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## MIRAGES: AN OPTICAL MACHINE IN THE DESERT

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Medina Wasl is the name of a small Iraqi town in the middle of the Mojave Desert in California. It is a mock village that forms part of the US Army's Fort Irwin National Training Center, through which troops transit before departing for theatres of operation in Iraq or Afghanistan. The village was built and is operated by Hollywood professionals. The extras they employ to play the role of its inhabitants are largely part of the Iraqi Diaspora in the United States.

Training for warfare is as much a question of learning how to look as it is of learning specific combat techniques. Medina Wasl teaches military personnel how to move about in a specific urban terrain and soldiers training here learn to distinguish their enemies from innocent civilians. They also learn that no one looks more like a terrorist than an innocent civilian, and that they should therefore consider every civilian a potential terrorist who is a threat to their lives. Trainees are taught that this mock village in California looks very much like what should they expect to encounter overseas. As for the village's inhabitants, they are played by Iraqis who have fled their country of origin and who are now asked to participate in the war effort of their newly adopted home. In doing this, effectively, they pledge allegiance to their new country but do so by personifying its most recent enemy: the 'terrorist'. If this can be seen as a betrayal it is a symbolic one that works at the level of caricature. They are looking at the actions of the militaries, and their participation to this *mise-en-scène* functions as an approval of what they see. And finally, someone has to look and acknowledge this exchange of gazes: this role falls to viewers—who are thereby being trained to become spectators of wars—through the work of the media.

Medina Wasl is open to journalists. It is, indeed, adapted to welcome them. This is how I was given access to shoot images for my film *Mirages* (2010). Even though I made this request as an artist and film-maker, I was granted the status of a journalist, which allowed me to observe first hand how the Public Affairs Officer deals with other media workers. His function is basically to frame things for visiting journalists and the framing operations of his role are concreted in various elements of set design that accommodate visiting media workers. Whilst, for instance, these elements of the architecture do facilitate the work of journalists, they also frame and orient it in significant ways. The village is an apparatus of vision and action that also includes an observation deck from which journalists film and photograph the 'theatre of operations'. There is even a hotel for them to stay in, from which they can monitor the activities of the village. Medina Wasl is the most photogenic of the thirteen similar villages at Fort Irwin and one of only two to which journalists are given access.

All of these factors suggest that Medina Wasl is a device of total vision and that it interpolates each of its users as belonging to one or other of the different groups – military, role players, media workers and their corresponding viewers – that are set up to watch the others watching. Whilst this structured set of visual relations has functions or ends for each group, it also rearranges the participants in an assemblage that is producing a new discourse on warfare.



Fig. 1. As Brian Howe, the manager of Fort Irwin's training operations said during an interview, the goal is to 'make [the mock village] as real as possible, so that when the soldiers actually get for the first time into Iraq or whatever theatre they go to, it's not new, it's familiar'  
Photo: Emanuel Licha, *Mirages*, video still, 2010.



Fig. 2. Howe mentioned during the interview that the set designers work with military who have been to Iraq: ‘they bring back their pictures and their knowledge. We also do research online to get very real pictures of the environment. We then put together a model of what we think it should look like’. This very particular and obviously skewed interpretation of Iraq is what soldiers will expect to find when they get there, especially since they are insistently told during their training that when they are in Medina Wasl, it is as if they were already in Iraq.

Photo: Emanuel Licha, *Mirages*, video still, 2010.



Fig. 3. A construction team is working on a new building in Medina Wasl. When the facility manager says that they ‘put together a model of what [they] think it should look like’, he most probably is referring to the way they want the mock-village they are about to build to look like. But let’s imagine for a while that ‘it’ stands for Iraq itself: the model they build would then represent an imaginary Iraq and exist in the stead of its reality. The model would then not represent an Iraqi village as it is, but rather what this village shall be. If we follow this hypothesis, the mock villages built by the military are not only ‘simulations’ of Iraqi villages, or an attempt to copy what they look like in reality, but rather an idealized version of the reality towards which the US authorities strive. It is Iraq as they would like it to be.

Photo: Emanuel Licha, *Mirages*, video still, 2010.



Fig. 4. Of a total number of about 1800 role players at Fort Irwin National Training Center, approximately 250 are 'Foreign Language Speakers' (FLS). Most of them are Iraqi-Americans and come from the area of San Diego. The set and the mise-en-scène in Medina Wasl are there to prove that according to the designers, Iraq and Iraqis do not look typical enough, and their representation had therefore to be hyper-ritualized. The results are dubious caricatures of Iraqi architecture, dress codes and customs. Photo: Emanuel Licha, *Mirages*, video still, 2010.



Fig. 5. Journalists reporting on Fort Irwin like to reproduce the same configuration or visual dispositif as the one used by journalists working in real war zones. Journalist Paul Mager is reporting live from the training facility, interviewing one of the Iraqi role players. The interview reveals a lot about the current frame of mind of these role players and about how the optical machine that Fort Irwin is functioning for them. The man tells the journalist that he left Iraq in 1996 because ‘there was no freedom in the country’. He then worked for the US Army to contribute to the ‘good things’ they do for Iraq. Later in the interview he announces that he just obtained the US citizenship. The role player appears to be genuinely happy about this news, and his image speaks in praise of the American policy. The reporter as an underlying connection establishes working for the Army and gaining access to US citizenship. Photo: still from a news report broadcast on KCAL9/CBS television network, Los Angeles, live from Fort Irwin NTC, Oct. 19, 2009.



Fig. 6. The hotel where journalists are invited to stay while they report on Fort Irwin is situated in the centre of Medina Wasl, and as such it is part of the set. Two friendly soldiers wearing a dishdashah are the receptionists of this hotel, whose functional decoration resembles what one could expect from hotels hosting media workers in zones of conflicts. The hotel is definitively part of the war environment, and it is important that soldiers get accustomed to their strategic role. It also helps them remember that as much as they are looking, they are being looked at by journalists who scrutinize their actions. Fort Irwin's decor is complete when journalists are on the site. It is therefore no surprise that the building housing the hotel is, alongside the mosque, the tallest in the village. It is also the only one to be fully decorated inside.

Photo: Emanuel Licha, *Mirages*, video still, 2010.



Fig. 7. This is the hotel room in which journalists stay whilst reporting on Fort Irwin. The view from the window is on the main square, as is the mosque. While standing at the window to admire the view one notices that something is missing: there are no curtains. This emphasizes the fact that the proportions of the window frame are very similar to those of a TV screen. This window in its aspect ratio stands as a reminder that everything seen, filmed or photographed here has already been framed, and that the architecture of the camp is an optical device. Sitting on the bed, what one sees is the ready to broadcast image of the mosque framed by the window.  
Photo: Emanuel Licha, *Mirages*, video still, 2010.





Fig. 8. When journalists visit Medina Wasl they are first taken to an observation deck situated on the facility's main alley and overhanging the 'theatre of operations' (an expression that is literalized for any visitor watching the action from this box). Even if the journalists eventually step down from the deck, everything they will look at from then will bear the mark of this initial configuration. Photo: Emanuel Licha, *Mirages*, video still, 2010.