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Securocratic wars of public safety
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New strategies for the reproduction of American state sovereignty have emerged in the last decade or so which can be characterized as de-territorialized campaigns of public safety. These wars are not exclusively focused on territorial conquest, or on an easily locatable or identifiable enemy with its own respective goals of territorial conquest. Rather, they are focused on countering imputed territorial contamination and transgression – ‘terrorist’ demographic and biological infiltration. They are not solely geo-strategic instruments – a means to a political end but function as cultural imaginaries. In this essay, I shall outline several provisional and obviously contingent characteristics of the emerging forms of warfare and sovereignty: the ‘police concept of history’; the emerging ‘treatment state’; the new visual culture of warfare; the sacrificial and the actuarial structure of political violence.

De-territorialized wars of public safety

New strategies for the reproduction of American state sovereignty have emerged in the last decade or so which can be characterized as
de-territorialized campaigns of public safety. These wars are not exclusively focused on territorial conquest, or on an easily locatable or identifiable enemy with its own respective goals of territorial appropriation. Rather, they are focused on countering imputed territorial contamination and transgression – ‘terrorist’, demographic and biological infiltration. These campaigns are not structured by time-limited political goals but are temporally open-ended. They are not solely geo-strategic instruments – a means to a political end but function as cultural imaginaries. De-territorialized wars of public safety are geo-political cultural forms that can achieve a specific internal hegemony within the American public sphere through the symbiosis of internalized fear and other-directed aggression. Indicative of this are, obviously, post-September 11 campaigns against terrorism in Afghanistan and Iraq and the response to recent bio-terrorism and quasi-naturally occurring viral scares, such as mad cow disease and, most recently, SARs to the degree it stigmatizes Asian migrants and diasporas. However, these public safety wars were presaged by earlier campaigns against ‘political polymorphism’ (Rancière 1992), by which I mean the war against drugs, and policy campaigns against economic refugees, asylum seekers, and undocumented immigrants, in addition to police campaigns against quality of life crimes that disproportionately target inner-city communities of color.

Under conditions of post-colonial abandonment, de-proletarianization, de-industrialization, cold-war depolarization and the collapse of the Keynesian welfare state, a prior political language was subjected to kenosis, a vacating of its proper names and the unfolding of a ‘heterologic of wrong names’: the Other ceases to be a colonial subject, a proletarian, a disenfranchised but struggling racial minority, a communist and re-appears as the drug dealer, the person living with AIDs, the illegal immigrant, the asylum seeker, and the terrorist. Part and parcel of the ideology of wrong names is that these categories are increasingly conflated in the securocrat’s classification system and programming measures (Feldman 2001).

The securocratic project legitimates its violence with a language of totalization but precisely because it uses external aggressions and internal surveillance as form of domestic governance totalization of a world system is not a functional outcome; in fact, the world picture the public safety ideology advances is inadequate to, and a reduction of, the complexities of globalization and emerging trans-cultural structures; its claims of universality collapse in the mire of particular deletions and suppressions: ‘The discourse of universalism may be as tribal as the discourse of identity, we could experience this during the Gulf War when many heralds of universal culture turned out to be heralds of clean universal weapons and undetailed death’ (Rancière 1992: 63). This agenda could not even sustain a coherent hegemony in occupied Iraq for six months, but, as things fall apart in Iraq, support for the war and occupation stabilizes and even increases on the American home
front, as does the political culture of ‘wrong names’, for nothing shakes the certitude of many Americans that Saddam Hussein was partly responsible for 9/11, all of which bears witness to the internal governance function of the public safety war.

Unlike the classic global and guerrilla wars of the twentieth century, these public safety wars are not wars of utopia, but wars of dystopia that assume that ‘perfected’ liberal democracies are threatened by an invisible, infiltrating menace. Thus, post-9/11 political theodicy promoted the ahistorical polarities of civilization/barbarism, or the equally ahistorical liberal rationalist notion of ‘wars of civilizations’, neither of which have a descriptive purchase on the actual global system. Indicative of this dystopic fear, was the rapid nationalization of the World Trade Center dead by the state and the media. The World Trade Center, despite its transnational frame of reference, was eulogized as a violated utopian space of Americanized capital, labor, and the inclusive production of wealth. This image was belied by the number of previously and still invisible undocumented foreign workers who vanished in the buildings’ collapse in comparison to the credentialed dead who achieved a supra-American citizenship.

Public safety war is an aggressive reaction to the depolarization of the post-Cold War period and to the cultural-economic geo-economic vertigo of globalization. De-territorialized securocratic war promotes an ideology of paranoid space in which borders leak, be these of the body politic or the individual body. Thus, the securocratic ideology fixes upon an iconography of demonized border-crossing figures and forces, including drug dealers, terrorists, asylum seekers, undocumented immigrants and microbes. Accompanying these war imaginaries are strategically positioned structures of displacement, projection, and arbitrary object choice and object substitution. We are now subjected to a new super-structure of war fantasy in which the targets of warfare and the enemies of public safety are as malleable and as arbitrary as a dream image. In this essay I shall outline several provisional and obviously contingent characteristics of the emerging forms of warfare and sovereignty: the ‘police concept of history’; the securocratic landscape; the emerging ‘treatment state’; the new visual culture of warfare; the sacrificial and the actuarial structure of political violence.1 My analyses in this essay are rooted in my ethnographic fieldwork in two locales that underwent extreme political terror, Northern Ireland (fieldwork conducted between 1986 and 1990) and South Africa (fieldwork conducted between 1997 and 2000), but it is also informed by my fieldwork on the consequences of public safety, public health and policing policies regarding the homeless, substance misusers, people living with AIDS, and Mexican migrants in New York City during the 1990s.2

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1 In this essay, as in all my publications on political violence, I distinguish political terror as experiential reality and intentional tactic from terrorism as an ideological construct. Indicative of this are those acts of political terror that are mobilized by the state to counter ‘terrorism’.  

Police concept of history

This new ideological environment promotes a ‘police concept of history’ (Rancière 1998), that is, the reframing of historical process into the eminently visual dichotomy of ideal safe space and dystopic, duplicit and risk-laden space. In this scopic regime, visible spaces of order are undermined by invisible yet impinging spaces of disorder. This concept of history advances the normative sociology and visual culture of the profile, which assigns political subjects to differential spaces: who belongs to and who is out of place or who is ‘infra-political’ (Rancière 1998: 177–8). The police concept of history is also commensurate with the new globalized economy: it invokes a normative notion of the transnational as an orderly space of economic circulation in which bodies and persons fulfill proper functions and occupy proper positions. Improper or transgressive circulation, symbolized in icons of mobile biosocial pollution such as HIV/AIDS, mad cow disease, SARS migration, the drug trade, and illegal immigrants, is feared and attacked. The infiltrating terrorist is thus both an instance of and a catchment concept for the idea of improper circulation: cognate transgressors from drug misusers to undocumented immigrants partake in the illicit substance of the terrorist.

Policing in this framework of ordered/disordered circulation is about the visible distribution of functions, profiles and positions within a society and between societies; it stands opposed to the emergence of new subjecthoods who resist the norms of circulation and/or who practice illicit forms of circulation because they ‘are between several names, statuses and identities; between humanity and inhumanity, citizenship and its denial’ (Rancière 1992: 61). Police history is less concerned with repression than with a more basic function: that of constituting the politically visible and invisible, which includes profiling systems, militarized and surveillance-centered siting prisms and stratagems of erasure, such as detainees without charge, trial, or legal representation, and the ideology of collateral damage (Feldman 1997; Rancière 1998).

The interruption of the moral economy of safe circulation is characterized as a dystopic ‘risk event’, a disruption of the imputed smooth functioning of the circulation apparatus in which nothing is meant to happen. ‘Normalcy’ is the non-event, which in effect means the proper distribution of functions, the occupation of proper differential positions, and social profiles. However, circulation is bivalent, it is the visual structure of social surfaces, the armature of everyday life, the insignia of modernity and yet it betrays and harbors infecting alterity. The social logic of circulation is mimetically handled and secured through the management of image flows: it is through the sympathetic or mimetic management of image circulation that the new governmentality seeks to construct the rationality of the total system of material circulation that always exceeds its reach. Hence, wars of public
safety take the form of mediatized mechanisms and are ordered as massive intrusions into visual culture, which are conflated with, and substitute for, the actual materiality and practices of the public sphere.

Rancière (1998) opposes the police enforcement of the continuum of circulation to ‘politics’, which is the manifestation of subjecthood as infrapolitical by stepping out of designated profiles, positions, and habitats. Thus, the police concept of history anxiously manages social surfaces and projects their immanent clandestine subversion, which also entails managing the public visualization of ‘events’ or risk intrusions. Thus, it is no coincidence that the two governing tropes of recent public safety warfare have been the technological onslaught of shock and awe and the excuse rationality of collateral damage; both forms of violence are invested in regulating the circulation of images. Shock and awe and collateral damage visually distribute death and destruction into domains of the event and the non-event, though here normalcy is predicated on what is not seen, on that invisible damage which is supplementary and incidental and which positions ‘shock and awe’ as an antiseptic digitized and visually seductive war.

Within and beyond the besieged nation-state, campaigns of public safety require both the policization of the military and the militarization of the police. Urban policing, for instance, is increasingly focused on the eradication or management of ‘quality of life’ crimes. These are transgressions that originate in minoritized economic immiseration zones – the sites of post-industrial downgrading and dis-investment, with the consequent involvement of impoverished communities in informal ‘black economies’. In this context, local policing ceases to focus on apprehending individual transgressors but rather on proactive geographical surveillance, occupation and the clamping down of entire communities. Juridical policing becomes a variation of counterinsurgency as crime is increasingly administered and contoured as a mode of clandestine economic circulation. In turn, informal and criminalized markets spaces become portaging sites that bridge and evade barriers set up by ‘dual city’ structures which detach minority enclaves from wider shifts in the wage /labor relation. The dual city was originally theorized as an economic consequence of globalization, in which entire internal urban peripheries were structurally disconnected from transnational economic development. However, in the securocratic apparatus, the dual city is transformed into an ideological object enforced and reproduced by technologies of spatial control.3

While disciplinary power isolates and closes off territories, measures of security lead to an opening and globalization; while the law wants to prevent and prescribe. In a word, discipline wants to produce order, while security wants to guide disorder’ (Agamben 2002: 1).

As in all policing ideologies, wars of public safety do not aim at the eradication of ‘the policed’ object, whether it be the terrorist, the
undocumented immigrant, or the drug abuser. Rather, these wars require the continued symbiotic presence of the policed object in order to justify the continuation and new elaborations of state sovereignty. Indeed, the wars against drugs, economic refugees, and undocumented immigrants are in symbiosis with national and transnational informal economies of scale, which may be interdicted in the short term and mutate but are unlikely to be policed or surveilled out of existence. However, beyond the persistence of transgressive informal economies, there is simply the indeterminacy of nomenclature, a perpetual motion machine of misclassification, in which the categories of terrorist and criminal can be used to cover a variety of floating objects and scenarios.

The securocratic landscape

This form of policing emerges with the disappearance of enforceable physical national borders and with the need to regulate the immiserated urban interior; it compensates for the loss of tangible borders by creating new boundary systems that are virtual, mediatized, such as electronic, biometric, and digital surveillance nets. Israeli architect and social critic Eyal Weizman has tracked the pioneering of this process by Israeli West Bank settlements, which in themselves function as an armed border whose topographic discontinuity, is supplemented by a continuum of electronic surveillance, military road-systems, tunnel systems, and architectural sealing that isolate and fragment surrounding Palestinian communities. Weizman calls this the ‘Politics of Verticality:’

Traditional international borders are political tools dividing the land on planes and maps; their geometric form, following principles of property laws, could be described as vertical planes extending from the centre of the earth to the height of the sky. The departure from a planar division of a territory to the creation of three-dimensional boundaries across sovereign bulks redefines the relationship between sovereignty and space. The ‘Politics of Verticality’ entails the re-visioning of existing cartographic techniques. It requires an Escher-like representation of space, a territorial hologram in which political acts of manipulation and multiplication of the territory transform a two-dimensional surface into a three-dimensional volume. (Weizman 2004)

The virtual border is matched by the virtual or ghostly transgressor; in the last three years we have accumulated a growing number of such ghosts including the ever-missing Bin Laden, or the now-captured Saddam Hussein, the current Iraqi resistance movement against American occupation, the Islamic
double agents-clerics at Guantanamo prisoner-of-war camp, and the perpetually detained ‘Gitmo’ (Guantanamo) detainees themselves.

Campaigns against quality-of-life crimes contribute to the formation of what Mike Davis identifies as the new urban ‘scan-scape’ characterized by social control zones (Davis 1992). In order to ensure political stability, the norm of an open-ended civil sphere with experiential co-ordinates in public space is currently interdicted by new discursive and practical arrangements of urban policing, public safety policy, and urban planning. This militarized polarization of the urban scene is bi-directional to the same degree that problematic urban economic peripheries are subjected to surveillance and infrastructural abandonment, areas of wealth concentration are characterised by defensive militarized office buildings (equipped with surveillance technologies and structural armoring) and gated communities that are structurally divorced from their surround while visually mastering this terrain. Weizman identifies a parallel pattern in the siting and surveillance systems of Israeli West Bank settlement that he dubs ‘optical urbanism’:

Weizman is struck by how this militarized optical urbanism of the West Bank settlement functions as a new national border, whereas Mike Davis sees the American militarized office building and high tech gated communities as abandoning what lies outside their boundaries as an underdeveloped, primitivized, and risky frontier. In both cases, securocratic ideology turns topography into heavily moralized scenography, or pathogenic space.

The model apparatus of optical urbanism is the surveillance satellite, including orbital satellites scanning the globe, the militarized armored closed circuit office building, the exurban gated community, or the urbanizing West Bank frontier settlement. Thus the virtual border, whether it faces outward or inward to foreignness, is no longer a barrier structure but a shifting net, a flexible spatial pathogenesis that shifts round the globe and can move from the exteriority of the transnational frontier into the core of the securocratic state. With global wars of public safety, classifying and surveilling pathogenic space has expanded as a geopolitical strategy. This
emerging political aesthetics of landscape and social space is a twenty-first-century updating of the seventeenth-century prism called the Claude (after its inventor the seventeenth-century painter Claude Lorrain), or the ‘black glass’, which was used in landscape painting to impose a moralized coloration on topography. Currently, securocratic scenography is fashioned through a variety of siting prisms, which, like the Claude, impose a moralized and disciplining valence on space and place, be this via the smart bomb televisual targeting lens, global satellite imaging, the scans of the closed circuit camera, or other internal and remote sensing systems. A certain scenography of the Other is accessible in the mass media and public culture only through the default mechanism of the moralized and militarized prism.

I would contend that the ruined and memorialized site of the World Trade Center now functions as a meta-Claude, a siting prism writ large, the black glass that alters the geopolitical landscape into arbitrary polarities of safety and risk. The collapsed towers’ cyborgian fusion of architectural ruins and dead bodies has replaced outdated colonial and post-colonial ideological apparatuses and functions as a renewed Orientalist machine for producing the securocratic Other. The attack on the World Trade Center established that edifice as repository of national identity; this was no coincidence, for the World Trade Center typified the spaces where American national identity and its attendant symbolic capital are meant to be domiciled. On 9/11, the two towers became a failed militarized office building, a failed gated edifice. But its political eulogization indicated the valorized locales where American identity is expected to be architecturally and spatially reproduced: the armored sacralized fortresses of secure commodification, be these malls, gated communities, or corporate keeps – sites that determine citizenship by whom they credential with security passes. 4

**Postcards from the edge**

Military apparatuses in political emergency zones increasingly function as both surveillance and ‘peace-keeping’ forces committed to regulating circulation in public space by imputed terrorist-ridden populations. Examples of this dual profile can be seen in the Balkans, West Africa, and in the custodial regulation of refugees, asylum seekers within the United States and at the ‘prisoner-of-war’ detention centers in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Guantánamo Bay. Today, humanitarian interventions are militarized and military interventions exploit the transnational discourse of human rights. The terrorist and the refugee are both the objects and the consequence of military intervention. The infrapolitical juridical personalities of the terrorist as an ‘unlawful combatant’ and of the migrant, refugee and asylum-seeker as an
unlawful resident and worker are mutually marked by the denial of their citizenship rights in an existing nation-state structure.

In tandem with the militarization of humanitarian aid goes the ideological and practical fusion of the concentration camp and the refugee camp, where people who have lost their nation-state citizenship can easily starve to death, or be subjected to military extermination and police and vigilante abuse, or be also fed, clothed, housed, and receive medical care. The militarized state is also the ‘treatment state’, a specialist apparatus in the custodial and circulatory control/repair of anti-societal populations that intermingles behavior modification techniques from sensory deprivation to psychiatric intervention. By illustration, the Guantanamo Bay prisoner-of-war camp, in which inmates are subject neither to American civil law nor to the Geneva Conventions, accords its detainees comprehensive health care and allows religious and dietary observances, in tandem with a chronic schedule of coercive interrogation, position abuse, beatings, depersonalization, and sensory deprivation called ‘Gitmoizing’ by the military interrogators.

We have recently witnessed the detailed workings of this treatment regime in the exercises of humiliation Iraqi detainees were compelled to rehearse at Abu Ghraib. The first series of photographs made public had the surrealistic aura of souvenir postcards sent by jokesters to the folks back home. They had the celebratory and horrific carnivalesque atmosphere of the picture postcards that were sold as mementos of the lynching and mutilation of African-Americans in the 1920s, and, like those images, the Abu Ghraib pictures spoke more about the identity of the captors than of the captives despite the latters’ sexual exposure. These scenes also resembled the practice of ‘battle proofing’ endemic in the Vietnam War in which new ‘in-country’ soldiers were ordered to bayonet piles of Vietnamese corpses as an exercise in dehumanizing the enemy, thereby desensitizing and inuring the greenhorn soldier to the human consequences of violence (Feldman 1991).

In contrast, the second wave of released Abu Ghraib photographs revealed another more operational reality: the mundane programmed logistics of an extremely violent sensory deprivation and behavioral modification regime. These photos are frequently taken from a prison tier above the enacted violence or at a remove from the scene of torture, and thus capture the viewpoint of an omniscient clinical spectator monitoring a series of experiments meant to trigger signs of subjugation obedience, confusion, and capitulation, i.e. shock and awe. Here the camera is not just a recording instrument but also a penetrative device appropriating the psyche, sexuality, and gender identity of the hooded Iraqi detainee as his body is turned inside out by the regimen. We view a well-oiled apparatus going through its daily round of exercises. There is nothing shameful or hidden here, nothing clandestine, the photographer is part of the apparatus of intimidation and exposure. His picture taking completes the jailors’ visual and spatial
command over the hooded, naked and rigid Iraqis who have been deprived of sight, bodily mobility, and sexual integrity. As in the televisual logic of the invasion that fused spectatorship at home with satellite imagery and visualizing smart bombs abroad, the Abu Ghraib photos are a continuation of American media control of the recalcitrant body of the ‘terrorist’ Other – torture as embedded journalism.

Just as much as political support at home for the war is contingent on an orchestrated flow of identity-sustaining images, Abu Ghraib reveals that the Americanization of Iraq has first to be experienced as a visual substance if it is to be credible and tangible to those charged with carrying it out at the front line. The Abu Ghraib scenes were devised as a post-9/11 dramaturgy of American power for the satisfaction of its military audience. At Abu Ghraib, the securocrats were revealed as a desiring machine.

It is the American cultural addiction to the visual/virtual command and control of the political that also explains the carnivalesque photographs of American soldiers celebrating their sexual humiliation of Iraqi men. What is staged in these scenes is an annotation to the routinized photographs of day-to-day sensory deprivation and engineered terror, and yet this burlesque imagery emerged from the behavior modification culture of Abu Ghraib. The ’porno’ photos and tableaux are a projection of American fantasies and sexuality as power onto Iraqi bodies. The figure of the woman as the agent of humiliation, subtended by those pictures of detainees wearing women’s underwear or leashed like S and M actors, is axial to this fantasy formation. Posed on top of these huddled naked bodies with her thumb jutting into the air, she is a transitional figure and symbolic conduit who acquires male gender power and cachet wherever she poses her dominance over naked Iraqi men; power that passes through her to be transferred to the male interrogators through these very poses and images. The Iraqi detainees, in turn, are subject to a gender inversion by and for their custodians; they are feminized through the visual elaboration of vulnerable bodily orifices and by the woman’s mimed acts of subjugation. This gender inversion may refract simplistic and reductive assumptions about Arab masculinity held by the jailors, but the latter are not neutral bystanders to their own experiments with the Iraqi body. If Iraqis are being reduced to a feminine passivity and vulnerability then conversely their Americans abusers, through their female mediator, are being (re-)masculinized by these acts and images.

Thus these photos are an early admission on the part of line soldiers that the liberation of Iraq has descended into mission drift; the scope and effectiveness of the Iraqi resistance, the chronic attacks, the steady hemorrhaging of casualties, the general antipathy of the Iraqi masses towards their putative liberators has positioned American soldiers in a position of ‘feminized’ vulnerability for they lack control over the integrity of the
American military body confronted with unmanageable terror – the very post-9/11 condition the invasion of Iraq was meant to interdict.

The Abu Ghraib rituals are ceremonies of nostalgia by which the perpetuators re-acquire, if only in an allegorical idiom, their former sense of mastery and command in a situation that is rapidly lurching beyond their grasp. That is why we know that the extraction of information was not the terminal goal of these rituals. For the hooded and faceless bodies that are being manipulated and posed are depersonalized specimens and not information-bearing individuals; they are merely emblems of a collective recalcitrant Iraqi body politic that has to be dissected as the treacherous social surface of an occupied Iraq.

**Objective guilt**

It may be comforting to some that the aforementioned military/disciplinary technologies and media are being applied to so-called discrete populations of terrorists, refugees, the domestic homeless, undocumented workers, substance abusers and drug dealers, to name a few. Nevertheless, such comfort is illusionary in the face of the massive expansion of the concept of *objective guilt* as the structure of governmentality. The creation of a ‘homeland security’ apparatus and its investment in ‘total information awareness’ and biometric systems points to a structural mutation of the American public sphere and public personhood through the digitization of risk and, therefore, guilt. A new micrology of surveillance is scheduled for debut which will not only watch and wait, but diagnoses, pre-empts, and intervenes. Structures of everyday life and no-longer-anonymous consumption, communication, and sociality behaviors, along with racial and ethnic profiling, are meant to dissect the social persona, abstracting minute gestures and assembling an epidemiology of potential terrorist profiles that transmute the citizen into a digital silhouette. Everyone, under the digitized gaze, becomes unknowingly complicit in the promotion of terrorist risk. As the surveilled body is fragmented into event and non-event, into offending acts and gestures and the inoffensive, intentionality is digitally deleted from the concept of the political or the criminal transgressor. For most crucially, digitized objective guilt is archived guilt, its full meaning and significance is reserved for a prospective diagnostic completion and a new digital combinatory. Acts and gestures are temporally elongated by building a profile of licit or illicit circulation. The virtual border that controls circulation is matched here by the virtual citizen, a holographic composite or profile of gestures, data, and algorithms.

Total information awareness-type systems construct a new form of citizenship and concomitant personhood. Spectatorship has been long recognized as the mediatized component of late modern citizenship and
political agency, and as an extension of the person’s sensorial inscription into the perceptual systems of commodification. Beller (1998) has asserted that such spectatorship is a form of labor and produces visual and informational surplus value. The new surveillance/public safety regime requires the labor of the spectator-citizen; for, to the same degree that the commodified gaze registers the spectator into a market place of looking and consumption, the praxis of gazing (at commodities, television, computer screens) and consequent acts of object acquisition now culminates in being seen, to being subjected to behavioral-optical appropriation by a variety of compulsory visibility regimes such as the homeland security apparatus.

**Visual culture of war**

I have already discussed the emerging visual modalities of the ‘treatment’ state in relation to zones and populations marked by objective guilt and the Abu Ghraib experiments. The notion of objective guilt has contributed to the acceptability of the concept of collateral damage. Collateral harm is legitimated under conditions in which guilt is de-individualized and proactively assigned. Further, the new visual culture of war enhances the ideology of collateral damage through image filtering. The televised visual sensationalism of ‘shock and awe’, and of smart bombs broadcasting their descent onto a building, filters out the sensations of pain, suffering and grief of the victims and their survivors (Feldman 1994). It creates spectatorship ideologies of inattention and distraction for the televisual witness. Anonymous victims of collateral damage stand in visual opposition to the sensational violence of ‘shock and awe’ to the degree that collateral damage ideology combines with the visual centrality of shock and awe to desensitize the viewing audience to the plight of ‘marginal,’ incidental and accidental victims, such as those in the Iraqi market-place bombing who died invisibly to the American media. Such filtering of images by the military ensured that certain victims never achieved the visual urgency or commanded the visual attention of Saddam’s attempted decapitation and the destruction of Iraqi ‘command and control centers’ in the American media. Visualized violence here is a powerful system of naming and un-naming, the sheer act of targeting a topos specifies a locus of objective guilt, and effectively ‘weaponizes’ entire communities, turning them into zones of aggression, and consequently de-individualizes the concept of victimage in the destruction of these spaces. While other spaces in and near the targeted zone are essentially disposable in the filters of inattention that are at the heart of ideologies of collateral damage and excuse.

Shock and awe is more than a military tactic; it is simultaneously an exercise in war as visual culture for the consumption of the televisual audience and an ideology of American modernization. Hegel viewed the
March of Bonaparte’s armies across a national geography as materializing the idea of progress. The progress of aerial bombing across a civilian terrain has much the same effect. In 1900 Georg Simmel identified sensory shock as the price of progressive modernity and urbanism; perceptual shock was the psychological medium in which the modern announced itself and refashioned new forms of personhood. Modernity’s shock was a violent conversion experience creating new social subjects amenable to emerging technological and commodity regimes and work disciplines (Simmel 1971). The current ideology of shock and awe fuses technological and theological norms, for it too is a form of accelerated conversion: the rapid Americanization of the Oriental Other though technological onslaught and subsequent post-war therapeutic treatment and rehabilitation.

President Bush’s proposal to tear down Abu Ghraib prison encapsulates the core assumption of securocratic modernization and its incomprehension of the situation and nation it seeks to transform. The erasure of Abu Ghraib, and its replacement by a sparkling new up-to-date American-designed prison simply extends the motivating logic of the invasion and occupation of Iraq as a campaign of political conversion and will not redress the human rights violation that were committed at Abu Ghraib and elsewhere by the occupation. Already the new supposedly torture-free wing of Abu Ghraib that has been established in the wake of the scandal has been baptized ‘Camp Redemption’. Apparently, this military adventure was intended and designed to propel Baathist Iraq from its totalitarian dark age into the bright transplanted malls of an Americanized Middle East, including the latest in prison design. Alongside military deployment, America has become expert in the building of prisons and in the use of penal architectures as an entrepreneurial form of development for America’s economic peripheries, a strategy evidently to be deployed in an immiserated Iraq (Gilmore 1998–9, n.d.). The United States has the largest prison population per capita in the world and Bush’s vision of democratization in post-war Iraq looks to new penal facilities as both social control apparatuses and economic engines.

Beyond planning the Iraqi future Bush’s proposal was a statement about the Iraqi past and an attempt to manipulate Iraqi collective memory through the ‘alzheimers’ of modernization. As part of Iraqi Americanization Bush seeks to architecturally modulate the collective witness of the American occupation – to blur the memory of abuse by starting afresh with new buildings and institutions, which are expected to generate new identities and new spaces of silence and forgetting – the classic American frontier renewal myth. Yet, Bush knows that Abu Ghraib is actually a crime scene, a stratigraphic site rife with forensic evidence of human rights violations.
Subject populations have to be traumatized and awed through terrorist violence either on the macro-scale of aerial bombings, large-scale atrocity attacks, or in the microphysics of detention center abuses. In either case, the *mise-en-scène* of modern political terror is essentially sacrificial spectacle. Moreover, shock and awe, despite its counter-terror rationale, is a visualist ideology fully complicit with the sacrificial logic of terrorism. The ratio between spectacular shock and awe, on the one hand, and marginalized collateral damage, on the other, is sacrificial. The collateral victim is disposed of, deferred, and defaced in order to construct the hegemony of shock and awe as sanitized violence and undetailed death, a ratio that can also be discerned in the media aesthetics of selective compassion.

Despite its religious associations with the pre-modern, sacrificial practice, here is an extension of actuarial calculation or risk management and risk reduction. The *pharmakos* was the name accorded to the sacrificed in ancient Greece; it was a bivalent term for the *pharmakos* took on the collective accumulated pollution of the polis and was simultaneously beneficial since this figure removed contradiction and evil from the polity. Modern sacrificial violence retains the older form of the *pharmakon*, cure and toxin, for public safety regimes use actuarial violence uses risk and harm to manage and expel the negative. And yet, to read current counter-terrorist violence as governed by sacrificial codes is in marked contrast to those pre-modern rituals whose sacrificial content and victims were collectively acknowledged. Sanitizing ideologies of precision warfare obscure the sacrificial element in this violence, reducing it to technocratic rationality.

Contemporary sacrificial violence involves the use of controlled risk strategies, such as warfare or torture, to interdict a supposedly greater risk. Those outcomes of actuarial calculation that cannot be absorbed back into a means-end ratio are termed collateral damage. Consider the statistics reported by the United Nation that, in the aftermath of the American invasion and the collapse of the Hussein regime, 8 million firearms are now circulating in the Iraqi public sphere in the hands of paramilitary organizations, ordinary criminals, and a lucrative informal gun market. The weapons of mass destruction that were searched for in vain have re-emerged as a weaponized and militarized everyday life structure of a post-war liberated Iraq (UN Wire 2004).

Torture at Abu Ghraib was calculated to interdict violence against the occupying forces; the human rights violations that resulted were viewed by the perpetrators as a necessary collateral cost of this supposedly wider ‘just’ war. However, the performance structure of these acts of torture indicated that ‘who or what’ was being tortured was not a specific individual but a fantasized Arab-Iraqi who was made to conform to a sacrificial logic, and
who was malformed by abuse into a surrogate or emissary victim (Girard 1977). Torture at Abu Ghraib was political theater, both in relation to its actual output of useful intelligence and in terms of its transcription of American desire onto the body of the captive. In this theatre actuarial control and risk reduction are not concretely achieved, but rather staged and consumed as a political commodity: a medium of ideological exchange. In most torture scenarios extracted intelligence is rarely deployed as an emblem of domination, only the demeaned body of the interrogated vis-à-vis the agency of the interrogator bears the task of representing a danger brought mimetically under domination. One could say that the entire Iraqi war project from the opening night of ‘shock and awe’ to the sordid reality of Abu Ghraib was the mediatic fabrication of post-9/11 risk reduction as a virtual reality.

Sacrificial action has been used in Tiananmen Square by the protesting students who undertook short-termed hunger strikes; by Irish Republican Hunger Strikers, ten of whom starved to death; by secular Palestinian, Islamist, and by Tamil Tiger martyr-bombers. Sacrificial action is deployed by a variety of ideological persuasions and crosscuts the religious and the secular. Modern politicized sacrifice is a technicity that is not etiologically reducible to pre-political or pre-modern religious frames. It could be further argued that the tendency to see sacrifice primarily as an archaic and religious mode of action sets up an inability to recognize sacrificial action as a modern political ethos. This periodization renders the identification of sacrificial logic in modernity as a historically problematic religious regression. What is problematic is the formalist approach to sacrificial logic and action that cannot discern its contemporary embeddedness in a variety of technocratic rationalities and mythemes from democracy to public safety.

As political rhetoric, sacrificial spectacle selects/creates generic subjects as raw material, vulnerable to labile objectification. The process of sacrifice uses symbolic agents who can assume and absorb multiple collective memories and refract diverse and often contradictory collective fantasies. Contemporary sacrifice is an organized instrument of political terror through which collective meanings and historical change are mobilized, visualized, and dramatized in the theater of physical elimination. Sacrificial rhetoric mobilizes tropes such as metonymic and synecdochal substitution that are the material manipulation of media systems to achieve a specific set of sympathetic effects, to elicit a public structure of emotions. Sacrifice involves the symbolic separation of a part from the whole, and in such a manner that the part(s) or victim(s) stands in for the societal totality that is meant to be affected by sacrificial intervention. Sacrifice re-enacts the offense, contamination, pollution, and transgression it attempts to rectify through mimetic totalization of the offending social order, group, or institution in the form of the emblematic victim(s). The victim or target is endowed with semiotic and mnemonic capacities that are switched on with the application of violent

spectacle. The sacrificial act concentrates unreconciled historical memory and social contradiction in a symbolic persona. The sacrificial subject is inherently ambivalent, contaminating and purifying, disordering and ordering, intrinsic to the social order and alien, because sacrifice for its authors is the expulsion of contradiction from history in the vehicle of the emissary victim. The movement of victims by violence from existence to destruction is frequently envisioned as enabling the movement of society from one historical stage to the next.

Sacrificial violence achieves a new semiosis in a globalized media terrain. Historically, media have encouraged the myth of totalizing depiction, they fashion a world picture that Kracauer, as early as the 1920s, identified as a reduction, a concentrate and abbreviation that passes itself off as the whole: ‘The aim of the illustrated newspaper is the complete reproduction of the world accessible to the photographic apparatus’ (Kracauer 1995: 57–8). The success of sacrificial substitution in modernity in which social totality is concentrated in a staged and surrogate form can be credited to this mediatized sacrifice, which reduces the real to the reproducible image. Mediatized sacrifice established codes of abbreviation and sequences of metonymic action that trigger paradigmatic reference or an allegorical index of tropes. As allegory, sacrifice is the politics of ruins in which an act of material destruction and its aftermath materializes directional historical time. ‘In allegory, history appears as nature in decay or ruins and the temporal mode is one of retrospective contemplation’ (Buck-Morss 1988: 168).

Though certain sacrificial sessions are hidden away and orchestrated for a specialized audience, as in the torture/humiliation practices at Abu Ghraib, the visual logic of the allegorical ruin is still retained. The photographs of naked, leashed Iraqi male bodies and their exposed orifices may not have shown classical skeletal images of memento mori, but nevertheless these photos were made to show destroyed bodies, desocialized, de-Islamized, and de-masculinized, whose displayed organs and mortified flesh expose the interiority of the subjugated. The photographs captured now ruined bodies converted, owned, penetrated, and occupied by American captors and cameras.

Eventually the social inequities that the act of sacrificial violence was meant to dramatize and redress are supplanted by vicious exchanges of sacrificial acts as the primary and traumatic content of social memory of both perpetuators and victims (turned vengeful perpetrators). Primary social inequities such as racism, economic exploitation, neo-colonial occupation, and institutional stigma are supplanted by memories of the violent acts that were meant to convey the message of redress in the first place. The relations of political antagonism (the means by which the conditions of political antagonism are expressed and materialized) displace the original conditions and contexts of political antagonism. The promise of totalization,
of socio-political immanence, by the sacrificial act fades in the face of radical
disjuncture – for its symbolic parameters cannot reabsorb all the collateral
damage it has inaugurated. And here we have to move away from the final
myth of actuarial violence, that collateral damage is ephemeral, transitory,
and historically marginal. That position can be maintained only at the center
of the sacrificial platform, and it promotes a selective scenography of efficacy
and containable harm in order to legitimate further sacrificial deletions from
the social landscape.

We have seen too many instances in Northern Ireland, South Africa, Sri
Lanka, Israel/Palestine where sacrificial intervention becomes increasingly
chronic as it becomes structurally distanced from the political goals it was
deployed to realize and materialize. The evaporation of means-ends outcomes
in the domain of historical transformation is supplemented by the fetishiza-
tion of means-end rationality in the operational logistics of the sacrificial
mechanism; the latter increasingly becomes the time and place where a
political apparatus recuperates its identity irrespective of its achievement of
stated political agendas. The inability of the sacrificial act to achieve post-
sacrificial satisfaction and reconciliation with history is displaced onto the
ritual process itself. Sacrifice is repeated as a material intervention and
declaration of political desire that cannot yield satisfaction, and which cannot
sustain the social values it is deployed to advance or transform the inequities
it was meant to repair. In its chronic mode sacrifice becomes the dream world
of political wish-images, a space for indulgence in arbitrary associations,
endless substitutions and uninhibited conflations; it is devoid of any intrinsic
political analysis despite the enormous destruction it wields – it exhibits the
power to withhold, but not to create. The sacrificial intervention is intended
as a summation of historical experience and yet the act itself fails to reconcile
a community of witness with historical experience. History remains static;
there is no ‘acceleration of time’, as Koselleck (1985) put it.

As sacrificial violence becomes the primary context of further redundant
violence it is characterized by a compulsive repetition disorder, where initial
attempts to banish socio-political contradiction through emblematic violence
inevitably fail. In this compulsive repetition mode, the sacrificial act is itself
unconsciously subjected to a sacrificial logic due to its failure to resolve
contradiction and its inability to achieve historical completion. Sacrifice, once
fetishized as an instrumental means-end technique, is unconsciously prose-
cuted as a meaning-bearing form through pathogenic re-enactment that
highlights its sheer lack of efficacy, its empty, yet dramatic functionality.
Caught between actuarial calculation, on the one hand, and allegorical
communication on the other, the sacrificial act becomes an empty political-
historical instrument, the functional equivalent of politics on autopilot. It
expresses historical memory and embodies desire for political transformation,
and yet obscures the latter in the suffering of the act’s arbitrary victims as it fails to move society to a new historical stage.

It is here that Rene Girard’s (1977) utopia of Christological resolution through a unique and differential act of violence, detached from the desymbolizing effects of all prior acts of mimetic violence, falls into serious disarray, a disarray we have witnessed in George Bush’s attempt to sacralize and hierarchize American military aggression.

The sacrificial rite repeats violence and unavoidably confirms the performance of violence as hegemonic and legitimate. Within a dominant pattern of mimetic violent reciprocity, the sacrificial rite is vulnerable to new levels of mimetic appropriation precisely because it establishes a ritualised form of violence and surrogate victimage as hegemonic. The sacrificial rite, because of its dialectical and genealogical relation to mimetic violence, shifts the structures of mimetic objectification onto new levels of cultural performative complexity. What Girard does not account for is that with the advent of sacrificial ritual, what becomes emulated and subject to mimesis is the sacrificial form itself as a semio-technique of political legitimations and as narrative code for the construction of historical reality. (Feldman 1991: 260–1)

To peruse the performative infrastructure and role sets of political sacrifice is to understand why most contemporary acts of political terror have taken on both a decidedly ante-modern and post-modern shape. In many acts of political terror today, we find a contradictory forensic and visual fixation on mortification, mutilation, and atrocity, on the one hand, and an almost unlimited capacity to technically sanitize the violent act, on the other hand (Feldman 1994; Appadurai 1998). In both modalities, political violence creates victims and, through them, tangible historical memory and then obliterates the mnemonic product, the politically transcribed body, in its aftermath. This alteration between atrocity-centered/vivisectionist violence and sanitizing/erased and/or ‘smart bomb/collateral damage violence’ encapsulates a sacrificial dialogic in modern political terror. This dialogic oscillates between the victim dismembered and somatically opened to history and the victim erased; an inversion between violent acts of political memory and orchestrated historical disappearance. These polarities were operating in the Abu Ghrab regimen. There was a fixation on the visual exposure and violation of the prisoners’ bodily orifices as if the exposed orifice was the passageway into the resistance pathology of the detainee, and at the same time there was the defacement of individual identity of the inmates through hoooding, nakedness, and sensory deprivation. Moreover, in Abu Ghrab, many of the tortures were designed to produce shame as well as physical pain and fear. The shame structure of these humiliations was also meant to produce deniability by reducing the victims to a post-release muteness in which to speak of what occurred would be to bring their own reputations into
disrepute in home communities Abu Ghraib humiliations were designed to erase the record of suffering they inflicted as historical fact.

There is an economic logic to the political act of terror. There is an economy of violence that compares acts of violence and damage in actuarial tables of commensuration, value equivalence, restoration, and compensation. The appearance of rational cultural management promised by actuarial calculation quickly evaporates when we also consider that the retribution and revenge carried out by the state apparatus, or para-state apparatuses seeks to restore loss and prospectively to rehabilitate an elusive retrospective social symmetry through compensatory violence – retribution is actuarial. To restore social symmetry assumes that a social order was once free of terror and violence, an assumption that already promotes a skewed historiography of deniability and deleted damage, which is only furthered by subsequent acts of compensatory violence Thus, retributive and restorative sacrifice must narrow the boundaries and definitions of the social order it defends, represents, and re-enacts through violence. A social order or political structure that reproduces itself through sacrificial action eventually shrinks its self-understanding and definitions to fit the limited representational capacities of that violence.

Paul Virilio’s theory of the technological accident speaks to recent genealogies of actuarial violence and collateral damage, and assigns these lines of descent a mediatic origin.

Just before the carnage of 1914, American cinema of the Mack Sennett type offered it up for our consumption as comedy, with those short slapstick films in which hosts of vehicles of different kinds (trains, cars, planes and ships) collided, crashed, smashed, exploded and were quickly repaired in a collection of catastrophes from which the heroes emerged without pain and strangely unharmed. (Virilio 2000: 90)

Virilio describes technological development as driven by the symbiosis of innovation and accident, resulting in consequent actuarial compensation, that is further technological innovation. Here we see the ideological kernel of contemporary actuarial and sacrificial violence, for an ideology of progress driven by accidents and casualties legitimates violence as an inevitable tool of historical transformation and reinvents violence as collateral damage, as the calculated cost of historical transformation. The convergence of modern media and virtualized miracles of immunity, repair, and restoration, as shown in early cinema, are symptomatic of the metaphysics of compensation and restoration crucial to the actuarial promise of technologized violence, particularly the mediatized warfare of the current epoch. This metaphysics of restoration is culturally elaborated in the cyclical structure of contemporary games of digital simulated violence. In Virilio’s discussion the technological machine consumes history by removing error from the world though the
violence of collateral damage. We should not be surprised when the public safety war claims as its truth the technological removal of political error, overtly in the form of the terrorist, and tacitly in the management and control of the migrant, the refugee, and those with transnational viral diseases and disabled immune systems. Our cure will be their accident and our violence their remedy.

Conclusion

In search of a post-9/11 restoration of national and global symmetry the Bush regime will not find ultimate satisfaction in a post-war Americanized Iraq, but will embark on the hunt for new transitional objects for sacrificial construction, perhaps in Syria, Iran, or Indonesia. Thus we must ask ourselves if this nomadic order of public safety is in effect a new order of demonic visualization, a ghost-busting regime, committed to bringing invisible alterity to the social surface and thereby engrossed in personifying and theologizing the problematic vertigo of globalization in the form of emblematic evil. This dynamic conflates the policing of national and transnational social surfaces with effective governance. Thus, American political culture now materializes public safety norms in concrete acts of military intervention abroad and scopic security regimes at home. Ideologies of public safety are used as a palliative against the insecurities and dis-ease precipitated by all the circulatory structures that now buffet a besieged American nationhood from outside and from within. In this context, there is a salience to the increasing mediatization of the military apparatus, as it invests in ocular instruments and planning, and the in tandem militarization of media as American public culture invests in digital optics and symbolic violence as the site of consumer desire, gaming, fact setting, and truth claiming. For this reciprocal digital militarization is the prospective social logic by which globalized wars of public safety will be progressively normalized and rendered routine. Couched in the fetishism of mediatized visual culture and technological progress, and thus rendered beyond cultural critique, the securocratic war will no longer require the increasing distant goad of the burnt towers as they eventually fossilize into the collateral damage of the new regimes of public safety.

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