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Clausewitzian Coup d'Oeil: The Extraordinary Intuition of the War Genius

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Abstract

The Clausewitzian concept of the *coup d'oeil* is seen as an extraordinary form of intuition, distinct from the tact of judgement. Although this concept is not unrelated to the tactical *coup d'oeil* of 18th-century military writers, it differs in the breadth of the conceptual system into which Clausewitz integrates it. Within this system, the concept also differs from contemporary notions of “strategic intuition” or “battlefield *coup d'oeil*”.

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Introduction

Having previously explored the relationship between the Greek concept of *anakhínoia* and the *coup d'oeil* of the military writers of the 18th century, this article will take a closer look at the meaning that Clausewitz gave to the term. The aim is to show that the meaning given to the term by the author of *On War* differs significantly from contemporary concepts of “strategic intuition”, “battlefield *coup d'oeil*” or *coup d'oeil* understood as “adaptive tactical expertise”, all inspired by Clausewitz. The latter was not directly concerned with the tactical or operational dimension of the concept – seizing the right moment for a manoeuvre, identifying the decisive point in a theatre of operations. His *coup d'oeil* has a different scope. It is one of the central concepts of Clausewitzian theory, even if its use in *On War* is rather infrequent (three occurrences, all in the same chapter).

The concept of the *coup d'oeil* is a kind of intuition, most commentators on *On War* agree. Although it is close to that of “tact of judgement”, Clausewitz gives it a more intuitive meaning and places it firmly at the strategic level of his thought. From this point of view, the *coup d'oeil* is closely linked to the genius for war – which is very explicit in *On War* – but also to concepts of uncertainty, the calculation of probability, and politics, which is more implicit.

Why did Clausewitz choose the expression?

The term *coup d'oeil* only occurs in *On War* and not in any of the author's earlier strategic writings. It should also be noted that the three occurrences of the term are all in chapter 3 of Book 1 – devoted to “the genius for war”, which is obviously no coincidence – that is to say, in a part of the work written late, i.e., probably after 1827. The idea Clausewitz was attempting to develop was already present in his early writings, although he did not initially use the term *coup d'oeil*. In his *Strategy* of 1804, the author lists several attributes of the mind in his discussion on the qualities of the commander-in-chief. In addition to ease of understanding (*leichte Fassungskraft*), clarity of representation (*Deutlichkeit in seinen Vorstellungen*), and sound judgement (*richtige Urteilskraft*), the general's mind must also have the ability to “quickly see” or assess a situation (*schnellen Überblick*).¹ *Überblick* could certainly be understood, at least in French, as *coup d'oeil*, but the word here does not have the meaning that Clausewitz gave later to the term in *On War*; in *Strategy*, *Überblick* is the ability to have an overall view, to grasp with the eyes, and not the *coup d'oeil* that Clausewitz later conceptualised.

Reading Book VIII of *On War*, however, reveals a problem: *Überblick* seems to be used in a way that makes it synonymous with *coup d'oeil*.² Significantly, as Antulio Echevarria notes, the English translations render *Überblick* as *coup d'oeil* in this case.³ The same is true of the French translations.⁴ Was Clausewitz hesitant in his terminology or lacking in conceptual rigour? Another explanation might be that the terms he chose reflect different stages of maturing ideas. Firstly, he would have used the term *Überblick* again, but to develop different ideas from those of 1804. Secondly, he would have considered the term *coup d'oeil* to be a better terminological alternative. It would be necessary to know exactly when Chapter 3 of Book I and Chapter 1 of Book VIII were revised in order to answer this question. For our purposes, we shall

be content to note that Clausewitz belatedly recognised the value of the concept of the *coup d'oeil*.

This expression was first coined – in its military sense – by Jean-Charles de Folard. Since the biographers of the author of *On War* believe that he had read the French military writer, it would be easiest to assume that his approach was inspired by Folard. But the explanation is far too simplistic. First, because it is difficult to discern any influence of Folard on Clausewitz. Second, because the term *coup d'oeil* was widely used and polysemic in military theory in the 18th century. Third, because the use of French expressions – very few in *On War* – is paradoxical for a writer who considered French a language of prefabricated thoughts (*lauter gemachte Gedanken*).⁵

Clausewitz didn't have to read Folard to get to know the concept; all he had to do was to read Frederick II, who had made it his own by keeping it in its French form.⁶ The real question is: why did Clausewitz use this expression and not its German equivalents, such as Scharnhorst's *militärischer Blick* or Bülow's *militärisches Augenmaß*?⁷ The explicit answer given in *On War* is that the *coup d'oeil* has less visual connotations (more on this later); this was probably true for German-speaking readers of the book. But two other factors may have influenced Clausewitz's choice. On the one hand, he wanted to distance himself from Bülow, some of whose ideas he had taken up – without naming him. On the other hand, he was looking for a concept that would encompass a multi-sensory meaning, including what we might now call a cognitive-emotional aspect. This applied to the idea of *coup d'oeil*. Gotthard Christoph Müller defined it as a fine, precise sense (*Gefühl*) of space and time in his *Militärische Encyklopädie*.⁸ As for Johann Caspar Lavater, he believed that the *coup d'oeil* combines insight (*Hellblick*), brilliance (*Glanzblick*), and speed (*Schnellblick*).⁹ Lavater's use of three terms posed a problem for the translator of the work into English, who opted for a single term: "intuition".¹⁰

Peter Paret mentions that Clausewitz was a reader of the Swiss historian Johannes von Müller and that Müller was a reader of Lavater, but says nothing about whether Clausewitz was a reader of Lavater.¹¹ Although Lavater's *Handbibel fuer Leidenden* was on Clausewitz's library shelves, it is impossible to prove that Carl or Marie read the author's most famous work on physiognomy. All we can say is that this cognitive-emotional connotation was in the air then.

What is the visual part of the *coup d'oeil*?

First of all, it is important to reject the idea that Clausewitz's "emphasis on the *coup d'oeil* is an accurate reflection of the importance of topography in the post-revolutionary French military ventures".¹² His approach is the opposite, the question being how much visuality remains in his conception of *coup d'oeil*. More specifically, it involves determining the relationship between the mind's eye (*geistige Auge*) – according to Clausewitz's famous definition – and the bodily organ.¹³ At first sight, the relationship seems cumulative. This is Thomas David Pilcher's interpretation in his rough translation: "By *coup d'oeil* is meant a correct survey not only by the physical but also by the mental eye".¹⁴ This point of view is also taken in the much more interesting studies by Echevarria and Christian Müller.¹⁵

However, another interpretation is that the relationship is not one of association but of dissociation. The cumulative connotation of Pilcher's previous quotation is absent from the original version, which states rather an opposition.

Clausewitz writes that the *coup d'oeil* denotes not simply (*nicht bloß*) the physical eye, but more frequently (*häufiger*) the mental eye. It is not a characterisation of the dual way in which the *coup d'oeil* works, but a distinction between two meanings of the term. What follows is even more explicit, as Clausewitz wants to strip (*entkleiden*) the concept of its visual connotations.¹⁶ In fact, an opposition between the concepts of *Augenmaß* and *coup d'oeil* underlies the construction of this part of the chapter devoted to genius. Howard and Paret's translation reflects this by associating the first of these words with "a name which refers to visual estimates only".¹⁷ This name – the *Augenmaß* – implies a limited meaning (*beschränkten Bedeutung*), which the author clearly wants to expand. If this is an indirect criticism of Bülow – whom Clausewitz does not name – it is an unfair one. Indeed, Bülow's "military-strategic *Augenmaß*" was clearly not limited to the "oeil" understood as an organ.¹⁸

For both Clausewitz and Bülow, the concept of *coup d'oeil* was emancipated from its initial visual and topographical anchorage. The author of *On War* obviously does not ignore the importance of terrain and the general's appreciation of it, but he places it in a different conceptual category, which he simply calls sense of locality (*Ortssinn*).¹⁹ In this respect, Lorraine Daston's comparison between Clausewitz and Pierre Alexandre Joseph Allent – a high-ranking French military engineer – has its limitations, since they do not use the term *coup d'oeil* in the same sense. The Prussian author is concerned with warfare in general, with the genius for war; and he is interested in the intuitive judgement that guides the general's decisions. The French writer, on the other hand, is concerned with military reconnaissance, the tasks entrusted to staff officers, and he is interested in the appreciation of the shape of the terrain, the disposition of the troops, and their movements. However, Daston is right to point out that Allent, at least at his own scale, celebrated the "unconscious tact of the body at the expense of the conscious exactitude of the mind", and that such an intuitive approach was gradually seen as a source of error in the course of the 19th century.²⁰ Clausewitz's approach also touches on the realm of intuition. But it is not really about the "tact of the body"; it's more about judgement.

The *coup d'oeil* is an attribute of cognition that Clausewitz deliberately distinguishes from seeing. This does not mean that seeing does not play a role in the mental process in which the *coup d'oeil* is also involved. Rather, the author is attempting to isolate one aspect of this process conceptually.

How is the *coup d'oeil* defined?

In *On War*, the definition of the concept is rather convoluted: an inner light (*inneren Licht*) that leads to truth (*Wahrheit*) in the darkness (*Dunkelheit*) of the mind or understanding (*Verstand*).²¹ In contrast to the enumerative approach of 1804, Clausewitz here seeks to specify the conditions under which the mental and moral manifestations (*Äußerungen der Geistes- und Seelenkräfte*) involved in war are exercised. Since war is the domain of chance (*Zufall*) and uncertainty (*Ungewißheit*), the general must demonstrate a superior ability to overcome the unexpected, which Clausewitz calls presence of mind (*Geistesgegenwart*).²² This presence of mind is itself the product of insight and resolution (*Entschlossenheit*) in a process that Raymond Aron outlined in his analysis of Book 1, chapter 3, but without paying sufficient attention to the notion of *coup d'oeil*.

As Aron explains, Clausewitz's argument begins with the courage (*Mut*) necessary to assume one's responsibilities and ends with the determination (*Entschlossenheit*) that the general must show in a context of uncertainty.²³ Between courage and determination, however, there is an intermediate term, which is precisely *coup d'oeil*. This concept is much more closely related – the term comes from Clausewitz (*verwandten*) – to the concepts of resolution and presence of mind than is suggested by Aron, who also fails to highlight the idea of promptness associated with *coup d'oeil*. The author of *On War* is, however, very clear on this point: *Coup d'oeil* is nothing more (*nichts als*) than the instantaneous perception of a truth (*schnelles Treffen einer Wahrheit*) that remains invisible (*gar nicht sichtbar*) to the ordinary mind (*gewöhnlicher Blick des Geistes*), or which only becomes visible after long observation and mature reflection (*nach langem Betrachten und Überlegen*). It is therefore not only a question of understanding and penetrating judgement, but also of the speed of the process. While the ordinary mind has the greatest difficulty in dealing with the many factors it has to assess in the fog of war – the realm of uncertainty – the eye of the genius (*Blick des Genies*) discerns the significant factors that guide action. Clausewitz refers to a particular turn of mind or spirit (*einer eigentümlichen Richtung des Verstandes*) when he discusses the whole process in which the *coup d'oeil* is made.²⁴

How are we to understand this second definitional sketch, which conceives of *coup d'oeil* in terms of a capacity to rapidly perceive the truth? Clausewitz does not use the notion of intuitive knowledge (*anschauliche Erkenntnis*), which was widely developed at the time by Schopenhauer,²⁵ but he seems to come close to it when he speaks of the presentiment (*Ahnen*) and intuition (*Herausfühlen*) of the truth according to which one must act (*der Wahrheit, nach welcher gehandelt werden muß*).²⁶ The concept of truth must not be misinterpreted. It has the same meaning as in the first sketch of the definition of *coup d'oeil*, or in the passage where the author mentions the gaze of a mind that senses the truth (*mit dem Blick eines die Wahrheit überall ahnenden Geistes träfe*): the truth here is the right decision that the genius discerns in the fog of war. As Lukas Milevski has pointed out, the Clausewitzian *coup d'oeil* refers not only to understanding a situation through an “act of intuitive imagination”, but also to identifying the solution.²⁷ To be precise, one could say that *coup d'oeil* implies finding the solution which terminologically corresponds to the truth. It's a kind of “flair for essentials”, as Howard points out.²⁸

The explanation of the origin of this capacity to anticipate is not clear in the chapter on the genius for war. It is a matter of sensitivity or temperament (*Gemüt*) and understanding or intellect (*Verstand*), but it is unclear how the combination (*Legierung*) between these two components takes place.²⁹

The most explicit answer is not to be found in the chapter on genius, but in the chapter on friction. After stating that the understanding (*Kenntnis*) of friction is an essential part of the experience of war (*Kriegserfahrung*), Clausewitz specifies that it is this experience that offers the “practice of judgement” (*Übung des Urteils*) through which a general will form the ideas that will guide his action. At the end of the chapter, he uses the famous expression *Takt [tact] seines Urteils* [judgement], which is difficult to interpret and therefore to translate.³⁰

What exactly does the term “tact of judgement” mean?

The importance of this concept has been much commented upon: it is considered to be the essence of what Clausewitz

calls the genius for war.³¹ The origins of his ideas regarding “tact of judgement” have been the object of debate and controversy among scholars. Similarities with the Kantian notion of *logischer Takt* are undeniable, but it is an exaggeration to assume, as Hartmut Böhme does, that there is a “complete correspondence” between the two approaches.³² As Ernest Vollrath has shown, it is not necessary to refer to Johann Gottfried Kiesewetter – a student of Kant and teacher at the military academy attended by Clausewitz at the beginning of the 19th century – to explain the development of the concept of the *Takt des Urteils*.³³ Its foundations lay in the intellectual debate of the time, and the scholarly circles that Clausewitz frequented in Berlin in the 1810s and 1820s were good incubators of ideas.

Anders Engberg-Pedersen has pointed out that in fields as diverse as philosophy, pedagogy, music, and literature, the concept of *Takt* was widely disseminated in the early 19th century.³⁴ He also notes that Clausewitz shared the pedagogue Johann Friedrich Herbart’s view that tact cannot be reduced to theoretical maxims.³⁵ Similarly, Alexander von Humboldt’s casual linking of the concepts of experience, judgement, and tact is also close to the ideas developed by Clausewitz a few years later. In his travelogues, the naturalist refers to the long experience (*lange Erfahrung*) of the Mexican Indians in the cultivation of agave, which enabled them to acquire a sound judgement (*sicheres Urteil*), or rather, as Humboldt put it, *einen richtigen* [correct] *Takt*.³⁶ More important than a decisive intellectual influence in the emergence of the concept of *Takt des Urteils* is the polysemy of the word *Takt*, which in German today, or in Clausewitz’s time, is more important than the English and French terms “tact”.

Takt can mean the act of touching (*Berührung*), a quick feeling (*schnelles Gefühl*), a fine sense (*feines Gefühl*), the quality of being sensitive (*Feingefühl*), a measure of time (*Tonmaß*), a sound step (*Tonschritt*), or a certain duration of the sound (*bestimmte Dauer des Tones*).³⁷ However, Clausewitz does not always use the word in the same sense, as the end of the chapter on friction shows. First of all, the author opposes the theory to *Takt*, stating that the latter is identified with the practice of judgement (*Übung des Urteils*). The meaning of the word seems to connote a finesse of judgement sharpened by experience, but one of the translators of *On War* also discerns a tactile connotation, i.e., the ability to *touch* the object of reflection.³⁸ Engberg-Pedersen has also emphasised the importance of this tactile connotation in Clausewitz’s use of the term.³⁹

The immediately following analogy, which introduces the expression *Takt seines Urteils*, brings in another meaning of the word, which is the quality of being sensitive: the tact of the gentleman (*Weltmann*) who always speaks, acts, and moves appropriately.⁴⁰ In other occurrences of the term – there are nine in *On War* – *Takt des Urteils* refers more to the speed of judgement and thus to the role of *coup d’oeil*. This is the case in the famous passage in the last part of the book, devoted to the plan of war, where Clausewitz contrasts the intuition of judgement with logical reasoning in order to define war as an art (*Kunst*) and a skill (*Fertigkeit*).⁴¹ In short, the invariable translation of *Takt des Urteils* as “tact of judgment” does not always convey the subtlety in the original meaning, including the rhythmic connotation of the term in German.

According to Panajotis Kondylis, Clausewitz’s approach implies that it is not possible to give a precise definition of the tact of judgement; he sees it as a refined instinct (*verfeinerten Instinkt*) and contrasts it with the logical activity of the intellect.⁴² Conceptually, there is a close relationship between the notions of *coup d’oeil* and *Takt des Urteils*. But Ulrike Kleemeier makes an important point: the *coup d’oeil* “may indicate a more intuitive response”. She is right, and that’s why it is

important not to treat the two concepts as “synonyms”.⁴³ Before we return to this question, however, it is important to look at the concept of the genius.

What is genius?

Genius is one of the most difficult concepts to grasp when analysing Clausewitz. In *On War*, the term has several meanings. In some cases, it refers to a person of superior mental (*Seelenkräfte*) ability. In *On War*, the term seldom has this denotation; it occurs once in a negative formulation, meaning that Charles XII and Henry IV are not considered warrior geniuses; another is in the passage where Clausewitz states that it is rare to find a warrior genius (*kriegerisches Genie*) among primitive peoples.⁴⁴ Sometimes the term is used to describe a specific mental capacity found at all levels of the military hierarchy, from “top to bottom”.⁴⁵ The use of the term in this sense is as marginal as the previous one. As for the dominant meaning of the term, it refers to a concept – which Milevski rightly sees as holistic – that characterises the specific mental dispositions of the outstanding commander-in-chief that enable him to find his way in the fog of war.

Clausewitz’s concept of genius derives partly from the figures who are its concrete manifestation – Frederick II and Napoleon – and partly from Kantian philosophy, as Hew Strachan has pointed out.⁴⁶ It is difficult, however, to determine the exact nature of Kant’s influence. Aron’s view is that this influence is indirect and limited.⁴⁷ Paret is more nuanced: Clausewitz forged his concept of genius, perhaps by studying Kant’s *Critique of Judgment*, but more certainly in the lectures given by Kiesewetter.⁴⁸ Azar Gat, Youri Cormier, and José FernándezVega, to name but a few, all share this interpretation.⁴⁹ But the question is: why, then, didn’t he keep Kiesewetter’s distinction between *Genie* and *Kopf* (a brain)? A *Genie* is active in the field of art, creating original works for others to admire, but without the ability to reproduce their creative process, which the genius cannot teach. A *Kopf* is active in the field of science and knowledge and is involved in innovative activities; others, to whom he can teach his discoveries, can understand and use his knowledge.⁵⁰ Clausewitz’s approach to the tension between the theory and practice (the art) of war was entirely consistent with such a distinction.

In any case, the key to understanding Clausewitz’s approach to the concept of genius lies, as Aron has suggested, in the manuscript on *Art Theory*, probably written in the early 1820s.⁵¹ Concerning the relationship between the laws of an art theory (*Gesetzen einer Kunsttheorie*) and the creative power of the artist – or productive force (*hervorbringende Kraft*) – Clausewitz makes clear that this power is completely independent of the theory (*diese Kraft ist von der Theorie ganz unabhängig*) and that it resides in talent, which is characterised by the term genius, when it has reached an eminent height (*eine vorzügliche Höhe*). To be more precise, theory can give direction (*Richtung*) to the creative power; but more often than not, talent follows its path without a guide (*geht seinen Weg meistens ohne Führen*), and the artist’s activity will very seldom be guided by a rule that is clearly before his eyes (*ihm deutlich vor Augen stehende Regel geleitet werden*).⁵²

The difference between the fine arts and the art of war lies not in the relationship between theory and creative power, but in the environment in which the creative power of the commander-in-chief is deployed, and in the fact that he is not manipulating an inert matter, but confronting another will.⁵³ This idea is revisited and clarified in *On War* through a double distinction: “In war, the will is directed at an animate object that reacts (*einen lebendigen, reagierenden*)”, not at inanimate

matter (*toten Stoff*), as is the case with the mechanical arts (*mechanischen Künste*), or at matter which is animate but passive and yielding, as in the fine arts.⁵⁴ As Andreas Herberg-Rothe has shown, Clausewitz was not thinking of just one reaction, but of the alternating reactions and counter-reactions that are part of conflictual interaction.⁵⁵

The *coup d'oeil* – as a cognitive attribute of the genius (the person) and as a component of the cognitive process that is also called genius – allows the will to be guided in the face of this “animated object that reacts”. It is the equivalent of the artist’s talent for the gifted general. But does it have the same relationship to the theory and the rules as the creative power of the artist? This question was approached from a slightly different angle in the interesting debate between Jon Sumida and Clifford Rogers on the ability of genius (the person) to rise above the rules.⁵⁶ Without going into the details of the controversy, we can say that there is a problem with the meaning of the term “rules”.

Clausewitz uses the concepts of laws (*Gesetzen*), rules (*Regeln*), principles (*Grundsätze*), doctrines (*Lehren*), procedures (*Verfahren*), and methods (*Methodismus*) – to be understood as schemes or modes of operation – in very different argumentative contexts. Any interrogation of the relationship between the concept of genius and any of these terms must take into account this argumentative context, and one should not over-simplify the question by ignoring the nuances in the other German concepts. In *On War*, there are only three passages in which the concept of genius is explicitly confronted with one or other of these notions. The first two do not pose any difficulty of interpretation: Clausewitz denounces the poor rules (*Betteltum von Regeln*) of war theories that do not integrate the genius factor. Indeed, he argues that one cannot formulate a positive doctrine of war (*eine positive Lehre ist unmöglich*) that does not integrate the genius factor, as it would then be in contradiction with reality.⁵⁷ In both cases, we are dealing with rules and doctrines that are not those of Clausewitz’s theory. The third passage deals with audacity (*Kühnheit*) and argues that this quality strongly supports the “higher calculation” – carried out in a flash and half unconsciously – performed through genius and tact of judgement (*höheren Kalküls, den das Genie, der Takt des Urteils in Blitzesschnelle und nur halb bewußt durchlaufen hat*, without violating the laws of probability (*Wahrscheinlichkeitsgesetzen*)).⁵⁸

The concept of laws of probability occurs four times in *On War* and only once in the chapter on genius, but the two concepts are closely related, even if the choice of words might suggest otherwise. The laws of probability make it possible to estimate (*geschätzt*) the multiple and indeterminate variables (*Größen*) that influence the course of war; faced with this complexity, the man of action (*Handelnder*) feels the truth of a glance (*Blick*) of the mind (*Geist*).⁵⁹ The “higher calculation” carried out in a flash by the tact of judgement is nothing other than the calculation of probability (*Wahrscheinlichkeitskalkül* and *Wahrscheinlichkeitsberechnung*) mentioned in some of the most famous passages of *On War*. It is not a calculation in the mathematical sense, but a capacity of the mind to grasp the truth. Aron calls this capacity “a kind of intuition”;⁶⁰ it is the cognitive capacity denoted by the concept of *coup d'oeil*.

The close connection between the concepts of *coup d'oeil*, genius, and the calculation of probability implies that the genius – in this case, the person who possesses the attribute of the same name – cannot actually violate the laws of probability, since he, by definition, masters them. Can he free himself from rules, principles, procedures, or methods? In fact, the question is wrongly put. The correct question is twofold: are these factors consciously at the root of the calculation of probability, and have they contributed to the formation of that exceptional ability that Clausewitz calls

genius?

As far as method is concerned, Clausewitz's answer seems categorical: method is part of tactics, not strategy. At the highest levels of the military hierarchy, its importance is even lost (*bis sie sich in den höchsten Stellen ganz verliert*).⁶¹ On closer inspection, however, the answer is more nuanced. In fact, generals resort to operational schemes either because they are trying to imitate a genius (Frederick II, Bonaparte) or because these schemes fit into the operational arrangements they want to achieve. Under these conditions, the influence of these patterns remains important at the highest level of the hierarchy as long as a true theory of war – that of Clausewitz – has not shaped the minds and judgements of generals. In other words, method shapes the judgement of generals without genius, who would benefit from a good theory of war that would open their minds. As for the exceptional men who possess that attribute of the mind, namely genius, they have necessarily been exposed to methods, but they possess the ability to emancipate themselves from it to operate the higher calculation that enables them to navigate the fog of war. What is true of method is also true of pre-established procedures.

The question of rules and principles is presented in the same perspective: Clausewitz links them more to tactics than to strategy. The example of a rule given in *On War* illustrates this: to attack the enemy with renewed energy when he withdraws his batteries from the battle, because this last action is an indication of the enemy's willingness to break off the engagement.⁶² Like principles, this rule must be present in the mind (*gegenwärtig*) of the man of action, and it may well have helped to shape his judgement. Can the exceptional general emancipate himself from it? Obviously, yes, since he has the option to let the enemy retreat without intervening. Because real wars do not always aim to destroy the enemy, rules and principles are only *conditionally* valid.⁶³ The problem is that Clifford Rogers, in his controversy with Jon Sumida, gives a different meaning to the term rule. The two examples of "rules" he uses actually correspond to the propositions (*Sätzen*) formulated by Clausewitz in his "Final Note".⁶⁴

These propositions state rather obvious realities, things that are, all things considered, easy to understand (*ganz evident*), and form the core of Clausewitzian theory of the art of war.⁶⁵ The function of this theory is to help acquire the vision of things (*Einsicht der Dinge*) – fused (*verschmolzen*) in thought (*Denken*) – which will make the march (*Gang*) of the man of action easier and safer.⁶⁶ Clausewitz does not use the terms *coup d'oeil* or intuition, but the idea is to compensate for the absence of this quality in generals who do not possess genius. Thus, the relationship between the concept of genius and theory in Clausewitz has little to do with the controversy about the relationship between the genius – the person – and the rules.

A final difficulty with the concept of genius is its relationship to the concept of tact or judgement. In an earlier passage of *On War*, the two concepts are apparently regarded as equivalent (*higher kalküls, den das Genie, der Takt des Urteils in Blitzesschnelle und nur halb bewußt durchlaufen hat*). But the "Final Note" offers a substantially different approach, which is in fact more coherent: the tact of judgement is an ordinary intuition that most generals use and which enables them to hit the mark more or less accurately (*mehr oder weniger gut trifft*) depending on their degree of genius (*mehr oder weniger Genie in ihnen ist*). On the other hand, the great generals – and this is, according to Clausewitz, what makes them great – always hit the mark with their intuition (*immer das Rechte trafen*). In other words, genius does not, strictly speaking, lie in

the tact of judgement, but in one of its extraordinary manifestations, namely extraordinary intuition: the *coup d'oeil*.⁶⁷ Engberg-Pedersen expresses this by pointing out that the *coup d'oeil* is at a higher level, far above the mental faculties that characterise the tact of judgement.⁶⁸

Is the *coup d'oeil* anything like a strategic intuition?

The concept of strategic intuition has been developed by William Duggan in a two-step process. In his book *Napoleon's Glance*, the author first took an interest in the Clausewitzian *coup d'oeil*, translating it simply – and incorrectly – by the term used in the title of his book, *glance*, and identifying it with what psychologists call “expert intuition”.⁶⁹ In a second phase, Duggan revises this approach by introducing the concept of strategic intuition, which he distinguishes from expert intuition. The mental mechanism (“intelligent memory”) of the two forms of intuition is similar, but one combines elements linked to the personal experience of the subject (his socialisation, his training), while the other combines elements external to individual experience (the experiences of others, lessons from history). Expert intuition is effective in familiar situations; strategic intuition enables us to face new situations by looking for solutions outside our own experience.⁷⁰ Duggan defines strategic intuition as: “The selective projection of past elements into the future in a new combination as a course of action that might or might not fit your previous goals, with the personal commitment to follow through and work out the details along the way”.⁷¹

The purpose here is not to discuss Duggan's methodology, definition, and conclusions. It is simply to raise two questions: Is his interpretation of Clausewitz's concept of *coup d'oeil* accurate? Can we understand the mental mechanisms of *coup d'oeil* from his approach to the cognitive characteristics of strategic intuition?

Duggan associates the three notions of resolution, presence of mind, and experience with the Clausewitzian *coup d'oeil*. The first two, as we have seen, are indeed closely associated with *coup d'oeil*; the problem lies in his approach to the notion of experience. According to Duggan, this experience is not only the personal experience of the general, but also historical experience (“examples from history”).⁷² However, there is a confusion here between the question dealt with in the chapter on the genius for war – in a section of the book dealing with the nature of war – and the question dealt with in the chapter on “examples”, which is in a part of the book that focuses on the theory of war. One should not confuse the spirit of resolution (*Entschlossenheit*) at the heart of action with the theory of war (*die Theorie der Kriegskunst*). The experience that nourishes the spirit of resolution is a concrete experience of war (*Kriegserfahrung*), which fosters the general's “practice” of judgement and, in turn, his know-how (*Fertigkeit*). This war experience is thus much closer to expert intuition than to strategic intuition as Duggan conceives it.

What's more, this experience of war is never directly linked to the *coup d'oeil*. Clausewitz certainly links it to the commander-in-chief's knowledge of friction (*Kenntnis dieser Friktion*) and considers that its duration allowed him to acquire a “knack”, according to the translation of *Takt* suggested by Howard and Paret.⁷³ But he never explicitly states that the *coup d'oeil* depends on personal experience and even less on historical examples. Duggan's claim that Clausewitz identified four “steps” of the *coup d'oeil* – examples from history, presence of mind, flash of insight itself, resolution – is

therefore difficult to accept. What is interesting, however, is his approach of making a distinction between two forms of intuition with different cognitive bases. The Clausewitzian *coup d'oeil* is certainly more than expert intuition; even if it does not fit Duggan's definition of strategic intuition, it is an extraordinary manifestation of the judgement (*Urteil*) raised to a marvellous insight of spirit or flash of genius (*wunderbaren Geistesblick*).⁷⁴ In short, the third concept that must be considered to understand the Clausewitzian conception of *coup d'oeil* is that of the genius for war. The experience of war is certainly at the root of the know-how of the general, whether good or mediocre; but what distinguishes the ordinary general from the great warrior is what might be called a particular cognitive configuration of that experience. This is the "inner light" illuminating the genius for war.

Does this inner light correspond to an original combination of examples from history, stored on the "shelves of the brain", that apply to a new situation?⁷⁵ Perhaps partly, but neuroscientists have proposed other hypotheses to explain creative thinking. According to Ariana Anderson and her colleagues, the neural mechanisms of highly creative people appear to work differently and have a unique pattern of brain connectivity compared to a control group.⁷⁶ She uses an air-traffic metaphor to describe her results: "In terms of brain connectivity, while everyone else is stuck in a three-hour layover at a major airport, the highly creatives take private planes directly to a distant destination".⁷⁷

In interpreting the results of their research on the inhibition of obvious associations, Caroline Di Bernardi Luft and her colleagues also adopted this idea of the "less travelled path". Their findings reveal how alpha brainwaves help inhibit habitual thinking for more inspired ones: "right-lateralized alpha is a core feature of creative cognition, which might underlie our capacity to override strong semantic associations that are shaped by prior experience".⁷⁸ The interest of this approach is that experience is not only a support for cognition, but can also be an obstacle to thinking differently. Clausewitz put it another way: routine (*Methodismus*) can cause the greatest poverty of mind (*die entschiedenste Geistesarmut*).⁷⁹

The Clausewitzian *coup d'oeil* is a brilliant intuition that takes the "less travelled path" and that, as we shall see, is conceptually located entirely in the realm of strategy. In this sense, it is indeed a strategic intuition, but one that has little to do with the meaning that Duggan gives to the term.

From tactic to strategy

Contemporary approaches to *coup d'oeil* are generally pre-Clausewitzian in the sense that they prioritise tactical *coup d'oeil*, closer to the *coup d'oeil* in action of 18th-century military writers. Trent Lythgoe is very explicit about this, seeing the *coup d'oeil* as an "adaptive tactical expertise".⁸⁰ This is also the case with Arthur Athens's "battlefield *coup d'oeil*".⁸¹ Even Duggan illustrates his approach to strategic intuition with examples that are actually tactical or operational (Bonaparte recognised the importance of the Aiguillette Fort when he besieged Toulon in 1793, while Patton identified Agrigento as the "decisive point" in the Battle of Sicily in 1943).⁸² These approaches have their own terminological coherence, based on the perspective of developing the intuitive skills of officers of all ranks. But they are at odds with Clausewitz's approach.

After Bülow, Clausewitz shifted *coup d'oeil* from the sphere of tactics to that of strategy. He admitted that the idea and the thing (*der Ausdruck wie die Sache*) are a priori more in the realm of tactics, according to the concept of the 18th century. But his approach is different. Sumida has correctly observed: Clausewitz “focuses his analytical effort on the commander-in-chief”.⁸³ For Clausewitz, if the *coup d'oeil* cannot be absent from strategic thinking, it is because of its main characteristic: its speed when quick decisions are required (*schnelle Entscheidungen erforderlich sind*). These decisions are those of the general, not those of an executor.

Why such a focus? Because at this level, war reveals itself in all its complexity, and because a deep gulf (*sehr große Kluft*) separates the commander-in-chief from his first subordinate in terms of intellectual activity (*Geistestätigkeit*; i.e., independent thought). This is where the frictions are highest, the uncertainties are greatest, the factors to take into account are so many, and the military and political spheres are closest to each other. This last point is particularly important: “On that level, strategy [*Kriegführung*] and policy coalesce: the commander-in-chief is simultaneously a statesman”.⁸⁴ Political factors are therefore also a part of this multiplicity of factors (*Größen*) that the *coup d'oeil* has to grasp.⁸⁵ It's no coincidence, then, that the two main figures – Frederick II and Napoleon – who, according to Clausewitz, epitomised military genius, both led their armies and led their states. Perhaps, as Aron points out, there was a “contradiction” between Clausewitz's definition of genius and Napoleon's statesmanship.⁸⁶ But the fact is that, for the author of *On War*, the political factor was conceptually linked to the idea of genius for war.

As the only cognitive component of the combination that makes up genius, the *coup d'oeil* helps to keep Clausewitz's conceptual system coherent. As Sumida pointed out, the concept makes it possible to manage – one might say rebalance – the problems posed by uncertainty.⁸⁷ The “inner light” means that the fog of war is not completely opaque and that insight can be gained. It makes it possible both to denounce the approaches of the positive theories of war and to justify the new theoretical approach proposed by Clausewitz. The former are incapable of integrating genius – and moral forces – into their analyses; the latter has the genius for the object: “What genius does is the best rule (*Regel*), and theory can do no better than show how and why this should be the case”.⁸⁸ From this approach follows the function of the theory of war: to help “the commander acquire those insights [*Einsicht der Dinge*] that, once absorbed into his way of thinking, will smooth and protect his progress”. Put differently, the extraordinary intuition of genius is the point of reference that allows theory to guide the ordinary intuition of an equally ordinary mind.

However, this approach poses a problem that could be described as a tension between the didactic ambition of the theory and the complexity of Clausewitz's thought. As Müller puts it, Clausewitz's theoretical path is intellectually very demanding, but it offers only reference points (*Orientierungspunkte*) for the development of autonomous analytical thought.⁸⁹ It is therefore just as likely to mislead an ordinary mind as it is to bring that mind close to genius. The difficulty of fully grasping what Clausewitz meant by a *coup d'oeil* suffices to illustrate this point.

Clausewitz does not explicitly address the question of the nature of the *coup d'oeil*, whether innate or acquired. But his approach to *Takt* – ordinary intuition – contains elements of an answer. Defined as an exercise in judgement (*Übung des Urteils*), *Takt* is likely to become almost a habit of thinking (*der fast zur Gewohnheit gewordene Takt seines Urteils*).⁹⁰ Of course, the possibility of improvement in intuition presupposes that it is, at least in part, an acquired skill. Clausewitz

suggests, however, that this deliberate improvement may make it possible to approach the *coup d'oeil* of genius, but certainly not to attain it. Two implicit reasons are at work here. The first has to do with a peculiar direction of the mind (*einer eigentümlichen Richtung des Verstandes*) of individuals: in the case of Frederick II and Napoleon, the harmonious combination of elements that made up their genius allowed them to exercise their *Takt* by taking the “less travelled path”. The second reason is conceptual. Clausewitz’s elevation of the tactical *coup d'oeil* to the level of strategy must necessarily include politics among the factors that enter into the calculation of probability. The strategic *coup d'oeil* is therefore logically more complex than the *coup d'oeil* in action of officers under the commander-in-chief.

This *coup d'oeil* in action resembles the shrewdness that the Greeks attributed to the most brilliant generals: an intuitive ability to seize and exploit the moment of opportunity. What we might call the intuition of the expert is certainly part of the process of forming the *coup d'oeil* of the genius, but the approach of the author of *On War* is conceptually more ambitious. Thinking of war in its totality (*das Ganze*), conceiving it as a non-linear phenomenon, to use Alan Beyerchen’s expression, and defining it in relation to politics, Clausewitz cannot have a narrow conception of the *coup d'oeil*. It is not simply a matter of seizing an opportunity on the battlefield or a decisive point on the map of operations, but of navigating the full complexity of war, including its non-military dimensions.

Even in his day, Clausewitz saw war as an extremely complex phenomenon with multiple factors, now more than ever. However, advances in science and technology have fuelled the idea of “lifting the fog of war”, as William Owens called his book.⁹¹ This project predates the revolution in military affairs (RMA) and dates back at least to the Vietnam War and McNamara’s approach to applying management techniques to war.⁹² Developing and applying artificial intelligence (AI) has brought this idea, which is regularly challenged by reality, back into focus. Could this render Clausewitz’s approach obsolete by changing the nature of war? From a methodological and epistemological point of view, a good understanding of Clausewitz’s analyses is now more necessary than ever. First, because artificial intelligence systems designed to clear the fog could just as easily increase uncertainty.⁹³ Second, because Clausewitz’s concepts can be used to critique the AI literature’s scientific approaches to the conduct of war.⁹⁴ Third, because Clausewitzian terminology continues to inspire authors hoping AI can dispel the fog of war; this is the case of Anders Bollmann and Therese Heltberg, who have proposed the concept of the *digital coup d'oeil* to characterise the ability to exploit the resources of big data and AI.⁹⁵

Conclusion

In a thought-provoking article published in *The National Interest* in 2009, Andrew Krepinevich and Barry Watts argued that the United States faces an “intellectual” problem in terms of strategic performance: its “political and military elites are no longer very clear about what strategy is”.⁹⁶ The point was not to deplore the lack of understanding of Clausewitz, who was not mentioned, but the observation applies perfectly to the issue at hand. Charles Krulack’s concept of the “strategic corporal” illustrates this well.⁹⁷ Similarly, Owens’s idea that technology would lift the fog of war by providing an “omniscient view of the battlefield” showed a very personal understanding of the concept.⁹⁸ The same problem is likely to arise with the concept of *coup d'oeil*.

Like the Greek authors and the 18th-century military writers, Clausewitz questioned the exceptional abilities of generals who demonstrated uncommon intuition in the conduct of war. Admittedly, his concept of the *coup d'oeil* has some features in common with the shrewdness of the Greek generals and the tactical acumen of their 18th-century counterparts. It differs, however, in the breadth of the conceptual system in which it is embedded. The supreme commander's extraordinary intuition pierces the fog at the highest level of war – that of the articulation of the military and the political. This *coup d'oeil* is an attribute of genius in a double sense: an exceptional cognitive ability of the person – the genius – who understands the full complexity of war; and the cognitive component of a concept – genius as an abstract notion – which makes it possible to rebalance the weight of uncertainty in Clausewitz's theory. This theory remains indispensable for thinking about the growing complexity of war, even if it is true that one of its components is no longer relevant – and therefore requires further reflection: the unity of political direction and operational conduct, which for Clausewitz was the hallmark of genius for war.

Footnotes

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- ³ Antulio Echevarria, *Clausewitz and Contemporary War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2007), 35.
- ⁴ Carl von Clausewitz, *De la guerre*, trans. D. Naville (Paris: Editions de Minuit 1955), 670.
- ⁵ Carl to Maria, 16 August 1807, in *Leben des Generals Carl von Clausewitz und der Frau Marie von Clausewitz* ed. Karl Schwartz (Berlin: Dümmlers, 1878), 1: 286.
- ⁶ Frederick II, *Die General-Principia vom Kriege: appliciret auf die Tactique und auf die Disciplin, derer Preußischen Truppen* (s.l.: s.n. 1753), 39.
- ⁷ Gerhard von Scharnhorst ed., *Unterricht des Königs von Preussen an die Generale seiner Armeen* (Hannover: in der Helwinguschen Hofbuchhandlung 1794), 388. Heinrich von Bülow, *Geist des neuern Kriegssystem* (Hamburg: Hoffman 1799), 54. The substitution is also made explicitly in a passage from his history of the 1799 campaign, written at the turn of the 1820s and 1830s. Quoting a letter from Suvorov in which the latter uses the term *Augenmaß*, Clausewitz adds in brackets “namely [*nämlich*] coup d'oeil”. *Die Feldzüge von 1799 in Italien und der Schweiz* (Berlin: Dümmler 1833), I: 227.
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- ¹⁴ Thomas David Pilcher, *War According to Clausewitz* (London: Cassell 1918), 26.
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- ²² Clausewitz, *Vom Kriege*, 32.
- ²³ Raymond Aron, *Clausewitz, Philosopher of War* (New York: Simon and Schuster 1986), 136.
- ²⁴ Clausewitz, *Vom Kriege*, 31.
- ²⁵ Arthur Schopenhauer, *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung* (Berlin: Deutsche Buch-Gemeinschaft 1819), 87-88.
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- ²⁷ Lukas Milevski, “The idea of genius in Clausewitz and Sun Tzu”, *Comparative Strategy* 38, 2019, 145.
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- ⁴⁴ Clausewitz, *Vom Kriege*, 29, 40.
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⁵⁰ Johann Gottfried Carl Christian Kiesewetter, *Grundriss einer reinen allgemeinen Logik nach Kantischen Grundsätzen zum Gebrauch für Vorlesungen* (Berlin: Lagarde 1796), II: 32.

⁵¹ Aron, *Clausewitz*, 180-181.

⁵² Carl von Clausewitz, *Kleine Schriften* (Hamburg: Tredition 2012), 130.

⁵³ Aron, *Clausewitz*, 181. Milevsky’s claim that the *coup d’oeil* – and thus the genius of which the *coup d’oeil* is an attribute – is “unilateral” is difficult to grasp. Clearly, genius belongs to one of the opposing parties, but it cannot be considered to “stand apart from and uninfluenced by any adversarial interaction”, since it unfolds within the framework of the reciprocal action that is the condition of its manifestation. Milevski, “The idea of genius”, 145.

⁵⁴ Clausewitz, *Vom Kriege*, 70.

⁵⁵ Andreas Herberg-Rothe, “Philosophy and Methodology in Clausewitz’s Work”, *The Philosophical Journal of Conflict and Violence*, 6/1, 2022, 3-4.

⁵⁶ Clifford J. Rogers, “Clausewitz, genius, and the rules”, *The Journal of Military History* 66, 2002, 1167-1176.

⁵⁷ Clausewitz, *Vom Kriege*, 58, 61.

⁵⁸ Clausewitz, *Vom Kriege*, 108.

⁵⁹ Clausewitz, *Vom Kriege*, 41.

⁶⁰ Aron, *Clausewitz*, 185.

⁶¹ Clausewitz, *Vom Kriege*, 73.

⁶² Clausewitz, *Vom Kriege*, 72.

⁶³ Aron, *Clausewitz*, 221.

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⁶⁵ Clausewitz, *Vom Kriege*, XIV.

⁶⁶ Clausewitz, *Vom Kriege*, 68-69.

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- ⁷⁵ Duggan, *Strategic Intuition*, 60.
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- ⁸⁴ Clausewitz, *On War*, 111.
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