

Theater of War

by stephen hastings-king

The director lights a cigarette.

We became The World Famous Shadow Puppet Theater because we thought that the best way to become world famous was to act as though we already were.

When the war came we attached ourselves to the effort. We were not authorized, but went from town to town as if we were.

We set up in a public square. While the sun is going down we start a recorded fanfare and people arrive. As darkness falls our lights take over. After a shadow pantomime, we begin.

We say: War is always happening. It has neither beginning nor end. It is a system the extent of which is indeterminate and the meaning of which is itself.

We say: The system is war and because each of you fit with it and it allows you to make sense of things and yourselves, you are each war embodied just as you are different as individuals but the same as people, just as the puppets are different as puppets but the same as shadows.

Then the audience watches a Punch and Judy battle of shadow Good against shadow Evil fought with toy weapons systems while beneath their sightlines a map is spread on a wooden table and a magnifying device is positioned over it.

We say: War includes everything and everyone, all who control and all who are controlled.

We say: It includes the space of the mapmaker and that of the map and that of people who gather around the table to look through a magnifying device at the map in order to see first the town in which they live then the space in which they stand then themselves gathered around a table looking through a magnifying device at a map in order to see first the town in which they live then the space in which they stand then themselves gathered around a table and so on level after level. This is how we are war.

By then, people have moved from their seats through the strange half light to look at the map spread on a table through a magnifying device and see the town where they live then the place where they stand then themselves looking through a magnifying device again and again.

We say: There is no outside. All possible relations are accounted for in advance. Your individual consent does not matter because consent is all there is.

For a long time, the director looks through thin trails of smoke, surveying the wooden tables and place settings.

We toured continuously while something big and invisible changed around us. People stopped entering into our theater of war. They sat and watched. Nothing we could say affected them.

The director takes a drag from the cigarette.

I do not enjoy having become a relic.

For a long time, he looks at the nautical décor: the walls, the lengths of netting and the buoys; the ceiling, the tinsel and the mirror balls.

