EDITORIAL INTRODUCTION
INTELLIGENCE AND WAR

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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.

The Bureau of Investigative Journalism has published the names and ages of victims based on survivor testimony: https://twitter.com/tbij/status/829413081579188225.
will assist the US in preventing terrorism against its citizens and people around
the world,\textsuperscript{5} 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,”\textsuperscript{6} 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outdated, similar to videos disseminated on the Internet as early as 2007.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.”\textsuperscript{7}

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),\textsuperscript{8} we are in war, at war, perpetually. The “battle-
fields” 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.

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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.11 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.” 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. 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,” 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 investigation, 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 ontologies 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

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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.18 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

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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.
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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.
THE BLACK HOLE OF MEMORY: FRENCH MNEMOTECHNIQUES IN THE ERASURE OF THE HOLOCAUST

MICHAEL DORLAND

Introduction

In the summer and fall of 2012, the French Republic seemingly closed the last two gaps in “the national memory,” as PresidentFrançois Hollande put it, in the Republic’s difficult engagement with French participation in the Holocaust. On 22 July, the 70th anniversary commemoration took place on the former site of the Vélorodrome d’Hiver (the Vel d’Hiv, for short), a bicycle racing stadium (torn down in 1959), but where on 16 and 17 July 1942, the French police had rounded up 13,152 non-French Jews—8,160 being interned in the Vel d’Hiv before deportation to various camps in France, and at least 3,000 children directly to Auschwitz. The roundup was the biggest such action by the French police and undertaken with neither prompting nor the assistance by the German Occupier. The main French transit camp to the east, at Drancy on the outskirts of Paris and through which passed some 63,000 deportees, was itself also the site of a major commemoration on 21 September 2012 and the official opening of the Drancy Mémorial de la Shoah. On this occasion, President Hollande told his audience that it was no longer a question of making accusations—“Justice had passed, even if often too late.” What mattered now was to transmit what had occurred to future generations because “Learning from the past is the only way to prevent [such events] from reoccurring.”1 At the Vel d’Hiv commem-

oration in July, *Le Monde* had reported a survey that up to 67% of 15–35 year-olds had never heard of the Vel d’Hiv, nor had 25% of those over 65.

France has been a site of major memory wars over its role both in the Second World War and, in particular, its contribution to the Judeocide for 70 years. In this it is no different from other Western European countries, with the notable exception of Germany. As Elizabeth Bellamy notes, in her *Affective Genealogies: Psychoanalysis, Postmodernism and the ‘Jewish Question’ After Auschwitz*, the French case of World War II memory is, in relation to “its own scarcely confronted ‘Jewish Question’[,] even more complex than Germany’s.”

War, defeat and the occupation of France by Nazi Germany also entailed a new twist of the scarcely confronted Jewish Question, but in the form of the persecution, deportation, and almost total extermination of over 75,000 French- and more so non-French Jews refugeed in France. The result of this accumulation of trauma, post-1945, was the repression of the French Judeocide from public memory, which lasted, except for occasional symptomatic outbreaks (in which films played a key role), well until the mid-1990s when Jacques Chirac in his first term as President formally recognized that the Republic had committed against its Jewish citizens crimes “without statute of limitations.”

In the French context (and in the theory of post-Holocaust affect more broadly), the struggle over public memory is thus framed and infiltrated by 1) collective and Individual trauma, 2) failed attempts at re-membering (trying to put back together what was sundered), that 3) eventually take the forms of symbolic acts of commemoration (for some) and the injunction to bear witness (for others). All these tactics of mnemotechniques are ultimately articulated through various practices of writing (novels, memoirs, historiography, as well

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2 Stéphanie Le Bars, “La majorité des moins de 34 ans ignorant ce que fut la rafle,” *Le Monde*, 16 July 2012, http://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2012/07/16/la-majorite-des-moins-de-34-ans-ignorent-ce-que-fut-la-rafle_1734195_3224.html. In his Vel d’Hiv speech, Hollande had stated that “The truth is that this crime was committed in France by France.” The statement produced some equivocation among right-wing politicians over confusing “France” with the “Etat français,” the official title of the Vichy regime. This prompted historians such as Suzanne Citron to remark in *Libération* that “when the entire bureaucracy, every single magistrate but one, when the majority of the deputies elected to the Chambre in 1936 all vote full powers to [Marshall] Pétain, is this an act by France or only of the Etat français?” Suzanne Citron, “Henri Guaino: une subjectivité négatrice de l’histoire,” *Libération*, 31 July 2012, http://www.liberation.fr/france/2012/07/31/henri-guaino-une-subjectivite-negatrice-de-l-histoire_836781.

as films) that are always at the same time acts of rewriting and transformation. I will focus below mainly on the interconnections between remembering and commemoration as these pose some of the more profound dimensions of the struggles over memory, and include as well important particularities of Jewish memory, so central both to the Holocaust in general and to its French context in particular.

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Ruth Leys observes, usefully for the discussion to follow, that “Post-traumatic disorder is fundamentally a disorder of memory.”

One of the central themes running through the entire discussion on trauma accordingly concerns its relationship to memory, and recent French thought would prove to be particularly enlightening in this respect.

One of the related corollaries here is that the difficulties of remembering recollections often took the form of unconscious strategies of forgetting, such as amnesia or falling into silence. As Alain Finkelkraut remarked in his 2000 book on the problems of thinking about the twentieth century—calling it “a historical monster” completely refractory to any ordering of human time—clearly one of the main dimensions of such monstrosity had to do with memory, or more exactly the inability to remember. As a result, a large literature developed dealing with the problems of memory from every conceivable perspective: biological and neurological, cultural, historical and sociological, with one portion devoted, not surprisingly, to the Holocaust. Here, however, much of the emphasis seemed to be on reclaiming memory—and Holocaust memory in particular. Thus, the resulting examination of artworks, public monuments, and Holocaust museums, which was, at the same time a

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6 For example, but not exhaustively, Pirjo Ahokas and Martine Chard-Hutchison, eds., *Reclaiming Memory: American Representations of the Holocaust* (Turku, Finland: University of Turku Press, 1997). See also Caroline Wiedmer, *The Claims of Memory: Representations of the Holocaust in Contemporary Germany and France* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1997). On another level altogether emphasizing the ambiguity of memory and the rhetoric of ruins, see especially James E. Young’s pathbreaking *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993). Much work of course has been done on memory since the 1990s, so much so that some today speak of a “memorialist turn” in the light of globalization that ironically has shifted research away from territorialized, nationally bound research such as Holocaust studies toward supposedly more open transnational approaches to “other” forms of memory.
displacement of memory onto either particular objects or collective rituals of commemoration. It is as if, given our individual problems with our own personal memories, remembering and commemoration had become “collectivized,” or surely socialized in ways not previously understood.

French philosopher Paul Ricoeur’s *La Mémoire, l’histoire, l’oubli* explores the complex imbrications of contemporary memory, history, and forgetfulness. His motives in writing this book stemmed from a lengthy professional preoccupation with historical writing, but also from a “civic” sense of being troubled by the public implications of “the worrying spectacle” of too much memory here, too much forgetfulness there, compounded by “the influence of commemorations and the abuses of memory” (*MHO*, 1).

Ricoeur turned to the work of the founder of the twentieth-century sociology of memory, Maurice Halbwachs (1877–1945). Halbwachs died at Buchenwald; his last days have been written about by Jorge Semprun in his 2002 *Le mort qu’il faut*, and movingly sketched by fellow detainee, artist Boris Tsilitsky. In 1925, Halbwachs had published *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire* that defined the field of social memory; he returned to it in his *Mémoire collective*, posthumously published in 1949. Ricoeur insisted in *MHO* on the previously unnoticed radicality of Halbwachs’s distinction between collective memory and historical memory (512). In Halbwachs’s earlier work, the fundamental distinction had been between individual and collective memory, two very different ways of the organization of memory, but nonetheless still interconnected.

Not so with the idea of historical memory which, Halbwachs argued, went back to schooldays in which the student was first exposed to history primarily as dates that had to be memorized (facts, major events, and people)—that is, as material completely exterior not only to a young life but to that life’s experience. While the historically-obsessed Third Republic made some headway in bringing the teaching of history closer to lived memory, Halbwachs noted that this had mainly occurred after the fact, and largely by way of national commemorations, including national narratives, myths, and so on.

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7 The ability to recall a personal memory is, as Ricoeur remarked, near the end of a long life (1913–2005), “a small miracle.”
9 Jorge Semprun, *Le mort qu’il faut* (Paris: Folio, 2002). Tsilitsky’s sketches of deportation, in particular the so-called “small” Jewish camp within Buchenwald, and later paintings were displayed at an exhibition by the Museum of Jewish History and Culture in Paris in 2006.
For Halbwachs, the teaching of, or construction of, history was a form of violence from the outside exerted upon memory, that resulted, in Ricoeur’s words, in “the uncanniness of the historical past” (MHO, 513).

The ensuing problem concerned that of the transgenerational transmission of this uncanny form of history that operated first, through the construction of the idea of a generation as a we-group of a common age and so culture, but that was also anchored biologically in sexual reproduction as well as in the succession of generations; the old die out and are replaced by the new generation. Social links were thus firmly codified in the parental system of our societies where the biological and the social are brought together by affective familial ties as well as by juridical mechanisms like adoption. However, given the long chain of the succession of generations in an immense genealogical tree whose roots are lost in the soil of history, the ancestral stories, so familiar to so-called traditional societies, were eventually forgotten, and what remained was only the abstract and anonymous idea of generational succession.

In this way, living memory fell into the clutches of history. While traces of the past remained either in the form of books, the archaeological discovery of monuments, and public efforts by city authorities not to entirely obliterate the historical urban architecture, there still lingered on the horizon a historical will-to-power that sought to integrate into “an integral memory” the separate forms of individual, collective, and historical memory so that it became possible, in Halbwachs’s words, “To never forget anything” (“On n’oublie rien,” cited in MHO, 515).

Except that the complete absorption of lived memory by history did not quite happen. For one, Halbwachs commented on a “malaise” as regards the delimitation of the discipline of history and the ensuing endless turf wars over control of and sub-divisions within the historical field (as also in most other fields of knowledge). Secondly, the major frame of reference for historical memory remained predominantly that of the nation, even though between the nation and the individual there are countless intervening variables and groups. Thirdly, the role of historical writing and historiography assumed ever greater distance from collective memory in the name of the pursuit of scientific objectivity. And lastly, for Halbwachs, the opposition between the procedures of scholarly history and the exercise of collective memory took the form, as Ricoeur put it, of “a challenge addressed to his close colleagues [the historians of the so-called “longue durée”]” (MHO, 516). For Halbwachs, the very notion

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11 On this, in the American context, see Peter Novick’s impressive That Noble Dream: The “Objectivity Question” and the American Historical Profession (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).
of “historical memory” became ever more problematic—as a result of which “memory” and “history” remained suspended in an uneasy, forced cohabitation.

The late Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi’s *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* took the next step opened up by Halbwachs of further separating historiography from the sense of history that, Yerushalmi argued, had been invented by ancient Israel.12 By historiography is to be understood a self-reflexive discipline that analyzes over time the methods and interpretations used by historians. As such, historiography openly revealed the crisis that it had generated in the very heart of memory, both personal and collective, that by definition maintained itself alive through its transmission from one generation to another. In Halbwachs’s words, “History begins where tradition ends” (cited in *MHO*, 518). Historiography, however, attacked lived memory by “correcting it, displacing it, contesting it, interrupting it, and destroying it” (Ricoeur, *MHO*, 518).

Yerushalmi’s account of Jewish memory revealed itself to be both singular and exemplary. It was not to be confused with the oral tradition, especially not among a people as highly literate and devoted to reading and commentary as the Jews. Jewish memory, then, was highly charged with a sense of history, but not of historiography. The title of Yerushalmi’s lectures, *Zakhor*, is the injunction of the Torah to remember, not through the verbal, discursive, or literary ways by which, according to Ricoeur, the operations of historical distanciation worked (*MHO*, 519). Rather, the Jewish sense of history was sustained through the injunction to transmit the stories and laws of the Jewish experience, beginning with those stories closest to us familially, and moving to the entire collectivity interpellated by the words, “Hear, oh Israel” (*Shema Yisroel*, the holiest of Jewish prayers13), that abolish the distance between those close and those further away. Not only did the Jewish sense of history ignore historiography; but, as Yerushalmi puts it, “there is no equivalence between meaning in history, the memory of the past, and the writing of history” (cited in *MHO*, 520).

Problems, however, arose with the secularizing impulses of the Jewish Enlightenment and the rise of the professional Jewish historian in the project of “a science of Jewishness” (*Wissenschaft des Judentums*) early in the nineteenth century. But this science was, Yerushalmi argued, less the adoption of the

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13 A parody of which, refracted through his Auschwitz experience, opens Primo Levi’s *If This is A Man* (*Si questo è un uomo*, 1958), first translated into English under the title *Survival in Auschwitz* (1960).
methods of scientific history than the radical critique of the theological sense of Jewish memory. Historiography thus equated to secularization; as Yerushalmi put it, “assimilation from without [and] collapse from within,” so that secular Jewish history—and particularly so that of post-1948 Israel—succumbed in many ways to the problems of any other national history (cited in MHO, 522). As Ricoeur remarked, for Yerushalmi, historiography had nothing to do with restoring memory; on the contrary, it represented an entirely new kind of memory, that of the rational project of wanting to save the past in its entirety. This “delirium of exhaustivity” (Ricoeur’s words, MHO, 522) became self-perpetuating and Faustian; and, also, as Nietzsche had remarked, there was something in the “historical sense” that injures and finally destroys the living thing, be it a man or a people or a system of culture” (cited in Zakhor, 145, and not 147 as Ricoeur has it, MHO, 522).

The third prong of Ricoeur’s (and Yerushalmi’s) powerful assault against historiography dealt with the differences in the treatment of history between the first (1984) and third volumes (1992) of Pierre Nora’s monumental compilation entitled Les Lieux de mémoire.14 As we saw, memory progressively displaced itself from lived forms and became redeposited in various “sites” (“lieux”).15 For Nora, the “lieux” or sites of memory became more important because there no longer existed “milieux d’histoire” or environments of history. The consciousness of a break with the past was bound up with the sense that memory had been torn apart. History had led to “the eradication of memory” (Nora in Revel and Hunt, 632). Accordingly, “Memory and history, far from being synonymous, appear now to be in fundamental opposition” (Nora in Revel and Hunt, 633; Ricoeur, MHO, 523–528). Memory was “life,” while history was the “always problematic and incomplete” reconstruction of what is no longer. History is a critical discourse, antithetical to memory, perpetually suspicious of it, “and its true mission is to suppress and destroy it” (Nora in Revel and Hunt, 633). The “unification of history and memory”—the awkward translation Marc Roudebush gives to “histoire-mémoire,” the devouring of memory by history, in turn gave rise to, as Ricoeur put it, “a new figure” that Nora termed “memory seized by history” (MHO, 525; emphasis added). This new figuration of history had three characteristics or “symptoms,” as Ricoeur noted. One, it was an “archival” (Roudebush) form of memory—Nora used the

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word “archivistic” (“archivistique”), which better captures the precariousness contained by what Leibniz had called “paper memory.” Ricoeur commented that the essays Nora gathered in Vol. 1 attested to the resulting corrosive and constraining character—again, of the violent imposition—of history from the outside. And this especially in the form of a materialization of history that, as of 1980—in France, the year of the Cultural “patrimoine”—and the ensuing, “very brutal” (Nora) inflation of the inverse correspondance of the former sites of memory to topographical sites given over to commemoration (Ricoeur, MHO, 525–526).

This entailed the reduction of memory to that of individual psychology, as a product of cultural compensation for the historicization of memory. Memory thus became a form of cultural duty or obligation. To paraphrase Nora, if memory was no longer everywhere, it was nowhere, unless taken in charge at one end by the culture industry and so dutifully placed before an individual consciousness at the other end, in the appropriate official locations (museums and so on). Ricoeur observed in a footnote (MHO, 526n94) that Nora’s point about the individualization of memory as duty made an explicit parallel with the recent turn of many non-religious French Jews to a reactivation of Jewish memory. As Nora put it:

In this tradition which has no other history than that of its own memory, to be Jewish is to recall Being, but this non-refusable (“irrécusable”) obligation to remember, once interiorized, places you, one after the other, in an entirely new situation. Memory of what? Memory of memory. The psychologization of memory leaves everyone with the sentiment that one’s salvation, finally, depends upon acquitting this impossible debt. (This passage from Nora 1984, xxx–xxxi, does not appear in the Roudebush translation in Revel and Hunt)

The third symptom, from memory-as-archive to memory-as-duty, was memory-as-fracture (MHO, 526; Nora, 1984, xxxi). In Vol. 1, Nora had remarked that “museums, archives, cemeteries, festivals, anniversaries, treaties, depositions, monuments, sanctuaries, fraternal orders” (Nora in Revel and Hunt, 636) were “the beleaguered and cold” markers of a society without ritual, “a society deeply absorbed in its own transformation and renewal, one that inherently favours the new over the ancient, the young over the old, the future over the past.” This gave Ricoeur several further openings for his reflections later in MHO that the sites of memory are forms of transcription—that is, of writing. Second, it allowed Ricoeur to elaborate via the essay on “Generations” (in Nora, Vol. 1) on some of the problems he had mentioned in discussing
Halbwachs: namely, that the idea of “talking about my g-g-g-generation” (as the song by The Who put it, not Ricoeur) had inaugurated a symbolic rupture that resulted in a purely *horizontal* vision of the social bond in which one generation simply replaced another in a process of perpetual substitution (*MHO*, 530). For one example in France, take the immense resonances of “the May ’68 generation.” The implications for Ricoeur as for Nora (especially attached in Vol. II to the vertical idea of the memory-nation) were considerable. Memory, as predominantly generational, turned increasingly to *commemoration*. As Ricoeur noted, “We are thus in the realm of pure memory, that which makes a mockery of history, and abolishes duration to turn it into a present without a past” (*MHO*, 531). The past, *if there at all*, exists only to “memorialize” the present. As such, Nora wrote, “Commemoration has emancipated itself from its traditionally designated space, and it is the entire epoch that has become commemorative” (Nora, Vol. III, 998). The “era of commemoration” had become “infinite” (Nora, Vol. III, 1005).

The above discussion, however, sheds light on several problems relevant to the study of recent French historical writing at the narrow end and then to the broader question of memory in the Western invention of tradition. At the narrow end, it helps explain the persistent problems around the French writing of the history of the Resistance until the 1980s, in its inability to recognize the important role played by Jewish Resistance groups. In effect, that until further problematization of the nature of historical writing itself, the ‘history’ of the Resistance could only be at best that of the memoirs of the official Resistance generation, and only that. This, then, also explains the separate and parallel characteristics of early postwar studies by French Jewish historians as being framed by a different historical sense of the idea of history; here, against the millennial background of specifically Jewish history with its catastrophic antecedents going back to the Roman destruction of the Second Temple. Accordingly, for the *goyim*, to put it this way, writing the history of the Holocaust—and for that matter of the persistent uncanniness that Jewish survivors aroused among non-Jews—posed an even greater problem. In other words, and to be charitable about it, that part of such a history was itself enfolded within the long history of Christian anti-Semitism, and so called for a form of reflexivity regarding Western culture as a whole that was challenging, to put it mildly. It was easier, as it were, to ignore, repress, or *pathologize* the matter, as a further part of this larger challenge also had its specific ramifications for a potential rewriting of the various national histories of Europe, thus demanding a *double* self-reflexivity. The difference between these strategies was that to ignore or repress were still only largely unconscious acts, whereas to *pathologize* drew upon formidable the knowledge/power resources.
that, after Freud, Michel Foucault’s work was among the first to unveil to the present generation.

These differences in turn suggest another point; namely, the extent to which historiography itself, because of its problematic and uneasy relationship to lived memory as well as to trauma, or the traumatic nature of historical events, is profoundly entangled with related psychological phenomena—as a form of the will-to-power, for example, or even more clearly as a neurosis. Not for nothing did Henry Rousso frame his study of the problem of Vichy memory (1994) as a manifestation of neurosis. Finally, if the argument made by Nora about the dissolution of the past by an infinite era of Commemoration holds, this also connects the interrelationship of acts of Commemoration with the collective burden imposed upon survivors of being living witnesses to the bad events of recent history.

II

In France, the 1980s saw the biggest Commemoration of all, the 1989 Bicentennial of the Great Revolution of 1789. One of the many books on the “The Commemoration” is a 1999 reprint of a collection of articles by various leading historians, sociologists and so on, published in the journal *Le Débat* from 1983 on. Its cover, a photograph taken from the official, televised ceremonies, shows black-American opera star Jessye Norman who rendered “La Marseillaise” at the Commemoration opening night, draped in a long dress made from the tricolours of the national flag. The photograph powerfully recalls Roland Barthes’ famous essay in *Mythologies* (1957) about the black soldier saluting the French flag. There, he analyzed the signifier of this sign system as being, on one level, about France’s “imperiality,” although he went on to show that, in fact, it signified nothing at all. It was not, he wrote, about French imperialism “tied to the totality of ... the general History of France,” but rather a mythical concept “made of yielding, shapeless associations” and one “must firmly stress [that] ... it is a formless, unstable, nebulous condensation”—something whose fundamental character “is to be appropriated.” But if Commemoration is fundamentally about “appropriation,” it should not be forgotten that the late 1980s through mid-1990s was also when France at last began to appropriate into the “mémoire-nation” the French Jewish Question. Or at least, the beginnings of what

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sociologist Pierre Birnbaum in Vol. II of Nora’s Les Lieux de mémoire saw at the time as a possible “new deal” for Franco-Judaism.17

On 16–17 July 1942, some 4,500 Paris police, aided by the bus drivers of the CTRP (as the RATP was called then), rounded up between 12,500–13,200 Jews—men, women, and children—interning just over 8,000 at the Vélodrôme d’Hiver (or Vel d’Hiv, for short)18 not far from the Eiffel Tower at the time, but demolished after the war. The rest were directly sent to Drancy and then all were deported to Auschwitz, where they were murdered. This was the largest deportation of Jews from Paris by the Vichy government.

In 1949, de Gaulle had a square, bounded by the quais de Grenelle and Branly, the boulevard Grenelle, and the Bir-Hakeim bridge, dedicated to the memory of the “thirty thousand Jewish ... victims of racial persecution ... confined in this space by order of the Nazi occupier.”19 In the early 1960s, an architecturally stark Memorial to the Deportation was built at the tip of the Ile Saint-Louis, just behind Notre Dame, although French Jews are not mentioned explicitly there.

De Gaulle’s plaque was removed in 1986, to make way for a new one dedicated by then mayor of Paris Jacques Chirac on 18 July 1986. The Chirac

17 Pierre Birnbaum, “Grégoire, Dreyfus, Drancy et Copernic,” 2679–2717. Copernic refers to the Paris street in which a synagogue was firebombed in 1980. The Abbé Grégoire at the time of the Revolution fought for the recognition of French Jews as citizens, but not as Jews. Drancy was the terminal outside Paris from which convoys were assembled for Auschwitz or equivalent one-way destinations. Drancy is also a central reference point in a recent feature film, Emotional Arithmetic, drawn from the novel by Canadian writer Matt Cohen.

18 As Sarah Schladow writes, “In France, the earlier discovery of damning government files and the opening of government archives had brought France’s war history, and the gap between national and Jewish perceptions of French complicity, again into question. While Vichy was now a subject for popular representations, the French government still avoided addressing the relation of various war criminals to genocide.... The passage in 1990 of a parliamentary bill against public denial of Nazi crimes sat in tension with hitherto tolerated liberal publication and legitimisation of revisionist views. Notwithstanding, the government remained reluctant, despite commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary in 1992 of the infamous Vélodrome d’Hiver roundup of Jews, to single out Jews amongst the victims of Vichy and Nazi policy, or to pass judgement on the ‘crimes’ of past French governments and French collaborators. However, increasing antisemitism and xenophobia in 1993, protested by Jews and Resistance groups, moved the government to inaugurate a national day of remembrance for ‘Jewish and other racial victims of Vichy policies,’ and to call for monuments at various French sites linked to concentration or deportation.” Sarah Schladow, “Regenerations of the Holocaust: From the Politics of Identification Towards a Political Identity,” Unpublished PhD Dissertation in Cultural Studies, Curtin University (2007), 298.

plaque gave more details, corrected the numbers arrested, broke them down by
gender and age (4,115 children, for instance), and re-stated that the deportation
had been done by the police of Vichy on order of the Nazi occupier. As
Wiedmer notes, while giving more information, the new plaque still did not tell
the whole story: for instance, that the members of the police involved stayed in
their jobs after the Occupation (45–46). The annual commemoration of the Vel
d’Hiv remained privately observed by various Jewish organizations until 1993
when President Mitterand made it a National Day of Commemoration of the
racist and anti-Semitic persecutions committed “under the de facto authority”
of Vichy or, by its official name, the Government of the French State. There
was further fiddling about with plaques and a kitschy monument was put up by
Mitterand.

But it was not until the July 1995 commemorative ceremony that
Chirac, beginning his first mandate as President of the Republic, admitted that
“France” patrie of the Enlightenment and the rights of man had, on 16 July
1942, “accomplished the irreparable,” broken its promises and delivered its
wards to their executioners: “We owe [the Jews deported from France] a debt
without statute of limitations” (cited in Wiedmer, 53). Even so, it was not until
1997, emblematized in part by the trial of Maurice Papon—a Vichy préfèt in
charge of deportations in the Gironde, who later rose under de Gaulle to head
the Paris police and oversaw the 1961 police-riot and murder of several
Algerians protesting the war in Algeria20—but also because then prime
minister Lionel Jospin had committed his new government to assist the
Commission recently formed to (finally) investigate the wartime appropriation
of Jewish property, to open up the official archives of the Vichy period, and to
fund the creation of what became the Mémorial de la Shoah, that the French
Holocaust became part of the national memory. The 1997 commemoration of
the Vel d’Hiv thus marked its entry into the commemorative pantheon and,
today, where only a few thousand commemorants once stood in memory, it has
become a major media event. It is the same story for the site of the Drancy
camp: speeches by the President of the Republic, solemn media coverage, and
so on. As Wiedmer also notes, since 25 April 25 1954, every last Sunday in
April is the National Day of Memory of the Deportation, to remember the
liberation of the camps and, as she puts it bizarrely given her book’s topic, “the
end of suffering” (49).

Of the subsequent French debates over Holocaust memory and
representation, I’ll briefly mention two. One began in March 1966 when a
young French journalist, Jean-François Steiner, published his Treblinka: The

20 Papon died in 2007 and was quietly buried, wearing his Legion of Honour.
Revolt of an Extermination Camp, a mix of history and fictional reconstructions’ that went on to become an international best-seller and was quickly translated into English, German, Spanish, Italian, Portuguese, and Japanese. In Paris, the book became the centre of an intellectual scandal that raged for the next six months, involving leading figures like Simone de Beauvoir who had written a glowing preface, the critic George Steiner and other literary luminaries (Elie Wiesel, Jean-Paul Sartre, etc.). In an interview, Steiner himself started the controversy by raising the question of to what extent the Jewish deportees, here members of the Sonderkommando, were ‘complicitous’ in the Nazi extermination machine. The same claim made in the U.S. about the Judenrate (Jewish Councils) by Hannah Arendt in 1963 and earlier by historian Raul Hilberg in 1961 had unleashed furious controversy, though far more so for Arendt at the time than over Hilberg’s extremely meticulous study. The “Steiner Affair” raised similar hackles in France, but, as Samuel Moyn noted in his 2005 study, for different reasons. For one, the predominant French view of the Holocaust had scarcely paid much attention to the extermination camps, as opposed to the concentration camps, where the bulk of (non-Jewish) French Resistants were held. In discussing the extermination camps, there was no avoiding the fact that the vast majority of the exterminated were Jews. In this sense, as Moyn remarked (5), the role played by the Treblinka affair was a watershed in France in the public uses and discussion of Holocaust memory that opened it up from its previous restriction to a small and unknown coterie of scholars, marginal to the established disciplines. Second, Steiner consciously wrote his book “as a popular ‘Western’,” as Moyn put it (7), freely admitting that he had “imagined” parts of it, to make the facts speak more truly, so to speak. As well, his French publisher, Fayard, forced him to remove some unflattering remarks about professional historians, people who do not take journalistic arrogance lightly.

In 2003 a further controversy broke out with the publication of art historian Georges Didi-Huberman’s Images malgré tout. Claude Lanzmann, explaining why his 1984 film Shoah had not used conventional documentary footage, had famously remarked that it was because such images from within

the death-camps did not exist, adding that if he had found such in the many years of research on the film he would have destroyed them. Didi-Huberman’s book was a response to Lanzmann as well as other critics, that such images did in fact exist—and in particular four photographs ostensibly taken from within Auschwitz gas chamber V by an anonymous member of a Sonderkommando in August 1944 that shows gassed bodies being cremated in outdoor incineration pits (State Museum of Auschwitz-Birkenau, photo negatives Nos. 277–278, 282–283, in Didi-Huberman, 24–27). Much of the resulting argument had to do with technical discussion of what images show and do not, and how did the person taking the shots get hold of a camera. Didi-Huberman’s main point, however, was to stress the idea of “in spite of it all” (malgré tout)—that is, that the debate over “how to read” the Holocaust was not settled at all.

III

This brings us appropriately to the problems of bearing witness or testimony. Historian Annette Wieviorka, in 1998, published a small book entitled L’Ere du témoin, the era of the witness.24 It was dedicated to psychoanalyst Anne-Lise Stern whose long-running seminar at the Maison des Sciences de l’Homme as of the 1970s had centred on uncovering the often unconscious but continuing presence of echoes of the Holocaust in contemporary European culture.

Wieviorka opened with the words spoken by Jewish historian Simon Dubnov to his comrades in Riga in December 1941, just before being murdered as part of the liquidation of the ghetto: “Good people, do not forget; good people, tell the story; good people, write!” (9). Not only were numerous written accounts, diaries and so on found buried in the ruins of the ghettos and death camps of Eastern Europe,25 and later rediscovered, but between 1944–1948, the work of the Central Commission of Jewish History in Poland had gathered over 7,000 testimonial accounts from survivors. Raul Hilberg recalled YIVO research director Philip Friedman, who died in 1960, telling him that there

24 Annette Wieviorka, L’ère du témoin (Paris: Plon, 1998). The originator of the idea of an era of testimony was Shoshana Felman’s long essay on Claude Lanzmann’s film Shoah; see her “In an Era of Testimony,” Yale French Studies 79 (1991), 39–81. Felman also suggests Shoah was less a “historical document on the genocide,” and more a “film about witnessing”: its “disorienting vision of the present” re-writes the past “event-without-a-witness into witnessing, into history.”

were by the 1950s some 18,000 writings by survivors, and that those numbers were already out of date (Wieviorka, 9–12). Since then, to manuscripts have been added countless numbers of audio cassettes and tapes, videotapes, CD-ROMs, DVDs, gathered and stocked in numerous archives and libraries in sites throughout the West. Wieviorka remarked that historians had seldom looked at this recorded material, leaving the “gigantic corpus” either to literary scholars, or to diverse psychiatrists (15). Most importantly, all this material provided a “model of the construction of memory”—in other words, “a figure of testimony” (16). These she proposed to investigate in three dimensions: 1) those left by the ones who were killed, 2) how the Eichmann Trial made the emergence of the figure of the witness possible, and 3) how this figure had become society-wide in the sense that one could speak meaningfully of an era of testimony. However, it is important to note that there is no unanimity on the obligation to bear witness.26

But rather than recount her argument, allow me to examine instead the problematic figure of the witness. In French, a “témoin” in its most banal sense is someone who tells what he or she saw, usually to a police officer, or in a courtroom, about an accident or a crime, or gives visual identification of those involved. There are degrees of witnessing and testimony, accompanied by increasing levels of formality: depositions, attestations, etc., in which what is being recounted is written down, transcribed, and signed, all of which serve as guarantees of the veracity of the account. The formalization aspects also increase the stakes, and no doubt reach their pinnacle in the eternal Covenant of G-d with the Jewish people. The Covenant is a legally binding contract, sealed by the Law, the Ark of the Covenant, and the mark of circumcision.

On a very different level, Holocaust historian Raul Hilberg in his 2001 Sources of Holocaust Research classified “testimony” into four categories, noting that the word itself referred to sources that were “highly varied and widely scattered,” and depended on whether the testimony is from a perpetuator, a bystander, or a survivor.27 His four categories were legal testimony, interviews of specific persons, oral history, and “memoir literature.” He raised a number of problems with the testimony of survivors: were they representative of the Jewish community that was destroyed? Were they a random sample of survivors as a whole? Did their testimony reflect a random

27 Raul Hilberg, Sources of Holocaust Research: An Analysis (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2001), 44.
sample of their experiences? In fact, unless a number of surviving witnesses could testify about a common experience in a specific case—as he noted, such as historian Christopher Browning found in the 134 accounts of shared memory of survivors of the labour camp of Starachowice—Hilberg himself had little use for survivor testimony as a historian. There was simply too much individual variation to guarantee reliability.

But we can leave the historians to the dilemmas of their professional activities, as there are other ways to look at the matter. Besides, we have already sufficiently seen the kinds of crises of veracity that affect the historical profession, and as psychiatrist Dori Laub remarks, it was that very crisis of the profession that led to the move to “history as trauma” (255), and so the shift, for Laub, to psychoanalytic approaches to survivor accounts—that is, taking them as a form of narrative.

As a system of law, Judaism is characterized by a style of legal reasoning and modes of argumentation. As such, these are rhetorical acts that generate figures of discourse. One of these figures is the witness testifying to God’s injustice. As Anson Laytner proposed in his fascinating Arguing With God: A Jewish Tradition:

as God has not acted toward His people as a God should act...
His people have known it. The Jewish literary heritage is replete with laments and dirges, complaints and arguments, all protesting God’s mistreatment of His people.... This history [of Jewish suffering since Roman times, if not long before] has given rise to a unique literature of argument prayers ... that, though rooted in deep faith, nevertheless calls God to task for His Lapses of duty.... [Thjis is the Jewish mode of appealing to God the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court against God the Partner.

As this last sentence makes clear, and drawing on the work of scholars dealing with thought forms and patterns in the Talmud, the 12 different categories of prayer, etc., the main stylistic form of “protest/appeals” that Laytner found in practically every period of Jewish history, was “the law court” pattern of prayer. For a very clear illustration of how the law-court pattern manifests

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itself, Laytner analyzed two appeals to God by Moses recounted in Exodus 32: 9–14, and 32: 30–35. The structure of the law-court argument was thus as follows: Address and introductory petition; Defence argument; Petition; Divine response/verdict; Execution and sentence (Laytner, 10–12).

In historical terms, the predominant mode of address here has tended to take the form of prayer/appeal, but this was not always the case, and particularly not in the Holocaust and post-Holocaust period. Laytner specifically discusses “the prose arguments” of Elie Wiesel (214–227). For Wiesel, and in turn reflecting many of the dilemmas of post-Holocaust theology, God was both alive and dead, or was alive but absconded during the Holocaust. Much of the argument relies heavily on the figure of paradox, but certainly one thrust concerned a rejection of the ancient doctrine of “u’mipnei hata’einu”—for our sins, we are punished. That the Holocaust was a form of divine retribution is an utter obscenity for Wiesel. In the absence of God, one’s obligation as a Jew is to one’s fellow human beings, to one’s fellow survivors as well as the millions of others who died, to whose memory one must remain a living witness. Wiesel’s stance, Laytner noted accurately, was one of “defiance” (226): he continued to argue with and question God, even if he was no longer sure that He was there, while still adhering to the Covenant in spite of God. As with Didi-Huberman, his was a philosophical version of the Malgré Tout.

Finally and briefly, sociologist Renaud Dulong looked at the complexities of the notion of the eyewitness. The phenomenon of the witness, he wrote, “is that a narrative is factualized by ... the presence of its narrator in

31 For a brilliant discussion of Yiddish poetry of the “annihilation,” see Rachel Ertel, Dans la langue de personne (Paris: Seuil, 1993). One can translate the title with two meanings: 1) as a language that itself disappeared in the flames of the Holocaust, but also 2) as the traces left by the annihilated people turned by the Nazis into nothing and nobody: “personne” means both someone and no-one.

32 Renaud Dulong, Le témoin occulaire: les conditions sociales de l’attestation personelle (Paris: Editions de l’EHESS, 1998). Schladow (2007) remarks that “Witnessing is a process of positioning, both specular and active, whereby the subject is constructed in terms of what s/he has seen or experienced. In relaying that experience, not only is the subject positioned in relation to others, the recipient is also positioned to accept/believe or refuse/disbelieve the testimony. The process of witnessing, officially or unofficially, is therefore ineluctable: what has been witnessed cannot be changed for the subject; nor can it be changed for the recipient of the testimony, who essentially can no longer remain neutral. In the Eichmann trial, for instance, both the witnesses and the recipient audience were positioned by the act of relaying testimony – the former, as subjects of the experience; the latter, as judging subjects of Jewish testimony and experience and of Eichmann and the trial itself. Jewish experience could no longer be ignored or discounted, only accepted or refused, creating the conditions for subsequent discourse about Jewish victimhood and the Holocaust.”
regard to the reported event” (1998, 10–11). One is dealing with greater matters than, say, just the communication of information; indeed, for Dulong, these issues opened up yet another new field of sociological research, in the sense that the witness, regarded too often solely in juridical contexts as a kind of recording device, is instead a multi-dimensional phenomenon. However, and largely due to the methods of scientific criticism, all witnessing today has arguably become dubious, but at what cost? Can any living testimony not be debunked by psychology? As well, to the extent that a large part of our daily information comes from the ‘guarantee’ provided by another person, what are the implications for our ordinary interactions in which so much of what we do and think we know relies on unreliable human perceptions and very approximate human memory?

A 2005 collection of essays, edited by Dulong and Carole Dornier, deals frontally with war-related trauma and memory, but as a problem of the aesthetics of witnessing.33 Any account, in its dual ambition of “telling the truth” and of adequately transmitting experience to others, necessarily entails aesthetic (stylistic and formal) issues that range across the variety of media of expression, from the “high” style of literary writing including poetry, but also includes theatrical representations (of the Rwanda genocide in this collection), as well as films. For example, Emmanuel Finkiel’s 1999 feature film Voyages focuses upon four Jewish women survivors’ experience decades later. Voyages opens with the return of 65-year-old Riwka to what remains of Auschwitz.34 As in Alain Resnais’ Hiroshima mon Amour whose leitmotif is “Tu n’as rien vu à Hiroshima,” Riwka too “ne verra rien d’Auschwitz.”35

In the same collection, historian Frédéric Rousseau returns to Jean Norton Cru’s 1929 book, Witnesses: An essay of analysis and critique of the memoirs of combatants published in French, 1915–1928.36 The book caused a scandal at the time because the story it told so completely flew in the face of the commemorative memory established since the First World War—the heroic sacrifice of the Unknown Soldier, the glory of dying pro patria, but as well of such supposedly realist, antiwar novels as Henri Barbusse’s Le feu (1916). The still unanswered question Norton Cru raised was, “How does one write about war?” Rousseau demonstrated the various stylistic artifices (exaggeration and

35 The script is appended to Dulong and Dornier, along with an interview with Finkiel, 251 ff.
sensationalism, the abuse of local colour such as regional accents, as well as a stylistic verve that said more about the author than those whose experience he was trying to get at) that Norton Cru had denounced in others while using them himself. Rousseau shows that the debate around such questions has gone on for 70 years and specifically raises that of the “fictionalization” of the concentrationary universe violently denounced by some survivors as having made of “the deportation a best-seller” (Rousseau in Dulong and Dornier, 13–14). This leads Rousseau to mention once again the seemingly endless controversy over the mid-1970s American miniseries Holocaust that French writer and critic Alain Finkelkraut had contemptuously called “Love Story in the extermination camps” (cited in Rousseau, 14). Finally, Rousseau circles back to Norton Cru’s question of how to write about war, combining this with a second question raised by British historian Eric Hobsbawm in The Age of Extremes (1994): namely, “how does one write about the concentration camps?” For Rousseau, contemporary historian, the two questions today had “become one and the same” (14; emphasis added).

The other side of the coin concerns the social emergence of what Dulong called “new figures of testimony” (17; emphasis added), in the form of the “new type of witness” exemplified by the former soldier or concentration camp returnee, whose testimony is all the more precious as the generations contemporary of the great catastrophes of the twentieth century die out (16).

Their testimony is an essential element of what he terms “a dispositive of vigilance” that permanently reminds us of the murderous outcomes of totalitarian and racist logics. But also they are living reminders of the obscenity of some political positions and slogans; living proof of the lies of Holocaust deniers; and brakes upon our own forgetfulness (16). Or so we can always hope, malgré tout.

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37 Much has been written about the Holocaust series at the time of its release and after. Suffice it here to quote historian Peter Novick who observes that the four-part, 9½ hour mini-series over four nights and watched by 100 million Americans imparted “to more Americans [more information] ... than over all the preceding thirty years.” Peter Novick, The Holocaust in American Life (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1999), 209.
UNSETTLING REDEMPTION: 
THE ETHICS OF INTRASUBJECTIVITY IN THE ACT OF KILLING

SARA KENDALL

“Dostoyevsky was concerned with psychology; he made visible the criminal element hidden in each person. Brecht is concerned with politics; he makes visible the element of crime hidden in all business.”
—Walter Benjamin

I. Between Psyche and Polis

The Act of Killing (2012) resists clear categorization as a cultural artefact. Neither documentary nor dramatization, it inhabits a space between, offering a novel approach to cinematic representations of historical violence. Referencing the period surrounding the overthrow of Indonesian president Sukarno by a military coup in the mid-1960s that brought US-backed General Suharto to power, the film focuses on several mid-level agents of an anti-communist purge that resulted in the deaths of half a million to two million people. By following a group of former paramilitary killers through dramatic re-enactments of their crimes, it lends material resources and an international platform to the

perpetrators through inviting them to produce their own narrative of the violence using the stylistic conventions of their choice.

In contemporary Indonesia, where many of the same perpetrators have links to state power and are treated as heroic figures, the discourse of “ending impunity” invoked by human rights activists and proponents of international criminal law is markedly absent. As one of the film’s subjects maintains, “war crimes are defined by the winners. I’m a winner. So I can make my own definition.” Institutional mechanisms such as courts and truth commissions that inscribe and enforce the redress of past wrongs are far from the political horizon in contemporary Indonesia. Coming to terms with past atrocities requires alternate approaches in a polity that continues to disavow this violent history. In this sense the film is an intervention: a possible unsettling of political complacency and a site for reflection on existing power structures and historical effacements. The film’s official trailer prompts its audience with the overlaid text—“why have they never been punished?”—suggesting that lack of accountability is a significant and framing theme.

By inviting perpetrators to craft narratives of their crimes, however, The Act of Killing also provokes reflection on its novel experimental form. The film draws its audience into a space of ethical ambiguity, prompting questions as to the work’s meaning and purpose. Can it produce remorse and redemption among its perpetrator-subjects, and is this approach likely to bring about political transformation? How might this artefact contribute to the historical record of mass atrocity? The Act of Killing can thus be read in relation to “transitology,” a term that I use here to characterize the ideological underpinnings, sentiments, and themes of the field of transitional justice. The field places ideological emphasis on the temporal and ethical movement from past injustice to a presumptively just present. As part of a broader discourse of “humanitarian reason,” it employs affective sentiments that include trauma.

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3 “Transitology” is often understood more narrowly as referring to the comparative political study of regime transitions, and particularly of post-Soviet regimes, within the discipline of political science. For a critical treatment of this narrower form, see John Haskell and Boris Mamlyuk, “Capitalism, Communism … and Colonialism? Revisiting ‘Transitology’ as the Ideology of Informal Empire,” Global Jurist 9, no. 2 (2009): 1–35. Others have used the term in relation to transitional justice; see John Torpey (ed.), Politics and the Past: On Repairing Historical Injustices (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2003). Here I use the term to refer to the animating sentiments of the field of transitional justice—thus its referent is more an affect than a field of inquiry or a set of mechanisms.

4 Didier Fassin, Humanitarian Reason: A Moral History of the Present, trans. Rachel Gomme (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012). Fassin argues that “humanitarianism elicits the fantasy of a global moral community that may still be viable and the expectation that solidarity may have redeeming powers. This secular imaginary of communion and redemption implies a
healing, remorse, and redemption. It addresses themes of accountability, impunity, truth-telling, and reconciliation. These sentiments and themes have appeared within the film itself, in interviews with its makers, and in journalistic and scholarly commentary. According to an anthropologist specializing in cultural and political responses to Indonesia’s violent past, the film “penetrates the entrenched impunity enjoyed by the perpetrators of one of the worst massacres in modern history.” In this light, the film has been taken up not only as a creative work, but also as a means of provoking a psychological transition in its subjects and a broader political recognition of a disavowed past.

The Act of Killing can be read in relation to what I am calling “transitology” on two different registers: at the level of the psyche and at the level of the polis. Following Walter Benjamin, we might say that the film combines a Dostoyevskian interest in the inner criminal with a Brechtian concern for exposing the underside of political and social structures—in this case, the links between individual killers, paramilitary organizations, and ultimately the Indonesian state. Joshua Oppenheimer, the most public presence of the film’s three directors, offers an account of his decision to support a group of perpetrators, including the film’s main perpetrator-protagonist, Anwar Congo, in producing narratives of their own crimes:

And so begins a process of refinement and embellishment where these simple re-enactments with Anwar and his friends become these kind of grotesque, surreal, beautiful, phantasmagoric dramatizations. The engine of that embellishment is in fact Anwar’s own conscience in the hope that by making it beautiful in the film he can somehow make it ok for himself.

Oppenheimer is interested in tracing the work of Anwar’s conscience—to the extent that he believes he can record and render it visible—in order to show how Anwar tries to “make it ok” for himself. Anwar’s psyche provides a key narrative thread for the film, which at times seems to venture into a personal journey of seeking redemption, or, at the very least, of some form of release

sudden awareness of the fundamentally unequal human condition and an ethical necessity to not remain passive about it in the name of solidarity—however ephemeral this awareness is, and whatever limited impact this necessity has” (xii).


6 SOHK.TV Interview with Joshua Oppenheimer (The Act of Killing), interview by Jack Jones, © Minky Productions 2013, available online at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pMBx4crMG7A.
from the nightmares that have been haunting him. Yet Oppenheimer claims an additional objective: he wants to show that this violence in which Anwar is implicated is not removed, remote, and marginal, but rather endemic and universal. “All of our societies are built on mass violence,” he contends, which forms the “the underbelly of our reality.”7 In the words of Simon Critchley, we might say that the wider orientation of The Act of Killing is one of “political disappointment”:

something lacking or failing arises from the realization that we inhabit a violently unjust world, a world defined by the horror of war, a world where, as Dostoevsky says, blood is being spilt in the merriest way, as if it were champagne.8

Part of the film’s project entails capturing the merry ways in which its subjects recount the spilling of blood. For Critchley, political disappointment “provokes the question of justice,”9 and it seems that the question of justice haunts the margins of the film without being overtly addressed. How then can this “violently unjust world” be navigated, where perpetrators such as Congo continue to inhabit positions of influence? What kind of transition, if any, is possible without a transformation of the polis—the political community that has been affected by mass atrocity? Is the possible redemption of the perpetrator’s psyche the only available avenue of redress enabled by this form?

This article explores what kind of transformation or transition is possible within the terms of the film’s own (en)framing and the wider historico-political context that it inhabits. The Act of Killing takes up a different and more subjective task of documentation than the field of transitional justice’s traditional orientation toward a polity, and in this sense the film’s objectives diverge considerably from those of the field.10 Yet transitional mechanisms also employ the affective categories of trauma and healing, and in this sense I suggest that both the film and certain discourses of transitional justice share a common sentiment. At the level of the individual subject—whether victim, perpetrator, or beneficiary of past oppression—“transitology” appears to slide into the realm of the therapeutic, and the imperative of overcoming trauma takes precedence over attention to structural injustice. As Didier Fassin and

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7 Ibid.
9 Ibid., 38.
Richard Rechtman have noted, the category of trauma has become a dominant form of representing historical violence:

> Trauma has become a major signifier of our age. It is our normal means of relating present suffering to past violence. It is the scar that a tragic event leaves on an individual victim or on a witness—sometimes even on a perpetrator.\(^{11}\)

Oppenheimer explains that he “lingered on Anwar because his pain was close to the surface”—“it was though he was shadowed by genuine memories that were haunting him.”\(^{12}\) Indeed, as the next section argues, *The Act of Killing* seems to present the production of the film itself as a therapeutic process—an uneasy narrative of coming to terms with past acts. Yet unlike the frame of a truth and reconciliation commission, which allows a space for the figure of the perpetrator but with attendant conditions (solemnity at a minimum, and in some cases an intersubjective expression of remorse), the frame of the film appears unconditional: here perpetrators participate in producing a spectacle without the expectation that they ought to account for what they have done.

In this sense, trauma—Anwar’s pain and the memories that haunt him—forms a greater part of the film’s narrative arc than the issue of ongoing structural injustice and impunity. The film’s relation to the theme of accountability is less direct and more allegorical, read through the shattered psyche of its main perpetrator-protagonist. Oppenheimer claims he was “not interested in leading a killer to remorse. But … discovering his brokenness has been the most effective exposé, if you like, of the rottenness of the whole regime.”\(^{13}\) This exposé suggests a kind of metonymical relationship, where Anwar’s broken psyche is seen to index the political order in contemporary Indonesia. The risk with this emphasis on the personal journey lies in foregrounding the psyche over the polis, and with privileging affective sentiments concerning the individual over political transformation. As a critical intervention, the film’s main purchase comes from what it allows us to see

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\(^{11}\) Didier Fassin and Richard Rechtman, *The Empire of Trauma: An Inquiry into the Condition of Victimhood* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), xi. Cathy Caruth argues that “The phenomenon of trauma seems to have become all-inclusive, but it has done so precisely because it brings us to the limits of our understanding: if psychoanalysis, psychiatry, sociology, and even literature are beginning to hear each other anew in the study of trauma, it is because they are listening through the radical disruption and gaps of traumatic experience.” *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 4.

\(^{12}\) SOHK.TV Interview.

about the broader structural conditions of contemporary Indonesia than about Anwar’s intrasubjective journey.

This reading of *The Act of Killing* thus draws upon critiques of transitional justice, humanitarian discourse, and human rights. These critiques often employ a shared concern with how these discourses depoliticize and moralize, focusing on individual sentiments rather than structures of power. As Bronwyn Leebaw claims, transitional justice processes “are too often framed as apolitical responses to the deeds and experiences of individual victims and perpetrators.”14 By contrast, thinking through transition at the broader level of the polity reveals the (political) dynamics between victims, perpetrators, and beneficiaries, as well as the structural conditions that continue to inform the way this violent history is disavowed in contemporary Indonesia.

II. The Theatricality of Evil

In 1965, the Indonesian government was overthrown by the military. Anybody opposed to the military dictatorship could be accused of being a communist: union members, landless farmers, intellectuals, and the ethnic Chinese. In less than a year, and with the direct aid of western governments, over one million “communists” were murdered. The army used paramilitaries and gangsters to carry out the killings. These men have been in power—and have persecuted their opponents—ever since. When we met the killers, they proudly told us stories about what they did. To understand why, we asked them to create scenes about the killings in whatever way they wished. This film follows that process, and documents its consequences.

If *The Act of Killing* can be considered a documentary, its subject is not this violent period of Indonesian history in the mid-1960s. Little historical framing is provided beyond what appears in the text above, which accompanies the film’s opening moments. Much of the work of situating and contextualizing its content is left to the viewer.15 As a documentary, then, this film’s subject is the theatrical representation of violence by select individuals who participated in it.

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15 A good companion piece or supplement in this regard is Benedict Anderson’s chapter in an edited volume assembled by Oppenheimer and a co-editor, which documents the September 30th movement and places the violence in political context. See Benedict Anderson, “Impunity,” in Brink and Oppenheimer (eds.), *Killer Images*, 268–286.
These perpetrator-protagonists present their past enemies as “communists” and “Chinese,” but apart from the claim above that killings were carried out “with the direct aid of western governments,” the larger Cold War history in which these acts transpired remains outside the frame. The Indonesian state’s counter-revolutionary suppression of its pre-1965 revolutionary past also does not feature in the narrative. The film thus does not engage in what Mahmood Mamdani would call “the question of political identity” resulting from “the history of state formation,” which would entail a more complex presentation of the colonial and post-colonial history of Indonesia as well as its broader geopolitical context. Instead, the film’s cursory introduction above mainly foregrounds the fact that the perpetrators were never removed from power, and it claims that their violent acts have been mythologized as heroic and necessary.

The text above forms the largest part of its meta-narrative, where its makers inform their audience about the film’s context and their intentions in producing it. Its closing credits produce another archive: the overwhelming anonymity of its Indonesian crew, including one of the co-directors, marking the repressive political circumstances in which the film was made. The production of the film entailed great risks for them, and their participation was a courageous act of parrhesia—of speaking truth to the contemporary Indonesian state. But much of the broader context of The Act of Killing has come out primarily through interviews with its makers rather than within the film itself. The film is not an isolated text that stands alone as an interpretive object, but instead can be read alongside the commentary that its makers provide. This interpretive decision is a consequence of the film opening a number of ethical questions about its production that remain unanswered within The Act of Killing. The makers of the film have elaborated upon these questions extensively in press accounts and interviews. In these interviews, however, the emphasis appears to be as much about the experience of making the film within a film from the standpoint of its perpetrator-protagonists as it is about the

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16 For more detailed historical accounts of this period, see the texts mentioned in supra note 2.
17 See Max Lane, Unfinished Nation: Indonesia Before and After Suharto (London: Verso, 2008).
19 Michel Foucault, Fearless Speech (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2001).
broader Indonesian political context. For example, Joshua Oppenheimer describes the film as follows:

*The Act of Killing* is a film in which former death squad leaders who have been in power ever since they helped the army of Indonesia kill a million people in 1965 are invited to dramatize what they have done as a way of understanding what happens to all of us when we build our normality on the basis of terror and lies. And these men set about re-enacting their acts of genocide, acts of mass murder, in dramatizations inspired by the film genres that they love—gangster, musical, cowboy, Western—and along the way they, the main characters in the film, go through an emotional journey where they start to understand—the film-making process becomes the prism through which they finally recognize the true meaning of what they have done.21

This extract from an interview is exemplary both for its discussion of form—the role of film and specific genres—as well as for expressing the sentiment that I have described as “transitology.” Here the perpetrator-protagonists are seen as undertaking “an emotional journey” where they move from a state of disavowal, repression or displacement to recognition of their past deeds. For this reason, the film can be read not only as a work of art but also as a narrative of redemption crafted by its filmmakers that links it thematically to the field of transitional justice.

With nearly a decade spent acquiring footage, the normative arc of *The Act of Killing* comes in how it is edited and crafted as the narrative described by Oppenheimer above. In his many public interviews, Oppenheimer explains that he had been living in a community of survivors of the mid-1960s violence, and that there was limited space for recounting their stories in light of the political conditions in contemporary Indonesia. Instead they advised him to speak to those responsible for their suffering, and Oppenheimer found that the perpetrators within the community were more than willing to recount what they had done.22

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21 SOHK.TV Interview.
22 At the film’s first large public screening in September 2012, Oppenheimer explains that he had previously been commissioned to make a film of survivor communities who were working on a plantation in Northern Sumatra. He found that their inability to mobilize to contest their working conditions was tied to the ongoing fear of perpetrators living in their midst, and he was advised to speak with the perpetrators. Introduction to *The Act of Killing* with Joshua Oppenheimer at the Toronto International Film Festival, September 9, 2012, available at
The resulting film is thus based upon the narratives of the perpetrators. These men “had a natural theatricality … which led [Oppenheimer] to offer to underwrite and film their re-enactments of their deeds.”23 The film’s audience is introduced to “Anwar Congo: Executioner in 1965,” who demonstrates how he dispensed with suspected communists on a rooftop in Medan, Northern Sumatra. He explains that he adapted wire-based strangulation in order to minimize the bloodiness of his acts of killing. The broad smile on Anwar’s face as he stands poised with the wire around the neck of another man, also smiling, is unsettling enough: this is compounded when moments later he begins to dance and claims that “I’ve tried to forget all this with good music…. Dancing…. Anwar’s modes of escape provide a red thread throughout the film, as do his claims that he is haunted by victims of these acts who come to him in nightmares. The other perpetrator-protagonists appear less emotionally developed within the frame of the film: Herman Koto, Anwar’s main sidekick, seems to be liberated from such haunting and instead delights in the subversive position afforded by the film’s production. Koto’s most memorable scenes involve him dressing in drag: as the violated woman in a Western-style wagon train scene; as a vengeful goddess who delights in eating Anwar’s organs; and as an ambiguous figure clad in body-fitting pink lycra, accentuating Koto’s corpulent form. Indeed, Koto’s interventions as a character in The Act of Killing serve more as theatrical depictions of a much-admired Hollywood than as registering the “emotional journey” that Oppenheimer describes.

The men involved in staging this film within a film have associations with the Pancasila Youth, a paramilitary organization with connections to the Indonesian state. Emerging from out of the period of Suharto’s ascendance to power, the organization was rooted in the activities of paramilitary “gangsters” who supported the overthrow of Sukarno’s government and the attendant purge of suspected communists. The perpetrator-protagonists in The Act of Killing frequently refer to themselves as “gangsters,” asserting a link between “gangster” and “free man” as if the terms were locked together through a shared etymology. The “gangster” presented here is unlike the 1960s Jamaican

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NU-8Xv-LVUk. See also Oppenheimer’s interview with “Democracy Now.”

23 “The killers did not get a salary but were paid what Mr. Oppenheimer called a ‘modest per diem’ (approved by the University of Westminster and the British Arts and Humanities Research Council, which financed the re-enactments).” Larry Rother, “A Movie’s Killers are All Too Real: ‘The Act of Killing’ and Indonesian Death Squads,” New York Times, July 12, 2013, available at http://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/14/movies/the-act-of-killing-and-indonesian-death-squads.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0.

www.mediatropes.com
“rude boy,” however, whose transgressive self-fashioning has been read as a practice of freedom. Instead, the Indonesian “gangster” presented in the film reads as a morally unencumbered subject, radically libertarian, whose “freedom” appears more as a negative freedom rather than as a practice of identity. These self-proclaimed “free men” are still imbricated with state power: they participated in counterrevolutionary violence that displaced the previous post-colonial order. The film’s overlaid text tells us “Pancasila Youth is one of Indonesia’s biggest paramilitary organizations. Pancasila Youth played a leading role in the 1965–66 killings.” In a political speech captured by the filmmakers, the organization’s leader, Yapto Soerjosoeannoto, states:

> All members of the Pancasila Youth are heroes. From exterminating the communists to fighting neo-communists and left-wing extremists and those wishing to break apart the nation. This isn’t only the duty of the army and police. We, Pancasila Youth, must take a stand. For these are threats to the nation and we must take action.

Despite claims to libertarian subjectivity, the gangster is carrying out the work of the state by proxy. The gangster appears as a persona who kills without remorse, but precisely because he is carrying out this work for others. Oppenheimer notes that sometimes Anwar and his friends would use a state television crew “since they are basically the government in Northern Sumatra.” Although the protagonists cultivate a mythology of their own libertarian form of freedom, they are still bound up in the state apparatus of contemporary Indonesia, raising questions regarding the extent to which the filmmakers may also be interpellated into this framework of power despite their attempts to unravel it. As with other subversive documentary works, such as Mads Brügger’s films *The Red Chapel* (2009) and *The Ambassador* (2011), there are uncomfortable moments for both filmmaker and audience as access is negotiated through acts or omissions that inhabit a grey zone between documentation and complicity. Yet by dwelling in this ambiguous zone, the

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26 Oppenheimer claims that he began the project “with a sense of mission for the survivors, but at the same time, I also wanted to know how my characters, as human beings, imagined themselves. Therefore, I had no choice but to treat them like human beings if I expected them to allow me to see the human beings they really are from the very beginning of the filming. That was the gauntlet I threw down before myself. And then at a certain point, Anwar and I started to
film also archives the limits of what forms of documentation are possible in light of the heroic status still accorded to these perpetrators in contemporary Indonesia as well as their links to state power.

The representation of violence—and particularly of state and state-sanctioned violence—is constrained by social and political factors. In her work on the images of torture taken at the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq, Judith Butler asks us to consider “what forms of social and state power are ‘embedded’ in the frame.” Butler’s work concerns images from war reporting, and the subject is mediated through the photographer’s lens and through the US state’s efforts to establish control over the framing, “if always with only partial success.” The Act of Killing harbours a double frame: there is the framing carried out by the perpetrators in their embellished re-enactments, who are themselves enframed by Oppenheimer when he shows Anwar casually dancing the cha-cha after his staged demonstration of killing by wire on the rooftop. Here we see quite clearly the “framing of the frame,” in Butler’s words: a framing that is often constrained directly and indirectly by state power. Oppenheimer has made concessions to power that were arguably productive: among other things, through his decision to focus on perpetrators, which he claims resulted in part due to harassment and threats from state security services when he attempted to document victims. Another concession may have been the decision to give the perpetrators authorial control over the narratives they would tell. Although it led to fascinating insights into how these individuals see themselves and wish to be seen, the decision to let the film’s subjects recount their acts through the stylistic conventions of their choice raises questions about the ethics of this form of representation. Even so, the film also reveals what power has attempted to occlude, which is where its own subversive potential emerges.

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28 Ibid., 73.
29 Ibid., 74.
30 Oppenheimer notes that in 2001, when he and his co-director interviewed descendants of murdered union workers who were too frightened to unionize themselves out of fear that they would be persecuted, Oppenheimer and Cynn were “quickly and repeatedly harassed by the military. ‘They would take our equipment, they would take our tapes, they would detain us,’ Oppenheimer said. ‘It was very difficult to get anything taped, and it was very frightening, especially for the survivors.’” See “Making a ‘Killing’,” The Austin Chronicle, August 9, 2013, available at http://www.austinchronicle.com/screens/2013-08-09/making-a-killing/.
Watching the film, then, there is the distinct sense of a divide between the period of its making—which may have entailed moments of complicity, or at least of the filmmaker bearing neutral witness—and the period of its dissemination, when its critical force can be brought to bear upon the powers that previously constrained its production.

The film harbours a tension precisely because of its makers’ careful efforts not to moralize or guide the perpetrators’ self-reflections while assembling the material that forms the finished product. Thus Anwar seems left to his own observations of himself, musing, “I’d see the person being interrogated … I wouldn’t be sadistic. I’d give the guy a cigarette, I’d still be dancing, laughing. It was like we were killing happily,” or noting “I know my bad dreams come from what I did, killing people who didn’t want to die. I forced them to die.” There is no intersubjective space of judgment within the film, no sense of accountability to others, but rather the impression of an egoic journey with occasional moments of self-reflection. The journey transpires through the vehicle of artistic production, dwelling upon aesthetic details such as Anwar’s comments, when viewing himself on film, that he would never have worn white back then on account of the blood—“I look like I’m dressed for a picnic”—or “My acting has to be violent. And maybe I should dye my hair black.” Such seemingly trite and unrepentant observations, combined with the stylized spectacle of the re-enactments, leads to the aestheticization of violence as camp. As Susan Sontag wrote, the essence of camp is “its love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration”—a “sensibility” that “converts the serious into the frivolous.”31 A scene of young women dancing before a waterfall while Anwar receives imagined blessings from his victims forms a particularly unsettling example—a staged spectacle of redemption drawn entirely from the perpetrators’ own creativity and desire.

One of the film’s main provocations is thus the ethical discomfort it may produce for its viewers in witnessing this conversion of serious material—acts that could constitute crimes against humanity in the framework of international law—into campy visual spectacles when viewed as a work of art. As a documentary, the film’s subject is the creation of the film within it, with the latter inhabiting an ambivalent space between fiction and nonfiction; Oppenheimer himself refers to it as “nonfiction filmmaking.”32 The inner film

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32 “The core of nonfiction filmmaking is that somehow you are creating a reality with your characters the moment you film them. You are never a passive observer documenting ‘what’s there.’ That’s why it’s fundamentally creative.” Oppenheimer’s interview with Pamela Cohn, BOMBlog.
depicts events that occurred, but mediated through creative retellings that re-contextualize these acts through the use of different settings, props, and costuming, and drawing upon the tropes of Hollywood film genres. Theorizing the ethics of viewing in this case thus requires drawing upon work that considers the representation of both actual and fictionalized violence.

The ethical questions prompted by *The Act of Killing* have been addressed in other attempts to think through how acts of violence are represented through different media, including photography and journalism. Several scholars have noted how certain representations operate as a kind of “pornography of violence,” which Judith Butler describes as “the pleasure taken in seeing human degradation and in the eroticization of that degradation”—a “sexualization of the act of seeing” distinct from the depiction of sexual acts.\(^{33}\) Mahmood Mamdani has claimed that “[n]ewspaper writing on Darfur has sketched a pornography of violence…. This voyeuristic approach accompanies a moralistic discourse whose effect is both to obscure the politics of the violence and position the reader as a virtuous, not just a concerned observer.”\(^{34}\) In both instances, the critique concerns the relation between the spectator and the representation, a gaze that is construed as pornographic due to the affect of the viewer contrasted with the gravity of what is represented. Relatively, Arthur Kleinman has argued that “commercialized voyeurism” may lead to the loss of empathy as suffering is increasingly rendered visible in commercial and consumable forms.\(^{35}\) Among the effects pointed out by these commentators are the derivation of pleasure from suffering, the depoliticization of violence, moralistic spectatorship, and the loss of empathy.

While Butler, Mamdani, and Kleinman are speaking here of the potential effects of “pornographic” or “voyeuristic” documentation of violent acts and suffering, others have thought through the ethical dilemmas attending fictional representations of violence in literature and film, where they note tensions between the seductive pleasure of an aesthetic form and its troubling content. Concerning the political effects of Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, Michael Taussig writes,

\(^{33}\) Butler, *Frames of War*, 89 and 91.


I am not so sure that its strikingly literary quality and hallucinatory filminess do not finally blind and stun the reader into a trance, drowning in a sea-storm of imagery. The danger here lies with aestheticizing horror, and while Conrad stops short of doing that, we must realize that just to the side lurks the seductive poetics of fascism and the imaginative source of terror and torture embedded deep within us all.\(^{36}\)

In her work on violent films, criminologist Alison Young asks how we might judge the affect of cinematic violence. This approach foregrounds the figure of the film’s viewer, who is put in a “thoroughly equivocal position” of deriving pleasure from both judging violence as well as from the aesthetics of the scene in which violence is carried out.\(^{37}\) Writing about a torture scene in Quentin Tarantino’s film *Reservoir Dogs* (1992), Young notes “the spectator is placed in a thoroughly compromised ethical position, experiencing both pleasure in the look of the scene and of the character, and distaste for the violence that will ensue.”\(^{38}\) A film critic commenting on *The Act of Killing* hints at this ethical dilemma when she remarks “it’s important to emphasize, I think, how fun—in a horrible way—this really is to watch.”\(^{39}\)

The difference is in what is being depicted: in the first instance a fictional account of torture, and in the second, theatrical representations of past acts, which is what leaves the violent scenes in *The Act of Killing*—though not the historical acts they depict—somewhere between Abu Ghraib and *Reservoir Dogs*. Anwar seizes upon this ambiguity between documentation and aesthetic representation when he observes,

Why do people watch films about Nazis? To see power and sadism. We can do that. We can make something even more sadistic than … more sadistic than what you see in movies about Nazis. Sure I can! Because there’s never been a movie where heads get chopped off except in fiction, but that’s different because I did it in real life!


\(^{38}\) Ibid.

In addition to the ethical dilemmas it presents to its viewers, part of the interpretive challenge of viewing *The Act of Killing* lies in understanding the referent of these scenes. Do they represent historical acts or rather the memories of individual deeds, distorted and embellished over time, an amalgamation of reality and fiction? Projections of sadism refigured as heroism? Outside the structuring frame of a truth commission, with its testimony taken under oath, there is no external constraint upon these representations apart from the material constraints of the filmic form. The makers of the film within the film, these perpetrator-protagonists, are free to set the terms of the frame and its truth conditions. Oppenheimer maintains in an interview that “everything we see is nonfiction” and “everything is true,” but this “truth” is mediated “through artifacts, through emotional and poetic force, through [Anwar’s] personal process.”40 Elsewhere in a scholarly piece on a related project, Oppenheimer and a co-author claim that “we avoid considering historical narration as mediation of a past that can be made coherently and fully present; instead we consider historical narrative as a performance whose staging produces effects.”41

What kind of archive might this be, then, in registering events from Indonesia’s violent history? For Oppenheimer and his co-directors, it would seem that the film documents a certain transformation within its subjects. To return to Oppenheimer’s comment, “the filmmaking process becomes the prism through which they finally recognize the meaning of what they have done.” I want to suggest here that such a reading is overly restrictive, foregrounding the psychic dimensions of a largely intrasubjective process to the detriment of a series of other important relationships. There is the relationship between *The Act of Killing* and its makers, which raises issues of complicity, interpellation, and framing. There is the relation between the film and its audience, raising issues about the ethics of viewing: the risks of aestheticizing violence as camp, the (pornographic) pleasure and *jouissance* of spectatorship, and ethical disorientation.42 Finally, there is the relationship between the film’s subjects

40 Oppenheimer’s interview with Pamela Cohn, BOMBlog.
42 Sontag expressed concerns that the Abu Ghraib photographs were unable to produce “ethical pathos” in their viewers; meanwhile Kleinman comments that “[t]he impossibility of engagement with the real life constraints and contingencies of that which is local” create the conditions of possibility of an “amoral virtual reality: suffering at a distance, and a safe distance at that” (“Everything That Really Matters,” 319). Baudrillard presents an even more grim picture by arguing that the possibility of an adequate ethical response has been foreclosed because oppositional forms have now become complicit with hegemonic powers: “Images, even
and the broader socio-political context to which they belong. This relationship highlights the psyche/polis dichotomy that the film arguably resolves in favour of the psyche.

III. “Transitology” and Humanitarian Reason

The boundaries between Anwar as a person and the political regime have been dissolved. He’s holding it all. I could not have had any kind of political ending; it had to solely reflect Anwar’s psychological state.43

There has been no public accounting for the violence that occurred in Indonesia during the mid-1960s. Because of the ongoing relationship between perpetrators and the Indonesian state, Oppenheimer and his co-directors turned to inventive forms to produce narratives of that period. As an archive of historical violence, the film captures subjective impressions of past acts, mediated through decades of remembering, repressing, and embellishing, and supplemented by campy costumes and sets in its contemporary re-telling. Reading this film as a work of art—whether documentary, creative nonfiction, or even as fantasy—leads to the ethical questions posed above concerning its production and uptake by its audience. But the film’s intervention is not only as a work of art. Its makers see it as prompting a transition within its subjects, and more broadly, as acting into Indonesian society to reveal what has been repressed. As noted previously, one commentator claimed that the film “penetrates the entrenched impunity enjoyed by the perpetrators.”44 These understandings of the film—as a site of reckoning and accountability—bring it into a relationship with what I have been referring to as “transitology,” or the ideological sentiments of transitional justice.45

The Act of Killing raises what political theorist Robert Meister calls the “questions of impunity and disclosure” that accompany the transitional justice

radical-critical ones, are still a part of the crime they denounce, albeit an involuntary one. What is the impact of a film like Darwin’s Nightmare, which denounces racial discrimination in Tanzania? It will tour the Western world and reinforce the endogamy, the cultural and political autarky of this separate world through images and the consumption of images.” Jean Baudrillard, The Agony of Power (Los Angeles, Semiotext(e)), 60.
43 Oppenheimer’s interview with Pamela Cohn, BOMBlog.
45 I understand ideology here as both what disguises and distorts what we see as well as how we make sense of social relations. Didier Fassin attempts to bridge these two positions, which he identifies with Karl Marx and Clifford Geertz, by suggesting a critical orientation “at the frontiers” (neither fully outside nor inside). Fassin, Humanitarian Reason, 249.
literature on trials and truth commissions. Individual criminal accountability and truth-telling are among the ideological underpinnings of the field of transitional justice. These sentiments appear both within the film itself and in interviews with its makers. One bridge between this internal narrative and external commentary lies in a rare appearance of Oppenheimer within the frame of the film. The filmmaker prompts the paramilitary perpetrator Adi Zulkadry, who has thus far appeared unapologetic, to reflect upon his own acts in the language of criminal accountability. From behind the camera, Oppenheimer asks, “I don’t mean to make you uncomfortable, but I have to ask…. By telling yourself it was “war,” you’re not haunted like Anwar. But the Geneva Conventions would define what you did as a ‘war crime.’” Zulkadry explains why he does not agree “with the international courts,” interpreting law or right as a product of those in power—“when Bush was in power, Guantanamo was right”—and concluding that, as “a winner,” he was able to define war crimes for himself. Oppenheimer presses further: “What if you were brought to the international criminal court in The Hague?” Zulkadry responds defiantly: “I’d go! I don’t feel guilty…. Please, get me called to The Hague!” In practice the Hague court could not exercise jurisdiction over Zulkadry’s acts, but Oppenheimer’s remarks appear to be aimed at prompting the unreconciled perpetrator to think in terms of his individual criminal accountability.

In addition to prompting his subject to considering his violent acts as crimes, Oppenheimer also presses him to think about the importance of establishing a historical record. In response to Zulkadry’s claim that “even if everything you’re finding out is absolutely true, it’s not good,” Oppenheimer counters, “but for the millions of families whose relative were killed, if the truth comes out, it’s good.” Oppenheimer’s claim about the moral value of truth for those directly affected by violence reveals an underlying premise of truth commissions: that establishing a historical record of what transpired is a collectively therapeutic exercise. But what if the narrative of the perpetrators is insufficiently remorseful or even defiant? Antjie Krog recounts the desire of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s audience to hear from apartheid-era perpetrators after months of victims’ accounts: “More and more, we want the second narrative. And it had better be good. It had better be powerful. It had better display integrity. And it had better bring acute personal detail, grief, and bewilderment.”

Yet as Krog goes on to recount, many of the


apartheid-era perpetrators who appeared before the commission did not speak in the repentant tone that the audience desired. Similarly, the anonymous Indonesian co-director of *The Act of Killing* commented:

> How could these people tell these horrible stories so lightly and so proudly? You just want to challenge them right away. But you have to keep telling yourself to be patient, to let them tell the story the way they like. Because then we can learn something about the whole system of destruction.\(^{48}\)

In the event that the speakers do not perform the desired integrity, grief, and bewilderment and instead speak with levity and pride, their speech acts become a matter of establishing content for the historical record rather than attempts to repent or reconcile. In this sense the film has aspects of the work of a truth commission, of documenting “something about the whole system of destruction.” It may be that, in Oppenheimer’s words, “something true is revealed through this process,”\(^{49}\) yet this “truth” is mediated through many layers of representation and artifice. Meanwhile, the therapeutic dimension is foreclosed to the audience of the speech act and is reserved for the perpetrators alone.

The filmmakers’ emphasis on accountability and truth-telling appears to be supplanted by a deeper investment in the psychological journey of the film’s subjects. This privileges an intrasubjective focus on the psyche of the perpetrator-protagonists over an intersubjective frame, whether accountability to others or establishing the truth for others. Two key scenes arguably offer different conclusions to *The Act of Killing*, both of which are revealing for this emphasis on the insular sentiments of the perpetrator. The first scene, which also appears briefly in the opening, is a staged scene of redemption. Young women dance to “Born Free” in front of a waterfall, encircling Anwar, clad in black, and Herman, in a vivid blue dress. Two men approach Anwar and remove garrotting wire from around their necks. One pulls a medal out of his pocket, drapes it over Anwar’s neck, shakes his hand, and states: “for executing me and sending me to heaven…. I thank you a thousand times, for everything.” The men then join hands with Anwar and Herman and raise their arms skyward. This scene contrasts sharply with the final sequence of the film, wherein Anwar returns to the darkened rooftop of the building where he had previously demonstrated how he executed people by garrotting. In contrast to his previous theatrics, this time Anwar is restless and troubled.

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\(^{48}\) Rohter, “A Movie’s Killers are All Too Real.”

\(^{49}\) Oppenheimer’s interview with Pamela Cohn, BOMBlog.
“This is where we tortured and killed the people we captured,” he explains, adding “I know it was wrong—but I had to do it.” His breathing becomes more laboured and his body begins to shudder, and he retches violently. The scene drags on, with the camera lingering on the figure of Anwar retching, suspended at this threshold of abjection.

The two scenes suggest different moral conclusions for the perpetrators themselves. In the first we witness a staged spectacle of reconciliation and redemption, where the perpetrators have appropriated the voices of dead victims for their own egoic purposes. Yet what is depicted is a kind of inoperative reconciliation. The perpetrator constructs his own fantasy projection of forgiving victims; there is no intersubjective encounter, but rather a relation of self to self mediated by the psychic projection of an imagined other. By contrast, in the second scene we see how Anwar is unable to purge himself of his hauntings—the resolution or climax does not arrive, and he remains in a liminal state of apparent suffering. There is no catharsis to be had on the rooftop site where he committed his acts of killing.

In both instances, then, these scenes heavily emphasize the psychic desires or suffering of the perpetrators. The film’s focus on their affect and sentiments is a symptom of what anthropologist Didier Fassin describes as “humanitarian reason”: a moral economy where “[i]nequality is replaced by exclusion, domination is transformed into misfortune, injustice is articulated as suffering, violence is expressed in terms of trauma.” In this economy, the second (moralistic) term is privileged over the first (political) term, and the language of suffering and trauma displaces the language of injustice and violence. Fassin argues that there is a corresponding epistemological shift among those who document violence and injustice, who are now “more sensitive to the subjectivity of agents and to the experience of pain and affliction.” Fassin illustrates how recourse to the concept of trauma makes it possible to expand the range of individuals who may be considered victims—thus perpetrators can be drawn into the fold of suffering and traumatized subjects.

Political theorists have noted the central role afforded to trauma and suffering in contemporary discourses of human rights and transitional justice. Wendy Brown claims that human rights “take their shape as a moral discourse centered on pain and suffering rather than a political discourse of

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51 Ibid., 6.
52 Ibid., 218.
comprehensive justice.” Robert Meister extends this critique of the apolitical moralism of contemporary human rights discourse by considering how it presents the relationships between different political subjectivities, whether perpetrators, victims, or conformists (bystanders to or beneficiaries of past regimes). For Meister, the aspiration of human rights discourse “is that victims of past evil will not struggle against its ongoing beneficiaries after the evildoers are gone.” The project of human rights transforms a politics of struggle and popular resistance into an ethics of reconciliation, “with its ostensibly less political focus on compassion for bodies in pain.” What this means politically in transitional societies such as South Africa, Meister argues, is that invoking past or ongoing grievances—such as the gains that beneficiaries of past violence continue to enjoy in the present—disrupts the collective agreement that “evil” has passed.

In the vision of Indonesia represented through the film, the widely acknowledged “evil” appears to be the spectral threat of an imagined “communism” rather than the historical violence of the anti-communist purge in which Anwar and his supporters participated. There is no collective agreement that the events of 1965–66 require some form of reconciliation; indeed, as *The Act of Killing* points out, these acts continue to be publicly celebrated. Unlike South Africa, then, Indonesia is not a transitional society, yet Meister’s critique offers a vocabulary for understanding the complex political subjectivity of the film’s main characters in addition to illustrating the shortcomings of “humanitarian compassion.” The subjectivity of the film’s protagonists is multiple: they are perpetrators as well as ongoing beneficiaries of past violence, enjoying the gains brought through their connections to the Pancasila Youth and, by extension, to the Indonesian state. Oppenheimer’s interviews suggest an additional identity: they are also represented as traumatized subjects through their participation in these acts of killing.

54 Meister’s critique unfolds on two registers: ideologically (“as a continuation of the counterrevolutionary project”) and theologically (“as a culmination of Paul’s Judeo-Christianity”) (Meister, *After Evil*, 314). Both ideological and theological positions advocate for the temporal deferral of justice by declaring “evil” to be in the past.
55 Ibid., 8.
56 Ibid.
57 In a “Special Dialogue” on Indonesian National Television presented in the film, the show’s smiling host announces that “Anwar and his friends developed a new, more efficient system for exterminating communists, a system more humane, less sadistic, and without excessive violence… but you also just wiped them out!” to an applauding audience clad in Pancasila Youth uniforms.
Robert Meister is concerned with the political significance of intersubjective identification in contemporary human rights discourse and transitional justice. A key relationship is the beneficiary’s identification with the (idealized and reconciled) victim as a mutual survivor of past violence, which serves to reassure the beneficiary that the (potentially unreconciled and aggrieved) victim will not demand compensation. In this way, Meister writes, “humanitarian compassion defends against the beneficiary’s anxieties” through the beneficiary’s identification with the reconciled victim.58 Through a psychoanalytic reading, Meister shows how the self may be split in ways that project and incorporate other identities. The hostility a beneficiary would feel toward an external victim (who, if unreconciled, may appear as a threat) is instead directed toward an internalized victim. The suffering that the beneficiary may have wished upon another (or did not prevent from happening) becomes the beneficiary’s own loss. The resulting melancholia of the beneficiary is a product of feeling an “ongoing and irreparable” loss that has been internalized: the beneficiary feels bad, “but in a good way, because he suffers as though he were someone else.”59 Freud’s psychoanalytic account of melancholia is centered on the melancholic patient. By contrast, Meister is concerned with the political effects of beneficiaries producing an inner victim: Identifying with and as the victim of the loss represses and perpetuates that patient’s ambivalence about being, rather, a perpetrator or beneficiary. But the object of those negative feelings is nothing outside the beneficiary’s unconscious mind. So we are not asked to consider whose primary loss the melancholic internalizes as his own loss or how this might affect ongoing relations with the real (external) loser.60

For Meister, these forms of psychic identification foreground the feelings of the “winners”—perpetrators and beneficiaries—rather than actual (socio-political) relations between those who benefited from past injustice and those who suffered. In humanitarian discourse, Meister argues, this helps to explain how compassion is a privileged affect: with compassion, melancholic feelings are transformed into pity for the “victimary object” that the beneficiary also identifies with and internalizes. But because this (internal) victim is a projection rather than an actual, aggrieved individual, such compassion is remarkably tenuous and can easily regress to paranoia when the external victim is encountered. The political effect of this form of humanitarian compassion is

58 Meister, After Evil, 230.
59 Ibid., 223.
60 Ibid.
to transform the beneficiary into a bystander, a witness to suffering, but a suffering that is still oriented toward preserving the psychic comfort of the beneficiary: “The compassionate bystander is no longer a beneficiary who has a victim; rather, he is the witness that his imaginary victim wants.” What Fassin identifies as the logic of “humanitarian reason” features heavily in Meister’s diagnosis of “humanitarian compassion,” where injustice is recast as suffering and bearing witness is taken to be a political act. Meister writes,

humanitarian compassion defends against the beneficiary’s anxieties by constructing him as a viewer who can choose to insert himself into the picture viewed. Twenty-first-century humanitarianism calls the beneficiary a bystander in order to recall him as a witness who will no longer look away from those who still suffer. The new, affective bond to be created between them is made possible by an act of memory that makes compassion in the present discontinuous with the past.

Meister’s overarching concern is with the ways in which contemporary humanitarian discourse (including the language of human rights and transitional justice) forecloses the possibility of justice in the present by reconstituting these different political identities—perpetrators, victims, and collaborators—as survivors of past injustice united through a shared ethos of reconciliation. The moral economy of affect, identification, and empathy displaces a political analysis of enduring power imbalances and ongoing injustice.

I draw upon Meister’s critique of humanitarian discourse because it helps to diagnose some of the presumptions of The Act of Killing’s approach to historical injustice. The film documents remorseless perpetrators and boastful paramilitaries, but it also archives the trauma of Anwar’s psyche. Toward the end of the film, the perpetrators stage a noir-style scene where Anwar plays a communist victim of a garrotting and Herman plays his interrogator. With a blindfold over his eyes and Herman tugging at a wire around his neck, Anwar becomes visibly disturbed and his hand begins to shake. Herman stops and asks if Anwar can continue, and Anwar responds, “No. I can’t do that again.” Later, after Oppenheimer shows Anwar the waterfall scene, or what the filmmaker has referred to in an interview as “Anwar’s vision of redemption,” he asks to view the scene where he is strangled. He calls his young grandsons into the room to view it with him, instructing them to “watch the scene where grandpa

61 Ibid., 226.
62 Ibid., 230.
63 Oppenheimer’s interview with Pamela Cohn, BOMBlog.
is tortured and killed.” After his grandsons leave, Anwar addresses the filmmaker (offscreen):

Anwar Congo: Did the people I tortured feel the way I do here? I can feel what the people I tortured felt. Because here my dignity has been destroyed … and then fear comes, right there and then. All the terror suddenly possessed my body. It surrounded me, and possessed me.

Joshua Oppenheimer: Actually, the people you tortured felt far worse—because you know it’s only a film. They knew they were being killed.

Anwar Congo: But I can feel it, Josh. Really, I feel it. Or have I sinned? I did this to so may people, Josh. Is it all coming back to me? I really hope it won’t. I don’t want it to, Josh.

Anwar claims to feel what his victims felt, asserting a kind of affective bond that suggests an effort to internalize the victim in the psychoanalytic framework described above. As not only a beneficiary of past violence but also as a direct participant in acts of killing, Anwar may have even more reason to internalize and thus “tame” the objects of his violence in an effort to overcome their persistent hauntings. When Oppenheimer contests this identification by invoking the actual victim, Anwar insists on this affective bond—“really, I feel it”—and expresses the paranoia of the perpetrator who fears revenge. This scene contrasts starkly with Anwar’s “vision of redemption” before the waterfall, where reconciled victims thank him for redeeming them (sending them to heaven), in turn redeeming him from his “sin.” It is in this latter scene where Anwar seeks to incorporate the projected internal victim, reconstituting himself as a compassionate witness and attempting to instantiate a symbolic break from the past. In this sense the film within a film employs the transitiological tropes of reconciliation and bearing witness. Indeed, Oppenheimer describes these scenes of Anwar’s psychic struggles and hopes for redemption as something to which the filmmakers and the film’s audience should also bear witness:

At some point, as Anwar started to go more and more into his conscience and into his nightmares, I felt, somehow, that I was a fellow traveler with him through all this, into all those dark places. But I had to keep my eyes open in order to allow him to go through all this and just be with him on that journey, as a support, certainly, but more importantly, as a witness. That’s
how I felt more and more towards the end of making it and how one should feel towards the end of the movie.\textsuperscript{64}

Read in relation to Meister’s critique of “humanitarian compassion,” we can see how injustice is recast here as suffering, and bearing witness is taken to be a moral imperative—we are hailed as well. The moral economy of affect, identification, and empathy displaces a political analysis of enduring power structures and ongoing injustice. Meister seeks to show how this logic forecloses the possibility of justice in the present by reconstituting these different political identities—perpetrators, victims, and collaborators—as survivors of past injustice through a shared \textit{ethos} of reconciliation.

This critique of transitological sentiments within \textit{The Act of Killing} reveals the overdetermined presence of the \textit{psyche} and the relative absence of the \textit{polis} within the film. Meister argues that the “moral error of justice-as-reconciliation” is “to suggest that those who inflicted injury or benefited from it must focus on recovery and self-forgiveness.”\textsuperscript{65} Put another way, this “moral error” entails privileging the intrasubjective. Yet there may be a more liberatory potential for the film that extends beyond this inward orientation. In \textit{The Emancipated Spectator}, Jacques Rancière claims that the disorientation we feel as spectators of intolerable images multiplies “folds and gaps, connections and disconnections” that “reframe relations between bodies” and “change the cartography of the perceptible, the thinkable and the feasible.”\textsuperscript{66} Rancière suggests a different politics of the sensible based on the uncertainty of effects:

The images of art do not supply weapons for battles. They help sketch new configurations of what can be seen, what can be said and what can be thought and, consequently, a new landscape of the possible. But they do so on condition that their meaning or effect is not anticipated.\textsuperscript{67}

\textit{The Act of Killing}’s internal morality tale is a product of the narrative arc that its directors inscribed within it. But while this article has argued that the film’s progressive potential is not to be found in its subjects’ intrasubjective journeys, its uptake is indeterminate: indeed, it appears to sketch “a new landscape of the possible.” The film has been invoked as evidence of army-sponsored paramilitary participation in the killings by Indonesian human rights groups who are lobbying the government for a truth and reconciliation commission. As

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{64} Ibid.
  \item \textsuperscript{65} Meister, \textit{After Evil}, 62.
  \item \textsuperscript{67} Ibid., 103.
\end{itemize}
an intervention, then, the film’s main purchase comes from what it allows us to see about the broader structural conditions of contemporary Indonesia, and its critical potential lies in what it reveals about what state power attempts to occlude. The film archives the relative absence of forms of accountability for historical violence in contemporary Indonesia, suggesting that a return to the polis and its intersubjective space of judgment may be possible despite the film’s overdetermination of the psyche.
DRONE WARFARE: TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY EMPIRE AND COMMUNICATIONS

KEVIN HOWLEY

“Our enemies are innovative and resourceful, and so are we. They never stop thinking about new ways to harm our country and our people, and neither do we.”

— George W. Bush

In this paper, I examine the rise of drone warfare in light of media theorist Harold Innis’s seminal work on empire and communication (1995, 2007). Specifically, this discussion applies and extends Innis’s insights on the bias of communication to a critical analysis of the targeted killing program initiated under US President George W. Bush and expanded by his successor, Barack Obama. Throughout, I contend that weaponized drones embody a long-standing paradox of American culture: the impulse to collapse the geographical distance between the United States and other parts of the globe, while simultaneously magnifying the cultural differences between Americans and other peoples and societies. In doing so, the paper demonstrates the relevance of Innisian approaches to the relationship between technology and culture articulated through this new kind of war.

The paper is organized into three sections. The first offers a brief description of the aerial, navigational, imaging, and computational technologies employed by America’s fleet of weaponized drones. Throughout, I highlight the networked intelligence that distinguishes armed drones from other weapons platforms. This section also describes the operational logistics required to launch these aircraft, surveil their targets, and fire their missiles. Contrary to

media portrayals and popular belief, drone missions require more than a handful of operators. Rather, combat patrols routinely involve three or four unmanned aircraft, requiring upwards of 150 personnel, including ground crews, remote pilots, sensor operators, intelligence analysts, and legal advisors (Chatterjee 2015). These flight teams constitute the operational component of what the US military aptly describes as the “kill chain.” Thus, Innis’s insights into the relationship between communication technologies and the rise of administrative classes—what he describes as monopolies of knowledge and power—can be applied to “the assassination complex” (Scahill 2015) that authorizes and conducts drone strikes.

The second section employs Innis’s space-time dialectic to examine the rise of drone warfare. According to Innis, communication technologies manifest and express certain tendencies—what he called biases—that enable or constrain the ability of organizations, institutions, and empires to control space (territory) and time (continuity). Innis’s historical analysis reveals how speech and the oral tradition emphasize the temporal duration of social organization, thereby facilitating the establishment of long-lasting and sustainable communities. Conversely, the written word, followed by print and later electronic communication, emphasize the spatial extension of social organization, thereby facilitating territorial growth and administrative control over enormous expanses. This expansionist tendency deeply troubled Innis. According to James Carey, Innis “placed the ‘tragedy of modern culture’ in America and Europe upon the intrinsic tendencies of both printing press and electronic media to reduce space and time to the service of a calculus of commercialism and expansionism” (1992: 133–134).

The third section considers the moral and political implications of drone warfare in light of Innis’s thinking about technology and culture. As Catherine Frost reminds us, “There is a powerful moral voice speaking in his communications work, and it carries a message about the achievements possible in a good society and the brutalizing effects in a bad one” (2003: n.p.). Writing in the midst of a Cold War that threatened to annihilate humankind, Innis’s work took on great urgency. Were he alive today, Innis would no doubt condemn the depravity of killing by remote control. Here, then, we can appreciate the value of taking a discursive turn to Innis’s approach to empire and communication (Angus 1998). That is to say, Innis understood that the bias of communication could only be controlled through deliberative politics. “The genius of social policy, he thought, was to serve the demands of both time and space; to use one to prevent the excesses of the other: to use historicism to check the dreams of reason and to use reason to control the passions of memory” (Carey 1992: 160–161). In short, Innis fully appreciated the role of
language and culture in shaping technology—and viewed his scholarship as an intervention into the politics of technological development.

The paper concludes with some thoughts on Innis’s legacy and its relevance for both communication and American studies in the age of drone warfare. As Megan Mullen notes, “One might well claim that the American empire has been Innis’ best theorized, even though he did not live to witness its most revealing manifestations” (2009: 177). Simply put, the US drone program is but the latest manifestation of American empire. In an effort to mitigate the self-destructive values and perspectives fostered by space-biased cultures, then, we must be wary, as Innis was, of inscribing new technologies with the sublime (Carey 1992). Doing so, especially in the American context, has wrought a great many engineering and electrical wonders: from the railroad and the Brooklyn Bridge to the electric light and the Moon landing. More ominously, the American fascination with new forms of what David Nye (1994) calls “the dynamic sublime” led to the development of atomic weapons that so troubled Innis at middle of the last century—and which likewise ushered in the era of drone warfare at the dawn of new millennium.

““It’s About The Data Link, Stupid”

In news and popular culture, the growing fascination with drones rests in large measure on the futuristic design of these aircraft and the lethal payload they carry. For entrepreneurs and commercial drone manufactures this public perception is both a blessing and a curse. But for students of communication, the drone’s true innovation lies elsewhere. Speaking to The Atlantic magazine, retired Air Force major general James Poss, who supervised the transformation of the Predator from a surveillance vehicle to a weapons platform, put it plainly: “It’s about the data link, stupid” (Bowden 2013: 62). Absent the array of information gathering and processing technologies used to conduct US drone strikes, these unmanned planes are something of a throwback to the propeller driven aircraft of the early twentieth century. Thus these high tech killing machines integrate modern transportation and communication technologies: essential ingredients for the command and control requirements of empire, both ancient and modern. As Wayne Cocroft observes, “The Roman Empire developed a sophisticated system of roads, imperial messengers and, along its frontiers, a network of signal stations” (2013: 65). Likewise, the US drone fleet—the tip of America’s imperial spear—relies upon a network infrastructure that connects these remotely piloted aircraft with far-flung launch and recovery units, signal processing centres, and ground control stations (GCS) via radio, fiber optics, and telecommunication satellites.
Made of lightweight composite materials that enable the aircraft to loiter above a target for hours at a time, the distinguishing physical characteristic of the Predator drone—and its larger more heavily armed counterpart, the Reaper—is the vehicle’s bulbous nose. Housing an array of sensors, actuators, antennae and cameras, this section of the aircraft not only allows pilots to fly these aircraft from halfway across the world, but also gives these vehicles an unprecedented ability to combine long duration intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) missions with the capacity to take lethal action. Specifically, these operations include launch and recovery units using line-of-sight C-band radio signals operating in or nearby the aircraft’s theatre of operation in the skies above Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, Yemen, and Somalia. Once airborne, a ground control station in the United States assumes control of the vehicle using Ku-band satellite signals. Data and images collected by these unmanned planes are processed at the US Air Force base in Ramstein, Germany and subsequently relayed across the Atlantic Ocean to the United States via fiber optic cables.

CIA operations originate adjacent to the intelligence agency’s headquarters in Langley, Virginia, while Creech Air Force Base in Nevada is home to the US Air Force’s best-known Ground Control System (GCS). Meanwhile, Special Operations Forces (SOF) and other ground troops have real-time access to information and imagery collected by drones flying overhead. In turn, authorized military personnel, intelligence analysts, and civilian leaders around the world can access this data via the Distributed Common Ground System (DCGS): what journalist Andrew Cockburn describes as a “little-known global network” that acts as “the central nervous system funneling, collating, and sharing unimaginable quantities of imagery and electronic information” (2015: 3). Coupling intelligence gathering, data analysis, target selection, and rapid strike capabilities in this fashion, drones are the embodiment of what Pentagon strategists describe as “network centric warfare” (Kometer 2003).

It bears mentioning that the US military developed the Global Positioning System (GPS) employed by these unmanned aircraft, and all manner of civilian technologies from automobile navigation systems to smartphones, for purposes of command and control. From an Innisian perspective, then, drones exploit the twin revolutions in satellite navigation and digital communication to annihilate space and time in the service of military

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2 Billed as the United States’ most lethal unmanned aircraft, the Reaper carries laser guided Hellfire missiles, much like the Predator, as well as two 500 lb. “smart bombs.” In contrast, the high altitude Global Hawk is an unarmed surveillance platform.
expansionism. Tracing imperial history through the ages, Innis came to view media and communication technologies as “the staples of empire” (Watson 2007: 14). In turn, improvements in navigation and communication cultivated an expansionist mindset increasingly reliant on the projection of force over vast territories. Describing the rise and fall of ancient dynasties, Innis found that “military organization essential to the expulsion of the invaders became the basis of expansion and growth of an Egyptian empire. Protectorates were established beyond the borders as a means of economy in the use of soldiers and in administrative costs” (40). Similarly, in the aftermath of the Second World War, the United States emerged as a global superpower whose reach and influence extended across Europe and the Pacific Rim as never before. Since that time, America’s imperial ambitions have been inextricably linked to the rise of what President Dwight D. Eisenhower (1961) famously described as the “military-industrial complex”: a self-perpetuating alliance between the military, industry, academia, and the political class, that not only assured US global hegemony but also secured the political-economic dominance of arms manufactures.

In the aftermath of the attacks of September 11, 2001, the United States embarked on a new round of imperial expansion, including the repurposing of existing military bases and the construction of new ones, to facilitate what war planners call full spectrum dominance—the ability to control every dimension of the battlefield: land, air, and sea; as well the virtual terrain of information space. As a result, the so-called defence industries—aeronautics firms, electronics and telecommunication companies, weapons manufactures, private contractors, and related corporate interests—have reaped enormous profits over the course of America’s decades-long war on terror (Turse & Engelhardt 2012). Notwithstanding the chronic failure of US news organizations to acknowledge, much less discuss, American empire, an emerging constellation of drone bases has not gone completely unnoticed. For instance, in 2011 the Wall Street Journal reported: “The military has reopened a base for the unmanned aircraft on the island nation of Seychelles to intensify attacks on al Qaeda affiliates, particularly in Somalia” (Barnes 2011: n.p.). More recently, investigative journalist Nick Turse identified no fewer than 60 such bases across Africa—including a single $100 million drone base currently under construction in Niger (Turse 2016). Like earlier empires that built transportation and communication infrastructures for the purpose of administration and control over vast territories, these postcolonial outposts enable the United States to project force across the globe, albeit with little public knowledge at home; but not without the support of local, frequently despotic regimes. Writing for the independent news site TomDispatch, Turse notes:
These bases, camps, compounds, port facilities, fuel bunkers and other sites can be found in at least 34 countries—more than 60% of the nations on the continent—many of them corrupt, repressive states with poor human rights records. (2015: n.p.)

Thus the sorrows of empire, to borrow Chalmers Johnson’s (2004) haunting characterization of US militarism, encompass far more than the eclipse of American democracy and the nation’s economic subservience to merchants of death. Like Innis before him, Johnson recognized and cautioned against the brutalizing effects of space-bound societies evident in twenty-first century American empire and its unrelenting assault on tribal Islam.

This ring of drone bases increasingly relies on the National Security Administration’s (NSA) global surveillance infrastructure to “find, fix, and finish” (F3 in military shorthand) targets of US drone strikes. To that end, the NSA employs two tactics: the first uses the intelligence agency’s phone-tracking capabilities to geolocate the cell phone SIM cards of potential targets. NSA furnishes this information to either the CIA or the Joint Special Operations Command’s (JSOC) High Value Targeting task force for subsequent “kinetic military action.” Significantly, this technique does not monitor or collect the content of cell phone conversations; rather, geolocation relies on the metadata associated with cell phone activity. The second tactic equips drones and other aircraft with so-called virtual base tower receivers that mimic cell phone towers, effectively turning a suspect’s phone into a tracking device. As we shall see, the drone program’s reliance on signals intelligence (SIGINT) raises profound moral questions. For my present purposes, the sheer volume of metadata gleaned from cell phones—as well as computers, wireless routers, and other electronic equipment—is noteworthy.

In the words of a former drone operator, this data requires “millions of dollars and millions of man hours” to assess and interpret (Scahill & Greenwald 2014: n.p.). In turn, this process yields material collected in “target information folders” on suspected terrorists; ultimately this information is distilled into the widely reported “baseball cards” used by the President and his national security team to select individuals for targeted assassination (Becker & Shane 2012). Once SIGINT “finds” a target, the unblinking stare afforded by the aircraft’s imaging technologies, including daylight and infrared cameras, “fix” a suspect in a specific location until such time as JSOC, the CIA, or other high-ranking officials authorize a drone strike to “finish” the target. In short,

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3 Commonly used by politicians and media spokespeople, this phrase is another in a long line of euphemisms for the use of violent force by US military and paramilitary units.
intelligence analysts are but one link in a kill chain that extends from ground control stations to the Oval Office.

Thus the assassination complex (Scahill 2015) resembles the bureaucracies Innis observed coalescing around each new medium of communication. According to Innis, these administrative classes constitute monopolies of knowledge and power that exert enormous influence over social, economic, and political life. For instance, the “distributed intimacy” engendered by drone warfare is asymmetrical. That is to say, US personnel come to know intimate details about their quarry, while potential targets know little more than the fact that their lives are under constant surveillance. Conversely, the clandestine nature of the drone program, including specifics regarding how targets are selected, represents yet another dimension of this monopoly of knowledge. Outside of the President’s national security team, few members of Congress, let alone the American people, have even a rudimentary understanding of the inner workings of the targeted killing program. As Innis notes of Egyptian empire, “Complexity favoured increasing control under a monopoly of priests and the confinement of knowledge to special classes” (2007: 44). So too the secrecy and sociotechnical complexity of the drone program constitutes a special class of “hi-tech assassins” (Cockburn 2015). Put differently, in twenty-first century American empire, the President’s self-granted authority to act as judge, jury, and executioner—coupled with what a former drone operator described as the “godlike power” of killing by remote control⁴—bears a striking resemblance to the religious and quasi-religious consolidation of power Innis identifies with monopolies of knowledge.

**Drones and the Problems of Time and Space**

In his final years—at the middle of the twentieth century—Harold Innis lamented the shortsighted, and to his mind, self-defeating tendencies of space-biased cultures, and cautioned against the diminishing importance of time, reflection, and historical perspective. All of which begs the question: What would Innis make of twenty-first century empire and communication? For Gaëtan Tremblay the answer is clear: “Computers and telecommunications networks have strengthened this trend significantly, to the point that one wonders if we are not witnessing the emergence of a new form of imperialism, which would not necessitate, in most cases, the establishment of a sprawling political administration” (2012: 573). We can discern this new form of imperialism in the space- and time-annihilating capabilities of weaponized

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drones described above. Leveraging leading-edge aeronautics with advanced optics, data processing, and networked communication, drones represent an archetypal “space-biased” technology. In short, the ability of remote operators and others to monitor, select, and strike targets from half a world away, and in real-time,\(^5\) epitomizes the “pernicious neglect of time” Innis analyzed in his later writing (Compton & Comor 2007: 47). This growing contempt for time facilitates and promotes a state of perpetual war.

Indeed, despite the much-heralded success of the US drone campaign in news and official discourse, the so-called war on terror proceeds with no end in sight. Nearly two decades on, American forces continue to conduct military operations across the Greater Middle East, with little to show for it other than increasing tensions and volatility. The possibility that this regional instability is due, in large measure, to American militarism rarely enters mainstream political discourse. Nonetheless, the targeted killing program has failed to defeat jihadi movements and may in fact serve as a recruitment tool for extremist groups across the region; on a par with the radicalization of Muslims in the wake of revelations of indefinite detention and torture of suspected terrorists at the US detention facility at Guantanamo Bay, Iraq’s infamous Abu Ghraib prison, and dozens of CIA “black sites” around the world.

Rather than eliminate potential threats, US drone strikes fuel popular resentments and swell the ranks of local insurgencies. This is a recipe for endless war: a corrosive and counterproductive strategy that represents a genuine existential threat to American civilization. Writing in the early 1950s, Innis argued: “Losing touch with the problems of time, [the state] has been willing to engage in wars to carry out immediate objectives” (1995: 76). From an Innisian perspective, then, the short-term tactical victories afforded by drone strikes that kill militant leaders overshadow the long-term strategic implications of waging perpetual war. Killing by remote control has become so commonplace that analysts sometimes characterize the program with a callous but revealing euphemism: mowing the lawn.\(^6\) The domesticating logic behind this metaphor is hard to miss: an otherwise mundane household ritual serves to normalize and routinize drone assassination. This seemingly innocuous figure

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\(^5\) As Andrew Cockburn (2015) observes, there is in fact a 2–5 second delay or “latency” owing to the vast distance data travels from an airborne drone, to orbiting communication satellites, then via fiber optic cable from the US Air Force base in Ramstein, Germany, across the Atlantic Ocean and on to command and control stations across the continental United States.

of speech belies the depraved indifference for human life cultivated by drone warfare and underscores a growing indifference for time that Innis associated with space-biased cultures. Thus, the euphemism “mowing the lawn” performs the important ideological work of promoting, while simultaneously trivializing, a state of perpetual war.

In addition to normalizing endless war, unmanned aircraft and the associated surveillance and computational technologies used to conduct robotic warfare work in effect to weaponize time. Doing so, this new kind of war exacerbates historical processes, which, Innis argued, “destroyed a sense of time” (1995: 86). Consider the US Air Force’s Gorgon Stare IRS system. Grouping the imagery taken by as many as ten remote planes flying simultaneously over a target area, the Gorgon Stare enables analysts to continuously monitor and record activity throughout an entire city: “Computers store these moving images so that analysts can dial back to a particular time and place and zero in, or mark certain individuals and vehicles and instruct the machines to track them over time” (Bowden 2013: 63, my emphasis). This preoccupation with prior knowledge—something of an obsession in the post-9/11 American psyche—is antithetical to the importance of time to the stability, continuity, and duration of societies Innis observed in his histories of communication.

Likewise, the use of so-called signature strikes, which target unidentified groups of “military-aged men” based solely on their geographic location, physical attributes, and patterns of behaviour, reveals an utter disregard for time emblematic of space-biased technologies and societies. In this respect, signature strikes dramatically reveal an undue obsession with the immediate” that all too often claims the lives of innocent civilians (Innis 1995: 61). Unlike targeted assassination, this tactic does not require presidential approval. Rather, military personnel monitor, surveil, and frequently assault targets whose actions bear the “signature” of militant activity, without any evidence of violent or criminal activity. Small wonder, then, that critics liken signature strikes to “pre-crime”—a preemptive law enforcement technique that incarcerates people who are suspected of committing some future crime (Calhoun 2016).

As depicted in Steven Spielberg’s 2002 thriller, Minority Report, based on a short story of the same name by acclaimed science-fiction writer Philip K. Dick, would-be criminals are apprehended before they break the law. But in contemporary law enforcement and military operations, the philosophy and practice of pre-crime has transmogrified from the stuff of dystopian fiction to the harsh reality of lived experience (e.g., Smith 2016). From an Innisian
perspective, pre-crime reduces time to a commodity, subject to manipulation
and control by monopolies of knowledge and power. Unlike pre-crime,
however, signature strikes forego capture altogether and instead kill suspects
without charge or trial. Upending the temporal order of criminal investigations,
pre-crime attempts to predict and control criminal activity before it occurs. So
too, signature strikes violate any notion of due process—a time-honoured legal
tradition—and instead target groups of people for execution based on actions
and behaviours observed from “eyes in the sky.”

“Shoot first and ask questions later”—a quintessentially American
sentiment—seems an apt description for this tactic. The cruel irony in all of
this reveals an utter contempt for time: a barbarous and self-defeating present-
mindedness that Innis would doubtless find appalling, but not at all surprising,
given American empire’s reliance upon and fascination with the sublimity of
space- and time-annihilating communication and transportation technologies.

Significantly, the bias of space-oriented media and communication is
evident in the official language used to justify drone assassination. President
Obama’s Office of Legal Counsel developed a “broader concept of
imminence” to justify killing individuals, without evidence, who might, at
some unspecified point in time, be involved in an attack on US interests and
citizens. Critics decried this abuse of language in legal arguments asserting the
President’s authority to execute suspected terrorists. The elasticity of this new
definition, critics contend, not only defies common understanding and usage of
the word. It also sets a troubling legal precedent, one that epitomizes a
profound neglect for time. Indeed, this lexical sleight of hand may have
significant and unforeseen ramifications in the years to come as other nations
and non-state actors deploy weaponized drones of their own (Kreps & Zenko
2014). Such is the trap of present-mindedness Innis cautioned against. In sum,
the rhetorical strategy of redefining the word “imminent” to provide legal
justification for targeted killing does more than rob the word of its meaning.
Rather, it is the discursive embodiment of the values, outlooks, and aspirations
expressed by and constitutive of space-biased cultures. All of which
underscores the crucial and decisive role discourse plays in shaping as well as
reflecting technological development.

Innis and the Discursive Turn
With its focus on the material features of media and communication
technology—its relative lightness or heaviness, its ephemeral or durable
character—Innis’s historical analysis is sometimes criticized as reductionist
and determinist. These critiques overlook or fail to appreciate Innis’s attention to the varied forces and conditions—economic and cultural, geographic and political—that shape and inform technological innovation. Foregrounding the significance of space and time to the growth and development of human societies, Innis viewed the relationship between communication and social organization as dialectical and contingent, and made this the centrepiece of his study. As Ian Angus puts it, “The concepts of time and space are used to describe the constitutive power of media of communication in constructing and maintaining society” (1998: n.p.).

Furthermore, Innis’s historical analysis suggests that communication technologies are both a reflection and an expression of a given society’s bias toward its maintenance in time, or its expansion in space. In other words, while technologies have inherent characteristics, they are nonetheless malleable and, Innis believed, ought to be developed in a relational fashion, for purposes of serving society’s interests across both time and space. Viewed in this light, Innis’s work is at once descriptive and prescriptive. On the one hand, Innis identifies and celebrates past societies that achieved such a balance; on the other, he pleads for modern societies to strike a similar balance between these two cultural biases (Innis 1995).

Writing in Empire and Communications, Innis observes that human cultures “flourish under conditions in which civilization reflects the influence of more than one medium and in which the bias of one medium towards decentralization is offset by the bias of another medium towards centralization” (2007: 27). By contrast, an over emphasis on either dimension leads to monopolies of knowledge and power that undermine social stability and security. Equally important, as Catherine Frost observes, Innis recognized the moral implications of his analysis: “More was at stake than the staying power of civilizations. The civility of civilizations, their worthiness as articulations of the human community mattered as well” (2003: n.p.). Emblematic of the most repellent tendencies and aspirations of space-biased cultures, the use of drones to kill people from half a world away raises profound moral questions precisely because they epitomize the incivility, the cowardice—indeed the barbarism—of this new kind of war.

All of which contradicts news and official discourse that portrays these killing machines as sophisticated weapons capable of hitting their targets with pinpoint accuracy and precision. Indeed, drone survivors, investigative journalists, human rights lawyers, and anti-war activists produce and circulate alternative and oppositional discourses that challenge this dominant order of discourse (e.g., Benjamin 2013; Kahn 2013; Knefel 2012; Rehman 2013).
Consider the words of a former drone operator regarding the aforementioned geolocation targeting practices used to conduct and coordinate US drone strikes. Speaking to *The Intercept*, the unnamed source claims that insurgents are well aware of the NSA tracking system and have developed tactics to conceal or disguise their identities: “They would do things like go to meetings, take all their SIM cards out, put them in a bag, mix them up, and everybody gets a different SIM card when they leave. That’s how they confuse us” (Scahill & Greenwald 2014: n.p.).

The moral hazard of what this whistleblower describes as “death by metadata,” rarely acknowledged in such candid terms, undermines repeated claims by the Obama administration that the US conducts drone strikes only when individuals have been identified and that there is “near certainty” that innocent civilians will not be killed or injured. But as the former drone operator concludes, more likely than not, the person with the phone at the time of an assault is not the intended target:

> People get hung up that there’s a targeted list of people. It’s really like we’re targeting a cell phone. We’re not going after people—we’re gong after their phones, in the hopes that the person on the other end of that missile is the bad guy. (Scahill & Greenwald 2014: n.p.)

This same report underscores the moral discrepancies between US intelligence-gathering practices before and after a drone strike. Prior to an assault, the kill chain relies almost exclusively on SIGINT: the sort of intelligence-gathering techniques insurgents have learned to compromise and confound. Despite the moral, if not the tactical, advantages of having eyes and ears on the ground, as well as in the sky, human intelligence (HUMINT) rarely contributes to the target selection process. In contrast, Caitlin Hayden, a spokesperson for the National Security Council (NSC), described after-action assessments this way:

> After any use of targeted lethal force, where there are indications that civilian deaths may have occurred, intelligence analysts draw on a large body of information—including human intelligence, signals intelligence, media reports, and surveillance footage—to help us make informed determinations about whether civilians were in fact killed or not. (Scahill & Greenwald 2014: n.p.)

The twisted logic of confirming the presence of civilian casualties after an assault has taken place raises profound moral questions: precisely the sort of
humanist concerns that motivated Innis’s communications work at the dawn of the Cold War (Frost 2003).

To this end, and in keeping with his training as an economist, Innis sought to strike a balance between time- and space-biased media. The moral and political shortcomings of industrial societies—especially the problems of “mechanized knowledge” Innis found most troubling—find a counterbalance in the dialogic character of the oral tradition:

Innis claims that orality was a stabilizing influence in civilization in the past, though this has not been adequately enough understood. In the present we need to recover and extend orality in order to develop greater stability in time and this is the healing intention of Innis’ theory—to restore balance where balance has been disturbed. (Angus 1998: n.p.)

Contrary to criticism that his work suffers from rigid technological determinism, then, Innis understood full well that the balance he sought was not a matter of technological innovation, but rather of politics and culture (Acland 2006). Nowhere is this more evident than in the discursive struggle over America’s use of armed drones in its decades-long war on terror. Political and military leaders—working in tandem with their enablers in the corporate news media—attempt to dominate policy discussions through secrecy, selective leaks, and sanitized press coverage of US drone strikes. Conversely, elements of civil society exercise power and influence policy through all manner of discursive practices—investigative reporting, whistleblowing, street protests, and graphic arts, to name a few.

None of which is to ignore or underestimate the power differentials operating across these orders of discourse. Still, this discursive struggle has tangible effects. For instance, in July 2016, following years of litigation and agitation on behalf of innocent drone victims and their families, President Obama issued an executive order calling for greater accountability for civilian casualties of US drone strikes. Three months later, a coalition of human rights groups followed up on the new policy and sent a letter to Barack Obama identifying ten drone strikes “requiring investigation and acknowledgement” of civilian casualties (Fulton 2016). These efforts to introduce a measure of transparency in America’s drone program underscore the significance of creating a discursive space to debate the wisdom, efficacy, and morality of drone warfare. Equally important, the discursive struggle surrounding the US drone program offers a stark political lesson on the relationship between language, culture, and technology. As James Carey puts it: “The bias of technology can be controlled only by politics, by curtailing the expansionist
tendencies of technological societies and by creating avenues of democratic
discussion and participation beyond the control of modern technology” (1992:
136).

Drones: The New American Sublime

It is tempting to view the US drone program in terms of a “clash of
civilizations” between the Western and Muslim worlds (Lewis 2002). The
appeal of this narrative pivots on longstanding and seemingly intractable
tensions over religion and politics. But as Akbar Ahmed observes, a significant
and frequently overlooked aspect of this analysis lies in the recognition that
“the clash of civilizations is not the inevitable outcome of history, but a sign
that communication and exchange has broken down” (2013: 304). Ahmed’s
insight echoes a similar sentiment expressed by Harold Innis some 65 years
ago: “Enormous improvements in communication have made understanding
more difficult” (1995: 31).

This paradox is all the more startling in light of the multiplicity of
communication forms and technologies employed by state and non-state actors
alike in their respective struggles to win hearts and minds or, conversely, to
strike terror in the hearts of their adversaries. Militant groups like Al-Qaeda
and, more infamously, ISIS issue threats and document all manner of atrocities
through social media and related platforms. All to the consternation and
indignation of Western viewers. Conversely, the Department of Defense posts
footage of US drone strikes to YouTube for purposes of “promoting UAVs
domestically and ‘enlightening’ our enemies” (Franklin 2010). While the
success of this “drone porn” in dissuading would-be extremists from taking up
arms remains unclear, these clips generate enormous enthusiasm among
American audiences.

The rhetoric of the technological sublime pervades much of our
language and a good deal of our thinking about drones. The ability to wage war
from a world away; to strike at adversaries while keeping US forces relatively
free from harm has made war easy: a sublime state of perpetual conflict. In the
American imagination, the technological sublime represents progress,
ingenuity, and unrivaled mastery over the natural world. Curiously, the electric
sublime—replete with promises of liberty, fraternity, and prosperity—finds one
of its most vocal proponents in Marshall McLuhan, who was deeply influenced
by Innis’s work. But Innis was far more sceptical of the rhetoric of the electric
sublime. As James Carey points out, Innis “disputed the notion that electricity
would replace centralization in economics and politics with decentralization,
democracy, and a cultural revival” (1992: 133). Drawing upon Innis’s clear-eyed assessment of more recent developments in computational, navigation, and communication technologies, Carey continues: “What we are witnessing is another increase in the scale of social organization based upon electronic communication” (170). Put in more theoretical terms, then, integrating elements of both the dynamic and electric sublime, drones represent a rather ominous development in a historic and ongoing process of time-space compression that collapses geographic distance, frequently exacerbating unequal relations of social, economic, and political power (Harvey 1990).

In conclusion, Innis’s work offers an invaluable heuristic tool for understanding the relationship between the technological sublime and the growth and expansion of American empire. The dynamic sublime of the railroad coupled with the electric sublime of the telegraph were instrumental in colonizing a continent and its Indigenous peoples. Led by the drone program, this latest round of American imperial expansion likewise threatens tribal Islam—oral cultures, not unlike the native peoples of North America, deeply rooted in place and tradition. All of which is to suggest that the sublime frequently (and purposefully) obscures the brutalizing effects of space-binding societies and technologies. In the American context, the sublime represents far more than a quasi-religious feeling or sensation. Rather, it is a way of thinking that inscribes technologies and social relations in discernable, replicable, perhaps even predictable ways—what Charles Acland describes as “grooves.” Acland concludes:

It behooves us to examine seriously the lasting consequences of the grooves in social existence as scratched out by policy programs. In the end, we need to ask not only about the decisions taken, but *what manner of cultural coherence* is being fabricated, fortified and advanced by said decisions. (2006: 176, my emphasis)

Innis’s work poses fundamental questions regarding policy decisions in the twenty-first century, especially, as I have suggested here, the US drone program and the attendant “arms race” in military drones across the globe. More importantly, Innis’s moral voice demands that we consider the implications of such cultural coherence in a society enamored with drones: the new American sublime.
References


BIGLY MISTWEATED: 
ON CIVIC GRIEVANCE

AVITAL RONELL

1. The Trumpian Incursion

So. Let me rewind, pull this together. Maybe I’m coming out of it, ready to rumble, unsticking from a uniformly frozen pose, my brand of Medusoid petrification. I go in and out of these alternating states of inertia and hopped up mobility, locked and loaded. Whatever. I am a fucking mess. Or rather, I am a reflector of a mess, transmitting in a desert of despair. The elections threw us an existential curve ball. How resolutely we lost—yet, to whom, to what!? The scope of the loss that must be borne—massive, embarrassing, harbinger of body harm—pitches one into a catatonic stall whose shelf-life and stealth articulations, somatic jostles, disturbed sleep patterns, lost trust, rage outbreaks, unconscious scrapes, decisive breakups, social suspicion, cannot be fully predicted. Under such circumstances, it is not clear how to maintain the protest engine set in gear, how to make it viable and sustainable, something “we can believe in.” The election of a team super-charged by masculinist pathologies jolted us as a protest in its own right—in terms of Nietzschean evaluation, as the bad and decadent side of the very notion of protest. Trump is the sign of a protest gone bad, very bad, tremendously bad. Folks, it’s very, very bad. The campaign wore the mask of a life-affirming imposition, laced with destructive jouissance, while holding steady on first chakra intensities that boost familial, tribal, nation-hugging appropriations, strong but pitched very low, very, very low. When they went low, we were nearly ko’d.

As for me, I await instructions from the community of warrior-agitators, Micah White and other highly articulate activists on the ground in order to see how to move up against the impossible. I would be listening to music to get pumped, to Common, to Cranfield and Slade, to Beethoven and so many other fist-raisers across the charts of musical lament. But, in this instance, I can’t. A mourning period has kept me away from music so my head fills with static bombs instead. So much holds me from returning the punches in the throttled stagnation of disappointment. I sit in anticipatory bereavement of the next years, trying to rouse, looking for energy surges and the stores of public
language that let me fuse with other citizens of rage. But like a schizo sprung from Deleuze’s pages, I am running, for the most part, to the count of stationary mobility. I guess that’s OK, if you’re just a tracker of minoritized traces, I mean, a writer. . .

**It’s das Man’s world.**¹ January 20, noted indelibly by the great poet, Paul Celan, ended our ability to tell time. It was a catastrophic date. According to the poet, the unique date haunts our relation to temporality and marks the stoppage of history. Time ceased on January 20, a marker of the shadow of time, announcing the vanishing of Enlightenment buoys that carry historically prized notions on which discerning folks tend to count and existentially float—in good or bad times, in the warp of time, even when one is out of time or in the tunnel of untimeliness, one straps oneself to notions pumped by a touch of transcendence such as “progress,” “perfectibility,” “the end of prejudice,” “human dignity,” “the relinquishment of superstition,” and so forth. Celan’s date announces and voids these hopeful levers; as in Blanchot’s essay, “The Indestructible,” the poet’s language states that something has happened on the order of the human capacity to destroy, revealing to us man’s delivery to his own destruction, completing a run of unstoppable impairment.

On this date—the hollow of which returns every year to hit us in some unconscious place of troubled receptivity—on this date, in 1942, senior Nazi officials and SS officers were convened at Wannsee, a suburb of Berlin, to engineer “The Final Solution to the Jewish Question.” Celan’s taut reflections on January 20 prompted Derrida to think about signature and date, what it means to sign off with a date, even one that stalls any advance, including the simplest return of a given date, in terms of calendrical time. The term, a termination, is pencilled in every year again, reappearing faintly as a permanent lesion that cannot be removed from the remotest horizon of historical becoming. Even the notion of “horizon,” as basis and background—as supporting field and limit, hermeneutically set—was shattered. January 20: a date to end all dates, the final date, charged with finality, determining the phantasm and implementation of the depraved idea of a final solution, the destruction of a neighbour, the friend, a civic alterity.

The German-American Donald Trump does not measure up to the unprecedented insolence, the event that decided Jewish extermination. Yet, something pernicious keeps returning, and civic prohibitions, after so much

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¹ Vibing off the popular slogan, “it’s a man’s world,” I refer here to Heidegger’s consideration of what he calls in *Being and Time* “das Man,” usually translated as “the They,” an inauthentic morph of man. But you should read the pertinent passages closely to get the full gist of the import and vapidity of “das Man.”
reparative straitening, have been lifted. The unsayables are mouthed by the obscene broadcast system named, “Trump”—a name that Thomas Mann, or Flaubert before him, would write into a narrative that seeks to capture mediocrity and a promiscuous capacity for unrelenting wreckage. How did this come about on our watch, at the time allotted for inhabiting this earth, attended by a particular stopwatch checking being and nihilism, when fundamental values are upended? To the degree that we are still related to the possibility of advent, counting in our largely hapless ways on the future, marked inwardly by dates that recur or continue to disturb and cease historical humming, the revenant and breach of the time, the date January 20, must be accounted for. The obsession with a date’s return is not a flex of science fiction, but part of a congruency that bears reflection, calls up ethical responsiveness and a sense of haunted time, already written up, on the rebound and off the rails. At once unprecedented in terms of arrogance of office and overreach, the era of Trump also brandishes a series of regressive collapses, backsliding to racist grammars, reigniting, in terms of sanctioned public discourse, the nearly snuffed out inflammation of white supremacist mania, misogynist blowback, Christian jihadist spew, and archaic bordering systems. Infantile modes of aggression motor the polluters of the good breast, to speak with Melanie Klein’s analysis of the greedy predator.

Since Kafka made it a point to open the gates of our penitentiary culture—always near and intrusive, if underground or relocated to a border island, unconsciously encroaching—our bodies have been seen as exposed to retaliatory write-ups, strapped into historical writing machines that stamp and date us, leaking historical inscription. January 20: the date and what it stands for may seem remote, yet figures of Nazism keep returning, as if on automatic replay, citing the traumatism of an historical repetition compulsion. As distant as the imaginary field of reception must seem at times, its tireless reach is awesome, spills into the way we move or stagger through darkened fields of political comprehension.

Calling our teachers. Events turning on time still hit you in the gut and make your immune system give way, not only because of this or that decimating decree or violent dispatch. Nietzsche, first philosopher to put his body on the line, warned against the way political events and recurring destructions would disturb your organs, making you want to puke. Retching and shuttered down by migraines, Friedrich Nietzsche has also taught us to dance, to take measure and calibrate steps as we engage the necessity, when something hits home, of Dis-Tanz, dance of distance. When darkness threatens to drown out my ability to push back, throw that punch, shout out in fist-shaking fury, I remember the way Nietzsche has filled my dance card, sometimes taking me for
a solitary spin; other times, by opening and inventing a new lexicon of rage, the last philosopher, as he was called, scripted a world-class swirl around futural sites of calamity. In the darkest night, Nietzsche threw himself into the rhythm and possibilities of music and its ecstatic flare. Nietzsche, graduate of Bayreuth, knows all about Woodstock nation and the spirit of music to get us on up. I wonder, my friends (I understand the temptation to sit this out, to freeze in stupefied ignominy, even when we send holograms out to the streets of protest, nonetheless): Can I still have this dance, ask you to unclench sufficiently, or just a little bit, so that language can happen upon us and thought tuned to our mournful disordering of sense? (This is not the place, but when he goes wild on us and Dionysian, throwing up in the Nietzschean vocabulary is a good thing—not only part of the heave of cleansing but also a way to reverse dialectics. But this is another story. Or is it? Can Hegel and analytic philosophers dance their way out of the knob of history?)

*   *   *   *   *

To the White House (Sorry, Virginia Woolf!). Given the grave appointment of moment—it was in the cards to collate January 20—the report of his actions remains taped to the dates of calamity checked off by Celan and Derrida. On Holocaust Remembrance Day, which falls a week after January 20 (though Werner Hamacher has argued that there is no “after” the Holocaust, time has stilled in an unreadable frozen pose)—a week later, according to ontic calendars (materially indifferent, mechanically turning around the blighted sun), the successful miscreant, whose narcissism demands of him a turnout of crass acts of power, issues a decree to shut out Muslims of seven nation-states. Severing the Abrahamic brother, world takes a hit and opens to the fallout of the unbound. In more Arendtian terms, he has cut into existence, developing repressive disavowals of world-binding relations. Even though time has stopped, though something keeps ticking, its shadow progression nonetheless offers dates to check off. There is something like a January 21 that lines up, presenting itself, though without matching the mood with triumphal bragging rights or the fantasy of overcoming the wounding pinch of the precedent date. There is little hope for moving beyond what Celan and Derrida signed off as “January 20.” But this is what we’ve got, this is what I’ll take, with the understanding that January 20 and 21 are evermore toggled together, if for a flash or lurch forward. January 21 limps along, wanting to make time return along an axis of viability. A surge, a remembrance of uprising and the power punch of protest, still pulsing without certitude of outcome, still straining despite the strong turnouts, January 21, 2017, delivered a response to the
dispiriting call relayed from January 20 on our shared timetable of wounded acknowledgement.

For a moment, there was a January 21.

Nearly unexpected, cued up by the call of a newly keyed rhetoric of destruction, a licenced throwdown of hatred, a 21 January turned up the sound system of Echo to drown out, if only momentarily, a damaged national Narcissus. However minoritized Echo may be in myth and subsidiary narratives that surround her, she, in the end, may just have the upper hand, the righteous stance of a first-responder that knows no gag order. In terms of adding a date to the time-suspension of 20 January, a different relation may start to rouse in terms of harm done in and by time, a harm that remains irreversible. The second and secondary appointment may not overtake the destructive propensities of January 20, but maybe it shifts grounds enough for something different to rise up, if not the fresh, new sun. The toggled date, January 21, does not cancel out the injurious date that it must somehow succeed, but tends to its wounds.

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**A grieving citizenry and the anxiety of non-address.** Let us move to the second day, if we can push on the sense of that week, according to a nonlinear flight-plan, knowing that the 20th of January will not budge. The 2017 Women’s March—massive, elegant, to the point—invites us to look into the nature of protest, the way we file by sites of inequity or are filed down by disturbing flare-outs of injustice. My focus in recent work is on civic grievances. How do we understand the form of address constituted by complaint or the grievances we file? The march of January 21, at once exalted and dispiriting—we hit a wall, it wasn’t Mexico—made every one of us level with the way civic grievances are bound to be diverted by those addressed. Sometimes messages may arrive, but we have no mastery over their itineraries. Missiles and missives can be disarmed at any point of their trajectory. Yes: sometimes, something arrives, though, and lands off programmed routes. Laced with grief, profiling the solemnity of a grieving citizenry, the Women’s March of January 21, was strengthened by its very sense of deflation and the anxiety of non-address. We were in a swirl of Mitein, bulked up by a momentary epiphany of collective determination. But we also held to the abyssal sense of indeterminacy, making points that will not stick with those wielding executive power. Our contestatory field was not level, was on the side of decimated being, glacial sobriety. Am I exaggerating—or, as my students might say, “over-exaggerating” my point? I’m not sure that I am, given the proto-fascist
cut of destiny that I’m looking at. The language was spare on January 21. On the downside of exuberance, posters were homemade and fabulously quirky. We were set on a kind of Bataillean march: forming a community without communion, we remained unconvinced of our substantiality, yet moved by a kind of resolve, a nearly Heideggerian Ent-schlossenheit. The tightening of resolve came down on the other side of Heidegger, the one granted by Reiner Schürmann, astonishing philosopher who succumbed to AIDS, capable of drawing the work into its anarchic freedom zones, turning it against the murky intentionalities of its signatory. Resolve contains the capacity for exposure. It also sheds light on the response for which a terrifying disclosure calls. Tensed by civic disappointment, alert to the gravity of the call to responsibility, a crowd of duty-bound responders went out on the streets, showing up in the face of loss. As oddball as this may seem in our day of urgent political collapse, an overall grasp of Derridian codes of delivery alongside the concern this philosopher articulated with misdirected missives will help orient our sense of “destinerring” intelligence, a system of envoys left unprotected by any reliable logic of cognition or recognizable political system.

Let me bring back my friend, Werner Hamacher, Germany’s contemporary version of Hegel. Werner warns that protest as form and tactical manoeuvre may not suffice in the face of this calamity; we must look to something which functions like ostracization in the Athenian polis. Donald Trump and his destructive horde must be ostracized, with violent precision and unrelenting determination.

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At the intersection of twitterature & shiterature. As a wave of action that starts us off, protest must be analyzed, understood, considered in terms of its deficiencies, without overlooking the proud, if brutal, history of breakout syntax of civic responsibility. We were told at the time that the bombs stopped flying, napalm had ceased cratering the earth, when protest surged during the Vietnam era under the slogan, “The whole world is watching!” Philosophically inflected and pragmatically tuned, the scope of protest, its ability to affect change or blow the whistle, its capacity ethically to produce a necessary halt, becomes a matter of calculating what our time can tolerate, absorb or feed on, the responsiveness that protest presupposes or abandons. Some protests have nowhere to go but a dead letter office. Other flexes of protest muscle appear to meet a target, make things take measure, die down where necessary, or expose their repressive brutality in ways that end a certain run of aggressive indecency. At this point in our history, a series of reflections and interventions must ask the tough questions without deflating a sense of the power punch that a protest
nation must deliver. Protest, an appetite of civic grief that must be increased, if continually modified, requires us to assume the posture of hyperethicity, even when we sense and fear the pump up of resistance to be somehow faltering, crashing against a wall of reduced expectation. Sometimes it works. Sometimes, we are outplayed and undermined. Most of us, ready to stand up, do so warily on the faltering Grundstruktur of the understanding that, at bottom, let’s face it, this can’t go on, but we must go on. One does not always have to be motored by the certitude of telic success to bring the energy powerlessness, the force of protest into the dark zones of civic despondency.

The sense of betrayal was so colossal and multi-appointed in November that I don’t know whether I, for one, will rock out of my hellhole any time soon. Still, every other day I do send out a mortal to rally the troops and tropes that might revive a numbed and medicated body politic that feels and looks like road-kill. I go into my obsessive loop, mulling over the details of note. What the hell happened here? Is the ascension of Trump a matter, largely, of misogynist apprehension, white masculinist payback, homophobic overflow just when we thought that gay marriage and divorce equality had settled in, cozy and nauseatingly equalized to straight normativity?

Give me another smack of misogyny, the way it fastens onto the imaginary body of a maternal shape and shadow. Day and night I analyze the lethal prompts of a maternal empire that gets swooped down on according to the logic and habits of military aggression. One could say that the field of anal-sadistic military aggression constitutes my specialty, part of my critical arsenal as I probed the arse-upward manoeuvres inherent to my “militerary” domains and invested sites of psychoanalytic mappings. I take it as rigorously necessary that Trump’s mouth-hole be the flapping aperture to funnel floods of radically unleashed aggression, the toxic spill of excrementalized language, part of his recourse to a crucial intersection where twitterature meets shiterature—what Freud has seen as part of the expression of sheer pleasure, puerile and adolescent, involved in an unrestrained propensity to leak language, ugly language, releasing the overjoyed slosh of smut.

Pierre Alferi has recently written about extreme texts of brevity, micrograms where twitterature figures prominently (or, rather, minutely, nanotechnologically signalling); shiterature is mine, however, part of my contemplation of the “Kaka céleste” series where I dwell on the locution—sacred, primal, moving—“holy shit!” But that is another story, another narrative pump, even if it can be seen to drip into our political body and deliver an offensive rhetoric of elimination.
A loser son. I don’t know if Trump has cut a backroom deal with China and Russia, tilting power in their direction. I shall limit my scope and speculative grasp to open up elsewhere. For the purposes of this assignment, I am a theorist who likes to get a hold on the way power operates when authority is running on empty, as Hannah Arendt and Alexandre Kojève feared in the face of totalitarian takeover. The fool, Donald Trump, carries no authority, which is precisely where the problem lies, in the violent shudder of the vanishing of authority that this morph of a loser son embodies. It is perhaps not a mere disturbance on the coherence charts that Russia’s position as locatable enemy power is coming apart. With all Schmittian warning systems alerting that we must have the enemy in our sights, that it remains crucial to know and contain a figure of enmity in order to maintain some kind of political sanity—whether propped up as fiction of adversarial opposition or promoted as a real target zone—the point is, that unless one is willing to be Mad Maxed out in the desert of a structureless politics, the adherence to a notion of canny enmity defines the capacity of a nation to ensure its survival. Wait. What?!

Are we seriously talking about the need for enmity on the say-so of Carl Schmitt? A pitch for sanity? Sanity: A word hard to pull out these days. Nietzsche 101. Take a close look at the phobic vocabulary of those in charge. The most madly managed trot out their opinions, however violently sharpened, according to a logic of national sanity, as if they were cleaning up a mess, as if they were not the mess and debris of capitalist infraction. The projective inversion of a mess that needs to be cleaned up holds my interest. As a group, as a discourse and launchpad for reckless referential aberrancy, Republican-types have tended to toss out the disavowed residue of internal debris, a floating dumpster impoverishing a world in need of continual nurturance. Cleaning up and cleaning out are endangering ventures. I am putting out an APB on the way Trump generates a false consciousness of hygienic propriety, white surfaces veneering excremental money funds.

The field of cleanliness and articulations of germaphobia will continue to insinuate itself into the discursive habits and decrees, the insidious aggressions and misconstruals, of the current administration. They want to clean up. The fear of contamination, a prompt to xenophobic excess and severe misogyny, the disgust promoted by the smell of women, motor the purported toughness on issues of immigration and other exclusionary operations for which the team of garish white billionaires has already made itself known. Regarding their leader, he comes up as puerile, bereft of superegoical controls. His is not merely an idiot, though Lacan has had a lot to say about the figure of the “idiot
“king,” a despotic emergence: he is a map of symptomatological heaves that restrict and bind him, a circumstance which no one would really give a fuck about, if it weren’t in fact pushing the agenda of a gold-plated debilitated subject: the thought of a woman peeing reviles and excites Trump; his grammatical aberration when gushing about pussy, well, I will get to later—

As for that overachieving snot-nose, Carl Schmitt: Yes, a Nazi political theorist at some level makes pitches about sanity and sanitation, wholesomeness, at least in terms of keeping a clean-cut enemy line. Still others contribute to the imaginary and manic compulsion for cleanliness by means that involve, at some level of consciousness, cleansing of ethnic and intestinal proportions, and the sometime mask and mascot Friedrich Nietzsche makes it clear from the start of his genealogical probe that Germans cleave to tropes of digestive disorder, obsessions with phantasms of elimination, evacuation, flushing what gets cleared out as toxic, detachable form the body politic, but this is another matter, or is it? The engagement with tropes of Germanicity, the accumulation of geo-archival memory taps, and even the jokingly stated fact that nowadays one is fleeing to Germany whereas in those days one was fleeing to America from Germany, should not be left to some scholarly sidebar. Wait. I’d like to retract the implied swipe against scholars, if that’s what it was, just now, a kind of reflexive drive-by. Scholars under the regime of Trump are a targeted species, disdained and marked for controlled extinction. I will defend them, even if the feelings are not always mutual and I myself have struggled with the university as an autoimmune lab that kills off any creative spark or sign of vitality. At the same time, yes, the university poses as a sanctuary for politically correct feints, it houses dissidents, bookworms and queers like no other institution of waning solidity. I will refrain from switching on the history channel that features deplorable episodes—ethical misconduct ascribable to university life, racist installations despite affirmative action inlays, and so on. I take these moral deficits on in another text and, for now, I declare a truce and start a protective intervention on behalf of all those who want to study and experience a furlough from the peculiar lashings of the so-called “real world.” Derrida has indicated in his many works on the plights and innovative verve of the university, including in his important article, “The University in the Eyes of its Pupils,” to which I refer you, that we owe the basic structuring of the university to 18th-century German thought.

A national crypt formation. Like the group led by Mohammed Atta on September 11, 2001, the Trump family hails from Germany, though Trump himself disavowed his origins and switched up Germany for Sweden, where he claims he thought his clan came from. Still, the Trumps wanted to go back to Germany after an initial spell of immigration, but were barred from doing so.
That is really too bad, that even the Germans wouldn’t take them back! Trump’s racist golf partner and news source, Bernhard Lang, recently mused that many of those who had voted in November “looked illegal” to him. Trump likes to take his German interlocutor and racialist provocateur seriously. These prods are not merely aleatory bumps in the night or accidents that pockmark the manicured lawn that golfers glide along, whispering casually tossed confidences, teeing off on obscenities. Then there’s Breitbart, ach, ach! Disavowed but still pumping, something returns from Germanic roots and boots, and the rhetoric of unconscious tactical manoeuvres must not be left out of a picture that assumes the false allure of transparency. Laurence Rickels has shown California’s dependency on Germanic tropologies and ideological formations—a homegrown German Ideology. I have explored the way a certain foreclosure of air space in World War Two keeps running aggression back to the United States in a manner that calls for vigilant analysis and, following an understanding of a national crypt-formation, requires more critical attention. Following the thought of Maria Torok, Nicolas Abraham, Rickels, Donato, Cathy Caruth, Cynthia Chase, etc., and Derrida on condemned sites and the revenants that such sites tend to host, I try to locate the crypts and effects of the phantom in recurrent events prompted by historical snags or back-slides. In “Support Our Tropes” and elsewhere I go after the repertory of recurring hits for which historical repression is responsible. For now, all I can delimit is a starting point, maybe offering an aerial view of a symptom geographically pinnable but stuffed with the excess of symbolicity.

New York City has become a national tag for traumatic incursion that double and reflect in a specular way that I’m sure many have noted: 9/11 turns into 11/9, towers relay to each other from the collapsed World Trade Center towers to the hubristic Trump tower. If I had Derridian expanses at my disposal, I would now consider the fate and marking systems that we associate with the tower in prophetic narratives, turns and tropes of Babel and the story of Jericho. In a curious inversion, Trump is phobic about anything that is not a tower or phallically pointing up. The White House gives him the creeps, so he builds a tower across the way and does not want to look down. He cannot even find the light-switch, he whines.

Trump’s poses of buffoonery and his clownish propensity for linguistic reduction, the sheer stupidity and off-the-charts vulgarity of his claims and limited grasp of world-binding obligation—forfeiting the ligature that resides in obligation, part of the constituting acts that bind us to world—his trail of foreclosures in the psychoanalytic sense, ever doubled in the material arrangements of his real estate business, have left the world dumbstruck. Yet I would warn that revulsion should serve only as a first-level affect, part of a
commando reactivity that needs to be refined, contextualized, no doubt even *sublated*. For, as disturbingly destructive as his incursions and poses may be, they serve only to disclose what was already there, as if we had been living until now, for the greater part, in what Heidegger calls a “negative hallucination.” Namely, we did *not* see what was there. Christopher Fynsk directs us to Nietzsche’s thinking of nihilism in order to get a viewing of this basket of deplorables (my rough translation, with a Hilary add-on).

Something on the order of a nihilistic disclosure has been exposed, if under the Germanic name, “Trump,” and manifested in its distorted human carrier. As alien, disturbing, and inassimilable as the traumatic invasiveness of the “Trump brand” has been since it crossed over from Germany to Queens into Manhattan, it would be wrong to treat it only as a loathsome aberration without secret roots in the makeup of most enlightened and mature social structures and vigilant controls. Untethered arrogance, proud conceits and failure’s success are brought up in the figures and disfigurations of Mssrs. Trump and Pence, but in fact give access to a disavowed shadow part of America—the bright side of which is being concealed under the shit-pile that Trump and Co. have produced recklessly, yet with decipherable intention and historical backup. Low-blow bigotry is not new, nor can it be simply surrendered to the tides of time. What comes off as new is the revivalist fervour with which names such as “deportation” and “pussy” have been declassified for public announcement, and are becoming part of a registry of legitimate prompters to prods of bullying and social atrocity. Conditions for assuaging precarity, such as outlined by Judith Butler, have been given the heave ho. And this ho is heaving.

As Lacan had predicted long ago, racism, understood as rapport to the *jouissance* of the other, cannot be done away with merely by erosive waves of enlightened movement, where time itself (and its splintered conceptual branches) takes care of the clean-up of error, superstition, a degraded version of will-to-power that consists in oppressive slams of outcast players. In case we were under the illusion that women were welcome to sit at the table of historical deliberation, we were wrong—or, as the terrible lessons of the Balkans has taught us definitively, hatred can sit and simmer for decades, if not centuries, before it reaches for the neighbour’s throat again. This stir-up of archaic pain belongs to one of Freud’s enduring insights: hatred, ambivalence, aggression and other human outreach programs in the spheres of negativity cannot simply be repressed but are bound to return and pound hard.

For a long while—since the time I was a politically impassioned teen—I experienced America as being on the brink of civil war, teetering over an abyss of irreconcilable differences, set in a rough clench that, at moments of grace,
can resemble more of an embrace, part of a nation compelled, against all odds, to hug it out. Most of the time, though, it’s a matter of clashing hard, and the cinema with its excess of violent description tells us a lot a lot about our playbooks of destructive fervour. Still, in my imaginaire, America was meant to gather us up in our tattered clothing, pointed us to a certain, if risky, horizon of promise, allowed us to dream it up according to outrageous protocols of becoming. I was suckled by the generous indication of the American dream. The shutdown marked by Trump has thrown an axe into my imaginaire, momentarily congealed as a frozen sea, to speak with Kafka. Btw, I always speak with Kafka and must revert now to his recast of the Statue of Liberty, who was called by the kids at school “Miss Liberty” in my immigrant childhood. As a grownup I read the philosopheme, “America,” tracking its significance in literary and theoretical texts, the way it works and unworks in setting a horizon of abandon and being. I turn to Miss Liberty, a gift from France, whom I salute inwardly on my walks on the waterfront, the piers. Miss Liberty. She was my first real crush, a full-figured, book-holding being that I looked up to. In Kafka’s prophetic novel, Amerika, the Statue of Liberty, legendary welcoming committee to the destitute, holds a dagger in her clenched fist.

But let me return to Lacan’s lucidity when it comes to the desire for racist resolution, the lure and abiding allure of racism. The racist disposition—stoked, hungry, close at hand—is not merely reducible to a mistake or an effect of ignorance, though there’s a lot of that bumble in its makeup. I don’t think stupidity takes the lead role when it comes to prompting racist and misogynist assaults (in a longer piece, I would separate these two instances of social aggression to the extent that the violation of women feeds into racist diminishments and the two models of aggressive targeting play off each other in ways that one wants to pursue further). In Lacan laced with Klein, the other is seen to take away what you don’t have, marking your deficiency, which gets traded out in projective waves of unabating envy and aggressive clawing at the facticity of the other’s very existence. The target of envious rage gets consistently disparaged and hurt, even if left, so to speak, ontologically intact. No one can live on ontological legitimacy alone, but needs serious welcoming and encouragement, the syntax of “I want you to be,” as Arendt once described the ethical imperative in terms of love for the refugee or endangered other. I have no time for this now, I say to myself, as I want to get out on the streets, do my work and eldercare rounds, I have no time for this, though we are obligated to make time for this—for reading, creating, practicing something like a “reparative imperative” when reading Lacan and Melanie Klein bifocally. (Also, I will not get into his misogyny and pilfering feints when it comes to
women analysts, aaaeeeeiii! What’s a girl to do? Ach! Don’t get me started. Day in, day out I kid you not we are surrounded by a masculinist S.W.A.T. team. Every effort to repair, undermined. Don’t get me started. The good things, however problematic, are off limits for us. For instance, there’s simply no call for friendship, even among women, in the metaphysical dialup—at most, girls have been accorded some provisional and retaliatory alliances, identificatory contrivances, or other busts in the consolidation of Mitsein. Ach! I don’t think that Hegel, who was in it to win it, was dialectically angling for the capture of powerful affect, for raising the stakes of friendship by turning women into standout enemies, though. When you scroll down the philosophical corridor of determinations, becoming friends—the interlocution or supplement of narcissistic annexation that this may imply—is always and strictly a man’s affair. We inherited this relentless state of things, remain inscribed by its persistence, no matter how removed from the injurious logic of metaphysical say-so one might hope by now to be. Ach! Maybe I was called up by a different politics of friendship, a different grid or writing practice that pulls one close to another’s distress. Let’s not go there—a wonderful American locution that my colleague Eckhart adores. Where, there? Do you btw know what it’s like to be a girl? To take corrosive insults all day long—to have to wrestle down insolence all the time, to wear yourself down proving and outdoing yourself, overcompensating, pushing hard, becoming exhausted to the point of blanking, so much so that you can’t even complain? Don’t get me started.) But let me back down in order to point out that Lacan’s reflections on racism were delivered in a work titled “Television” and addresses all sorts of technological insets, giving us a clue about the growing importance of medial projection when it comes to matters of social aggression, particularly in terms of racism. Donald Trump is largely indissociable from television and its psychic tethers. Stephen K. Bannon started out as a filmmaker, wanting to break into Hollywood. They are always camera-ready. The slogan, “The whole world is watching!” has taken another turn with decisive consequences, in need of further exploration, entrapping everyone in a dismally distorted reality world. Among other things, reality T.V. has inured us to obscene displays of over-the-top wealth, cleaning up the filthy rich through its filters.

To return to the misogynist cast of the moment: Of course, there never has not been a misogynist wall of aggression against which to collapse. Trump didn’t invent a particularly crass form of attack on women but exposed its prevalence and became a loudspeaker for what has always been pelted against those of us so constructed (provisionally and problematically—but I’m not going to argue this now, though one could state with conviction that it’s
precisely at a time when gendered being is shaken up considerably, proliferating according to mutating assignments, that we can monitor a regressive return to “woman” who, diminished and puffed up at once, conscripted as pussy or lioness, must bring up, from her depleted store, the roar). Again. I am not a woman, strictly speaking, but at times like this, OK, count me in. I’ll stop with boasting that I have the biggest dick in the country (for Shakespeare “country” slips easily into “cunt,” you can cunt me in). So let me stay with something like a rhetorical analysis that shows even the harshest insult to slip on the ice of Trump’s ongoing hostility, some of which unconsciously pillages and reveals something like a national psyche, while a great deal of the outtake belongs to a sinister calculation ascribable to the habits prescribed by corporate fascism and its rapacious takes.

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The pussy différand. It seemed like a turning point. Trump was audio-trapped into revealing the invasive cast of his smuttiness. Billy Bush was fired, Donald went on to be POTUS. Billy, a remnant of the Bush family on the scene and screen, swiftly kicked the medial bucket. In the following days, Billy had to apologize to his little girls and explain that what they had heard on the media was not really him, or was him, and now he’s different, redemptively set on their side. Trump, in any case, had already disposed of most of that return-of-the-repressed clan—the shrubs, Dubya, W, whatever we had no reason to diminuate—that now incites nostalgia, however falsely remembered. Trump was not entirely wrong about the Shit Plate that the Bushes left us with, out of which he crept. The Bush boys may not throw down language about pussy-grabbing entitlement, but they, too, contributed their share to the attack on women and produced a map of maternalized attack zones into which fighter pilots, high on drugs and shooting up porn videos, amped up on rock ’n roll, dropping their bombs. There are many ways to shut down women, even more to shut them up at home or on the fields of the overblown imaginary.

One thing that was not caught on tape, and to my knowledge received no airplay, involves the grammatical aberration that landed Trump’s statement. I am not certain what to make of the glitch, pointed out to me by a graduate student, foreign but outfitted with a perfect command of the English language. Nor am I certain, as I once was when analyzing the syntactical disturbance and semantic pitfalls of the Bushian cannonade of language alerts and pointing up the consistently failed locution and violent relation to language spilling toxically onto killing fields. Language so battered led one to wonder whether an abusive rapport to language does not in itself trigger massive rounds of harm and other deeds of misfiring. Were these destructions, of language, of being,
not intricately wound up? Neglected language comes out hurting innocent bystanders. I do not include purposively welded distortion, what makes up poetry, sharp linguistic positing, and hip-hop. Nor do I overlook the more or less normal dosage of catachresis that every speech acts rhetorically enfold. Every rapport that language entertains entails abuse. And sometimes the most depraved are highly eloquent.

This Trumpish *impoverishment* of speech is something different, though, something like endangering neglect, stripping down language to a depleted status of refuge language, displaying flimsy performative tosses of a grammar school child on the edge of throwing a tantrum, reducing world to a limited field made to hold only balled up energy, egological fits. I suspect that the medial success of the locution, “You are fired!” received ratings not only for its economical brutality, a staging of decision and severance that more complicated zones of ambivalence and hesitation repel. You are fired, “signifiered,” you are addressed in your nullity, you are counted out, driven away, called off. And so on. Now I would want to hitch a ride on Blanchot, but I must restrain myself. Have to prepare my class. But let me say just this. The celebrity signifier, “You are fired!” also fires off on the eliminated addressees, targets them as they are tagged out. Trump drew blood from this exclamation—from day one, he tried to fire Obama; he is the commando officer of a huge firing squad that masquerades as a hiring machine, and so on. This is the performativity to which the Trump apparatus aspires, meant to eliminate, but I am only in the early stages of putting together a rhetorical analysis of highly contaminated edges of performative fire power. In this case, I’m just putting out a call, asking that one look at how acts of “firing” weaponize, terrorize, and escalate into convulsive deportation raids, offering the sense also that some things or peoples can be called off or done away with.

What I did want to bring into focus at this time involves the wobble of the pussy-grabbing injury—something that brings us back to Trump’s phobic stances. Let’s review it in slo-mo for a sec. *Normally*, if I can invoke this obsolesced term, one “grabs a pussy,” if that’s what the aggressor is getting at. It may consist in a power grab, a belittling clutch, violent and illicit, a body assault, a reflex of childish or churlish indiscipline. Maybe that is why in some neighbourhoods of slang usage, the vag may be called a snatch. To “grab pussy” is to throw down a synecdochal reduction on a woman (who is in any case always reduced, if Lacanian psychoanalysis is right, to something lacking, a lack, what one does not have). In cooking and other arts, in wide areas of science, reductions have their plate, even their prestige. But Donald did not revert in his celebrity boast to this locution; he has boasted about “grabbing by the pussy.” One commonly grabs by the tail or toe, as in a racist childhood...
ditty; one grabs by the horns or balls. Grabbing pussy and grabbing by the pussy indicate different acts and phantasms, one unquestionably intrusive, and the other one possibly more troubled to the extent that it must come from an imaginary prompt, where little Donald or little Hans, little Hands, must disavow Mother’s castration. When you’re a celebrity riding the F-factor (Adorno’s marker for American hotspots of fascism), the statement seems to go, you do not have to face castration—hers, or yours. Beyond the self-articulating consequence that the statement carries, it shows that the terrible responsibility linked to the assumption of powerlessness has been voided. The stakes of authority are such that they make room for and stem from the relinquishment of power even as one strives to protect, support, adjust, govern the sector of the world on which one must take a responsible hold. The aporetic limits of power keep in place the tensional structure from which one must lead off. You know what I mean, right? With Donald Trump at the helm, leadership itself has reached a point of exhaustion, bringing about little more than variants of self-mockery and acute misapprehension as it snaps the world. But every leader finds her shadow part, however mastered, in the lack of constraint and narcissistic blowout episodes generated by the Trump assumption of power/powerlessness. I am not saying that this distortion is lacking bite or to any degree harmless. On the contrary: We are in the hands—reputedly undersized but punishing, capable of outsized smack-downs—of an endangering bloodsucker. Still, Trump himself (if there’s anyone in there, sleepless in that bloated egosphere) has little substance beyond the nihilistic disclosure for which he stands and a nation falls.

The fascistoid urge. How could the nation fall for him, though, and install this mock-up of capitalist vulgarity? Many analyses have rushed in to cover the wound and wonder of the degradation bearing the name of Trump. Had I the time and stamina, if I were not one of those felled by national fatigue syndrome, I would now want to turn to texts of those who were tempted by certain aspects of totalitarianism, the betrayer’s notebooks, to try to understand what the German-American Trump repeats, revises, unconsciously overhauls, consciously drags in. The task, in outline, requires those of us trained to stay with the congested flow, to identify how the fascistoid temptation works from unresolved prior catastrophes that are on the rebound at this time. What is being disclosed now—and why now? This moment, stripped of grace, propelled by cynical excess and caged in by a relentless calculative grid, represents a very crushing death rattle of accumulated political grammars and ethical failures, if that’s what we are called to witness and stare down. In the meanwhile he is grabbing some phantom of the feminine by the pussy. The spectacle of disavowal is served by the broken locution to the world that must witness
deportation of all that is construed as foreign, alien, in breach of an imaginary wholeness about to be rendered “great again.”

Besides the destruction of vulnerable being, marked-down and newly harassable, the age also prepares to attack intellectual, artistic, scientific, and scholarly pursuit. Trump and Co. have registered escalating violence against the increasingly unsheltered precincts of thought and its intellectual branches, family trees, and affiliations. These communities, however disrupted or constitutively insubstantial, must find or invent their retaliatory capacities as they review key survival issues. We can start by looking to those studies that review modalities of aggression, analyzing shades of civic violence, the spiked and concealed itineraries of bullying; we can investigate tropologies of familialism and the theological imprint—prevalent types of artificially sweetened authority that rely on retrograde concepts of power, a Putin ingredient that by no means can be limited to one manifestation or grammar of brute power. All in all (if one can still say this, in the sense of “we all fall down”), we face now an untethered show of force in the absence of authority, in the undertow of decelerating authority. One of his underscored problems and ours: Trump has no authority. This is why one needs to revisit the conditions that prompted Plato to invent authority. When you are disarmed and your so-called powers of rhetorical persuasion are lost on them, the powering up of authority—as fiction, as performative tour de force—gives a polity some leverage to go after the lead devastators of social being. I have pledged many pages to deconstructing the troubled concern with nonauthorized tyrannies in Loser Sons, training on the ferocious regimes that beset us. In many ways I sat it out with this book that scanned the Bush years as I prepared an anticipatory biography of the clan that has broken into our lives, and were invited to do so. They steer the historical destruction that we share under a new morph—a more pernicious type of virus—though the political body was primed for precisely such an incursion, the colossal crisis of democracy.

So many are hurting and diminished. So much has to be done and said, and, already, more needs to be undone, refused to be done or said, though some of the language lashes cannot be unsaid and the raids have begun. Let me do my thing, therefore, and turn to a less topical, more untimely and perhaps, on that account, more telling account of genealogical consequence. What does literature teach us about today’s disarray and essential types of advocacy? How do we hold those who are undercut by ruthless acts of exclusionary violence that head them off at any viable pass? Let me patch us through to a more phantomal call for justice, all the more commanding.

All the more, Elsinore. I am calling you.
2. In the Name of Justice: The Wreckage of Immaturity

**Give me another round.** There is something that has obsessed me, a kind of recurrent motif, a plaintive cry, put out in my prequel work, and that seems to be calling for attention now, again. Embedded in the book on “loser sons” as provisional site of ending it all, one will find a sustained political reflection on late puberty and the phantasm of maturity. *Let me ask you this:* Have you ever met a truly mature being (in the sense that exceeds acknowledging mere checkpoints of ageing and the disposition that allows for stepping back, lucidly cooling one’s engines)? There may be some human states of exception here and there, but they, too, show the tendency to lapse into immaturity. Goethe, one of the historically maturest beings according to the tabulations turned in by Nietzsche, fell hard for a teenager when hitting his seventies. But even Goethe, who transcended first chakra nationalisms, regressive familialisms, and all manner of tribal bonding needs, credited his growth to “wiederholter Pubertät,” recurring puberty. The oversized writer counted on the returns of puberty to move on with creative and libidinal abundance, inviting the double edge of abandon and sovereign trespass. He consistently abandoned himself to the returns of adolescent exuberance. At the same time, he was the poet who pressed claims about the correlative intensities of joy and suffering—puberty consigns the upsurging child to pits of pain smoothed over only by the tranquilizing boons of so-called adulthood. Speaking of the *East-Westerly Divan*, I have seen streams of immaturity strike even the wisest gurus and sensible teachers who suddenly go infantile, giggle, play, shriek with laughter. It is not clear where to situate laughter on the developmental scale or when evaluating psychic and somatic outburst, how to account for the spiritual or purifying capacities of laughter and its openness to gender reassignment—or even the way it functions as a *gift* in Freud and, in terms of disrupting vital registers of significance, has left an explosive hole in Bataille and Nancy.

Puberty, perhaps not philosophically mature enough to have become a fully developed concept, sets up a breach, flagging a destructive passage on the road to majority. The minor hits a snag that may never entirely resolve, but is bound to return and deliver an unexpected knockout punch. Sparing only a few, puberty comes around the bend for the second and umpteenth time, to offer faux replenishment or the bumbled bad news of your finitude, foretelling an imminent crash. Driven perhaps on the ontic level by metonymies of the newly flaunted sports car, the unaccountable affair or newly minted wife, a fresh store of aggression and ensnaring spree of Selbstbehauptung, the body bump of untimely self-assertion, *acht!*, the return of puberty undermines the flattering
growth chart that humanity assigns to itself. As shock and disruption introduced to the concept of developmentality, puberty is linked, via Lyotard’s political essays, to Kant’s remarkable statements about immaturity. Perhaps now more than ever, we need to look into the malefic drag of immature political behaviours.

Kant sets out from the insight that one wants to remain immature, tethered to authority, kept on a short leash, in an existential and political comfort zone that stalls growth and seasoned decision. In the chapter, “Was war Aufklärung?/ What was Enlightenment? The Turn of the Screwed,” I interrogate such a moment of faltering self-assumption as the passage through puberty. I return to this passage—through puberty, in Loser Sons—in order to seize on an issue that has not received sufficient air play, or heir play, and can help us move forward, if that is conceivable, with the Hamlet dilemma, looping a hysterical knot that to this day tightens the noose around what we continue to incorporate and attach to, often unconsciously, as the political body. As weighty as Hamlet has been in terms of inheritance and gateway to the staple of infrastructuring themes of modernity, the play’s remarkable resilience is also due to the flaws it exposes, the way it flatlines and plays dumb, trying to prompt a traumatic truth to speak. A dumb show haunts the dramaturgy as it explores the limits of saying and showing, wondering aloud if it is capable of instigating confession and aligning with justice. One is throttled and voiceless, dependent on a ghost’s directives and plaintive insistence for motive and intelligibility.

Hamlet, who no doubt has slimmed down or was considerably photo-shopped for the portrait we may carry of him, wallet- or poster-size, started out as a pudgy adolescent. Bulked with body excess, he faces off with the bodyless inflation of paternal overdrive. How does Hamlet carry the weight of his heritage? When Lyotard moves on troubled adolescent awakening, he knowingly dwells at the limits of philosophical statement and determination, rehearsing that which may well lie beyond the scope of theoretical reach or investigation. Maybe the overweight waddle of Prince Hamlet is not a matter for speculation or the corporeal zoom, part of sizing his portion of indecisive agony. Or, maybe he needed the carriage of young portliness, a way of taking up space in the kingdom that at once counted him out and counted on him. What about the body of the Prince? How does it reflect the political body, bloated with gluttony, morally emaciated according to the transcripts the Prince handles, in contrast to the vanished body of the King?

This line of questioning, its imprudent check on a figure cut by the Prince, seems no doubt out of bounds for philosophical inquiry as we know it. Philosophy nowadays won’t be starved out, however, and goes after the most minute triggers of obsession. Adolescence, the cusp of immaturity, fits only with difficulty into its bodies, protesting all manner of unjust burdening, and philosophy itself has to be prodded and poked if it is to start reasoning with the unreasonable. This is where Hamlet pushes Horatio on the point of what can happen in excess of philosophical dream schemes: like a girl, a philosophy can dream. . . .

I return to this arena in order to lift a latent strand of thought that may provide us with access to the jouissance of the pudgy Trump, a tantrum-throwing adolescent, chronic complainer, a whiner who may be held back by the line of Kantian immaturity. Unlike Hamlet—though Freud would disagree on this point (he saw Hamlet as making murderous decisions)—Trump is driven by decisiveness, if poorly anchored and motored by faulty assessment or boorish self-advancement. But let me stay with a more savoury figure of immaturity, if one can say so. Hamlet joins the ranks of Lyotard’s Emma and Abraham to the degree that he, too, is staggered by a mode of address that can be integrated only minimally, if at all. This group of hapless receivers have not reached the level of maturity that could reasonably field a call of the magnitude that befalls them. They are traumatically called up by a force or voice or prod that cannot properly be deciphered, yet produces “a strong alteration”—Freud’s designation for the episode of puberty—that occurs when the turnover from childhood to majority is marked.3 Off target yet on the way to them, the call fatefully diverts them and something drastic happens, an uncontrollable spill of being that jostles the kids, relating them to the unrelatable. The jolt that they receive when picking up the untranslatable call or the call that only ever relays its own untranslatability, evokes the shock of puberty—“the rebellious blur bleeding out of the dilemma of impaired comprehension: ‘what is happening (to me)?’”4 I did not want to miss out on focusing a piece of Hamlet’s commando reactivity—the specific way he remains enraged yet stalled, rebellious yet unable to execute a plan or hit an assigned target, girlfriend-bound yet mother-fixated, cute but yet to lose the baby-fat—as part of the unaccountable upheaval, the social out-of-jointedness pertaining to a condition at once common (everyone goes through this self-estrangement, more or less) and alien

4 Ronell, Loser Sons, 175.
(what kind of freakish monstrosity just got released on the community of family, friendship, and nation, political observers?).

According to Lyotard, the shock of puberty, the rattling call, shapes our political narratives, even as it apparently recedes to raise havoc on more unconscious channels of social behaviour. If I am getting this right, the brand of hysteria ascribable to puberty cuts into the spheres of political performance and agonized concern for justice in a number of ways. My own assessment, reading psychoanalysis’s victims of recurring puberty, is that the excited teen, running high on self-inflationary fuel, and disrupted by an untranslatable address, sparks the scene of action. Puberty’s claims announce themselves each time uniquely, in full revolt of what is. The runaway teen spirit, going nowhere fast, riveted by a sudden arousal, an awakening, enters a stretch of being that remains enigmatic and active, infiltrating all manner of social practice. Occupied to a considerable degree by adolescent tropes of giddiness, overabundance, sarcasm, attack, and ruin—the despondencies and grammars of excitability—the stoppers and starters of social responsiveness still need to be accounted for, even if we lack a grid to tabulate the saturation of the political according to adolescent excitability. Aligned with Abraham and Emma, in terms of the disturbing jolts visited upon these hapless receptors and written up by Lyotard, Hamlet, for his part, proves to be terror-riven as he tries to field a deracinating call that spurs him to stand up in submissive readiness. On one level, though very differently apportioned, they share the predicament of receiving an instruction, an intrusive charge and convocation. They are cocked to respond to a call: ready or not, adolescents are made to assume that a call is meant for them. Hamlet understands that “readiness is all.” But was he ready for what was coming at him? The call rips through them before they are prepared to become who they are, marking an experience of shattering decision that, paradoxically, makes them who they are, skipping the beat and reassuring timing of becoming. They are riveted and invaded by a ghostly call under whose authority they are bound to freeze up.

The affective haze. The numbed reluctance to assume responsibility for what continues to arrive unannounced, the coercive pull to take the call sustains the affective haze of political torpor and childish recoil. Still, there are calls, as I have tried to track elsewhere, that should not be taken and are really not meant for those overactive teenagers who presume to be born to set things right—or make America great again. Ach! This is all very difficult to sort out, and there is no way adequately or justly to size up the degraded morph that Trump represents by measure of Hamlet. Still, there is something about immaturity and

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5 Ibid., 177.
complaint that binds them, if on a distorted plane of fun house visuals. One has been stripped of linguistic capacity on which the other expands; yet, they communicate symptoms and share a failure that we will not soon shake. A plan at least has been outlined, emerging from these primal and pulsating jolts that exhort us to adjust a practice to the endangered stance of rigorous hesitation—a concept developed by Lacoue-Labarthe in the thought of cautious ethicity.

The childish nature, wary and ever incredulous on the one hand, prematurely triggered, tight and ready to spring to action on the other, must lean into the emptiness of the voiding call, another name for puberty’s shakedown. According to Lyotard, Kant paved the way of a steep slope on the downside of nothingness, “the Id-side to which I am singularly host and hostage.” Drawing puberty onto the political platform of deed and reflection, Lyotard attempts to maintain something of a philosophical claim: “to speak in an intelligible fashion on the subject of the Id-side of the articulable, that is to say of the Nihil.” Turning away from an interpretation of drives, Lyotard scrolls down to the Kantian Id-side of things—even though Kant has remained too strongly attached, Lyotard observes, to subjectivist thought, that is, to a philosophy of consciousness. The brand of hysteria ascribable to puberty cuts into the political performance, requiring us to revisit time and again some circumscribed zones of unmarked intensity.

It would be wrongheaded to think that one could simply skip over the motif and developmental-historical stopover of puberty when modern politics have depended so emphatically on teenaged mythologies and fast-tracking disasters.

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7 Ibid., 25.
8 Laurence Rickels, stellar scholar of adolescence and teen passion, together with Winnicott, Eissler, Cavell, and others, renders a political theory of uncontained adolescence. Consider these strong statements that arise from a reflection on juvenile delinquency and politics on the loose: “The secular era (or Teen Age) that begins with Hamlet schedules the origin of its subject according to the first suicidal ideation and the first identification with the ghost.” Moreover, when analyzing what it means, according to Winnicott, for the teen “to skip the relationship to the death of the parents . . . and proceed directly to a position of authority,” Rickels reminds us, at the end of this section: “There was, by [Winnicott’s] reckoning one instance in the recent past of this alternative stabilization of the Teen Age by positioning it society-wide as ego ideal and that was Nazi Germany.” In a recent lecture, Rickels argues that the Nazis dealt with the problem of adolescence by creating the Hitler Youth, a formation that horrifyingly turned teenagers into superegoical monsters. In “The Other Coast of Terrorism: On Sue de Berr’s Hans & Grete” in Terror and the Roots of Poetics, ed. Jeffrey Champlin (New York and Dresden: Atropos Press, 2013), 22 and 25. See also D. W. Winnicott, “Creativity and its Origins,” Playing and Reality (London and New York: Routledge, 1996 [1971]), 65–85;
Perhaps the time-out still observed by *Hamlet* requires a renewed reflection on political action (in the sense of Arendt) and the complaint of puberty (in the sense of compromised sense). Hamlet, excessive and ineffective, modelling the shocked incomprehension of a social body, has only himself to complain to. Hence the famous soliloquy, a filter of the unanswered call of anguish. Trump has Twitter to complain to, and an arsenal ready to go off at any moment.

### 3. Raising the Visor: Advocating for the Vanishing and Destitute

We advocate for those whose presencing is compromised. This kind of advocacy, bequeathed from beyond (or the past, or the jurisdictions of beckoning futures) may well extend in one form or another, to everybody and nobody or to every nonbody, for a ghostly apparition claims body without material grounding—but what do I know, I am merely a scholar who tracks the dimension of unknowables, at the edge of falsifiable evidence. Hamlet’s father, a semi-fiction, aligned with the fiction of paternity, is plated in armour, packaging only a vague insinuation of body. Forcing an address to that which eludes presence, the ghostly apparition, not presently living out his life, but walking the afterlife, returns to Elsinore in the name of justice. For Derrida, the scene, which throws into question all “scenes,” all modalities of seeing or possible sightings, calls up “the principle of some responsibility, beyond all living present, within that which disjoins the living present, before the ghosts of those who are not yet born or who are already dead, be they victims of wars, political or other kinds of violence, nationalist, racist, colonialist, sexist, or other kinds of exterminations, victims of the oppressions of capitalist imperialism or any of the forms of totalitarianism . . . without this non-contemporaneity with itself of the living present, without that which secretly unhinges it, without this responsibility and this respect for justice concerning those who are not there, of those who are no longer or who are not yet present and living.”

The disadjustment that Derrida reviews along the lines of Hamlet’s grievance—slashes of untimeliness posed and exposed by the ghostly interlocutor—says that justice is still outstanding in the sense that it is still due,

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undelivered. Any call for justice approaches us with the delivery systems of the phantom, latent but persistent, part of a patrimonial logic that shakes us awake, usually at midnight, when daytime is de-occupied, and the non-contemporaneity of what is serves an ethical subpoena. Derrida speaks of the visor-effect of the specter that summons Hamlet, the way the ghost sees without being seen in terms of the face that he conceals, and, we can add, in tune with the drastic superegoical broadcast system that this set-up entails.

**Disjuncture as the very possibility of the other.** The question that leaves us hanging is one that bears down on our political bodies, their inscriptions and orientations, still baffling—and as untraceable as the origin of a categorical imperative: from whom (or what) do we take our orders, whether these are marching orders or the ordering sense of world, under the sway of what or whom does one feel prodded, become answerable, motivated or immobilized, deprogrammed, set for action, ideologically retrofitted, and so on? In other words, which plaintive transmitters acquire legitimacy in the line up of calls taken, flooding the sonic atmosphere with purposeful alarms racing at us from elsewhere? Even our most mundane political call outs and deliberations, our temptation fed continually by the thought of action, crucially involves a spectropolitics. Just consult Marx or any revolutionary transmitting system that deals out canny political analyses and listens to the unsaid, often accompanied by tremendous static.

Complaints launched against Claudius come to a standstill due only in part to a neurotic relation to time—who does not have a neurotic relation to time, a hysterical sense of speed-up or melancholic slow down, and so forth, or not, precisely, no forth; well maybe Heidegger does not have a discernibly hysterical relation to time, but who writes two or more volumes on time, crosses one of them out, resumes differently, returns to lost premises, casts them off again only catastrophically to misread the historical times disdaining all sorts of temporal tip-offs and archaic regressions, crossing back into time and being, and so forth? One would need to consider rigorously the differing flow charts of time in Heidegger—waves of granting, types of favouring, the beat of poetic donation, denials and instabilities of and in time set between moments, undecidably given as trace, as well as figuring the modalities of time given as indeterminacy (arche, lapse, moment, eschaton, duration, present, suspension, telos, hurried instances, diachrony, the rush of ec-static temporality, etc., etc.).

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10 For more good times—hollow times, bad timing, the empty interval, dead zones—see my *Finitude’s Score: Essays for the End of the Millennium* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1994), 5ff.
In all this expanse and depth of reflection, does Heidegger also give 
consideration to temporal drain-offs, to the depletion calibrated by time’s 
destructive recoveries and irretrievable losses—does his work showcase the 
Complaint of Time, recalling the way that Erasmus produced The Complaint of 
Peace, which, in that case, elucidates the way she has been forgotten, maligned 
by misbegotten theorems, turned the wrong way? The answer is by no means 
simple and, in some ways, yes, he does, for time has needed to be rethought and 
reset. Clearly, the larger cast of these questions must be engaged elsewhere. On 
the one hand, in shorthand, there is in his work little room for complaint, or 
even for the too-Jewishly flavoured lament. Perhaps some vital aspects of these 
questions can be handled with the password “Hamlet.” (Admittedly, my 
own/disowned, ex-appropriated hysterical relation to time and being makes me 
precipitate, fall out of the succession [and success] of scholarly pacing and 
thoretical measure: I apologize for the quasi-rant, a modality of complaint, 
held back by the complacencies of insinuation and lost ground. Ach, ach!) 

I apologize for being in such a hurry—and anyway, I am clearly 
mistaken, one could say that all of Heidegger is one big complaint about the 
oblivion of Being even though, as Levinas has observed, Dasein, never seen 
eating, can also be said never, ever, never to complain, isn’t it the case that 
Heidegger has no viable admissions policy for the thought of Klage, 
complaint—oh, maybe I am entangled in the aporetic trap of complaining about 
Heidegger, as if one could take recourse in any hope of avenging his work, or 
put up a fight against his call to Being, a preposterous theoretical stance. End of 
quasi-rant.

The complaint that Claudius has abused power cannot entirely fly. The 
exercise of power is always haunted by its susceptibility to abuse, rendering the 
trope that handles the abuse of power a mark par excellence of sovereignty. 
There are at least two ascensions to contend with, illicitly if intimately wrought: 
that of Hamlet, King of Denmark, to the ghostly realm, that of Claudius to the 
material, worldly realm of sovereign decision. The complaint against the abuse 
of power can never fly to the extent that it guarantees the sovereign hold, which 
in some respects bounces charges of abuse off its shiny armour. It may be that 
Hamlet’s father, laying the complaint on his son of his predicament, commits 
abusive language acts as deposed sovereign. In this arena, the complaint keeps 
one in the throes of an irretrievably losing streak. One is out there, voided, 
ghosted, twisting in the air.

Among so many time-released questions and effects of language, 
Hamlet raises the question of what it means to make things right, or to presume 
that one was called upon to do so. How one encounters the grievance coming
from above depends on any number of strategic considerations and incalculable pulls in the direction of reparative justice. Is the death of one’s father something that can be repaired? Can one go up against maternal jouissance? How to count down the days of regulated mourning when the reigning king asks that you get with the program, integrate back into social connectedness and viability?

I will limit my stab at an answer to the subject at hand, with the understanding that the text continues to pound out a number of pertinent angles on its failure to commit to the dictation of conventional forms of vengeance, some more compelling than others when it comes to understanding the way justice is meted out or utterly sideswiped, returned to sender. The double plaintiffs, Hamlet and Hamlet, are barred from taking action following coded protocols of revenge-seeking engagement. We get a clue of this when Prince Hamlet pulls out a pen rather than a sword, moving to the arena of writing, erasure and deferral, under ghostly dictation, noting the paternal grievance, pencilling in a schedule for recovering the damages. The quickened pulse of law understood as revenge-based halts for a moment of rigorous indecision, purposefully miscarried. The complaint is entered as component part of a writing machine rigged only to interrupt the call of immediacy, the demand for equivalency (on which justice, according to Nietzsche, is based) and closure. Hamlet will obtain his end, we could say, but this sense of finality does not coincide with closure. Such a structure that resists closure runs analogue with the mourning disorder that wears him down until the suicidal ending in excess of closure, leaving Horatio to write it up and Fortinbras to marshal the new influx of troops, effecting a flex of law enforcement that abandons the endless reflection on justice off the revenge clock and in the generality of time. Time is up, a new army of tropes takes over the scene without justice rendered or evil-doing accommodated. The complaint has run its course without a final checkpoint or wrap of meaningful conclusion. Perhaps the “without” indents the fateful moment, a formulation of “out” that still hinges on a remnant of “with,” the dependency that Derrida elsewhere has marked as the privation of “without,” ever dependent in English on “with,” an enduring indication of being-with struck out but still precariously retained. I am without you, hanging onto the memory of a “with” taken away.

As he lay dying, Hamlet’s split-second of sovereignty, with Claudius counted out, is without historical duration yet nonetheless constitutes an event. The quiver of ascension to a vacant throne drives him to make a decision that was neither called for nor secured under law: the tremulous ascension coupled with imminent decline allows for Hamlet illegitimately to “elect” Fortinbras as his rightful successor, as Rebecca Comay has shown as she monitors the step-by-step of Hamlet’s stammering death-drive and short-lived election campaign.
It is hard to time Hamlet’s dying or resolve on a death certificate, for he announces his demise according to different clocks of deferred finality: I am dead, Horatio, I die, I am dying, I die, I must, it speaks—winding down according to a staccato, a lurching sense of timing, an intemporal spasm of expiration. The drama leaves it unclear where the complaint eventually falls, on the side of justice or evil. To the extent that it has drawn out its time and outrun the limits of clocked action, the complaint as disposition and defiant halt, initiated by Hamlet the Dane, appears to be in cahoots with the very wrong it criticizes: it has known only to prolong the span of an injurious misdeed.

In *Specters of Marx*, when auditing the economy of vengeance and punishment, Derrida discusses disjuncture as the very possibility of the other. Without hitting the pause button, he names Hamlet in the context of the complaint: “If right or law stems from vengeance, as Hamlet seems to complain that it does—before Nietzsche, before Heidegger, before Benjamin—can one not yearn for a justice that one day, a day belonging no longer to history, a quasi-messianic day, would finally be removed from the fatality of vengeance? Better than removed: infinitely foreign, heterogeneous at its source? And is this day before us, to come, or more ancient than memory itself?” Derrida puts out a call for justice that would roll out of Hamlet’s plight, redescribing the struggle with a complaint conceived by and addressed to justice, disclosing the very concept that until now underlies justice. Thank Gd for the American Constitution, which seems time and again to bounce back and hit hard against excessive episodes of harassment. But the Constitution stands on fragile ground, susceptible to interpretive warfare and corrosive aims. In keeping with Derrida’s concern, the law itself, susceptible to further interrogation, belongs at the outset to a compulsion for vengeful reactivity. This is the case with many legal systems and sites, implementation. We find ourselves at a moment of particularly strong indications of abusive vindictiveness, when the law is turned to its origin in acts and affects of vengeance. At this time, in this disjointure, it does not suffice to call out flexes of aberration or lawlessness, but we might begin, again, ach! to explore further, more rigorously than ever, how the pernicious weaponizing and misuse of law against the vulnerable among us originates with the law and grabs onto justice as part of its disavowed self-legitimation. How fatiguing for us all! Worn down, exhausted, dimmed, we feel that we can’t go on, yet we must go on, leaning into the emptiness of an energy-sapping task.

*Ach!* Let me call it a day. Tomorrow I will rise up differently. To be continued.

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THE DISEASED “TERROR TUNNELS” IN GAZA: ISRAELI SURVEILLANCE AND THE AUTOIMMUNIZATION OF AN ILLIBERAL DEMOCRACY

MAROUF HASIAN, JR.

“… that threat might seem exaggerated to some … like a cancer that attacks a particular part of the body. But left unchecked, that cancer grows, metastasizing…. Nor would you let terrorists dig dozens of terror tunnels under your borders to infiltrate your towns.”

— Benjamin Netanyahu (2014, paras. 5, 26)

Several years have passed since the end of the 51-day Gaza-Israeli War (2014), labelled Operation Protective Edge (OPE) by the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), and there has been no shortage of dehumanization rhetorics to characterize the alleged dangers to Israeli civilians and soldiers that come from so-called “terror tunnels.” Many of those who share Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s worries about the “cancerous” growth of the “Hamas regime” (Harakat al-Muqāwamah al-Islāmiyyah—Islamic Resistance Movement) do not dwell on the massive, overwhelming control of the land, sea, and air in this region by the Israelis. Instead, pro-Israeli writers used medicalized and mediated tropes to magnify “subterranean” threats, which help to create the impression that this is all part of an ongoing “war” between symmetrically matched foes. As I explain in more detail below, what were once considered by many in Israel and the international communities (especially in the USA and the UK) to be “smuggling tunnels” have been transformed into haunted and deadly spaces and places where countless terrorists wielding an assortment of weapons can terrorize Israeli foes.

It is also no coincidence that at the very time that organizations like Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and the United Nations circulated reports about potential Israeli violations of “international humanitarian law”
(IHL) during the execution of OPE, the Israelis countered by trying to deflect attention away from Israeli drones, jets, artillery, tanks, etc., and toward the activities of the Palestinians in Gaza who either build tunnels or hide subterranean networks. Literal and figurative metaphors associated with the medicalized or securitized horrors associated with these “infiltration,” “terror,” or “subterranean” tunnels are then discursively linked to other dense layers of arguments about Hamas rockets or other catastrophic weapons. Israeli casualty figures were kept low during OPE, in theory, because of the willingness of the IDF to spend money on bomb shelters as well as the efficacy of the famous “Iron Dome.”

After 2014, both mainstream and alternative presses became preoccupied with the topic of the terror tunnels, and permutations of arguments about these particular spaces and places appeared in discussions about everything from tourism in Gaza to the need for the US and Israel to sign pacts and resolutions that displayed bilateral interest in countering these subterranean, terrorist threats. While some of the commentary about the terror tunnels has appeared in elite military or legal outlets that discuss in great detail the legality and morality of Israeli’s rights to intervene in Gaza and fight conflicts there according to what the militaries call the “law of armed conflict” (LOAC), there are also daily journalistic commentaries that remind ordinary citizens in Israel that they must constantly be vigilant if they wish to survive in inhospitable lands.

Identity politics and cultural explanations have become entangled in the legal and moral commentaries about the terror tunnels, and the processes of discovering, reporting on, and destroying the tunnels have become mass-mediated events that bind those living in places like Tel Aviv to those who may be living in settlements near Gazan borders. At the same time, the performative acts that take place when journalists and others write and talk about the terror tunnels help viewers and listeners to understand the supposed radical differences that exist between the Islamic societies that would support Hamas and the righteous Zionists who know about the importance of steadfastness and shows of martial strength as deterrence. Again, in theory, twenty-first century Israelis are “modern” and want “calm” and are willing to go to their bomb shelters while Gazans who supported the Hamas regime are vilified for having squandered their limited resources on building tunnels instead of shelters.

All of these identity politics and other cultural markers of difference are also used to explain how some nations do or do not violate the LOAC or treaties when they decide to act in particular ways in and around the Gaza Strip. For example, in the same speech that included the epigraph cited above,
Netanyahu told a UN audience that Israel “surgically struck at the rocket launchers and the tunnels,” and that the “Palestinians civilians” who died during OPE were “unintentionally killed” (Netanyahu, 2014, para. 28). Yet what the Israeli Prime Minister did not mention is that for weeks Israeli missiles did intentionally target the “infrastructures” that housed hundreds of thousands of civilians and Hamas officials. His remarks provided international readers and viewers with typical diplomatic condensations—symbols that were parts of binary, yet ideologically dense, media tropes that helped explain how Israeli incursions into Gaza, unlike Palestinian attacks on IDF troops, were necessitous cures for the terrorist ills that confronted both Israel and the West.

In this typical counterterrorist narrative, Netanyahu did his best to juxtapose the restraining hand of an Israeli Zionist democracy with the uncivilized Muslim fanaticism of ISIS, Hamas, and the Iranians who might want to “trigger the apocalyptic return of an Imam from the 9th century” (Netanyahu, 2014, para. 11). There will be academics who will contend that this type of hyperbolic diplomatic discourse has little to do with actual military or securitized manoeuvring in the Palestinian-Gaza conflict, but it would be a mistake to trivialize the representative nature, and the impact, of this type of governmentality.

The Israeli Prime Minister’s commentaries on both OPE and the supposed defensive postures of the Israelis when faced with the “terror tunnels” involve more than the mere rhetoric of a single elite or empowered rhetor. If Netanyahu’s representative medicalized grammatology resonates with the “Far Right” in Israel (Blumenthal, 2014), one wonders just how many other IDF soldiers or how many other pro-Israelis also share these ideological assumptions and beliefs?

For critical scholars who are interested in the study of Foucauldian epistemes or institutional hegemonic dispositifs in securitized and militarized contexts, it will be imperative to unpack and decode the military, legal, and cultural signifiers that are used to magnify the supposed dangers that are posed by these terror tunnels. If, as Michel Foucault (1977/1980) once noted, dispositifs are those heterogeneous assemblages of institutional, administrative, or physical apparatuses that are used to convey elite and tacit knowledge (pp. 194–228), then we need to study how the materiality or physicality of the terror tunnels has been linked to the “social bodies” that can maintain power over individuals and populations. Interdisciplinary researchers need to see how rhetoric about the terror tunnels is used to converse about psychological and existential biopolitical lives and thanatopolitical threats, and this in turn
influences how others outside of the Middle East view these Gazan-Israeli conflicts.

One of the arguments that I will be making in this essay is that far too many scholars who write about Gazan affairs focus on the realpolitik power of the “Far Right” in Israel (often credited with empowering Prime Minister Netanyahu and his Cabinet during OPE)\(^1\) while they focus too little on what Bruno Latour and many others have called the “dingpolitik” of contemporary cultures, which has to do with the politics associated with things and objects.

This dingpolitik dimension of Gazan-Israeli conflicts manifests itself in various ways that are linked to the terror tunnels. For example, those who hear warning sirens and rush to shelters are often the ones who send in letters to the editors of outlets like the Jerusalem Post or Ha’aretz, demanding protection from terrorist neighbours. Discourse surrounding the acoustic horrors associated with hearing tunnelling underneath border homes, or essays on the psychological damages that come from constantly worrying about rockets or Hamas raids, can be used to magnify the numbers of social agents who help produce and recirculate persuasive dispositifs about tunnel exigencies. Discussions of the “terror tunnels” within Israeli societies thus reproduces, reflects, and refracts the very same mediated tropes that appear in IDF websites or in Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs blogs. The worlds of dingpolitik and realpolitik blur as Israeli leaders and populations discursively connect these tunnels to other objects like bunkers, fences, drones, shelters, rockets, etc. that all become a naturalized part of Israel-Gazan daily securitizing affairs.

At the same time that I highlight the ubiquitous nature of both the elite and populist nature of these rhetorics, I want to underscore the repetitive nature of the argumentative strategies that are used to produce what I consider to be threat inflation. Between 2014 and 2016, countless arguments were circulated by Israeli journalists, IDF spokespersons, representatives of the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and respected think-tanks in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, which tried to emphasize the “surprise” that came from the militant Palestinian usage of “new” tunnels during OPE. But all of this talk of the latest existential danger from Palestinians was old wine in new bottles; Israel has been writing about the “infiltration” of Palestinian Arabs since the 1948 Israeli War of Independence.

\(^1\) See, for example, the insightful work of Blumenthal (2014), who talks about “politicide” and the persuasive power of the Israeli Far Right. Although I am a great admirer of his work, I believe he underestimates the resonance of some of these militaristic and securitizing rhetorics surrounding existential Hamas—or Palestinian threats—especially after 2000—among the broader Israeli public.
The twenty-first century iteration that focuses on stopping this infiltration is insidious for several reasons. First, it reinforces the idea that Israelis are not occupying Palestinian lands, but are just preventing encroachment from those who do not understand that Israelis are merely “recovering” the Biblical lands of places like “Judea” and “Samaria.” At the same time, by constantly harping on the weekly activities of Hamas rocketeers and Palestinian tunnel builders, Israeli leaders and supportive audiences are helping their listeners anticipate the next Gazan incursion. Third, by highlighting the depravity of those who turn smuggling tunnels into weaponized tunnels, IDF defenders can show that the most “moral army” in the world not only knows about, but respects, the IHL principles of distinction, proportionality, humanity, and necessity. In contrast, as I explain in more detail below, Palestinian women and men who build tunnels are portrayed as individuals who should, and do, lose their “non-combat” status as they help build Hamas “infrastructure.”

Since the fall of 2014, there have been many excellent interdisciplinary studies of the “politics of verticality” (Graham, 2016) that have focused on the trials and tribulations of those disempowered in Gaza who regularly contend with blockading, targeted assassinations, the West Bank’s “Separation Wall,” and other examples of the material objects that are a part of this particular dingpolitik. We are just beginning to unpack some of the affective and the cognitive features of what I argue are the autoimmunizing discourses that have been produced to justify the dispensation of mass violence in recent Israeli/Palestinian conflicts. Timothy Campbell, writing in 2008, argued that if we look back through the mists of time, and if readers think about what has happened since September 11, 2001, it wouldn’t be hard to “imagine we are in the midst of a full-scale autoimmunity crisis whose symptomology” was diagnosed by Jacques Derrida and Roberto Esposito (p. xix). Judith Butler (2010), reviewing this same phenomenon from a slightly different angle, remarked in her *Frames of War* that the US seemed to be trying to “immunize itself against the thought of its own precariousness” (p. 48) when it engaged in destructive foreign interventionism. For example, rather than treating the acts of Osama bin Laden as criminal matters that required the more moderate intervention of the FBI and domestic criminal investigations, the attacks on the Twin Towers were configured as military or securitized acts of war. What could have been confined to the pursuit of the individuals who carried out the act on the Twin Towers quickly morphed into an all out “War on Terror” against various foes, including but not limited to Al Qaeda. The number of enemies grew daily as US and international audiences heard about the litany of crimes that were perpetrated by thousands of foreigners who fought network-centric
warfare in the name of Al Qaeda and the Taliban. All different types of acts could be labelled as threats to “Homeland Security.” The invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq became simply the precursors of “extraterritorial” ventures where autoimmunity talk of stopping the spread of “cancerous” terrorist cells became the taken-for-granted grammars that have been used throughout the Global War on Terror (GWOT).

The Israeli dispositifs had features that resembled these American “war on terror” epistemes, but talk of the terror tunnels also tapped into culturally specific regional ideologies that had been circulating since the time of what Palestinians call Al-Nakba, or the “catastrophe,” when at least 700,000 Palestinian Arabs either “fled” or were forcibly removed from parts of what would become Israel. Magnifying the dangers of the terror tunnels was another way of staving off possible interventionism on the part of the UN Security Council or the International Criminal Court, allowing Israel to frame Gazan tunnel construction as justification for self-defence.

Talk of the tunnels helped Israelis blunt some of the political fallout that came from post-Gazan incursion talk of memoricide, urbanicide, “spacio-cide” (Hanafi, 2009), or even genocide. The last thing Israelis want to see is some UN peacekeeping force—using the principle of “responsibility to protect”—appearing on the borders of Gaza, in the towns of the occupied West Bank, or East Jerusalem quarters. Magnifying terror tunnel dangers helps Israelis appear to be moderate and realistic social actors who are following the LOAC as they “mow the lawn” in Gaza.

Where do these constitutive, mass-mediated tropes about “terror tunnels” appear and how are they used to collectively punish Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank? How is the discursive construction of “infested” terror tunnels symbolically linked to the social agency of Gazan populations, and what technical and other materials solutions are offered by Israeli military or diplomatic spokespeople who want to stave off, or counter, international criticism of Gazan incursions? Do these Israeli attempts at what Jacques Derrida calls “autoimmunity” resonate with most Israelis, including leftists or liberals, and are there any vocal and empowered critics inside and outside of Israel who contest the empiricism or the normative claims that have become a part of the rhetorical horizons for tunnelling in the aftermath of OPE? Is it possible that “post-heroic” worries about protecting Israeli troops and the vilification of Gazan populations have also successfully set the stage for the pragmatic end of “two-solutions” and the international communities’ acceptance of “Judea” and “Samaria” as real geopolitical entities?
In order to help answer those types of queries I will be begin by presenting readers with a brief overview of some of the Israeli rhetorical histories that make visible the hauntologies of terror tunnels that circulated long before the advent of Operation Protective Edge in 2014. The second segment of the essay illustrates how interest in terror tunnels spiked during the first few weeks of OPE, and how Israeli officials and laypersons used visual and textual arguments to explain the magnitude of the dangers that were posed by the “terror tunnels.” The third portion of the essay extends this analysis by highlighting how massive bombardments and incursions into Gaza were configured as matters of medical or military necessity. The concluding section of the essay invites readers to contemplate the long-term realpolitik impact of all of this dingpolitik attention that is paid to the Gazan tunnels.

Surveilling and Diagnosing Palestinian Diseases Before OPE

In spite of the fact that smuggling tunnels in Gaza have been around since the time of Alexander the Great, media interest in reporting on their existence has waxed and waned. For my purposes here, it should be noted that worries about Gazan threat escalated after 2000, when many Israeli security officers and militarists no longer viewed themselves as the “belligerent” occupiers of the West Bank involved in primarily policing activities. Now, with the advent of the Second Intifada, Palestinian dissent was reconfigured as terrorism that threatened those Israelis living in both rural and urban areas.

Ariel Sharon’s controversial decision to convince Israelis to relinquish the Gaza Strip and voluntarily “disengage” from Gaza set the stage for the rise of Hamas as well as that organization’s characterization as a terrorist organization in US and Israeli elite discourses. Palestinians in Gaza voting Hamas into power as their Palestinian representatives catalyzed the efforts of Israelis who set up buffer zones, stopped employee travel into Israel, and

2 In 2005 savvy Israeli decision-makers decided to “disengage” from Gaza so that they could use their psychic and social energies to build up identities and the forensic architecture of “Judea” and “Samaria” on the West Bank, and the rise of Hamas has helped Israelis frame their continued settler colonization and incursions into occupied territories as counterterrorist efforts that help both Israelis and the rest of the world that needs to be protected from Islamic jihads and radical Arab extremism. In spite of the countless petitions, investigations into alleged Israeli allegations of violations of international humanitarian law (IHL) after Operation Protective Edge, and increased NGO and activist involvement in trying to help the women and children in Gaza, much of the world—perhaps preoccupied with other migrant crises, drone proliferation, wars against ISIS, and the perpetual war against the Taliban and Al Qaeda—has essentially abandoned and accepted the political, military, and social marginalization of both Hamas and the civilian populations living in the Gaza Strip.
blockaded the Gazan coast. This in turn led to massive spikes in talk of the “smuggling” tunnels that became the conduits for Gazans who tunneled into places like Egypt in search for supplies. The Israelis, worried about the militarization of Hamas, started to circulate thanatopolitical rhetorics about how to put the Gazan population on a “diet.” One of the dieticians working for the Israeli Health Ministry, for example, was consulted on how best to prove the “minimum requirements for the sustenance of Gaza Strip residents” without “inflicting a humanitarian disaster” (Mondoweiss, Staff, “The Gaza Diet,” 2009, para. 1).

Defenders of the smuggling tunnels oftentimes cited the words of Dov Weisglass, an adviser to Ehud Olmert, the then-Israeli Prime Minister, who allegedly said that Israel’s planned response to the Palestinian legislative elections in 2006 was to “put Palestinians on a diet, but not to make them die of hunger” (Cook, 2012, para. 1-2). Thanks to the efforts of an Israeli Human Rights Group, Israeli authorities were forced to reveal the existence of a “Red Lines” document (2008) that indicated that Israeli health officials were calculating the minimum number of calories needed by Gaza’s 1.5 million inhabitants to avoid malnutrition, and some of these Red Line computations even took into account the number of truckloads of food that Israel was supposed to allow into Gaza every day (Cook, 2012). Foucauldian critiques of this type of discourse over the control of a population could serve as pro-Palestinian propaganda for those who wish to argue that this was an example of Israel’s dehumanizing treatment of Gazan populations.

Both critics and supporters of Israeli incursions into Gaza—after a 2008/2009 invasion and a 2012 operation—used permutations of biopolitical or thanatopolitical arguments in fascinating ways, characterizing both the smuggling tunnels and their links to various Israeli controlling behaviours or IDF “operations” in Gaza. For example, the United Kingdom’s Guardian once explained to readers how WikiLeaks had come across an Israeli cable from diplomats who were quoted as saying that they “wanted to keep Gaza’s economy on the brink of collapse.” In the same article, Fawzi Barhoum, a spokesperson for Hamas, opined that a WikiLeaks disclosure of what were supposed to be secret cables showed that the Israeli blockade of Gaza was “targeting all human beings” in ways that led to calls that Israelis be tried by the ICC for “crimes against humanity” (Associated Press, 2012, para. 16).

NGOs like Gisha debated with Israeli military spokespersons about the military or civilian usages of everything from the “smuggling tunnels” to the blockades that impacted how much food was flowing into Gaza. While Israeli military analysts argued that they kept track of the typical Gazan’s daily caloric
needs—2,300 calories—for humanitarian biopolitical purposes, their detractors argued that this very decisionism regarding how much food could flow into Gaza put on display the ways in which Israelis were weaponizing food in their ideological battles with Hamas.

In the pre-2014 incursion discourse, it would be the “Hamas rockets” that were often the primary abject objects of horror. However, more than a few Israeli analysts started to produce anecdotal evidence that showed how the smuggling tunnels were being used to bring in materials that could be used to attack Israelis. For example, after Operation Cast Lead (2008–2009), massive numbers of probabilistic tales were told about how Hamas or Hezbollah terrorist operatives were continually trying to “infiltrate” Israeli lands. While Hamas argued that the tunnels were taxed by their government, and were the only means of bringing in everything from Kentucky Fried Chicken to medical supplies through the tunnels, the Israelis argued that the tunnels were being used to bring in rockets and other weapons.

Israeli commentary on the weaponization of the tunnels could thus be used to strategically counter complaints about the illegality of the blockade. While pro-Palestinian supporters spoke of the lifelines that were provided to Gazan populations by the smuggling tunnels, Israelis configured the tunnels as vehicles that might lead to the next “catastrophe.” Instead of using probabilistic rhetorics that focused on the actual number of Israeli dead, or the efficacy of warning sirens or the Iron Dome, IDF spokespersons and American defenders of attacks on the tunnels used probabilistic rhetorics that took into account “thwarted” terror tunnel attacks.

Long before OPE, many generations of Israeli warfighters, who wanted to rationalize their own periodic incursions into Gaza since the 1990s, had consistently written or talked about how “smuggling” tunnels were actually asymmetrical weapons that were a part of “subterranean warfare.” In 2009, for example, the Israel Security Agency provided a cliché-filled summary of what motivated Israeli militarists and security forces to carry out Operation Cast Lead:

During Operation “Cast Lead,” IDF forces, on the basis of ISA and army intelligence, struck at more than 300 targets, including: training camps and headquarters, military facilities,

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3 In spite of the fact that Gazan tunnels have been around since at least the time of Alexander the Great, today’s mainstream and alternative media outlets often parrot Israeli claims that this is a “new” form of “counterterrorist” warfare that demands that we ignore the interpretations of the role of the tunnels that is presented by organizations like Amnesty International, the UN, Breaking the Silence, or B’Tselem.
Several points are noteworthy here. First of all, notice the ways in which Israelis are implying that their security forces had the situational awareness to identify “targets.” Then notice how this type of framing blurs the line between civilians and terrorists, police training facilities and military camps, that can all be lumped under the term “infrastructure.” Third, notice the ways that Israelis—as early as 2009—are arguing that schools and holy sites are being used to shield Hamas operatives. The use of the term “infrastructure” could be used to turn any bombed building into a legitimate target for supposed “wars” like Operation Cast Lead.

After 2009, countless Israeli elite and public commentators discussed how the IDF took inordinate precautions to avoid civilian casualties during their military operations, but these rhetorical autoimmunizing templates selectively promoted militarized solutions while assiduously avoiding diplomatic or political solutions to the rocket or tunnel problems. Hamas, after all, was not to be reasoned with.

If anything, when Israelis debated amongst themselves before OPE about what to do about the Gazan tunnels, they spent most of their time debating the best ways to take out cancerous terrorist threats, or the preferred way of engaging in more violent behaviours—including the reoccupation of Gaza, the cutting of off electricity to the Strip, or the need to annex the West Bank before tunnel construction threatened spaces and places like Hebron or Jerusalem. As international critics of Israeli occupation strategies vocalized their disenchantment with Israeli blockading policies, many Israelis responded by emphasizing how IDF forces had restrained themselves in ways that prevented even more civilian deaths during Israeli incursions into Gaza. In the same way that Americans had metaphorically “taken off the gloves” when the CIA tried to track down bin Laden and exterminate terrorists threats in places like Yemen, Pakistan, and Mali, the Israelis often used terror tunnel rhetoric to explain why they needed to counter the Leftist positions of Israelis who called for some modicum of respect for the “rules of engagement” of IHL, or LOAC.

By 2012 Israeli public audiences were used to hearing from their civilian, religious, and military leaders who no longer separated militarist Hamas operatives from Hamas diplomats, and a growing number of Israelis were worried that Hamas might even threat “Judea” and “Samaria” if tunnels
were built in that part of Israel. Gilad Sharon, the son of Ariel Sharon, complained about the lax standards that seemed to have been put in place that were mollycoddling the enemy before Operation Pillar of Defense in 2012. As far as Sharon was concerned, Israelis could no longer accept the half-measures used during the 2008–2009 Operation Cast Lead that were too protective of Gazan lives while allowing many Israelis to live under a “rain of death.” What he suggested is that Israelis quit listening to those who separated Palestinian civilians in the Gaza from the Hamas regime, and he averred that it was time that the world heard the call of the sound of “decisive victory” that would come in the form of a “Tarzan-like cry” that would let the “entire jungle know in no uncertain terms just who won, and just who was defeated” (Sharon, 2012, paras. 1–3). For those who may have any doubts regarding the specific types of drastic measures that might need to be taken in this supposed jungle warfare for the survival of the fittest, Sharon (2012) explained:

The desire to prevent harm to innocent civilians in Gaza will ultimately lead to harming the truly innocent: the residents of southern Israel. The residents of Gaza are not innocent, they elected Hamas. The Gazans aren’t hostages; they chose this freely…. The Gaza Strip functions as a state—it has a government and conducts foreign relations, there are schools, medical facilities, there are armed forces and all the other trappings of statehood…. Why do our citizens have to live with rocket fire from Gaza while we fight with our hands tied? Why are the citizens of Gaza immune? … There is no justification for the State of Gaza being able to shoot at our towns with impunity. We need to flatten entire neighborhoods in Gaza. Flatten all of Gaza. The Americans didn’t stop with Hiroshima—the Japanese weren’t surrendering fast enough, so they hit Nagasaki, too. (paras. 4–7)

Here is a fascinating example of how dingpolitik is symbolically aligned with realpolitik, and how the circulation of mass-mediated fragments and other tropes invites readers and listeners to consider the revamping of traditional Geneva-type protections of populations. Protecting Gazan populations are acts

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4 In some cases, Israeli diplomats and IDF added their voices to the chorus of those who circulated clarion calls about the horrors of the terror tunnels during their post-hoc debriefings of the “lessons learned” during earlier incursions like Operation Cast Lead (2008–2009). I would argue that much of this rhetoric was used as public diplomacy to counter the claims of international critics who focused attention on the disclosures regarding civilian targeting that appeared in the famous Goldstone Report, that explicitly pointed out the intentionality of some attacks on non-combatants.
that are configured as irresponsible decisions on the part of those who should know better. Notice the intertextual commentary on impunity and immunity that treats militarized or securitized solutions as the best, or perhaps the only, way to avoid fighting terrorists with hands that are tied behind backs.

At the same time that some Israeli civilian leaders rationalized actual or potential attacks on Gazan civilians, their experts on law came up with countless defences of Israeli interpretations of IHL that supposedly put on display the legitimacy and morality of IDF actions during their incursions into Gaza. Law review writers in America and in Israel started to craft essays that explained how UN investigators or Red Cross officials needed to rethink the way that prisoners, civilians, and other supposedly helpless communities should be characterized in counterterrorist situations if enemy populations were “directly participating” in twenty-first-century warfare. Palestinian women and children who helped build tunnels became some of the key characters in these pro-Israeli rhetorics that tried to explain the existential dangers that could flow from the activities of “non-state” terrorist actors.

Between 2009 and 2013, many participants in these “terror tunnel” debates wrote and acted as if commentaries on counterterrorist responses to the tunnels provided the entire world with some Archimedean yardstick that would allow global citizens in a post-heroic world to improve the way that they thought about legal restraints on warfighting with terrorists during asymmetric contests. Israeli think-tanks, after 2012, often circulated Israeli exceptionalist rhetorics that celebrated how the “Israeli mind” could come up with logistical ways of combating terror tunnels, including the building of walls at the outer parameters of buffer zones or the use of seismic equipment for tunnel detection.

Before OPE, one of the largest spikes in Israeli journalistic coverage of the “terror” or “infiltration” tunnels took place during the fall of 2013, when a 1.5 mile-long tunnel was found near Kibbutz Ein HaShlosha. For a period of time, the IDF issued a gag order preventing reportage on this tunnel. But in October of that year, Israeli communities and international readers were bombarded with information about what the BBC called “the Gaza terror tunnel” (BBC, 2013). One Hamas spokesperson, Sami Abu Zuhri, opined that by talking about this tunnel, the Israelis were trying “to justify the blockage and the continuous aggression on the Gaza Strip,” but Defense Minister Moshe Ya’alon informed reporters that the discovery of this particular terror tunnel was “further proof that Hamas continues to prepare for confrontation with Israel” (BBC, 2013, paras, 4, 12). Again, talk of “smuggling” tunnels was now
being sutured together with autoimmunizing discourses that transformed all of this smuggling into infiltration opportunities.

Prime Minister Netanyahu would later complain about the anti-Israeli “telegenic” visual imagery that was being used by critics to undermine the legitimacy of OPE, but during 2013 he himself joined the chorus of those who wrote about how Palestinian tunnel experts were traumatizing or killing Israeli children. One of the most popular of these recirculated narratives noted how explosives were discovered in one tunnel whose target seemed to be a kindergarten in an Israeli kibbutz. This, Israeli outlets reported, was the third such tunnel that would be discovered during the last several months that originated in the Abasan village located near Khan Younis. The Israelis responded to this perceived threat by immediately halting the transfer of construction materials into Gaza. Netanyahu explained that in spite of having some of the “quietest” times in more than a decade, his Cabinet was helping carry out an “aggressive policy against terror” (JTA, 2014, para. 8). Many press outlets carried stories about the dangers to Eretz Israel that were posed by tunnels intent on kidnapping soldiers or civilians.

By the time that international communities heard about the beginning of the 51-day Operation Protective Edge, they had already been presented with untold numbers of Israeli tunnel rhetorics that invited foreigners to sympathize with the plight of Israeli civilians who were allegedly at the mercy of Palestinian terrorists who came out of infiltration tunnels.

Infuriated Israelis demanded that something had to be done about these hazards, and this helped with the rhetorical production of autoimmunizing discourses that put on display what the IDF and security officials were doing to save Israeli lives.

The (Re)Discovery of the “Terror Tunnels” and Requests for the Curative Power of Operation Protective Edge

Before, and during, the first few weeks of OPE in 2014, many of the textual and visual images that were circulated by the IDF, Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), and other pro-Israeli outlets contained many complementary and contradictory positions on the visibility or invisibility of the Gazan tunnels. Given the fact that the IDF and Israel Security Agency had cobbled together polysemic and polyvalent rationales for why Israel needed to continue to securitize both the PA and Gaza after the 2005 “disengagement,” there were no shortage of ways that pro-Israeli defenders could rationalize the shift that took place when the physical movement of Israeli tanks and artillery into Gaza
followed in the wake of distant drone and jet attacks. By the second half of OPE, places like Rafah were levelled in the name of eliminating terror tunnel threats, and Israeli detractors claimed that talk of the tunnels was post-hoc rhetoric used to justify both the war and the methods that were used during the conflict.

Hundreds of ideographic infograms and infographs were circulated during and after OPE in order to help domestic and international audiences visualize the nature and scope of the dangers that were faced by Israelis who invaded Gaza. Figure 1, below, was used for visual argumentation that displayed how terrorists were moving from hidden locations in Shuja’iya and Al Wafa as they crossed borders and infiltrated Israeli territories.

Figure 1: Gaza Strip. Courtesy of Israel Defense Forces
By naming specific places and using maps and graphs to portray all of this danger, IDF spokespersons could create the impression that the fog of war did not interfere with their strategic and operational plans as they went after identified tunnel targets.

What helped magnify these dangers, and concretize these problems for many Israeli citizens, were the ways that these Gazan tunnel dangers could also be linked symbolically to what was happening in Israel proper (behind the Green Line) or in Judea or Samaria.

Sadly, one of the most effective ways of gaining the adherence of Israeli publics depended on perceptual views regarding the daily existential dangers that were posed when Israeli citizens and soldiers read about dozens of knife attacks that were witnessed during the “third Intifada.” The deaths of three Israeli youths, and the “manhunt” for the alleged Hamas operatives who were accused of abducting and killing Eyal Yifrach, Gilad Shaar, and Naftali Fraenkel, led to the sweeping detentions of Palestinians during Operation Brother’s Keeper (2014). Hamas rockets rained down on Israeli towns and villages in the aftermath of the arrest of dozens of key Palestinian leaders, and within a matter of days, Israeli fighter jets, naval vessels, artillery pieces, and tanks were shelling major sections of Gaza.

After the tank incursions, more “terror tunnels” were discovered in Gaza, and throughout July of 2014, there would be more discussions of the cancerous growth of the terror tunnels. In some cases, tunnels became the spotlighted material objects of inquiry in studies of two-state solution failures, and in other cases pundits wrote about the need to re-occupy Gaza. Those who sought more funding from overseas commented on the American cooperation that was needed to make sure that counter-tunnel technological know-how would stay ahead of Hamas ingenuity.

As this particular operation progressed, global audiences were now presented with argumentative permutations from Israelis that treated OPE as if it was the militaristic or securitized cure for diseased Hamas tunnels. In theory, if Gazan populations wanted to survive and illustrate their neutrality, they needed to avoid Hamas and listen to the warnings that came from IDF communicators or Israel Air Force pilots who told them to move away from “infrastructure.” While Israeli strategists emphasized how they were using leaflets and “knocking on roof” techniques to warn civilians to abandon targeted buildings (Joronen, 2016), Israeli detractors averred that this was just one more traumatizing militaristic tactic because Israeli militarists knew that there was no safe place to run to or hide in Gaza. At the same time that NGOs and other international communities complained about the civilian deaths that
were incurred during attacks on mosques, schools, medical facilities, or other Gazan buildings, Israelis circulated hundreds of infograms and essays on official and non-official websites about “human shields” and webs of tunnels that were a part of terrorists’ “subterranean” warfare.

Netanyahu’s commentaries that were quoted earlier in this essay represented just a tiny sliver of the thick dehumanizing descriptions of the tunnels that were often characterized in ways that implied that either Hamas fighters or Palestinian civilians were vermin, diseases, cockroaches, or other forms of pestilence that required massive interventionism, control, or extermination. “Fighting Hamas is like having an infection,” explained “Arb” in his comments following one July 2014 missive on OPE, and he went on to explain that Hamas activities left Israelis with little choice when they “decided to disinfect it before it becomes dangerous” or continue “to fester and grow until it becomes a very serious threat” (following Sheizaf, 2014). Months later, another blogger suggested that the Israelis needed to wait for the tunnels to be “filled with Jihadists” and then either spray poison gas or pump the tunnels full of bleach because “the only way to clean a sewer pipe is to disinfect it and flush out all the harmful bacteria” (after Barrack, 2014).

These bloggers should not have worried—within a matter of months, Egyptians—allegedly acting on requests from Israelis—were filling tunnels along their border with Gaza with ocean water or other materials that were credited with killing several Palestinians.

In one of the most fascinating examples of how even elite decision-makers involved in protracted and contentious conflicts can try to harness the power of social media outlets to advance their causes, President Netanyahu used Twitter to circulate the image that appears in Figure 2. Although detractors at the website Mondoweiss characterized this as a “cartoon” that had little to do with Gazan realities (North and Weiss, 2014), the purveyors of this image used a familiar binary approach to OPE that would probably resonate with most pro-Israeli viewers. Netanyahu’s infogram puts on display the dinner tables and kindergartens that appear to be the object of Palestinian tunnel infiltration, and the same pictorial contains a thinly veiled critique of NGOs and others who might inadvertently be emboldening Hamas’s misuse of international funds that could have been used in ways that had little to do with building tunnels. Word and deed come together; the “tunnels of terror” are depicted as having nothing to do with jets, tanks, drones, and other Israel weaponry, but have everything to do with potential attacks on Israeli innocents.
This same image also reinforces the notion that homes, hospitals, and mosques were the targetable infrastructures that turned civilian edifices into targets for legal Israeli strikes during OPE.

The aesthetic beauty of these types of tunnel visualizations—filled with allegorical allusions to nationalistic/ethnic colours that allow for coded dichotomous thinking—are used to contextualize the dangers of the Hamas tunnels in alluring ways. Now it is not only adult voters who can follow Netanyahu’s operative logics, but youngsters who are already accustomed to working with the tacit “factual” knowledge that can be conveyed through photographs, selfies, charts, infographs, videos, and other apparatuses. The visual attractiveness of this imagery conveys to viewers who might not read...
IDF military reports or legal responses to international queries the horror that must be confronted in the form of the firing of rockets that threaten Israeli rural and urban settings.

All of this focus on Israeli communities serves several key rhetorical functions. First, this deflects attention away from other mediated frames that might put on display the Palestinian women and children who died in their homes during attacks on tunnel infrastructures. Second, constantly magnifying the “concrete dangers” (Ministry of Israeli Affairs, 2014) creates situations in which arguments about proportionality will always favour aggressors who are working with subjective military interpretations of perceived national emergency and dangers. By using probabilistic scenarios instead of actual consequentialist frames, Israeli military lawyers and Netanyahu’s supporters can always claim that Israelis were following the IHL principle of “proportionality.” This is because the Israelis can claim that the military advantages that were gained by exterminating infiltration tunnels outweighs all incidental loss of Palestinian lives during OPE. At the same time, the elegance of all of these aesthetic infograms, infographs, and YouTube videos produced by “IDF Spokesperson” are made freely available for their supporters, who can use these same pictorials to ornament their textual defences of the latest Gazan incursion.

The very asymmetry of the conflict, where few precious Israeli lives can be contrasted with the alleged uncaring nature of Hamas’s treatment of the dead, serves not as evidence of IHL violations but rather the care that the IDF takes to protect those who defend Judea and Samaria. At times this draconian calculus of grammatical motives may seem irrational to transglobal critics, but it resonates with Israeli audiences who now get to see, as well as believe in, Israeli exceptionalism. What virile Israeli soldiers, regardless of gender, would not be willing to give their lives to make sure that “calm” reigns in Israel through the destruction of detected terror tunnels?

As readers might expect, these types of figurations of OPE, with their presences and absences, did not go unchallenged. Amir Hass (2016), a writer of Ha’aretz, had this to say about some of the militaristic Israeli frames that left out the carnage of OPE:

Behind every erased Gazan family is an Israeli pilot. Behind every orphaned child who has lost his brothers and sisters in the bombing is an Israeli commander who gave the order and a soldier who pulled the trigger. Behind every demolished house are the Israeli physicist and hi-tech specialist who calculated the optimal angles for maximal impact. And there is the army
spokesperson (backed by legal experts) who always evaded the journalist’s question: how proportional is it to shell an entire building with all its inhabitants? What—in your laws—justifies killing 23 family members, babies, children and the elderly among them, in one fell swoop of a missile? (para. 1)

This, however, was a text produced by one of the few Israeli leftists who was willing to openly critique the IHL interpretations that were offered by Israeli militarists during and after OPE.

By the third week of July 2014, there were few American or Israeli mainstream newspaper, journal, or law review commentaries on Gaza tunnelling that did not recirculate arguments from interviewers who took for granted the existential dangers that were posed by Gazan tunnels. Terrence McCoy, writing for the Washington Post, referred back to the October 2013 reportage on the Ein HaShlosha tunnel before quoting Israel sources that estimated that Hamas had spent some $10 million on some 800 tons of concrete that were used in what was described as a “complex,” two-year project. IDF sources were quoted warning that the tunnels were built to “carry out attacks such as abductions of Israeli civilians and soldiers alike” and that the this led to “infiltrations into Israel communities, mass murders and hostage-taking scenarios” (McCoy, 2014, paras. 1–4).

These scenarios, in turn, were used by those who wanted to see the total destruction of the tunnels, or the massive infusion of money flowing into anti-tunnelling ventures. In the same way that the famed “Iron Dome” performed the biopolitical function of protecting Israeli populations, the financing of walls along buffer zones was supposed to stop the metastasizing of cancerous tunnel threats.

Israeli public requests for money to be spent on anti-tunnelling efforts, as well as the visual and textual magnification of Hamas risks, along with the minimalization of Israeli aggression, provide other examples of what George Bisharat (2013) has called “legal entrepreneurialism,” where Israeli military officers who defend the use of targeted assassinations by drones or attacks on hospitals, schools, and homes justify their actions by using legal and military frameworks that expand the scope of legitimate state violence, while ridiculing international interpretations of the Geneva Convention or other IHL provisions that would limit violence and protect non-combatants (Bisharat, 2013). Sensing that many interpretative communities outside of Israel will never accept the legitimacy or morality of their siege of Gaza and the blockages, fences, drone attacks, and episodic military incursions into Gaza or Judea and Samaria, Israelis write as if their brand of counterterrorism represents the future of
twenty-first century asymmetric warfare. What these pro-Gazan war advocates may not realize is that many of their interpretations of IHL resemble the colonial and imperial arguments that were once used to rationalize aggressive warfare against “barbarians” during colonial emergency campaigns.

Unfortunately, Hamas spokespersons, instead of pointing out the precarity of their situation and the need for democratic solutions to seemingly intractable problems, produced their own medicalized, securitized, and militaristic discourses that also exaggerated the efficacy of the tunnels in real and imagined battles with Israelis. Instead of defending the smuggling tunnels as a legitimate means of carrying on civilian biopolitical life, those who support the more militaristic wing of Hamas try to take pride in the steadfastness of Palestinians who participate in the construction of dangerous tunnels. In an article that appeared in one of the publications for the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, the Hamas leader, Ismail Haniyeh, at a March 2014 rally in Gaza, is quoted as saying:

The tunnels we are inaugurating today are the new Hamas strategy in the war against Israel—the strategy of the tunnels. From belowground and aboveground, you, the occupiers, will be dismissed. You will have no place in the land of Palestine….

What the resistance forces are preparing secretly for the next confrontation with Israel is beyond imagination for Israel.

(Rubenstein, 2014)

Again, the tunnels are not new, and all of this alleged secrecy on the part of Hamas involves major bluffs and exaggeration on the part of the radical Palestinian militarists. Civilians in Gaza thus end up ensnared in a dynamic process of problematic dingpolitik and realpolitik that is being produced on all sides by those who write and talk about these terror tunnels.

Obviously there are other ways of configuring the biopolitics of the Gazan smuggling tunnels, and many civilians realize that if this place will ever see peace, it will not come from the persistent attacks on Gaza. In Atef Abu Saif’s Book, *The Drone Eats with Me*, we get a very different point of view of Gazan life during OPE—one that looks nothing like the bluster of Ismail Haniyeh’s vision of tunnel warfare. In his book, Abu Saif self-identifies as a civilian who has to constantly assuage the fears of his children. His loved ones keep asking him when all of the shelling and when the destruction of OPE will end. Saif’s book, as Qualey (2015) explains, is a type of literary engagement that is not preoccupied with talk of militaristic solutions, but instead chronicles how innocent men, women, and children in Gaza, who want nothing to do with warfare, survive in a “war without distinct edges.” In this particular literary
geopolitical imagining, there is no focus on subterranean warfare, but, rather, the fear that comes from a different politics of verticality. In *The Drones Eat with Me*, the 51-day conflict is characterized more like a “weather event.” Saif explains how traumatized civilians spend their days walking down streets hoping not to attract the attention of drone crews flying overhead, and like meteorologists, those who want to survive have to make educated guesses about open-air patterns and daily conditions. Qualey (2015) eloquently explains this facet of the daily *dingpolitiks* in Saif’s Book:

> Although the Israeli soldier occasionally appears, the titular drone remains the central antagonist. The drone here is anthropomorphised: it eats, sleeps, drinks and gazes into Abu Saif’s living room. Occasionally, Abu Saif imagines the nameless and faceless Israeli soldier, but this soldier is always secondary to his drone. The Palestinians too become alienated from themselves. The video-game nature of distance warfare brings a new sort of dehumanisation. In the middle of the war, Abu Saif quotes from a conversation between nameless Gazans:
> “I spent that day running between shells like I was playing a video game. Like I was a character in the game, someone else was playing me.” (paras. 9–10)

While Israeli citizens worried daily about the next rocket attack from Gaza, their non-combatant counterparts in Gaza buried those who died from thanatopolitical drone attacks.

If Israeli terror tunnel rhetorics only focused on the existential dangers posed by Palestinian infiltrators, this in itself would be problematic. But the problems are magnified when it is civilian populations, and not only rocket carriers, who are viewed as pesky contributors to infestation problems. This is where autoimmunity rhetorics are used to explain how the dispensation of a little inoculating violence by the Israelis can help cure Palestinian civilian pestilence.

**Autoimmunity: The Rhetorical Metamorphosis of Palestinian Civilians into Terrorist Targets**

While a few Israeli writers or critics of OPE commented on the exaggerated dangers associated with the tunnels, a growing number of pundits writing about the terror tunnels joined the ranks of those who acknowledged the need to target Palestinian civilian populations. For example, in late July of 2014, Elizabeth Tsurkov indicated on *Twitter* that she had spotted a sign that day on
Herzl Boulevard in Jerusalem that read: “There are No Innocents in Gaza” (Tsurkov, 2014, para. 1). Tsurkov was writing about some populist sentiments that were being expressed by those who supported OPE.

This type of ideographic cliché about the lack of innocents sadly represented the typical sentiments found in complex public and elite media tropes that circulated in countless mainstream and alternative venues both during and after OPE. Few of these commentators reflected on how Hamas operatives could use similar operative logics to claim that all Israelis, because of their conscription, were targets, or that some of the military facilities that served as the homes for bombers, drones, artillery, or other machinery were placed near Israeli populations. Did that mean that patriotic Israelis, who celebrated the presence of all of this weaponry, should be viewed as “participants” that negated the chance that they would be treated as non-combatants or civilians? The focus on the social agency of the Gazan populations who purportedly built tunnels or climbed to the roofs of their homes during Israel operations deflected attention away from the asymmetrical nature of all of this vilification of Palestinian populations.

As noted above, after the Second Intifada, this move toward expanding the number of potential social actors who could be viewed as deadly enemies has been complemented by some auxiliary militaristic and elite discourses that have commented on the prioritizing of Israeli lives, and this has called for a recalibration of the ways that decision-makers feel about what is called the “force protection” of Israel soldiers. For example, Asa Kasher (2014), who is often characterized as the “father” of contemporary Israeli military ethical theorizing, has argued that “no state has or should shoulder as much responsibility for the safety of enemy civilians as it does for its own people” (para. 7). These types of militaristic and legalistic distinctions help buttress the claims of those who argue that there are no civilians in Gaza.

In spite of Israeli claims that novel twenty-first century battlefield conditions and the discovery of “new” tunnels have required this move toward harshness, many of these Israeli epistemes contain the residual rhetorical fragments that could be found in early colonial and imperial rationales for the treatment of civilians and the enemy during other “emergencies.” Frédéric Mégret, who has used a postcolonial lens to review some of the antecedents of what he calls “international law’s ‘other,’” noted that during the nineteenth century, the British argued that they could use dum dum bullets because that was “ammunition more suitable to the conditions of savage warfare” (2005, p. 11). Heinrich von Treitschke, a German intellectual, once complained that if Kaiser Wilhelm’s Second Reich “applied international law” to what was
happening during the suppression of the Nama and Herero in German South West Africa, this would turn “international law” into mere “phrases” because it would not be “humanity or justice but shameful weakness” not to punish African tribes or burn villages (Mégret, 2005, p. 11).

Many antiquated colonial and imperial commentaries on the barbarity of the populations of the “other” have lingered in all sorts of military and legal archives to be picked by twenty-first century arguers who wish to deny international protections to certain civilian populations. Israeli talk of the primacy of “force protection” reapplies many of these colonial and post-colonial arguments that were once used to make distinctions between the barbaric “other” and the civilized colonials or imperialists.

In many ways, this focus on the supposed illegal behaviour of supportive Gazan populations who “participate” by failing to prevent the building of tunnels is also a part of the lingering debates that international communities have had about the protection of guerrillas and freedom fighters during anti-colonial struggles. Since at least the time of the passage of the 1977 Protocols to the Geneva Conventions extending some protections to those engaged in asymmetrical warfare, there have been those who have repudiated these efforts as an affront to efficacious “self-defense” counterterrorist efforts.

The existence of the tunnels beneath Gaza, which are configured as parts of massive webs that are used to hide those wishing to infiltrate Israel in unanticipated places, become entangled in these geopolitical and domestic debates about irregular warfighting, the rights of settlers to fight off “barbarians,” and what can or cannot be done during colonial or imperial “emergencies.” The post-World War II communities who once witnessed the horrors of a conflict that took tens of millions of lives willingly passed the Geneva Conventions and provided that extraordinary protection to civilians. However, during the twenty-first century, as the war against Fascism was replaced by the Global War on Terror, members of post-heroic ages work to erode some of the lines that were once drawn between the protection of civilians and the protection of warfighters.

To complicate matters for civilians, technological talk about the progress of anti-tunnelling research often circulates as clinical, objective scientific inquiry that masks the thanatopolitical nature of all of these securitization rhetorics. What we are actually witnessing is a form of what Gordon and Perugini (2016) call a “resignification of space” and a reconstitution of civilians that allow a powerful nation-state to “frame its violence post hoc in order to claim that this violence was utilized in accordance with international law” (p. 168). Using various forms of lawfare (politicized
law, see Dunlap, 2008) and warfare Israelis and other defenders of extra-territorial “counterterrorist” efforts can configure countless forms of political dissent in Gaza, or any attempts to circumvent sieges or blockades, as civilian acts that pose national security risks to Israelis and Israeli interests.

In Gazan contexts, universal and inherently polysemic and polyvalent terms such as “military necessity,” the laws of “distinction,” the rules of “proportionality,” and the scope of “humanity” are used in monolithic Israeli ways to vilify civilians who align themselves with Hamas. What are supposed to be IHL provisions that were passed to constrain the use of aggressive warfighting against defenceless civilians are reinterpreted to enable and embolden those who want to use massive “lethal force” against Gazan “infrastructural” targets. Mikko Joronen has written of how Israeli visual rhetorics and military textual materials are used to comment on the legality of “roof-knocking” techniques, and this has led to an “inversion of biopolitical subjects” who become the target objects of a “thanatopolitics of ethical killing during Operation Protective Edge” (Joronen, 2016, p. 1).

The existence of even one newly “discovered” terror tunnel anywhere in Gaza serves as the lynchpin for those who want to treat Gazans in the same way that Lebanese populations were treated when it was said they supported Hezbollah. Regardless of who gets bombed or shelled, the victims can always be blamed for their suffering. These types of rhetorical moves help explain why an individual like Major-General (res.) Giora Eiland, a popular Israeli commentator and military analyst, can explain to readers of Ynet.com why “there is no such thing as ‘innocent civilians.’” In an Op-Ed published near the end of OPE, Eiland opined that Israelis needed to do more than simply take out some terrorist tunnels in Gaza. Given the fact that Hamas had not forcibly occupied the Gaza Strip, Israelis needed to be willing to accept the fact that Hamas was the “authentic representative” of Palestinian populations and that these were “cruel people” (Eiland, 2014, paras. 8–10).

How did the descendants of those who survived the fighting in places like Lotz or the Warsaw Ghetto or the forests of the Ukraine—who needed tunnels and subterranean warfare during the Holocaust—come to believe that Hamas represents some unique dangers for Eretz Israel?

Some of the most popular of the Israeli pro-military ideographic or visual media frames that were deployed during and after OPE sutured together discursive information about the tunnels with commentaries about the individual and communal decisions that have been made by Gazan populations. In their vocal defence of Israel’s use of targeted assassinations, blockades, drone attacks, massive military barrages, and aerial targeting of Gazan
“infrastructures,” pro-Israeli advocates focus attention on the voluntary nature of Palestinian decision-making that ensures that they will not be treated as innocent non-combatants injured in the fog of war. Eiland, writing for moderate and conservative Israeli readers of Ynet, opined that the Israeli dispersal of violence during OPE had been too restrained. His situational awareness led him to argue that the Israeli military had been hindered when they were forced to try to discriminate between “good” Gazan citizens and “bad” supporters of Hamas. Echoing Sharon’s (2012) claims, and writing in early August of 2014, Eiland (by then a Major-General in the Israel reserves) explained that it was “absurd” to fight an enemy with “one hand” while providing that same enemy with food and energy with the “other hand” (Eiland, 2014).

From a diplomatic vantage point, the older negotiating rhetorics that were produced by post-Nakba Israeli speakers who argued that there were “no Palestinian” people have now morphed into twenty-first century claims that there are “no civilians” in Gaza. It could plausibly be averred that Israeli militarists and their supporters have participated in a necropolitics (Mbembe, 2003) of Gazan affairs that tallies the dead in ways that assume that some 1000 “terrorists” were killed during the latest incursion.

These autoimmunizing rhetorics are filled with contradictory explanations for how IDF or Israeli security forces see, or don’t see, what is happening in the tunnels. The IDF and Minister of Foreign Affairs websites, YouTube spaces, and other social media platforms often give the impression that they have a “God’s-eye” view of Gaza, where the excellence of Israeli systems of information gathering from informants, drones, or other forms of human and nonhuman surveillance provides them with an omnipresent, omnipotent, and omniscient view of what is happening from above, on the ground, and even below the ground during incursions like OPE. This type of nationalistic situational awareness—one that can only come from Israeli understandings of Palestinians and military threats—is characterized by academics as the “God trick,” which, in this particular instance, is used to explain why Israeli targeting during OPE was so precise and so protective of civilian lives.

However, other defences of OPE assume the blindness of the IDF and the invisibility of Hamas’s tunnelling activity in Gaza. This particular dispositif is composed from fragments that explains that the aerial war against Hamas was not enough, and that the vast subterranean network was hidden from the view of not only of the Israelis, but the UN special reporters or others who would focus attention on potential Israeli war crimes while ignoring the
existential dangers posed by tunnels that could be used to carry out the next catastrophe or “holocaust” that might be suffered by non-vigilant Israelis.

Magnifying the dangers of the terror tunnels after OPE not only hides the physical asymmetry and the massive destruction that was suffered by civilians who cannot be dismissed by the international community as “collateral damage.” Conversations about terror tunnel rhetorics also aids the cause of those who want to see moral equivalence created through the usage of a *dingpolitik* that juxtaposes Hamas missiles and tunnels with Israel F-16s, drones, tanks, artillery, and naval shelling. Forensic architectural talk about subterranean warfare augments the lawfare and *hasbara* (Israeli word for public diplomacy) that is circulated by everyone from Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to the sympathetic pro-Israeli student who fights against BDS movements on global campuses. Terror tunnels in Gaza, explains McGhie-Fraser (2015), “dig deep in the geopolitical imagination,” and have “played a key role in re-establishing a blockaded economy, transporting goods, sparking fear and hope,” and “played a prominent role in the spike of conflicts centering in Gaza in 2014” (para. 1).

This mass-mediated homogenization of all Gazans as supporters of Hamas and builders of tunnels blurs the lines between civilians and military targets, or supporters of the Gazan regime and the refugees living on the Gaza Strip. Once again, “the transformation of Palestinian physical space” is used in thick *dispositifs* that lead “to the disappearance of Palestine’s human landscape” (Bardi, 2016, p. 171). It does not help matters when we realize that in the wake of OPE, many of Netanyahu’s critics on the Far Right of the Israeli political spectrum have accused the Israeli Prime Minister of *underestimating* the magnitude of the terrorist threats that were posed by the “infiltration” tunnels as they demand that even more drastic action be taken during the next “mowing of the grass” in Gaza.

All of this scopic tunnel regime serves a host of diverse *realpolitik* Israeli interests. First, it deflects attention away from any calculus of risk and violence that would compare and contrast the deaths of 3 Israeli civilians during OPE with the deaths of thousands of Palestinian women and children. Second, by refusing to differentiate between the activities of the military wing of the Hamas regime and all of the civilians living on the Gaza Strip, the Israeli military foregrounds the morality of prioritizing the “force protection” of their own troops. As Judith Butler explained during her talk at the London School of Economics (LSE) in 2015, a “figurative operation” or “transposition” was taking place here, which allowed rhetors to act as if “those populations are effectively figured as part of weaponry,” so that individuals like Prime Minister
Netanyahu could complain about how Palestinians in Gaza where using their “telegenically dead” to mislead world communities about the realities of the situation (Butler, 2014, p. 239).

Conclusion

If Butler (2009) is right when she argues that select interpretive frames help audiences to decide who lives a life in luxury and who lives precariously, then have we reached a situation where much of the cosmopolitan world outside of Israel complains about the immunizing occupation of Gaza by Israelis, but yet does little to stop any of this? While they apply their vaunted principles of “international humanitarian law” in idealistic texts that comment on the illegality of the bombings of places such as Rafah, international cosmopolitans also seem to have accepted the facticity of the visualities that are circulated by Netanyahu, the IDF, and the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which treat incursions into Gaza as if they were in some symmetrical “war”; constant probabilistic talk of what might come of out Palestinian “terror tunnels” is used to deflect attention away from what is happening in the occupied West Bank as the spread of Israeli settlements signals the “recovery” of “Judea” and “Samaria.”

Critical scholars have the unenviable task of illustrating how the terror tunnel rhetorics are merely the most recent examples of biopolitical and thanatopolitical rhetorics that can be used to justify the “mowing of the lawn,” and the bombing of civilians in Gaza. As I noted earlier, it makes it much easier on the conscience to think of targets of lethal attacks as “infrastructure,” a term that can be used by militarists and legal wordsmiths to rationalize all sorts of dingpolitik and realpolitik behaviour. Using commentary on the need to prioritize the protection of one’s own soldiers and one’s own people dates back to colonial moments when IHL provisions protected Europeans from the ravages of the “barbarians,” and all of this Israeli talk of being at the forefront of counterterrorist anti-tunnelling is just a way of trying to act illiberally while appearing to be a liberal, Zionist, democratic society. In the moral, military, and legal calculus that is used in debates about terror tunnels, even the slightest of risk to any Israeli is treated as something that warrants the destructions of thousands of Palestinians lives in places like Gaza.

Forgetting about the nationalistic choices involved and the rhetorical crafting of potent medicalizing and securitizing rhetorics in Gazan contexts becomes especially problematic when countless innocent lives are at stake. Mediating tropes that focus on metastasizing cancers and terror tunnels may
play well for domestic Israeli audiences, especially during election time, but these same discursive and visual fragments become recurring and sedimented media tropes that have afterlives. They can be recycled and picked up, mashed together with graphics from other incursions, and then refurbished for use in many transcontinental debates about the morality, legitimacy, and legality of current and future Israeli incursions into Gaza, the West Bank, or southern Lebanon. Note, for example, how both during and after OPE global audiences who read mainstream newspapers or who viewed YouTube or Facebook are now bombarded with weekly messages about how Hamas has thousands of Palestinian workers who labour away at the digging of tunnels, making it appear as though all of Gaza is nothing more than an infected Strip that is occupied by denizens who have lost the right to be called non-combatants or civilians. The evolutionary development of terror tunnel rhetorics, which incrementally added new layers to Israeli governmental apparatus and hasbara, spiked between 2014–2016—to the point where polls showing that many Israelis feel that hundreds of millions of shekels must be spent on anti-tunnel weaponry.

As Nietzsche, Foucault, and many other rhetoricians over the years have warned us, the march of some key perspectival metaphors and other tropes can become a part of empowering, hegemonic dispositifs, and this is the case when Israelis use talk of pestilence, cancer, and other thanatopolitical horrors to magnify threats in a host of intertextual commentaries about the “Hamas regime.” Conflicts that actually involve structural and material disagreements about the characterizations of “Biblical” lands, demographics, water rights, dispossession, and occupation and rights of return are masked as “subterranean” battles that might require the expenditure of vast amounts of time and money as pro-Israelis in America call for the passage of bilateral agreements between the US and Israel to help further immunize Israel from Palestinian “infiltrators.” This, consciously or unconsciously, recycles those old Nakba rationales for killing or deporting those who tried to “infiltrate” Israeli after the “War of Independence.”

All media tropes conceal as well as reveal, and in this particular rhetorical situation, Israelis can pick and choose when they want to argue about visibility or invisibility, omniscience or blindness, as they debate about how best to combat the Gazan leaders and publics that turned smuggling tunnels into “terror” tunnels. For example, there are times when Israelis have argued as if they could peer through the fog of war, as they claimed that they knew that they had killed at least 1000 terrorists during OPE, and their use of telegenic visualities is used to illustrate their tracking of the mosques, the schools, the UN shelters, NGO buildings, or other places that supposedly housed “human
shields” and Hamas rockets. At other times, when Israelis wanted to rationalize why tanks and soldiers had to invade Gaza, they used rhetorics that assumed that the IDF was blind, and needed to actually invade Gaza in order to take out some of the 32 tunnels that they allegedly discovered during OPE.

In many ways it could be argued that if we accepted the “truth effects” of all of this anti-tunnelling rhetoric there would still be a host of questions that are rarely asked by mainstream journalists as they parrot IDF claims. Is the loss of thousands of Palestinian lives in Gaza during the 2014 invasion really a legal and “proportional” way to look at the supposed military gain that came from destroying some 32 discovered tunnels during OPE? How did Israeli secret service agents or IDF representatives actually know that those who died in the rubble could be configured as “combatants” or “civilians”? Were they assuming that every male over a certain age belonged to the “Hamas regime”? How did they discern the motives of the populations that they assumed acted as human shields? How would Israeli purveyors of some of these tunnel infographics or infograms respond if Hamas argued that the presence of any weapons in the homes of settlers or civilians in places like Tel Aviv transformed them into non-combatant enemies living in targetable “infrastructures”? What media tropes have appeared that put on display the placement of Israeli air bases, “Iron Dome” installations, naval weaponry, etc. in relation to dense population centers? Why just focus on the alleged social agency of “Hamas”?

All lives are precious, including Israeli lives, and all of this talk of targeting Gazan civilians takes us very far indeed from both the letter and the spirit of the post-War II Geneva Conventions and the 1977 Protocols.

Sadly, the amount of energy that is expended through writing and talking about terror tunnels signals the deflection of attention away from the real structural and material causes of much of this disputation. These are really disputes about expansionism, water, land, demographics, and ethnic hierarchies, but they are hidden by a militaristic discourse that can praise the subservience of Fatah on the West Bank while vilifying the tunnel builders who pay taxes to Hamas. This lack of both Israeli and international interest in non-military ways of viewing regional geopolitics and the economies of dispossession is reflected in the transmogrification of the older “smuggling” tunnels into catastrophic “terror tunnels.”

Before the Second Intifada when most Israelis, Palestinians, and outside observers debated about the “Arab-Israeli” conflict, talk of peaceful negotiations, the duties of belligerent occupiers, the status of a divided Jerusalem, two-state solutions, and preserving the “Green line” West of the
Jordan River, filled the geographic imaginaries of countless transcontinental ideological figurations. Yet since the end of the twentieth century, securitization rhetorics produced by militarist Israelis have become more polarizing, and those who want to avoid peacekeeping, or those who disdain land for peace agreements, are always in a rush to invent or discover the next existential threat that has to be dealt with by the “most moral army” in the world.

Militarizing the smuggling tunnels seems to make perfect sense when all facets of Palestinian/Israeli landscapes, including the West Bank and Jerusalem, have become weaponized, fashioned into sources of what Israelis call “friction.” Moreover, instead of admitting that blockades have hindered the development of a Gaza that might become a viable Palestinian entity, Israelis complain about how Gazan populations build tunnels instead of shelters, and this in turn means that destruction in the Gaza Strip becomes a symbol and point of condensation for representing Palestinian economic, political, social, and legal failures.5 The sentiments expressed by Eiland and Sharon that were noted above may sadly represent the mainstream of Israeli rhetorical cultures that have little faith in the Palestinian Authority or UN peacekeeping. Here there is no place for organizations like Breaking the Silence, which have been accused of traitorous conduct by pointing out lax rules of engagement that contributed to the horrors of OPE.

For many who believe that combating terrorism is a military science, the phrase “mowing the lawn” may appear to be a relatively harmless, and accurate, way of describing the war of attrition that might exist between Israel and Hamas or Israel and Hezbollah. However, when this terminology is used in anti-tunnel contexts these figurations put on display the problematic nature of

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5 At one time there were even a few post-Zionist historiographers and others who held out hope that in our post-Oslo world we could find peaceful resolutions to our debates about the status of Jerusalem or the West Bank and the militarization of Gaza, but after the Second Intifada the dominant media tropes that circulated in mainstream and alternative outlets provided readers and viewers with increasingly polarizing ways of configuring this violence. While a growing number of international liberals, cosmopolitans, peace activists, and even sympathetic Israelis join BDS movements and call for the end to the Israeli blockade of Gaza, Israelis in turn respond with their own hasbara. They contend that a perfect storm of anti-Semitism, misunderstandings about Hamas, and the non-recognition of their Biblical rights to Palestinian lands has contributed to the attempted “delegitimation” of their democratic, Zionist state. Sadly, instead of finding constructive ways of co-producing one-state or two-state solutions that might allow for the growth of two different, and equal, ethnic and religious communities on neighbouring lands most of the world is often forced to make choices regarding what Weizman (2012) once characterized as the “lesser” of evils.
these discursive indigeneity contests. Post-OPE newspaper articles, journals, and books still use metaphoric clusters that imply that those who really care about situational awareness in Gaza should keep in mind, and accept, the empiricism behind all of this talk of the insecticides and pesticides that are needed to keep a lawn free of unwanted weeds and other undesirable pests. Imagine how many Israelis must have pictures of Israeli beaches, tourist destinations, peaceful settlements, and the protection of Hebron in their minds as they contrast these images with the lives of the Gazans who live under “the Hamas regime.”

Talk of terror tunnels also serves as a projection device that can be used by Israelis who are interested in the promotion and circulation of a unique, Israeli type of what Roger Stahl (2009) has called militainment. “Progress reports” are circulated by journalists on a nearly weekly basis in both mainstream and alternative press outlets about the efforts of the IDF and the Egyptians as they discover, blow-up, or flood the newly discovered terror tunnels in our post-heroic tunnelling age. This blending of entertainment, Israeli pride in technological prowess, and the assuaging of fears and guilt becomes a part of a dangerous biopolitical mix of rhetorical fragments that can be used by those who wish to show they are security experts or sales personnel who can help guard Israel. They can form alliances with those who want to see the constant funding of expensive anti-tunnelling devices that in turn helps show the world that Israeli drones and anti-missile defence systems are not the only marketable exports that are leaving Israeli shores. The systematic, incremental, methodical, and episodic nature of terrorizing surveillant control of Gazan tunnels thus serves the interests of former Israeli Majors and Generals who can become security consultants on corporate boards that are working around the clock to prevent future tunnel infiltration.

In some cases, talk of “mowing the lawn” is used in perspectival frameworks to complain about the alleged “soft” treatment of Palestinian enemies! For example, Martin Sherman has explicitly claimed that “mowing the lawn” strategies have not worked. “The grass needs to be uprooted,” once and for all, Sherman (2014) averred, and the only “durable solution requires dismantling Gaza, humanitarian relocation of the non-belligerent Arab

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6 By “indigeneity” I am referring to the discursive contests that take place between Israelis and Palestinians during heated exchanges about the historiography of Palestine. While Israelis claim that they were given the land by God and have been continuously living in Judea and Samaria since the time of Abraham, puzzled Palestinian Arabs claim that they are actually the indigenous ethnic communities who have been living on this same land for centuries. Indigeneity wars take place as history books, archaeology, geography, and other terrains become the spaces and places of these heated exchanges.
population, and extension of Israeli sovereignty over the region” (paras. 35–36). Many more Israelis are willing to accept the need to recover the West Bank and the Google mapping of “Judea” and “Samaria,” but there are those who point to the tunnels and OPE as they invite readers to undo Ariel Sharon’s work and recapture Gaza. Given this type of rhetoric, one can readily see why some Palestinian intellectuals view the 1948 dispossession, which saw the migration of more than 700,000 Palestinians who “fled” Palestine, as just one small part of a continual Nakba.

These are not concerns that ended with the conclusion of the 51-day OPE. Israeli and American think-tanks continue, in 2017, to fill mainstream newspapers and the blogosphere with commentary on how best to fight the allegedly “new” tunnel wars that cannot be waged successfully by mollycoddling civilian populations. It is no coincidence that after Operation Protect Edge politicians like Netanyahu can continue to appeal to voters by recycling some of his 2013–2014 commentaries on the dangers of rockets that might hit Israeli kindergarteners near Gaza. Nor is it happenstance that talk of terror tunnels appears in articles about defending illegal West Bank settlements, where any actual removal of these structures can be characterized as “ethnic cleansing.”

The magnification of terror tunnel threats can also be used to counter the claims of Israeli critics who can be labelled as anti-Semitic or purveyors of discourses that are trying to “delegitimate” Israel. Some of these terror-tunnel infiltration metanarratives appear in mediascapes that are intended for domestic Israeli consumption, but these same perspectival tales can be used by those interested in the promotion of hasbara to refute misguided foreign views of Gaza. This type of rhetorical posturing is intended for international media consumers to blunt the persuasive power of organizations such as B’Tselem, Breaking the Silence, Amnesty International, or UN committees who complain about OPE practices, occupation, or the disproportionate use of violence by Israeli in Gaza. Configuring anti-Israeli diatribes as myopic blinds the persuasive power of those who contend that Gazan incursions have led to a culture of impunity.

If I am right, then media critics and others will observe in the near future how young Israeli and American military authors will become a part of a cottage industry that churns out reports, law reviews, journal articles, theses, and dissertations on how best to counter the existential threats posed by Gazan terror tunnels. The old heroic, Geneva Convention discussions that assumed that all civilians needed protection will give way to post-heroic commentaries on how non-combatants around the world have lost these protections when
they help build underground networks in subterranean realms. Civilian protections for the “enemy” other in many other contexts will give way as aesthetic media tropes are produced that will now take for granted that one’s own soldiers and civilian populations have no choice but to recognize that the Israelis were on to something when they averred that there were “no innocents” in Gaza.
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**THE TERRITORY OF THE SCREEN**

**DEREK GREGORY**

**I Saw a Man**

Owen Sheers’s remarkable novel, *I Saw a Man*, describes the circles of grief that spiral from a US drone strike in Pakistan’s Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). A Predator, controlled from Creech Air Force Base in Nevada by Daniel, a US Air Force pilot, had been flying over eastern Afghanistan for more than an hour when the crew was tasked to cross the border into Pakistan and execute the targeted killing of Hafiz Mehsud, a high-ranking member of the Pakistan Taliban. The mission was under the direction of the CIA from its headquarters in Langley, Virginia. Intelligence from a local informant and signals intercepts suggested that Mehsud had arranged a rendezvous in the mountains northwest of Miranshah, and within minutes of receiving the mission brief the other—dispersed—actors in the kill-chain were in radio communication or online with the Predator crew. The aircraft’s sensors tracked two vehicles to a compound high in one of the eastern valleys, and soon afterwards a minivan and a pickup truck joined them. The occupants spilled out, several of them carrying weapons. The screeners watching the video feeds in Florida decided they were all men. “Sweet target,” breathed Maria, the sensor operator sitting next to Daniel. Suddenly he noticed movement in the minivan. “Was that a woman in there?” he asked. “No way to tell,” one of the screeners told him. “I saw a man,” said the mission intelligence coordinator from Langley, cutting off the discussion.

Seconds later Daniel was cleared to engage the target. Two Hellfire missiles roared from their racks beneath the aircraft. As he watched his screen:

A lighter patch appeared in the van’s door again. Four, three, two. It was a headscarf. One.

The visuals flashed white, blanking in the glare.
“Impact,” Maria said beside him.

Daniel watched as definition slowly returned to the screens. Maria zoomed in close. The vehicles were burning.
Among those killed were the passengers in the second “convoy”—a loaded term—who turned out to be foreign journalists, together with their local driver and interpreter; the headscarf Daniel had glimpsed belonged to Caroline, the British wife of the novel’s central protagonist, Michael. “I saw a man,” the mission intelligence coordinator had said—yet he wasn’t there. *She* was.¹

The details of the strike—even some of the phrases used—faithfully mimic other civilian casualty incidents in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and the novel successfully raises a series of far from fictive questions about the multiple implications of “distance” in such remote operations. Michael is an author with a reputation for effacing himself from his narratives: “Isn’t that what you’re always saying?” he is asked. “You need distance to see anything clearly?” When he tries to assuage his grief by losing himself in his fencing lessons his instructor insists “DISTANCE! DISTANCE MICHAEL! It’s your best defence.” And in parallel those involved in the kill-chain are effaced from the official narrative:

“A U.S. drone strike.” That was all the press release said. No mention of Creech, screeners, Intel coordinator, an operator, a pilot. It was as if the Predator had been genuinely unmanned. As if there had been no hand behind its flight, no eye behind its cameras.

But Daniel could not escape his involvement so easily. Although he is haunted by his role in targeted killing, he recalibrates the distance—and the difference—between Nevada and the Afghanistan-Pakistan borderlands. Each morning, as he sets off from his home outside Las Vegas to drive to Creech, he reflects on the similarity between the mountains over which he would soon be flying his Predator and the Charleston range shimmering in his windshield. Despite their closeness, Daniel had never ventured into them and didn’t really know them.

They were his daily view but not yet his landscape, a feature of his geography but not yet his territory. Unlike those other

¹Owen Sheers, *I Saw a Man* (London and New York: Picador and Doubleday, 2015). The title is taken from a version of William Hughes Mearns’s poem *Antigonish* (1899): “Yesterday, upon the stair/I saw a man who wasn’t there/He wasn’t there again today/I wish, I wish he’d go away.” The significance of my last two sentences—and the emphasis—is that the presence of women (and children) is typically taken by the US military as an index of “civilian-ness”; the assumption is problematic in all sorts of ways, but the presence of civilians on a target is not necessarily sufficient to avert a strike. I should also explain that in the course of the novel it becomes clear that there was another man “who wasn’t there”—though in that case the location was Hampstead not Waziristan.
mountains, 8,000 miles away. Those mountains Daniel knew intimately. He’d never climbed in them, either, but he was still familiar with the villages silted into their folds, the shadows their peaks threw at evening and the habits of the shepherds marshalling their flocks along their lower slopes. Recently he’d even been able to anticipate, given the right weather conditions, at what time the clouds would come misting down the higher peaks into the ravines of the valleys. Over the last few months he’d begun to feel an ownership over them. Were they not as much his workplace as that of those shepherds? For the troops operating in the area they were simply elevation, exhaustion, fear. They were hostile territory. But for Daniel they were his hunting ground, and as such it was his job not just to know them but to learn them, too. To love them, even, so that from the darkness of his control station in Creech, he might be able to move through their altitudes as naturally as the eagles who’d ridden their thermals for centuries.

It’s a brilliant paragraph that captures the ways in which optical mastery is transmuted into “ownership,” knowledge pinned to power, and the imagery of the eagle parallels the Predator hunting its prey.\(^2\) Flying over Afghanistan’s rugged terrain Daniel’s view was different from that of American troops on the ground, for whom the mountains meant only “elevation, exhaustion, fear.” He was freed from all that, soaring high above them, precisely because his territory appeared elsewhere. Loitering above that isolated compound in Waziristan, Sheers writes, Daniel “scanned the territory of his screen.” This is one of the most perceptive images in I Saw a Man, and it is this that I want to explore.

**Screening Death**

The United States conducts multiple targeted killing programs using Predators and Reapers. The CIA-directed program was initiated in Yemen on 3

\(^2\) Cf. Grégoire Chamayou, *Théorie du drone* (Paris: La fabrique, 2013), who describes targeted killing as “militarized man-hunting.” This text provides much more than the next chapters in Chamayou’s previous work, *Les chasses à l’homme* (in English, *Manhunts*), because it addresses the emergence of a radically new modality of later modern war that is focused on the identification, pursuit and elimination of *individuals* in which combat yields to pursuit and the battlefield is replaced by the hunting ground.
November 2002 and extended to Pakistan on 18 June 2004. Both were deemed to be outside “areas of active hostilities,” which is why remote platforms were the preferred means of execution since those distant targets would ordinarily be beyond the overt reach of ground troops, but most of the missions were flown by USAF crews and—consistent with the heightened individuation of later modern war—the US military conducted its own targeted killing programs in the “hot zones” of Afghanistan and Iraq using aircraft and Special Forces.

As Sheers’s aperçu shows, killing somebody with a Hellfire missile controlled from thousands of miles away depends upon a screen—or more accurately a series of screens—on which the image of a human body will eventually be touched by the cross-hairs of a targeting pod. But this is not a purely optical war; bodies are present on both sides of the screen(s). Remote operations are only “unmanned” in the narrow sense of being carried out from aircraft with no crew on board: hence the Air Force’s proud claim to “project power without vulnerability.” Hundreds of people are involved in conducting each flight, and many more work behind the scenes to produce the intelligence on which each strike depends. They are entangled in a constellation of machines and circuits, algorithms and standard operating procedures, so that—like many other modalities of later modern war—remote operations are the hypostatization of more-than-human military violence. But all these people are also placed in particular subject-positions through their enrollment in the kill-chain, which is always more than a technical division of labour. Similarly, their targets appear on the screens as silent and spectral traces, and all sorts of technical and lexical devices are used that render them less-than-human: “jackpots,” “squirters,” even “bugsplat.”

“You stopped seeing people on the screen as people,” confessed one former sensor operator. “On the screen they

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were dots. Ants.”7 The casual de-humanization is also effected through a seemingly more anodyne scientific vocabulary. Here is Joseph Pugliese:

The military term “pattern of life” is inscribed with two intertwined systems of scientific conceptuality: algorithmic and biological. The human subject detected by drone’s surveillance cameras is, in the first scientific schema, transmuted algorithmically into a patterned sequence of numerals: the digital code of ones and zeros. Converted into digital data coded as a “pattern of life,” the targeted human subject is reduced to an anonymous simulacrum that flickers across the screen and that can effectively be liquidated into a “pattern of death” with the swivel of a joystick. Viewed through the scientific gaze of clinical biology, “pattern of life” connects the drone’s scanning technologies to the discourse of an instrumentalist science, its constitutive gaze of objectifying detachment and its production of exterminatory violence. Patterns of life are what are discovered and analysed in the Petri dish of the laboratory…. Analogically, the human subjects targeted as suspect yet anonymous “patterns of life” by the drones become equivalent to forms of pathogenic life. The operators of the drones’ exterminatory attacks must, in effect, be seen to conduct a type of scientific ethnic cleansing of pathogenic “life forms.”8

7 Vegas Tenold, “The Untold Casualties of the Drone War,” Rolling Stone, 18 February 2016, http://www.rollingstone.com/politics/news/the-untold-casualties-of-the-drone-war-20160218; the speaker was Michael Haas, who served with the 15th Reconnaissance/3rd Special Operations Squadrons at Creech between 2006 and 2011. Haas and other sensor operators insist that these casual reductions also diminish the humanity of those watching the screens: “What kind of people say shit like that?”

But those whose lives and deaths flicker into view are all flesh and blood human beings whose fate is decided by actors watching them from the other side of the world.⁹

Seen thus, “the territory of the screen” is more than metaphor. Territory is not only a political-legal inscription that delimits a bounded enclosure in three-dimensional space; it is also, as Stuart Elden suggests, a (bio)political technology whose calibrations enable states to assert, enact and enforce a claim over bodies-in-space.¹⁰ In many cases states have mobilized multiple political technologies to harden their own borders while also claiming the right to track and in extremis to target bodies-in-spaces outside them. This is precisely what activates US drone strikes in the borderlands, where intelligence agencies produce and reproduce the FATA as a data field that is systematically mined to expose seams of information and selectively sown with explosives to be rematerialized as a killing field. The screens on which and through which the strikes are animated are mediations in an extended sequence in which bodies moving into, through and out from the FATA are tracked and turned into targets in a process that Ian Hacking once described more generally as “making people up”: except that in this scenario the targets are not so much “people” as digital traces.¹¹ The scattered actions and interactions of individuals are registered by remote sensors, removed from the fleshiness of human bodies and reassembled as what Grégoire Chamayou calls “schematic bodies.”¹² They are given code names (“Objective x”) and index numbers, they are tracked on screens and their danse macabre is plotted on time-space grids and followed by drones. But as soon as the Hellfire missiles are released the transformations that have produced the target over the preceding weeks and months cascade back

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⁹ Cf. the installation of a giant photograph of a child orphaned by a drone strike installed in a field in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in 2014; the artists intended to target those who do the targeting by reminding them that people are “Not A Bug Splat”: https://notabugsplat.com.

¹⁰ Stuart Elden, “Land, Terrain, Territory,” Progress in Human Geography 34, no. 6 (2010): 799–807, though he makes more of the spaces and less of the bodies—which is why I emphasize the biopolitical.

¹¹ In his classic lecture, “Kinds of People: Moving Targets” (British Academy, 2006), Hacking described how “a new scientific classification may bring into being a new kind of person”—in this case, the target—and how “a classification may interact with the people classified.” A signature strike based on a supposedly pathological “pattern of life” is surely the deadliest version of this “interaction.”

into the human body: in an instant virtuality becomes corporeality and traces turn into remains.13

The technicity of the targeted killing program is consolidated in innumerable ways, but like the division of labour in the kill-chain it is always more than merely “technical” and as such has extremely important political effects. Here I focus on three elements of its political technology—kill lists, signals intercepts and visual feeds—and diagram their joint transformation of the FATA into a space of execution.

“Kill Lists”

Kill lists identify and prioritize named individuals authorized for targeted killing. Lists are not inert tabulations; they are inherently “lively” (even where their purpose is to kill) because they have the capacity to do things, in this case to produce the effects that they name. In the new security regime ushered in after 9/11 the function of the kill lists—like the other “security lists” that proliferated in the shadow of the Twin Towers—was to facilitate, license and script new modes of targeting.14 In doing so they underwent a series of technical transformations that served their new, central purpose: pre-emption. The Bush administration agreed a “High-Value Target List” so that the CIA could kill or capture suspected terrorists who were linked to al Qaeda and associated groups without having to seek further approval, and it was on this basis that the CIA directed the first drone strikes in the FATA.15 The US military developed its own Joint Prioritized Effects List (JPEL), as the basis for its targeted killing in Afghanistan. These multiple, often overlapping lists were coordinated and vetted by videoconference, but the Obama administration moved quickly to consolidate the process and to involve the president in

authorizing all personality strikes outside an “area of active hostilities.” The hub for the program became the Pakistan-Afghanistan Department at the CIA’s Counterterrorism Center at Langley. When Obama took office in 2009 he summarily terminated the CIA’s program of extraordinary rendition and closed its black sites, but provided no alternative arrangements for the detention of enemy combatants captured outside a war zone, leaving the agency with a “disposition problem”: what to do with suspected terrorists? Nominally “kill or capture” operations were now heavily tilted towards “kill.” The response was to devise a “disposition matrix” that arrayed the biographies, locations and known associates of named targets with the assets available either to “find, fix and finish” them or (less likely) to capture and transfer them to other jurisdictions.

The kill list embedded in the matrix turned out to be infinitely extendable, more like a revolving door than a rolodex, so much so that at one point Pakistan’s exasperated Chief of Army Staff General Kayani demanded that the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Mullen explain how, after hundreds of drone strikes, “the United States [could] possibly still be working

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16 Obama approved all nominated strikes outside Afghanistan and Pakistan; most of those in Afghanistan were conducted under the authority of the Pentagon using the JPEL, while the Director of the CIA had the authority to approve strikes in Pakistan unless there were special, usually political considerations.

17 Daniel Klaidman, Kill or Capture: The War on Terror and the Soul of the Obama Presidency (New York: Houghton, Mifflin, Harcourt, 2012). “Capture” in Pakistan has not always been infeasible. One study found that 66 per cent of all detainees at Guantanamo had been captured in Pakistan by its security forces or their partners; a follow-up study of those still incarcerated ten years later found that 60 per cent had been captured in Pakistan. Mark Denbeaux et al., “Report on Guantanamo Detainees: Profile of 517 Detainees Through Analysis of Department of Defense Data,” Seton Hall University School of Law (2005), http://scholarship.shu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1399&context=shlr; Spencer Ackerman, “Only Three of 116 Guantánamo Detainees were Captured by US Forces,” Guardian, 25 August 2015, https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/aug/25/guantanamo-detainees-captured-pakistan-afghanistan. The analysis also raises questions about the accuracy of US intelligence and the evidentiary basis for their detention in the first place: many were subsequently released without charge, a provision clearly not possible once “killing” is substituted for “capture.”

its way through a ‘top 20’ list?” The answer lies not only in the remarkable capacity of al Qaeda and the Taliban to regenerate, because the endless expansion of the list is written into the constitution of the database and the algorithms from which it emerges. The database accumulates information from multiple agencies, and for targets in the FATA the primary sources are ground intelligence from local informants, signals intelligence from the National Security Agency (NSA), and surveillance imagery from the United States Air Force that provide the collective warrant for each strike. Algorithms are then used to search the database to produce correlations, coincidences and connections that serve to identify suspects, confirm their guilt and anticipate their future actions. Jutta Weber explains that the process follows “a logic of eliminating every possible danger”:

[T]he database is the perfect tool for pre-emptive security measures because it has no need of the logic of cause and effect. It widens the search space and provides endless patterns of possibilistic networks.

Although she suggests that the growth of big data and the transition from hierarchical to relational and now post-relational databases has marginalized earlier narrative forms, those reappear as soon as suspects have been conjured from the database. The case for including—killing—each individual on the list is exported from its digital target folder to a summary Powerpoint slide called a “baseball card” that converts into a “storyboard” after each mission (Figures 1a and 2b show examples from Afghanistan; those for covert operations in Pakistan remain outside the public domain). Every file is vetted by the CIA’s lawyers and its General Counsel, and by deputies at the National Security Council, and during Obama’s tenure all “complex cases” were approved by the president at a special Tuesday meeting. Herein lies the real magic of the system. “To make the increasingly powerful non-human agency of algorithms and database systems invisible,” Weber writes, “the symbolic power of the sovereign is emphasised: on ‘Terror Tuesdays’ it (appears that it) is only the sovereign who decides about life and death.” But this is an optical illusion. As

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19 Miller, “Plan”; for details of the kabuki dance between Islamabad and Washington see Gregory, “Dirty Dancing.”
Louise Amoore argues more generally, “the sovereign strike is always something more, something in excess of a single flash of decision” and emerges instead from a constellation of prior practices and projected calculations.  

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21 Weber, “Keep Adding,” 120; Louise Amoore, The Politics of Possibility: Risk and Security Beyond Probability (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 2. Amoore explains: Though sovereign decisions of many kinds … may appear as sudden flashes, their apparent immediacy conceals a complex of calculation, consulting, analysis, algorithmic modelling and risk management that is the condition of possibility of contemporary security. Thus, when the philosopher Giorgio Agamben proposes that the state of exception be understood as empty, “kenomatic” or an “anomic space,” what is elided is precisely the lively, unpredictable and complex life that thrives within that space. I think that is exactly right, but what is also elided is the operative presence of legal formularies and the function of the quasi-juridical within what Dan McQuillan calls more generally “algorithmic states of exception.” See Dan McQuillan, “Algorithmic States of Exception,” European Journal of Cultural Studies 18, no. 45 (2015): 564–576.
More is at stake in the production of the kill list than bureaucracy, the anonymity it confers and the dispersion of responsibility it allows. These are important issues but the technicity that lies behind the list makes a surreptitious yet powerful claim about the Reason that animates it. The strikes that are the list’s telos and terminus are held out to be “precise” not only because science and engineering have supposedly made them so through advances in surveillance and weapons systems but also because target nomination is itself constructed as a techno-scientific achievement. The process is presented as technical and protected as secret, kept outside the law until its products are inserted into a quasi-juridical tribunal as objective evidence that cannot be contested but must be acted upon (because pre-emptive). I describe this as a “quasi-juridical” because lawyers are involved but those nominated have no knowledge of the process, no legal representation and no possibility of appeal.


23 For a rare example of somebody seeking to contest their nomination, see the case of Malik Jalal, a tribal leader from North Waziristan: Derek Gregory, “Death Sentences” at https://geographicalimaginations.com/2016/04/12/death-sentences; Lizzie Dearden, “The Man
There is sorcery here too: Claudia Aradau argues that all of this “has more in common with the ‘pseudo-rationality’ of astrology than the method of clues”—let alone due process.

Big data reasoning combines a veneer of rationality—algorithmic logic and probabilistic calculations—with the irrationality of telling the future from data “signatures.” Everything has a “data signature” and everything can be derived from data in a never-ending loop of adding variables and correspondences. Big data is rendered as an inescapable system not only from which there is no place to hide, but where it is impossible to think the error of knowledge. Error does not undermine the production of knowledge, but is integrated in the production of knowledge.24

Technicity buries such critical questions within the presumptive neutrality of its method and its “registers of expertise.”25

Pre-emptive strikes in the FATA are a version of “just-in-time” killing. In most cases their authorization is valid for 60 days, and any target that is not killed within that period must be reviewed and renewed. This provides an operational reason for the “elongated” concept of imminence used as legal cover. There is no equivalent to the raw immediacy of “troops in contact” on the other side of the border—though even there the concept has often been stretched and civilians have been killed as a result26—but the half-life of the authorization tacitly encourages those directing a strike to act “as soon as they see an opportunity—even if there’s a high chance of civilians being killed, too—because in their mind they might never get the chance to strike that target again.”27


26 Derek Gregory, “Angry Eyes” (forthcoming).
27 Jeremy Scahill and Glenn Greenwald, “The NSA’s Secret Role in the US Assassination Program,” The Intercept, 9 February 2014, https://theintercept.com/2014/02/10/the-nsas-secret-role/. They described their informant as a “drone operator” for Joint Special Operations Command; his experience was primarily of strikes in Yemen and Somalia but his commentary included Pakistan.
Signals Intercepts

That possibility is increased by the extraordinary difficulty of finding the target. Signals intercepts are important in all targeted killing but particularly in areas like the FATA where the United States has no boots on the ground and few field agents in place. Its quarry seeks refuge not only in the physical fastness of the borderlands—remote locations where Special Operations officers characterize them as “a low-contrast foe easily camouflaged among civilian clutter” (sic)—but also in an “electronic sanctuary” where communications about operations, logistics and finance “can be hidden among the innumerable civilian signals that constitute daily cell phone and Internet traffic.”28 The objective of signals intelligence is to use the one to betray the other: to divine the physical location of an individual target in North or South Waziristan from his digital traces. This requires a topological twist in which the logics of military violence and intelligence are transposed:

Warfare has shifted from the scaling of military operations to the selective targeting of individual enemies. Intelligence has shifted from the selective targeting of known threats to wholesale data mining for the purposes of finding hidden threats.29

This is how the NSA, which is part of the Department of Defense and responsible for the global collection and processing of signals intelligence, has become such a vital junction between the CIA and the US military. The United States is the physical backbone of the Internet, and this pole position enables the NSA to conduct upstream intercepts of foreign communications as they flow through fibre-optic cables at domestic switching stations. The NSA extends its global reach still further through collaborations with other intelligence agencies, the most important of which are its Tier I partners—the other members of the “Five Eyes” (Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the United Kingdom)30—and also through downstream intercepts collected from

30 “The Five Eyes” had its origins in the Atlantic Charter of 1941 and was enshrined in a formal agreement in the early 1950s; there is presumably little need to emphasize the whiteness of their eyes. The work of the United Kingdom’s GCHQ is particularly important in supplementing the NSA because it has an extensive chain of intercept stations in Asia. The NSA also works with
the servers of the major Internet service providers. These intercepts yield both Digital Network Intelligence (DNI)—web-based data that includes e-mails, social media and browsing histories—and Dialed Number Recognition (DNR) metadata for cell phones, which includes lists of numbers dialed and the duration of calls. By mid-2012 the NSA was processing more than 20 billion “communication events” each day. This is data-mining on the global scale but it is geographically differentiated and Pakistan has been a major locus of activity. During a three-day period in March 2013 DNI intercepts from Pakistan accounted for 13.9 per cent of the NSA’s global DNI intercepts (second only to Iran, which accounted for 14.5 per cent) and 11.1 per cent of its global DNR intercepts (second only to Afghanistan, which accounted for 17.6 per cent). Taken together, Pakistan was the target of the most intense interception during that period (12.3 per cent of all global DNI and DNR intercepts).31

Predators and Reapers loitering over the FATA have been the grim beneficiaries of these intercepts, but they have also been involved in harvesting signals intelligence through sensors and virtual base-tower transceivers fitted to the aircraft. Most of the detail remains classified, and much of what has been released is seven or eight years old, but the Snowden cache documented SHENANIGANS, which uses a pod on the aircraft that “vacuums up massive amounts of data from any wireless routers, computers, smart phones or other electronic devices that are within range,” and GILGAMESH, which can force a SIM card or cellphone to lock on to the device multiple times as the drone cruises around a Restricted Operating Zone and triangulate its location to within ten metres.32 There must be other programs in operation by now, many of them more advanced and more intrusive, and to capitalize on these capabilities the NSA has developed its own version of remote split operations. While most of its work takes place in the United States, the NSA has also forward-deployed

Tier II partners which are contracted for specific projects and paid for their services; these have sometimes included third parties in Pakistan like telecommunications providers.


32 Scahill and Greenwald, “NSA’s Secret Role.”
collectors in tactical support teams that work in close concert with the CIA and the US military to identify and track targets in real time.  

Tactical intelligence is less about the nomination of targets than their geo-location: the execution of the kill list. The details of specific operations in the FATA remain classified but some information has been released. We know about the use of e-mail intercepts to establish a likely vector of safe-houses in North Waziristan used by Hassan Ghul, and in particular a message from his wife that identified a compound near Mir Ali; several days later on 1 October 2012 the al-Qaeda “facilitator” was targeted and killed by US drones riding his motorbike nearby. We know too about the use of cell phone intercepts to track Mullah Mansour as his taxi crossed the border from Iran into Baluchistan; hours later on 21 May 2016 the Taliban leader was targeted and killed by US drones. In both cases the information was presumably released because the strikes were successful, but we also know that nominated targets switch cellphones or SIM cards with friends or acquaintances and since it is the material object rather than the physical person that is tracked it is possible, even


likely for civilians to be killed instead. The US knows it too, which raises grave questions about the degree to which in such cases it is prepared—as international humanitarian law says it must—to take every feasible precaution to spare civilian life.

The likelihood of civilian casualties increases when metadata are used to identify suspicious patterns of life and to link contacts in a network of presumed complicity (“guilt by association”). This has become standard operating procedure:

The most basic analytic tools map the date, time, and location of cellphones to look for patterns or significant moments of overlap. Other tools compute speed and trajectory for large numbers of mobile devices, overlaying the electronic data on transportation maps to compute the likely travel time and determine which devices might have intersected.

This is time-geography weaponized, rhythmanalysis made lethal. The proud boast of the ubiquitous Michel Hayden—a US Air Force general who also served as director of the NSA and later director of the CIA—that “We kill

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people based on metadata” may have been hyperbole. Yet signals intelligence in all its guises has transformed the FATA into a deadly version of what Rob Kitchin and Martin Dodge call “code/space.” In the contemporary world, they argue, “software and the spatiality of everyday life have become co-dependent and co-produced” to such a degree that code/space becomes “any space that is dependent on software-driven technologies to function as intended.” For targeted killing in the FATA, all this is shunted into reverse: intentionality becomes the preserve of those doing the hunting while the intentionality of their quarry is inferred via the algorithms that drive data-mining. And in the FATA code/space functions as a threat to everyday life; it materially affects not only those who are targeted but all those who live under the constant threat of being inadvertently killed by lethal surveillance. Kitchin and Dodge also suggest that code/spaces are now “stretched out across extended network architectures, making them simultaneously local and global, grounded in certain locations but accessible from anywhere across the network, and linked together into chains that stretch across space and time to connect start and end nodes into complex webs of interactions and transactions.” In the FATA those chains are kill-chains; signals intelligence, at once global and local, has become instrumental in what the NSA calls “cueing and compressing numerous kill-chains.”

Video Feeds

If those kill-chains often depend on what Dan McQuillan calls “algorithmic seeing,” they are always ultimately triggered by the full-motion video feeds

   Death can come from the sky at any moment, and the instability and incoherence of existing legal categories means that there is no way for an individual to be certain whether he is considered targetable by the United States. (Would attending a meeting or community gathering also attended by an al-Qaida member make him targetable? Would renting a building or selling a vehicle to a member of an “associated” force render him targetable? What counts as an “associated force?” Would accepting financial or medical aid from a terrorist group make him a target? Would extending hospitality to a relative who is affiliated with a terrorist group lead the United States to consider him a target?).
42 Scahill and Greenwald, “NSA’s Secret Role.”
provided by Predators and Reapers. Each aircraft has a nose camera used by the pilot to control its flight, but it is also equipped with a multi-spectral targeting pod that is controlled by the sensor operator. This pod is the key to each strike; it has undergone several iterations and upgrades (“blocks”), but in general it comprises an infrared (monochrome) video camera and a colour/monochrome daylight video camera, together with a laser target designator and illuminator. It is this system that enables the aircraft to be so effective against what the Air Force calls “high-value, fleeting and time-sensitive targets.” Combined with their long dwell times, the video feeds returned to the United States in near real-time via a Ku-band satellite link to Ramstein Air Base in Germany and a fiber-optic cable under the Atlantic enable Predators and Reapers to track (or “find and fix”) highly mobile targets. The minimum frame rate to capture movement is 1 Hz (one frame per second); video has a frame rate of 6 – 120 Hz, and full-motion video (FMV) is defined by the Pentagon as motion imagery captured at 24 – 30 Hz or greater. The sensors have several fixed modes of magnification (there is no continuous zoom), and the standard resolution for all of them is 480 × 640 pixels. Some Reapers have been equipped with high-definition sensors that capture motion at 720 × 1280 or better, and these provide a more robust positive identification of the target (PID). No figures are available for the FATA, but for targeted killing in East Africa high-definition FMV was used in most successful “fixes” (geo-location and PID of the target) and was involved in most unsuccessful ones.

43 Cf. Nina Franz, “Targeted Killing and Pattern of Life Analysis: Weaponised Media,” Media, Culture and Society 39, no. 1 (2017): 111–121. She emphasizes that “the aerial view that transformed warfare” is no longer confined to optical media “but seeks out the patterns and schemas that arise from human populations, or rather their double—the data masses” (112).
45 Lance Menthle, Myron Hura, and Carl Rhodes, The Effectiveness of Remotely Piloted Aircraft in a Permissive Hunter-Killer Scenario (RAND Project Air Force, 2014), 17–18. The most recent iteration (2016) includes four high definition cameras covering five spectral bands. But the field of view provided by the sensors is extremely narrow (“like looking through a soda straw”), which is why in so many cases several drones are involved in a single targeted killing. There have been experiments with Wide-Angle Motion Imagery (WAMI), including the “Gorgon Stare” and ARGUS, but it is far from clear that these ever advanced beyond the experimental stage and, given their timing, it is highly unlikely that they were involved in the high-water of targeted killing in the FATA.
46 ISR Support to Small-Footprint CT Operations—Somalia/Yemen (February 2013), slide 43, https://theintercept.com/document/2015/10/15/small-footprint-operations-2-13. The criteria for “success” have not been disclosed, and so it is unclear whether this was limited to the execution of the target (a “jackpot”) or extended to the avoidance of civilian casualties.
High definition or not, the full-motion video feeds have allowed remote crews to claim time and time again that they are not thousands of miles from their targets but just eighteen inches: the distance from eye to screen. The sense of optical proximity is palpable and pervasive in their accounts. Targets are tracked for weeks, even months:

We see them playing with their dogs or doing their laundry. We know their patterns like our neighbors’ patterns. We even go to their funerals.47

This is at best a simplification, since the long loiter times of each aircraft necessitate frequent shift changes on the ground; each new crew must (re)familiarize themselves with the target (and there is no guarantee that it will be the same one). The same officer insists that through this close-in surveillance it all “somehow becomes personal.” Journalist Mark Bowden echoes his sentiments. “Drone pilots become familiar with their victims,” he writes, watching them “in the ordinary rhythms of their lives—with their wives and friends, with their children.” What he calls “the dazzling clarity of the drone’s optics” means that “war by remote control turns out to be intimate....”48

But these characterizations are doubly problematic. The drone’s optics may well be dazzling but they are far from crystal-clear. They certainly do not approach the resolution shown in films like Good Kill (2014) or Eye in the Sky (2015). The quality of the images is highly variable in time and space, depending on atmospheric conditions, bandwidth compression, and the sensor that is used.49 Infrared in particular makes it notoriously difficult to discern details, and one commentator claims that

The silent stream of images generated by warm bodies against a cold background that was filtered through security encryption and satellite relays before ultimate translation into viewable pictures was indistinct at best…. [T]he images gave only a “soda-straw” view of events, with a visual acuity of 20/200. As

49 Reception can vary too, depending on the technical capabilities that are often unevenly distributed across the kill-chain.
it so happens, this is the legal definition of blindness for drivers in the United States.\textsuperscript{50}

Even more important than these technical limitations, “intimacy” is a conceit; what is being described is violently invasive and thoroughly conditional. Most obviously, the crews and those who direct their missions can see without being seen, and Chamayou has argued that “the fact that the killer and his victim” are not inscribed in “reciprocal perceptual fields” facilitates the “administration of violence” because it ruptures what psychologist Stanley Milgram called “the experienced unity of the act.”\textsuperscript{51} The technology may be “mesmerizing,” reporter Mark Benjamin concedes, but “it also makes the process of killing another human being eerily impersonal.”\textsuperscript{52} This happens because the video feeds display what Harun Farocki calls “operative images” that “do not represent an object but are part of an operation.”\textsuperscript{53} The “impersonality” of the operation is not a function of the technology alone: what matters is its incorporation into a process—a standard operating procedure—and a chain of command that is techno-scientific and quasi-juridical. It takes crews from six to twelve months to absorb the technical mediations that sustain remote split operations, so that “you put yourself more and more in the position that this is more and more real life and that you are actually there,” one sensor operator told Omer Fast: but over the same period, he continued, “you become emotionally distant.”\textsuperscript{54} And here, in a different interview, is the same officer who earlier spoke of it becoming more “personal”:

I would couch it not in terms of an emotional connection but a ... seriousness. I have watched this individual, and regardless of how many children he has, no matter how close his wife is ... I am tasked to strike this individual. The seriousness of it is that I am going to do this and it will affect his family.\textsuperscript{55}

“Emotional distance” and “seriousness” return us to the presumptive objectivity of the scientific gaze, but the form of irruptive intimacy—a hypermasculinized


\textsuperscript{52} Mark Benjamin, “Killing ‘Bubba’ From the Skies,” \textit{Salon}, 15 February 2008, \url{http://www.salon.com/2008/02/15/air_war}; my emphasis.


\textsuperscript{54} Omar Fast, \textit{5,000 Feet is the Best} (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012), 100.

“voyeuristic intimacy”—that this licenses also militates against any identity with those whose lives are under surveillance. What it can do—and what feeds the conceit of intimacy—is turn the objects of the military gaze into marionettes and mannequins. For the videos are silent movies, and while Nasser Hussain emphasizes that “the drone hovers overhead in silence” those watching from afar—even if they claim to “know” their targets and their families—fill in the gaps with their own running commentaries and interpretations. And there is no way for them to know how accurate their ventriloquism is. Often it is distorted by a casual Orientalism—in which those under surveillance remain irredeemably Other, their patterns of life forming “a living tableau of queerness,” as Edward Said once put it—and by a predisposition to reduce commonplace actions to imminent threats in what has already been construed as a hostile landscape. The same is true of visual identifications; even if the video stream were crystal-clear it could not turn the FATA into a transparent space in which the identities and roles of the figures on the screen become self-evident. Visuality is always a techno-cultural process, which means that “terrorists,” “militants” and “civilians” are not somehow “found” in the image stream but are instead produced through the inferences drawn by those watching their external signs and the conversations that shape the conclusions they draw. The political technology that constitutes the territory of the screen thus not only invites but also requires those using it to transcribe their codes and conventions onto what then becomes a killable body enclosed by the terrible violence of the state.

I Saw a Man (Who Wasn’t There)

Shortly after 9/11 Michael Dillon identified what he saw as “a fundamental change in the corporeal imagination of martial presence”:

> Throughout the modern period military bodies have been disciplinary bodies. Now they aspire to be digital ones.
> Domination remains the desire that animates them—shock and awe in the battlespace, hegemony ingeospace—but since the desire is increasingly mediated through radically different

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digital practices, the corporeality it engenders is undergoing transformation as well. A novel politico-cultural economy of martial desire is enabled here … in which materiality has become code….

As military embodiment pursues the intelligence incarnate offered by the information and molecular revolutions, power over life becomes allied with power over death in a complex convergence of sovereign geopolitics with global biopolitics gone digital.59

You can perhaps see something of this at work in the datastreams that feed the kill lists, the signals squeezed out of the noise of innumerable intercepts, and the digital technologies that animate the video feeds. Even so, I think it vital to underscore how these biopolitical technologies de-corporealize their targets, turning them into “men that weren’t there.” The corporeal is transformed into the calculative, and through a process of somatic abstraction the fleshiness and bloodiness of the targets—those “killable bodies”—become smears on a screen. In a sobering essay Joseph Pugliese has argued that in the very moment of execution those transformations are not simply, suddenly reversed but displaced into a generic flesh. And there is a clear implication that those displacements are pre-figured in the original de-corporealization of the target.60

This makes it even more important not to follow Daniel—and all the other Daniel—and lose ourselves in the territory of the screen; still less to confine our analysis to what lies behind it. For we also need to focus on what lies in front of it, and to realize that its materialities—and the interpellations it sets in motion—are always entangled with another territory that seeks the power of life and death over fleshy human bodies in densely biophysical spaces.61

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61 I elaborate these claims in “Meatspace?” see https://geographicalimaginations.com/2017/02/08/meatspace/.
ENTERTAINING GENIUS:  
U.S. MEDIA REPRESENTATIONS OF EXCEPTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

JULIE B. WIEST

Introduction

We learn how to assign meanings to things, experiences, behaviours, and even ourselves through the socialization process, and mass media as an agency of socialization are particularly influential. Despite decades of studies in media representation, with scholars examining portrayals of a wide array of social groups and phenomena and those portrayals’ effects on public perceptions, studies of what constitutes exceptional intelligence have been extremely light. Most people can identify real and fictional people that are considered highly intelligent, but less clear are the reasons and processes by which meanings about exceptional intelligence are established and shared. This study helps to fill that gap by: (1) uncovering patterned characteristics of highly intelligent characters as represented in U.S. entertainment media, and (2) identifying links between those patterns of representation and larger social structures.

Exceptional intelligence is discussed in the literature in a variety of ways. Education scholars offer the most-thorough examinations, particularly in relation to student achievement on standardized assessments (e.g., Jacob, 2001) and educational promotion within schools (e.g., Anagnostopoulos, 2006; O’Connor, 1999, 2001). Some scholars have focused on the influence of group membership and social location on intellectual development (Berger, Cohen, & Zelditch, 1972; Farber, 1965; Hunt & Carlson, 2007). Other studies link aspects of social location to perceptions of intelligence. For example, some scholars point to the long-held cultural stereotypes of deficient intelligence among African-Americans (Banks & Jewell, 1995) and hyper-intelligence of Asian-Americans (Nagoshi, 1998). And scholars interested in the links between gender roles and intelligence demonstrate that the “nerd girl” can be understood as “an alternative to the pressures of hegemonic femininity” (Bucholtz, 1999, p. 213) and the male nerd as both challenging and complementing hegemonic masculinity (Kendall, 2000). A few scholars have studied nerds as a distinct

Because it is difficult to measure, intelligence is sometimes studied vis-à-vis other presumably related characteristics. For example, Mayer, Caruso, Zigler, and Dreyden (1989) constructed the Intellectual Experience Scale to measure intelligence using a number of “intelligence-related” characteristics, including degree of intellectual absorption, intellectual confidence, intellectual curiosity, intellectual values and pleasure, and intuitive and insightful thought.

Sternberg and Grigorenko (2004) argue that intelligence cannot be understood without examining the cultural context in which it is defined. In an earlier study, Sternberg, Conway, Ketron, and Bernstein (1981) found a tendency among Americans to define exceptional intelligence as having practical problem-solving abilities, strong verbal abilities, and social competence. In contrast, scholars studying non-Western definitions of intelligence have uncovered different meanings. African and Indian conceptions of high intelligence tend to focus on skills that foster group relations and focus on achieving a common goal (Ruzgis & Grigorenko, 1994; Srivastava & Misra, 2001). And Chen (1994) found that Chinese conceptions of high intelligence emphasize verbal and nonverbal reasoning abilities and rote memory.

Studies of media representation compose an extensive body of literature. Within U.S. entertainment media alone, scholars have examined representations of Native Americans in films, television, and literature (Fitzgerald, 2010; Meek, 2006); salespeople in films and television (Hartman, 2006); people with Attention Deficit Disorder on television (England-Kennedy, 2008); stepfamilies in films (Leon & Angst, 2005); virginity loss in films (Carpenter, 2009); gender-role behaviour on primetime television (Hess & Grant, 1983); African-American stereotypes in films (Hughey, 2009); and the Middle East in films and television after 9/11 (Hirchi, 2007). Some scholars have examined portrayals of various groups on specific television shows or films: Merskin (2007) examined portrayals of Latina women on the show Desperate Housewives; Van Damme and Van Bauwel (2010) looked at gender stereotypes on the teen show One Tree Hill; Avila-Saavedra (2010) explored U.S.-Latinx identity on the show Ugly Betty; Hatfield (2010) examined hegemonic masculinity on the show Two and a Half Men; Hirji (2011) looked at representations of Muslim women on the shows 24, Lost, and Little Mosque on the Prairie; Weaver (2004) examined rape discourses in the film The Accused; and Downing (2007) looked at terrorism portrayals on the show 24.

Several studies were found that examine media representations of groups relevant to the current study, though none focuses on representations in
film. Wilson and Latterell (2001) compared children’s perceptions of mathematicians to popular media portrayals of the group, finding that both tend to cast mathematicians as nerdy men, brilliant but often frustrated, physically unattractive, obsessed with their work, with few friends and poor social skills. They argue that this characterization is not only unrealistic but that it suggests a media effect that could be discouraging young people from enjoying math and/or pursuing it as a career. Similarly, Franzini (2008) argues that teen television shows represent characters as either “cool” or “smart,” but rarely both, suggesting that scholarly intelligence and social intelligence are fundamentally opposed. Examining representations of exceptional intelligence in prime-time fictional television shows, Kahlenberg (2008) found that most highly intelligent characters were male, young or middle aged, members of the middle or upper class, overrepresented in professional and law enforcement occupations, with little to no sense of humour. Kahlenberg (2008) also identified three different kinds of intelligence represented on prime-time television shows: academic, practical, and technical intelligence.

Several scholars have examined representations of the “nerd” on television. Bednarek (2012) explored the “nerd” stereotype in her examination of the main character (Sheldon Cooper) on the show The Big Bang Theory. She argues that Western media frequently present nerds and geeks as young, white males with particular characteristics: (1) intelligent and studious; (2) an interest in, obsession with, or knowledge of all things technological or scientific, especially relating to computers; (3) an interest in science fiction and fantasy; (4) obsessive-compulsive or Asperger-like behaviour; (5) socially inept or awkward; (6) unattractive, in terms of weight or wearing glasses and/or unfashionable clothing; (7) physically awkward or unfit; and (8) sexually inactive or a virgin (Bednarek, 2012, pp. 203–204). Randell-Moon (2008, p. 181) identifies media representations of “nerds” as linked to academic intelligence (rather than other forms of intelligence such as practical knowledge) and describes the status as “socially marginalizing.”

Nearly all scholars who examine media representations of various groups and phenomena argue that these portrayals reinforce cultural stereotypes and/or are at least somewhat distorted versions of reality. No study was found that suggests these media portrayals are unreasonably positive, but some suggest that the representations are qualitatively negative (e.g., Hartman, 2006; Hirchi, 2007; Meek, 2006; Randell-Moon, 2008; Thomas & Holderman, 2008). For example, Thomas and Holderman (2008, p. 31) argue that popular media portray intellectuals as “life’s losers” and exceptional intelligence as contrary to beauty, sexiness, stylishness, gracefulness, and happiness. Only one study was found (McVittie & McKinlay, 2013) that examined the ways in which members
of a group portrayed in media (in this case, psychiatrists) responded to their misrepresentation, suggesting that the representations are often one-sided.

Clearly, much research has examined meanings related to intelligence, as well as media representations of myriad groups and characteristics, but few scholars have linked the two. Little is known about how exceptional intelligence is portrayed in U.S. mass media, particularly when the subjects of those portrayals would not be characterized as “nerds.” Mass media (especially entertainment media) are a significant agency of socialization, imparting cultural messages that shape public consciousness. It is important to pay close attention to the meanings transmitted within those messages, especially as they link to public perceptions and behaviours. This study helps fill a gap in this literature, specifically by addressing the following research questions: How are exceptionally intelligent characters represented in U.S. entertainment television shows and films? And what meanings about intelligence are constructed and/or reinforced via these media representations of exceptionally intelligent television and film characters?

**Theoretical Framework**

The perspectives of symbolic interactionism and social constructionism, as well as media effects studies, help clarify the role of media in creating and perpetuating social reality and, thus, formed the guiding theoretical framework for this study. The symbolic interactionist perspective emphasizes the social processes through which humans learn to interpret their world. From this perspective, humans do not merely respond to stimuli in their environment, but they respond to an object, person, or event based on the meaning they have assigned to it/them (Blumer, 1969). According to Blumer (1969), meanings are not inherent in things, people, or situations but are conferred through social processes of interpretation, communication, and interaction. In other words, we must learn from others what things mean, how to interpret meaning in varying conditions, and how to respond in socially acceptable ways. This meaning-making process shapes human behaviour.

We learn how to assign meaning to things we encounter through the socialization process and various agents of socialization (e.g., family members, teachers, peers, religious leaders, etc.). Mass media are a particularly influential agency of socialization because of their enormous reach. In 2012, the average U.S. adult spent 13.6 hours per day consuming mass media, including watching television, listening to radio, making or receiving voice calls, using desktop computers, using mobile computers (including laptops, smartphones, and
tablets), and gaming (Short, 2013). The largest percentage of this time—40 percent—was spent watching television (Short, 2013).

Scholars have studied media consumption for decades, and there is general agreement that mass media (particularly television) play a prominent role in the construction of social reality (e.g., Fox & Philliber, 1978; Gamson, Croteau, Hoynes, & Sasson, 1992; Gerbner, 1998; Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1986; Hall, 1975; Massoni, 2004; O’Guinn & Shrum, 1997; Samaniego & Pascual, 2007; Smythe, 1954). Kellner (1995) argues that mass media have a profound influence on people’s perceptions of their world, social groups, and even themselves. The decades-long Cultural Indicators Project, from which cultivation analysis developed, found that heavy television viewership has a substantial influence on viewers’ perceptions of the world (Gerbner, 1998; Gerbner et al., 1986; Gerbner, Gross, Signorielli, & Morgan, 1980; Hawkins, Pingree, & Adler, 1987). And film scholars have drawn similar conclusions (e.g., Carpenter, 2009).

Many of the misconceptions held by heavy media consumers illustrate cultural stereotypes that perpetuate social inequalities (Sanders & Ramasubramanian, 2012). In particular, scholars who have examined representations related to race (Avila-Saavedra, 2010; Ford, 1997; Hughey, 2009; Merskin, 2007; Saunders, 2008; Sinkiewicz & Marx, 2009) and gender roles (Andrae, 1996; Caputi & Sagle, 2004; Hart, 2008; Hatfield, 2010; Hess & Grant, 1983; Kahlenberg, 2008; Romm, 1986; Van Damme & Van Bouwel, 2010) argue that the portrayals help perpetuate constructs of social power that advantage whites and men. The Cultural Indicators Project found that the overrepresentation of powerful groups (whites, men, the middle-aged, and those with higher occupational prestige) on television does influence viewers’ perceptions of these real-life groups (Gerbner, 1998). And these influences do not just affect individuals’ perceptions of out-group members, but evidence suggests that they also influence perceptions of one’s in-group (Jeffres, Atkin, Lee, & Neuendorf, 2011; Sanders & Ramasubramanian, 2012).

In sum, mass media constitute a prominent agency of socialization, media representations are often distorted versions of reality, and these representations influence public perceptions about the world, social groups, and even one’s own identity. This provides the guiding framework and rationale for this study of highly intelligent characters in television and film, suggesting that media portrayals may create and maintain meanings about exceptional intelligence, who is considered highly intelligent (and who isn’t), and how individuals may (or may not) identify themselves that way.
Data and Method

This study employs a qualitative content analysis to explore meanings about exceptional intelligence, especially as those meanings are transmitted in entertainment media via representations of highly intelligent fictional characters. In contrast to real people who appear on news shows, talk shows, reality shows, and documentaries, fictional characters are media creations that are rather tightly controlled. They typically appear in only one television show or film, and audiences thus receive a relatively consistent representation. Further, communication scholars who study “entertainment-education” strategies (e.g., Singhal, Rogers, & Brown, 1993; Singhal, Wang, & Rogers, 2013) have found that embedding persuasive messages in entertainment media content can be highly effective in shaping consumer attitudes and behaviours. This suggests that media messages meant to entertain can be at least as influential in shaping cultural meaning as media messages that more overtly intend to educate and/or persuade; thus, entertainment media are important sites for social research.

Because no academic studies were found that examined broad media portrayals of exceptionally intelligent characters (i.e., in multiple television shows and/or multiple films), there was no precedent for compiling a sampling frame from which to draw characters for analysis. Therefore, I started with an Internet search, using terms such as “smart TV characters,” “smart movie characters,” “smart fictional characters,” and “genius characters.” This led to quite a few lists composed by both professional and amateur writers/critics with titles including: “The Top 25 Smartest TV Characters,” “The 10 Smartest Characters on Television,” “Top 10 Amazingly Intelligent Characters in Movies,” and “Top 10 Fictional Geniuses.” I searched for and examined these lists until I had reached the point of saturation and was no longer seeing new names. I then composed a list of 40 characters that appeared most often across these lists.

Using that final list as my sampling frame, I employed the purposive sampling method to obtain a manageable sample of 20 characters, including 10 from television shows and 10 from films (see table below). In doing so, I looked for variety in age, occupation, and socioeconomic status of the characters, as well as variety in show/film genre, production years, and show format (e.g., half-hour sitcom, hour-long drama, etc.). In addition, because the literature indicates a strong influence of gender and race in media constructions of intelligence (i.e., most highly intelligent characters are portrayed as white males), I attempted to increase the gender and racial diversity of the sample by including an equal number of male and female characters and every nonwhite
character in the sampling frame. Despite these efforts, however, only one character in the sample—Olivia Pope—is not white.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHARACTER</th>
<th>TITLE</th>
<th>YEAR(S)</th>
<th>GENRE</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Television show characters</strong></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Temperance Brennan</td>
<td><em>Bones</em> (Fox)</td>
<td>2005–</td>
<td>Crime drama (hour)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sheldon Cooper</td>
<td><em>The Big Bang Theory</em> (CBS)</td>
<td>2007–</td>
<td>Comedy (½ hour)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Amy Farrah Fowler</td>
<td><em>The Big Bang Theory</em> (CBS)</td>
<td>2007–</td>
<td>Comedy (½ hour)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gregory House</td>
<td><em>House M.D.</em> (Fox)</td>
<td>2004–2012</td>
<td>Medical drama (hour)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leslie Knope</td>
<td><em>Parks &amp; Recreation</em> (NBC)</td>
<td>2009–2015</td>
<td>Comedy (½ hour)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adrian Monk</td>
<td><em>Monk</em> (USA)</td>
<td>2002–2009</td>
<td>Crime drama/comedy (hour)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Olivia Pope</td>
<td><em>Scandal</em> (ABC)</td>
<td>2012–</td>
<td>Political drama (hour)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Spencer Reid</td>
<td><em>Criminal Minds</em> (CBS)</td>
<td>2005–</td>
<td>Crime drama (hour)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lisa Simpson</td>
<td><em>The Simpsons</em> (Fox)</td>
<td>1989–</td>
<td>Animated comedy (½ hour)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Walter White</td>
<td><em>Breaking Bad</em> (AMC)</td>
<td>2008–2013</td>
<td>Crime drama (hour)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Film characters</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Ray Babbitt</td>
<td><em>Rain Man</em></td>
<td>1988</td>
<td>Drama</td>
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<td>Erin Brockovich</td>
<td><em>Erin Brockovich</em></td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>Drama</td>
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<td>Katniss Everdeen</td>
<td><em>The Hunger Games</em></td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>Adventure/thriller</td>
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<td>Hermione Granger</td>
<td><em>Harry Potter</em></td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>Fantasy</td>
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<td>Will Hunting</td>
<td><em>Good Will Hunting</em></td>
<td>1997</td>
<td>Drama</td>
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<td>Hannibal Lecter</td>
<td><em>The Silence of the Lambs</em></td>
<td>1991</td>
<td>Crime drama</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John Nash</td>
<td><em>A Beautiful Mind</em></td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>Drama</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lisbeth Salander</td>
<td><em>The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo</em></td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>Drama/thriller</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tony Stark</td>
<td><em>Iron Man</em></td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>Action/fantasy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clarice Starling</td>
<td><em>The Silence of the Lambs</em></td>
<td>1991</td>
<td>Crime drama</td>
</tr>
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</table>
To study representations of the 20 characters, I selected the qualitative content analysis method, which is frequently employed for in-depth examinations of media content. The approach consists of a search for underlying patterns or meanings in the content under study (Bryman, 2001), guided by broad research questions and loose categories or themes. I developed analysis categories based on the study’s research questions and guided by the literature and theoretical framework. They included demographic categories (character’s occupation, gender, age, race, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, dis/ability status, and religious affiliation); indications of each character’s intelligence (i.e., what makes him/her super-smart?); descriptions of the character and his/her daily life (i.e., main interests or hobbies, relationships with others, emotional displays, leadership roles, and orientation toward rules, laws, and policies); evidence of intelligence-related characteristics; evidence of characteristics associated with the nerd stereotype; as well as an “other” category for any additional observations.

In addition to my own analysis of the 20 characters using the categories just described, I also enlisted help from 10 undergraduate research assistants. Each assistant first received training on the method and analysis categories, and then was assigned two characters to analyze. They were instructed to watch each film or selected television show episodes at least twice while recording observations. No previous studies were found that suggested an appropriate number of television show episodes to analyze for a qualitative content analysis, so I selected the number of episodes by matching the viewing time (minus advertising) to an average feature-length film. Thus, those analyzing television shows selected a minimum of three episodes for one-hour shows and six episodes for half-hour shows. Particular episodes were selected by analysts according to convenience and accessibility (e.g., some borrowed a season on DVD from the university library; others watched whatever episodes were available via Netflix or Hulu). This increased the overall number of episodes included in the analysis, since at least three people observed each character and picked their own episodes. When data collection was complete, all written observations were reviewed and checked for reliability. The findings below describe only the observations on which all three observers (myself and the two assistants assigned to that character) agreed.
Findings

Character Demographics

Age. Characters represent a range of ages, though most are under 40 years and none is older than 60 years. Three characters are children: Lisa Simpson (8 year-old), Hermione Granger (11), and Katniss Everdeen (16). Eleven characters are between ages 20 and 39: Will Hunting (20–21), Lisbeth Salander (23), Spencer Reid (20s), Clarice Starling (late 20s or early 30s), Erin Brockovich (30s), Sheldon Cooper (30s), Amy Farrah Fowler (30s), Olivia Pope (late 30s), Temperance Brennan (late 30s), Leslie Knope (late 30s), and Tony Stark (late 30s). Five characters are between ages 40 and 59: Raymond Babbit (40s), Walter White (50), Gregory House (50s), Hannibal Lecter (50s), and Adrian Monk (50s). The character John Nash was excluded from the analysis of age, as the film in which he appears chronicles his life from young adulthood to old age.

Socioeconomic status. Most characters appear to have middle to high socioeconomic status, as estimated by occupational prestige, educational attainment, and approximate income and wealth. Just five characters would be considered lower status: Erin Brockovich, Katniss Everdeen, Will Hunting, Lisbeth Salander, and Lisa Simpson.

Gender performance. Including an equal number of male and female characters in the final sample proved valuable, as there are some clear differences in the ways highly intelligent male characters and highly intelligent female characters are represented. Female characters’ femininity tended to be downplayed in various ways or even almost absent. Four of the female characters—Erin Brockovich, Leslie Knope, Olivia Pope, and Lisa Simpson—demonstrate idealized femininity in several ways (e.g., wearing feminine clothing, showing a range of emotions, and valuing and investing in their personal relationships), but they also violate idealized femininity in others ways. For example, Knope and Pope have high-status careers; Brockovich is loud, foul-mouthed, and does not relate well to other women; and all are strong-willed, independent, and outspoken. The other six female characters—Temperance Brennan, Katniss Everdeen, Amy Farrah Fowler, Hermione Granger, Lisbeth Salander, and Clarice Starling—demonstrate very few aspects of idealized femininity. For example, Brennan works with dead bodies and does not mind getting dirty; Everdeen is a skilled hunter and recoils at compliments on her appearance; Starling is exceptionally brave and strong; all are independent and strong-willed; all show very little emotion; and none wears traditionally feminine clothing or much (if any) makeup or jewellery. In contrast, most of the male characters fit many aspects of hegemonic...
masculinity, with three—Will Hunting, Tony Stark, and Walter White—demonstrating almost hyper-masculinity with their good looks, charm, strength, and/or strong sexual drive. Just two male characters—Sheldon Cooper and Adrian Monk—demonstrate very few aspects of hegemonic masculinity. For example, Cooper is physically weak and has no sexual experience or interest, and Monk is uncomfortable around women, does not know how to shoot guns, and does not demonstrate a desire for dominance or control.

**Sexual orientation.** Nineteen of the 20 characters are heterosexual, though not all participate in sexual activity or demonstrate sexual interest. Seven characters appear almost asexual, though there are hints (e.g., references to ex-partners or mild flirtations with the opposite sex) about their heterosexuality: Raymond Babbit, Sheldon Cooper, Hermione Granger, Hannibal Lecter, Adrian Monk, Spencer Reid, and Clarice Starling. Just one character is not heterosexual: Lisbeth Salander appears to identify as bisexual or queer, as she is shown sleeping with a woman and a man during the film.

**Occupation.** Of the 17 characters who are over age 18, most fit into a narrow range of occupations. The largest occupational group includes eight scientists or doctors: Temperance Brennan (forensic anthropologist), Sheldon Cooper (physicist), Amy Farrah Fowler (neurobiologist), Gregory House (medical doctor), Hannibal Lecter (former psychiatrist), John Nash (mathematician and professor), Tony Stark (scientist and inventor), and Walter White (former chemist and high school chemistry teacher). The second-largest occupational group includes six characters in government and/or criminal justice roles: Leslie Knope (deputy city parks director and member of city council), Adrian Monk (private detective), Olivia Pope (political strategist), Spencer Reid (FBI agent and criminal profiler), Lisbeth Salander (investigator and computer hacker), and Clarice Starling (FBI agent-in-training). Two characters work in what would be considered blue-collar jobs (Erin Brockovich is an officer worker, and Will Hunting is a janitor and construction worker), and one is unemployed (Raymond Babbit).

**Dis/ability status.** A disproportionately large number of characters appear to have mental or developmental disabilities. Three demonstrate symptoms of autism (Raymond Babbit, Sheldon Cooper, and Spencer Reid). Two demonstrate symptoms of obsessive compulsive disorder (Cooper and Adrian Monk). In addition, John Nash has schizophrenia, Hannibal Lecter is a cannibal, Gregory House has a drug addiction, and Lisbeth Salandar discusses her possible insanity. Just one character has a physical disability: Because of an injury, Tony Stark requires an electrical energy source to keep pieces of shrapnel out of his heart.
Religious affiliation. No character is overtly religious. One character (Lisa Simpson) is Buddhist after converting from Christianity, and one (Temperance Brennan) is a proclaimed atheist. For the other 18 characters, religion appears to play no role in their lives. No affiliation is suggested for any of them aside from two characters (Leslie Knope and Hermione Granger) celebrating Christmas, but this should not necessarily be considered an expression of Christian faith. According to the Pew Research Center (2013a), about 90 percent of Americans celebrate Christmas, but only about half consider it mostly a religious holiday.

Explanations of Intelligence

A variety of characteristics are used to indicate the characters’ intelligence, though three fit a majority of characters: being exceptionally logical, analytical, and/or intuitive (fits 13 characters), having a high IQ (fits 11 characters), and having an ability to think on one’s feet, perform under pressure, and/or being exceptionally clever (fits 11 characters). Other indicators of intelligence for these characters include: having advanced knowledge in his/her field (fits nine characters), having a good vocabulary or being well-spoken (fits eight characters), having advanced knowledge of art, literature, and/or classical music (fits eight characters), being innovative or a problem-solver (fits six characters), manipulating or fooling others (fits five characters), and having an exceptional memory (fits four characters).

Interests and Hobbies

Half of the characters had few or no apparent interests or hobbies outside of their occupation: Temperance Brennan, Erin Brockovich, Sheldon Cooper, Gregory House, Adrian Monk, John Nash, Olivia Pope, Spencer Reid, Lisbeth Salander, and Clarice Starling. Six characters enjoyed studying subjects unrelated to their occupation during free time. Activities that five or six characters enjoyed included reading and spending time with family and friends. Activities that two or three characters enjoyed included watching television and/or films, listening to or playing music, video chatting, art or museums, volunteering or civic engagement, and physical activity.

Relationships with Others

Most of the characters (13 out of 20) have few or no close friends, though this appeared to be for different reasons. Of these, just one character is an almost total loner (Lisbeth Salander) and one is generally disliked by others (Gregory House), but 11 appear to be mostly liked by others and capable of fitting in
during most social situations (Raymond Babbit, Erin Brockovich, Katniss Everdeen, Hannibal Lecter, Adrian Monk, John Nash, Spencer Reid, Lisa Simpson, Tony Stark, Clarice Starling, and Walter White). Five characters have a handful of close friends (Temperance Brennan, Sheldon Cooper, Amy Farrah Fowler, Hermione Granger, and Will Hunting), and just two—both female characters—appear to be socially well-adjusted with many friends (Leslie Knope and Olivia Pope). Interestingly, only four characters appear to have close relationships with family members (Raymond Babbit, Katniss Everdeen, Lisa Simpson, and Walter White). Almost all have difficulty managing or maintaining romantic relationships.

**Emotional Displays**

Most of the characters (14 out of 20) demonstrate abnormal emotional displays. Eight of these display extremely subdued or no emotion (with the most common emotional displays being excitement over their work or frustration with others): Temperance Brennan, Sheldon Cooper, Amy Farrah Fowler, Gregory House, Adrian Monk, Spencer Reid, Clarice Starling, and Walter White. Five characters demonstrate limited but strong emotions (mostly anger, fear, and sadness): Raymond Babbit, Will Hunting, Hannibal Lecter, Lisbeth Salander, and Tony Stark. Four characters display inappropriate emotional responses for given situations (all also appear to have mental or developmental disorders): Raymond Babbit, Sheldon Cooper, Adrian Monk, and John Nash. The six characters who display normative emotions are all female: Erin Brockovich, Katniss Everdeen, Hermione Granger, Leslie Knope, Olivia Pope, and Lisa Simpson.

**Leadership Roles**

The characters are almost evenly split in terms of whether or not they are represented as leaders. Eleven characters occupy leadership roles: Temperance Brennan, Erin Brockovich, Katniss Everdeen, Hermione Granger, Will Hunting, Leslie Knope, Olivia Pope, Lisa Simpson, Tony Stark, Clarice Starling, and Walter White. A greater proportion of female characters are represented as leaders (8 out of 10), compared to male characters (3 out of 10).

**Orientation towards Rules, Laws, and Policies**

Again, characters are almost evenly split in terms of their orientation as either “rule followers” or “rule breakers,” with slightly more of the latter. Twelve characters frequently break various kinds of rules (e.g., laws, policies, and
social norms): Raymond Babbit, Erin Brockovich, Katniss Everdeen, Gregory House, Will Hunting, Hannibal Lecter, Adrian Monk, John Nash, Olivia Pope, Lisbeth Salander, Tony Stark, and Walter White. In this case, a greater proportion of male characters are represented as rule breakers (8 out of 10), compared to female characters (4 out of 10). Examining this category with the preceding one reveals interesting findings. Among those considered leaders, there are slightly more rule breakers (six) than rule followers (five), and all of the rule-following leaders are female characters.

**Intelligence-Related and “Nerd” Characteristics**

Most of the five intelligence-related characteristics identified in the literature are demonstrated by the characters in this study. Fourteen characters demonstrate intellectual absorption; all 20 demonstrate intellectual confidence, 18 demonstrate intellectual curiosity, 11 demonstrate intellectual values and pleasure, and 18 demonstrate intuitive and insightful thought.

In contrast, the “nerd” characteristics identified in the literature did not fit many of the characters studied. Six characters demonstrate an interest in, obsession with, or knowledge of all things technological or scientific; three demonstrate an interest in sci-fi, fantasy, and/or related activities; seven demonstrate social ineptness or awkwardness; four are unattractive in terms of weight and/or unfashionable clothing; and five are physically awkward or unfit. Two characters (Sheldon Cooper and Spencer Reid) demonstrate all five characteristics, and two others (Will Hunting and Walter White) demonstrate near-perfect opposition to these characteristics.

**Discussion**

Like other studies of media representation, this study uncovered narrow and mostly stereotypical representations of highly intelligent characters in U.S. entertainment media. This study contributes to knowledge about underlying meanings regarding exceptional intelligence in U.S. culture, as indicated by mass media representations. Specifically, the findings indicate what exceptional intelligence means in U.S. culture, as well as who is exceptionally intelligent (and who is not).

As indicated by Sternberg and colleagues (1981), exceptional intelligence itself is narrowly defined, as it is linked to some attributes and not others. In particular, this study indicates that the definition of exceptional intelligence in U.S. culture includes: a high IQ; extraordinary capacities for
logical, analytical, and/or intuitive thought; and a remarkable ability to control situations and perform under pressure. Secondary to those characteristics are advanced knowledge in one’s field; a good vocabulary or eloquence; advanced knowledge of art, literature, and/or classical music; problem-solving capabilities; the capacity to manipulate others; and an exceptional memory.

Consistent with Kahlenberg’s (2008) findings, exceptional intelligence appears to also mean the acquisition of purposeful, practical knowledge, as evidenced by the absence of one intelligence-related characteristic among characters in the sample: intellectual values and pleasure (i.e., the enjoyment of learning and pursuing knowledge for its own sake). Also absent from the cultural definition of exceptional intelligence are characteristics like kindness, generosity, selflessness, courage, and well-roundedness.

Demographic characteristics of highly intelligent characters in this study appear to fit those identified by previous studies (e.g., Kahlenberg, 2008). A profile of a typical highly intelligent character represented in U.S. entertainment media appears to be: a white male (or unfeminine female) who is between 30 and 60 years old, heterosexual though with limited sexual interest, a member of the middle or upper class who works as a doctor or scientist, unable or unwilling to maintain close social relationships or show emotions, uninterested in hobbies, not religious, and exceptionally intuitive, clever, confident, and focused. Summarizing common characteristics of highly intelligent people as indicated by media portrayals not only illustrates cultural ideas about who is highly intelligent, but it also reveals connections between these ideals and social power constructs in the U.S., particularly with regard to age, class, occupational status, sexual orientation, and gender.

Most of the characters in the sample are under 40 years old and none is older than 60 years, suggesting that exceptional intelligence is related to youth. This notion is linked to ageist ideology in U.S. culture, especially the idea that mental capabilities decline in later adulthood. Further, several of the characters are identified as child prodigies (John Nash, Will Hunting, Tony Stark, Spencer Reid, and Lisa Simpson), emphasizing the connection between intelligence and youth.

Most of the characters appear to have middle to high socioeconomic status and work in high-status occupations. This suggests that exceptional intelligence is related to occupational prestige, educational attainment, income, and wealth, all of which are highly valued in U.S. culture. In addition, all but one of the characters are heterosexual, albeit many with subdued sexual interest, suggesting that intelligence is related to a privileged sexual orientation, as well as the value of self-denial.
Consistent with previous studies (e.g., Hart, 2008; Kahlenberg, 2008), there are important differences in the representations of male and female characters. First, exceptional intelligence seems to be a component of masculinity but not femininity. The very meaning of exceptional intelligence in U.S. culture is more closely related to aspects of hegemonic masculinity (which emphasizes logical thought, control, and confidence) than idealized femininity (which emphasizes sentimental thought, passivity, and modesty). Most of the highly intelligent male characters were still represented as masculine and fit many of the ideals of hegemonic masculinity, but every highly intelligent female character deviated from idealized femininity in some way, many characters substantially so. In addition, the male characters were given more autonomy with regard to how they apply their intelligence, as they were not as often portrayed as leaders or rule followers. For the female characters, in contrast, there was a greater expectation for them to share their intellectual gifts for the good of others, as they frequently are portrayed as both leaders and rule followers. This difference highlights traditional gender roles, particularly the expectation of female altruism and the tolerance of male self-centeredness.

Although race could not be adequately analyzed in this study because of lack of representation, it is worth noting that the only nonwhite character in the study, a Black female (Olivia Pope), is one of few nonwhite characters on the show (Scandal) and is in a subordinated role as the employee and mistress of a powerful white man (the president of the United States). Both of these observations appear to fit within current U.S. power structures that privilege whiteness (and maleness).

Finally, consistent with previous studies (e.g., Franzini, 2008; Thomas & Holderman, 2008), the findings suggest a stigma of sorts for highly intelligent people in U.S. culture. Although the characters in this study are largely not portrayed as “nerds,” they are represented as different from “the rest of us” in ways that likely would be defined as undesirable. One example of this is how exceptional intelligence appears to be linked to a lack of religious affiliation, as about 80 percent of the U.S. population is religiously affiliated (Pew Research Center, 2013b). Exceptional intelligence also appears to be linked to mental disabilities, poor relationships with others, and limited emotional capacity (especially for men), all considered undesirable or deviant in U.S. culture. Lastly, exceptional intelligence appears to be linked to an obsession and total absorption in one’s work, with few outside interests or hobbies, which contrasts with the cultural value of moderation and a belief in the importance of a “work-life balance.”
There are several possible implications to the narrow ways in which exceptional intelligence and highly intelligent people are represented in U.S. entertainment media and defined in U.S. culture. As indicated in the literature, media portrayals help create and maintain meanings about various groups and social characteristics. Extremely narrow representations of highly intelligent people in U.S. entertainment media could contribute to public perceptions about intelligence that support current power structures and further subjugate subordinate groups. These representations also may serve to stigmatize exceptional intelligence in ways that discourage intellectual pursuits. Further, forms of intelligence and related characteristics that do not fit culturally defined intelligence may not be recognized, limiting opportunities for many.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research
Several limitations to this study should be considered in assessing its findings and when designing similar studies in the future. First, the sampling method inadvertently composed a sample of almost entirely white characters, which substantially reduced the study’s ability to identify influences from cultural meanings related to race. However, this does reveal an important lack of racial diversity in published lists of highly intelligent characters that should be examined in future research. This could be related to the well-documented underrepresentation of people of colour in entertainment media (particularly in positive roles) or possibly the characteristics or interests of the list-writers. Future research should consider employing a method that draws a more inclusive sample to enhance understanding and comparison of diverse portrayals of exceptional intelligence.

In addition, a qualitative content analysis is a limited data-collection method in that it can only be used to describe content under study and cannot be used to infer effects of that content. Other scholars have identified media-based influences on public perceptions of social groups and characteristics, but more research is needed to identify any social, cultural, political, economic, or psychological effects of these narrow media representations of exceptional intelligence.

Finally, this study only examined representations in U.S. television shows and films; future studies could promote deeper understanding of the links between media representations of exceptional intelligence and cultural meaning by examining media content outside the U.S.
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References


Words, my friends, are alive. They do things to us, we must not forget it. They sentence us to lifetimes of stories: names: sorries

Words lie with us in bed

tell / touch \ tremble
like a lover’s hand

Words leave traces of heat
afternoon brilliance after contact after-
taste of “I love you”

Words hunger make love longer
twenty-six candles lit, burning
the persistent, painful chronology of time

Words, my friends, are violent. They break us apart

Words war kidnap | kill drop bombs | build walls
exile || exclude || execute || bodies ||

bodies of bodies, beaten: bloody bodies: bone buttes, gun-blazed:

When the laser beam of the sniper settled on my grandmother’s sunflower hijab, red the words “Muslim” and “Bosanka” shot her dead.

rahmetli nena: late grandma

Words come too late
tardive stories: names: sorries
Her name was Šuhra Fejžić
before the words “I do,” changed her life “gave her in”
hers maiden name was Šuhra Husović, my nena

Words, my friends, are bridges—on my nena’s grave, curved symbols: waves, branches, suns—Arabic, a language not my language—a language not my language, living on my tongue, taste of pita krompiruša

Words (repair), relieve, re-live us “to give up desire or power to punish,” etymology of Forgive to “give in” to words, foreign yet familiar

أسرة
حب
سلام