

High Times in the Military Establishment Patterns of Desire in the work of Jonathan Terranova

*There's room at the top they are telling you still
But first you must learn how to smile as you kill
If you want to be like the folks on the hill*
- John Lennon, 'Working Class Hero'

It's been quite a first decade for 'The New American Century'. And even with US unemployment about to lurch past the 10% mark it seems there's still one employer who's always hiring.

The world may collapse all around us but for the military the boom period continues, stirred on by each calamity, guided by technical virtuosity and driven by cold clinical rationality, reaching towards catastrophic ends through a focus on spectacular means.

The passing of 'liberal' technocrat Robert McNamara should give pause for thought for the pundits and military strategists who make their calculations within cloistered settings.

In old age the quasi-redemptive McNamara was a sorry sight. Gone was the cock-eyed self-assurance and absolute conviction in his ability to sway reality. Vietnam, it seemed, was no Ford Motors.

Enter a Barrack Obama, his swagger reminiscent of a McNamara in his prime with an equal self-assuredness of his own ability to rise above the quagmire of his predecessors via an enlightened restructuring of the military effort.

In his run for presidency Obama was often perceived as a 'peace' candidate who would end 'the war'. Few even batted an eyelid when the new president expanded the military budget by US \$20 billion or opened a new war in Pakistan. Somehow it felt better with Obama in charge.

The fabric of popular culture this century has been simply bewildering. Never have the surface and symbols of its aesthetic appeared so clinically menacing, a beauty-obsessed technological dog of a consumer world.

*Trapped inside the next best thing
And always at someone else's expense*
-Val Inc, 'Open'

Assuming the role of resident decorator to the Neo Con elites, Jonathan Terranova sets up opulent infiltrations into the military industrial complex set within the fraying subjects and surfaces of an imagined interior culture. It's a flight of fancy, which brings us a honey-dipped General Petraeus, like a Mars Bar on ice, casual as if just returning back from some virtual golf course.

The most fascinating thing about the political figures of our times is that they don't actually exist. From Terranova's work that's no stretch of the imagination. Bill Maher reminded us recently that first and foremost, Obama is a TV character. Not to mention his sidekick Sloppy Joe. I could imagine Joe Biden kicking back, cocktail straw in hand, in one of Terranova's interior decorated luxury private jets. Nice work if you can get it!

But it's the dizzying state of our daily unreality and pseudo multi-cultural lives that Terranova pokes and prods at with his jagged synthetic hybrids. The Southern Confederacy lives on in some of these images - as does the dollar bill, a roadmap to a galaxy of chocolate-box revelations.

It's a time of beefed up mass communications on steroids that's driven a kind of re-staging of the colonial project. Set in this glutinous time, Terranova chronicles the imagined lives of a new powerful but tacky elite as it jet sets about in a vast new cultural landscape of synthetic pleasures amidst the conquering of new real and virtual territories for the ubiquitous 'free market'.

It's this vacuous world that Terranova confronts us with and pointedly reminds us of its ravenous appetite and adaptability in appropriating any cultural signs into a logic of profit and progress. It is the continuing triumph of the spectacular surface in a saturated and monolithic global culture.

It's a bumpy ride to which there is no end in sight. The Western consumer world has been lulled into an acceptance of permanent war. Democracy has come to mean unrestricted 'free' market capitalism and war is big business.

Terranova thrusts the pathetic reality of the situation into these at times putrid images. It is a bulging balloon of signs and signifiers that is one puff away from bursting. Grab onto whatever shard of meaning that you can. It's going to get hairy!

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