

Michael J. Shapiro

CODES AND VIOLENCE: A POLITICS OF “WORD ABUNDANCE”

The soldier, that corpse in a trenchcoat, to his military autism.
Semezdin Mehmehdinovic (1998, p. 54)

Prelude: Mr. “Fuck It”

In a seemingly enigmatic scene in Michael Cimino’s feature film *The Deer Hunter*, Mike and Nick, two guests at a Russian Orthodox wedding celebration, spot a Green Beret, on leave from the Vietnam War, standing at the bar. Because they, along with the groom, Steve, are soon headed to the war, they are excited about seeing someone who can tell them what it’s like “over there.” However, the Green Beret proves to be remarkably inarticulate. In response to all their queries, his only utterance is “fuck it;” he is unable to tell them (or the viewers) anything about the war. Weary of the unfruitful interrogation, Mike and Nick begin calling the bi-syllabic Green Beret “Fuck it.” As it turns out, the film as a whole is about people who are remarkably inarticulate. And because the inarticulateness of the film’s primary characters renders them susceptible to an unreflective transition – from working bodies (they are all employed in a steel mill)

to warring bodies – the film is an apt vehicle for exploring the question of why people adopt and enact enmities that have little to do with (or are even disjunctive with) their personal experiences.

Much of my analysis, which is aimed at approaching this “why” question, is focused on an extended reading of *The Deer Hunter*. But before exploring what in effect the Green Beret, aka “Fuck it,” is telling us, I want to begin at the level of the larger question, which Immanuel Kant raised in *Perpetual Peace* and *The Contest of Faculties*: what is *history* telling us? In *Perpetual Peace* Kant expresses optimism about the peace-fostering potential of publicity. He posits the pervasive global development of an “unwritten code of political and international right” (1991, p. 108), so that “we can flatter ourselves that we are continually advancing towards a perpetual peace” (*Ibid.*). And in *The Contest of Faculties*, he suggests that there are exemplary events (Kant has the French Revolution in mind here) that serve as a “rough historical sign,” which allows us to infer that there is an increasingly peaceful tendency. The publicity generated by such events is producing, Kant thought, a level of enthusiasm which bodes well for the development of a “universal community” (1991b).

However, because of his philosophy of consciousness, which is based on a narrative of mental faculties – the story begins with the process of interpreting raw experience, moves on to a productive understanding and eventuates in a publicity that universalizes perspectives (see 1952) – Kant neglects what Michel Foucault calls “the coercive structure of the signifier” (1997, p. 42). With a commitment to humanity’s historically enlarging and increasingly shared consciousness, Kant provides no way to discern the variable power of signifying systems, which are especially coercive when they are deployed on people who possess a limited “stock of signs” (e.g. Barthes 1981) with which to confront them critically. And, it should be noted that, in keeping with Barthes’ and Foucault’s models of discourse (and the spirit of Cimino’s film), the language deficits are primarily a feature of discursive economies (the available discursive assets) rather than of particular individuals.

In this investigation, I begin with a brief review of the rapid change from hospitable co-existence to antagonism in the former Yugoslavia; then, using as my primary vehicle a reading of *The Deer Hunter*, I elaborate a framework for examining people’s relationship to signi-

fying practices, such that they can be readily turned from peaceful citizens to warring bodies. Finally, I contrast the susceptibility to nationalistic codes of the characters in the film with the writers, Semezdin Mehmedinovic, Manuel Puig, Salman Rushdie and Hanan al Shaykh, who articulate and exemplify the complex coding systems associated with the hospitable cosmopolitanism that Kant hoped would be a universal human disposition.

The Bosnian "Deconstruction"¹

Sophisticated conceptualizations of the history of state-initiated nation building projects, from the "national-philosophism" of Kant and Hegel (Derrida 1992, p. 17), to the "imagined communities" of Benedict Anderson (1991), have emphasized a narrative of increasing human accord at the level of felt attachments. But just as (à la Adorno) "Auschwitz is an abyss in which the philosophical genre of Hegelian speculative discourse seems to disappear" (Lyotard 1989, p. 393), the fate of the former Yugoslavia is an abyss in which Benedict Anderson's account of the growth of imagined communities seems to disappear.

Treating "the geography of violence" and the reversal of the Andersonian process, Robert Hayden has described the rationale of the "forced unmixing of peoples" in the former Yugoslavia. The "continuing coexistence" of peoples in the Yugoslav state, he notes:

was counter to the political ideologies that won the free elections of 1990. Thus extreme nationalism in the former Yugoslavia has not been only a matter of imagining allegedly "primordial" communities, but rather of making existing heterogeneous ones unimaginable (1996, p. 783).

Examining legal texts, especially the new constitutions in which the idea of the "nation" has been ethnicized (p. 791), Hayden sees the law as the primary mechanism through which an "imagination of an ethnonational community" (p. 793) displaced the former national consciousness promoted in the former Yugoslav state. And, ironically, the implementation of the various ethnonationalisms was most violent in those regions in which the "nations of Yugoslavia were most intermingled" (p. 783).

In accord with Hayden's finding, the (now exiled) Bosnian poet, Semezdin Mehmedinovic discovered, when he examined the Sarajevo phone book under the family name of the leader of Serbian ethnonationalism, Karadzic, that (inferring from ethnic surnames) there were "10 Muslims, 9 Serbs, and 1 Croat." He concludes that, "on the basis of such a Bosnian ethnic inventory, any racist idea – of necessity – becomes grotesque" (Mehmedinovic 1998, p. 22). The violence attending the practice of the "grotesque" robbed Mehmedinovic of his illusions:

I myself no longer have any illusions about people. I know that someone I've just spent a nice afternoon with could knock on my door at any second with a stocking over his head...So I don't have any illusions left about people or, for that matter about nations...It is not only my world that has been deconstructed but language as well (p. 23).

But the violent "unmixing" in a formerly heterogeneous community has not robbed Mehmedinovic of his ability to resist the ideological condensations activating the ethnonational initiatives. Refusing to be "subjugated to a disturbingly reductive vocabulary" (Alcalay 1998, p. xv), Mehmedinovic relies on his writerly commitment to a "word abundance" (1998, p. 90), a perspective he developed through his experience of the boundary-breaching literature in the former Yugoslavia, where Bosnian, Serbian, and Croatian writing manifested an "inextricable connectedness and diversity," and where, "there was absolutely no nationalist omen or hidden agenda between the lines of this literature..." (p. 115).

Intermittently, in his account of the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Mehmedinovic contrasts the story of national literatures, which have been enriched through their accretion of new idioms from in-migrating peoples, with the coercive effect of nationalistic cant on native bodies with little discursive defense: "Soldiers... are just young people..." (p. 44) who, he implies, lack the conceptual sophistication to resist nationalist mythology. Mehmedinovic's treatment of the discursive frailties that grease the skids for youth to slide from child-like innocence to nationalist-macho violence is poetic and thus necessarily cryptic. Michael Cimino's film *The Deer Hunter* provides an elaborate treatment of the transition, as it features a group of young

men whose lack of a discursive rapport with themselves – much less with each other – makes them susceptible to becoming “warriors,” sent out to an exotic venue in order to “proudly serve their country” (as the MC directing the wedding festivities in the first half of the film puts it).

The Deer Hunter

Sometimes because of genre confusion and sometimes for simple hermeneutic reasons, much of the critical reaction to Cimino’s film has been obtuse. With respect to the former: apparently it must be emphasized that *The Deer Hunter* is a FEATURE FILM, i.e. it is a fictional genre, not a documentary. That its mountain scenes are not faithful to the Pennsylvania landscape or that the Russian roulette imposed on American and South Vietnamese prisoners by the Viet Cong “never actually happened in Vietnam” are irrelevant to an interpretation of their significance in the film (as in e.g. Dempsey 1979). With respect to the latter: the viewer is also mislead if asked to judge the film’s ideological position on the Vietnam war or its sensitivity to the relative suffering the war imposed on Americans versus Vietnamese (as in e.g. Kinder 1979). While the war venue plays an important role in the film, the story is not about Vietnamese or indeed not even very much about the Vietnam War.

To adopt a basic hermeneutic standpoint at the outset (which I will subsequently attempt to vindicate with details), the film, as I have suggested above, is primarily about linguistically-challenged Americans, who, lacking a discursive *savoir faire* with themselves and others, are coerced by simplistic patriotic codes to risk their lives in a violent conflict that makes little sense to them. That said, the first major scene in a steel mill in the mythic, ethnically Ukrainian town of Clairton Pennsylvania sets the stage for a film whose major storyline pursues its theme of discursive impoverishment by focusing on the interpretation and exchange of signs. After an opening in which the camera pans the town’s streets and buildings, the scene shifts to the inside of a steel mill, where heavily costumed and visored men are surrounded by gigantic machines that spew smoke

and fire. Barely visible to each other and unable to communicate verbally over the roar of the blast furnaces, they coordinate their work with simple hand signals, until one signal overcodes all the others – the loud blast of the whistle that indicates the end of their work shift.

What follows is a scene of animated male bonding, mostly in the form of exaggerated physical horseplay. When the friends – Axel, Mike, Nick, and Steve, and Stanley – speak to each other, it's only in the form of clichés and typical men's sexual jokes and innuendos, for example Nick's joke: "Have you heard about the happy Roman: glad-he-ate-her." As they exit the mill, still grabbing and jostling each other, the mood suddenly changes as Mike looks skyward and calls their attention to black spots in the air (doubtless caused by the sun hitting the heavy particulates in the polluted air). Using the code of the now absent Native Americans, he refers to the spots as "sun dogs," which he notes are "an old Indian thing," a "good omen" for a deer hunt.

The arresting effect of Mike's code reading evinces two kinds of interpretive response. The first kind is within the film. Stanley responds to Mike's pedagogy by saying that Mike makes no sense. Here and in another scene in which Mike insists that the only way to hunt a deer is to use one shot (to which Nick responds by calling Mike a "control freak"), Mike is established as not only the primary deer hunter but also the primary interpreter of experiences. Whether or not his codes are persuasive, at least he has some, which he applies resolutely, because, as he says to Nick, he "just doesn't like surprises." The second kind of interpretive response belongs to the viewer, who has just gotten a clue about the film's title, the *Deer Hunter*. A contemporary deer hunter is standing in for James Fenimore Cooper's American *Deer Slayer*. But the "old Indian thing(s)" are no longer on the scene. This is a different America, operating with different, largely imported, codes.

The break in the flow of the story, as male horseplay is interrupted by a discussion of enigmatic signs, should evoke another interpretive response in the viewer, one which, if the film is to be intelligible (in a critical sense), must pervade the viewing experience of the entire story. While Cimino's story has the film's characters read signs and omens, the viewers are having a parallel experience; the cinematic deployment of signs continually demands attention. For ex-

ample, one of the signs, to which the audience alone is privy, is a bad omen provided during the wedding of Steve and Angela. As they drink wine from cups with their arms intertwined, they are told that if they don't spill a drop, they are guaranteed lifelong good fortune. While the wedding guests assume that the couple is successful as they drain their glasses, the viewer is shown, through a close-up shot, two tiny drops of red wine landing on the bride's gown.

The deployment of some of the other signs places heavier hermeneutic demands on the viewer. For example, when Michael returns to Clairton from Vietnam and Nick is AWOL, Linda, seemingly giving up on the return of her fiancé, decides to make Michael her romantic partner. Just before she suggests that they go to bed together to (in her euphemistic expression) "at least comfort each other," a cross is visible around her neck. But before she delivers her proposition, with an un self-conscious and barely discernible hand gesture, she flicks the cross to one side so that it is hidden by her hair.

To locate the gesture in the economy of signs within the Russian orthodox subculture of Clairton, it is necessary to heed the gender differentiation that the film provides in its early scenes. After leaving work, the men assemble in a bar, run by their friend John. As before, their verbal exchanges are sparse, banal, and hackneyed. There, and subsequently, the lowest common denominator of their discursive poverty is exemplified by Axel, whose response to all queries, rhetorical or otherwise, is "fuckin' A" (Axel says little else through the film). While assembled in the bar – effectively a hall of worship to their comradeship – their bartender/friend John presides. He pours and they drink. The beer and the romantic ballad, playing on the juke box (to which they occasionally sing along) are the primary media that unites them, as they unwind together and begin an early, largely non-verbal, celebration of Steve's wedding that will take place that evening.

While the beer drinking proceeds, constituting the primary code of manhood and comradeship, the scene cuts to the women, whose preparation for the wedding shows them consuming a different set of signs: the cultural and the religious. Steve's mother is shown seeking the Russian Orthodox priest's counsel about her fears about the sacrilegious depravity of the groom and his friends and the cultural insensitivity of the wedding couple's generation as a whole. And the younger women are shown observing the cultural forms as they dress

for the wedding. Insofar as cultural and religious practices are sustained, it is primarily the job of the women. Like the men, they live in a world of signs that are pre-packaged and demand little reflection. And, like the men, they have secrets; they sedulously manage the signs they emit.

The sign management demands on the women are most evident in Angela, Steve's bride, and Linda, who is to become Nick's fiancée. As Angela dresses for the wedding, she turns sideways to see if her gown reveals her pregnancy, which is known to her mother but not the groom. In Linda's case, she applies makeup to hide a bruised face, which is a sign of family violence. Her drunken, abusive, bed-ridden father, reciprocates for her care taking with blows. Michael's sign management, propelled by his immense self-alienation, is the most exemplary among the men. It is signaled early in the film during the factory scene, where he is shown slamming his visor over his face, masking the only canvass on which his thoughts and feelings might be rendered. Thereafter, his retreat from his self- and other-engagement takes the form of a dogmatic application of codes (for example, his demand that a deer hunt must use one shot) and through an extended displacement; the deer stands in for a dear. It becomes clear, for example (from the camera shots that follow his eyes during the wedding celebration), that he is attracted to Nick's romantic partner, Linda, but there he muzzles his desire by turning to the alcohol-as-media that characterizes his experience among men; he suggests that he and Linda have a beer.

The deer hunt for Mike, who is the only one that takes it seriously – Nick says he just likes looking at the trees and the other men just drink and carouse on the trip – is thus a substitute for the pursuit of romantic attachments.² And during the hunt, while his friends goof around and exchange platitudes, Mike is involved in assiduous coding. For example, when Stanley, having forgotten his boots, asks to borrow Mike's, Mike refuses and, after lamenting the constant lack of seriousness of Stanley on their hunts, justifies his refusal with the remark: "This is this." In a response that reflects the impoverished level of meaning-exchanges among the men, Stanley says: "*This is this!* ...What's that bullshit supposed to mean?" It's a remark that reinforces Stanley's earlier assertion about Mike (outside the mill, after the "sun dogs" are spotted), which suggests that only a symptomatic

reading could make sense of Mike's utterances: "Sometimes only a doctor can understand you."

To return to the scene in which Linda suggests that she and Mike have sex, Mike's response to the proposition is of a piece with his earlier self-alienation, now deepened by his war experience: "I don't know, I feel a lot of distance – far away." Hitherto, all of his expressions of intimacy have been with men, expressed primarily through physical horseplay. He has had a code to pursue a deer but not a dear. However, apart from a lack of romantic *savoir faire*, Mike's response evokes a powerful theme in the narrative, the extent to which the young men are homeless. When Mike returns from Vietnam to Clairton, without his friend Nick (to whom he had made a promise to bring him back), home no longer seems like home. In the taxi on the way into town he spots a banner across the street that says "Welcome Home Michael," but he deliberately avoids the reunion. Was he ever at home? After the film's initial deer hunt, right after the wedding, Mike is able to enact his one-shot code and bring down a deer. But after the hunt, Mike is sitting among the men assembled in the bar, as John plays a melancholy Chopin sonata on the piano.

The music of this "noted exile" (see Burke 1992, p. 252) evokes a somber mood among men who seem to be never at home. They too are exiles from home, and the melancholic music reflects their state of melancholy. They confuse loss and lack (Žižek 2000, p. 659); they are mourning a lost object – home – which they never possessed. And their fundamental non rapport with themselves (their inability to make sense of themselves) has rendered them vulnerable to hackneyed sense-making codes. The confusion over home remains fundamentally unresolved for Nick, while Mike finally achieves a measure of resolution. Once Nick's suicide removes him from Mike's confused conception of home (he goes on a final deer hunt without him) and Nick can no longer mediate his relationship with Linda (he is finally able to have sex with her), he is able to stop enacting his deer-dear displacement. When he has the deer in his sights, he fires into the air instead of killing it and says, by way of release, "O.K."

Inasmuch as "what melancholy obfuscates is that the object is lacking from the very beginning" (Žižek 2000, p. 660), it is clear that Nick is the exemplar of one who manifests the most severe melancholic symptoms. More precisely, Nick, in keeping with the tendency

of “the melancholic to [engage in] an excessive, superfluous mourning for an object even before this object is lost” (*Ibid*, p. 661), anticipates estrangement from his home – in an early scene, as he and Mike dress for the wedding and contemplate their nearing departure for Vietnam. Reflecting on his attachment to Clairton as his home, he says, “I love this fuckin’ place... It’s all right here,” and he follows this remark with a plea to Mike: “if anything happens, don’t leave me over there.” But what is that “all” that is “right here?” Once Nick suffers the trauma of his temporary capture in Vietnam, his ability to connect verbally with home is finally sundered. Two adjacent scenes testify to Nick’s linguistic incapacity to express his attachment. First, while in the trauma unit of the hospital in Saigon, he cannot come up with his parent’s names for the doctor, and afterwards, when he looks at Linda’s picture in his wallet and then begins to call her on the phone, he aborts the call and rushes off.

Ultimately, when Mike returns to Vietnam to bring Nick home (Nick has stayed and become a player in a Russian roulette gambling enterprise, compulsively repeating his experience as a captive), he fails because Nick rejects his offer to bring him home, spits in his face, and shoots himself in the head. As a result, Mike ends up bringing home his corpse. Why does Nick die? One commentator on the film has put it bluntly, but is more or less on the mark: “Nick is inarticulate. It’s why he pulls the trigger” (Wood 1980, p. 368). There is certainly abundant evidence of Nick’s discursive limitations. For example, at the wedding, when Linda’s eligibility to marry is signaled by her catching of the thrown bridle bouquet, Nick’s attempt to bring what is on his mind into discourse is muddled. After asking Linda to marry him he says: “I don’t know what the hell I mean.”

However Nick’s discursive poverty is a general characteristic of the men as a whole, the most extreme case being Axel whose “Fuckin’ A” response to all queries is symptomatic of not only the friends’ inarticulate interactions (for example, to greet friends, Mike simply says “Heyyyyyy!”) but also of the community’s inability to respond to tragedy. They defer to ritualized signs rather than discussing their fears or examining information from the global mediascape. For example, the ballroom where the wedding is celebrated has signs of death – for example flag-draped pictures of young men who have died in Vietnam – but the only way the war is explicitly brought into discourse is

in the form of a patriotic slogan on a banner that says, "Serving God and Country Proudly." Cimino's story, constructed with its cinematic cuts and juxtapositions, emphasizes the senseless brutality of the war and points out that the determination of who lives, who dies, and who gets maimed is more or less a game of Russian Roulette (In the film, chance is inflected ethnically to accommodate his Russian American characters). Meanwhile, the community relies on ritual practices – weddings and funerals – and ritualized utterances.

The community's constant resort to platitudes rather than discussion is shown early in the film. Once the wedding celebration is in full swing and untoward acts are committed – e.g. Stanley's girl friend is shown getting groped while dancing with the master of ceremonies – the response is always ritualized. The interpretation John offers to Stanley about the groping, when Stanley seeks affirmation that what he is seeing is wrong, is "it's a wedding!" And when platitudes will not avail, no words are used. Stanley simply gets up and slugs his girl friend. Similarly, when Steve returns maimed from Vietnam and ends up in a Schriener's hospital, unwilling to come home because, as he tells Mike, "I don't fit in," his wife Angela can't talk about it. When Mike insists that she tell him where Steve is, she silently writes a telephone number on a piece of paper.

Whatever home is for the people of Clairton, it's not a place for an elaborate exchange of meanings. "Home," as the cinematic signs tell us, is simply a Pennsylvania town, where in everyday life and in times of stress they resort to simple labels. For example, they drink Rolling Rock beer (the labels are clearly visible on the first bar scene) while "over there" has meaning also on the basis of simple labels; during the coerced Russian Roulette game in Vietnam, the beer drunk by the Viet Cong is Miller. The minimal coding and the lack of self-reflection about "home" is ultimately underscored in the film's last scene, the post funeral breakfast served in John's bar. As the mourners enter after attending Nick's funeral, John says, "make yourselves at home," a remark that has ironic resonance inasmuch as we have been witnessing people who are fundamentally not at home, who are unable to come to terms with what they feel or think. Because Nick's suicide makes no sense to them, and because they cannot find articulate ways to provide each other with solace, they finally resort to an empty patriotic gesture, a querulous singing of *God Bless America*.

Throughout the film, the men-turned-warriors cannot escape the insularity of their small town and the claustrophobic steel mill in which they work. Indeed they never seem to escape from their work venue, even while in Vietnam. The opening scene in the mill, where the men are surrounded by flames, appears to be repeated when they get to Vietnam, where the opening scene also shows the men through a fiery haze created by the burning of a village. But the macho male bonding and community rituals that provide solace for their life around blast furnaces do not avail them in the fire fights of their war experience (where the senseless brutality traumatizes them, rendering them virtually speechless). There, even farther from home, only Mike's coding (demanding three instead of one shot in this case to triumph over their captors) provides a temporary sense. But just as Mike's one shot sense-making during their deer hunt is shown to have its limitations once the hunt is over – as shown in the melancholy post-hunt bar scene, where John plays Chopin on the piano – his three shot sense-making, which provides a temporary rescue in Vietnam, does not avail the community, which is unable to make anything but ritualistic sense of the what the war has done to its men, as shown again in the final bar scene.

Cimino's film has men going to war because that is what men are supposed to do, especially if their only discursive resort is a set of macho and patriotic codes. And men are still going to war. Since Immanuel Kant's hopeful reading of the signs of history in the eighteenth century, there has been no sign of a generalized accumulated wisdom which suggests that the publicity from momentous events will generate a "universal community" moving in a more peaceful direction. Recognizing contemporary history's negation of Kantian optimism, Jacques Derrida essayed another reading of "the signs of the times" – two centuries later but with a cautious ambivalence:

Hope fear and trembling are commensurate with the signs that are coming to us from everywhere in Europe, where, precisely in the name of identity, be it cultural or not, the worst violences are those that we recognize all too well without yet having thought them through, the crimes of xenophobia, racism, anti-Semitism, religious or nationalist fanaticism, are being unleashed, mixed up, mixed up with each other, but also there

is nothing fortuitous in this, mixed in with the breath, with the respiration, with the very 'spirit' of promise (1994, p. 6).

Rather than posing the larger issue of a generalized, collective basis for a "spirit of promise," I want to evoke the perspectives of those people who have exceeded the experiential and discursive insularity of the community in *The Deer Hunter*, in particular, writers who, like Semezdin Mehmedinovic (discussed above), have been able to think themselves outside of the violent and coercive codes that turn a citizen body into a "soldier" to whom Mehmedinovic refers as "a corpse in a trenchcoat, to his military autism."

Conclusion: Breaking the Codes

As I noted in my discussion of *Sarajevo Blues*, Mehmedinovic's writerly commitment to "word abundance" was encouraged by his experience of "the boundary breaching literature in the former Yugoslavia." Another diasporic intellectual, Salman Rushdie, articulates a similar attachment to boundary breaching, which, in his recent novel *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* (1999), is articulated within a musical frame. Challenging the structure of enmities within the contemporary geopolitical world of nation-states by elaborating a metaphor of the shaking ground, the novel begins with the death of a world renowned rock singer, Vina Apsara, who is swallowed up in a Mexican earthquake. Thereafter, the narration foregrounds the value of multiplicity of codes while disparaging Hindu nationalism in particular and national attachments in general. That multiplicity is realized musically, we are told, especially in the "earthquake songs" of Ormus Cama, which "are about the collapse of all walls, boundaries, restraints" (p. 24). Rushdie, like one of his characters in his novel (*Rai*), is a permanent exile from his home country. He attributes his creativity as a writer to his resistance to the "reason" of any particular nation-state. His novel expresses the same East-West hybridity that Rushdie prizes:

We are now partly of the West. Our identity is at once plural and partial. Sometimes we feel that we straddle two cultures; at other times, that we

fall between two stools. But however ambiguous and shifting this ground may be, it is not an infertile territory for a writer to occupy (Rushdie 1992, p. 15).

In accord with these sentiments, Rushdie's sentences in the novel contain American and British idioms, and Bombay argot, as well as various other idioms from diverse language formations. And the novel as a whole is constructed out of diverse cultural genres, as well as idioms, reflecting the inter-cultural semiosis (encounter of meaning systems)³ through which fused musical forms emerge. As Rushdie puts it, his writing is influenced by both the western "idea of the fable"...which was originally a moral tale," and eastern "oral narration techniques...still alive in India." (1999b, p. 7). Rushdie's writing is therefore stylistically homologous with the music of his Ormus Cama, who admits at one point that his lyrics – "cockeyed words" and "vowel sounds" – are simultaneously his, and someone else's (1999, p. 93). Like Rushdie's prose, the world's musical hybridity is always already present in the pre-musical sounds of many national patrimonies. As the narration notes, Ormus' incorporation of so-called "western sounds" in his music is not a betrayal of a pre-existing purity:

The music he had in his head during the unsinging childhood years, was not of the West except in the sense that the West was from the beginning, impure old Bombay where West, East, North and South had always been scrambled, like codes, like eggs (p. 95-6).

As in Rushdie's novel, the Lebanese writer, Hanan al Shaykh's *Beirut Blues* (1995) operates within a musical idiom to contest the nationalistic codes of macho men. Shaykh's novel contests the reasons of state and the macho codes that drive the enmities of the fighting men. Born in Lebanon and brought up in a "strict Shi'a family" (Sunderman 1997, p. 297), Shaykh is also a diasporic intellectual, who was educated in Cairo and has lived subsequently in London. But apart from the contribution of her travels, which have moved her outside the frame of particular nationalistic imperatives, Shaykh achieves her distance from martial codes through her focus on the loci of enunciation of "strong women" (p.304). And, like Rushdie, she expresses the distance with a musical idiom. She appropriates the imagery of blues singer, Billie

Holiday (to whom her narrator writes as part of the novel's epistolary structure). Moreover, her narrator is named Ashmahan, which is "also the name of a famous singer in the 1930's whose strength is inspiring" (p. 303). Born a princess, the historical Ashmahan "fled from her country, Syria, to Egypt, leaving behind a husband, daughter and a principality of macho men..." (p. 304).

The strong women providing Shaykh's detachment from violent nationalism inspire her to recode the civil war and see it as a function of a conceptual claustrophobia, which she expresses in a passage reminiscent of Mehmedinovic's imagery of the unreflective warrior :

Now I understand why when they are in tanks soldiers feel they can crush cars and trees in their path like brambles, because they're disconnected from everything, their own souls and bodies included, and what's left is this instrument of steel rolling majestically forward (1995, p. 67).

Finally, yet another diasporic intellectual, the novelist, Manuel Puig, who grew up in Argentina and spent much of his adult life in New York, was also influenced by the penetration of the world's mediacepe into the macho male, nationalistic culture surrounding him. Unlike Rushdie, whose escape from local perspectives was inspired by the Western rock music he was able to receive from Radio Ceylon, Puig, who expressed suspicion of the numbing qualities of much of rock & roll, was more attuned to local music and instead used Hollywood film as a vehicle to detach him from local, macho codes (Freedman 2000, p. 2). As one biographical sketch puts it:

The movies played a liberating, almost transcendent role in Mr. Puig's own life. Born in Vallegas, Argentina, in 1932, he started his movie going career with "The Bride of Frankenstein." Through his childhood and adolescence, he went to the local theater five nights a week, using the same seat for 10 years (Freedman 2000, p. 3).

Beginning as a film script writer, Puig turned to novels, which he wrote in a cinematic style and, most significantly, his novels staged encounters between the intensely ideational codes of political characters and the fantasies of characters whose imaginations are constructed from popular culture: pulpy romance novels, radio and tel-

elevision, the stories in the sensationalist press, and especially, the world of film. Puig's movement into the world of imagination looms larger than his exile to New York, for even as a child and adolescent, he was already outside of the local imaginary. Ultimately, the ideational transcendence of a Puig – and the other diasporic intellectuals I have juxtaposed to the characters in *The Deer Hunter* – cannot, for example, stop the tanks driven by those in thrall to a “military autism.” But the contrast serves to highlight the importance of “word abundance,” genre disruption, and the scrambling of codes as antidotes to the linguistic claustrophobia that often attends unreflective transitions from citizen subjects to warring bodies.

Notes

- ¹ See Campbell (1998) for a deconstructive reading of the war in Bosnia.
- ² For another treatment that sees the deer hunt as a symbolic displacement, see Burke (1992).
- ³ For an analysis and explication of semiosis, see Walter Mignolo's discussion of the semiotic interaction between diverse meaning systems and their material realizations during the Euro- and Meso-American encounter in the Renaissance (1995, pp. 7-9).

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