

KROEBER ANTHROPOLOGICAL  
SOCIETY, 102(1):3-19

## **Mythologies of Terror: Fantasy and Self-Fulfilling Prophecy in U.S. Counterterrorism**

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Adapted from a talk given March 8, 2012 at the  
Anthropology in the World Symposium  
in honor of Laura Nader

At the end of the Cold War, with the fears of nuclear holocaust over, the United States emerged as the only superpower with no credible military enemy on the horizon. And yet the U.S. Defense budget almost doubled during the last decade. It is now larger than that of all other countries combined. Such costs are justified because, after the Cold War, a new enemy has surfaced: the Terrorist. The vast new security bureaucracy created after 9/11 encompasses, according to Dana Priest and William Arkin, some 1,200 government organizations and 1,900 private companies working at over 17,000 locations across the country, which occupy, in the Washington area alone, the equivalent of nearly three Pentagons or 22 U.S. Capitol buildings.<sup>1</sup> Americans with top secret clearances number now over 850,000; the number of private contractors working on top secret programs, i.e. counterterrorism, is more than 250,000. As a sample of growth in top secret America, the Pentagon Defense Intelligence grew from 7,500 people in 2002 to 16,500 in 2010. The Department of Homeland Security had by 2010 a workforce of 230,000. There is more fear of al-Qaeda as a threat than the Soviet superpower of the Cold War. One estimate by the Nobel Prize economist [Joseph] Stiglitz has the total bill of the War on Terror in between \$3 and \$4 trillion. It is “asymmetric warfare” in which “the United States has so far spent \$1.4 million *per dollar of AQ [al-Qaeda] investment in the attacks* on the response,” (Kilcullen 2009:25,274) spending for years just in one hour in Iraq the equivalent of the total of al-Qaeda’s financial resources (Singer 2009:271).

But the economy is only one aspect of the political climate forced by terrorism. What is most extraordinary is the *state of exception* imposed on American politics, evidence of which is there for anyone to see: Guantanamo, indefinite detention, rendition, torture, extra-judicial killings by drones. We have a domestic intelligence network that collects information about tens of thousands of U.S. citizens, involving an apparatus of close to 4,000 federal, state and local organizations. These are the daily staple news of current politics, officially sanctioned and normalized and broadly accepted by the general public. And yet these are borderline realities at the intersection of law and politics,

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in the past clearly illegal and anathema, now official policy. The State of Exception means that lawbreaking can be approved by the highest officials and go unpunished. As Agamben put it, a situation obtains in which “it is impossible to distinguish transgression of the law from the execution of the law, such that what violates a rule and what conforms to it coincide without any reminder” (Agamben 1998:57). All of this is justified because we are facing an allegedly apocalyptic enemy—the Terrorist. Nobody will question that violent people oppose the U.S. and would like to bring it down; the issue is whether nineteen suicide bombers armed with box-cutters can be turned into such an apocalyptic threat against the greatest military power in history and give rise to an endless War on Terror.

## **Dual Sovereignty**

The basic political context of counterterrorist intelligence in the War on Terror parallels what anthropologists have categorized as “dual sovereignty.” In many societies there is an opposition and complementarity between the jural/administrative power of the chiefs and the secretive, mystical authority of priests and sorcerers. A classic case is the Shilluk’s divine kingship studied by Edward Evans-Pritchard (1948). The relationship between the open political process and the secret covert action required by the War on Terror evokes in our own society a similar dual sovereignty by which democracy’s legal authority is complemented with a different type of power that finds its legitimacy in the elusive principle of national security. If overt politics is based on the rule of law, covert politics is grounded on secret information that cannot be shared with the public at large.

In a recent book, Priest and Arkin have reported on the existence of an “alternate universe” in the Washington D.C. area (2011). Obama promised to close Guantanamo but under political pressure backed off from his promise. Recently he signed into law the provision of indefinite detention of U.S. citizens, then adding that he did not agree with it. Who does really impose these counterterrorist measures, even against the will of the President? Is it the official legality or the expediency of “alternative universe?”

Are the drone attacks legal? “Outside the context of armed conflict, the use of drones for targeted killing is almost never likely to be legal,” wrote Philip Alston (Caryl 2011:56). But for the global War on Terror, is there anything anywhere that is not “armed conflict?” Thus under the guise of combating terrorism, U.S. counterterrorism considers itself legitimized to overrule national sovereignties and flaunt international law; in short, to establish a state of exception by which actions that ordinarily are illegal and immoral are suddenly tolerable because the fight against the Terrorist demands it. When in the 1980s various European countries enacted policies of “shoot-to-kill” suspected terrorists, they were met with international outrage (Zulaika and Douglass 1996:158-160). Extra-judicial killings of hundreds of suspected militants, of whom we even ignore their names, are now perpetrated in the name of the War on Terror; they no longer elicit international scandal, but are praised as most effective.

The latest example of “But how can that be?” for me is the killings with drones of hundreds of Pakistanis and Afghans. In the words of defense secretary [Leon] Panetta, in counterterrorism this is “the only game in town.” Finding out how many have died and how many of them are civilian is almost impossible—and that is how the

State of Exception likes it to be, for secrecy and the fog of war are very much part of its *modus operandi*, the drone attacks being “covert” operations whose very existence must remain secret. According to the Conflict Monitoring Center, a private organization which collects Pakistani and foreign news reports, the people killed by drones is 2,717, including 175 children; its webpage estimates that of the 609 killed in 2011, only four were al-Qaeda leaders. Of the close to three thousand people killed, the CIA knows the names of 125 and considers 35 of them as “high value targets” (Ahmad 2011). Even a “counterterrorist guru” such as David Kilcullen estimated, in his book *The Accidental Guerrilla*, that up to 2009 the ratio of civilians killed for each militant was 50 to one—that is, 98 percent of drone casualties were civilian. This is not a view shared by President Obama, who a month ago said that, “actually, drones have not caused a huge number of civilian casualties. For the most part they have been very precise precision strikes against al-Qaeda and their affiliates” (Shane 2012). But how can that be? It can happen because of the monstrous figure of the Terrorist.

Remember the dog analogy before killing the man. Beginning with the general name “drone” for the UAV (unmanned aerial vehicles), the metaphoric link between drones and the bestiary is preserved obsessively by naming them after animals. “Predator” is the best-known name; the latest generation of drones are called “Reaper.” “Global Hawk,” “Raven,” “Wasp,” “Dragon Runner,” “Eagle Eye,” “Vampire Bat,” “Snake-hot,” “Big Dog,” and “Centaur” are some other names (Singer 2009:56). One of the pilots of these unmanned drones is Lieutenant Colonel Matt J. Martin who has written a memoir entitled *Predator*, where he compares his flight missions to those of hunting, with thoughts such as these before he is going to shoot his target, whom he deems a “barbarian”: “I wondered if a mouse might not feel like that just before a hawk dropped out of the sky to snatch it up with piercing talons” (Martin 2010:72, 43). Martin makes use of the biblical bestiary to explain his frame of mind: “I sometimes pondered how Adam might have gone back to the Garden of Eden and whacked the serpent” (46).

Historically the encounter between the Europeans and the native Americans brought debates, while invoking Aristotle, as to the “essential qualities” of the new-found savages—did people who allegedly practiced cannibalism and incest, and were rumored to be dog-headed, have a *human* soul? Within Greek thought to be fully human an individual had to be a city dweller, whereas those living in the wilderness were barbarians beyond social bonds (urban women, slaves, and merchants were denied the privilege). In Judeo-Christian thought the human/animal difference became a qualitative state of being, immortality for humans being a major differential consequence. Animal souls were nothing but pure desire; rational man had the right to domesticate or hunt the beasts as well as people with animal souls. Much as there were “barbarians” during the Greek and Roman periods, during the Middle Ages there was the figure of the Wild Man who was opposed to civilized people on the basis of *law*. Closely related to “wildness” were the notions of “savagery,” “madness,” “heresy,” and “barbarism.” In current political rhetoric, the heir to such a Wild Man, the non-political animal living outside of the confines of the city and civilization, is “the Terrorist,” characterized as an anomalous figure perpetrating a frontal assault to any type of political norm or moral law.

It was the British anthropologist Edmund Leach who brought the parallel bt-

ween the encounter of Europeans with American Indians and contemporary terrorists when he wrote: "...the themes of terroristic massacre, cannibalism by imaginary dog-headed monsters, [is] a political opportunism that makes your opponents virtuous or monstrous as a matter of convenience without any regard for the empirical facts of the case, and the principle that if the lack of shared moral values is so complete that the 'other' comes to be categorized as a wild animal, then every imaginable form of terroristic activity is not only attributed to the other side but becomes permissible for oneself. Indeed, counterterrorism becomes, in a bizarre sense, a religiously sanctioned moral duty" (Leach 1977:36).

The intellectual problem with such an archetypal figure of a wholly anomalous individual, be it wild men or terrorists, is that it works in the way myth worked in ancient cultures, as Hayden White pointed out: "That is, as a projection of repressed desires and anxieties, as an example of a mode of thought in which the distinction between the physical and the mental worlds has been dissolved and in which fictions (such as wildness, barbarism, savagery) are treated, not as *conceptual instruments* for designating an area of inquiry or for constructing a catalogue of human possibilities, or as *symbols* representing a relationship between two areas of experience, but as *signs* designating the existence of thing or entities whose attributes bear just those qualities that the imagination, for whatever reasons, insists they must bear" (White 1978:154). Dog-headed animals and predators hunting beastly headhunters are instances of such remythification.

Albert Einstein wrote that "technological progress is like an axe in the hands of a pathological criminal." For the counterterrorist, that criminal can only be the terrorist. But Einstein was pointing rather to Dr. Strangelove—the Western leaders' use of the new weapons during the atomic era and which provoked much discontent and resistance among the very scientists, such as Robert Oppenheimer, who first developed them. Oppenheimer, the head of the Manhattan Project, was eventually forced out and replaced by Edward Teller, the inspiration behind Peter Sellers' *Dr. Strangelove*. Far from perceiving the monstrosity of Western militarism, the counterterrorist sees the terrorist as the only "barbarian." It is not so bad that we possess the weapons of mass destruction; what is terrifying is the desire that terrorists have to possess them.

"The first science to be learned should be mythology or the interpretation of fables," wrote Vico (1968:51). Fables tend to make use of animal metaphors which, in ritualized contexts such as hunting or war, become categorical markers between the human and the non-human, the civilized and the barbarian, thus allowing for the elimination of whatever threatens an order culturally defined as human. There is no way to *explain* murder. All we can do is provide historical and cultural models to help conceptualize it. Following Vico's advice, cultural anthropology has focused ethnographically on the ritual metaphors and mythical constructions underlying cultural institutions such as headhunting or "divine kinship." But is anthropology allowed to extend this paradigm—applied to headhunters, regicides, military heroes, and other forms of ritualized murder—to the tabooed "terrorists"? Are the terrorists wholly unlike the rest of us or do in the end terrorists and counterterrorist belong to the same field of humanity? I believe that it has never been more urgent to hold fast to the radical ethnographic legacy of modern anthropology, one that was summarized by Clifford Geertz as "looking into

dragons, not domesticating or abominating them, nor drowning them in vats of theory” (Geertz 1984:275), and to bring to the public its critical potential in the manner exercised by Margaret Mead and Laura Nader. Affirming a common humanity with savages and terrorists is not only the inaugural premise of such a tradition; it is an epistemological necessity in order to unveil the mythologies of terror of our current political culture.

## **A Crisis of Knowledge**

What concerns us most here is a crisis of knowledge in terrorism studies. Right from their inception, a sign of this crisis has been the difficulties of, not only defining the term itself, but the very interpretive frameworks of the events covered by the concept. A critical analysis must inquire into the genealogy of this discourse and world-view, beginning with the very naming of the phenomenon; it must examine its conceptual premises and policies, question its politics and ethics.

It is the placement of the terrorists in a context of taboo, the willful ignorance of their political subjectivities, the role of fantasy in the entire phenomenon—these are aspects that need investigation to find out the extend of the crisis of knowledge in the entire field. One has to begin such study by examining what counts as a standard of evidence and as valuable information in such context of taboo, what type of experience should be respected, what sort of associative logic links together various kinds of events.

Forty percent of the U.S. military budget is secret (Johnson 2007:209), as are the budgets of the intelligence agencies. The number of classified documents has tripled since 2001 to 23 million. Priest and Arkin provide evidence that no one in government knows how much is spent in counterterrorism nor is in charge of managing its exponential growth nor is responsible for the overall effort. Yet the critical question is: does secrecy help or make a country more vulnerable in the current culture of instant electronic information?

The National Security Agency “now ingests 1.7 billion pieces of intercepted communications every twenty-four hours” (Priest and Arkin 2011:77). After 9/11 government agencies published some 50,000 intelligence reports. The usefulness of the report depends on the quality of the analysts, and these are among the lowest paid employees, young people making \$40,000 to \$60,000, two-thirds of whom at the CIA have less than five years of experience, and are typically ignorant of the languages or the cultures of the countries they are working on. The intelligence veterans have migrated to the lucrative private sector. As director of intelligence at U.S. Central Command, John M. Custer III grew so angry at the lack of useful information coming from the gigantic National Counterterrorism Center that in 2007 he visited its director and told him “that after four and a half years, this organization had never provided one shred of information that helped me prosecute three wars!” (Priest and Arkin 2011:84-85). Priest and Arkin’s conclusion is that nobody is in charge of Counterterrorism in Top Secret America. Which explains, for example, that in the case of Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, the Nigerian known as the “underwear bomber,” who tried to blow up Northwest Airlines Flight 253 over Detroit in Christmas of 2009, not only was information from the British intelligence connecting him to Anwar al-Awlaki, but his own father had contacted the

CIA officers at the U.S. Embassy in Abuja, Nigeria, alerting them of the danger posed by his son's "extremely religious views." And yet his name was not added to the No Fly List nor was his U.S. visa revoked.

This was déjà vu of the knowledge had by fifty to sixty officers for a period of over a year that two of the future 9/11 plotters were in this country and nothing was being done about it.

Which brings us to the relevant issue of the extent to which counterterrorism has become terrorism's best ally. It is a fact recognized by the 9/11 Commission Report that the plotters could have been found and the attacks prevented. What are the premises and blind spots in counterterrorism that not only allowed 9/11, but might have contributed to making the problem much worse? And isn't the drone war just another flight into counterterrorist fantasy and one more chapter in self-fulfilling prophecy?

What is the meaning of "information" in such terrorist scenarios of states of exception and in the presence of a community of believers whose basic structure separates those who "know" the secret information and the rest of us who are to be kept in the dark? Secrecy means that no critical judgment can be exercised, much like in mystical societies where knowledge belongs only to the sacred specialist. Intelligence becomes ancillary information when belief drives knowledge. Once the decision has been made that the enemy is a Hitler-like monster, the ordinary standards of factual evidence are supplemented with untested premises grounded on moral and political principles. The main role of information is no longer procuring factual evidence but helping uncover the secret intentions of the evildoer.

The British historian Hugh Trevor-Roper, having analyzed the "grotesque mental construction" of European witchcraft with the conclusion that, during the Renaissance, there was in fact a regression in superstitious modes of thought from the Middle Ages, had the following uncanny observation: "Indeed, the more learned a man was in the traditional scholarship of the time, the more likely he was to support the witchdoctors" (Trevor-Roper 1969:154). Is current counterterrorism knowledge also in the ironic predicament that the more it "knows" the more fooled it is? As a sample, here is a similar commentary on experts predicting biological terrorism by Milton Leitenberg: "The less the commentator seems to know about biological warfare the easier he seems to think the task is" (Mueller 2006:22). Following the earlier discussion on the value of "information" in the counterterrorist episteme, does having more of it help? Or isn't having more of the same thing even more obfuscating?

The other issue with information being by definition "secret" is what you do with information that is in the open. Imagine that the name of your next airplane hijacker is in a city's phone book, as was the case with 9/11: should you take it seriously? When such information is by nature ultra-secret, wouldn't paying attention to a phone book betray in itself ignorance of what you are dealing with? In short, the information was in the system, yet why did the system refused to read and act on it? Doesn't such oversight suggest that there is, at some level, unconscious but systemic complicity between terrorists and counterterrorists? Perhaps the complicity springs from sharing a culture of ultra-secrecy in which open information is dismissed as irrelevant and in which the temporality of waiting tends to grant more urgency to what could happen than to what is actually the case.

## The Force of Fantasy and the Real

A critical perspective on terrorism discourse confronts us at the outset with the ontological ambivalence of what is the *real* of the Thing itself. The figure of the Terrorist gives ground to a reality the menace of which is felt to be greater than the one posed by the superpower Soviet Union during the Cold War. The task of a critical approach is to problematize that *real* as necessarily imbued in fantasy. This requires we deploy a valid theory by which fantasy is not equal to the *not-real* but rather “*it constitutes a dimension of the real*” (Butler 1990:108). This is a theory of fantasy removed from the representational realism of the media whose reports on terrorism tend to be oblivious of the “state of the exception” in which they are gathered and produced (censorship, one-sided sources, information obtained under torture, and so on). In such realism “representation becomes a moment of the reproduction and consolidation of the real” (106). A positivist view of the real stabilizes itself by the phantasmatic exclusion of all absence as unreal. Terrorism is that disavowed phantasmatic exclusion, included in the system as exception, that solidifies and gives ground to the politically real. Since this real is shaped by the phantom of terrorism constrained by the State of Exception, the exceptional phantasmatic draws the boundaries of the real and “assumes the status of the real, that is, when the two become compellingly conflated” (107). Thus fantasy emerges with the mask of the real. As Nader remarks, counterterrorism in many of its forms “appears as fantasy requiring terror in the name of ending terror, when in reality the elimination of terror is the apotheosis of terror” (Nader 2012:113).

Not surprisingly, the current drone war has been described as “sheer fantasy, if not literally science fiction” (Sluka 2011:72). Indeed, as admitted by everyone working in the industry, science fiction is the major inspiration behind the drone technology. “If you don’t read science fiction, you’re not qualified to talk about the future,” said Arlan Andrews, the founder of SIGMA and a writer close to the White House and Department of Homeland Security (Singer 2009:160).

What science fiction presents as pure fiction, robotics makes an aspect of reality. When the fiction turns out to be *reality*, a frenzy of excitement and the oft-repeated sense of *magic* obtains. A frequent comparison of the remote controlled unmanned drones is *video game*. In fact, military researchers are modeling the robot controllers “after the PlayStation because that’s what these 18-, 19-year-old Marines have been playing with pretty much all of their lives,” according to Greg Heines, head of the Dragon Runner project (Singer 2009:68). Making war a continuation of the kids’ video games creates an experiential link between “play” and “war,” confusing the virtual and the real.

## Self-Fulfilling Prophecies

“Time” is the difference between science fiction, where there is no requirement of real time, and actual reality. It is the play with time that is most revealing of the manipulations of associative magic, as shown in divination. The oracle, based on secret knowledge, reveals whether witchcraft has transpired and whether its danger looms ahead. Counter-terrorist thinking has also a peculiar relation to temporality, as threats are largely based on the inevitability of waiting. Actual historical temporality becomes subservient to the

feared future. If there are no terrorist attacks, the counterterrorist can claim success in preventing them; but if the attack does occur, then the counterterrorist can say “I told you so,” and argue that he was right in his predictions. At this point terrorism foretold becomes prophecy fulfilled. Such imperviousness to error in actual historical events points to a time warp that goes to the heart of counterterrorist mythology. Such waiting implies in fact that historical time has surrendered itself to a fateful future. The result of this passive temporality regarding events we can do nothing to prevent is a fateful mindset in which the terror events are closer to nature than society and politics, and there is hardly any point in looking into the intellectual premises or subjective motivations that guide terrorist actions. The great political victory of the suicide bombers is that they imposed on U.S. politics their own suicidal temporality of waiting and a culture grounded on the oracular knowledge of secret intelligence, which then justified the War on Terror.

“The self-fulfilling prophecy is, in the beginning,” writes sociologist Robert Merton, “a false definition of the situation evoking a new behavior which makes the original false conception come true. This specious validity of the self-fulfilling prophecy perpetuates a reign of error. For the prophet will cite the actual course of events as proof that he was right from the very beginning—such are the perversities of social logic” (Merton 1968:477). It was false that there was al-Qaeda in Iraq before the invasion, but then it became true after the invasion. Anti-American radical Islamists could never afford to have anti-aircraft missiles, until the CIA provided Stinger missiles to Afghan rebels battling the Soviets during the 1980s. Similarly, over forty countries are currently developing drone technology to be used as military robots, with the likelihood that in a not far away future they might fall in the hands of terrorists. Such self-fulfilling prophecy of counterterrorist drones being used by terrorists, we are told, “is not far away” (Caryl 2007:58).

A central dimension of terrorism, and one that is crucial to show its self-fulfilling quality, has to do with *threats* and their perception and the reactions they provoke. A threat plays with the sign as representing a future event, while we never know whether the issuer actually means it or not, or whether he might change his opinion in the future. The Unabomber brought the traffic in California airports to a halt by simply sending a letter to a newspaper with the threat of bringing down an airliner, while he sent another letter to another newspaper admitting that the threat was a “prank.” The actual reality of the threat might be nothing but play -- a *zero* that can yet have deadly serious consequences. Counterterrorism is a prime example of what Merton labeled “the Thomas theorem:” “If men define situations as they are real in their consequences” (Merton 1968:475). Once the situation is defined as one of inevitable terrorism and endless waiting, what could happen weighs as much as what is actually the case; once a threat, whose intention or possibility is unknown to us, is taken seriously, its reality requires that we must act on it. Terrorism is the catalyst for confusing various semantic levels of linguistic, ritual and military actions.

Anthropologists have examined phenomena such as divination, which manipulates the axis of time in a cultural context of magic and witchcraft. They have compared pre-modern mystical notions of causation and temporality to our own modern standards of rationality. The central premise of counterterrorism thinking is the oft-repeated formula that “it is not if, but when.” Hypotheticals are premised with the conditional *if*—

“if A, then B.” What characterizes basic counterterrorist knowledge about the next impending attack is that it will happen. In a mind-set that parallels Azande witchcraft, the counterterrorist axiom of “not if” rules out mere hypotheses.<sup>2</sup> The revelations are thus “unfulfilled hypotheticals” that will become real with time. Counterterrorist projections are the equivalent to oracular certainties—the horror will happen no matter what. This leads in pragmatic terms to the fatalistic attitude of disregarding actual knowledge and not taking responsibility for actual decisions—what does it really matter what we decide since it is going to happen anyway and whatever happens is out of our hands? What matters, therefore, is that we sort of *divine* what the course of action will be.

The practical aspect of this temporality of waiting, in which the certainty of the impending evil is beyond any hypothetical (“not if”), is that we need to act preemptively now against events that are to happen in the future. The rationale behind nuclear deterrence was that developing armaments now, ready to strike at the push of a button, guaranteed that they would not be used in the future. Many commentators saw in such logic the quintessence of technological madness. But that was not enough. Since future nuclear attacks by terrorists are only a matter of time, we must wage war now preemptively even in a nuclear context, thus breaking the historic assumption that nuclear arsenals were for deterrence, not for actual usage. Thus the formula of “not if, but when” becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. The counterterrorist thinking makes it an imperative that the war must start now—against Saddam Hussein, against al-Qaeda, against Iran, against all potential terrorists. This is how the American public, including the liberal media, accepted the rationale to go to war against Iraq.

What happens to the axis of time in the expectations of robotic technology? Robots will have to react in such speed, we are told, that in the decision cycle, reduced from minutes to microseconds, “As the loop gets shorter and shorter, there won’t be any time in it for humans,” according to an army colonel (Singer 2009:64). It is no longer the “perversion of temporality” in the waiting for terror, but the very elimination of human time—the perfect fantasy by which humans are left aside in a war in which, not only will they not die, but, by reducing time to the category of fiction, they will not have to make the tough decisions and carry the burden of their consequences.

The fact that robotic technologies created to combat terrorism reinforce such self-generating quality to a frightening degree can be illustrated with the best-known case of terrorism before 9/11: the Pan Am flight 103 downed over Lockerbie, Scotland in December 1988, killing the 270 passengers aboard. What the public ignores is that this was preceded in July of 1988 by the downing of an Iranian airliner in the Persian Gulf by the U.S.S. *Vincennes* with 290 people on board, and this was the result of the cruiser being equipped with an Aegis radar system that registered the civilian plane as “Assumed Enemy.” The Iranian jet was on a consistent course and broadcasting a civilian radar and radio signal, but the automated Aegis had been designed for dealing with Soviet bombers and thus it appeared on its computer screen to be an Iranian F-14 fighter. The hard data were telling the crew that the plane wasn’t a fighter, but the computer was telling them it was. And who could challenge the robotic knowledge of Aegis? And because the *Vincennes* was a Robo-cruiser, the crew had the authority to fire without seeking further permission from the authorities. In short, “the computer was trusted even more than any human captain’s independent judgment on whether to shoot or not”

(Singer 2009:125). Five months after the tragedy provoked by the *Vincennes* came the terrorist attack on the Pan Am 103, and prominent experts saw a case of revenge or “blood feuding” (TT 11). A classic case of counterterrorism’s self-generating logic.

What are the practical results of the drone campaign? The number of terrorist attacks in Pakistan has gone up sharply in a wave of anti-Americanism, for Pakistanis “overwhelmingly believe that most of those who die in the attacks are civilians” (Caryl 2007:56). One concrete instance of such a link was provided by Faisal Shahzad, the Pakistani-American known for the failed bomb in Times Square in May 2010, who declared in his trial that “I’m avenging the attack” of “drones [that] kill women, children... everybody... I am part of the answer” (Hari 2010). Add to this the stark fact that the CIA drone strikes set a precedent for the nearly 50 other nations, including Pakistan and Iran, that already possess the same unmanned technology.

Counterterrorists know all of this. Yet why is it that these very drones, that help increase terrorist insurgency “exponentially,” are still “the only game in town”? In short, counterterrorism knows that its tactics operate clearly along the path of a self-fulfilling feedback, and yet there is nothing else better to do. Such an impasse— if we do nothing, terrorism will flourish; if we do something it will flourish even more—shows dramatically the current crisis in counterterrorist knowledge.

There is at the domestic level another dimension of how counterterrorism needs terrorists, much like a hunter needs the beastly prey, and which can be gathered from Trevor Aaronson, working here in Berkeley, in his article “The Informants” (2011): “Informants report to their handlers on people who have, say, made statements sympathizing with terrorists. Those names are then cross-referenced with existing intelligence data, such as immigration and criminal records. FBI agents may then assign an undercover operative to approach the target by posing as a radical. Sometimes the operative will propose a plot, provide explosives, even lead the target in a fake oath to al-Qaeda. Once enough incriminating information has been gathered, there’s an arrest—and a press conference announcing another foiled plot.” The Washington Metro bombing plot, the New York subway plot, the plot to blow up the Sears Tower, the one to bomb a Portland Christmas tree lighting, and dozens more across the nation were organized and led by the FBI. *Mother Jones*, having examined the prosecutions of 508 defendants in terrorism-related cases, found that all the high-profile terrorism plots of the last decade, with the exception of three,<sup>3</sup> were FBI stings (Aaronson 2011:30-43). The FBI consumes now most of its budget (3.3 billion) on counterterrorism, not on organized crime (2.2 billion). It has 15,000 spies, many of them with the task of infiltrating Muslim communities, paid as much as \$100,000 in some cases. As one defense lawyer put it, “They’re creating crimes to solve crimes so they can claim a victory in the war on terror” (Aaronson 2011:33). Attorney Eric Holder argued in a speech that sting operations have “proven to be an essential law enforcement tool in uncovering and preventing potential terror attacks” (Aaronson 2011:33). But what this view doesn’t take into account is the extent to which the sting operation is actually creating terrorism. There is no better case to prove this than the case of the blind Sheikh, which several writers consider to be a crucial event leading to 9/11.

What cannot be answered is of course how many of the FBI’s targeted “terrorists” would have never become one were it not for an informant. In the case of the blind

Sheik, the evidence points to the fact that, if not for the sting operation based on a paid informant notorious for lying to everyone, according to the *New York Times*, his fatwa would not have taken place, a key event in the making of 9/11.

The final result of such counterterrorist culture is that regular crimes are now frequently viewed by law enforcement and intelligence agencies with the suspicion that they are possibly linked to terrorism.<sup>4</sup> What greater success could al-Qaeda have in the end than it be considered by the U.S. security as a bigger threat than the Soviet superpower during the Cold War, deserving in counterreaction so far several trillion dollars?

### The Aestheticization of War

“War is beautiful,” the Futurists wrote in their manifesto early in the last century, “because it establishes human domination over the subjugated machinery.... War is beautiful because it creates the new architectural form of big tanks, geometrical flight formations, smoke spirals from burning villages...” (Benjamin 1968:241). The Nazi in charge of bombing Guernica, Lieutenant Colonel Wolfram von Richthofen, wrote in his diary, of “marvelous effects of the bombardment” (Maier 1976:103-104). And similarly President Truman, hearing the news of the effects of “Little Boy” on Hiroshima, exclaimed ecstatically, “this is the greatest thing in history!” and ordered three days later to drop “Fat Man” on Nagasaki. The latest creation in such a tradition of technological marvel, creating awe and self-congratulation, is the remotely controlled pilotless drone.

Quoting the Italian Futurists’ manifesto, Benjamin wrote about “the aestheticization of politics,” his conclusion unequivocal: “All efforts to render politics aesthetic culminate in one thing: war” (Benjamin 1968:241). In his 1936 essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” Benjamin viewed the dissemination of art by the new technologies positively as an affirmation of mass culture. But there is a warning at the end of the essay about fascism and its “violation of the technical apparatus” in parallel with fascism’s attempts at social reorganization by allowing the proletarianized masses “to express themselves,” rather than give them what is due. “The logical result of Fascism is the introduction of aesthetics into political life,” Benjamin adds, concluding with the motto he attributes to Fascism, *Fiat ars—pereat mundus*. Such command to create art unconcerned with the destruction of the world is the ultimate perfection of the aesthete’s *l’art por l’art*—its ultimate expectation being that war will supply “the artistic gratification of a sense perception that has been altered by technology.” The final result of such aestheticization of politics is that humanity’s “self-alienation has reached such a degree that it is capable of experiencing its own destruction as an aesthetic enjoyment of the highest order” (242). Thus, in Buck-Morss’s commentary, “Benjamin is saying that sensory alienation lies at the source of the aestheticization of politics, which fascism does not create, but merely ‘manages’” (Buck-Morss 1992:4). The question that concerns us here is whether current counterterrorism is possible without assuming the sensorial alienation and aestheticized politics that characterized fascism—including the outcome that we end up enjoying the view of our own destruction.

“Shock and Awe” was the name of the initial massive U.S. led campaign against Iraq on March 19, 2003. Whatever it was for the inhabitants of Bagdad on the ground, for us watching it on TV it was *awesome*. According to a *New York Times*/CBS poll, 62

percent agreed with the attack even if only 8 percent thought that the invasion had made the possibility of a terrorist retaliatory attack less likely. What made this majority of the population, 53 percent, who thought that Shock and Awe would not make things better in the fight against terrorism, still approve of the attack? It surely must have had something to do with the television's aestheticization of the events. It was war as spectacle, as documentary drama, as prime-time Television event—in short, as art.

The latest in this technological aestheticization are the drones. Ten thousand feet above in the sky, they are a further step in the sensorial distancing from the targeted enemy. The enemy is no longer a real body even for the warrior attackers but now a mere image. The eye perceives not the fatal consequences but the precision of the goal, the geometry of the operation, the beautiful execution in reaching and destroying the target. Aesthetics is needed to shut up perception into what the framers of the event want to be perceived.

There are legal complications about killing someone face-to-face in cold blood, but it is all legal to do so from the technological distance of a drone—"We can kill them from the air," a commander observed, "but the lawyers say, 'No, you can't just'"—the source put his hands together, stretched out his index fingers, stiffened his arms, and pointed his invisible pistol at my forehead—"blow someone away like that—*pow!*" (Priest and Arkin 2011:211). Drones provide the required distance—the technologically mediated aesthetic component—for killing to be "legal" for the killers and an act accepted as "normal" by the general public.

The drone industry has evolved in close association with science fiction in secretive places such as "Area 51" in the Nevada desert close to Las Vegas. In case we are not sure about the aestheticization of this industry, Area 51 has been the setting for more than sixty movies, TV shows, and video games (Singer 2009:138). There is a Science Fiction Channel with a TV series about Eureka, the town set by the Pentagon for scientists to work and live in. The popularity of science fiction, despite its admittedly "nerdy" quality, is undeniable. Roughly ten percent of all books belong currently to science fiction and fantasy, without counting major authors who write "techno-thrillers." In the film industry, *Star Wars* was the blockbuster that began the genre; of the top ten most watched movies six are science fiction; among the most popular TV shows, many have been science fiction.

What Benjamin demanded from art was to *undo* the corporeal alienation of the senses, "to restore the instinctual power of the human bodily senses for the sake of humanity's self-preservation, and to do this, not by avoiding the new technologies, but by passing through them" (Buck-Morss 1992:5). Restoring the human bodily senses is what counterterrorism's strategy of tabooing avoids at all costs: the Terrorist should not be seen or heard, and any attempt at 'understanding' his alleged political or moral claims is highly suspect as equivalent to 'justifying' them and already giving in to his pretenses. Projecting oneself into terrorist subjectivity is tantamount to making an apology of the monster. Being an ethnographer of terrorists is simply anathema since no communicative link, let alone bodily contact, with them is permissible. Counterterrorism, in short, has created a new industry of thousands of government organizations and private companies to study subjects whom they are never suppose to meet, see, or talk to. The first premise of ethnographic participant observation (that you must be in the

presence of the bodies, faces, interactions, primary institutional settings of the people you write about) is a complete denial of the taboo that is foundational to counterterrorism.

But this is also what Benjamin required from art: the full restoration of the bodily senses against the aesthetic alteration we observe in fascistic manipulation of the human sensorium by showing us the beauty of war while hiding from our perception the resulting bodily horrors. And for this there is no better way than “passing through” those very technologies. The best way to counteract the aesthetic beautification of “Shock and Awe” over Iraq, the new kind of *voyeurism* afforded by wars fought afar with vastly superior technologies and without risks for those watching it on TV, would have been for the TV cameras to show the thousands of charred bodies on the ground. Fascistic aestheticization consisted for Benjamin in such artistic manipulation.

Following Benjamin’s advice, we should postulate the use of robotics to restore the senses fully. To begin with, an initial consequence of the allegedly all-seeing surveillance vision of the drones would be to dispel the deceitful secrecy surrounding counterterrorism. Could they free us from such false pretenses as Saddam Hussein having WMD’s? Could they perhaps help us uncover plots such as the one previous to 9/11? Where counterterrorism has gone stray is in its inability to rightly interpret terrorist threats and its ignorance of terrorist subjectivities; the entire counterterrorist discourse betrays a deep mythology as to the “otherness” of the Terrorist figure and the omnipotence of its apocalyptic menace; only the force of fantasy in a nuclear era can explain that counterterrorism has taken such a pivotal role in current international politics. There would be no greater antidote to such counterterrorist fantasies than full electronic knowledge of the actual weapons, movements, and organizational links of the terrorists.

Robots, their salesmen tell us, have an “undervalued advantage” that derives precisely from the fact that “they don’t carry all our wonderful ‘human baggage’” (Singer 2009:65). Drones don’t have hangovers or heartbreaks; in particular they don’t commit suicide. If anything, what you can say about terrorists is that, in their inhumanity, they carry far too much “human baggage”—they carry all the blindness of a man in love, the follies of a fanatic, the madness of a suicide. From Robespierre to bin Laden, you could argue that *humanity* itself is at the root of all terrorist thought and action. Too frequently, the only exit terrorists can find to get rid of the burden of their human bodies—plagued by unsolvable impasses, the paradoxes of politics and ethics, by love and hatred—is by killing others and themselves. Counterterrorists know that they too are all too human in their battle against their sworn enemies and they suffer the battle’s post-traumatic syndrome.

Recently, anthropologists have also become absorbed with the role of witnessing and ethics in their discipline. Scheper-Hughes’s paper “The Primacy of the Ethical” (Scheper-Hughes 1995:409-420) marks the militant position of a “barefoot anthropology” in which the anthropologist must above all be sensitive to ethical imperatives. She is inspired by the writings of the moral philosopher Emmanuel Levinas. His exorbitant ethical “asymmetry,” one that goes far beyond a formal and private I-Thou reciprocity (in Alyosha Karamazov’s words, “We are all responsible for everyone else—but I am more responsible than all the others”) presents the highest human ideal. And yet, while

valuing Levinasian ethics, we should ask ourselves whether such borrowing of the moral high ground from an ethical authority succeeds in our attempt to be true witnesses of our times. For we should beware of Abraham. The road to violence, repression, and murder is usually preceded with calls to morality and martyrdom. It is by appealing to the ultimate truth of ethics that the military mandarin, the patriotic scoundrel, or the counterterrorism zealot will engage in the most cruel forms of dehumanization. The disturbing question is how equipped is a moralist anthropology to record the many moral outrages committed in the name of morality.

Terrorism and counterterrorism present a contemporary discourse that attests to the relevance of the role of the witness—both as a promise of redemption and as a failure—in the history of crime. The face-to-face confrontation with the killers and victims can radically affect the witness. Such a transformation was partially achieved in the town meeting that concluded my anthropological fieldwork, when my neighbors asked me to speak about what I had “found out” in the course of my investigation and I turned the meeting into a confrontation between the opposing views regarding political murder. Witnessing the opposing side’s views and destitution was seemingly a unique lesson in history and ethics. In one sense there was a promise of resolution in the very act of an entire community bearing witness. “By provoking such dialogue between irreconcilable worldviews, I felt I was sharing with my Itziar neighbors and friends anthropology’s subversive character;” that is, ethnography became “a distancing device by pointing out the ‘otherness’ of what people experience, the ethnographer included, within the boundaries of their cultural constructions” and, in so doing, the anthropologist was “inviting his culture to understand and ultimately question the role of the native” (Zulaika 1988:350) and the citizen.

The sacrifice of Isaac is what a writer is confronted with each time he or she witnesses a “ritual killing.” Each time a soldier gets initiated into the mysterious realm of having to kill and die for an ethics higher than the individual, the sacrifice of Isaac is being commanded. This is the scandal of our politics, our militarism, our international law. We are faithful to our basic social and national moralities by everywhere agreeing with the sacrifice of Isaac—the very betrayal of ethics. And thus, in perpetual paradox, the same invocation of ethics issued against the discipline’s comfort level risks itself providing that very moral comfort that might set the anthropologist apart from the moral predicament of his/her informants. The special responsibility towards those who suffer should transform the anthropologist into a witness, but a witness à la Abraham—horrified not primarily by some evil out there in the world but rather by the abyss of one’s own participation in the murder.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See Dana Priest and William M. Arkin, *Top Secret America: The Rise of the New American Security State* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> See Peter Winch, “Understanding a Primitive Society.” *Rationality* R. Wilson, ed. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1977), 78-111.

<sup>3</sup> The three exceptions were Najibulla Zazi, who attempted to bomb the New York City subway in September 2009; Hesham Nohamed Hadayet, who fired a gun at the Los Angeles airport's E1-A1 ticket counter; and Times Square failed bomber Faisal Shahzad.

<sup>4</sup> See Singer's depiction of the security measures around the inauguration of Obama (2009:46).

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