



War and the Visceral Imagination

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TOY SOLDIERS REVISTED

Posted by *Clarissa Ceglie* on September 12, 2011 · [Leave a Comment](#)



Surely, I'm not the only female who played with toy soldiers as a child? Steeped in the 1960s TV lore of *Combat!*, *The Rat Patrol* and *12 O'Clock High*, which we saw as reruns in the 1970s, my brother and I frequently enacted valorous backyard skirmishes with our little green men. It was a visceral experience to be sure: the scent of freshly mown suburban grass serving as jungle cover, the chill and odor of wet garden soil dug into miniature trenches, and the stiffly prescriptive poses and props of the troops that our small fingers nonetheless attempted to bend to our imaginative wills.

I hadn't thought much about these childhood re-enactments until Twitter called my attention to the [Casualties of War series](#) by the design collective Dorothy. This set of soldiers, one of which is pictured at left, focuses on the psychological wars that combatants fight after the battlefield is left behind—but its scars are carried home.

Artist Yoram Wolberger is another whose work subverts these familiar plastic figurines to question “the mass production of cultural ideals.”⁽¹⁾ With painstaking attention to the quirks and flaws of the originals, he enlarges toy soldiers, cowboys and Indians to near adult-size.

What Do You Think?

Both Dorothy and Wolberger invite us to revisit the material culture of play and its longstanding idealization of war. Some questions that come to mind for me are:

- What other artifacts are implicated in “the mass production of cultural ideals” related to war?
- How can we account for the affective and material dimensions of such playthings?
- How might our culture be different if children played with Dorothy's figurines or a set of tiny green peace advocates?

What questions does this thread raise for you? And, if you are doing work in this area or have objects in your collections that relate to this discussion, please chime in.

Further Resources

Scholars who've written about the relationship between war toys and militarism include Kenneth Brown and Wendy Varney.^(2,3) And, Jeffrey Goldstein brings us up to the age of militaristic video games.⁽⁴⁾ So, too, does artist Harun Farocki. In works such as *Serious Games I–IV* (2009–10), he explores the ways in which play acting, simulation, soldier training and war intersect. This extended reflection on video-game technology is part of the current MoMA exhibition “*Harun Farocki: Images of War (at a Distance)*.”

I'm hoping to see the exhibition before it closes in January and would love to hear from anyone who has already been. Here's the *New York Times* review.

1. Quote from Mark Miann, “The archaeology of false idols” in *Cowboys & Indians. Yoram Wolberger* (New York: Benrison Contemporary, 2010): 4-7.
2. Kenneth D. Brown, “Modelling for War? Toy Soldiers in Late Victorian and Edwardian Britain,” *Journal of Social History* 24, no. 2 (1990): 237-54.
3. Varney, Wendy, “Playing with ‘War Fare,’” *Peace Review* 12, no. 3 (2000): 385.
4. Jeffrey Goldstein, “Immortal Kombat: War Toys and Violent Video Games,” in *Why We Watch: The Attractions of Violent Entertainment*, ed. Jeffrey Goldstein (Cary, NC: Oxford University Press, 1998): 53-68.

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