In this essay, I argue that the Mano River War should be understood as a conflict to which the ubiquitous presence of digital media was crucial. This was a war structured by the economy of attention. To profit in this economy, combatants and non-combatants were required to play to an audience that they knew was there, but often could only sense or apprehend in the most abstract way. The realities of constantly being available to be seen were crucial to understanding the spectacular performance of violence in this conflict. [Keywords: Sierra Leone, Liberia, media, violence, visuality]

Figure 1: Mama Munda has never asked me for the photographs I take or expressed much interest in those I give her. She has never asked why I take them or what I do with them. It is as though she simply expects that white strangers will photograph her, and over the years a number of us have. She knows these images circulate around the world. That, apparently, is enough.

Figure 1 is an odd image (see next page). A man pretends to be firing at another from close range. Mama Munda and her apprentice (the man being fired at) feign turning the bullets back on him. Yet what is most striking to me (the punctum of the image, to use Roland Barthes’s term, the “accident” that “shoots out of it like an arrow” [1981:26-27]) is the fact
that so many of the figures in the image are not looking at the gun or at the man on whom it is trained. Instead, they focus on the photographer. Even the apprentice, a few inches from the gun barrel, turns his attention to the camera. I asked to make a portrait of Mama Munda, and everyone sprang into place for this tableau. Mama Munda’s paramilitary squad, the Kasela War Council, knows what photographers want.

* * *

Figure 2: The battle for Monrovia’s New Bridge in 2003 went on for days. Government troops held the downtown side, while LURD (Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy) forces held Bushrod Island and the west side of the city. The video sequences in Brabazon and Stack’s Liberia: An Uncivil War (2004) show young men taking turns running into the open, firing from the hip, gangster style. The bravest—often the youngest—sometimes walk.

Then a long shot of this fighter. Completely exposed on the bridge, he jumps up and down in Timberland boots. Like the others, he fires his AK-47 one handed. It is not obvious who or what he is firing at, but the audio captures gunfire all around him.

And then he stops firing, turns, and for a few seconds performs an elegant hip hop dance.

* * *

Figure 3: In late 2001, I walked through the Brookfields neighborhood of central Freetown late one night with a CDF (Civil Defense Forces) fighter named Mohammed. There was a great deal of speculation on the part of militiamen about the Special Court for Sierra Leone and the extent of its mandate. When I asked Mohammed whether he feared prosecution by the Court, he said no. I suspected that he would argue
that he had done nothing wrong, or that as a rank and file member of the CDF he would be too junior to be of interest to international prosecutors. Instead, he told me bluntly that there were no satellites recording his wartime activities. Other members of the kamajor militia claimed a similar invisibility, arguing for example that my camera could not “snap” them in their occult protections without their permission. But Mohammed was the first to argue this as a matter of law.

* * *

In this essay, I want to explore what these three images, and others like them, tell us about the intersection of violence, imaging technology, and visual culture in West African war zones. I am, of course, interested in what these images show. They tell us something about how occult forces bulletproof the body, something about the use of weaponry by largely untrained fighters, and something about the relationship between combatants and the Special Court. But I am also concerned with what these images and others like them say about the nature and performance of violence in this hyper-visual digital age.

In a frequently cited essay, Walter Benjamin wrote that with the advent of technologies of mechanical reproduction, images have no inherent meaning. They become dependent on context and explanation, their meanings subject to negotiation and play. “For the first time,” he writes of photographs, “captions have become obligatory” (Benjamin 2003:258). The digital age of the 1990s and early 2000s introduced a different politics of the image. What we see at work in the Mano River War—the fighting that engulfed both Sierra Leone and Liberia for much of the 1990s—is a visual culture in which captions are no longer obligatory. The reasons for this may seem contradictory. On the one hand, the images this war produced required no captions because they were at once so familiar that their messages were always already understood. The meaning of the image was embedded in it. The “gangsta” imagery of armed young black men is a world media icon of chaos and criminal violence. It seems to require no
further commentary. At the same time, this war produced a host of images that remain deliberately ambiguous, images to which no caption could be fixed at all. That was not their point. These were images that were intended to communicate only the fact of their own existence. They were scenes of extra-ordinary mutilations of the human body, such as the amputation of the hands and arms of children or the castration of prisoners of war. They were spectacles meant to attract attention, nothing more.

These two ideas are not necessarily mutually exclusive if we begin to look at the production of images of violence as labor in a digital visual economy. What we saw in this conflict was violence as a mode of spectacular image making. The important point for the combatants who made these violent images, and for those around the globe who traffic in them, was not to contextualize them or give them meaning. It was simply to make them excessive enough to be seen. In the digital visual world, one profits not from the labor of assigning meaning to an image, but simply from being seen in the competitive marketplace of visual production.

I explore these ideas in this essay by first arguing that the Mano River War should be understood as a conflict to which the ubiquitous presence of digital media was crucial. Virtually every aspect of the conflict was mediated by media technology, from Charles Taylor’s early campaigns in the Liberian bush to the LURD offensive on Monrovia 14 years later. I then explore some of the consequences of this media omnipresence by arguing, inspired by Deleuze’s (1986, 1989) writings on the cinema and Jonathan Beller’s (2002, 2006) framing of the “cinematic mode of production,” that visuality—the capacity to look and the capacity to be seen or to remain unseen—is a crucial element in the economic survival of postcolonial subjects. This was a war structured by the economy of attention. To profit in this economy (an economy as much a part of the war as the trade in diamonds, drugs, and weapons), combatants and non-combatants were required to play to an audience that they knew was there, but often could only sense or apprehend in the most abstract way. The realities of constantly being available to be seen were crucial to understanding a great deal of the spectacular performance of violence in the Mano River War. One consequence of this was that many combatants found themselves to be acting out a limited repertoire of visual roles. Though they produced ever more dramatic spectacles during the course of the war, these spectacles, these demands to be seen, were very often generated by young men who could only ever see themselves
in terms of the limited array of stock roles currently assigned to West African youth.

A Digital War
The Mano River War has been called the first post-Cold War conflict and the first postmodern war. It was also among the first digital wars. Along with the early 1990s conflict in the Balkans and the first Gulf War, the Mano River War was among the first to be inextricably bound to the possibilities opened up by digital communication. This was a war in which a great deal could be accomplished by phoning the BBC from the West African bush, live via satellite phone, and announcing that one had just taken a major town, surrounded a capital city, routed one’s opponents, or blocked a major road. Whether this was true or not was largely irrelevant. To be broadcast over the BBC “Focus on Africa” program was enough to make it so. Residents of a town or village would flee upon hearing that they were under attack or already over-run, leaving the target empty and available. Militia units or rebel forces guarding a checkpoint would hear the BBC tell them they were about to be (or had been) defeated, and they would take to the bush. Mission accomplished. This was a tactic pioneered by Charles Taylor and his NPFL (National Patriotic Front of Liberia), though it was hardly unique to them. Live, real time media was one of the most important weapons in this war.

Video imaging technology was a particularly crucial part of this mediascape. Some of the most important, defining moments of this war were captured on video, and some of what became defining moments of the war became so precisely because they were visually recorded. Take, for example, the 1990 execution of Liberian President Samuel Doe. A Lebanese cameraman is on hand when INPFL (Independent National Patriotic Front of Liberia) leader Prince Johnson’s men seize Doe. They drag him before Johnson, who in full view of the camera conducts a drunken trial replete
with made-for-television torture, mockery, and drama. For years afterward, the video clips of a dying Samuel Doe circulated throughout West Africa, screened on local television and were available for purchase in a variety of bootleg forms (see Figure 4).

In Sierra Leone, Foday Sankoh’s tiny RUF (Revolutionary United Front) radically overstated its presence through radio announcements and an early video shot from one “liberated” town. The RUF created an image of itself by first circulating video and audio clips. Only later did it become the force that it broadcast itself to be in 1991. In an eerie parallel, I sat with LURD’s titular leader Sekou Conneh in early 2002 for a screening of his own hagiographic video portrait. Surrounded by cheering LURD fighters in the group’s Conakry compound, we watched footage from the recently captured Liberian town of Voinjama. Most of the footage consisted of an obviously coerced celebration of Conneh’s arrival. Terrified civilians clapped and sang in Conneh’s honor, welcoming him and his entourage of armed, drugged youth. These scenes were interspersed with shots of Conneh climbing onto an anti-aircraft gun mounted in the back of a pick-up and shooting wildly into the trees. Conneh looked like a happy child, stunned by the power of his new toys as he shredded the jungle canopy. The truth of these images (to paraphrase the artist and critic Olu Oguibe [2004] writing about the photograph in Africa) clearly lay in the simple fact of their existence, rather than in their content. Conneh’s video praise-song was effective, like Sankoh’s, not for the truth it showed, but because to exist in the media is a form of truth in itself (cf. Utas 2006).

A more famous video truth was filmed in 1999 when the Sierra Leonean journalist Sorious Samura was trapped in Freetown as the AFRC (Armed Forces Revolutionary Council)/RUF invaded on January 6. The resulting documentary, *Cry Freetown*, was shown on CNN and broadcast worldwide. This led to a website (www.cryfreetown.org/) which accurately describes a film that “has become a phenomenon.” The website is a portal to histories of Sierra Leone, opportunities to purchase the film or view other works, make donations to aid agencies or write letters to everyone from RUF leader Foday Sankoh to then-US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. Samples of Samura’s film became common currency on YouTube and are spliced into countless other films and news accounts of the war in Sierra Leone. Samura’s film has also become the stock imagery for a great many media productions that require graphic footage to illustrate generic stories about violence in Africa or the horrors of the diamond trade.
Video (as well as still photography) also created a perverse form of Mano River War celebrity. The ease of access to Freetown’s Aberdeen Road amputee camp meant that journalists hoping to cover the graphic violence of the war in Sierra Leone could do so in relative safety. The camp was only a short ride from the helipad that brought cameramen from the airport to the capital, and a visiting reporter could cover the war’s most iconic victims without having to spend a single night in-country. Shipped via satellite phone to home offices in London, Paris, New York, or Tokyo, those images were on the wire or broadcast on television even before the journalists capturing them landed safely in Abidjan or Accra. A half dozen faces and wounds are shown over and over on television, in newspapers, and on computer screens worldwide as the representations of African tragedy.

Perhaps the most poignant video moment in the Mano River War occurred in Monrovia in 2003. Desperate for United States intervention, Liberian civilians began to pile the bodies of the dead outside the US embassy. Their action had the desired effect in one way: it attracted an enormous amount of media attention. The spectacle of the dead was an undeniably visual story, broadcast across US media outlets. But instead of producing an armed intervention of US Marines, the pile of bodies simply generated more stories of the horror of witnessing African war. One American news magazine show ran an extended interview with the journalist who covered the event; interspersed with the footage of the Liberian dead were shots of the white journalist retching in the street at the sight of so much blood.

* * *

The critique of international media practices in the coverage of the Mano River War is an ethical charge for any scholar working in the region. Indeed, some of the most important scholarship on the war has been analysis of what Rosalind Shaw (2003) has called “juju journalism,” the fixation on the most outrageous aspects of the conflict and the resulting primitivizing of African war. The most widely read anthropological contribution to the study of this conflict remains Paul Richards’s *Fighting for the Rainforest* (1996), a book written largely in response to narratives about the war in mainstream international publications. At one point or another, virtually every scholar writing about this war has made reference to the way in which various global media has portrated it—and rightly so.
Nevertheless, I am less concerned here with media critique than with tracing how images and image technology moved through West Africa and became part of an endless circulation of war imagery of which combatants were keenly aware. The Mano River War was among the first of the digital wars not only by virtue of how it was covered, but because it was fought by a generation of combatants who were themselves products of the digital age. Militia fighters in Liberia and Sierra Leone belong to the same cohort that the journalist Evan Wright (2004:6-7), covering US Marines during the 2003 Iraq invasion, called “Generation Kill,” a cynical generation more comfortable with electronic pop culture than with politics or history. Even youth in the most rural parts of Sierra Leone and Liberia had, by the mid-1990s, a sense of the world as it was represented in the video productions of Hollywood, Bollywood, and Nollywood. As a result, these fighters knew themselves to be the subjects of visual narratives that circulate worldwide. In other words, while we are rightly critical of journalistic discourses that play up the most spectacular aspects of violence in postcolonial conflicts today, we must also pay attention to the ways in which those who are waging such wars make use of those tropes and are themselves participants in an economy of violent images.

Ibrahim Tucker, a CDF commander on the Sierra Leone/Liberia border at the time of the 1997 Sierra Leone coup, put it bluntly: “The first thing we did when we heard about the take-over,” he said, was to “ask ourselves ‘How can we get to media?’ We decided to send to Monrovia for Jonathan Paye-Layleh [the BBC correspondent]. He went to us. Then he goes over the air. The battle had started.”

The Culture of Images

Some part of the postmodern condition is defined by living in a world structured through globally circulating images. This is not in itself a particularly controversial idea. It is hard to argue with Thomas de Zengotita’s (2006) contention that no part of being in the world today can be imagined without mediation by communication technologies, even if this has been given little direct attention by Africanist anthropologists. (For two notable exceptions, see Larkin [2008] and Meyer [2003].) What has been harder to understand is how that mediation takes place, the role played by the actual technologies of media production, and the limits of a media consumer’s ability to play with the images around him or her in meaningful ways.
These are debates that go back to the earliest days of mechanical imaging technology. If anything, they are made more difficult in the digital age. At the extremes, they are all-or-nothing interpretations. On the one hand is a school of thought that sees infinite possibilities for interpreting the content of images, a limitless free play of creative possibility. Images arrive and we are largely free to do with them what we will—accept them, reject them, offer counter-readings, or put them to new uses based on culture or individual psychology. The opposite extreme privileges the limits that media technologies themselves place on what can be done with the images they produce. Consumers are always passive in the sense that what an image means has already been decided for them by the medium itself and is subject to little negotiation. Images demand to be understood in limited and particular ways.

Of course, most critical commentators on visual culture fall somewhere in between. Africanist anthropologists have, however, tended toward a culturally determinist view, celebrating the ways in which African communities creatively rework images that largely originated elsewhere. With laudable intentions, many anthropologists have sought to portray African subjects as savvy media consumers capable of producing novel interpretations outside the hegemonic influence of the American and European culture industries.

Here, I trend the other direction. Without falling wholly into the trap of technological determinism, I propose that the reality of the video age is that contemporary visual technologies place definite limits on what it means to be a subject in the postmodern world—in Africa as it is everywhere. There may be room to maneuver within those limits, but to truly understand the logic of violence in the Mano River region, we need to take seriously the consequences of waging war in an era defined by digital vision. As the visual theorist Nicholas Mirzoeff has written, ours is the moment of the “visual subject”: the actor whose existence is defined by the axiom “I am seen and I see that I am seen” (2002:10, see also 2005:3). This has concrete consequences. It means that we must take into account not only how individuals and collectives read, interpret, play with, resist, or adapt the content of globally circulating images; we must also account for a kind of flattening out of possibilities generated by the constant stream of images and by the ever-present possibility of being seen. We need to explore not only how African subjects—like combatants in West Africa—consume images from elsewhere, but how they understand what it means
to be visible and how they seek to generate images that will circulate globally through these same ubiquitous channels.

Jonathan Beller (2002, 2006) has described this as life under capital’s “cinematic mode of production.” Cinema, he writes, is the logical progression of capital’s constant revolution in the means of production. Cinema is not simply an artifact (the movies), but it names a social regime in which the very act of seeing—of paying attention—has been organized around a capacity to generate profit. This is an attention economy. In its latest stages, the stage of labor’s full subsumption in the logic of capital, the very act of directing one’s gaze or capturing the gaze of another is the key to generating profit. Capitalism’s constant expansion has, in the digital age, reached the point of revolutionizing the senses of the human body. “[M]odern visual technology,” Beller writes, “tools the body for new labor processes during the twentieth century...” (1994:8). In the postmodern world defined by cinema and its offshoot technologies, “to look is to labor” (Beller 2002:61).

This claim suggests that not only do we confront the image at the scene of the screen, but we confront the logistics of the image wherever we turn—imaginal functions are today imbricated in perception itself. Not only do the denizens of capital labor to maintain themselves as image, we labor in the image. The image, which pervades all appearing, is the mis-en-scène of the new work. (Beller 2002:60)

Ours is an era in which life revolves around the production of images and the ways in which we engage with them. Sociality is defined by how we labor vis-à-vis the images that surround us.

When a LURD fighter stares into the camera and tells a journalist (and the world) that “I am ready to eat the heart [of a prisoner of war]. Yes I am a totally wicked boy” (see Figure 5), he is laboring in the digital media image of the black male warrior youth more than he is living out some “traditional” social framing that can account for cannibalistic violence.

This is a performance for the camera by a young man for whom the camera’s attention is an end in itself. It is work to hold the spotlight, but that is the reality of the world today. One’s fortunes and futures are tied to the visual.

Birgit Meyer (2003) points toward a similar conclusion when she argues that cinema in Ghana expresses a certain reorganization of the power...
of visuality in the modern world. Ghanaian popular films, made on the cheap with the advent of video, are very often moral commentaries on greed and illegitimate (capitalist) accumulation through occult or spiritual means. Meyer argues that Ghanaian cinema places the filmmaker and the video viewer in a position formerly reserved for the prophet or the occult specialist—individuals with a unique capacity to see and understand the invisible workings of supernatural forces. These are forces that constantly play on themes and symbols of capital’s production of value: profit disconnected from legitimate labor or work, conspicuous consumption, alienation from family or tradition. The ability to “see” these invisible forces at work is now available to everyone through the magic of the camera. Film allows us to portray for public consumption what was formerly a unique (and valuable) gift—clarity of vision regarding invisible influences. Ghanaian films, she argues, “democratize, generalize, and commodify vision” (Meyer 2003:36).

If we go a step further, we could argue that the postcolonial African condition is defined as one of subjection to this new visual economy. This is the true society of the spectacle (Debord 1994). The urban experience, for example, is increasingly governed by proliferating forces defined by their ability to be seen or unseen (De Boeck 2002, 2005; Simone 2002). Life in the city today is a process of constant negotiation of the visible and invisible. Increasingly, what one cannot see, or cannot see clearly, determines one’s fortunes. An ability to see the otherwise invisible is a strategy not only for survival but for profit. And one is always subject to a gaze, whether it is the gaze of jealous rivals or lovers, witches, international NGOs or media, or the postcolonial state (Mbembe 1992, Piot 1999).

* * *

Hassan Koroma exemplifies the new labor of vision. On those days when he has nothing else to do—which in the rainy season of 2005 was most days—Koroma sat on the main road through Duala, Monrovia and he waited. A tall man, muscular from labor in the diamond mines of both
Sierra Leone and Liberia, Koroma was nevertheless remarkably adept at blending in. For hours, he perched on the wood slats of empty market stalls, or stood with others under the garish lights of kiosks open late into the night. Koroma watched the streets, the passing traffic, the walkers, the other observers (see Figure 6). He hoped to be seen by some and to be invisible to others. Like so many young people, he deconstructed the visual field before him with remarkable, sometimes even alarming precision. In the throng of thousands of passing faces and passing cars he could pick out acquaintances from his school days, buddies from the mines, fighters in his units with the CDF or with LURD (he served in both as a trained gunner and frontline commando). Hour after endless hour, Koroma scanned the whirl of bodies, vehicles, and mud for those who owed him favors or debts and for those to whom he owed them in turn. He popped into the gaze of the former, dodged that of the latter. One never knew when a friend or relative might unexpectedly drive by at the wheel of a gleaming Land Cruiser, having landed a job at an NGO. To see such an acquaintance could be a shot at employment, or at the very least a strategic tip or a small hand-out. One never knew when a distant relative from the village might fly past in a taxi with news of a business transaction for which she needed porters or muscle.

For young men like Hassan, the street is both a stage and a veil. It offers a backdrop from which one emerges and a degree of anonymity when necessary. The street represents an economy of vision that is unique to the city. It requires visual mastery. This is expertise that doesn’t come naturally to anyone, but an expertise that one learns quickly. It is a tool of the trade of cosmopolitan labor.

* * *

The gaze as a subject of African sociality is not new in anthropology, of course. Paul Riesman’s (1977) famous study of Fulani social life defines the very notion of community by the need for certain relationships to be seen. Fights, for example, take place in the center of the village precisely
so that they can be seen by others and so that the belligerents can mediate their conflict through a witnessing crowd. Drawing on work in northern Togo, Charles Piot (1999:101) describes how ritual—whether a village initiation or the spectacular ceremonial displays of the state—“has to do with making visible actions and statuses that are not considered achieved until they are ‘seen’ by others.” And in his analysis of the aesthetics of violence in BaKongo, Wyatt MacGaffey (2000:71) points out that “the witness” is always critical to establishing whether an act of violence is legitimate—a key consideration in the practice of politics.

What Beller’s cinematic mode of production adds to this literature is a specific focus on how these regimes of the visual become part of a globalized regime of value production linked to the logic of late stage capitalism. Vision, in other words, is now mediated by the logic of capital’s form of profit. “The perception that images pass through the perception of others increases their currency and hence their value. Vision adds value to visual objects” (Beller 1994:37). Where we might once have deconstructed the cultural value of vision, in the digital age we must also account for the way visibility accrues capitalism’s form of value.

There are a number of consequences to this line of thought for understanding Africa today. One is that “local” cultures of secrecy and concealment, long a staple of West Africanist anthropology, are being subsumed by a more global economy of visual signs—though one no less tied to occult imaginaries, as I take up below. But the consequence that may be of the most importance to understanding the violence of the Mano River War is the way in which this cinematic mode of production leads combatants to imagine a consumer/audience/witness and the impact this has on their performance of violence. Young men joined this war for a host of reasons, political and personal. But those motivations, and even more importantly the actions that sprang from them, were mediated by how these fighters understood their relationship to a vast contemporary “mediascape” (Appadurai 1996:35). To summarize what follows: much of the violence of this war must be understood in terms of the creation of spectacles that serve no end other than to draw attention to themselves. Whose attention they are meant to attract is a question that combatants often could not answer in concrete terms, and rarely asked themselves. Cinema is defined, in Colebrook’s paraphrase of Deleuze, by its “liberation of the sequencing of images from any single observer” (2002:31, cf. Deleuze 1986, 1989). Cinema has no singular point of view.
This is its peculiar magic. It enables vision from any angle, from anywhere. To labor cinematically is to perform for an audience that is both unseen and largely unknowable because it is potentially anywhere and everywhere. To produce cinematically is to produce in the abstract, to generate images for consumption by (potentially) everyone and no one. What mattered to fighters in this war was that one was always potentially on view and that to be seen could be productive work.

**Gangsters, Satellites, and Virtuosos**
The subject of satellites illustrates what I mean when I suggest that the war’s combatants performed for an abstract audience. One afternoon at the Brookfields Hotel, Mohammed and I sat talking with a handful of others about what satellites do and how they see. Mohammed and I had finished watching compilations of videos culled from home movies and news sources, videos that documented the destruction of Freetown under the 1997 coup and the 1999 rebel invasion. When I made a passing remark about the camera crews that had filmed some of these scenes, Mohammed scoffed. Those images, he argued, were made by satellite. Satellites are powerful tools, they can film from virtually any angle, any time of day or night. Surely, he argued, I didn’t think that CNN and the BBC would send actual white journalists that close to the action of an African war?

A few years later, a commander who played important roles in both the CDF defense of Freetown in January 1999 and the LURD incursion on Monrovia in 2003 brought up satellites once again. In a conversation about the Monrovia offensive and the US response to it, Junior argued that the Americans were deeply knowledgeable about events on the ground in Liberia. This was a war, he argued, in which the world (an abstract but monolithic entity) was keenly interested—and to which it was directing a great deal of attention:

In the urban areas, you know, people have cameras there. The cameras can pick you out. The satellites can pick you out...The bigger countries sometimes put their satellites on conflict areas. People focus their satellites and picture you and do all kinds of things. There was a French journalist group in the country, and they did all kinds of things. There was a guy from Benin who saw me clearly in those
pictures there [the ones shot by the French]. Satellites were all over, and no one knows. They are using them for all kinds of things.

The satellite in each of these stories is not simply a camera. It is a potential omnipresence relaying images for indeterminate (though powerful) purposes to an abstract audience. This God’s eye might one day become that of the Special Court. It might be the eye of the international media, or the US government weighing the relative merits of sending in troops to save Monrovia. In this sense, the satellite as trope differs somewhat in meaning for combatants than it did for the Liberian refugees Mats Utas (2006:175-177) spoke with in camps in Côte d’Ivoire. There, too, satellite documentation of the war was a frequent topic of conversation. But for refugees looking for news from home, the association of high technology satellites with non-Liberian image makers (the US and other non-African nations) gave the images a certain objectivity. Therein lay their value. They stood in contrast to less reliable “Liberian” sources of information. For the combatants whose activities could be subject to the satellites’ purview, however, the objectivity of the image was not the point. What mattered was the fact of visibility, of the ever-present possibility that one could be seen by a vast and diffuse audience. As Junior put it, “satellites were all over, and no one knows.”

I will return below to the profitability of being seen. First, however, it is important to note that the camera as the eye of the world at large was not the unique preoccupation of combatants. Placing the bodies of the dead at the door of the US embassy in Monrovia presumed the world as a witness. Those who organized this visual plea understood that it would attract the gaze of outsiders, and while on the one hand we can presume that the intended audience was decision makers in the US government it would be equally accurate to assume that the audience was a supranational and more generalized one: a world of the powerful by whom the residents of an African city under siege might justifiably feel abandoned and excluded. When one of the protestors turns to Brabazon and Stack’s camera and asks, “Why you give them guns to kill us?” (see Figure 7), her plea is simultaneously direct and abstract. She is directly addressing a witness, present via the body of the journalist and his camera. Abstract in the sense of speech directed to power itself, the power of transnational forces of capital that profit by moving weapons to African countries and those who allow it to happen.
One might expect that for combatants a pervasive discourse of visibility, in which one is always potentially seen, would generate a certain paranoia. In fact, it had far more nuanced effects. It produced the kinds of sophisticated experiments in revelation and concealment through which combatants cloaked and promoted themselves as warriors, as men, and as economic beings. Among the most important of the war’s occult technologies were those of invisibility, as Mohammed suggested when he spoke so assuredly of being invisible to the satellites, or as others suggested when they argued that my camera could not photograph them without their permission. Combatants participated in a discourse of empowerment vis-à-vis the capriciousness of vision. We could call it the occult economy of the image. “[T]he constant pursuit of new, magical means for otherwise unattainable ends,” namely the vast wealth generated by global capitalism today, is how Jean and John Comaroff (1999:284) define (in part) the occult economy. In combatants’ occult economy of vision, the otherwise unattainable end is increasingly a space outside of scrutiny, a space of activity that is not surveilled by the ubiquitous eye of digital technology.

Another way to frame this is to say that the digital age has brought to the fore the idea of the virtuoso performance, a sense of combat as aesthetic and the battlefield as stage. Consider again the film clip of the fighter on Monrovia’s New Bridge, stopping amid a hail of bullets to perform his dance (Figure 2). There is something uncalculated, spontaneous about his movements. It is showmanship, but as a performance it seems to express a kind of ecstasy in being visible. The audience for this performance is unclear. The young man clearly knows he is visible to his enemy across the bridge. He knows he can be seen by comrades on his side of the fight. And we can presume he knows the camera is present, as it has been (in the form of the accompanying journalist) for days. But no single witness appears as the obvious target of his action, and the message he might be sending to any one of them is unclear. His playfulness is part taunt, part boast, but more than anything else it is the exuberant outburst of a young man who knows that he is the center of attention.
Note, too, the way that he holds and fires his weapon. Like the other combatants on the bridge, and indeed like virtually every militia fighter in this war, he shoots from the hip, gangster-style. He doesn’t aim, he simply sprays ammunition in unfocused patterns in the direction of the enemy. Militarily it is highly ineffective. But as an aesthetic it is compelling, even terrifying. It is the way weapons are fired in Hollywood gangster and gangsta movies. Every young man knows that this is what a warrior looks like when he wages war, especially a young black man fighting his way through the streets of the city. Youth who received even cursory training from military veterans knew this was technically incorrect, but continued to prefer the more aesthetically pleasing performance of the hip-shooting rebel over the precise but less charged tactic of standing, sighting, and carefully firing one’s gun.

The same gangster performance shows up again and again when I asked combatants to pose for portraits. Some of the results are bizarre. In Voinjama, a group of LURD fighters in 2002 arranged themselves in tableau (see Figures 8 and 9). In Figure 8, the fighter on the right went into a crouch and placed his weapon on his head, an extreme version of another popular shooting style (also borrowed from Hollywood imagery) where the weapon is held high and sideways. Later on the same day, I asked two young men if I could take their picture and they staged a mock maneuver running from a house, firing as they crossed the street (see Figure 9). The militiaman on the right carried an RPG and pretended to fire it low and from the side. These men knew what a warrior looked like and they struck the pose easily. They did it for visiting photographers and they did it in the presence of the enemy. The effect, and the intention, was the same.
We could productively talk about these performances of the warrior in terms of the cultivation of a certain style, much as James Ferguson (1999:93-110) has done vis-à-vis urban laborers and their styles of dress in Zambia. Style here is a “signifying practice,” one that requires a certain competence and cultivation, but is used to create social differences. Urban youth in Zambia cultivate a cosmopolitan style to mark themselves as distinctly urban and to visibly demarcate those who are rural and “local.” Those, in other words, without the means or the knowledge to deploy “global” fashion as an identity marker. Urban youth connect themselves to an imagined cosmopolitan world beyond themselves by performing a style that is clearly not of the village, not of tradition.

Reading militia fighters in the Mano River War in such terms makes some sense. These were youth with an image of themselves as part of a global, black male underclass, revolutionary heroes with a great deal in common with US rappers and gang members, Jamaican rasta sufferers and the freedom fighters of anti-colonial struggles. Hollywood film, rap, and reggae provide a set of images for how one performs that kind of identity, and these young men had cultivated that style of performance with a great deal of ease.

But I find it more useful to think of this kind of performance in slightly different terms. What distinguishes these fighters from the young men Ferguson discusses is the audience for their performance. These fighters were certainly creating an identity for themselves, but they were equally if not more concerned with the cultivation of a world audience and with the creation of an image that would travel. Their labor was only partly on themselves. Their larger purpose was to labor on their witnesses. This, in other words, was work in the attention economy.

To this end, I find Paolo Virno’s (2004) writing on the virtuoso performance to be more immediately relevant. In brief, Virno argues that labor today is increasingly a kind of performance art. In the present moment of capital, most forms of work produce nothing material, or at least their profitability does not lie in what they produce. Profit is derived rather from how well one enacts a script, how effectively one plays a role. Virtuosity in the performing arts is by Virno’s definition “an activity which finds its own fulfillment (that is, its own purpose) in itself, without objectifying itself into an end product, without settling into a ‘finished product,’ or an object which would survive the performance” (2004:52). The virtuoso performs for the sake of the performance and profits from
the performance itself. She or he produces the spectacle of the performance, and profits from that spectacle. Which leads to the second characteristic of the virtuoso performance: it requires an audience. The spectacle means nothing unless it is produced in the presence of others. “[V]irtuosos need the presence of an audience precisely because they are not producing an end product,” Virno writes. “Lacking a specific extrinsic product, the virtuoso has to rely on witnesses” (2004:52).

In terms of thinking through the violence performed by young men during the Mano River War, this provides a way to think of violence outside the terms that have tended to guide analysis of the wars in Sierra Leone and Liberia. Both the scholarly and popular literatures have been divided, for example, over the question of whether violence in this region was the product of rational calculation or irrational barbarity. Both rest on the idea of criminal violence tied to a crisis of youth precipitated by financial or moral economies. But a more productive way to understand the economy of violence at work here would be as an economy oriented toward maximizing the spectacular. The “ends” such violence was meant to achieve might be calculated, but they were calculated according to the arithmetic of signs, the logic of image production. Repeatedly, when I pressed combatants to explore the logic of targeting civilians for attack, of amputation or the mutilation of bodies in seemingly excessive ways, the answer was that “it was war” or that “I am a rebel.” For combatants, both phrases seemed to conjure a complete mise-en-scène against which certain (virtuoso) performances simply made sense without having to be tied to specific goals or tactical outcomes. To participate in war, to be a rebel was by definition to generate certain kinds of spectacular, violent images. Everyone knew the script. A repertoire of images exists for how one performs war; some did it better than others, but the performance was an end in itself. How exactly one might profit from these performances was not always immediately clear, even to combatants themselves. The exact correlation between “work” and its remuneration is mystified, as it is throughout the global attention economy.7

The Logic of the Advertising Oneself

In the run-up to LURD’s 2003 offensive on Monrovia, commanders of the group spoke in eloquent detail about the need to attack high visibility civilian targets as a way to attract media attention. In the competitive market
for global humanitarian intervention, visibility pays and the most fearsome forces become the most visible. As one commander put it, LURD would set out to destroy Monrovia so that the “international community” could rush in and attempt to stop them (see Hoffman 2004).

Such was the thinking that made it tactically attractive to attack villages one had no plans to defend or to hold. By early 1995, as Gberie (2005:92) writes in his account of the RUF in Sierra Leone, the rebels’ goal was not to conquer territory but to demolish it and then disappear. The RUF provisioned itself through lightning strikes on towns and villages, after which they melted back into the bush. These attacks signal a strategy that is more than utilitarian. To attack a town or village was to signal that one had the power to make violent spectacles. All of the war’s factions attacked towns they did not have the military capability to hold. To be seen on the offensive was to exist. In a 24-hour news cycle, only the residents care (or even remember) whether a hamlet is held or lost in rural Liberia or Sierra Leone, and the residents are not the target audience. (There were no doubt exceptions to this, such as the 1993 RUF attack on Kabala and the ULIMO attack on Voinjama in the same year; both were arguably engineered specifically to “speak” to the residents of those communities—though the larger point about how and what is communicated through spectacular attacks remains the same.) Being seen to be on the offensive and make your mark on bodies and buildings—that is the logic of advertising oneself in a digital war.

It is a logic of excessiveness. The goal of advertising in the digital media is not so much to generate or convey specific content about a commodity as to make the ad itself spectacular enough to capture attention. Jean Baudrillard’s (1988) phrase “the ecstasy of communication” beautifully (if tragically) captures the advertising logic in digital age violence. The point is to create images that cannot be reduced to any particular message; these are images with consequences, but those consequences are not purely utilitarian. One must produce excessive images in order to be seen. This is a task that requires extreme, ecstatic modes of performance. There is a limited supply of international NGO dollars in the world, and a limited amount of airtime on the BBC. The competition for attention in a violent world is fierce. One gets nothing done unless one is seen, and one must perform with a certain amount of skill if one is to achieve visibility in such a crowded field.
When I pressed the Bo field commander on the need to target civilians for attack, he made the following argument:

[The targeting of civilians] is one of the major tools in guerrilla warfare. Because when the guerrilla is fighting, he is less equipped, he has less manpower. He’s going to use tactics to put fear into the civilian populace and send the signal to the government that it can’t protect its people...It is one of the tools the guerrilla uses. Fear and intimidation.

The sending of signals here is key. What made this conversation so telling is that what this young man (a person of considerable influence in both the CDF and LURD) described was a war time logic that he was prepared to apply on either side of the Sierra Leone/Liberia border. In other words, whether his next step was to fight against the government of Liberia or for the government of Sierra Leone was basically irrelevant. This was the logic of war. War is the sending of messages through the bodies of non-combatants, through the kind of excessive violence that could capture attention and convey to an audience that one exists as a visual subject. By that late stage of the war in Sierra Leone, in which the CDF had become thoroughly enmeshed in the logic of capitalist modes of production, the thing that mattered was the virtuoso performance of violence. There were a limited number of roles one could play as a militia fighter, a limited selection of scripts from which a combatant could read. In the attention economy, “to look is to labor,” and to be seen is profitable.

* * *

Hassan Jalloh understands the ecstacy of communication. He is the Minister of Enjoyment.

That, at least, was his title in 2007, when he campaigned for the People’s Movement for Democratic Change Party in Sierra Leone’s August national elections. Before that, Jalloh was a ground commander for the CDF when they took over the town of Kenema. He led a group of Special Forces, mostly Liberians or youth who could claim citizenship on either side of the Sierra Leone/Liberia border. Many were veterans of the Liberian war who were recruited into the Special Forces because they had a modicum of training and considerable experience in the bush.
Jalloh achieved some notoriety during his time in Kenema for his occult power and his prowess at the front. A British video team interviewed Jalloh in Kenema in 1998, during which he describes the God-given power of the kamajors, whose bullet-proofing capabilities are too awesome to be understood even by those who use them. In the video, Jalloh is the face of the African warrior. “We are the kamajors,” he says into the camera, “we actually came down from the acts of the Almighty Allah. It’s a spiritual something which I cannot tell you much about…I am working with a spiritual something I don’t know, but I believe in it and I believe in God.” The British narrator then goes on to describe a “primitive war” in which “age-old African magic serves as self protection for modern political ideals.” Surrounding Jalloh as he speaks are young men eager to push themselves and their weapons into the frame of the camera. Many are dressed in their battle garb, smiling for the camera or marching with exaggerated swagger down the largely deserted streets of Kenema. What from the point of view of the filmmakers is evidence of tribalism and pre-modernity, appears from the point of view of Jalloh and the men around him as a consciousness of being filmed and a deliberate effort to play up the African warrior mystique. This, they know, is what the camera wants.

It is the next phase in Jalloh’s career that is perhaps most telling about the circulation of images—and violence—in the digital age. In 2006 and then again in 2007, Jalloh led what he referred to as a “culture troupe” to the Kanilai International Cultural Festival in the Gambia, a pan-West African event sponsored by Gambian President Yahya Jammeh. The Kanilai Festival, as the President’s spokesman put it in one interview, is meant to “accord us all to learn culture.” Jalloh’s group twice took the trophy in Mystic Performance. They did so by demonstrating feats associated with their occult abilities as kamajors (the fighters in the Sierra Leone war who claimed to be immune to the bullets of their enemies). The culture troupe was Jalloh’s Special Forces rebranded—though only barely. When I interviewed Jalloh in Bo in 2006, he described how he won that year’s competition by catching bullets in his teeth. Press coverage of the 2007 competition described how “the Sierra Leonean contingent performed wonders when Hassan Jalloh transformed a dying or already dead man to life.” When they are not in the Gambia, Jalloh and his troupe are based in Bo, available to perform miracles for hire at local celebrations or, as Jalloh put it, to teach young people about their culture and the effectiveness of mystical powers. Jalloh demonstrated once again that he knows how to
perform the African warrior on an international stage, and how to make it profitable.

During the 2007 national elections, Jalloh and his men took to the streets on the PMDC's designated marching day in Bo. In a rainbow colored jump suit, waving his fly whisk, Jalloh declared himself the PMDC's Minister of Enjoyment. Flopping on the pavement, springing into the air, the lanky Minister promised to use his power of miracles to transform the future of Sierra Leonean youth through Party power. His march day antics had a satirical edge, but there was something strikingly earnest in every one of Jalloh’s performances. It seemed to matter little to Jalloh in which venue he performed his kamajor-ness. What mattered was that people paid attention.

Walter Benjamin’s "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (2003) suggests a profound ambivalence about the future being constructed through new imaging technology. Though it offered the possibility of democratizing art by breaking down the aura and the inaccessibility that surrounded high culture, it simultaneously eroded the possibility for coherent narrative. The camera, Benjamin argued, allowed every act to be evaluated individually, without reference to the totality of a performance. Narrative was sure to suffer. Storytelling in the age of imaging technology would become a rather incoherent art of mixing and matching images out of context and without an overarching storyline (cf. Benjamin 1968).

Hassan Jalloh put Benjamin’s fears to productive use. There is no coherent narrative that can connect the kamajor as a village hunter to the kamajor as a militia fighter to the kamajor as a mystic performer in a cultural dance troupe competing in a Gambian arts festival. Instead, what we have is a repeating image put profitably to different uses in different contexts. It is a mix and match, sampling aesthetic. Violence is abstracted here, unmoored from any kind of firm grounding in the political image of the kamajor. Hassan Jalloh can labor as a militia fighter catching his enemies’ bullets as he takes over the town of Kenema or he can labor as a cultural performer catching bullets for the amusement of President Jammeh and the cultural edification of West Africa. Both are productive labors and for Hassan Jalloh they are not all that qualitatively distinct.

What is most troubling about Jalloh’s story is that it illustrates a flattening out of the possibilities for male youth in the digital age. The
“being-looking-at-ness” of these youth, their constitution as visual subjects, offers them a fairly limited range of scripts from which they can craft a productive future. Jalloh, the Minister of Enjoyment, enacts his role in a host of circumstances but can’t arrive at an alternative to playing the kamajor. The virtuoso moment of performing violence comes with a decreasing range of options for how a subject imagines the future. It forecloses spaces of innovation. Jalloh refines his image as a kamajor, but like many young men who participated in the militia he cannot imagine too many possibilities for the post-conflict landscape that do not continue to rely on that image. The future “performances” that militia fighters envisioned for themselves, at least the ones that seemed attainable, were mostly those reminiscent of the role they had played during the war. Jalloh was, perhaps, more creative than many when he took his show on the road to Gambia and stages around Sierra Leone. For most, the continuation of their role as fighters in the region’s war meant moving to new battlefields in Liberia, Guinea, or Côte d’Ivoire, or pursuing the violent labor of work in the diamond fields and campaign trails that deploy the bodies of young men.

Conclusion
There is nothing new in the idea that the visual matters in Africa. From the introduction of the camera as a colonial tool there has been a contest between image makers and imaged subjects over the meaning of images, the paths by which they will circulate, and legitimate claims to authorship. Some of the most intriguing recent work in the anthropology of Africa has been work that deals with imaging technology and the meaning of the image in different spaces around the continent. Nor is it particularly novel to argue that image production is part of a larger, global economy of image making. Again, at least since the dawn of the colonial age, images of Africa have been commodities traded around the globe. That commodification has, in turn, been integral to the very production of African imagery.

What I have outlined in this essay are three veins in which the Mano River War suggests a new economy of vision. These mark a new moment, a postmodern moment in African image production. They were integral not only to the way the war was documented but to the way the war was fought.
The first is the sheer ubiquity of image producing technologies. Although a relatively under-covered war in the international media, video technology was present on these West African battlefields from the earliest days of Charles Taylor’s invasion of Liberia. The critical moments in the war were all documented in forms that circulated long afterward. Combatants produced many of their own images of their wartime activities, and they operated under the assumption that the war was catalogued as part of a constant visual archive. That archive might have been authored by live camera crews or by unmanned satellites, but there was a ubiquity of vision with which one needed constantly to reckon.

Second was the speed by which these wartime images traveled. There was in this war an expectation of instantaneity. One could appeal to the camera and be seen in real time. At the disarmament center in Bo in 2000, Mama Munda grabbed me by the arm and insisted that I broadcast over the BBC that her Kasela War Council boys were being denied access to the center. Her plea was for immediate media intervention, not an unreasonable expectation in the age of the internet and satellite tools of communication. What the digital has made possible, and what combatants in West Africa knew they made possible, was instantaneous and direct intervention in the micro-dynamics of daily living.

Finally, combatants in the Mano River War understood that the audiences for their images were abstract, or at very the least unknowable. Producing images for the postmodern media landscape means producing images with no real sense of who might see them or why. The calculus of how and why one makes certain actions visible is divorced from the question of audience; to be seen is known to be profitable and becomes an end in itself. When anyone and everyone is potentially watching, the world as a whole is the audience for one’s performance. ■

ENDNOTES

1I use the term “Mano River War” to describe two decades of regional instability made up of local, national, and trans-border violent events. For a more complete explanation of this umbrella term, see Hoffman (2011a, 2011b).


3This video is the subject of a great deal of writing about the war in Liberia. See, for example, Ellis (1999:9-12) and Utas (2006).

4This film, later titled “The History of the RUF,” is described in more detail in Gberie (2005:60-61).
The fact that the website still listed those options in early 2009, long after Foday Sankoh’s death and the end of Condeoleza Rice’s tenure as Secretary of State was both surreal and disturbing. Like the film Blood Diamond (2006), released four years after the end of the Sierra Leone war, it gave the impression of an eternally present African warfare. Sierra Leone, the website seemed to suggest, will always be at war.

Critiques of this tendency in Africanist anthropology are made by Ferguson (1999, 2006:155-175) and Weiss (2005).

This is an idea that I explore further in Hoffman 2011a.

The kamajors traced their mystical powers to the pre-war figure of the kamajoisia, village hunters in Mende communities who could harness occult powers in pursuit of large game and other threats of the forest.

Parts of this interview were still available online as of March 2009. See http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7n1Sp0wAAu1g.


REFERENCES


