

*'Highway of Death'* Anthony Macris

Highway of Death is a chapter from my novel-in-progress, *Great Western Highway*, and deals with representations of war in media and urban contexts. It presents a case study of the first Gulf War (1990-1991), and explores the levels of representations that go from theatre-of-war image production (footage of pilot screens as they conduct precision bombing), to the redeployment of these images in the media field (use of this footage in television news broadcasts). This investigation of image circulation in digital warfare is underpinned by the work of Jean Baudrillard and Paul Virilio, particularly their theories of simulacrum and the rhetoric of the image. The central theme of *Great Western Highway* is the penetration of market forces into the social fabric of contemporary Western societies such as Australia. The novel also provides a model of structural innovation that revives experimentation within narrative form in contemporary Australian writing, which has traditionally been entrenched in realist modes. The research methodology of the project was highly interdisciplinary, involving engagements with Thatcherism; corporeal narratology (Punday); theories of the culture industry (Horkheimer & Adorno); the French nouveau roman (Simon); Modernism (Joyce, Celine); and aspects of Postmodernism that deal with popular culture and self-reflexivity in the literary and media fields (Jameson, Warhol). The novel was written with the assistance of three New Work grants from the Literature Board of the Australia Council, and highly commended in the NSW Writers' Fellowship 2000.

# HIGHWAY OF DEATH

LONDON, WINTER 1990-1991

They're bombing Iraq back to the Stone Age, bouncing rubble with million-dollar missiles, but life in London goes on. You've been lucky to get this scrap of work, a month of classes teaching Euro-yuppies intermediate English, so you'd better tear yourself away from the TV screen. No more hours, days, weeks, of sprawling on your joke of a futon-cum-sofa, watching the live satellite feeds that narrate the first great victory of the age of digital empire. No more wandering about the flat in the ad breaks, pining because Christina has dumped you. It's time to get back into the classroom and teach subjunctives, conditionals, and the finer points of how to socialise in a foreign language.

The first few days of classes go smoothly and for hours at a time you manage to forget all about the war. They go so smoothly, in fact, that the director offers you some extra one-on-one tutoring. There are about a dozen teachers at the school. They're mainly women around your age, in the their mid-to late-twenties. One of them, a prim blonde in a twin-set, spends every morning tea break checking the health of her British Telecom shares in *The Times*. At the other end of the political spectrum is a not-so-recent Oxford graduate, bubbly but earnest, who still can't understand why the world is such a terribly unjust place. There are a couple of blokes, a gay New Zealander who's lived in London for five years but still ruthlessly clips his vowels, and the

Head Teacher, Ken from Middlesex, married, two children, a good shepherd to his flock of teachers. All in all, it's a relaxed place to work. After weeks of unemployment, of near total isolation, it's a relief to be amongst people again, to be making money, to be doing something that's even semi-useful.

You find it hard working in town. There's the Christina factor: it's hard being reminded of her presence in just about every café and cinema. But there's also a less sentimental reason. Outside are the music stores, the bookshops, the clothes stores. You haven't bought anything for what feels like years, there's a bit of cash coming your way, so you know you're highly susceptible to impulse buying. You manage to be very disciplined, you don't go out in your lunch break, you don't linger on your way home, but it's a constant struggle. The school is on the third floor of a building right on Tottenham Court Road, and even though it doesn't have a view of the street, you can still feel the energy of the crowds that spill along the footpath, caught up in that strangely muted frenzy of consumption peculiar to London. But while you manage to shut out the consumer heaven that surrounds you, it still makes its presence felt. There's always a student with a department store carrier bag sitting beside their chair, bulging with some new treasure from John Lewis, Selfridges, The Body Shop, or some Covent Garden clothes boutique. One day the New Zealander comes

back from lunch with a new Sony Discman that he shows off to the staff room. You're amazed at how jealous you are. The sight of its sleek shell of matt black plastic, the silver and gold earbuds that come with it, fill you with a kind of nagging rage that you immediately direct towards its owner. Why should he have it? What makes him so deserving? You know these are stupid, childish thoughts, but from that moment on you make sure that no one sees your battered Walkman, your tacky, bargain-basement, Music for Pleasure cassette tapes.

And then there are the women. It's a bit of a shock, being surrounded by so many women. Suddenly they're everywhere, in the stairwells and corridors, in the staffroom and your classroom. They're young, they're educated, they're attractive and stylish, and before too long you know who's single and who isn't. You're on your best behaviour: you stick to your job and make sure you ruffle no feathers. You get along well with just about everyone and it only takes a few innocuous female smiles for you to start thinking about what it might feel like to be with someone again. It's dizzying, this thrill of the possibility of tenderness, of love. It sends a tremor right through the layers of tension and bitterness and hurt that have suffocated you for months now.

But the idea of asking any of them out is inconceivable. It's not just because you'll be going soon. It's because it would mean being unfaithful to Christina. It's then that you realise you have no intention of forgetting Christina. None at all. The reminder of what love can be: it's what your love can be with Christina again. Before you know it, your mind is made up. When you get back to Brisbane, you'll try again. You'll say sorry and tell her you love her. You'll demand that she says she doesn't love you anymore. Can she say it? Go on, say it, say you don't love me anymore. There. You can't. That settles it. Nothing can stand in the way of true love. You'll be Dustin Hoffman in *The Graduate*. By sheer force of will, you'll win back your Elaine.

On Wednesday night, after dinner, you sit down and do some financial calculations. In about four

weeks or so you'll have enough cash for the flight back to Brisbane.

That decides it. Now there's no turning back. You go downstairs, give in your notice to Frank and Karen, and suddenly it's real. You're leaving London. You're going home.

THE ALLIED ONSLAUGHT continues. In some initial engagements Iraqi tank brigades come roaring out of the burning oil smoke and fight with the ferocity promised by Saddam. But with no air support, a fractured command, and tanks with only half the range of their Allied counterparts, they are usually destroyed even before they see the enemy. A news report shows an American officer displaying a Russian-made slide rule of oak and imitation ivory. "This is what they use to get artillery range," he says incredulously. "This is what they're pitting against AWACS." Some rare images from the battlefield follow. An Iraqi tank, charging through the desert, is immobilised by a white flash that blows its turret clean off. Stopped dead in its tracks, the tank is immediately veiled by a pall of black smoke. It starts rocking gently back and forth on the spot, then suddenly faster and faster, until once again it stops. Sparks begin to gush out of the hole where the turret once was: they erupt into a column of burning red flame that leaps into the sky. "The Iraqi armour can't withstand the concentrated impact of our artillery fire," the British officer continues in voice-over. "The new Multiple Launcher Rockets, or MLRs, are proving to be very effective. They allow us to cover enemy positions with bomblets over a very wide area. On the other hand, the Iraqi shells aren't really up to the job of getting through our tank armour. They've managed a few hits, but the damage has been remarkably minimal. We've suffered very few tank losses to date."

Buoyed by the light resistance, the Allies step up the campaign. Their troops and tanks pour into Kuwait and Iraq. They turn night into day, fill the air with a hail of burning metal. They carpet bomb, precision bomb, launch waves of cruise missiles and bunker busters. They use bulldozers to bury Iraqi

troops alive in their trenches. Ground forces obliterate the army units defending Kuwait; sometimes it takes hours, sometimes only minutes. No chemical, biological or nuclear threat emerges. Whole Iraqi divisions run away, and enemy prisoners of war climb to seventy thousand.

After just over two days of fighting Saddam accepts the inevitable. He orders the withdrawal of his armies from Kuwait.

It's clear the Americans have engineered a stunning victory. So stunning, in fact, they aren't quite sure what to do with it. The United Nations resolutions only authorise them to remove Iraqi forces from Kuwait. But with barely a few dozen casualties to date, and a brutal dictator and his million-strong army on its knees before them, it's tempting to go further. The momentum of victory seems unstoppable. After more than six months of planning and exercises, every US soldier is pumped up and ready to get their hands dirty. Their mission is to cut off the enemy and kill it. Yet on their radar screens they watch a mass of green pixels swarm north out of Kuwait: the retreating Iraqi army. It seems wrong, just plain wrong. These are thugs, looters, murderers, rapists. No one argues the point: the stories of Iraqi atrocities in Kuwait have raised the Ba'athists to the same level as the Nazis. They can't be allowed to leave, weaponry intact, ready to fight another day. It's an armed retreat, reasons Schwarzkopf. They're fair game. Let's go after them.

The Jahra highway, leading to Basra, is the Iraqi army's main escape route from Kuwait. Saddam's order to withdraw causes a frenzy of activity. The Iraqis use every means conceivable of getting out. They steal any vehicle they can find: motorcycles, sports cars, school buses, trucks, even front-end loaders and mowers. Most of them are piled high with booty: the contents of Kuwait's shopping malls, superstores and luxury boutiques. The retreat is pure chaos. The fleeing army creates an immense convoy so swollen with weapons and plunder it can barely move. The Allies watch it from their drones, their helicopters, their satellites. It's begging to be bombed.

The Allies soon oblige. Such a lucrative, target-rich

area is irresistible. First the Allies bomb the head of the convoy, to immobilise it. Then they bomb the rear, to prevent others from escaping. Then they attack the convoy itself. In news bulletins full of incomplete information, you learn that enormous Allied firepower is being directed on the paralysed convoy.

It's at this point that a major change in the tone of the news reporting takes place. Finally fed up with the tight control of information by the US military, with the whole game of censorship dressed up as national interest, the media actually starts reporting the war. Were the retreating Iraqi troops all that heavily armed? Could army units so dispersed really be a significant threat? Weren't they waving white flags in surrender? Weren't there thousands of civilians amongst the soldiers, some of them kidnapped Kuwaitis? And hadn't Saddam already ordered a withdrawal? Sound bites from US pilots taking part in the attacks don't help matters: one says it's like a "turkey shoot", another like "shooting fish in a barrel". Their tone isn't exactly regretful. Cheek-to-jowl with reports of bloodless Allied victories, are those of the senseless massacre of Iraqi troops. The victors are in danger of looking like murderers even more brutal than the ones they have so demonised.

When you leave work on Wednesday afternoon, your first pay cheque in your hot little hand, you see the word MASSACRE on the poster outside the local newsagent. You don't pay much attention to it; your mind is on other things. They've forwarded you a full week's pay, and there's more than you'd calculated; you're in a hurry to get to the nearby bank branch that will cash it immediately. You know this is a mistake. Your pulse is racing slightly, you're showing all the signs of splurging out on something stupid and setting back all your plans. And you know exactly what that something stupid is. It's been eating away at you, the New Zealander's CD player. All during lunchtime he sits there, earbuds gleaming, grooving away to the latest tunes as he prepares the afternoon lesson. Outside in the high street there's hi-fi shop after hi-fi shop, their windows stuffed full of Walkmans and Discmans. You know you can't afford it. You know that if you get a CD player, you'll

need CDs, and CDs cost a fortune; it's certain ruin. But it couldn't hurt just to look, could it? Just to see how much one costs? There might even be one on special. And wouldn't it be wrong to pass up a bargain, given that you'll buy one eventually anyway? You cash your cheque and head towards the nearest electrical store. The narrow footpaths of Tottenham Court Road are swollen with people on their way home from work, window shopping, killing time before they hit the pubs, restaurants, cinemas. Their winter overcoats are bumper to bumper as you try to make your way through the crowd, so you skirt over into the gutter whenever there's a break in the traffic. You reach a store. In the corner of your eye, rising above the high-street facades, you glimpse the British Telecom Tower, its crown bristling with antennae and satellite dishes. You're surprised it's still intact. Shouldn't such a communications asset have been taken out long ago? You tell yourself to forget about the war for five minutes, and enter the store.

You pass through the automated doors into the relative quiet of the showroom. The shelves and display stands are stacked with gadgets: VCRs, stereo minisystems, audio components in brushed aluminium. A young salesman is talking a customer through the features of a high-end pair of headphones, emphasising the velvet ear cushions, the gold-plated plug. You take all this in only briefly. Your attention has been immediately drawn to a Sony widescreen television standing in the middle of the floor space, one of the new generation with deeper blacks and sharper colours that have recently come onto the market. Without even thinking you come to a stop in front of it.

The sound has been turned down. Filling the screen is an aerial shot of a stretch of desert highway, no doubt filmed from a low-flying helicopter. It's a cloudy day. Both the highway itself and the surrounding desert are littered with the smouldering carcasses of what seems like dozens, if not hundreds, of vehicles. The camera flies over enormous trucks lying strewn in heaps, some on their backs with their wheels in the air, others with the long rectangle of the cargo hold twisted one way, the skull-like cabin

the other. It flies over craters blasted out of the bitumen, their ragged edges surrounded by mounds of twisted metal. The camera zooms out a little. Further out on the desert flanking the highway you see military transports, their canvas covers burnt away, sometimes leaving the ribbing, sometimes only a scorched flatbed covered in smoking black shapes. Further out again are the remains of sedans, station wagons and Land Rovers lying either slumped into the sand, on their sides or their backs. Spilling out of their open doors and boots are boxes and cartons and other shapeless piles that may be clothes, it's impossible to tell from this height. The helicopter flies on and on, the camera slowly zooms out, revealing carnage that stretches for miles ahead, trails for miles behind.

A small crowd gathers around you in front of the television. You stand there watching, transfixed. The helicopter sequence ends. Suddenly you are on the ground, right in the thick of it. You all go together into the slaughter. The shots change frequently, indicating heavy editing. That's all that's left of the dead, these cuts from one image to the next. The camera studies the scene. It soon gets bored with vehicles riddled with bullet holes, with shattered axles and engines spilling from under bonnets like entrails. It turns its attention to the loot, begins to pick out ghoulis contrasts. There seems to be no lack of them. The top half of a washing machine, its bottom half torn away, rests on the sand next to a gleaming mortar shell, seemingly unspent. A car door, its paint blistered off, its window a drip of molten silicon, forms the backdrop to a carton of Marlboro, a bottle of Chanel N°5, and a large-scale model of a black racing car. A blackened, mangled heap of metal, the long gun barrel that rises up out of it indicating it used to be an artillery gun, has a large double mattress leaning against it, more or less intact. And on it goes. It soon becomes apparent that there's virtually nothing the Iraqis haven't tried to steal: power tools, air-conditioning units, entire racks of women's dresses and men's suits, cartons of washing powder, computers, stereos, VCRs, cots, prams, toys. Everywhere there are televi-

sions. The editor of the report has saved these for last. The shots are so clear you can read the brand names: Panasonic, Sharp, NEC, and of course Sony, everywhere there are Sonys. Some of the televisions have their screens blown out, others are in perfect condition, lying there in the desert as if they were waiting to be turned on.

The crowd around you has grown so large that a salesman comes over. He takes one look at the screen, then discreetly walks away. A few seconds later the channel changes. The desert highway is replaced by a young woman on the studio set of a kitchen. She's wearing a tight, low-cut top. She beams and talks and shreds carrots. You feel a small shock go through the crowd, as if you've all just woken up from a deep trance. Everyone quickly disperses, and the buying mood immediately fills the store again. The man standing next to you, however, lingers a moment. He's probably in his mid-fifties, judging from his long grey beard. "Bloody disgrace," he mutters, half to you, half to the woman on the widescreen TV who leans forward to peep under a saucepan lid, at the same time offering you a generous helping of cleavage.

You turn around and walk straight out of the store. Now doesn't seem the time to get a Discman.

Later that night you watch a report with a war correspondent who has managed to slip through Allied checkpoints and get a look at the Highway of Death, as it is now officially known. No footage is shown; you only hear his voice. The accompanying image is a studio portrait of him dressed in a smart grey suit, his black hair carefully groomed, a sophisticated cell-phone held up to his pale, blandly handsome face.

"I reached the highway a day or so after the attacks, although some of the debris is still smoking. To say it is a scene of monumental devastation is an understatement. The ferocity of the attacks has been truly formidable. I'm not sure what munitions have been used, although some British marines thought it might be better to ask what munitions *hadn't* been used. There's talk that depleted uranium ordnance has been used, judging from the intensity of heat

generated by some blasts, but that can't be verified. Some of the bodies I have seen have simply been carbonised. Just reduced to black charcoal, some of them shrunk by about a quarter of their normal size. These, though, were probably the lucky ones: they would have enjoyed extremely quick deaths. More horrific, in a way, are the kinds of wounds caused by flying metal and debris, and of course the hot metal shards of the cluster bombs. The mutilation of bodies, their dismemberment, is simply horrific. I saw literally dozens of body parts strewn all about the desert. There are dogs about, and I saw a pack of them fighting over some human remains. Also, you have to be very careful where you step around here. Not all the bomblets explode, and they're as lethal as landmines if you step on them. Some British forces are here trying to clean up, getting rid of unexploded ordnance and covering bodies until they're told what to do next. But getting this lot cleaned up will be a very big job indeed.

"A US marine I spoke to told me that the very ferocity of the attacks no doubt prevented a lot of deaths. He pointed out the numerous number of vehicles that hauled themselves straight off the road into the desert, and then the footprints that lead further off. Obviously, once they saw what they were in for, most people just ran for it.

"What is also interesting is how the looters themselves are being looted. There's a truly bewildering array of stuff here; I've seen boxes of everything from toothpaste to CDs. Some of it has been taken, but I think the growing presence of Allied troops has put some stop to it. But it's clear that Bedouin tribesmen had at some point been working the road for at least some hours. You notice that some of the dead soldiers have their pockets turned inside out; that's their wallet and whatever else gone. Some of the vehicles are missing headlights, batteries, seats; these can all be used to make tents more habitable. A good number of vehicles have had the gas siphoned out.

"It's difficult to know what to feel. Some of these men were torturers, they mutilated their Kuwaiti victims, hung them up on meat hooks, they slowly

electrocuted them to death. Their death squads gang-raped women and girls, and terrorised the population with summary executions. But then, it's probably fair to say that others didn't want to be there at all. Some of these men lying dead here were brutal murderers, and many will think that they have only got what they deserved. And others were conscripts who no doubt thought this was all terribly wrong, and were the husbands and fathers of the women and children who have died in the Allied bombing, in horrific tragedies like the Amiriyah shelter. At this stage all I can really say is that I am overwhelmed by the evil of this place. The pure, unadulterated evil of it. I'm now in a British encampment some hundreds of metres away from it. Most of the troops I'm with are young men, and it has left its mark on them, there's no doubt about that. They're pretty much all shaken up by it, even if some of them might not want to admit or show it. There's no doubt the evil of it gets to everyone who sees it. I don't think it will ever leave me."

The correspondent's report finishes. It's 1 a.m. It's time you went to bed. You have to get up and face the crowds in the tube, the students in the classroom. You've put in a good week so far; you don't want to blow it. You're about to turn off the TV, but you hesitate. Just one more segment, you tell yourself. Just one more segment before you go to sleep.

In the next report you're taken north of Kuwait, into Iraqi territory. The Americans are pursuing the retreating Republican Guard. They want to cut it off

and destroy it before it can escape. In this particular news bulletin they're hunting it down with squadrons of Apache attack helicopters armed with Hellfire missiles and the most powerful Gatling gun ever created. Your TV screen fills with an Apache's video monitor: you see what the pilot sees. It's the ghostly blue you can now identify immediately, the deep, luminous blue of total surveillance, of target, lock on and kill. All around the perimeter of the screen white numbers rise and fall in rapid sequence, monitoring altitude, distance, air pressure, god knows what. You're flying low over desert sands. It's night. A tiny white figure appears, a thermal imprint of an Iraqi soldier. The ant-sized soldier starts to run, but there's nowhere to hide. On the screen two square white brackets appear. They frame the target, give a pulse of light to signal he's locked on. A burst of machine gun fire, registering as puffs of white, sprays the ground at his feet. The tiny figure flings itself to the ground, waits for the dust to settle, gets up, runs again, straight out of the frame formed by the square white brackets. They swiftly glide across the screen and lock on to him again. The light pulses, the machine gun fires, he falls, waits, rises and runs again. The sequence repeats itself four, five, six times. He runs, stumbles, falls in a ring of machine gun fire, hauls himself up again.

You turn off the TV and go to bed. You're exhausted. You fall asleep immediately.

From 'Great Western Highway' (*Capital*, Volume One, Part Two).

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Mindful forgetfulness  
releases the wild into captivity.

FELICIA FLETCHER

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