Lethal Theory

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Architect and researcher Eyal Weizman uses interviews with two brigadier generals of the Israeli Armed Forces, Aviv Kokhavi and Shimon Naveh, the latter of whom headed up the Institute for Operational Theory and Research that closed in 2006, and is now retired, to illustrate the importance of the formulation of theories in the Israeli army's recent ways of conducting a municipal war. He likewise shows what radical and disastrous consequences the 'operational theory' derived from thinkers such as Tschumi, Deleuze and Guattari has for the population.

'I have long, indeed for years, played with the idea of setting out the sphere of life – bios – graphically on a map. First I envisaged an ordinary map, but now I would incline to a general staff's map of a city centre, if such a thing existed. Doubtless it does not, because of the ignorance of the theatre of future wars.' [1]

Walter Benjamin

The manoeuvre conducted by units of the Israeli Defense Forces [IDF] in Nablus in April 2002 was described by its commander, Brigadier General Aviv Kokhavi, [2] as 'inverse geometry', which he explained as 'the re-organization of the urban syntax by means of a series of micro-tactical actions'. [3] During the battle, soldiers moved within the city across 100-m-long 'over-ground-tunnels' carved out of a dense and contiguous urban structure. Although several thousands of soldiers and several hundred Palestinian guerrilla fighters were manoeuvring simultaneously in the city, they were so 'saturated' within its fabric that very few would have been visible from an aerial perspective at any given moment. Furthermore, soldiers used none of the streets, roads, alleys or courtyards that constitute the syntax of the city, and none of the external doors, internal stairwells and windows that constitute the order of buildings, but rather moved horizontally through party walls, and vertically through holes blasted in ceilings and floors. [4] This form of movement, described by the military as 'infestation', sought to redefine inside as outside, and domestic interiors as thoroughfares. Rather than submit to the authority of conventional spatial boundaries and logic, movement became constitutive of space. The three-dimensional progression through walls, ceilings and floors across the urban mass reinterpreted, short-circuited and recomposed both architectural and urban syntax. The IDF's strategy of 'walking-through-walls' involved a conception of the city as not just the site, but the very medium of warfare – a flexible, almost liquid medium that is forever contingent and in flux.

At stake are the underlying concepts, assumptions and principles that determine military strategies and tactics. The vast 'intellectual field' that geographer Stephen Graham has called an international 'shadow world' of military urban research institutes and training centres that have been established to rethink military operations in cities could be understood as somewhat similar to the international matrix of elite academies of architecture. However, according to urban theorist Simon Marvin, the military-architectural 'shadow world' is currently generating more intense and well-funded urban research programmes than all these university programmes put together, and is certainly aware of

the avant-garde urban research conducted in architecture institutions, especially as regards Third World and particularly African cities. [5] Interesting is the fact that there is a considerable overlap among the theoretical texts considered 'essential' by military academies and schools of architecture. Indeed, the reading lists of contemporary military institutions include works from around 1968 (with a special emphasis on the writings of Deleuze, Guattari and Debord), as well as more contemporary writings on urbanism, psychology, cybernetics and postcolonial and poststructuralist theory. If writers claiming that the space for criticality has to some extent withered away in late twentieth-century capitalist culture are right, it surely seems to have found a place to flourish in the military.

In an interview I conducted with Aviv Kokhavi, commander of the Paratrooper Brigade, he explained the principle that guided the battle. [6] What was interesting for me in his explanation of the principle of the battle was not so much the description of the action itself as the way he conceived its articulation.

'This space that you look at, this room that you look at, is nothing but your interpretation of it. Now, you can stretch the boundaries of your interpretation, but not in an unlimited fashion, after all it must be bound by physics, as it contains buildings and alleys. The question is: How do you interpret the alley? Do you interpret it as a place, like every architect and every town planner, to walk through, or do you interpret it as a place that is forbidden to walk through? This depends only on interpretation. We interpreted the alley as a place forbidden to walk through, and the door as a place forbidden to pass through, and the window as a place forbidden to look through, because a weapon awaits us in the alley, and a booby trap awaits us behind the doors. This is because the enemy interprets space in a traditional, classical manner, and I do not want to obey this interpretation and fall into his traps. Not only do I not want to fall into his traps, I want to surprise him! This is the essence of war. I need to win. I need to emerge from an unexpected place. And this is what we tried to do.

This is why we opted for the methodology of moving through walls . . . Like a worm that eats its way forward, emerging at points and then disappearing. . . . I said to my troops, "Friends! This is not a matter of your choice! There is no other way of moving! If until now you were used to moving along roads and sidewalks, forget it! From now on we all walk through walls!"'

For anyone who might imagine that moving through walls is a relatively 'gentle' form of warfare, the following is a description of the sequence of the events: Soldiers assemble behind a wall. Using explosives or a large hammer, they break a hole large enough to pass through. Their charge through the wall is sometimes preceded by stun grenades or a few random shots into what is most often a private living room occupied by unsuspecting civilians. When the soldiers have passed through the party wall, the occupants are assembled and locked inside one of the rooms, where they are made to remain – sometimes for several days – until the operation is concluded, often without water, toilet, food or medicine. The unexpected penetration of war into the private domain of the home has been experienced by civilians in Palestine, just like in Iraq, as the most profound form of trauma and humiliation. A Palestinian woman identified as Aisha, interviewed by a journalist for the Palestine Monitor, Sune Segal, in November 2002, described the experience:

'Imagine it – you're sitting in your living room, which you know so well; this is the room where the family watches television together after the evening meal. . . . And, suddenly, that wall disappears with a deafening roar, the room fills with dust and debris, and through the wall pours one soldier after the other, screaming orders. You have no idea if they're after you, if they've come to take over your home, or if your house just lies on their route to somewhere else. The children are screaming, panicking. . . . Is it possible to even begin to imagine the horror experienced by a five-year-old child as four, six, eight, twelve soldiers,

their faces painted black, submachine guns pointed everywhere, antennas protruding from their backpacks, making them look like giant alien bugs, blast their way through that wall?' [7]

Pointing to another wall now covered by a bookcase she adds: 'And this is where they left. They blew up the wall and continued to our neighbour's house.' [8]

Shimon Naveh, a retired brigadier general, directs the Operational Theory Research Institute (closed May 2006), which is affiliated with the military and trains staff officers from the IDF and other militaries in 'operational theory' – defined in military jargon as somewhere between strategy and tactics. In an interview, Naveh summed up the mission of his institute, which was founded in 1996.

'We are like the Jesuit order. We attempt to teach and train soldiers to think. . . . We read Christopher Alexander (can you imagine?), we read John Forester, and other architects. We are reading Gregory Bateson, we are reading Clifford Geertz. Not myself, but our soldiers, our generals are reflecting on these kinds of materials. We have established a school and developed a curriculum that trains "operational architects".' [9]

In a lecture, Naveh showed a diagram resembling a 'square of opposition' that plots a set of logical relationships between certain propositions referring to military and guerrilla operations. The corners were labelled with phrases such as Difference and Repetition – The Dialectics of Structuring and Structure; Formless Rival Entities; Fractal Manoeuvre; Velocity vs. Rhythms; the Wahhabi War Machine; Postmodern Anarchists; Nomadic Terrorists, mainly referencing the work of Deleuze and Guattari. [10] In our interview, I asked Naveh why Deleuze and Guattari?' [11] He replied:

'Several of the concepts in A Thousand Plateaus became instrumental for us . . . allowing us to explain contemporary situations in a way that we could not have otherwise explained them. It problematized our own paradigms. . . . Most important was the distinction they have pointed out between the concepts of "smooth" and "striated" space . . . [which accordingly reflect] the organizational concepts of the "war machine" [12] and the "state apparatus" . . . In the IDF we now often use the term "to smooth out space" when we want to refer to operation in a space as if it had no borders. We try to produce the operational space in such a manner that borders do not affect us. Palestinian areas could indeed be thought of as "striated", in the sense that they are enclosed by fences, walls, ditches, roads blocks and so on . . . We want to confront the "striated" space of traditional, old-fashioned military practice [the way most IDF units presently operate] with smoothness that allows for movement through space that crosses any borders and barriers. Rather than contain and organize our forces according to existing borders, we want to move through them.' [13]

And when I asked him if moving through walls was part of it, he explained: 'In Nablus, the IDF understood urban fighting as a spatial problem . . . Travelling through walls is a simple mechanical solution that connects theory and practice. Traversing boundaries is the definition of the condition of "smoothness".' [14]

Furthermore, in similar terms to those employed by contemporary philosophy, the military conceives of some of its own 'practice' as forms of research. Naveh claimed that since very little 'intelligence' can be produced about guerrilla and terror groups before military operations actually take place (often it is hard if not impossible for the military to penetrate these organizations), one of the only ways to gain knowledge regarding its organizational logic is to attack it. The assumption is that attacking the enemy in an unpredictable manner, randomly prodding it, will induce it to surface, reveal itself and assume shape, and when its shape becomes visible, it could be further attacked with more precision. This mode of action is what philosopher Brian Massumi recently defined as incitatory operation: militaries consciously contributing to the actual emergence of the threat they are purportedly there to pre-empt. 'Since the threat is proliferating in any case, your best

option is to help make it proliferate more. The most effective way to fight an unspecified threat is to actively contribute to producing it . . . [causing] the enemy to emerge from its state of potential and take actual shape . . .' [15] In an interview I conducted with him, Naveh has put it these terms (no less): 'tactical activity provides tools of inquiry for operational architects . . .' These actions lead thus to an inversion of the traditional relation of 'intelligence' to 'operation', or (in the terms of theory) 'research' to 'practice'. Naveh: 'Raids are a tools of research . . . they provoke the enemy to reveal its organization . . . Most relevant intelligence is not gathered as the basis upon which attacks are conducted, but attacks become themselves modes of producing knowledge about the enemy's system.' Within this mode of operation, practice supports research and not the other way around. Naveh further mentioned: 'Operative and tactical commanders depend on one another and learn the problems through constructing the battle narrative; action becomes knowledge, and knowledge becomes action. Without a decisive result possible, the main benefit of military operation is the very improvement of the [military] system as a system.'

To understand the IDF's tactics for moving through Palestinian urban spaces, it is necessary to understand how they interpret the by now familiar principle of 'swarming' – a term that has been a buzz word in military theory since the start of the Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA) in the 1980s (and the demonstration in 1991 during the Gulf War). The swarm manoeuvre was in fact adapted, at least in word, from the Artificial Intelligence principle of 'swarm intelligence', which assumes that problem-solving capacities are found in the interaction and communication of relatively unsophisticated agents (ants, birds, bees, soldiers) without (or with minimal) centralized control. 'Swarm intelligence' thus refers to the overall, combined intelligence of a system, rather than to the intelligence of its component parts. It is the system itself that learns through interaction and adaptation to emergent situations. [16]

The swarm exemplifies the principle of 'non-linearity' apparent in spatial, organizational, and temporal terms. The traditional manoeuvre paradigm, characterized by the simplified geometry of Euclidean order, is transformed, according to the military, into a complex 'fractal'-like geometry. Instead of fixed linear or vertical chains of command and communications, swarms are coordinated as polycentric networks with a horizontal form of communication, in which each 'autarkic unit' can communicate with the others without going through central command. The narrative of the battle plan is to be replaced by what the military calls 'the toolbox' approach, [17] according to which units receive the tools they need to deal with several given situations and scenarios, but cannot predict the order in which these events would actually occur. This non-linearity that is thus positioned at the very end of a very linear geometrical order, as well as a command system that is explained as 'non-hierarchical,' but is in fact located at the very tactical end of an inherently hierarchical system.

This may explain the fascination of the military with the spatial and organizational models and modes of operation advanced by theorists like Deleuze and Guattari.

Indeed, as far as the military is concerned, urban warfare is the ultimate postmodern form of warfare. Belief in a logically structured and single-track battle plan is lost in the face of the complexity and ambiguity of urban reality. 'It becomes,' as the same soldier later indicated, 'impossible to draw up battle scenarios or single-track plans to pursue.' Civilians become combatants, and combatants become civilians again. Identity can be changed as quickly as gender can be feigned: the transformation of women into fighting men can occur at the speed that it takes an undercover 'Arabized' Israeli soldier or a camouflaged Palestinian fighter to pull a machine gun out from under a dress. For a Palestinian fighter caught in the crosshairs of this battle, Israelis seem 'to be everywhere: behind, on the sides, on the right and on the left. How can you fight that way?' [18] Since Palestinian guerrilla fighters were sometimes manoeuvring in a similar manner, through pre-planned openings, most fighting took place in private homes. Some buildings became like layer cakes, with

Israeli soldiers both above and below a floor where Palestinians were trapped.

Critical theory has become crucial in Naveh's teaching and training. He explained during our interview: 'We employ critical theory primarily in order to critique the military institution itself – its fixed and heavy conceptual foundations. . . . Theory is important to us in order to articulate the gap between the existing paradigm and where we want to go. . . . Without theory, we could not make sense of different events that happen around us and that would otherwise seem disconnected. . . . We set up the Institute because we believed in education and needed an academy to develop ideas. . . . At present, the Institute has a tremendous impact on the military . . . [it has] become a subversive node within it. By training several high-ranking officers we filled the system [IDF] with subversive agents . . . who ask questions. . . . Some of the top brass are not embarrassed to talk about Deleuze or Tschumi.' [19]

My question to him was, why Tschumi?! 'The idea of disjunction embodied in Tschumi's book Architecture and Disjunction became relevant for us. . . . Tschumi had another approach to epistemology; he wanted to break with single-perspective knowledge and centralized thinking. He saw the world through a variety of different social practices, from a constantly shifting point of view. . . . [Tschumi] created a new grammar; he formed the ideas that compose our thinking.' [20]

Again, the question, so why not Derrida and Deconstruction? 'Our generals are architects. . . . Tschumi conceptualized the relation between action, space and its representation. His Manhattan Transcripts gave us the tools to draw operational plans in a manner other than drawing simple lines on maps. Tschumi provided useful strategies for planning an operation. Derrida may be a little too opaque for our crowd. We share more with architects; we combine theory and practice. We can read, but we know as well how to build and destroy, and sometimes kill.' [21]

In addition to these theoretical positions, Naveh references such canonical elements of urban theory as the situationist practices of dérive (a method of drifting through a city based on what they referred to as psychogeography) and détournement (the adaptation of abandoned buildings for purposes other than those they were designed to perform). These ideas were of course conceived by Guy Debord and other members of the Situationist International as part of a general strategy to challenge the built hierarchy of the capitalist city and break down distinctions between private and public, inside and outside,[22] use and function, replacing private space with a 'borderless' public surface. References to the work of Georges Bataille, either directly or as cited in the writings of Tschumi, also speak of a desire to attack architecture. Bataille's own call to arms was meant to dismantle the rigid rationalism of a post-war order, to escape 'the architectural straitjacket', and to liberate repressed human desires.

For Bataille, Tschumi and the situationists, the repressive power of the city is subverted by new strategies for moving through and across it. In the post-war period, when the broadly leftist theoretical ideas I have mentioned here were emerging, there was little confidence in the capacity of sovereign state structures to protect or further democracy. The 'micro-politics' of the time represented in many ways an attempt to constitute a mental and affective guerrilla fighter at the intimate levels of the body, sexuality and inter-subjectivity, an individual in whom the personal became subversively political. And as such, these micro-politics offered a strategy for withdrawing from the formal state apparatus into the private domain, which was later to extend outwards. While such theories were conceived in order to transgress the established 'bourgeois order' of the city, with the architectural element of the wall projected as solid and fixed, an embodiment of social and political repression. In the hands of the IDF, tactics inspired by these thinkers are projected as the basis for an attack on an 'enemy' city.

In no uncertain terms, education in the humanities – often believed to be the most powerful weapon against imperialism – is being appropriated as a powerful weapon of imperialism.

Although representing a spectrum of different positions, methods and periods, for Matta-Clark, Bataille, the situationists and Tschumi it was the repressive power of the capitalist city that should have been subverted. In the hands of the Israeli military, however, tactics inspired by these thinkers were projected as the basis for an attack on the little protected habitat of poor Palestinian refugees under siege.

In this context the transgression of domestic boundaries must be understood as the very manifestation of state repression. Hannah Arendt's understanding of the political domain of the classic city would agree with the equation of walls with law-and-order. According to Arendt, the political realm is guaranteed by two kinds of walls (or wall-like laws): the wall surrounding the city, which defined the zone of the political; and the walls separating private space from the public domain, ensuring the autonomy of the domestic realm.[23] The almost palindromic linguistic structure of law/wall helps to further bind these two structures in an interdependency that equates built and legal fabric. The un-walling of the wall invariably becomes the undoing of the law. The military practice of 'walking through walls' – on the scale of the house or the city – links the physical properties of construction with this syntax of architectural, social and political orders. New technologies developed to allow soldiers to see living organisms through walls, and to facilitate their ability to walk and fire weapons through them, address thus not only the materiality of the wall, but also its very concept. With the wall no longer physically or conceptually solid or legally impenetrable, the functional spatial syntax that it created collapses. In 'the camp', Agamben's well-known observation follows the trace left by Arendt, 'city and house became indistinguishable'. [24] The breaching of the physical, visual and conceptual border/wall exposes new domains to political power, and thus draws the clearest physical diagram to the concept of the 'state of exception'.

Future military operations in urban terrain will increasingly be dedicated to the use of technologies developed for the purpose of the 'un-walling of the wall'.[25] This is the architect's response to the logic of 'smart weapons'. The latter have paradoxically resulted in higher numbers of civilian casualties simply because the illusion of precision gives the military-political complex the necessary justification to use explosives in civilian environments where they cannot be used without endangering, injuring or killing civilians.

The imagined benefits of 'smart destruction' and attempts to perform 'sophisticated' swarming thus bring more destruction over the long term than 'traditional' strategies ever did, because these ever-more deadly methods combined with the highly manipulative and euphoric theoretical rhetoric used to promulgate them have induced decision-makers to authorize their frequent use. Here another use of 'theory' as the ultimate 'smart weapon' becomes apparent. The military's seductive use of theoretical and technological discourse seeks to portray war as remote, sterile, easy, quick, intellectual, exciting and even economic (from their own point of view). Violence can thus be projected as tolerable, and the public encouraged to support it.

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The interviews were conducted in August and September 2004 in both Hebrew (Kokhavi and Naveh) and English (Naveh), and documented on video by Nadav Harel and Zohar Kaniel. Translations from Hebrew are by the author.

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Footnotes

1. Walter Benjamin, *One-Way Street and Other Writings*, translated by Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter (London/New York: Verso, 1979), 295.
2. Kokhavi was the commander of the IDF operation for the evacuation of settlements in the Gaza Strip.
3. Quoted in Hannan Greenberg, 'The Limited Conflict: This is How you Trick Terrorists,' in: Yediot Aharonot; www.ynet.co.il (23 March 2004).
4. In fact, after serving their original purpose, the openings forced through the walls immediately become part of the syntax of the city and cannot be reused.
5. Simon Marvin, 'Military Urban Research Programmes: Normalising the Remote Control of Cities', paper delivered to the conference, 'Cities as Strategic Sites: Militarisation Anti-Globalisation & Warfare', Centre for Sustainable Urban and Regional Futures, Manchester, November 2002.
6. In order to put this interview in context it is important to note that Kokhavi took time off from active service, like many career officers, to earn a university degree. He originally intended to study architecture, but ultimately pursued philosophy at the Hebrew University. In one of his many recent interviews in the press he claimed that his military practice is influenced to a great extent by both disciplines. Chen Kotes-Bar, 'Starring Him [Bekikhuvo],' in *Ma'ariv*, 22 April 2005 [Hebrew].
7. Sune Segal, 'What Lies Beneath: Excerpts from an Invasion', in *Palestine Monitor,* November 2002; www.palestinemonitor.org June 2005); see also Nurhan Abujidi, 'Forced to Forget: Cultural Identity & Collective Memory/Urbicide Reference'. Durham Work Shop 24-25 November 2005, Durham, England.
8. Segal, 'What Lies Beneath', op. cit. (note 8).
9. Shimon Naveh, discussion following the talk, 'Dicta Clausewitz: Fractal Manoeuvre: A Brief History of Future Warfare in Urban Environments', delivered in conjunction with 'States Of Emergency: The Geography of Human Rights', a debate organized by myself and Anselm Franke as part of 'Territories Live', B'tzalel Gallery, Tel Aviv, 5 November 2004.
10. Naveh, 'Dicta Clausewitz', op. cit (note 10); cf. among others, Naveh's titles to those in Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus, Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (New York/London: Continuum: 2004); Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995).
11. Eyal Weizman telephone interview with Shimon Naveh on 14 October 2005.
12. War machines, according to Deleuze and Guattari, are polymorphous and diffuse organizations characterized by their capacity for metamorphosis. They are made up of small groups that split up or merge with one another depending on contingency and circumstances. Deleuze and Guattari were aware that the state may willingly transform itself into a war machine. Similarly, in their discussion of 'smooth space', it is implied that this conception may lead to state domination.
13. See also Shimon Naveh, *Asymmetric Conflict: An Operational Reflection on Hegemonic Strategies* (Tel Aviv: The Eshed Group for Operational Knowledge, 2005), 9.
14. Eyal Weizman telephone interview with Shimon Naveh on 14 October 2005.
15. Brian Massumi, 'Potential Politics and the Primacy of Preemption', *Theory & Event,* no. 2, vol. 10 (2007).
16. Eric Bonabeau, Marco Dorigo and Guy Theraulaz, *Swarm Intelligence: From Natural to Artificial Systems* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); Sean J.A. Edwards, *Swarming on the Battlefield: Past, Present and Future* (Santa Monica: RAND, 2000); John Arquilla and David Ronfeldt (eds.), *Networks and Netwars: The Future of Terror, Crime, and Militancy* (Santa Monica: RAND, 2001).
17. Michel Foucault's description of theory as a 'tool-box' was originally developed in conjunction with Deleuze in a 1972 discussion; see Gilles

Deleuze and Michel Foucault, 'Intellectuals and Power', in: *Michel Foucault, Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, edited and introduction by Donald F. Bouchard (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980), 206.
18. Quoted in Yagil Henkin, 'The Best Way Into Baghdad', The New York Times, 3 April 2003, Op-Ed section, www.nytimes.com.
19. Eyal Weizman telephone interview with Shimon Naveh on 14 October 2005.
20. Naveh is currently working on the Hebrew translation of Bernard Tschumi's *Architecture and Disjunction* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997).
21. Eyal Weizman telephone interview with Shimon Naveh on 14 October 2005.
22. A Palestinian Woman described her experience of the battle in this way: 'Go inside, he ordered in hysterical broken English. Inside! I am already inside! It took me a few seconds to understand that this young soldier was redefining inside to mean anything that is not visible, to him at least. My being 'outside' within the 'inside' was bothering him. Not only is he imposing a curfew on me, he is also redefining what is outside and what is inside within my own private sphere.' Segal, 'What Lies Beneath', op. cit. (note 8).
23. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 63-64.
24. Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 187.
25. Brian Hatton, 'The Problem of Our Walls', The Journal of Architecture 4 (Spring 1999), 71; Krzysztof Wodiczko, Public Address (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1991).

Tags

Architecture, Philosophy, Urban Space

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