those that seem to accept, in quite a liberal way, the centrality of good intentions. You talk of a number of interventions as having good intentions, but unintended consequences. At times you seem to take ‘good intentions’ at face value.

JDD: The book and film are journeys that follow a chronological but also pedagogical path: they are learning experiences. If you are a good detective, you find that things always get more complicated the closer you get to your subject matter, in my case the war machine, those who built it, run it, as well as are victims of it. You realize fairly quickly that no single perspective, especially an ideological one, is going to capture all sides, and you have to open up to a wide range of heartfelt intentions. This is part of the interview process, getting closer to your subject. When you do this, there is always going to be the risk of identifying with your informant. Ethnographers are very much aware of this, so they have all kinds of tricks against it, but I follow Clifford Geertz’s line that you are never going to achieve perfect objectivity, and indeed you shouldn’t, as you have to maintain some empathy with your subject. I’m always trying to find ways to empathize at an emotional level with humans who are going through a very hard set of decisions – while keeping a distance that allows you to make some judgements about motivations and consequences. Getting that right was probably the toughest aspect of *Human Terrain*. It’s always hard in a book, but it’s even harder in a documentary film, which is much more dependent on nailing the interviews.

You’re probably right to out me as a closet realist. I was trained in the realist, classical tradition, but as taught in England – before there was an ‘English School’. We were always given philosophical tools of self-reflection to go along with it. At the same time I was doing double-readings of the canonical texts, like Kant, Hobbes, Machiavelli, because I’d been trained at McGill in continental philosophy by people like Charles Taylor, to always apply meta-theoretical, meta-philosophical attitudes. From that kind of critical reading it became obvious to me just how dependent the realist model of the world was upon idealist simulacra, chief among them that all states are black boxes in their pursuit of self-interests. This crude form of realism – what I call ‘paleo-realism’ – is still the dominant approach to IR in the United States, not least for its simplicity. It seems like you just can’t kill it; it’s like a zombie, always coming back to haunt us. That said, there are parallels between realism and post-positivism that I’ve always seen as possible sites for strategic alliances. They both agree that there’s nothing at the centre, that we have to construct some sort of order on a daily basis. Realism and post-positivism do have a kinship, in that they understand that the centre won’t hold unless humans find some way to make order out of disorder. So for me they are not completely dissimilar or alien traditions.
JS: One of the curious things is that when it comes to theoretical discussion, your big enemy is realism, whilst the ‘virtuous wars’ that you critique are, above all, liberal wars. They are either liberal humanitarian wars (Bosnia, Kosovo), or radical neo-liberal wars (Afghanistan, Iraq). And yet liberalism as a theoretical tradition seems to receive little attention or critical comment from you. Why?

JDD: Really? Early in my career – and probably at some cost to my career – I was one of the few people willing to take on Bob Keohane when he was the arch-exemplar of neoliberal institutionalism. And later I called out the neo-liberals who supported the Iraq War, much more so than the realists, who took a highly visible stand against the war, in the New York Times and elsewhere, saying it was the wrong war at the wrong time and not in our self-interest. So, yes, I strategically sided with Steve Walt and other realists. I still do. They stand up for their convictions – they don’t flee into the ideal.

AS: You said previously that the ultimate test of a virtual film is how well it travels. Virtuous War is very focused on the US and US forms of warfare. Does the concept of MIME-NET travel, say, to the Democratic Republic of Congo or Darfur?

JDD: The concept of MIME-NET is expanding, but isn’t infinitely expandable. It contains contradictions and self-critiques. MIME-NET produced Avatar, which, to my mind – and despite its bad script – is one of the best anti-militarist statements in film since Dr. Strangelove. In this regard, MIME-NET contains within its representational powers a capacity for overturning the worst aspects of militarism. Like all networks, MIME-NET can carry bad information or good information, it carries forces for change and forces for the status quo. Proponents of techno-utopian war and techno-pessimists focus too much on intentions. I agree with Kevin Kelly (1999) that networks have an organic component, their own agency, and that outcomes cannot be controlled once information starts moving and accelerating, especially once this information goes through different iterations in different cultures.

AS: What about warfare in those parts of the world at low-tech end of the spectrum? You refer in your work to bloody ethnic and religious conflicts. Are these MIME-NET wars?

JDD: What motivated these people were networks: hate radio networks, hate video. The ability to propagate a message quickly definitely enabled many of the genocides of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. The way that you can distort and project images of the Turks defeating the Serbs in 1389, and then muster genocidal orgies on the strength of them, and so on. That testifies to the power of MIME-NET in even low-tech societies.

AS: So would it be fair to say that what travels is the concept of the network, while the actual media and military means vary? That there is a spectrum of networked violence, with the RMA at one end and jihadists at the other?

JDD: The asymmetry of violence is enabled by networks. Why does al-Qaida have so much power? It’s because they have networked the impact of their violence. I’m convinced that’s why there was a gap between the first plane
and the second plane on 9/11 – so they could ensure that video cameras were set up, to force multiply the horror of the World Trade Centre being destroyed. The MIME-NET both compensates for an asymmetry, and enables the force multiplier of power to expand into something above and beyond material capacities.

JS: What about the virtual and virtuous part of your story? How well do they travel? We know that questions of virtue are at the heart of, and are bound up with, all wars. But specifically in the way that you talk about virtue – the sense of virtuousness that comes from virtuality and from being at a distance – does that speak to the ‘small wars’ or the ‘ethnic wars’ to which Anna was referring?

JDD: Obviously, virtues are going to vary according to different cultures, but there are some fundamentals. One is, people want respect, they want dignity, they want to be recognized as, if not free agents, then free individuals who are part of a collective. Disrespect, dishonour and resentment become important when one virtue tries to assert its universality over particularist virtues. When war is fundamentally based on a universalist imperative, it’s inevitable that there’s going to be a clash with local virtues. That’s why I might form strategic alliances with realists but believe a post-structuralist perspective on things like culture and values is more ‘realistic’ than what they have to offer.

AS: You tend not to use the concept of militarism in your work; why is that? What is your take on the concept?

JDD: If you go through my work, there aren’t a lot of ‘isms’, period. I think what you’re really asking me is why I don’t take up ‘anti-militarism’. The reason for this is that I’ve tried to move beyond the sort of pure critique to which ‘anti-’ applies. I’m more interested in counter-militarism, counter-media, counter-simulations. Foucault makes the point in his interview with Maoists in Power/Knowledge (Foucault, 1988: 1–36), that criticism in one culture, or in a different historical period, doesn’t lend itself to political action in another. I hold to that view. Militarism and anti-militarism was a very important debate at the time when military values were clearly spilling over into the civilian realm, in the 1920s and 1930s, and indeed, when Eisenhower issued his famous warning. Now, however, because there’s such a diffusion of military values everywhere, as well as a diffusion of civilian values into the military, I don’t find the binary notions of ‘militarism’ and ‘anti-militarism’ as useful as they once were.

JS: What difference does the notion of counter-militarism bring?

JDD: ‘Countering’ involves establishing a whole new way of thinking and of becoming, rather than just being in opposition. For Foucault, ‘counter-justice’ involved fighting the existing system but also trying to create alternative courts or tribunals (Foucault, 1988: 33–5). So maybe we should think about how to create an alternative military. One that accepts gays and lesbians would be a start. One that might be based on conscription. One that might be based on certain rules of engagement and norms that are
completely alien to what exist now. For example, what does it mean that fashion designers are now using a lot of camouflage? What’s the effect of that? Does that make society more militaristic, or is it in some way undermining the authority of the military? How do you make that judgement? What’s the role of appropriation, as opposed to imposition, of military values? What happens when you appropriate them for other ends? These are some of the areas that need to be explored, outside of the old binaries. We shouldn’t be beholden to old models that have lost their heuristic value.

**AS:** One of the things we’re interested in, in this book, is speaking to some of the examples and issues that you’ve raised, while still wanting to hang on to the concept of militarism. The question of whether we are witnessing the civilianization of the military, or the militarization of civilian life, for example, is a legitimate and important question. As a post-structuralist you are not keen on ‘isms’, but the question remains as to how you know what you are seeing if you don’t have any guiding concepts.

**JDD:** I’m basically opposed to any concept that closes rather than opens an argument. By loosely using the term, without real historical context, ‘militarism’ takes on an amorphous quality, and it becomes hard to converse about it with people outside the circle. The corollary holds true with ‘anti-militarism’: how do you then make an argument need for armed intervention in genocidal situations, when only ‘militarist’ states have that capacity? This is why I don’t start – in my writing or lectures or films – with definitions: they are too often used to end rather than open up an argument. ‘Only that which has no history can be defined’: a good quotation – from Nietzsche (2009: 49) – to end an interview.