





BUTTS UP

by Ben Kritikos

"Fiat ars-pereat mundus," says Fascism, and, as Marinetti admits, expects war to supply the artistic gratification of a sense perception that has been changed by technology. This is evidently the consummation of "l'art pour l'art." Mankind, which in Homer's time was an object of contemplation for the Olympian gods, now is one for itself. Its self-alienation has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order.

-Walter Benjamin, The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical
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A.J. Hanson had red hair, thick Coke-bottle glasses that magnified two eyes peering in different directions, and a gangly top-heavy awkwardness that made his dirty jeans flap around his ankles. He sat next to me in Mr Van Heel's class. I played at A.J.'s house sometimes. He lived in a big messy place in Byram where the houses looked like barns and you could get good pizza but there was nowhere nice to swim. We played Ninja Gaiden and he showed me his BB gun. My mom would never let me play with a gun. She would probably freak out just knowing that A.J. had one. His dad sat in a grubby armchair staring dumbly at the TV like a dead person, while his mom tiptoed through the mess in a cotton frock, a huge body with a tiny voice. She called me honey. The smell really crowded you in: like dirty clothes and carpet and cheap microwavable food. But I liked A.J. and didn't care that people picked on him because he was poor. Lots of the kids who picked on him were poorer.

After the Pledge of Allegiance, a lady came into our class with sachets of purple flouride mouthwash. She showed us how to hold them up the right way and gently rip the top from left to right, then put the contents in our mouths without swallowing. She said swish the liquid around your mouth now and I'll count to 30. I watched the other kids with mouths full of the weird purple stuff. A.J. looked funny as he swished it around his mouth. His jaw worked up and down. A purple streak dribbled down his chin. We spat it all back into the sachets. The lady showed us how to fold the top so nothing spilled out, then walked around the class with a garbage bag. Some other kids also caught A.J. dribbling, like Casey Williams who pointed and laughed and called him a "retart". A.J. scribbled on his desk with the eraser end of a pencil. Amanda Papandreou walked past my desk and without thinking I tripped her. I put my foot out and she stumbled. Luckily she didn't fall. Just yesterday Mr Van Heel told us that Amanda had eye surgery and it was important that she didn't get involved in any horseplay because her eye could actually fall out. I knew this. She had a bandaged eye but still I stuck my foot out. If you judge them by adult standards, 5th graders are terrible people.

The recess bell rang and we all ran into the hallway and down the stairs to the cafeteria. Kids who ate the fastest got out to the playground first. I wolfed down

my food from the styrofoam tray and threw it in the garbage then ran outside to join the games. A bunch of kids stood against the high brick wall at the end of a square of blacktop. They threw around a yellow tennis ball. The biggest kids chose the game and who could play, while the smaller kids like me stood against the wall squirming under the scrutiny. We played a game called Butts Up. It starts with one player throwing the ball at the wall, and other players trying to catch it. If a player catches the ball before it bounces once off the ground, the thrower has to run to the wall before the ball hits it again. If you can't get there in time, or if you fumble the ball while trying to catch it, you've got to stand against the wall with your butt sticking out and the other players throw the ball at you from behind. They throw it as hard as they can. The tennis ball shot back and forth while kids scrambled around on the blacktop. The ball made a meaty sound every time it connected with a boy's body. Girls stood at the sidelines and watched, sometimes shouting at people or laughing when someone winced with the pain of being pelted. The girls shouted, jumping up and down, fierce fingers pointing out the choicest violence of the game. In Butts Up, an audience is really important.

I didn't like playing Butts Up so I left the game and walked along the brick wall towards the jungle gym. Casey Williams threw the ball at me. It hit me in the face. The pain wasn't too bad on account of the shock but the shock was worse anyway, and I had to try really hard not to cry. I felt my face contorting but turned towards the wall so nobody could see and held in the tears. I even pretended to pick up something off the ground and look really closely at it as a distraction and it seemed to work. Then Casey shouted something to A.J. and everybody said OOOHH like there was going to be a fight. I looked across the blacktop where everybody stopped playing and spotted A.J. He wouldn't look back at me.

"I heard him," Casey Williams said. "He said your mom was a fat whore." All eyes fixed on me. A.J. stared at the ground and everybody OOOHHd and nudged him towards me. A circle formed around us and the hands of people I couldn't see were pushing us towards each other. A.J. staggered limply over to me, guided by the hands. I guess I did the same. I tried to catch A.J.'s eye but he wouldn't look at me, so I scanned the surrounding faces: teeth and eyes and

shrill voices calling for a fight. Then A.J. jumped on me and knocked me down, pinning me to the ground. He bared down with his knees on my shoulders, tousling my shirt collar. His face snarled, full of hate, but I don't know what he saw. I struggled to get out from under him and shouted get off me, get the hell off me, I didn't do anything. He didn't get off but kept pulling at my shirt and even though he looked like he hated me I could tell that he didn't want to hit me. He had to look like he hated me and maybe right then he did hate me, because everybody was watching. And because everybody was watching I had to hate him too. I didn't think about it, something just changed and I hated him. So I got an arm loose and punched him in the face. His glasses flew off and I thought how funny it was to see him without his glasses because his eyes looked so much smaller. He squinted because I hit him square in the face and then he rolled off and I stood up. Kids shouted and laughed and patted me on the back because there's nothing better than a punch in the face when it's not your fist and it's not your face. I tried not to cry. Kids slapped their thighs and laughed.

When Iraq invaded Kuwait in August 1990 the TV went crazy. As a kid you got the impression that Saddam Hussein was this textbook bad guy from a Superman comic or something. In September we started middle school and some kids had t-shirts with a cartoon of Saddam being anally penetrated by a missile and the caption "THIS SCUD'S FOR YOU" referencing a beer commercial of the time. Over Christmas vacation the war drums were beating. My friend George got a book for Christmas with pictures of all the different planes and ships the US military planned to use in a war with Iraq. There were planes so big it took about 30 miles to turn around completely, and aircraft carriers where F-14s took off and landed after flying in formations above big open desert spaces where they could shoot rockets from so high up people probably couldn't even see them. The USS Missouri could shoot tomahawk missiles with deadly accuracy from a hundred miles away. Apache helicopters were so good at hiding from view and shooting Hellfire missiles at targets in closeto medium range that some generals said the war could be won maybe without putting any feet on the ground. There were smart bombs that you could launch from a neighboring country and land on a dime,

and cluster bombs that scattered smaller explosives around the area they fell in, and daisy cutters that pulverized everything in a hundred yard vicinity. There were also Patriot missiles that blew up enemy rockets in mid-air, acting as a kind of umbrella for areas the US didn't want to be attacked, like friendly Gulf neighbors. The B2 Stealth bomber plane was the coolest of them all. It used secret technology and appeared in George's book like an origami spaceship. We wanted so badly to touch one, all that black steel in weird angles. The book said it was undetectable by radar and so quiet that you wouldn't know it was there until it was close enough to blow you up. George even had Operation Desert Storm cards that were made by the baseball card company Topps. These were like baseball cards but with all the different people and weaponry involved in the war. President Bush, the Commander-in-Chief, was the top card but you could get ones with the other guys, and there were cards for the great planes and battleships too. The design of these cards matched the new desert pattern fatigues of the Army's uniform. George and I knew pretty much everything 11-year-olds could know about the forces amassed in the Persian Gulf. Operation Desert Storm was on its way and we couldn't wait.

The sixteenth of January 1991 was a school night. My mom cooked linguine with clams sauteed in a garlic and white wine sauce. After dinner we watched TV. The US had begun its aerial bombardment of the enemy forces in Kuwait and Iraq. A correspondent told the news anchor that he was in Baghdad and it was quiet, but then there were flashes and the sound of explosions in the background and you knew they were bombing. I watched the TV every night after dinner, watched the flashes and heard the explosions and then they started showing footage of planes taking off and landing from aircraft carriers--real planes that were doing the real fighting. It was the first time you could see all the action as it happened, the first time you could watch bombs hitting their targets. The news showed footage of battleships launching tomahawks and then showed the spot where the missile hit in Kuwait or Iraq or wherever. They showed a grainy screen in black and white and you saw a little light fly from off screen into the target, and then the screen was bleached out white. When the screen cleared again you could see the target in pieces

or on fire or just a mess you couldn't make sense of. You could see the same footage from the Apache helicopters: the light, the explosion and then little human shapes emerging from the wreckage with their hands up in surrender. You could see the footage from the fighter jets and high altitude bombers, see the little square screen with a building just discernible, then a flash and the building was gone like it had disappeared under an ink stain. You could see the roads running through the desert with miles of tangled metal wreckage. You could see the black plumes of smoke dotted around the flat desert landscape with little orange flames like campfires at their source where oil wells had been torched.

Never before could you watch a war in real time. The news stations ran constant coverage and the military could demonstrate the accuracy of their weapons in detail. I watched every night until one night I went to bed early because I didn't feel well. I closed the door but I could hear the TV from the next room. My mom came in to see if I was ok and I started crying. She asked what was wrong but I couldn't answer. She sat on the bed and ran her fingers through my hair and told me that sometimes people did bad things and needed to be stopped by force. My hands felt cold, like they didn't belong to me. Like they were somebody else's cold hands. My mother said that sometimes doing good meant hurting other people.

