

# TECHNOLOGICAL PANOPTICON AND TOTALITARIAN IMAGINARIES: THE 'WAR ON TERRORISM' AS A NATIONAL MYTH IN THE AGE OF REAL—TIME CULTURE

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## INTRODUCTION

1. The stark contrast between the overpowering destructive ability of technologically advanced weaponry and the fragility of everyday human life became a distressing but familiar fact of our time. The recent “war on terrorism” brought us ample degrees of shocks, outrages and an undeniable sense of powerlessness echoing the lament of Benjamin over the state of humanity hurrying down the path of self—destruction. In this paper, I attempt to analyze America’s “war on terrorism” beyond what its rhetorical formulation suggests, by viewing the phenomenon as a manifestation of the deeper, longer—term structural transformation of the present world, that has been most fundamentally changing our relation to the historical world into one fully mediated by the gaze of technology. I argue that what seems to be the rise of renewed American myth and the mission advocated are not simple responses to the shock of the 9—11, but are prepared by the gradual constitution of a surveillance society where people become increasingly subjugated to the transcendental gaze of technology and the military state. In a society where the state’s means of technological surveillance is fully internalized in its subjects, the subject’s consciousness voluntarily alienates its empirical base, cultivating a sense of displacement, which in turn tends to invite calls for the transcendental national identity as a means of restoring their fragmented self. Noteworthy here is that the recovery of the personal integrity of the subject and its emotional and spiritual quest for identity are immediately linked to the restoration of the national symbolic structure and the mythological aspirations national mission can evoke. At the same time however, such a mythological transcendence cannot assure one to regain the immediacy of body, especially in the age of real—time culture, but can only provide the virtual re—creation of lost identity frozen in time and space. In this technologically dominated cultural space, moreover, the cognitive space where historical memories and ethical judgments can be recalled in the free— association of imaginative linkages is stressed, jeopardizing the democratic foundation of civil society.

2. What I intend in this paper is to analyze the impact of advanced media and technology and its far reaching implications that have been transforming our perceptive and cognitive frame, as well as the temporal and spatial modalities of inhabited space, that are not only seriously affecting our mode of existence but also fostering an environment conducive to violence. I pay particular attention to the changing status of subjectivity in such transformations. As the self—objectification of the subject becomes accelerated, the body turns into a torturous place where rational consciousness attempts to control and reconstitute the empirical body according to its own telos; moreover, such a process of alienation eventually reaches the point where consciousness destroys its own empirical

ground, from which the subject feels an inverted form of pleasure. In this state of subjectivity dominated by the telos of technology, I argue that “things empirical,” including indeterminate matter free from consciousness, become squeezed out and remade into an ideally reconstituted form. Although this transformation of the empirical is the likely true cause of instability in the subject that drives them to seek transparency and identity, the self—alienated subject has already lost an ability to speak for itself to defend its own empirical base, and attempts to restore its identity and transparency and totality of meaning by eliminating the other, indeterminacy and plurality. I argue that a similar take—over of idealism, or the telos of technical rationalism, is also found in the sphere of knowledge, manifested in the inclination that nullifies the dialectical operation in our perception and cognition, thereby jeopardizing the process of critical reflection in our thought aided by an active involvement of imagination, historical memories and ethical consciousness. When these are taken together, one would recognize less explicit causes that led to the militarization of American society and the rise of the mythology of anti—terrorist war, that are much beyond what explanations based on the shock of the 9—11 can suggest. As in any historical time, the war conveniently turns public attention away from the internal/national problems to the patriotic fight against external enemies, and in this shift, general feelings of dissatisfaction, anger, powerlessness are transcended and replaced, at least momentarily, by a sense of unity, purpose and even moral passion and hope. Such a mythological transformation naturally involves much cost not only to the identified ‘enemies,’ but also to the war—waging society and those who must live in the culture of war at home. I conclude my paper by urging Americans to face and combat a range of mounting social problems at home to avoid further falling into a self—destructive path, and to recall its original spirit of democracy and freedom.

### **REAL—TIME WAR THAT VIRTUALLY UNITED THE NATION.**

3. Although the advent of warfare becoming a media event has been widely discussed at least since the 1991 Persian Gulf War, the role mass media played in the more recent War on Iraq seems to have progressed several steps further. The former is perhaps the first war that many have described as a “virtual war,” or more ironically, the war that “did not happen” *a la* Baudrillard, in the sense that the reality of the distant war and its brute violence disappeared behind the TV screen.<sup>1</sup> The nighttime raid of Baghdad was shown on TV as if it were a grand firework over an exotic city, nearly offering aesthetic pleasure to the viewers, helping to consolidate the narrative of ‘clean war’ that tacitly deters viewers’ attention away from the fact of mass destruction. By watching the ‘real event’ unfolding, one is made to cultivate a sense of war that is neither real nor fiction, but the war as a de—historicized/virtualized historical event that is proved to be actually happening on the TV screen and in one’s consciousness. In this way, the real—time reports transform the real war in a distant place into a ‘virtually real’ war. This aspect of ‘real—time’ war is advanced a step further in the recent ‘anti—terrorist’ War on Iraq, in which average Americans, as TV viewers, came to be directly involved in the making of war as a nationally orchestrated media event in the manner of viewing a reality show. Reporters were sent to the actual site of war equipped with hi—tech video—phones and movie antennas, and the reality—show style reports of the war was grafted upon the

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<sup>1</sup> Jean Baudrillard, “The Gulf War Did Not Take Place,” *Jean Baudrillard Selected Writings*, 2001

already existing narrative of America's mission against terrorism in a dramatized manner. In this 'dramatic' setting designed to appeal to the patriotic feelings of viewers, those who were at the site of war and those in front of TV screens together formulate media—led public opinion along the patriotic narrative line, in which the latter's expectations are incorporated and reflected in the former. In this instance, a satellite dish is no longer a neutral technological invention, but it serves as a transcendental gaze safeguarding America's mission that helps to convey and 'realize' the nation's projected hope, moral goals, and the reestablishment of the impaired sense of national pride and state authority. Here, journalism and technology collaborate together to package the war into an aesthetically pleasing, emotionally fulfilling and morally aspiring commodity to be consumed at each American household, that simultaneously serves the purpose of national strategic goals.

4. In this sense, the reality—show depiction of a dramatized war transforms the historical event of the war into a media constituted one, in which the historical and the material event is absorbed into the idealistic perspective of a solipsistic media consciousness. In this perspective in which the relation between the real and representation of the real is reversed, and the sense of exteriority is completely absent, the experience of life came to be only accessible through media reflected consciousness, possibly leading to the condition in which the substitute 'reality' is felt to be a 'more real' than the real, even though tactile empirical traits of life are undeniably missing. Moreover, such generation of the double/simulation does not end by the simple replacement of the real, but it cultivates certain paradoxical inclinations in those who are deprived of the objective—reality world. As I will argue further below, the repossession of the real among those who reside in real—time cultural space is not attempted by a nostalgic recalling of the past, an attempt simply to recuperate the traits of the lost moments as it used to be; rather, the phantom images are preferred to the real as something closer to the ideal. According to this 'logic,' the acceleration of the erasure of the real itself becomes a form of destruction—regeneration necessary for the erection of the 'ideal truth.' In short, reality culture is producing (and is a product of) an age in which our relation to the objective world, as well as the temporal and spatial modality of our experience, is complicated in a highly technologically permeated world, where the fleeting reality is recuperated in the form of 'substitute reality' mediated and reconstituted by the advanced media and technology. [Note: Such multiple breakdowns of the perceptual/cognitive frame is fostering the socio—cultural conditions that are prone to violence — i.e., the loss of dialectical perceptual processes in digital optic, time—frozen cognition devoid of critical reflection, recalling of historical memories, ethical judgments etc.]

#### **THE SUBJECT UNDER SURVEILLANCE — TYRANNICAL CONSCIOUSNESS AND SUBLIME DESIRE**

5. America's "war on terrorism" has predominantly been discussed in an immediate relation to the tragic events of 9—11, placed in a popular public narrative that emphasizes the overcoming of deep psychological shock by a heroic national will to fight against 'injustice.' This 'psychologization' of the event predictably swept across popular media, and the dramatization of the narrative of anti—terrorist war fulfilled emotional and spiritual needs to redeem the sense of loss, overcome fear and regain national pride. Yet, a closer glance at recent American society can tell us about other factors contributed to America's decision for waging a war — something that the psychological narrative is

silent about — i.e., the multiple crises American society was faced with, ranging from economic and political to cultural and subjective. The national myth then tacitly masks America's internal problems and dramatizes the nation's tragedy and heroic will in such a way as to re—unite a fragmenting and conflict—ridden society with an enhanced sense of national pride. Sheldon Wolin characterizes the present crisis of American society in terms of an “inverted totalitarianism,” a society plagued by the system—wide malfunctioning of democratic institutions, such as systemic bribery, the corrupt relation between the Court and private corporations, the dismal voting rate, the concentration of media ownership and its control.<sup>2</sup> Wolin also identifies the enlargement of state power upon civil society, i.e., the state's motivation to gain unlimited authority as in the 1930s, although it is the elite themselves today, rather than populace, who are carrying out the project.<sup>3</sup> According to Wolin, “inverted totalitarianism” grows in societies where senses of powerlessness, fear and anxiety, uncertainty and dependency are wide—spread, and they are constantly reproduced by various disciplinary and controlling mechanism (e.g., alarm, the release of information about the arrest and torture of individuals, the strict immigration control and regulations on foreigners, the downsizing of corporations and the laying off of employees, the reduction and abolition of welfare and publicly funded medical care and so on).<sup>4</sup> Closely related to this is a mechanism of ‘softer’ control by regulating information/knowledge, including the increased dependency of universities upon private funds and the establishment of research institutes, such as think—tanks and heritage organizations, closely linked to the interests of the power elite.<sup>5</sup> From this point of view, the expansion of state power over society is the manifestation of troubled democracy and weakening hegemony, rather than expressions of national strength as such.

6. Michele Willson warns that the system of state surveillance that Foucault discussed in his *Discipline and Punish* has become much more thorough in our time due to the development of computing systems which have virtually come to subjugate every facet of our life. Observing that the gaze of surveillance is near completely omnipresent, and systematically linked to databases that are capable of all possible analysis, Willson argues that we are living in the age of “technological panopticon”: today, our life is thoroughly controlled by various monitoring technologies and surveillance techniques (e.g., being caught speeding on camera; captured on video while shopping; monitored for work efficiency; and taking a loan which is recorded, linked with other financial transactions and purchasing practices).<sup>6</sup> As Foucault has argued, such an exercise of surveillance would instigate a normalization, an internalization of the watchful gaze, that results in a voluntary disciplining of oneself to conform while, by being objectified in transparent time—space governed by the gaze of state surveillance technology, individuals are reduced to disembodied files disposable to the authority. Moreover, to recall my previous argument, the reality deprived subjects attempt to restore themselves not by recuperating the fragments of lost moments/real but by accelerating the erasure of the real that in turn gives rise to its phantom substitute as something more ‘ideally real’ than the real. It could

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<sup>2</sup> Sheldon Wolin, “Inverted Totalitarianism,” *The Nation*, May 19 2003; translated into Japanese in *Sekai* , August 2003, p76.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p77

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

be argued that the internalization of the imperative of surveillance technology generates a form of “death—imperative,” the self—destructive drive in which the subject feels a distorted sense of pleasure. Anthony Swofford writes in his *Jarhead* (published March 2003, a novel based on his 6 months military service during the 1990 Persian Gulf War) that under extreme senses of fear, anxiety and self—imposed oppression, he came to feel a distorted sense of pleasure from abuse and torture.<sup>7</sup> Swofford’s experience of “twisted psychology” — the inversion of pleasure—displeasure principle — has an affinity to the inversion mechanism that occurs at the moment of encountering the sublime, in which transcendental consciousness affirms its superiority to the empirical body by virtue of the former objectifying the latter. It is argued that the finitude of empirical human existence felt at this moment simultaneously affirms the superiority of the infinite power of consciousness which soars into the realm of metaphysics. In this instance, the absolute consciousness’ drive to destroy its own empirical base affirms its greater power, and that is felt as pleasurable.

7. Rather obviously, such a subject is a crisis—ridden being whose empirical and ontological foundations are seriously at stake, and is therefore desperate to restore its internal coherence and stability. In F.T. Marinetti’s 1909 Italian futurist manifesto, one could see ample evidences that a sense of fear and anxiety manifesting themselves in the form of a violent rupture, in which an illogical, passionate drive for solidity, fortification, and transparency of meaning/identity, is revealed beneath its uncompromising radicalism. The manifesto contains a number of claims for extremity such as “the glorification of war, militarism and patriotism, scorn for women, the call for libraries, museums, and academies to be destroyed,” as well as the celebration of courage, audacity, and revolt, a new aesthetic of speed and struggle,” which are combined with a masculine hate of malleability/fluidity which is symbolized by femininity.<sup>8</sup> For the militarized/phallogocentric ego, such indeterminate malleability is both the object of abjection and the site of sublimity, in a similar way that the body is to consciousness, where the ego stands at the threshold of coming to an awareness of itself and then quickly turns back as it crosses the limit of having pleasure in imagining itself as Other.<sup>9</sup> This crisis—ridden ego seeks, then, to restore its internal order by rejecting its own empirical base, i.e., the body as feminine/matter, and affirms its superior identity by resorting to power symbols

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<sup>7</sup> Futamura, *ibid.*, p96.

<sup>8</sup> Christine Poggi, “Folla/Follia: Futurism and the Crowd,” *Critical Inquiry* 28, Spring 2002, p709.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* This relation between abjection and sublimity is also discussed by Julia Kristeva in her analysis of one’s feeling of utmost abjection to the corpse. As discussed in Peter Schwenger’s work on corpses, Kristeva argues that the reason it incurs feelings of abjection is because “the corpse is the body’s ultimate betrayal of the *I*,” the self that is maintained by border and coherence and the notion of self affirmed by the presence of God. (Peter Schwenger “Corpsing the Image,” *Critical Inquiry* 26, Spring 2000, p399.) Kristeva argues, “[e]verything that betrays that coherence — the body’s wastes, its fluids, ruptures, and putrescences — is associated with the abject,” and such formless, malleable, and unclean bodily aspects must be contained and controlled to fortify the self. (*ibid.*, p399) These uncontrolled aspects of the body, therefore, give birth to ego: “[O]n this foundation of the body’s propriety the ego is constituted” (*ibid.*). On this account, Kristeva sees that “the abject is edged with the sublime,” or what she calls *anti—egotistical* sublime, in the sense that it “involves a loss of self” (*ibid.*). She continues: “And, as in *jouissance* where the object of desire, known as object *a* [in Lacan’s terminology], bursts with the shattered mirror where the ego gives up its image in order to contemplate itself in the Other, there is nothing either objective or objectal to the abject. It is simply a frontier, a repulsive gift that the Other, having become *alter ego*, drops so that “I” does not disappear in it but finds, in that sublime alienation, a forfeited existence” (*ibid.*). In this sense, the abject bodily matter is a condition for the ego/self to gravitate towards the center, fortifying its border at the moment of sublimity. This moment of sublimity, therefore, affirms the superiority of the ego over the body, or the former as a result of rising out of the other, which are segregated by the ego’s ability to control and freeze the fluidity of the bodily matter into solidity and give it a shape.

and superior values of phallogocentric discourse. Here, transparency of meaning and the simple and clear boundaries that can reproduce the hierarchical symbolic order of phallogocentric discourse become critical for those disturbed identities to regain the sense of fortified selves.

8. In this sense, the ascent of American myth *via* the anti—terrorist war campaign serves the dual purpose of consolidating the fragmented nation and crisis—ridden subjects. That is to say, the imperative to restore centrality, coherence and transparency in discursive meaning — that also secure their own identities — allows the creation of the national mythology for the just war by virtue of which the stronger and morally superior American national subject arises. The identification of oneself with this heroic national character serves the following range of purposes: affirming the desirable image of self as morally dignified patriot; clarifying previously opaque meaning in discourse and fortifying the boundary of self; re—establishing American masculine identity that affirms the sense of power and superiority; and all this together works for the consolidation of America under its flag with a renewed sense of national power and pride. The post—9—11 American myth, in this sense, is an expression of the masculine fantasy to erase impurity, indeterminacy and differences in the realm of the symbolic, paralleling the self—propelling project inherent in advanced technology that squeezes them out, transforming the perceptual field and cognition into one devoid of temporality, imaginative wealth, historical memories and moral judgment.

#### THE RISE OF NATIONAL MYTHOLOGY.

9. It has been argued that the Project for New American Century (PNAC), the leading intellectual source of the present government’s neo—conservative foreign policy, upholds an extreme vision of dividing the world between good and evil, and hyper—active interventionist policy to unhesitatingly use military force grounded on the dogmatic belief in the war’s just cause.<sup>10</sup> Underlying this vision is a form of self—justificatory radicalism to pursue its own ideal, with a blind belief that “American leadership is good both for America and for the world.”<sup>11</sup> In this sense, mythology is the construction of false imageries, and the imposition of the elite defined vision of the world, which guides people to think and act in certain ways by virtue of subsuming their lived reality to the mythological narrative of the state. At another level, however, mythology is more than discursive construction, but is a process of national transformation itself in which the nation becomes something of a “self—evolving being” guided by the self—justificatory logic of aesthetico—political immanentism that attempts to embody the imaginary national body. [Note: Lacoue—Labarthe’s argument on *technē* as national self—becoming, that reveals and realizes the inherent characteristics of the nation=people.] What underlies such movement is the desire of the absolute subject to

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<sup>10</sup> Toshiaki Miura, *Busshu no amerika*, pp184—5

<sup>11</sup> The mission statement of the PNAC is cited in its internet homepage as follows: “The Project for the New American Century is a non—profit organization dedicated to a few fundamental propositions: that American leadership is good both for America and for the world; that such leadership requires military strength, diplomatic energy and commitment to moral principle; and that too few political leaders today are making the case for global leadership.” It continues: “The Project for the New American Century intends, through issue briefs, research papers, advocacy journalism, conferences, and seminars, to explain what American world leadership entails. It will also strive to rally support for a vigorous and principled policy of American international involvement and to stimulate useful public debate on foreign and defense policy and America’s role in the world.” The home page address is: <http://www.newamericancentury.org/>

establish a highly idealized nation based on abstract images of “Americans” as a collective self, that naturally involves the elimination of plurality, indeterminacy, differences and everything which cannot be reduced to the idealized notion of itself. Rather obviously, such a movement towards the identification of self is destructive of its own foundation — i.e., exteriority/the other — which saves society from the reduction to and fixation with the idealized, time—space—frozen vision of a perfect society made of the ‘man—machine’ (as seen in the images articulated in Filippo Marinetti’s futurist manifesto). Indeed, the construction of American national mythology and the formation of idealized national identity did involve the elimination of others — either in the sense of indeterminacy in discourse or that of the marginalized groups excluded from the idealized American subject, such as those of non—European origins, those with different religions, women and gays and lesbians.

10. As Japanese journalist Miura Toshiaki observes, the moral passion that drives the Christian Right is derived from the anger and fear of plural values and unconventional gender identities/practices (which is seen as “pollution”) that, reactionarily, makes them desire to keep their identity undisturbed, pure and transparent. Miura argues that it is these vague/inarticulate feelings, and the urge to shape them into things easily understood and emotionally satisfactory, that gave rise to the absolute and exclusive American ideal which could conveniently transcend all the existing social and discursive impurities into a clean, simple, admirable and transparent national goal to “fight against terrorism.”<sup>12</sup> Such a desire was already wide—spread and immanent in American society, but it was the horrifying events of 9—11 that provided a precise moment that transcended those inarticulate general social inclinations, into an American mythology with a clearly formulated set of national ideals and missions. Politically speaking, this moment of transcendence happened to give a timely opportunity for the President to gain the nation—wide support from the American public, which was previously lacking, and who thereafter successfully gained popularity as the leader of nation, as “a self—proclaimed war president” who perhaps represents an American spirit.<sup>13</sup> With the constitution of the new national myth, America as a nation came to be held together, united under the common will to fight against terrorism, with renewed confidence and pride gained by re—establishing clear identity boundaries and transparency of meanings.

11. In order for a mythological narrative to be convincing, perspectives critical of official doctrines, and voices and faces of those who evoke doubts on them, must be contained or eliminated. Indeed, the visual representation of the war reports near completely erased the images of those who fell victim to the high—tech military operation from screen. Yet, many of Americans, even those followed the official narrative of America’s war, are not likely to be fully convinced by the myth, but are vaguely aware of the unjust pursuit of their leaders. Unlike in the mythology of the 1930s, the myth of the absolute subject in the contemporary age is less ‘organic’ than its older counter—part; while the national body of the myth in the 1930s could provide an illusion of regaining the immediacy of

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Winning the Presidential election involved a dispute in an extremely close race, but it was not until after 9—11 that Bush won the nation—wide support as the leader of the country. Indeed, some argue that the shock and confusion in the aftermath of 9—11 provided him a heaven—sent opportunity, which he very effectively capitalized on, to gain legitimacy and authority as leader of the country. For example, being himself a dedicated Christian, Bush’s employment of religious lexicon effectively appealed to public sentiments and successfully gathered national aspiration to fight against terrorism

the body and things empirical, the recovery of immanence as such in the age of virtual media and real—time culture makes one doubtful, and thus causes uncanny feelings. This is where the surveillance and disciplinary mechanisms become necessary for state authority, and combined with that is the demonstration of the overpowering destructive ability of superior technology that inscribes in viewers a sense of powerlessness and inarticulate anxiety. Although this war was not the first that made us aware of the fact that our lives are at the mercy of those who control technology, the gigantic performance of sophisticated arsenals somewhat reminded us of the fact of a true battle, which is not between America and Iraq, but between those who pursue their own end with the destructive power of technology and those who are made disposable to it. This state of being half—aware of the true location of the war, however, is hard to sustain, as the public is equally made aware of the danger of being placed in an enemy camp, and therefore, efforts to deny such critical voices work both from within and from outside, either in the form of disciplinary measures or voluntary blindfolding for safety. Perhaps Americans are not alone in being in such a state of constant disciplinary conditioning, but for those who live in the age of virtual media — in which “constructed reality” means much more than mere fantasy but virtually transforms the relation between state authority and its subject in its mythological formulation — the sense of ‘outside,’ that of history, is in serious jeopardy. Although a simple, accessible and empowering formulation of the national war narrative was a sure cause for its popularity, it should be emphasized that the true efficacy of the official narrative does not lie in its rhetorical content, but in the ways messages are conveyed in the immediate context of structural transformation led by technology, in which the subjugation of lives to what appears to be inescapable, total structural power of high—tech, media surveillance society are convincing facts.



Mankind, which in Homer's time was an object of contemplation for the Olympian gods, now is one for itself. Its self—alienation has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order.

W. Benjamin

War is beautiful because it establishes man's domination over the subjugated machinery by means of gas masks, terrifying megaphones, flame throwers, and small tanks. War is beautiful because it initiates the dream—of metalization of the human body... Poets and artists of Futurism! ... remember these principles of an aesthetics of war so that your struggle for a new literature and a new graphic art... may be illuminated by them!

Filippo Marinetti

The lamentation of an existential loss, the appeal to another beginning, listening to 'evangelical' poetry: very close to, very far from, Messianic utopianism — this comprises or configures the hope of a religion. Whence can be seen, at the bedrock of totalitarianisms, the restoration — which is profane only as regards Christianity — of political religion.

Philippe Lacoue—Labarthe

Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,' in Harry Zorn, trans., *Illuminations*, New York: Schocken 1969, p242.

Filippo Marinetti, cited in James Der Derian, 'Introduction' to *The Virilio Reader*, Malden, Massachusetts and Oxford: Blackwell Publishers 1998, p3.

Philippe Lacoue—Labarthe, 'The Spirit of National Socialism and its Destiny,' *Retreating The Political*, London and New York: Routledge 1996, p156.