

## Between Nomadology, the War Machine and the State: A Deleuzian Analysis of the Film, *USA the Movie*

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[1] **A Snapshot in Time:** On the hot and steamy afternoon of July 31, 2004, we stood at Ground Zero, in lower Manhattan, among a moderate stream of tourists, many who were plying digital cameras. At and around the fenced and ramped site, there were dual signs of reconstruction and stasis. On the one hand, the orange skeleton of the “Freedom Tower” rose over the fully paved and lined crater. A subway stop had reopened at one corner of the site. Some of the adjacent buildings, such as the glass tower that is the Millennium Hilton Hotel, now presented an exterior that created a remarkable illusion, the illusion that the detritus of 9/11 had never touched them, had passed them by. On the other hand, several large and significantly damaged office buildings, neither under repair nor demolition, loomed nearby. Draped in black netting from top to bottom, they intermittently emerged from the Battery Park background, a somber presence over the concretized wound, as if silent and eternal witnesses of that day.

[2] Immediately across a narrow street from Ground Zero is a 1920’s building with eleven stories, 114 Liberty Street. Undergoing a second renovation since 9/11, each of the nine full-length windows on the eleventh floor had been commandeered to deliver a large and clearly visible statement. From the left-window-to-the-right, the message was as follows: The first three windows declared “NO MORE WARS, NO MORE WARS.” In the three central windows were peace signs. The remaining three windows flanked the sixties symbol with the admonition to tell “NO MORE LIES, NO MORE LIES.” It was a bold condemnation of the moral bankruptcy and violence of Bush’s Iraqi war and occupation, and a strident plea that the Iraqi campaign should not serve as a progenitor for a 21<sup>st</sup> Century extension of 20<sup>th</sup> Century geo-politics, the politics of endless, infinite war.



Figure 1 – 114 Liberty Street/July 31, 2004 <sup>1</sup>

[3] That is the basic, overt message of the underground, independent film, *USA the Movie*. But, within the film, the message is analogous to the opening and closing notes of a symphony, or the frequent repetition of a motif. It provides a basic coherence. But, as Barthes might say, the film is not a “readerly text”. In fact, it is a largely a Deleuzian film, with direct and indirect references to the war machine, capitalism, ideology, religion, the state and nomadism.<sup>2</sup> The film’s structure displays some uncanny affinities with the non-linear temporality and the rhizomic expositional style found in *A Thousand Plateaus*. *USA the Movie* eschews temporality and discursive linearity in favor of time, place and identity bending. Filmed between 9/11 and the beginning of the Iraqi

invasion, it's a unique film, rhizomic its structure, nomadic in its movement. As a document that is part contemporary history, part biography, part morality play, and part allegory, *USA the Movie* is arguably a significant exploration of "the American" as Deleuzian nomad, and the relationship between American nomadism, capitalism and the global war machine.

[4] Set within the frame of a solo intercontinental journey from the Grand Tetons to Manhattan (via recognizable stops in New Orleans and Washington, D.C.), the producers of *USA the Movie* describe the film (on the back of the DVD's cover) as

a fictional drive through reality, a prophetic journey into the future . . . One of the main elements is Kirk, a comfortable "All American" traveler who awakens from blissful ignorance into painful awareness of the world. He grows increasingly confused and destructive, fulfilling his destiny as the instrument of ultimate extinction. Real scenes [of the protagonist's] breakdown . . . act as a thread between fiction and reality . . .

[The film] is a journey inside . . . [the topography and culture of] a Superpower; a country that shocks with world with its might, bringing out envy, anger and hatred in the hearts of other nations. The film utilizes the feel of sweeping epic, independent drama, historic newsreel and verite' . . .<sup>3</sup>

[5] The film's narrative is intermittently non-linear and elliptical, and its representation of time oscillates between clockwise and counterclockwise rhythms that are connected by images, themes, movement, historical speech and music. Because the film's structure, like *A Thousand Plateaus* is rhizomic, this essay frames the film through (predominantly) Deleuzian categories, utilizing a Deleuzian "toolbox" that invites selective appropriation of ideas and examples. The essay's approach iterates Brian Massumi's (and Deleuze and Guattari's) exhortation "to lift a dynamism out of the book . . . and incarnate it in a foreign medium, whether it be painting, [film] or politics." "You can take [concepts] that [are] particularly to your liking and jump with [them]", he explains (xv). In analyzing a film that is structured by narrative and thematic leaps, the Deleuzian technique of disciplined "jumping" works best. Below are "tracks" or slices of the film analyzed through Deleuzian concepts of the nomad, the rhizome, and the war machine. But first some discussion about the five transformations that structure the narrative heart of the film.

### **The Five Stages of Transformation: A Postmodern Morality Play**

[6] The organizing figure of *USA the Movie* is an actor whose actual name is James Kirk. At the inaugural point of the central narrative, we watch as he drives away, in his mobile home (the *Columbus*) from the remote and jagged topography of the Grand Tetons. Concurrently, we hear radio reports on the tumult surrounding the imminent invasion (2003) of Iraq. As Kirk departs from the uninhabited periphery toward centers of power and capital, his eastward trajectory is often paired with a counterclockwise temporality. This temporal inversion is marked by news and talk radio excerpts, and finally, by extended video, somber and striking, of early post 9/11 Manhattan. As Kirk moves (from the Grand Tetons, through New Orleans, Washington, D.C., and, finally, to Manhattan), the journey brings him to social consciousness, in five stages of transformation. In quick order, these stages are as follows: First, the initial stage consists of a restless, but relatively unreflexive acceptance of radical neo-liberal ideology on the total and

inherent evil of the state. (Facing the camera, as a seated passenger in the *Columbus*, Kirk utters “fuck the government” during a rambling soliloquy, a soliloquy that also contains Kirk’s paradoxically pornographic sexual fantasy of Betsy Ross, the seamstress who stitched together the first U.S. flag). During the second phase, Kirk acquires an initial awareness of the ideological functions and political violence of global capitalism, most notably while interacting with a small group of protestors across from the White House. (Parenthetically, for Kirk, these D.C. scenes constitute the only set of group interactions and dialogue in the film).<sup>4</sup> His awareness is heightened during a fall 2001 pilgrimage to Ground Zero. Walking in the midst of ad hoc memorials, collections of snapshots of the missing and dead, and the grim demolition of the wrecked Twin Towers, Kirk, hunched on a doorstep, breaks down in grief.<sup>5</sup> His awareness of the violence and damage produced by global capitalism reaches an apex as his mental stability begins to erode, producing a short-lived sense of indignation at capital’s appropriation of the machinery of democratic governance. The swift on-screen transition from awareness, grief, to anger and a transition to the next phase, psychic unraveling, culminates in a pointed, rambling soap-box oration at Rockefeller Plaza, home of transnational General Electric and its media subsidiary, NBC. No one, except the videographer, attends to Kirk’s evening tirade.

[7] Anger spent, without tangible result, he encounters the bright, behemoth digital displays on Broadway. Third, in the series of rapid transformations, Kirk’s affect first slackens, then becomes distorted - a sign of his own sense of impotence in the face of the global commodity machine. This transformation is vividly portrayed in an oscillation from depersonalized, black and white portraits of Kirk against the eerie midnight luminosity of 24/7 Times Square, to a severely distorted, rambling affect during his NYC subway anti-capitalist rant.

[8] The fourth transformation consists of an immobilizing psychic breakdown in the interior of the *Columbus*, followed by a stint in Bellevue.<sup>6</sup> After his release, we see the *Columbus* towed away, the result of either a mechanical breakdown or repossession. Kirk is stripped of both his dwelling and the means of his nomadism. Iterative images (from earlier parts of the film) follow: A “Road Closed” sign; Kirk, alone, arms bandaged from the wrist to the armpits, pasting recomposed newspaper headline fragments all over the interior of the *Columbus*. Alone and broken, in the Grand Tetons, Kirk leans over a rock, a few feet from a campfire, exhausted, rather than at peace (a darker iteration of a similar scene from the beginning of the film). This time, he falls asleep, inattentive to the fire he once expertly tended. The resultant blaze destroys the local forest, turning it into a desert. In a final iteration (of the initial minutes of the film), we see Kirk naked, twitching, and dying in the deterritorialized desolation of his own making, the fifth and last transformation of Kirk and his environment.<sup>7</sup>

[9] On one level, these stages of transformation occur within a complex postmodern morality play. The protagonist serves as a culturally specific Everyman, an “average American,” facing both individual and, by extension, species death. This theme is buttressed by the iconicity of the model name of the mobile home/dwelling, *Columbus*, and its fusion with the identity of a technologized icon (Star Trek’s first generation captain) of the explorer, the lead actor, whose given name is James Kirk. Consider the following:

[10] As Gregory Ulmer has noted in a discussion of heuristics, the *Columbus* narrative (or icon) has three parts: *Columbus*, the explorer of the frontier (the still dominant narrative); *Columbus*,

the purveyor of genocide; and finally, Columbus, disgraced, broken and destroyed. In his explanation of the ficelle (the marginalized and/or secondary characteristics of a narrative) as necessary for paradigm creation and expanded awareness, Ulmer prescribes a process of “dream-work” that integrates and vivifies narratives via the functions of condensation, displacement and secondary elaboration. He calls this emergence of suppressed and marginalized meanings, and the new weight given to such narratives, the creation of a “conductive discourse.” The value of a conductive discourse is that it unburies narratives to be explored as rhizomes of identity and meaning. This process of narrative elaboration and integration of what were historically suppressed “supplements” to conventional ideological constructs is what Ulmer calls heuristics.<sup>8</sup>

[11] Applied to the film, the dominant Westernized ideology represented by standard “Columbus” icons is that of the age of discovery. It usually signifies heroic movement, from known and populated centers, longitudinally westward (into the future), into an uninhabited or sparsely inhabited frontier. Within “USA the Movie,” the use of the icon of “Columbus” clearly functions as a heuristic, inverting the positions of dominant and supplementary discourses. This inversion happens in these recognizable ways: First, the travels of the mobile home, the Columbus, begin on the uninhabited frontier, the Tetons, and move eastward, into pre-established centers of commerce and power, inverting the spatial directionality of the standard Columbus narrative. Secondly, the film often subverts the future-oriented temporality of the prevailing Columbus narrative. Spatial movement is often situated within a cyclical or counterclockwise temporality. Either temporal rhythm subverts a linear and progressive futurism. So, as Kirk traverses the smooth space of Interstate Highway System, the temporal directionality of the icon is inverted. Thirdly, the stated object of Kirk’s motivation for exploration inverts Columbus’ desire for wealth, influence and power. At night, in Washington, D.C., during a conversation with a black woman in a countercultural group, Kirk tells us what his journey is: “I’m trying to learn what I need to do. I’m trying to find what [my gift] is . . . I don’t know.”<sup>9</sup> The murky and partial nature of Kirk’s self-awareness [at that juncture] becomes immediately obvious when; in answer to the next question, “what about the love,” Kirk replies, “You buy love.” Even so, because Kirk’s quest is fundamentally internal, about self-discovery, the film inverts the psychological directionality of the Columbus narrative, from Columbus’ externalized desire for empire, wealth and power to Kirk’s intra-psychic quest for self-discovery.

[12] Finally, with its iterative visual and narrative choices, *USA the Movie* inverts the primacy of the standard über-Columbus narrative of the frontier: Foregrounded are the historically suppressed Columbian representations of genocide (iterated by the pairing of Bush’s inauguration speech extolling American Exceptionalism with photos of children scarred by A-bombs, followed by newspaper photos of mass skeletons of A-bombs victims) or the Columbian narrative of individual ruin (exemplified by multiple viewings of Kirk’s death throes in the desert). Taken as a whole, these representations simultaneously resituate the Columbian narrative as primarily one of genocide, coupled with or individual disgrace and ruin, as they displace the hegemonic meaning of Columbian (frontier) iconography into the background. These are the suppressed narratives that the film consciously explores and urgently privileges.

[13] The serendipity that is represented by the actor’s name, James Kirk, allows for a fusion of the Columbian myth (and the de facto genesis of a cyborg nomad, The Columbus/Kirk) with a late 20<sup>th</sup> Century technologically-imbued iteration of the frontier mythology, *Star Trek*. For the iconic

genealogy of Roddenberry’s *Star Trek* is largely an updated iteration of the older Columbian narrative of empire and frontier.

**The Nomad:**

[14] Throughout most of the narrative, the protagonist, James Kirk, is not a symbol of what the system has thrown away as detritus (unlike the extended shot of a tattered black homeless man caught in a twitching, exhausted sleep in front of the U.S. “Personnel Management” agency). He can be interpreted as a nascent, fitful, partial, ambivalent and unstable manifestation (a manifestation that fails to come to fruition) of the Deleuzian nomad, as described in *A Thousand Plateaus*:<sup>10</sup>

The nomad has a territory; he follows customary paths . . . the elements of his dwelling are concretized in terms of the trajectory that is forever mobilizing them . . . Whereas the migrant leaves behind a [hostile] milieu, the nomad is one who does not depart, [nor wants to] depart, who clings to the smooth space left by the receding forest . . . the nomad moves, but while seated, and he is only seated while moving . . . [and] knows how to wait [with] infinite patience. Immobility and speed, catatonia and rush, a “stationary process” [are nomadic] . . . He is a vector of deterritorialization . . . [adding] desert to desert. . .

It is a vital concern of every State . . .to vanquish nomadism [because] . . . each time there is an operation against the State – subordination, rioting, guerilla warfare or revolution as act – it can be said that a war machine has revived, that a new nomadic potential has appeared . . . (Deleuze and Guattari 50-60)

[15] As the central narrative of the film begins, as Kirk readies the Columbus for their journey, the accompanying soundtrack foregrounds pre-and-post-Iraqi invasion strife. The film’s audio track deliberately counter-poses actions of the U.S. government (and support for those acts) with either depictions of institutional impotence (the U.N.), or more interestingly, with acts of passionate gestures of protest and subordination against the U.S. invasion. By pairing Kirk’s departure from the remote vestiges of the American frontier with verbal articulations of subordination, the effect is to semiotically announce a new nomadic potential, as Kirk begins his eastbound trajectory. Representations of the nomad emerge as a key signifier that is richly elaborated through the film. The table (below) matches specific Deleuzian-delineated traits of the nomad to how such traits are embedded in the elliptical narrative of the film:

| <b>Characteristics of the Deleuzian Nomad</b>          | <b>Examples in <i>USA the Movie</i></b>   |
|--|---|
| The Nomad has a territory and follows customary paths. | Kirk’s customary territorial paths are the U.S. Interstate Highway System, New Orleans’ French Quarter, the streets adjacent to 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, the route of the Staten Island Ferry, the streets of Manhattan, and the NYC Subway. |
| Elements of his dwelling are                           | The omnipresent, gas-guzzling “Columbus” is Kirk’s mobile   |

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| concretized by the trajectory that mobilizes them.   | home, and the means of his intercontinental trajectory.  |
| The nomad clings to the smooth spaces left by the receding forest, does not depart, does not want to depart, and invents nomadism as a response. | Iterative views of “looking back,” while on the road, from the CCTV rear-view display, to repetitive shots of the rear view mirror, displaying the smooth spaces of a receding road that began at the forested edges of the Grand Tetons. In one sense, a departure from the Tetons is a departure from the comfort of the historical frontier mythology, and a journey into the damage and destruction that it has caused. Therefore, the rear mirror view, the CCTV glance back function as a form of nostalgia for frontier ideology, and its comforting heroic, triumphant and moralistic narrative. |
| The nomad moves, but while seated, and he is only seated while moving.   | The protagonist, at the wheel of the cross-continental vehicle, the “Columbus,” and as a passenger on the Staten Island ferry.   |
| The nomad knows how to wait with infinite patience.  | Kirk’s placidity, recognizable at several points, such as his response to an Interstate traffic jam.   |
| Immobility/speed, catatonia and rush, a “stationary process,” are all nomadic.   | Long-distance Interstate driving is well described as a derealized mix of speed/rush combined with the catatonic-like phenomenon of highway hypnosis. The protagonist’s initial agitation at the detritus of 9/11 and his encounter with the 24/7 rush world of Manhattan and the electronic/media saturation of Times Square (rush) is followed by a catatonic breakdown (in the parked Columbus) and subsequent hospitalization at Bellevue.   |
| The nomad is a vector of deterritorialization, adding desert to desert, by a series of local operations.   | The film begins with desert scenes, and ends with a forest fire, caused by an inattentive, weary and broken James Kirk. The fire clears the thin forest of life, creating additional desert. In the allegory that frames the film, Kirk, the nomad, dies in the newly deterritorialized desert, a product of his own creation. The film ends as it began, in the smooth spaces of the deterritorialized desert, representing the end point of American Exceptionalism.   |

[16] Kirk’s tragedy is that his nomadism is precarious, incomplete and stillborn. The result is that he, and what he represents, does not develop new rhizomes of thought and action, but collapses. Within the film’s structure, the meaning of that collapse is discussed in the concluding section of this essay.

**Rhizomes:**

[17] *USA the Movie* is emotionally intense, intellectually intriguing and profoundly disturbing, in surprising and unconventional ways. These qualities are the result of how its intertextual visual and auditory messages are composed. The film has an intermittently non-linear narrative structure. At some points, specific narratives emerge out of the darkness of midnight into an elliptical exposition that elliptically unfolds within a counterclockwise temporality. A significant number of motifs/images iterate, often deliberately breaking with conventional narrative frames and expectations, and away from Barthes' "readerly text." Here's how the co-producer of the film, Elizabeth Yoffe, characterized her understanding of the film, in an August 15th 2004 response to my initial digital inquiry about the film:

Everything you observed: the non-linear structure, the cyclical, sometimes counterclockwise use of time, the recurring motifs, the deliberate breaking of expectations regarding "plot" and character" arise from the filmmaker's worldview, intuitive expression, and methodical approach to creation.

Everything that is seen or heard on the screen is intentionally crafted. The clarity of certain visuals and the crispness of certain sounds are deliberately contrasted with blurred images or pops, crackles, hisses and barely audible sounds. Nothing is by accident in the movie; everything was created to evoke a feeling, sensation or tone. This meticulous, sometimes difficult form of expression is what made me want to work with this filmmaker and no other. Yet, an audience heavily conditioned by watching media that is created strictly for entertainment easily misunderstands this approach. (Yoffe 2004)<sup>11</sup>

[18] As a result, even sympathetic if untrained (in critical literary or media analysis techniques) audiences fail to do the close readings that the film so obviously deserves. For example, there are a number of iterations of the image of a light at the end of the tunnel. As they appear, they are followed by a deflating of the symbolic promise such a light conventionally represents. And there are many other iterative motifs, including symbolic encounters with "road closed" signs (indicating a parting of the ways between the state, American Exceptionalism and the war machine); or the fecund iteration of flags, often incongruously paired with supplemental discourses and scenes. For example, in Manhattan, variations on the U.S. flag are initially realized on a painfully human scale (as bands of blood-red impressions of hands form the flag's red stripes, in an impromptu 9/11 memorial produced on white sheets and displayed along Madison Avenue). Soon after, Kirk stands numb under other displays of the flag, post-human displays where both the pixels of the flag and Kirk disappear into the behemoth luminescent electronic and digital screens of global capitalism on Times Square. In another repetitive motif, iterations of a full moon (or an eclipse of a full moon) function as if an Amish witness to ritual acts of national lunacy.

[19] In thinking about the film's structure and rhythm, and about its intentions, Deleuze and Guattari's characterizations of the rhizome seem most appropriate:

[A film] is not an image of the world. It forms a rhizome with the world, there is an aparallel evolution of [film] and the world . . . Always follow the rhizome by rupture; [rhizomes] lengthen, prolong, and relay the line of flight; mak[ing] it vary . . . The rhizome is a map and not a tracing . . . open and connectable in all of its dimensions; it is detachable, reversible, susceptible to constant modification. . . conceived as a work of art, and constructed as a political action . . .

The coordinates are determined . . . by a pragmatics [of] composing multiplicities or aggregates of intensities . . . The rhizome operates by variation, expansion, conquest, capture, offshoots . . . [and contains] multiple entryways and exits and its own lines of flight. (Deleuze and Guattari 11-13, 21)

[20] *USA the Movie* is in a rhizomic relationship with USA, the political and cultural entity, open and connectable in all its dimensions, operating through variation, expansion and offshoots that constitute, as Deleuze and Guattari say, specific lines of flight. Below, a close tracking of the rhizomes of “the rear view” and “the moon” (visual and audio) demonstrate how this film functions as an exemplar of the Deleuzian imperative.

### The Rear View:

[21] One frequently iterated images of the film comes from sustained shots of the road, as seen from the rear view mirror (or through a black and white CCTV rear camera), as Kirk drives the Columbus. As discussed previously, (in the table on Nomadic characteristics) the most generalized interpretation of the constant iterations of “the look behind” embodies the nomad’s desire to cling to the ideology of the frontier, the mythology of the past. Within the audio-visual intertextual of the film, variations and offshoots produce specific lines of flight. A few representations (and selected samples of their appearance in the film) are discussed in the table below:

| Approximate Time | Shot  | Variation - connotation  |
|------------------|---|--|
| 16:30            | CCTV rear view  | Initial referent/nomadic   |
| 17:15            | Rear view mirror view   | Initial referent/nomadic   |
| 27:22            | CCTV glance back<br> | Audio track compares early 21 <sup>st</sup> Century U.S. w/the decline and fall of the USSR. Narratives display rising levels of fear and conflict. Visually, the CCTV rear review, as seen from the passenger’s side is aligned with the very far right shoulder of the Interstate lane. Connotatively, it’s a metonym for “far right,” and “off the road” U.S. politics. |
| 28:10            | Second CCTV glance back   | Audio track is from Ruth Stone’s poem, “Be Serious.” The 16 line poem includes the following:  |

|            |   |   |
|------------|---|---|
|            |    | <p>“Washington is thick in bunting and Bush posters.<br/>A crowd of sadness<br/>For the myth of democracy . . .<br/>Now we can see how all those other countries and states<br/>and republics live under their tyrants.<br/>How the poor die in the streets.”<sup>12</sup></p> <p>Visually, the CCTV image is horizontally misaligned, so that the road is at the top of the screen, the sky and the horizon, on the bottom, suggestive (in a referent from Chinese cosmology) that heaven and earth are out of alignment, often a signifier of bad governance.</p> |
| 29:00      | From the gas and speedometer gauge, reflections of the rear view.   | Audio criticism by Pacifica Radio of conventional media coverage of the Afghan and Iraqi wars, and how ignorance of the realities of war maintains bellicose support for a militaristic ideology of imperialism.  |
| 1:36.00    | Rapid downward look at the road back, grainy, in black and white.   | Audio commentary by Howard Zinn about the principle of expansion that is the one consistent element of U.S. foreign policy.   |
| 1:47.48-58 | At night, the Columbus breaks down. A tow-truck operator hitches his tow. From the rear view mirror of the tow-truck, we have one more look back. We see the Columbus, powerless, no longer able to traverse the highway under its own power. | <p>Audio track consists of concluding applause after Bush’s announcement, on the deck of the U.S.S. Abraham Lincoln that “major combat operations in Iraqi have ended . . . Iraq is free.”</p> <p>The audio and visual intertext suggests that the Iraqi campaign marks the beginning of the end of “American Exceptionalism” and the frontier ideology. The editorial connotation is that the “engine” of U.S. foreign policy (and its expansionist ethos) will “stall,” become mired in Iraq, unable to exit without assistance from the rest of the world.</p>   |

## The Moon:

[22] Cast as a form of prophetic judgment or shimmering witness, the iconography of the Moon functions as another rhizomic element:

| Approximate Time    | Shot  | Variation - connotation   |
|---------------------|---|---|
| Main Menu           | A full, reddish Moon (in looped animation), at the top of the menu, undergoing a total eclipse. Below the moon rises the mushroom cloud of a nuclear blast.                             | Species and planetary annihilation  |
| 2-3:00 intermittent | In grainy black and white, the half-light moon emerges, as part of an eerie desert scene.   | <p>Audio of machine gun fire and explosions, followed by a recitation of Wilfred Owen's "Dulce Est Decorum Est" which admonishes (as the clouds break, and the half moon appears):</p> <p>"You would not tell with such high zest/To children ardent for some desperate glory,/The old lie: Dulce et decorum est/Pro patria mori."<sup>13</sup></p> <p>Connotatively, the break in the clouds corresponds with the admonition against the foolish glorification of war. The moon reflects and reveals the lunacy of the idea that "it is sweet and decorous to deny for one's country."</p> |
| 10:12-10:39         | A shimmering moon, nearly full, constructed as looking down at the parade of drunkenness, ersatz patriotism, commodity consumption and commercial exhibitionism that takes place in New | <p>Martin Luther King's initial speech (April 4, 1967, Riverside Church, New York City) against the Vietnam War, calling for an end to "this unnatural experiment."</p> <p>As the revelers are sutured into gazing up at the moon, King goes on to affirm that "I can hear God say to America, 'You're too arrogant.'"</p>  |

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|---------------|--|--|
|               | Orleans' French Quarter on a weekend, soon after 9/11.   | <p>The speech continues, past this scene, to condemn the three evils of racism, economic exploitation and militarism.</p> <p>The soundtrack contains pops and crackles common to worn records and needles, accentuating the temporal distance between King's 1967 speech and contemporary events. The temporal distancing is in contradistinction to the obvious relevance of the speech to current political and cultural conditions.</p>   |
| 54:40 – 56:20 | <p>Similar shimmering moon</p>   | <p>Robert Kennedy's short, poignant speech, in Indianapolis, on April 4, 1968, telling a crowd of supporters of King's assassination . . . (the stark eloquence of Kennedy's words, combined with this vision of the moon, evokes, by extension, Kennedy's fate, a mere two months later).</p> <p>The audio then shifts to Armstrong's famous moon-landing utterance, July 1969: "One small leap for man, one giant leap for mankind." Anchor Walter Cronkite then turns his attention to conflict in the Middle East.</p> |
| 1:08          | The murky moon-light night (black & white photography) illuminates a cross draped with material, Columbine-like, as the camera pans up to catch the full moon, and the flag pole that is flying the American flag. | The moon functions as the witness of war, damage, folly and death.   |

[23] For the purposes of this paper, the intertextual rhizomes of the rear view mirror view and the moon are easily demonstrable, within the constraints of tables, and the limits of this essay. The film generates an über-rhizome, the flag, with a hyperprofusion of variation, iteration, offshoots, and other complexities around flag representations. In the film, one can find flags with hands

constituting red stripes, flags on electronic billboards, trucks; huge rural flag displays that take up acres, black flags, upside down flags, advertisements for flag stickers at truck stops, “United We Stand” flags, barber shop flags, flags in cemeteries, flags that point downward toward the ground, flags on 9/11 memorials, flags in the hands of a woman in a witches’ costume, New York Yankee flags, a forest of flags in Leighton, TN, in commercial and residential districts alike. The iterations are so numerous that, in other hands, this diverse swarming of flags could have overwhelmed the film. Analyzing the scope of the intertextuality of the flag is beyond the scope of the essay, but it remains as an invitation to potential viewers, and interpreters.

## **The War Machine:**

[24] *USA the Movie* caught my ear with explicit references to the war machine. But, having encountered the phrase in the film, a basic question emerges. Are there significant differences, and/or significant points of contact, between what the film’s director and co-producer, W.T. Zeyera, on the one hand, and Deleuze and Guattari, on the other, mean by the term “the war machine?” That’s the comparative task tackled in this section.

[25] Toward the end of the essay, Deleuze and Guattari identify the war machine more broadly. They define it as potential “lines of creative escape” from statist apparatuses of capture and regulation. This means that, in its positivity, it represents the realized imagination of artists, artisans, writers, alternative film directors, visionary moral entrepreneurs, political activists, and inventors, among others. Put more generally, the positive pole of the war machine elides statist capture and regulation (as it becomes the object of strategies of bureaucratic appropriation). For Deleuze and Guattari, war is not necessarily the prime activity of the war machine (given that the initial object of the machine war is defined the producing a variety of social relations other than war, something that escapes the state). Using Derrida’s taxonomy, the essay argues that war is the “supplement” of a creative war machine, a machine that does not see destruction as its main object). So, in *Nomadology*, they initially warn against misidentifying the war machine solely with state violence, or any given state’s military bureaucracies:

Whenever the irruption of war power is confused with. . .State domination, everything becomes muddled; the war machine can then be understood only through the categories of the negative . . . The State has no war machine of its own; it can only appropriate one in form of a military institution, [which] always [creates] problems. (Deleuze and Guattari 6-7)

[26] Deleuze and Guattari postulate that when a State appropriates a war machine, this means that the workings of the war machine are diverted, and then compelled to take war as a primary or exclusive object. It is this move that co-opts the war machine in the pursuit of overt political goals. (Deleuze and Guattari 113) They make distinctions between wars of annihilation (of the enemy’s armies), and total war (which involve waging war on a civilian population, as well as on armies, the kind of war that the Axis and Allies waged in WWII). But the story of the war machine has not terminated with WWII. In a chilling conclusion, they announce that the practice of total war has been usurped by

. . . a form of peace more terrifying still. The war machine has taken charge of the aim, worldwide order, and the States are no longer anything

more than objects or means adapted to that machine . . . the States [have] reissue[d] a war machine that takes charge of the aim, appropriates the States and assumes increasingly wider political functions . . . setting its sights on a new type of enemy, no longer another State but . . . the "unspecified enemy." (Deleuze and Guattari 119-120)

[27] This is the great and terrible pole of the contemporary war machine that is represented by the rise of the security states, in the post-9/11 geopolitical and global capital environment. But Deleuze and Guattari are quick to put equal stress on the alternative pole of the war machine; the pole that brings to bear creative resistance (and a reshuffling) of the conventional understanding of the war machine. Restless subjects are busy creating alternatives, and see war as the supplement to social creation: "They can make war only on the condition that they simultaneously create something else." (Deleuze and Guattari 121) Applied to an analysis of *USA the Movie*, the question can be posed as to how the war machine is represented, and how do the film's representations relate, directly and indirectly, to the themes in Nomadology.

[28] Not surprisingly, there's dozens of commentaries inserted within *USA the Movie*. This essay will not begin to attempt a critique of them all. Arguably, the most nomadic is by an ex-Marine, Rudy Stolfer, a self-described "old, white dready dude," in his mid-50s who is part of a small band of political protestors, encamped in Lafayette Park, directly across from the White House. During the latter part of his interaction with Kirk, both men sit in front a sign that exhorts passersby to "Convert the War Machine". Below is an excerpt taken from Rudy Stolfer's quasi-soliloquy:

Kirk: We're buying freedom.

Stolfer: I don't live in that "we" anymore, dude. I don't do money, I don't do system. I am their worst nightmare . . . Get this dead weight out of my way - lead, follow or get the fuck out of the road because we've got a life to live here. I got some nieces and nephews with way good potential and they need knuckle draggers removed (gestures toward the White House) be they six digits a year or some little bozo livin' in a cave . . .

Stolfer: (Next morning, hailing passersby) Anybody think that we've got a future without a war machine? Got some great info. Mighta kinda like ice your 401K plan. Might get a chance to enjoy it before we turn into a toxic waste land . . . [They say] you're with us or against us. Well, babe, you don't have to go far to find something that against "him" (pointing back to the White House) because I'm right here. The World Trade Center [attack] showed us that we can take a little time off because these guys aren't looking for any solutions. They want to maintain the status quo, and the fact that five percent of the people control ninety-five percent of the wealth (visuals display Stolfer's U.S. flag, mounted upside down, a traditional sign of protest by GI's during the Vietnam War). . . It's an extrapolation of what our problem is: We've got it all here. But we don't want to share.<sup>14</sup>

[29] Largely exterior to the state and the economy, the ex-Marine Stolfer typifies the Deleuzian notion of the nomad warrior: To the state, Stolfer's ability to think and act independently of its strictures, combined with his general quirkiness, is perceived either as irrelevant, deranged and contrary or as potentially dangerous, therefore in need of regulation and surveillance. He is in

exactly the position described by Deleuze and Guattari, one in which the warrior has a choice. That choice is either to betray the function of the military or to understand nothing (and, by extension, remain a docile and obedient bureaucrat).<sup>15</sup> Obviously, Stolfer chose the former option. And, although Stolfer does not explicitly tell us what the phrase “convert the war machine” means for him, one plausible Deleuzian explanation is as follows: Given his desire for a different, more open future constituted by less social and economic stratification, and more expressive and political freedom for his nieces and nephews, he is trying, in his own way, to build something else. This impulse represents the creative pole of the war machine. If Stolfer is as exterior to the State apparatus as he claims, he too, comprises a pole of the war machine. This is the pole that produces war as an addendum to “creative lines of escape.” It’s reasonable to assume that Stolfer wishes to “convert” the destructive pole, to redirect it away from destruction and to creation, as its organizing teleology. In this way, we can assume that, however partially, Stolfer sees beyond the contemporary war machine.<sup>16</sup> In the next section, we’ll analyze the protagonist’s relation to the war machine.

### **The Dreary Desert Sand of Dead Habit and Beyond** <sup>17</sup>

[30] Frequently, *USA the Movie* generates iterative rhizomic threads of meaning across the film. For example, in the first half hour, a portion of the audio track is of Ruth Stone reading (as noted above) her poem, “Be Serious.” In the poem, she coins the image of “A Crow of Sadness for the myth of democracy.” This icon of the crow functions, both in the poem and the film, as a melancholic witness to rituals emptied of their ability to renew and inspire, and/or as somber, silent spectators to the effects of the destructive pole of the war machine. As an image, the crow reappears during Kirk’s interactions with peaceful political protestors in Lafayette Park. Seen through the iron perimeter fence of the White House, the lawn appears as a prison yard for crows. Later, during the final minutes of the film, two crows hobble across arid and cracked ground, this time as the only living animal onlookers of Kirk’s naked and impermanent presence at the edges of a deterritorialized, windswept and hostile desert. The appearance of these crows extends the rhizome one last time. These two “crows of sadness” function as witnesses to the end of the postmodern moral allegory, signaling the imminent extinction of Homo sapiens.

[31] The final appearance of these crows is contiguous with another prominent intertextual rhizome of the film, the desert. Toward the end of the film, we hear the audio track of Martin Sheen’s recitation of Tagore’s “Where the Mind is Without Fear.”<sup>18</sup> In this poem-prayer, Tagore yearns for “a heaven of freedom,” imaging a place “where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way/Into the dreary desert sand of dead habit.” Here, and in its visual iterations at the beginning and end, is the key message and prophecy of the film: Move beyond the destructive pole of the war machine, the fantasies of glory, the perpetual cycle of violence or face near-term species extinction.

[32] Images of “the dreary desert sand” function as visual-temporal “bookends” for the film’s central message. The opening frames, encountered over a soundtrack of automatic rifles and machine gun fire mixed with the occasionally exploding munition, are of “dreary desert sand” dunes, filled with the rhythmic clatter of “a dead habit,” war. The camera pans from right to left, revealing vast expanses of grey, shadowy midnight desert. Then, the recitation of Wilfred Owen’s anti-war poem, “Dulce Est Decorum Est” begins. From frame one, the presence of the desert is coupled with the effects of the destructive pole of the war machine. Soon after, the dying figure of

the protagonist, James Kirk, lies in the desert. His death is recorded by a mythical observer, perhaps an allegorical extraterrestrial ethnographer. In a temporal circle, the prologue of this film previews a death foretold (to borrow the title of Marquez's novelette) that is the end result of Kirk's trajectory across the U.S. (and back). It's a trajectory retraced in the narrative of the film, and Kirk's death in the desert is revisited at the film's end, as we encounter him again, broken, naked and dying. (At one point, Kirk's right wrist is bent up, but his index finger is bent downward at the joint, evocative of Michelangelo's "Creation of Adam" on the Sistine Chapel. However, for Kirk, death is imminent. The quickening touch of the Divine will not be forthcoming).

[33] The question can be asked: "Why does Kirk die?" The allegorical answer is Tagore's: Kirk's "clear stream of reason" never fully emerged, and what there was of it "lost its way into the dreary desert sand of dead habit."<sup>19</sup> Specifically, while Kirk enters the Interstate Highway as a nascent nomad, the shock that comes from his jolt into socio-cultural awareness leaves him mired, unable to generate necessary "lines of creative escape." That failure marks the end of his muddy and partial nomadism. Without the ability to think and act independently and "outside" (rather than react for or against) the conventional habits of thought produced by corporatist and state apparatuses (a key characteristic of the true nomad), Kirk falls back into a insular individualism, disconnected yet again, but without the vague comfort provided by reassuring, if little examined, ideologies. Unlike the many cultural critics who have charted paths of resistance and lines of creative escape, he cannot sufficiently change his life, and his ideation. After his commitment, he is barely functional. He retreats into his "dead habit[s]," into a crippling privatism. In his despair and weary depression, he grows careless with the Promethean gift of fire, (allegorically) destroying the earth that had sustained him. On a fundamental level, Kirk's exhaustion is the result of a lack of imagination and reinvention. He cannot change. Constructed as a synecdoche for the American character in the early 21<sup>st</sup> Century, Kirk's death is intended to send a disturbing socio-cultural message. But it is a representation that is partial, given the plethora of voices arguing for a different world, with different types of arrangements. It's an open question whether the struggling, and ultimately ossified Kirk is a predominant and enduring American type, or dinosaur that must pass, as demographics and accompanying sensibilities produce structural changes in economic, cultural and social arrangements. But given the current configuration of capitalism, the war machine, and the production of everyday fear, this question about the present and future sensibilities of the American character is worth a serious and ongoing examination.

[34] Finally, there is another nomad to acknowledge within the *Columbus*, Kirk's mobile home: The director and *Geist* of the project, W.T. Zeyera, who created a complex structure of representation and meaning from of an intricate mix of dualities. In the process and product of *USA the Movie*, he fused reality with allegory, intention with contingency, personal troubles with collective tragedies, and art with history. Even in its limited circulation, the film has formed a rhizome with the world, generating a mapping well worth circulating, sharing, discussing, detaching, and redeploying.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank my friend, Dr. James H. McDonald (University of Texas at San Antonio) for the photograph. (McDonald took the photograph on July 31, 2004, when we visited the perimeter of Ground Zero in lower Manhattan).

<sup>2</sup> As a Deleuzian concept, “the war machine” refers to creative thought and action which escapes capture by state apparatuses of control and regulation. (See the subsection titled “The War Machine” for further discussion).

The concept of nomadism is discussed in greater detail in the subsection titled “Nomadism.” Essentially, the nomad is the bearer of creative and revolutionary thought and action that has the potential to reshape reality, and subvert the practices and order of what Deleuze and Guattari call “the sedentary state.”

For Deleuze and Guattari, the notion of Nomadology is an “anti-history”; with non-linear narratives that do not celebrate (or even acknowledge) the nation-state.

<sup>3</sup> Besides appearing on the back of the DVD, the same text (by co-producer Elizabeth Yoffe) can be found in a description of the film on the Amazon.com web page for the film. 26 August 2004 <[http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/tg/detail/-/B0001YJA2E/qid=1087081199/sr=1-4/ref=sr\\_1\\_4/104-1781659-3688716?v=glance&s=dvd](http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/tg/detail/-/B0001YJA2E/qid=1087081199/sr=1-4/ref=sr_1_4/104-1781659-3688716?v=glance&s=dvd)>

<sup>4</sup> See *USA the Movie*, Chapter Three, “God is not of Colors,” and Chapter Four, “Old White Dready Dude.”

<sup>5</sup> See *USA the Movie*, Chapter Seven, “2001: New York City,” and Chapter Eight, “The Cycle.”

<sup>6</sup> See *USA the Movie*, Chapter Nine, “A Voice in the Wilderness.”

<sup>7</sup> See *USA the Movie*, Chapter Thirteen, “Jim at the End of the World.”

<sup>8</sup> See *Seulemonde* Conversation with Gregory Ulmer. 26 August 2004. <<http://www.cas.usf.edu/journal/ulmer/ulmer.html>>

<sup>9</sup> See *USA the Movie*, Chapter Three, “God is not of Colors.”

<sup>10</sup> As a synecdoche for “the American Everyman,” creative nomadism is clearly a potential outcome for Kirk. As he motors through interstate highways, initially Kirk moves from a naïve recitation of banal forms of American ideology to puzzlement. Growing puzzlement generates dialogue, which produces an active questioning of the basic ideological tenets of American society. The fruits of this questioning give rise to a brief and intense socio-political awakening, soon followed by a psychological breakdown. At the point of psychological implosion, the potential for creative nomadism disintegrates. The figurative and hellish road from psychological breakdown to species death is all too short and swift.

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In the end, Kirk does not symbolize the revolutionary potential of the nomad whose creative impulses elude state apparatuses of capture. Rather, Kirk more closely resembles the reactionary nomad who remains a creature of the apparatuses of capture (of the war machine). Kirk is more Timothy McVeigh than Walt Whitman; more Bill O'Reilly than Allen Ginsburg.

<sup>11</sup> When I first began this piece, how to go about representing a non-linear, elliptical film with an intermittent counterclockwise temporality with a non-linear Deleuzian framework created some initial frustration. Not entirely sure if what I was doing had a solid connection with the film, I left a note on the web page of the producers, <[www.manticeye.com](http://www.manticeye.com)> , on August 10, 2004. I received a very gracious initial reply from Kelly Evans, who forwarded my request to the film's co-producer, Elizabeth Yoffe. We've had several extensive email exchanges in Mid-August of 2004 about the film. Eventually, I sent the initial draft of the piece to them, for comments. The particular excerpt is from an email (from Elizabeth Yoffe) dated August 15, 2004, 4:22 P.M.

<sup>12</sup> The complete text of "Be Serious" can be found in the "Poetry" Submenu on the *USA the Movie*, DVD.

<sup>13</sup> The full text of Owen's Poem "Dulce Est Decorum Est" is available on the "Poetry" Submenu on the *USA the Movie*, DVD.

<sup>14</sup> See *USA the Movie*, Chapters Three, "God is not of Colors," and Four, "Old White Dready Dude."

<sup>15</sup> See *Nomadology: The War Machine* 5.

<sup>16</sup> Stolfer's use of the term, "the war machine", has its genealogy as a part of a discourse of resistance to the escalation of the Vietnam War in the mid-1960s. At that time, the term was equated, in part, with the hi-tech destructive ability of U.S. military technology. Bereft of a compelling rationale for this war, the term also came to denote a Saturnian or Moloch-like tendency to mindlessly and mechanistically sacrifice the young (the future) to maintain the (present) status quo. Additionally, another aspect of this state-centered notion of "the war machine" also connoted the collective psychological task of marginalizing the cognitive dissonance around U.S.-based notions of self-identity. Here's how John Kerry described it in the early 1970s:

We rationalized destroying villages in order to save them. We saw America lose her sense of morality as she accepted very coolly a My Lai and refused to give up the image of American soldiers who hand out chocolate bars and chewing gum.

<[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Vietnam\\_War](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Vietnam_War)>

Just as the idea of Nomadology represents counter or anti-histories (to the singular, arborescent history produced under the aegis of the sedentary state), Deleuze and Guattari's notion of the war machine serves as a complete inversion of the Vietnam-era use of the term, emphasizing the extra-statist, creative and revolutionary potential of productive forces that escape or elide apparatuses of capture (the state form).

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In the wake of the political failure of the late 1960s, Deleuze and Guattari, like Foucault, interrogated a number of taken-for-granted assumptions about constitutive categories. The fruits of their interrogations produced a fundamental recasting of basic ideas on the exercise of power, the characteristics of the State and other institutions, a reorientation of ideas around causality (culminating in the theorization non-linear multiplicities and flows), and a profound investigation into the constitutive dynamics of desire.

In her discussion of Stolfer's use of the term "the war machine," the co-editor of *Rhizomes*, Carol Siegel, plausibly speculates that Stolfer's use of the term is "derived not from study of D&G but rather from the anti-war rhetoric of the 60s and 70s in which the term was common" (email, 10/23/04). While much around Stolfer's self-presentation exemplifies her point (the upside-down flag that Stolfer hoists, his proximity to the White House, his discussion of Vietnam experiences, etc.), Stolfer's soliloquy shows us that he's thinking about how to elude contemporary apparatuses of capture, and how others may elude such apparatuses. So, while granting the truth of Siegel's point, it's also plausible to see a combined representation of Stolfer's extra-statist narrative and his notion of the war machine as the intersecting portion of a Venn diagram. Many of Stolfer's discursive categories hearken backward to the 1960s, while some of his descriptions and prescriptions resemble the qualities of a contemporary, creative and revolutionary nomad.

<sup>17</sup> "The dreary desert sand of dead habit" is a phrase taken from Rabindranath Tagore's "Where the Mind is Without Fear." Read by Martin Sheen during an anti-Iraq invasion demonstration, the evocative phrase is at the heart of the antiwar message of the film. Direct and indirect references to desert sands (including the protagonist's demise, and the Iraqi invasion itself) are vividly evoked throughout *USA the Movie*.

<sup>18</sup> The full text of "Where the Mind is Without Fear" is available on the Poetry submenu on the *USA the Movie* DVD.

<sup>19</sup> Again, these are both lines from Tagore's poem.

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