

## SUMMER WORKSHOP

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# Something Is Happening Outside

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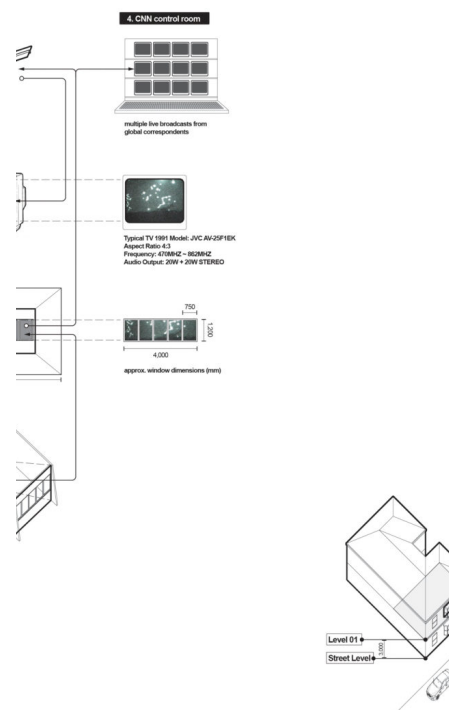


Diagram of two vision machines: Al-Rashid Hotel, Baghdad (left), and Sydney apartment (right). [All diagrams by Endriana Audisho]

Something is happening outside ...

— Bernard Shaw, CNN Live, January 16, 1991

Two window frames: Frame one, measuring 1.2 meters high by 3.8 meters wide, belongs to level nine of the high-rise Al-Rashid Hotel in Baghdad.<sup>1</sup> Frame two, 1.8 meters high by 1.5

meters wide, belongs to the study in my level-one Sydney apartment. Two types of screens: the first on televisions in the homes of a global audience glued to Cable News Network's live coverage of the Gulf War in 1991, and the second on my 13-inch Macbook Pro, which during the COVID-19 lockdown of 2020 has mediated my relationship to the outside through the multi-frame Zoom interface and daily news reports. Four vision machines<sup>2</sup> that simulate<sup>3</sup> representations of two conflicts.

How might the pandemic, which we are experiencing in real time, relate to broadcast-news coverage of the Gulf War conflict in the early 1990s?

Both events have required confinements of the body as a consequence of the risk involved in travelling outside, either to the battlefield of Baghdad or to the social areas where COVID-19 might spread. Both the hotel window and the laptop screen transform into vision machines linking the confined viewer to the larger world. Each scenario depends on complex spatial conditions that dismantle distinctions between closeness and distance — a blurring that entails different levels of risk and of simulation, depending on whether one is physically experiencing, witnessing and reporting on, or solely receiving reports of an event.

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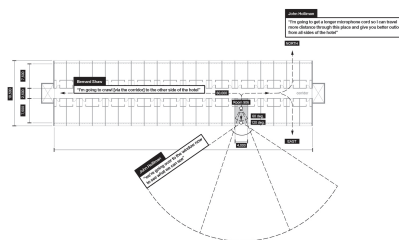
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the early 1990s?

On January 16, 1991, three CNN correspondents sheltered in a room on the ninth floor of the Al-Rashid Hotel in Baghdad, as U.S. and allied airstrikes hit the city. They reported live what they could see from their window. The reliance on the architectural element to report — to convey some sense of ground-truthing, from nine floors up — is made evident through the reporters' repeated references to the window. Two minutes into the coverage, at 6:41 pm EST, John Holliman states, “we're going over to the window now to see what we can see.” A moment later he adds, “I'm getting away from the window here now” as crackling sounds disrupt the audio reportage.

Unlike the zooming capacities of a digital camera, the fixed frame of the building window meant that, although the trapped correspondents could view what was happening from “up close” — they really were in Baghdad — they could do so only from their single vantage point in the hotel room. They could record audio but not video; the phosphor-green night-vision video clips and photographs of Baghdad that became iconic as representations of the Gulf War were not transmitted until a few days after the start of the conflict. Bernard Shaw's equivocal announcement on January 16 that “something is happening outside” establishes an immediate visual connection between the interior of the hotel and the city; however, this statement also suggests a speculative and disembodied engagement, one that anticipates but cannot (yet) confirm the real. The cropped and distanced eyewitness view, and consequent uncertainty in the reportage, opens a gap that is filled by interpretation on the part of the reporter. Then, as the news stories were processed by CNN in their studios, this interpretation was amplified by visual simulation as the reporter's words were overlaid with maps and diagrams onscreen.<sup>4</sup>



### Diagram of movement by CNN reporters in Al-Rashid Hotel, Baghdad, on January 16, 1991.

CNN’s first-hand account was relayed live on television to a global audience that experienced — within the comfort and safety of their homes — a simulation of the conflict, as if they were also in the hotel room. We can argue that live reporting imparts some version of the truth; if nothing else, one is present at an event. But the images that audiences came to associate with the war, veiling the city with a grainy green filter, introduced what *The New Yorker* has described as an “eerie, remote-control quality.”<sup>5</sup> Confronted by this spectacle, viewers did not witness images of the battlefield itself, but rather images of the effects of one technology (night-vision) transposed to another (the television screen). As Jean Baudrillard asks, in *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*, “how is it that a real war did not generate real images?”<sup>6</sup>

Fast-forward almost three decades, and we are facing another conflict mediated through windows and screens. This time, the windows are in our homes; Zoom interfaces appear on our screens, and the conflict is the pandemic. We consume the global media spectacle whilst remaining geographically disconnected, confined to our private spaces. In lockdown and quarantine, the window and the screen become the vision machines linking us to the outside.

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It seems that the closer we think a screen is bringing us to a conflict, the further we fall into simulations.

My window faces a main road that on a normal day would be choked with traffic. From March 12, when the WHO officially declared the pandemic, to May 1, when restrictions began to ease in Sydney, the view from my window stayed as empty as the street — a constant reminder of the ghostly quality of the crisis as I was experiencing it. Stuck with the same view for weeks, I turned to popular social-media hashtags such as [#ViewFromMyWindow](#) to discover distant views up close, as a substitute for travel. Zoom portals have also facilitated a sense of connection, stitching together multiple locations and time zones. It’s currently 6 pm (AEST) in Sydney, 11am (EEST) in Beirut, 10 am in (SAST) Johannesburg: three time zones I have been working across to reach my colleagues. Unlike television viewers in 1991, who were simply subjected to screens and the broadcasts

they relayed, with Zoom I can choose to connect to multiple interlocutors at one time. I can also curate my background, if not my reality. Each multi-screen Zoom portal can act as a simulation; I can switch the green-screen setting on and present myself, confined in Sydney, afloat on a virtual background of, let's say, Honolulu. Or I can disengage by muting, switching my video off, or simply zooming away with a click of the "Leave Meeting" button.

The window and the screen, which have furnished an apparatus for seeing and connecting in both CNN's live coverage and the COVID-19 pandemic, raise fundamental questions regarding our relationships to the complex realities of these conflicts. Of course, such experience is neither disembodied nor mediated for everyone; self-isolation, social distancing, and access to screens are privileged options. The citizens of Baghdad and the essential workers of the pandemic were and are fighting on frontlines, embodied and unmediated. Yet they are news consumers too, and returning from frontlines to the interiors of their homes — or checking their phones while at work — they too fall into the simulated, as screen-views frame and dominate reality. It seems that the closer we think we are getting to the conflicts, as these are facilitated by screens, the further we fall into these simulations. The view from my window is a reminder that I have only been viewing up-close from a distance.

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## NOTES

1. I derived this measurement of the Al-Rashid window by examining images of the hotel interior and extrapolating from the standardized height of the door.
2. Paul Virilio describes a vision machine as an apparatus that "would be capable not only of recognising the contours of shapes, but also of completely interpreting the visual field, of staging a complex environment close-up or at a distance." Paul Virilio, *The Vision Machine*, trans. Julie Rose (London: British Film Institute, 1994), 59.
3. Simulation is to be understood in Baudrillardian terms as the inability to distinguish reality from its representation, in that the copy has replaced the real. Simulation differs from representation as it substitutes signs of the real for the real, while representation assumes an equivalency between the sign and the real. See Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1981).
4. In the first 24 hours of coverage, audiences saw *images* of the war, and of Baghdad, framed through a montage of broken live audio, shifts between and among reports from 19 CNN correspondents in multiple television studios, minimally detailed maps, and diagrams of the city. See video at *Operation Desert Storm – CNN Live News Coverage – Part 1* (archived on YouTube in 2013).

5. William Finnegan, "The Talk of the Town," *The New Yorker* (January 28, 1991), 21.
6. Jean Baudrillard, *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 82.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



### ENDRIANA AUDISHO

Endriana Audisho is completing a Ph.D. at the University of Technology Sydney, considering journalistic accounts of conflict in the Middle East in relation to architectural discourse. She has received the Object Gallery Award for Design Excellence and the New South Wales Architects Registration Board's Byera Hadley Travel Scholarship, and has been nominated for the Australian Institute of Architects Design Medal. In 2019, she was awarded a research residency by Canadian Centre for Architecture. Endriana is a lecturer and interdisciplinary-electives course director in the School of Architecture at UTS.

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