

## **ELEVEN WAYS OF LOOKING**

ARTHUR ASA BERGER\* **AT THE GULF WAR**

IT WAS General "Stormin' Norman" Schwarzkopf, who said that "war is the most complex thing in the world." And the Gulf war was, in many respects, an incredible achievement. The military transported the equivalent of a good sized city to the Gulf, our government formed a coalition of people who hadn't, in the past, been too friendly toward one another, and strategists planned a brilliant military campaign.

But "complex things" tend to cause problems to many people. We have a need, it seems, to make sense of complex things by simplifying them. We use metaphors or schemas to comprehend, as best we can, complex matters.

Through the media, assorted experts, and a variety of commentators, we have made sense of the incredible events in the Gulf in at least eleven different ways.

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In Kurosawa's classic film, *Rashomon*, a bandit subdues a man (ties him up) and then rapes his wife in front of him. That much is sure. Afterwards, the man is killed, but whether he killed himself, was killed by the bandit, or died by accident is difficult to ascertain. This is because everyone involved in the episode tells a different story, including the dead man, whose spirit is channeled by a medium who goes into a trance. I use the concept of *The Rashomon Phenomenon* to describe the process by which "experts" and others gave their opinions on various aspects of the crisis. We had professors, retired generals, think tankers, and diplomats (and many others) discussing the situation and, as often as not, disagreeing with one another. The crisis was like *Rashomon*: you could never know who to believe.

*The War as a Video Game.* Some of the visual images shown on television encouraged some persons to describe the crisis and war as a video game. We saw "smart bombs" being aimed at the doorways or ventilating shafts of bunkers and planes zapping Iraqi targets with incredible precision. Because we saw little in the way of Iraqi casualties, the war took on the appearance of a somewhat surrealistic video game. The war also led to a spurt in the popularity of video games which simulated war in the Mideast.

*The Gulf War as Arabian Nights.* We can also see the crisis and war as a kind of fairy tale. It is possible to apply the notions of Vladimir Propp, an early student of fairy tales, to the war. He suggested most fairy tales have certain common attributes — a hero is sent of a mission, he has magic weapons given to him by a donor figure, he fights with a villain, and so on. Propp's book, *Morphology of a Folktale*, lists 31 different functions — actions done by heroes, villains, and secondary characters. Most of these functions can be applied to the Gulf crisis. But at the end of the fairy tale, the hero usually weds a princess and ascends the throne. What does this suggest for George, the hero of this tale?

*Kigmyism.* Kigmys were fantastic creatures created by Al Capp for his *L'il Abner* cartoon strip. They loved to be kicked. Might we see the tactics of the Iraqi Army as a kind of

Kigmyism, spread wide? Unfortunately, this attitude may have led to the massacre of unknown thousands of Iraqi soldiers, in a slaughter that we didn't see or know about until after the war. There may also be something of the reverse Kigmy personality in the Iraqis; they kicked (murdered, tortured) those weaker than they were and were Kigmies for those more powerful than they were.

*The Crisis as a Chess Game.* In this metaphor, the players (George Bush and the coalition, Saddam Hussein and his followers, moved pawns around and countered one another in something very similar to a game of chess. Saddam didn't use his Queen (poison gas) and was ultimately defeated by players with a better command of the game. Some people have suggested that Saddam and the Iraqi army wasn't in the same league as the coalition and never could have won. The only question was how many pawns he might have captured.

*Psycho-Saddam-analysis.* Various psychologists, psychiatrists and other experts analyzed Saddam's personality and the frequency with which he blinked his eyelids at certain interviews. He was, some said, a sociopath. Others suggested a serial killer. His rhetoric suggested megalomania. Semioticians analyzed his facial expressions and tried to guess what his smiles meant. Was he cracking up or, for some reason, in good humor. Elements of pyromania also can be discerned.

*FrankensteinSaddam.* This is a variation of Psycho-Saddam-analysis. Here we see Saddam as a monster figure from horror movies, perhaps a reincarnation of Adolph Hitler, killing masses of people and hiding out in various bombproof bunkers.

*The Gulf Crisis and War as a Media Event.* The war wasn't planned as a media event, but in a sense it turned into one. When the war started, lots of people were "glued" to their television sets and, to indicate how important the event was, commercials were canceled. Because there was so little actual footage, much of the media's war turned out to be discussion and analysis, in which experts played political and military *Rashomonism*.

*The War as a Medical Procedure.* The term "surgical strikes" suggest this medical analogy. Saddam and his cohorts are, so to speak, cancers that have to be cut out so the patient, the Middle East, can be cured. It helps to dehumanize an enemy, so you don't feel normal emotions about the death of human beings. Saddam and the Iraqis might also be seen as pathological tubers that were rooted out by our "wart hogs."

*Armageddon.* Fundamentalists see Saddam as an anti-Christ and the war in the Gulf as Armageddon, signaling the Second Coming. Orthodox rabbis, on the other hand, argue that God "hardened" Saddam's heart (the same way God hardened Pharaoh's heart) so he wouldn't withdraw his army and therefore it could be destroyed. The fact that the war ended on Purim also calls to mind the miraculous salvation of the Jews from Haman.

*The Malevolent Jack-In-The-Box.* Here we see Saddam as an evil Jack-in-the-Box who has escaped from confinement (that is, Iraq) and has to be "put back in his box." This also is a metaphor for learning about limits. Certain conspiracy theorists argue that Saddam was encouraged to spring out of his box by the American ambassador, who seemed to suggest that Saddam's invading Kuwait would not be seen by us as a big deal. We were, of course, looking for an opportunity to put Saddam back in his box and when he invaded Kuwait, he gave us the opening we were looking for.

Finally, it may be argued that my own somewhat *comedic perspective* represents a way human beings have of coping with horrors beyond our capacity to understand and deal with.

The ways of dealing with the crisis in the Gulf discussed above were suggested by the words people spoke, images shown on television, and material appearing in newspapers and magazines. We needed to make sense of a phenomenon that was evolving before us, that bewildered us, and that had all the elements of a tragic drama. It will take time for the full story to be told and for us to find better ways of making sense of this historic event.