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EMPIRE'S SHADOW

DURING THE MONTHS following 9.11, sorters in the US Postal Service were confronted with stacks of mail 'addressed to Osama bin Laden'.¹ Most of these missives were sent on to Afghanistan before investigators from the Justice Department could obtain a warrant authorizing their interception. As the letters were never opened (except perhaps by Osama), we can only speculate as to their content. Many would have conveyed threats: Americans, wanting to relieve the trauma of attack by taking some immediate action, pouring out their anger and frustration against the perceived agent of their distress. Perhaps some of the letters were laced with anthrax. It is just as likely, though, that they were infused with perfume. The women who reported to their analysts that they were haunted by the dream of sleeping with bin Laden may equally have taken the opportunity to pen the terrorist some lines of seduction. Would the ghastly, aesthetic face of Osama flash a smile upon opening a love letter from an American? Or would such a message be the kiss of death, a defilement more toxic than anthrax?

Whether curse or invitation, the letters bespeak a naive attachment to the real. At a time when most Americans communicate by e-mail, a page—typed or hand written, folded in an envelope, stamped, addressed and designated for actual physical transport—represents a tangible link to that longed-for condition. To write to Osama is to enact a form of sympathetic magic whereby the phantom terrorist, the haunting visage seen on video feeds from Al Jazeera, becomes a man of flesh, blood and bone. Just as children post their messages to Father Christmas at the North Pole as a means to dispel disbelief—to confirm Santa as

real, through the logic that equates an actual letter with an existing recipient—so Osama, inscrutably mythic to the western imagination, and Afghanistan, remote as the Arctic, are pressed into the mould of the real by the fact of the letters.

This, the age of fundamentalisms—both Christian and Islamic—is also an era of obtuse literal mindedness, anchored in a devotion to the real. The nineteenth century gave birth to the forensic sciences, popularized by the ploy of the fingerprint in detective novels; the twenty-first boasts a host of technologies guaranteed to inscribe us in the real: voice prints, retinal scans, DNA. Marshall McLuhan could once produce a frisson by proclaiming that ‘the medium is the message’, thus indicating that meaning was no longer rooted in what was said but in how it was communicated; we have now entered a world where code is reality, the human genome is our meaning. Struggling to keep up with advances in science, Washington’s newly created Office of Homeland Security seems antiquated at its inception in its attempts to pave the way to the real by compiling information on Americans’ credit-card purchases, travel plans, e-mail and medical records: constructing its citizens as the imagined sum of their data. With the imaginary thus steeped in the tedium of information, and the real reduced to the barren skeleton of code, Americans risk becoming a nation of sleepwalkers, yearning to recover the remnant of the symbolic order in their dreams.

Reductive readings of Lacan have preached the symbolic, the imaginary and the real as discrete categories, but the letters to Osama clearly manifest a blurring of the boundaries: the symbolic impinges on the imaginary so as to force the real into being—although in a version that only exists as a fiction. Slavoj Žižek has recently recommended that ‘we should be able to discern, in what we experience as fiction, the hard kernel of the Real which we are able to sustain only if we fictionalize it’.² Had the investigators from the Justice Department been allowed access to Osama’s mail they would no doubt have scanned it for such ‘kernels’, as a basis for bringing the letter-writers to trial—or, in a turn to the unreal, consigning them to the limbo of illegal aiders and abettors of terror, thus reducing the real to banality. Far more interesting are the kernels that will never be known to us, imbricated in each letter-writer’s private fiction.

¹ ‘Osama’s Got Mail’, *Washington Post*, 9 September 2002.

² Slavoj Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, London 2002, p. 19.

What haunts post-9.11 America is the spectre of the real, the horror that it may one day exceed the code yellow and orange alerts and go all the way to red, thus discovering what true catastrophe is: not sporadic and isolated events—a Trade Tower here, an anthrax letter there—but the final big bang, which will not only validate Bush, Cheney and Rumsfeld but obliterate them. This is, of course, as much a figment of the imagination as the notion of an ultimate real somehow ‘concealed beneath the layers of imaginary and symbolic veils’. As Žižek argues, the idea of a final, an absolutely distilled ‘Real Thing’ is ‘a fantasmatic spectre whose presence guarantees the consistency of our symbolic edifice’.³

Washington underground

Nowhere is the fantasmatic quality of the real more apparent than in America’s shadow government, at whose ‘secure, undisclosed location’ Vice President Cheney has (to this day) been hiding out. This us Tora Bora consists of forty underground bunkers built into the mountains within a 100-mile radius of Washington. Some of these sites are no longer ‘undisclosed’. Mount Weather, in Virginia, is the designated hide-out for the Speaker of the House, Cabinet heads and Supreme Court justices. No mean Afghan cave, the place has been described as a ‘small city’, with ‘vast quantities of office space, room to store the nation’s art treasures, sleeping accommodation for several thousand people’—nirvana for the Taliban. Two other features, ‘a private reservoir and a crematorium’, make clear that it can double as shelter and tomb. Perhaps the government is planning for their own martyrdom.⁴

Another shadow location, Raven Rock, has been earmarked as the underground site for whatever remnant of the military manages to survive a nuclear attack on Washington. It includes ‘computers and communication gear . . . a barbershop, dental and medical clinics, and a chapel’. Leaked descriptions characterize the sites as furnished with 1950s efficiency; indeed, many of the bunkers were first built under Eisenhower and replicate, on a grand scale, the fallout shelters that many Americans dug in their back yards.⁵ In reinventing them, our postmodern state betrays its nostalgia for the simple ‘us vs them’ politics of the Cold War, the comfort of a clearly discernable enemy. What could be more concrete

³ *Desert of the Real*, pp. 31–2.

⁴ ‘Secret of the us Nuclear Bunkers’, *Guardian*, 2 March 2002.

⁵ ‘Notes from the Underground’, *Village Voice*, 19 March 2002.

than a bunker carved into the heart of a mountain—proof of an enemy real as rock?

Family fictions

As referential point of origin, the 1950s represent the fantasized ur-moment of American history, before the social upheavals wrought by the movements for Civil Rights and women's equality, and of resistance to the war in Vietnam—a time when, we imagine, the nuclear family really did exist. The mirage was turned into fact a decade later in the tv sit-com, *Leave It To Beaver*, which provided an image of the 1950s family as a memorable reality, whose Mom-and-Pop scenario continues to be inscribed in the American popular-culture imaginary. Visitors to the Prime Time Diner at Disney World will find 'Mom' in her apron serving up a healthy dinner of meatloaf and mashed potatoes, with Jell-O for dessert—restaging, with each enactment, the 1950s as our socially centred reality. Happy, then, the employees of the shadow government who are dispatched back in time to their bunkers. Acting like characters in a top secret drama, they are only allowed to tell their families that they are off 'on a business trip'.⁶

Here we strike the kernel of reality in the midst of subterfuge: the privilege of the patriarchal breadwinner, whose comings and goings the 1950s housewife knew not to question, now catapulted into the twenty-first century and recreated in the post-apocalyptic shadow state. Underground twenty-four hours a day, on ninety-day rotations, the American officials entombed in this bureaucratic purgatory must dream of the freedom of their 1950s counterpart: the travelling salesman whose 'business trip' would have included the pastimes of a cheap hotel, its efficiency decor a proper setting for the pleasures of whisky and a compliant woman. What do the hundreds of employees relegated to the us shadow government do all day—and night? Presumably nothing, as Washington has yet to be hit. None of the accounts of their caves mention video libraries, stockpiled with morale boosters like Bruce Willis's *Die Hard* trilogy or, perhaps more appropriate, *Armageddon* (in which Willis saves the earth from a catastrophic collision with an asteroid). Perhaps, in keeping with the 1950s reference point, underground employees are encouraged to bring snapshots and videos of their families: like the California schoolchildren,

⁶ 'Shadow Government is at Work in Secret', *Washington Post*, 1 March 2002.

urged to pack a photo in their earthquake kits along with the flashlight, bottled water and nutritious snacks, shadow functionaries are probably forced to live the ideology of a panic intended to preserve the family unit as the core of American life. On the other hand, even photos might be prohibited in the bunkers; how else to maintain secrecy? Unlike those messy Al Qaeda operatives, caught with their tell-tale paraphernalia—journals, letters, photos, videos, cell phones and laptops—America's spectral officials must vanish into the secure sites without a trace. As shadows of the real, they must be utterly anonymous.

Thus we come full circle: from the rock-hard concrete to the insubstantial; from the bunker government, configured as the real referent for the symbolic performance of George Bush, to the existing government rendered real on the basis of a shadowy, non-functioning void. Similarly, Žižek documents 'the fundamental paradox of our "passion for the Real": it culminates in its apparent opposite, in a theatrical spectacle'.⁷ On the eve of Bush's inauguration, many Americans saw Cheney as the power behind the throne, the heavyweight, the reality principle to Bush's inept, befuddled figurehead of state. Such an interpretation was confirmed by Bush himself when (in his usual commanding prose) he explained that he felt 'an obligation as president [to] put measures in place that, should somebody be successful in attacking Washington, DC guarantee there's an ongoing government . . . That's one reason why the vice president was going to undisclosed locations.'⁸ In this scenario, the president is expendable, a visible target, while the vice president is preserved as the actually existing source of continuity. But if Cheney spends most of his heir-apparent life underground, are not Americans apt to forget him? True, he does surface from time to time to attend shadowy meetings with energy executives, after which all documents are either shredded or sequestered. Thus, the heavyweight becomes phantom and the lightweight becomes real.

Government cloned

Jacques Lacan has proposed Hamlet's 'play within a play' as a case of truth registered in fiction. The prince uses the little drama to create a structure, a dimension of 'truth disguised' as a fiction in order to make

⁷ *Desert of the Real*, p. 9

⁸ 'Congress Not Advised of Shadow Government', *Washington Post*, 2 March 2002.

Claudius betray himself. It is not the narrative (Claudius pouring the poison in the erstwhile king's ear), but the play scene as a structure that reveals the truth of Hamlet's Oedipal quandary: in seeing the performed action, Hamlet catches himself allied with his father's murderer, complicit with him in the desire for his mother.⁹ Here, the real is not a kernel, conveniently rock hard and discernable through the veil of fiction; it is instead the very structure, the warp and weft of the veils.

America's play within a play reveals a different structure: the incest not of Oedipus but of cloned replicants. The elaborate underground system of bunkers is not the only shadow government. The Bush White House is also paralleled by the fictional presidency of Josiah Bartlett in NBC's *West Wing*. Inaugurated during the Clinton era, Martin Sheen's rendition of the president was a left-liberal dream. While Clinton was busy instituting a neo-conservative economic agenda and driving coffin nails into welfare and health care, Jed Bartlett was fighting to maintain the country's social-safety net. Because *The West Wing* was so clearly Clinton's foil, many devoted viewers felt the show would lose its relevance with the Bush presidency. The fictional Bartlett and the real Bush would simply be polar opposites, unable to generate grist for utopian desires.

While *West Wing* narratives are indeed liberal fantasies, the key to understanding the role the show plays may be found in yet another fictional shadow government. Unveiled on CBS's *60 Minutes*, a revival of *Point, Counterpoint* is a weekly wrangle between Clinton and Bob Dole. In their debates, the former president and the former presidential candidate shadow the Bush government with alternative visions of what once was or might have been. Thus, viewers can experience a full range of parallel realities (for example, Bartlett intervenes to prevent a Rwanda-like genocide), all the while de-realizing the Bush narrative. Here, the question is not which presidency is a fiction and which real, or whether the unseen vice president is the true puppet master. Rather, the structure of all these clones reveals what many Americans believe to be the truth of the Bush presidency, that it is itself a fiction produced out of voter fraud and Supreme Court chicanery. Not that Al Gore then emerges as the last bastion of the real. Neither shadow nor real, Gore has become taboo, the *homo sacer* of the political world. Notwithstanding his desperate attempts to make himself real by putting on weight, growing a

⁹ Jacques Lacan, *Le Désir et son Interprétation*, Paris 2000, p. 286.

beard and muttering criticisms of the president's war policy, Gore lost his chance to be a shadow when he was summarily cancelled as a political personage in Florida. Only replicants and shadows can play at being president because the truth of the presidency is its clones, whose function is to diffuse reality across a spectrum of fictions.

Americans were given the opportunity to structure their daily lives as clones of the shadow government when Tom Ridge, head of Homeland Security, suggested each household turn a room into an impromptu fallout shelter. His advice came during one of the orange alerts when the nation was admonished to be extra vigilant. To channel citizens' anxieties into constructive shopping and home maintenance, Ridge advised that a simple application of plastic sheeting and duct tape could seal a room against chemical attack. The numbers of people who raced out to buy the tape were equal to those who made duct-tape jokes. In the end, Ridge retracted his advice when he realized that some Americans might prematurely hole up in their cellophane cocoons and suffocate, without ever getting to test their shelters in a real chemical attack. The best bunker clones were the war protesters who turned up at demonstrations wrapped, head to toe, in plastic sheeting and duct tape, turning their bodies into metaphors and thus resurrecting the symbolic. Their antitheses were those who flocked to Baghdad as 'human shields', the body here usurping the metaphor and offering itself as a real though puny buffer to attack.

Copy and save

Despite the numbers killed, the attacks on the wtc failed to extinguish any of the high-profile investment companies lodged in the towers. This is because businesses, unlike humans, clone their operations into backup files. For instance, 'Fiduciary Trust lost 87 of its 647 employees in the towers. Despite the tragic loss of life and the disappearance of its hardware infrastructure, the company was quickly up and running from a Comdisco recovery centre located in New Jersey.'¹⁰ Comdisco is one of many data-management firms that offer secure storage for the materials that constitute business as a physical body. The field leader is Iron Mountain, which operates 600 facilities worldwide, eight of them hundreds of feet underground. Like those of the shadow government, the

¹⁰ 'Read this, then go back up your data', *Fortune*, Winter 2000.

company's facilities originated in the Cold War; the authorities apparently envisaged a need to save documents as well as people from Soviet attack. Today, Iron Mountain provides storage (and shredding capabilities) 'for all major media, including paper, computer disks and tapes, microfilm and microfiche, master audio and video tapes, films and optical disks, x-rays and blueprints'.¹¹ One of Iron Mountain's recently acquired facilities is a vast limestone mine, north of Pittsburgh. Formerly home to government documents, this facility once 'stored applications from every person who ever sought a Social Security number'.¹² Its catacombs will now become final resting place for the Bettman Archive of 75 million photographic originals. At minus 4 degrees Fahrenheit and 35 per cent relative humidity, the repository will guarantee the durability of images such as that of the young John Kennedy Jr saluting his father's coffin.¹³

This life in death, the preserved entombment of American documents, betrays, again, a stubborn attachment for the real at a time when copies drive consumption. Digital media render vhs and audiotapes as obsolete as phonograph records. Is this the democratized work of art, Walter Benjamin's dream come true? According to Benjamin, mechanical reproduction has the powerful effect of eliminating the aura of traditional art—its privileged uniqueness—precisely because it delivers a copy to the beholder or listener 'in his own particular situation'. Benjamin celebrated the replica and saw in it 'the tremendous shattering of tradition' that was directly opposed to fascism's treasuring of tradition.¹⁴

Rather than supplanting the need for an original, the duplicate craves its own and demands that we designate some reproductions as more authentic than others. Post-fascist and postmodern, we have concretized certain lucky copies. Bunkered documents become the real, the more so since they will never be seen, only scanned and transmitted by computer. Buried in mines which no longer function as part of the steel industry or the subsequent 1950s bureaucracy, these copies become the authorized referents for the millions of clones that circulate above ground in our homes, shops, libraries and institutions. Stepping into the

¹¹ 'DSI Overview' at www.national-underground.com.

¹² 'Mining the hills for storage', *Post-Gazette*, 12 June 1998.

¹³ 'History Goes Underground', *Presentations*, August 2001.

¹⁴ Walter Benjamin, 'The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction', in Hannah Arendt, ed., *Illuminations*, New York 1968, p. 221.

brave new virtual world, we immediately find ourselves back in Plato's cave where 'the truth [is] literally nothing but the shadows of images'. The conceit of the cave recasts the notion of a play within a play, this time not from Hamlet's perspective but that of the actors. Ignorant of how the interplay of light on objects creates shadows, they 'see only their shadows' and concoct a sublime world where reality is the imaginary. Plato, obliged to disabuse the chained watchers of their mystification, expands the optic to show that the shadows are mere appearance. Iron Mountain, however, allows Americans to overcome the need for demystification: it makes the shadows real.¹⁵

Ultrasonic paranoia

What better way to do so than with home radar—the ultimate security device? Developed as one of the miracles of the Second World War, radar was mythologized in the 1950s for a generation confronting the contradictions of science and technology. While Disney touted atomic energy as the housewife's friend, offering cartoons of nuclear-powered vacuums and toasters, American schoolchildren were drilled in how to 'duck and cover' under their desks. In an atmosphere of Cold War anxiety, science teachers undoubtedly found relief in telling the story of how radar was stolen from the bat. Like Levi-Strauss recounting a Bororo myth, the teacher explained the animals' magic use of sound waves to render objects readable, if not actually visible. Bat physics overcame the metaphysical question of whether an object must be seen, or heard, to be real. Radar can give us a shadow where we thought there was nothing.

No longer a technology reserved for the military, radar offers unlimited possibilities for securing private spaces. Many American homes are now equipped with motion-triggered outdoor lighting systems; the suburban home of the not-too-distant future may well be secured with a radar device like the one currently produced by Israel Aircraft Industries. Marketed as suitable for 'officials' residences' the Minder, which can be installed along a fence line, is ready for democratization to meet the bunkering needs of private families. The Minder is only one example of hundreds of lightweight and portable radar systems, some specifically designed to be mounted on SUVs.¹⁶ Once radar becomes a standard automotive accessory like the GPS navigating system, citizens will be able to

¹⁵ *Dialogues of Plato*, tr. Benjamin Jowett, New York 1927, p. 772.

¹⁶ www.iai.co.il

stow their shovels and duct tape for the convenience of a family-sized mobile bunker—until someone, like the war protester clothed in plastic sheeting, applies anti-radar stealth paint to his body and becomes an anti-matter real threat that the Minder cannot translate into a shadow.

Taking Pineland

Shadow invasions happen on a regular basis in North Carolina where the Army conducts Operation Robin Sage four times a year. Intended to give Green Beret trainees a taste of unconventional warfare, Robin Sage is a play within a play, the consequences of which can be deadly. According to the military's scenario, ten of the state's central counties—all rural and somewhat impoverished—are scripted as the beleaguered nation of Pineland which has been taken over by a repressive government. The action begins when 'some two hundred aspiring Green Berets [are] inserted behind "enemy lines" by parachute, helicopter or plane'. Their mission is to topple Pineland's puppet government.¹⁷

The distinction between fiction and reality is considerably blurred because civilian locals are allowed to play various parts. Sometimes they represent members of the resistance, but they can just as easily be guerrilla fighters allied with the tyrannical government. Costumes offer no help in discerning who is military and who is civilian. Actors from the real army might wear camouflage but, because the script calls for unconventional war, they can also don civilian attire. Similarly the locals, carried away with enthusiasm for their parts, often purchase their own camouflage clothing from the state's numerous Army Surplus Stores. Residents have been known to 'construct fake bombs from pvc and traffic cones' and a few 'have also bought their own semiautomatic rifles for use in the exercises.'¹⁸

Staged over a period of weeks, its scenes and acts occurring randomly across a 4,500 square-mile swathe of countryside, the play is sporadic and unpredictable. Weapons lend excitement. According to the Army's script, no real soldier may carry live ammunition. But because North Carolina is a gun-toting state, citizens would be foolish not to duck and cover at the sound of gunfire. Thus, when Jessica Keeling 'heard a

¹⁷ 'Play Fighting', *Wall Street Journal*, 26 February 2002.

¹⁸ 'Tragedy Infiltrates a Bragg Tradition', in *Washington Post*, 3 March 2002; 'Play Fighting', 26 February 2002.

spray of mock machine-gun fire behind the Citgo filling station . . . she quickly locked the doors, herded customers playing video poker into the store's walk-in refrigerator and dialed 911.' Keeling was an unscripted local, who without knowing it, fulfilled a role in what turned out to be a hostage-rescue scene staged by the Army at the body shop next door. Other unscripted locals have been chased and rounded up by military operatives who had mistaken them for locals scripted as guerrilla fighters. And one unscripted elderly couple was recently held at gunpoint in their home by soldiers decked out with face paint, camouflage and M-4 carbines.¹⁹

In last year's dramatization, one incident stands out as a show stopper. It involved three categories of players: two soldiers disguised as civilians; a scripted local to act as the soldiers' driver, using his own civilian vehicle; and an unscripted local sheriff's deputy. The scene began when the deputy ordered the vehicle to pull over. Presuming he was playing the role of a guerrilla fighter who had stolen a law-enforcement officer's uniform, the soldiers went for their duffel bag to retrieve a disassembled rifle. Responding instantly to the perceived threat, the deputy—who did not know that he had stumbled into a play, and was carrying live ammunition as part of his real law-enforcement role—shot the two men, one of them fatally.

More complicated than Hamlet's mousetrap, Operation Robin Sage's play defines all as fiction. If the various renditions of the shadow government reveal that the truth is a clone, Robin Sage demonstrates that only death is real. The deputy's fatal act opens a Pandora's box of possible meanings. One of these casts him as a neo-conservative Hamlet who lashes out at life's blurred edges by driving the hard wedge of reality between truth and fiction. Another version sees him as a beleaguered local civil servant who kills a representative of a larger, stronger Federal force in a desperate attempt to reclaim jurisdictional rights to the Homeland. In this reading the Army (not the fictional government of Pineland), is the invader. Both interpretations contain kernels of truth but neither explains the sort of world that exists around the nation's military bases. Here, there is no clear distinction between military and civilian life. Locals are former soldiers, spouses of soldiers, or employees in businesses that cater to soldiers. They are the shadows whose real

¹⁹ 'Play Fighting', 26 February 2002.

lives feed the needs of the military, who in turn see themselves defending the lives of the locals.

Commenting on the post-9.11 world order and its new forms of warfare, Žižek asks: ‘are not “international terrorist organizations” the obscene double of the big multinational corporations—the ultimate rhizomatic machine?’ While terrorists and corporations tell different stories, they are united by a common deterritorialized global structure. As such, they demonstrate that contradictions at the level of narrative are overcome by a rhizomatic truth that spans the globe to sprout here and there in the guise of locally specific entities.²⁰

The counties surrounding the Army’s Fort Bragg in North Carolina may seem nondescript, a tangle of pine forest, farms, fields and forsaken townships. But the appearance of abandonment belies the compaction of global capitalism’s rhizomatic structure. Not a far-flung network binding terrorist to multinational corporation, but a microcosmic spot on the map where points of difference are fused to produce hybrid entities. Here, the rootball forms a dense, entangled mass that gives rise to myriad permutations of manipulated soldier and civilian DNA. The shadow other is subsumed in the self, and the bunker is the world all around.

²⁰ *Desert of the Real*, p. 38.