EDITORIAL INTRODUCTION
INTELLIGENCE AND WAR

STUART J. MURRAY, JONATHAN CHAU, AND TWYLA GIBSON

On 2 February 2017, The Guardian reported on US President Donald J. Trump’s first foray into the theatre of war: “US officials say Trump approved counterterrorism operation without sufficient intelligence.”¹ Just five days after his blustering inauguration, quietly, and over dinner, the mission was approved “by Trump and his closest advisers, including his son-in-law Jared Kushner and his special adviser and former Breitbart executive Stephen Bannon, as well as defence secretary General Jim Mattis.”² One must wonder about the meaning of “sufficient intelligence,” how it might be measured, and who bears responsibility when there are manifest insufficiencies all the way to the top of the “kill chain.”

Trump quickly pronounced the mission “successful,” while the Pentagon repeated that it takes the utmost care to gather sufficient intelligence on potential “targets” by assessing their “patterns of life”—and presumably the lives of those civilians to be sacrificed as a mission’s “collateral damage.”³ Reports suggest as many as 24 civilian deaths.⁴ “Success” and “intelligence” amount, in some reckonings, to necroeconomies: what officials deem a tolerable threshold of civilian deaths, the acceptable ratio of enemy combatants to non-combatant civilians. And while President Trump justified the loss of life—including the lives of an American commando, an 8-year-old American citizen, and a newborn baby—on the basis of some “important intelligence that

² Ibid.
will assist the US in preventing terrorism against its citizens and people around the world,” and while White House press secretary Sean Spicer went so far as to declare the botched raid “a very, very well-thought-out and executed effort,” it was soon revealed that the terrorist “intelligence” seized in the mission was outdated, similar to videos disseminated on the Internet as early as 2007. “The discovery prompted Central Command to cancel a planned news conference trumpeting the intelligence gathered in the Yemen raid.”

Despite the Orwellian injunctions—today scarcely even satirical—that “War is Peace,” and amidst rhetorics of securitization (surrendering l’état de droit to l’état de sécurité), we are in war, at war, perpetually. The “battlefields” do not and cannot yield “awareness” because they are everywhere:

mosques, Christmas markets, tourist destinations, theatres, restaurants, shopping malls, office buildings, living rooms, and hearts and minds rent by fear and loathing. The places of peace and war have converged on human life. What it means to be in or at war is more than ever a matter of media tropes finessing—and for some justifying—the use of state aggression, murder, and dispossession. We loosely base the title of this issue on a little-known publication by Gregory Elder, from the CIA’s Center for the Study of Intelligence, titled, “Intelligence in War: It Can Be Decisive.” The use of intelligence in war—and indeed the very meaning of these terms when war seems to qualify intelligence—is set in motion by the equivocal referent “It” in Elder’s title. Are we meant to understand that intelligence itself is decisive, our particular use or misuse of it? Or perhaps it is war that is decisive, its torture, machineries, and profitable military-industrial complex, that determines and delimits for us what intelligence might signify, along with its malignant signatures of death seen and unseen? Intelligence, Elder argues, amounts to “battlespace awareness,” a god’s-eye view that informs operations and tactics. This is not new. In military terms it is also called “situational awareness,” relying on RSTA—Reconnaissance, Surveillance, and Target Acquisition. And yet Elder’s argument is based solely on the analyses of five strategic battles that bear little resemblance to today’s network-centric Global War on Terror: the earliest is the First Battle of Bull Run (1861) and the most recent is the Israeli air-strike that initiated the Six-Day War (1967).

These battles are disanalogous to what we see today. Battles are fought, enemy combatants and non-combatants alike are killed, and the principles of International Humanitarian Law (IHL)—such as proportionality and necessity—are violated, often in the name of “intelligence,” and for the purposes of gathering it. The Commander-in-Chief’s insufficient intelligence would itself justify further military operations, to meliorate failures of intelligence, and to gather it. On the one hand, intelligence must be understood as integral to military actions and operations, a modus operandi that announces itself particularly through failures and insufficiencies. On the other hand, intelligence is presented as a strategic and tactical acquisition, some thing-as-such that will prove “decisive” in war, and that will characterize a successful mission. If these mutually informative aspects of intelligence yield “situational awareness,” this intelligence bears little relation to situated knowledges; “intelligence” is neither wisdom nor a modus vivendi; and “patterns of life” appear in the abstract frame.

---

of those who are marked for death, as “killable.” These are not simply “strategic” relations: they are not a matter of technologies or dispositifs in the hands of autonomous operators. As Michel Foucault remarks, “To say that the dispositif essentially has a strategic character assumes that it is a matter of a specific manipulation of relations of force, a rational and focused intervention in these relations of force, either to develop them along a particular direction, or to block them, or to stabilize them, to use them. The dispositif, thus, is always inscribed in a play of power, yet it is always tied to one or more limits of know-how (savoir), which emerge out of it, but, equally, condition it.”

Intelligence is woven into the dispositifs of power (pouvoir) and knowledge (savoir). Nominally democratic elections harness the techno-power of targeted advertising on social media to sway electoral groups and curate comments sections. Russian oligarchs meddle in American elections. Government is neither for the people nor by the people; it is a billionaires’ club. In the age of distributed intelligence, privatized big data, and digital cultures, the paradigm of intelligence as centralized and agentic is an Enlightenment fantasy, a ruse of liberal humanism in which the individual subject—the person—once synthesized information as knowledge. This task has been outsourced—to the Central Intelligence Agency or the National Security Agency, to Google and Facebook, among others—and we cling to the illusion of intelligent agency at our own peril. If liberal humanism underpins our model of intelligence, it is belied by modern warfare. Globalized and network-centric, war is

---


distributed agency: human and nonhuman actors and actants are enjoined through _dispositifs_ that traffic in fear and track virtually incalculable sums of data. As Eyal Weizman observes in a discussion on roboticized weaponry, “Because military action becomes gradually more systematic … a diffuse assemblage of sensors, automatic weapons, computers and optics together with human operators, overseers and regulators, it becomes increasingly hard to isolate individual responsibility and liability in the traditional way.”\(^\text{12}\) For Weizman, the entire apparatus itself—its distributed calculations, forecasts, strategies, and rhetorical justifications—is part of the evil it claims to combat.

Marshall McLuhan wisely noted the recrudescence of tribalism: the decline of literacy and the literate mind, an Enlightenment artefact.\(^\text{13}\) With the presidential victory of Donald J. Trump we have witnessed the upsurge of what we might call digitized orality, the tyranny of the tweet travelling at the speed of light: a “war” on media, “fake news,” lies clad as “alternative facts,”\(^\text{14}\) sound bites, fustigations remediated through the festering ecologies of alt-right and even traditional news media, which stage a triumph of form over content, spectacle over intelligence and analysis. While the rise of “alternative facts” as a de facto standard of political discourse is perhaps unsurprising, the speed at which we have been propelled into a post-truth present invites us to take pause. In the first month of Trump’s presidency, the notion of intelligence as an objective index of veracity has been rapidly disintegrated by a government that not only disseminates fake news, but deploys it at a dizzying, breakneck pace. On a seemingly daily basis, various government spokespersons and officials, including the president himself, reference fictive terrorist attacks, such as the Bowling Green Massacre and the Atlanta and Sweden “incidents,” which only exist as part of a post-truth, political imaginary. It is worthwhile considering this situation in the context of oral cultures, where the modern literate understanding of truth as an epistemological relation yields to ancient practices of truth-telling as part of a broader social ontology.

---


In a series of 1973 lectures entitled “Truth and Juridical Forms,” Foucault refers to a passage from Homer’s *Iliad* in which the winner of a race between Antilochus and Menelaus is disputed. Although there is a witness (or *histor*) present, the winner of the race is established “not through the testimony of a witness but through a sort of testing game, a challenge, hurled by one adversary at another.” In the Graeco-Roman context, Foucault explains, the test was a means of resolving disputes prior to the emergence of inquiry proper; and in the Middle Ages, the test briefly re-emerged in the opposition between inquiry and feudal law, which relied on the system of the test. It is only later in history that the “true” winner will rely on the convention of the witness to establish the juridical form of inquiry and what might broadly be considered “intelligence.” By contrast, in the ancient oral tradition, there is no investing - no witness, no inquisition, but a testing game: in this case, swearing an oath. To swear the oath is to accept the risk, “the responsibility for what would happen,” Foucault writes, and “the final uncovering of the truth would immediately devolve upon the gods.”

Foucault refers to four types of tests, none of which is epistemic: social tests, which relied on the social importance of the individual (argument by authority); verbal tests, which required correct and timely utterances (a job performed by the attorney later in history); physical tests of strength (such as a duel or a game); and finally, “magico-religious” tests of the oath. The test is not just a test of one’s social status or one’s virility, but more importantly, it is a test of faith that tempts the fates of cosmic forces beyond the speaker’s control.

Although the claims from figures such as Kellyanne Conway, Sean Spicer, and Donald Trump are often bewildering in their post-truth audacity—at least epistemologically—it is perhaps appropriate to analyze them in the context of the test, where the game of “truth” appeals implicitly to a higher authority and represents a test of faith. These claims also make visible the apparatus that enables the dissemination and proliferation of alt-facts and “fake news” as part of a digital oral culture and its ontologics of “intelligence.”

Today, our access to the world is framed through social media services such as Twitter and Facebook, with layers of framing mechanisms that not only spotlight what we should be thinking but shape how we think about such curated events. Asked to bear witness to testimony that is shaped by political agendas, filtered through multiple mediation and remediation processes, the always-on, globally connected, digital media ecologies that we inhabit ensure

16 Ibid., 18.
17 Ibid.
that we are always kept several arms’ lengths away from the thing itself. Watching TV with any credulity is a matter of faith (McLuhan implored us to throw away our television sets). While our awareness of national and international affairs has arguably never been greater, our access to and interface with these scenes of political upheaval, social injustice, and abuse of power has never been more heavily mediated and “gamefied.” This sense of distancing upends the notion of bearing witness. We do not bear witness to atrocities so much as bear witness to reports of reports. How can we lament the deployment of “alternative facts”—as Orwellian a term as one can conjure—when the very idea of a fact is so heavily reshaped by the time it reaches our screens?

In this light, Elder’s article offers only a narrow understanding of intelligence from the perspective of enlightened empiricism and imperialism. But the equivocation of the decisive “It” between war and intelligence offers some insight into the equivocations of alt-truth. Remarkably, not a shred of empathy can be gleaned from Elder’s words, neither for the “enemy” nor for American soldiers who perish in “friendly fire” or too often by suicide, or through the violence of PTSD (war’s autoimmune response). The language deployed by Elder creates a distancing effect by de-emphasizing the human dimensions of war. When writing of the Battle of Midway, Elder ascribes agency to “a US Navy patrol aircraft” that “located and maintained regular contact with” the Japanese fleet; the pilot is not worthy of mention. Violence is anonymous, recommended by war’s systems, machineries, and profit margins. Reduced to tactics and machineries, war, as described by Elder, is alienating to those of us who are trained to locate human perspectives. Elder’s eschewal of the human dimensions of war may be symptomatic of what Gilles Deleuze identified as the shift from the individual to the “dividual”—an endlessly divisible subject that is reducible to representative data patterns. In this extreme iteration of Deleuze’s control society, it is no wonder that critics embark on attempts to recover some sense of the individual, some semblance of the human, when considering phenomena such as war, which not only profoundly impacts at the human level, but is predicated on the participation of human

subjects. One must wonder what sort of humanization can be wrought from our contemporary media tropes. Language itself has been weaponized. Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR) is designed to Find, Fix, and Finish (F3) a human target. And within these scenes, what human intellection, or what sort of humanitarianism, can be fostered when humanity is rendered as post-human, a collocation of digital datasets? The master trope for contemporary “smart” warfare works to displace empathy, installing instead a regime of crass metaphors—kill chains, drones or “birds,” human “targets” as “objectives,” successful strikes as “jackpots.”

Collectively, the articles gathered in this issue acknowledge the fundamental shift from a centralized model of intelligence to a contemporary moment in which modern warfare along with a citizen’s access to the world are distributed and mediated through remediating frames and technologies. Yet, if this collection of essays can be said to have a common political function, it may be an implicit mandate to recuperate the human dimensions of war. Despite the varied foci of these articles, with objects of study ranging from drone warfare to documentary testimony to depictions of exceptional intelligence in popular media, they are connected in their commitment to understanding human lives as interrelated and intersubjective—and cursed, it would seem, to act with insufficient intelligence, and to navigate media ecologies in which intelligence itself is in flux.

**Article Summaries**

Michael Dorland’s “The Black Hole of Memory: French Mnemotechniques in the Erasure of the Holocaust” interrogates the role of memory and memorialization in the constitution of post-World War II France. Dorland hones in on the precarity of a France that grapples with its culpability in the Vel’ d’Hiv Round-up, spotlighting the role of the *witness* and the perpetually problematized function of *testimony* as key determinants in challenging both the public memory and the historical memory of a nation.
Sara Kendall’s essay, “Unsettling Redemption: The Ethics of Intra-subjectivity in The Act of Killing” navigates the problematic representation of mass atrocity. Employing Joshua Oppenheimer’s investigation of the Indonesian killings of 1965–1966, Kendall unsettles the documentary’s attempts to foreground the practices of healing and redemption, while wilfully sidestepping any acknowledgment of the structural dimensions of violence. To Kendall, the documentary’s focus on the narratives of the perpetrators, who function as proxies for the state, makes visible the aporia of the film, substituting a framework based on affect and empathy in place of critical political analyses of power imbalances.

Kevin Howley is concerned with the spatial ramifications of drone warfare. In “Drone Warfare: Twenty-First Century Empire and Communications,” Howley examines the battlefield deployment of drones through the lens of Harold Innis’s distinction between time-biased and space-biased media. By considering the drone as a space-biased technology that can transmit information across vast distances, yet only remain vital for short periods of time, Howley sees the drone as emblematic of the American impulse to simultaneously and paradoxically collapse geographical distance while expanding cultural differences between America and other nations.

Avital Ronell’s essay, entitled “BIGLY Mistweated: On Civic Grievance,” takes direct aim at the sitting US president, offering a rhetorical analysis of what she calls “Trumpian obscenity.” Ronell exposes the foundations of the current administration, identifying a government bereft of authority, stitched together by audacity, and punctuated by an almost unfathomable degree of absurdity. In her attempt to make sense of the fundamentally nonsensical and nihilistic discourse that Trump represents, Ronell walks alongside Paul Celan, Melanie Klein, and especially Jacques Derrida, concluding with a suggestive, elusive, and allusive possibility for negotiating the contemporary, Trumpian moment.

In “The Diseased ‘Terror Tunnels’ in Gaza: Israeli Surveillance and the Autoimmunization of an Illiberal Democracy,” Marouf Hasian, Jr. explains how Israel’s state-sanctioned use of autoimmunizing rhetorics depict the lives of Israelis as precarious and under threat. Here, the author’s preoccupation is with the Israeli strategy of rhetorically reconfiguring smuggling tunnels as “terror tunnels” that present an existential threat to Israeli citizens. In doing so, he shows how the non-combatant status of Gazan civilians is dissolved through the intervening effects of these media tropes.

Derek Gregory’s essay, “The Territory of the Screen,” offers a different perspective on drone warfare. Gregory leverages Owen Sheers’s novel, I Saw a
"Man," to explore the ways in which modern combat is contested through a series of mediating layers, a series of screens through which the United States, as Gregory argues, dematerializes the corporeality of human targets. For Gregory, drone warfare’s facilitation of remote killings is predicated on technical practices that reduce the extinguishing of life to technological processes that produce, and then execute, “killable bodies.”

But how is the increasingly unsustainable illusion of intelligence as being centralized and definitive maintained? Julie B. Wiest’s “Entertaining Genius: U.S. Media Representations of Exceptional Intelligence” identifies the media trope of exceptionally intelligent characters across mainstream film and television programs as key to producing and reinforcing popular understandings of intelligence. Through her analysis of such fictional savants, Wiest connects these patterns of representation to the larger social structures that reflect and reinforce narrowly defined notions of intelligence, and those who are permitted to possess it.

We end this issue with a poem from Sanita Fejzić, who offers a perspective on the human costs of war that is framed not by technology, but through poetic language.
Image Credits


Graffiti probably Banksy, London N1, 18 September 2005. By Photo Eadmundo, (http://flickr.com/photos/eadmundo/50033762/) [CC BY-SA 2.0 (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.0)], via Wikimedia Commons.

Pink Army is an international street art project that is against war. By S. Juhl (own work) [CC0], Kolding, Denmark, 18 October 2012, via Wikimedia Commons, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File%3APink_Army._Street_art_in_Kolding_Denmark_001.JPG.