

"The Surge" and the Battle of Codes at the Home Front: An Exchange between David Batiste Chirot and Murat Nemet-Nejat.

I. Introductory Thoughts

On January 10, 2006, the Bush administration escalated the size of the American forces in Iraq, calling the action "a surge." This subtle verbal slip from the conventional word, "escalation," to surge, with its suggestion of electricity, transformed the terms of the Iraq War debate, its place in the American political landscape, in a profound way. First, suggesting an electrical adrenaline shot, the word countered a sense of doom and helplessness, therefore, of an end game due to a hemorrhage of dead bodies on T.V., which was entering the American political consciousness. Second, with its suggestion of temporality and naturalness –after all, electrical grids have surges, a minor pimple, glitch perhaps within the framework of a beneficial order- the word doubly reassured the populace that the escalation/war –after all the people are not all fools, they knew that escalation was what was going on- will not go on forever.

Of course, the war is going on after one year, with no end in sight. John McCain, as a presidential candidate, can claim it may go on another hundred years, comparing it to the American presence in Germany or Korea. Even the Democrats seemed paralyzed, cautious, talking of "withdrawal" rather than ending.

How come a word so charged with temporality has had such an opposite effect? Whatever the facts in Iraq and in relation to America's position in the global world, the effect of "the surge" has been to freeze the political will at the home front, in suspended animation, stopping the clock. How come a set of words with very specific denotations and connotations function completely independently –often contrarily, in Machiavelli's terms, "like a fox"- as a collection of manipulative codes? What is the "reality" of codes, as spinners of illusions, as opposed to the "reality" of the images of dead bodies? Are these realities distinct or part of a continuous matrix, between thing and idea –act and the explanation of the act- "truth" and "political truth?" To be able to achieve insights into the mechanism of code-switch-boards is to gain political consciousness, a crucial intellectual response to a verbal attack on the mind.

Let us take the analysis of "the surge," its purpose, one step further, to its final step: "the word ["the surge"] doubly reassured the populace that the escalation/war –after all the people are not all fools, they knew that escalation was what was going on- will not go on forever." By the end of the chain of codal relays, the question "will the *war* go on forever or not," by a subtle symbolic sleigh-of-hand, has been replaced by the question "will the *surge* go on forever or not." It is at this slippage, which occurs surreptitiously, almost casually –what David Chirot calls "in plain sight"- as a natural replacement of one word with its "synonym," that a paralysis of political will occurs. The question of ending the war, deflected, shifts to the background. Mac Cane, even the Democrats, can claim acceptable success by bringing down the number of troops, "ending the surge," which

had to end by the logic of the capacity of American forces anyhow. A continuous presence of American forces in Iraq (at least “over its horizons”) becomes an accepted fact. The Bush government accomplishes a huge political coup through a masterly manipulation of codes.

“The surge” removes enough numbers of images from the T.V. screen to give verbal manipulations –“spinning” their tale- a chance.

When *The Big Bridge* put out the first “War Papers,” the underlying issue was action. War was hot in the T.V. media, Americans and Iraqis dying daily, and the inescapable question was what one can do, more than what one can say or think, under the circumstances. The editor of *The Big Bridge* expressed this impulse in a symbolic gesture, the visitor to the site facing the statement that the magazine had suspended its activities for a month every time he/she visited the sight. Action took the form of a gesture.

After a year, the Iraq War is suspended in time. The war itself as a visual has faded to the background, not disappeared, replaced by a subtle and deadly battle of codes, within the frame of a presidential campaign. Ironically, this is a contemplative moment, of pregnant stasis, peculiarly suited to the function of the poet as the cleaner, rejuvenator of the language of the tribe, the dispeller of its obfuscations. The main function of the poet at this moment in our history, I believe, is how to see, to make those dead bodies visible, as opposed to how to act in the conventional sense. “Seeing the invisible” is the symbolic act.

I for one, as a poet involved in the smithy of consciousness (which is also a poet’s conscience) find this function congenial. The function of the poet, to me, is to be a technician of the false, decoupling its mythologies –the “signifier” from the “signified”- so that, even if through a glass darkly and dimly, one can see, even if elusively, the reality the mythology is hiding.

Jack Spicer says the function of the poet is to arrive at, to reveal the word for “the real lemon.” William Burroughs, another believer in science/fiction and the power of Martian codes, says that a host of viruses are attacking this real lemon. The function of the poet is to neutralize these viruses –though he or she is infected by them- to let the lemon shine through.

In the virtual world, there is a dichotomy between image and words –or, as I already said, an act and an explanation of an act. But this distinction is continuously threatened. Through time, ever slowly, Wikipedia is infected by the incipient viruses of disinformation, not the other way around. The image itself is infected, dulled. The function of the poet is, continuously and repeatedly, to penetrate through the mythological image –the locusts of language- to see the lemon.

“Facts”/“Actoids”: “Facts” have established that Iraq had nothing to do with September 11. On the other hand, September 11 had everything to do with the Iraq War,

distorting the American psyche, enabling the release of the alien viruses of the Bush administration onto its weakened state. Actoids are acts caused, ruled by viruses. The question arises again, how does one fight them?

Since the start of January, 2008, David Chirot, poet, thinker and activist, and I have continued a dialogue in the Buffalo Poetics List around a question raised by the visual poet, Jim Andrews, on “code poetry.” (One can find them in the Buffalo Poetics Archives.) In these e-mails, often led by the fertile, allusive, probing mind of Chirot, as the exchanges took us, an expanding list of questions on the social position and function of the poet were discussed, around the ideas of “poet as spy,” William Burroughs’ cut-ups, the distinction between coincidences (*or* paranoid plots) and *random* processes, freedom, my idea of “film lumiere,” etc. were discussed. In the second part of this essay, I am including passage from the exchange which took place between Chirot, Andrews and me on January 17 and 18, 2008. I think they shed significant light on the question of The Iraq War and the poet at the beginning of 2008.

II. An Exchange between David Batiste Chirot and Murat Nemet-Nejat in the Buffalo Poetics List, January 17-18, 2008

“January 17, 2008, To the Buffalo Poetics List

Dear Jim and Murat—

...

I find it still a fascinating, time traveling code that Savinio sees in the ‘proof’ of Schliemann’s Troy being revealed by its shelling by a First World War British ship named Agamemnon. (This is the kind of incident that Burroughs worked to find with his cut-ups among his notebooks, his creations of time travel.) That the majority of persons will miss this code and instead read the scene simply as a British warship shelling a bunch of ruins in Turkey has a parallel in the reception of Savinio’s own work.

...

I wrote a while ago here re the baseball player, spy and radio star Moe Berg and the Hiroshima Bomb, Jack Spicer and Yasusada. Organized a bit, the writing is now called ‘Before Curveball.’ ‘Curveball’ himself now features in a piece leading up to and including the Guantanamo Poems¹, as ‘Curveball’ is the code name for the Iraqi informer whose fake information was used as ‘solid evidence’ which was presented complete with models to the UN by Colin Powell for the War in Iraq. ‘Curveball’ threw a ‘curveball’ all right, with as disastrous effects as the spying of Moe Berg. These bizarre baseball connections thus link two American wars and the poetries connected with them by their own strange routes....

These create a code which one finds as one goes along--
I think this finding of codes is different from the programming of
them—

...

This battle of the electricitiesⁱⁱ --the Electricity of Illumination and 'Projections' and the Electricity of Shock and Prisons--is an 'update' of the "electric code" war between Westinghouse and Edison in the latter part of the 19th Century. Though he was neither pro nor con the death penalty nor the use of electricity for it, Edison became an (elaborately underhanded) advocate of the use of A/C current over hanging and the guillotine as a method of dispatching those judged deserving. A/C was the product of his rival Westinghouse--Edison supported this: in order to further the public image of his D/C current as the 'Safe' one. Westinghouse would be the Bringer of Death, the Shock Doctrine, the Prison coded Electric Chair Provider, the Power Behind Old Sparky's Throne, and Edison the benevolent 'Projections,' and electric light bulb provider. 'Let there be light' as opposed to 'let there be the dark hood. So the 'battle of the codes' as a 'Light' and 'Death' matter is inscribed in the history of electricity itself.

[*Murat interjects*: Of course, Ronald Reagan was the host of Westinghouse Theatre, that same Reagan Obama thinks "thought outside the box." Was Reagan, in your words, David, an experimental political poet, "the communicator," pursuing the shock doctrine in the pursuit of 'the shining city on the hill?']

...

Often, where i live, we have conversations using words which sound like 'normal everyday words' to an outsider' but to us have a completely different meaning. It's the art of speaking night thoughts in broad daylight. The language of the 'world within the world.'

...

Actually one could say that 'code is the subject' of itself in such works as Illuminated Manuscripts and examples such as the Alhambra. The calligraphies and images which are within the lettering and borders of illuminated Manuscripts contain further meanings which are forms of codes both 'a part of' and 'apart from' in a supplementary sense.

[*Murat*:
Love of Words

A part of,

apart from my lover.

As words separate, I draw close
as words draw near, I fall apart.]

...

A poem can be made of anything' as WC Williams wrote. One could take the junk on this table and arrange it a myriad ways as poems, or take a bunch of identical plates or cups out of a cupboard and arrange them in various patterns as 'lines,' with spacings suggestive of 'pauses' and 'accents' and 'volumes.'

Murat and I are interested in the ways in which language camouflages an identity so that it may appear to 'assimilate' for reasons of survival, as well as means of resistance. Codes at one level have to do with 'value in terms of the 'status' of the 'object'--for example bar codes and ISBN numbers.... New forms of camouflaging and resisting will be developed just as quickly as new methods of 'identifying' and 'profiling' are.

...

In the immediate world are already the codes spoken which are at once both "obvious words" and "secret," the "proof of Troy," the "New Extreme Experimental American Poetry" in which Curveball and Moe Berg play a part, along with Thomas Edison and Westinghouse, Naomi Klein and Savinio, Sciasia, the Italian Letter, forgeries, Emily Dickinson and car bombings, Roberto Bolano and 9/11 and much much else.

Burroughs --

Burroughs' cut-ups, unlike the productions of the machines online that one can use to do cut-ups as though 'not by oneself,' are methods of making a 'minority of one' which via camouflages, masks, 'being obvious,' essays survival as an intact writer.

...

The cut-up uses texts to reveal the synchronicities and correspondences which exist among them, which in turn give evidences of the 'plot.'

...

The writer's activity is a guerrilla one against being turned into a passive, consenting, or unwitting accomplice in the vast complicities

with the conspiracies of Control.

...

Often the concept of 'opposition' itself can be used as a diversion from what is the overall issue of Control and an essay at understanding and recognizing as much as possible its manifestations.

An aspect of this is the breaking down seemingly of voices in which Jim notes 'all characters seem to be one.' The key is that they 'seem' to be 'one.' From the point of view of the writer, they are not one, but many, and constitute a swarm. The swarm is camouflaged by this 'seeming' to be one--if it is simply 'one' then it can be easily crushed. The multiple 'identities' of the writer creates such a swarm, a way of continually being 'a minority of one' 'on the move' whose 'intentions are fugitive'--a 'minority of one' whose intentions are to appear now as 'one,' now as 'another,' and in turn as a swarm which may appear to the eyes of Control as 'one.'

...

The Carny world, the hustlers, the small time dope peddlers, snitches, thieves, punks and assorted 'low life' and 'criminal' doctors, scientists etc that populate Burroughs' universe are his version in a sense of the Medieval Carnival, in which the masks fall away and the Emperor really has no clothes, Death walks nonchalantly in broad daylight, the Sins come out to play, and the monstrous buffoons that are the forces of Order are for a day or a few truly Buffoons.

...

If one has an awareness of the 'fugitive intentions' of language--for 'one's own survival'--in turn causes one makes this demand, this need for the examination of all language, for the "fugitive intentions" of Control.

...

The mystical aspect of the found which Murat notes i wrote of a few days ago and this is often involved in my own work. There is also this Burroughsian aspect of a writing which wants to live, by the means which necessity gives it, and not, as much as this is possible, by 'taking signs as wonders.'

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"January 18, 2008, To the Buffalo Poetics List

David,

'Was that the face that launched a thousand ships
And toppled the topless towers of Ilium?'

(Christopher Marlowe, poet and government agent/spy, and the only true rival of William Shakespeare, maybe Shakespeare himself)

In the poem 'The Nigger in the Photograph' the Turkish poet Ece Ayhan refers to *The Jew of Malta*. In the same book where 'The Nigger' appears, *A Blind Cat Black* (Sun and Moon), there is a poem, "The Secret Jew."

Ships and trains (the latter the subject of a parallel thread going on between Alan Sondheim and me in which Alan's photographs of a train museum in Morgantown has the qualities of cuts-ups): in Eric Ambler's spy noir *The Coffin for Dr. Demetrius*, a meeting between two agents occurs in the train going to Istanbul. Istanbul, 'neutral' during Second World War, was the very den of spies, longing and lost causes, another Casablanca. In the movie version of *The Coffin*, Orson Wells (the parallel to Claude Rains) plays the benevolent/threatening Turkish police chief inspector Hakim Bey. Hakim Bey is the pseudonym/heteronym to Peter Lamborn Wilson whose anarchist manifestos fight the codes of mediated language and whose ground breaking essays on Sufism gave me first the hint of the possibilities of using Sufism as a reservoir of language (of counter-codes) for political thought and poetry. In my essay 'Eleven Septembers Later,' written around Benjamin Hollander's poem *Vigilance* (Beyond Baroque) and Orson Welles's movie *A Touch of Evil*, I propose the concept of a new poetic form, 'Film Lumiere,' a prophetic genre in which every story is told twice (e.g. Agamemnon's ships and the British ship), superimposed on each other, creating a collision in a confrontation with the other. Of course, the collision at and collapse of the twin towers (the ur historical superimposition, plane and building, occurring twice, twin towers, maybe an ironic, contra binary code) is the generative event where time/space travel occurs instantaneously in one single act. Was that the event/act/political gesture that launched a thousand bombs and the utter insanity of the American psyche? (Wasn't *The Iliad* also a confrontation between two cultures, the East and the West?)

...

Basically, 'film lumiere' is the superimposition (as conflict or expansion) of different dynamic media, film, T.V., computer or language itself, on the contemplative, stasis essence of photographic image. In *The Talmud*, a basic enigmatic text (code) is surrounded by codes (commentaries) elaborating on, expanding or subverting (musically riffing from) this basic text. Text and commentary together, they create a matrix of prophetic Jewish life, 'film lumiere,' in your words, 'an illumination.'

...

The essay, 'The Peripheral Space of Photography' is another example of 'film lumiere' where the conglomeration of responses to photographic images not only 'illuminate' those images, but are themselves 'illuminations': 'light' (mysticism?) as the tongue of a subversive code.

[David: Actually one could say that 'code is the subject' of itself in such works as Illuminated Manuscripts and examples such as the Alhambra. The calligraphies and images which are *within* the lettering and borders of illuminated Manuscripts contain further meanings which are forms of codes both 'a part of' and 'apart from' in a supplementary sense.]

...

Puns, David, are I think a crucial, telegraphic code of time/space travel -pigeon communications. One among many examples: why, for example, the eerie, mysterious, reversed correspondence between 'a part' and 'apart'? Is it a mere coincidence or does a hidden-in-plain-sight correspondence between the two exist? Marcus [Bales] will say it's all coincidence, fancy/arbitrary dancing. But doesn't 'apart' as a single word contain the longing for reunion separation (spiritual separation) involve (a version of space travel)? This way language is not something 'there' but becomes something shaped, altered by our being. It has essence, part of that being; it has light.

'Coincidence' (and its underbelly 'paranoia/code'): ... Is coincidence merely itself (something there, and pure, devoid of human thought)... or does coincidence have a "plot"? Of course, seeing plots, codes is the true, ambiguous essence of paranoia. Even paranoids have enemies and stopped clocks twice a day tell the time, in a more precise, supreme way because they do not move, like an Einsteinian time keeper of absolute time. Was Cassandra a paranoiac or a reader of the codes of disaster (here to Agamemnon again)? That's why 'film lumiere' -an art of seeing and detecting codes- must finally be - necessity being the mother fucking mother of invention- prophetic.

I think this thread started -or hooked up with- the seemingly unrelated thread of inaugural poems. I wonder if, paranoiacally/prophetically, we are searching for (in your words, 'creating a code which one finds as one goes along') a new poetic/artistic code for the coming new presidency.

Ciao,

Murat"

Murat Nemet-Nejat
January 30, 2008

ⁱ David Chirot is referring to *Poems from Guantanamo: The Detainees Speak*, which was published by Iowa University Press in 2007. This book has a central place in Chirot's thinking. In another place in his post, he describes *Poems from Guantanamo* as "the first book of a new form of what i for now call the New Extreme Experimental American Poetry. Chirot is very interested in the conflict which exists between what the detainees are saying and the way the American government re-codifies their words to eliminate secret messages and the critics do so by aestheticizing them: "[Guantanamo] poet's work is for the most part censored out of fear it may contain 'coded messages,' and what is allowed to be presented must be passed through a form of 'non-literary' translation which greatly resembles some of the techniques advocated in the 'List of Writing Experiments' of Charles Bernstein. We now have an 'electrified' and 'recoded' and 'experimentally translated' as it were 'body of work produced under the watchful eyes of the ultimate American Panopticon, the extra-legal Guantanamo."

ⁱⁱ By "the battle of electricities" Chirot is referring to the "electrified" recoding of Guantanamo detainees' poems. Of course, in its endless ramifications, the phrase also refers to "the surge."