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Larval Terror and the 'Asymmetric Enemy'

Larvatus prodeo—I advance masked—wrote the young René Descartes, suggesting that he advanced upon the stage of the world like an actor wearing a mask (*larva* being the Latin word for mask). A few centuries later, Friedrich Nietzsche observed that 'whatever is profound *loves masks'* (1966: 50, aphorism 40) and that 'every philosophy also *conceals* a philosophy; every opinion is also a *lurking-place*; every word is *also* a mask' (1966: 228-29, aphorism 289). Indeed, every presentation and/or subject-position is a 'projection' that *conceals, disguises and dissimulates*; every *persona* is a mask atop a mask—a meshwork of masks and of masking. I—*any* I: *myself*, *yourself* or *other* wise—advance not merely *camouflaged*, but *forever* camouflaged (indeed *hyper*camouflaged): every persona hides *another* persona, and *another* and *another*, *ad infinitum*. So my first point is to highlight this *larval* condition of [an] infinitely recurring masking—the *darkside* or *underbelly* that accompanies and ultimately ungrounds any and every quote-unquote 'enlightened' position.

When carried to its darkest extremes, a feeling of terror often emerges from this condition of infinitely recurring masks: not the discomforting suspicion that 'truth' is masked and that the 'true nature' of reality is hidden from us, but rather the more terrifying realization that 'reality' is *a perpetual mask-generating machine*, that behind every illusion is not 'truth' or something really and truly 'real' (the *ontos* of the ancients) but rather *an illusion-generating meshwork* that operates autonomously beneath every stated *presentation*, *position* or *claim*. Just as in the film *Invasion of the Body-Snatchers*, larval terror is chiefly an affective state in which we may sense something—we may *feel* it viscerally—that we can't *identify*, *quantify* or *qualify*. 'Larval terror' is the feeling of ontological and epistemological insecurity that results when we are confronted with the infinite recursivity of the larval condition. When viewed within the context of globe-girdling and ubiquitous digital information-networks, what is terrifying about this reality of advancing ever-masked (especially in digitally mediated societies such as our own) is the ease by which its banality and ubiquity—its ongoing and widespread everydayness—can be weaponized. Even more terrifying than the realization that every mask hides another mask is the weaponization of insecurity that results from this larval feeling of terror. A passage from Philip K Dick's classic *Scanner Darkly* (1977) is telling in this regard:

One of the most effective forms of industrial or military sabotage limits itself to damage that can never be thoroughly proven—or even proven at all— to be anything deliberate. It is like an invisible political movement; perhaps it isn't there at all. If a bomb is wired to a car's ignition, then obviously there is an enemy; if a public building or a political headquarters is blown up, then there is a political enemy. But if an accident, or a series of accidents, occurs, if equipment merely fails to function, if it appears faulty, especially in a slow fashion, over a period of natural time, with numerous small failures and misfirings—then the victim, whether a person or a party or a country, can never marshal itself to defend itself (96).

Larval terrorism weaponizes the larval capacity to use and switch masks, to play upon the play of dissimulation (while advancing upon the 'stage of the world') in order to go*undetected—mismasked*, *mis- /un*-named, hence ultimately *unidentified*—by one's opponents. This is the second important point I want to highlight: one of the main contributions to larval terror today has been from governments (in collusion with supporting commercial enterprises) that, in the name of fighting the larval or 'asymmetric enemy', are entirely invested in *the politics of fear* and in heightening popular paranoia for the purposes of actualizing so-called 'counter-terrorist' measures that include large-scale,

indiscriminate, covert and illegal surveillance of individuals and populations. The 'asymmetric enemy,' an enemy that cannot be readily or easily distinguished from 'friend,' is not just camouflaged, but is said to take on many forms. The 'asymmetric enemy' as 'larval terrorist' is not an 'individual' at all, but is best understood as a network of larval forces that is able to utilize and thus weaponize its transitory, polymorphous, and emergent attributes. The concept of 'asymmetric enemy' thus becomes a weaponization of the larval and polymorphous nature of identity itself, and has been used by insurgents, governments and corporations to justify their own, often covert, interests.

Historically, the political act of distinguishing allies and enemies has been considered a cornerstone of the modern theory of war and statecraft. Among the classical theorists of international relations, this is a point made with particular force and clarity by the jurist and political theorist Carl Schmitt in the early 20th-century (see for example Schmitt 1996, published originally in German in 1927). According to Schmitt, the political activity by which states named and identified their enemy established the geopolitical architectonic necessary to regulate warfare in the international arena (the state's sovereignty consisting primarily in the right to decide on such 'states of exception' or *Ausnahmezustanden*). The political logic of naming one's *justis hostis* or 'equal and just enemy' determined and directed the international military and legal mechanisms governing and limiting warfare. By conceptualising the enemy as 'just and equal' (that is, as 'symmetrical' or equally capable of appropriating territory), the international state system thereby 'bracketed' warfare, especially through balance of power, by developing international legal norms governing the legitimate use of force (Schmitt 2006). As Schmitt's analysis demonstrates, the politics of 'absolutising' the enemy—of naming and affixing its identity through the complex dialectics of institutions and values—has (historically) been a fundamental condition for thinking about and engaging in modern warfare because the creation of an 'other' that is reviled is deemed necessary in order to manufacture the political cohesion of a homogeneous 'self'. So, *what happens when the friend/enemy distinction no longer serves as a stable basis for theorizing war?*

'It hits home', so-to-speak (this is, indeed, the tagline and main point of the popular 2011 American television series, *Homeland*): when dissimulation and insecurity become weapons of war, then it becomes hard to tell the difference between 'friend' and 'enemy', 'homeland' or 'alien' foreign territory. The ambiguity between friend and enemy—or more precisely, the complete overlapping of the two—makes the condition of asymmetry between opponents an especially potent and effective weapon of postmodern warfare: it has the ability to create insurgencies, undercurrents of turbulence *from within*, from the role of covert insider rather than overt outsider. Theorists of war acknowledge the dramatic change in the nature of warfare in the 21st-century away from its classical formulations toward 'network-centric' and 'asymmetric' theories based on the unknowability, unpredictability, and inherent complexity of the enemy (see for example Guha 2010a; Hirsch 2003; Negarestani 2006). Although 'the terrorist' is still designated as 'the enemy' within the logic of the global war on terror, the complex reality is that determining the identity of the enemy can no longer be used as a basis for theorizing or operationalizing warfare. The globalization of terrorism, exemplified in the global war on terror, transgresses the logic of the 'symmetric' enemy according to which 'war' and 'the enemy' can be defined by normative political criteria alone. According to the Defense Advanced Research Project Agency (DARPA), 'The most serious asymmetric threat facing the U.S. is terrorism, a threat characterized by collections of people loosely organized in shadowy networks that are difficult to identify and define' (DARPA's Total Information Awareness Office [IAO] *Vision Statement*: 2002, see http://asymmetricthreat.net/glossary.shtml). The 'terrorist' 'can be wrapped in civilian dress', and this ability to be disguised or masked gives it a decided advantage because the 'asymmetric enemy' *can* and *does* conceal and change its form (Hirsch: 2003).

When subjective identity (designated as either friend or enemy) is no longer necessary to regulate war, then the distinction between the object of terrorism and the agent of terrorism can no longer reliably be the standard or criteria regulating warfare (especially in the Global War on Terror). We see this dawning realization in the popular culture of our time: Who is the citizen and who is the terrorist? The implication here is that the enemy today is not just camouflaged, but *hyper*camouflaged, and a new mode of terrorism has weaponized precisely this overlap between friend and enemy, civilian and combatant (Negarestani 2006): "If camouflage utilizes a partial overlap between two or multiple entities, hypercamouflage is the complete overlap and coincidence between two or more entities. … Hypercamouflage is associated with the warrior under Taqiyya or the Thing (John Carpenter's movie); it can be defined as a total withdrawal from the perception of friends and a dissolution into the enemy: the rebirth of a new and obscure foe" (*Cyclonopedia:* 2008, 241).

The concept of hypercamouflage (or *taqiyya*, originally a Shia doctrine of strategic dissimulation) consists in the practice of concealing the identity when revealing it might be considered harmful. A new wave of terrorism has arisen at the end of the 20th and onset of the 21st century which weaponizes the doctrine of *taqiyya* by exploiting the blurring boundaries between war-time and peace-time (Negarestani 2006), between 'civilian' and 'combatant', pushing militarization outside of the classical geographical parameters of a definable 'theater of war' into what, in military terms, had always been a space of unfriction or peace, namely the civilian and the space of civil society. Friction, or what Clausewitz called 'the Fog of War', literally turns inward onto the battleground that is subjectivity. It is not surprising that this recursion is described as 'the endomilitarization of peace,' which is not just about taking advantage of peace as a temporary suspension which can be exploited, but moreso about the process 'wherein peace is directly used as a weapon, exploited as a new plane for invasion and insurgency, and for offensive strikes against enemy bases and/or their supportive lattices" (Negarestani: 2006, 54). The goal of such heretical Islamic agencies of terror such as *Jama'at-e Takfir* and its *Takfiri* agents (as well as many so-called 'counter-terrorist agencies' like governments) is to exploit the endo-militarization of peace as a new mode of war:

A Takfiri engages as a shadow-terrorist […]. In this war, the cover of camouflage can never be penetrated or disrupted, and the defensive employment of camouflage is replaced by a wholly novel, highly offensive, deployment, the space of hypercamouflage. The Takfiri's favoured mode of warfare is to program a new type of tactical line which totally blends with the enemy's lines in such a configuration that it introduces radical instability and eventually violent fissions into the system from within. (Negarestani: 2006, 55-6).

The most offensive, active phase of a Takfiri's life is not when he or she is on a high-profile mission like 9/11, but rather when he or she becomes a mere civilian, totally unarmed and dissociated from any line of command. 'By becoming as one with the citizens as expendable entities for the State, the warrior under taqiyya shifts the battlefield to the homeland and shifts the attention of the State and its instruments of policing onto citizens rather than outside forces' (Negarestani: 2008, 127).

In the form of *hypercamouflaged hosts* rather than as parasitical predators, such larval tactics of terror permit the advancement of subversive, insurgent, predatory forces which aim to dissolve a definable system from *within*. Under cover of peaceful and peace-time activity (which Dan Mellamphy and I have elsewhere called 'the Fog of Peace', cf. 2012: 206), these larval operatives open themselves up to and onto their milieu becoming host to the forces of war that burrow, nest, feed and metamorphosize with, in, and through them. By unleashing the immuno-political responses that attack the State's own body-politic within the logistics of peace-time (by fomenting paranoia and pitting citizen against citizen), the larval terrorist engages in the production of internal decay and decadence, the ultimate effect of which is to dissolve the State's institutions and institutionalized values, rendering them fragile, porous, and thus open to insurrection.

War on Terror in the Age of Intelligent Machines

Fear, insecurity, existential risk—these are all key mobilizers in the global apparatus of war on terror. We just have to listen to government rhetoric about the 'great evil' which has descended upon our world, and which can no longer be kept at bay since it is now incubating in and infiltrating our own borders and backyards. Commenting on today's dominant security paradigm, media philosopher McKenzie Wark (2012) has succinctly noted that "Insecurity secures the necessity for security. The threat to security—oddly enough—is security itself. We have nothing to secure but security itself" (80). The job of *securing* always requires the propagation of insecurity; insecurity, in other words, is the lubricant of and necessary precondition for security. Fear galvanizes and legitimizes the onto-theological politics of recognizing 'good' and 'evil', of identifying 'friend' and vilifying 'enemy', and of distinguishing 'us' from 'them'; and yet at the same time, fear also *de-politicizes* to the extent that it delegitimizes critique, dissent, and alternative perspectives (not just the discourses of those deemed 'Other', but also those who do not even count as human). Insecurity—and the spectrum of emotions like anxiety, fear, panic and terror that it implies—is the *affective* catalyst and *ideological* carrier that drives policies, technological research and development, and public opinion about the 'war on terror'. I would even go so far as to suggest that one of the main effects of the global war on terror has been, in fact, to set in motion the *globalization* of insecurity (through the rhetoric and discourses of crisis and disaster), which in effect, has led to the massive expansion of governmentality in collusion with corporations and security

industries worldwide. The currency of disaster and crises-rhetoric in general is connected to "the privileged form of a growing state security apparatus. The anti-terrorism doctrine of the US explicitly includes emergency response to natural disaster […] the jurisdiction of a security apparatus that is continually growing new arms and extending old ones, weaving itself into a complex, tentacular network. The network is designed to enable seamless relay from civilian emergency response to military response" (Massumi 2011).

Both the larval (*i.e.* 'masked' as well as 'masking') and tentacular aspects of the 'war on terror' are key components of the current global rationale of predictive analytics and its political techniques of predictive pre-emption. Since 2002, commercial information technology experts and management consultants have been giving governments technical advice about how the war on terror might be fought pre-emptively using risk profiling techniques, namely technologies designed to classify populations according to their degree of threat, for example, in border security. Since its inception in January of 2002, the United States Department of Homeland Security, the civilian counterpart to the US Department of Defense, has been key in developing some of the most sophisticated—and some say, most politically insidious—security/surveillance technologies to emerge as part of the war on terror (*e.g.* BOSS, PRISM). In his testimony before the joint committees on the virtues of using algorithmic processes to piece together fragments of data, the US Director of National Intelligence, James Clapper, has clarified that the American security paradigm consists *not* in identifying a statistical relationship between data on past activities and future terrorist attacks; rather, the goal is to develop the capability to use algorithmic analysis to identify "a potential terrorist, a subject who is not yet fully in view, who may be unnamed and as yet unrecognizable'. In other words, as made clear from this directive, the war on terror in the age of intelligent machines consists in making security decisions based *not* on what is concretely known, but instead in terms of a projected realm of possibility taking place in an uncertain, potential future. And this is a future that can only be seen by way of what security and privacy scholars call "the plural relations among data points" (Amoore: 2014, 109). In the war on terror, security decisions have become primarily a project of inference; taking all the information we can about an individual in order to figure out not was has been done, but *what may be done*: "Put simply, contemporary forms of security are less interested in who a suspect might be than in what a future suspect may become; less interested in the one-to-one match of the watch list or alerts index database, and more interested in the signals of real-time predictive analytics" (Amoore: 2014, 110).

The serious implication here is that the war on terror in the age of intelligent machines is not so much about using the rules of war to isolate and eliminate those undertaking terrorist activity, but rather to *affectively* and *virtually* extend war into all spheres of life, as well as to extend and use the techniques and technologies of war to manage and govern entire civilian populations. War becomes diffused through a complex mesh of our everyday media in which the very metaphor of war expands off the battlefield and pervades every sphere of everyday life. When war becomes larval, it also becomes pervasive and perpetual; the need for fear, for threats, for insecurity also become circulated within the spheres of everyday life. Whatever view one takes on the question of security today, there is no doubt that security is most certainly bound up with insecurity. Prioritizing security questions has led to the development of a whole host of new intelligence organs and initiatives involving surveillance of individuals and groups, as well as new partnerships between technology corporations and governments involving the mass-surveillance and capturing of all sorts of digital information and data. In an age of near-ubiquitous digital mediation and ever-enveloping forms of new media, the styles of surveillance are rapidly changing, and we, as users of digital technologies, are participating full-scale in institutionalizing these new forms of surveillance and control just by being consumers of various media-forms and platforms.

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