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Democracy's Theater of Cruelty

On 3 March 2006, *Time* magazine published a leaked file documenting the interrogation of detainee no. 063 Mohammed Mana Ahmed al-Qahtani at the Guantánamo Bay military prison in Cuba, which took place between 23 November 2002 and 11 January 2003.¹ Al-Qahtani, a Saudi citizen, is known as the supposed “20th hijacker,” who, according to the United States government, was planning to join the attacks on the Twin Towers and the Pentagon on 11 September 2001. He was, however, denied entry at the US border following a one-way flight from Pakistan to Orlando via Dubai. Later that same year, al-Qahtani was captured during the Battle of Tora Bora in Afghanistan. According to the US military, he “traveled to Afghanistan... multiple times, received basic and advanced terrorist training, and participated in hostilities against US and Coalition forces in Afghanistan.”²

The document describing the interrogation of al-Qahtani gained swift notoriety, as it illustrated in great detail how the US military made use of so-called “enhanced interrogation techniques,” also euphemistically referred to as “torture lite.” The George W. Bush administration legalized enhanced interrogation techniques by excluding “unlawful combatants” from the legal protections offered by the Geneva Convention³ in so-called black sites or secret prisons, of which Guantánamo, as well as Abu Ghraib in Iraq and Baghram Theater Internment Facility in Afghanistan, are part. These techniques often included “extended sleep deprivation, forced standing (also known as stress positions), isolation, manipulation of heat

¹ “SECRET ORCON INTERROGATION LOG DETAINEE 063,” *Time*, 3 March 2006, online at: <http://www.time.com/time/2006/log/log.pdf>.

² JTF-GTM-CDR, “Recommendation for Continued Detention Under DoD Control (CD) for Guantanamo Detainee, ISN US9SA-000063DP (S),” 30 October 2008,

p. 2, published by WikiLeaks as part of *The Guantánamo Files*, online at: <http://wikileaks.org/gitmo/prisoner/63.html>.

³ Philip Rumney, “Is Coercive Interrogation of Terrorist Suspects Effective? A Response to Bagaric and Clarke,” *University of San Francisco Law Review* 40 (2006), p. 509.

and cold, noise bombardment, personal humiliation, and mock execution."⁴

Because al-Qahtani's "confessions," which allegedly confirmed him to have had "access to the inner circles of al-Qaeda through his interactions with senior al-Qaeda members,"⁵ were gained through illegal means, charges against him were dropped as early as 2008.⁶ Nonetheless, the perception of al-Qahtani as a supposed security threat and the fact that the Guantánamo authorities still consider him to be "one of the most valuable sources in detention at JTF-GTMO"⁷ have kept him imprisoned and awaiting possible new charges.

A painful reality of the interrogation presents itself while reading the logs. Although the use of torture was legitimized as a necessary tool to gain intelligence in order to prevent future terrorist attacks, the fact that after 2008 they did not actually constitute any evidence in a court of law forces us to reevaluate its actual intentions. When causing severe physical and psychological damage to a person, what could one expect in the first place when it comes to gaining actual, precise information in the field of counter-terrorism? In his analysis of various cases of torture that are framed in terms of enhanced interrogation techniques, scholar of criminal justice Philip Rumney observes that "where a decision to use coercion is made in order to avoid an imminent catastrophe, the suspect, *assuming* he or she possesses relevant knowledge and is prepared to divulge

4 Jessica Wolfendale, "The Myth of Torture Lite," *Ethics and International Affairs* vol. 23, no. 1 (2009), pp. 47–48.

5 JTF-GTM-CDR, "Recommendation for Continued Detention Under DoD Control (CD) for Guantanamo Detainee, ISN US9SA-000063DP (S)," p. 12.

6 Elana Schor, "US drops charges against 9/11 suspect detained at Guantánamo,"

The Guardian, 14 May 2008, online at: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2008/may/14/usa.guantanamo>.

7 David Leigh, "Guantánamo Bay files: Torture gets results, US military insists," *The Guardian*, 25 April 2011, online at: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/apr/25/guantanamo-files-qahtani-salahi-torture>.

information, could easily give false or misleading information simply to stop the infliction of pain. Once found to be false, there may be little time for the authorities to gain truthful information."⁸ He goes on to note that "this is precisely the reason why the CIA warns about the ineffectiveness of physical coercion in its own interrogation manuals,"⁹ even though these same manuals claim that "physical coercion can be used to obtain 'needed information from subjects'."¹⁰ This brings Rumney to the crucial conclusion that "coercion is being used in some case, not to gather information, but to gain *confessions*... [which] have little role to play in gathering information that will prevent future terrorist attacks."¹¹

Among other brutal moments of interrogation, the file describes in great detail how al-Qahtani was forced into severe sleep deprivation and moved through several spaces, without being capable of orienting himself. In a press release, his lawyer Gitanjali S. Gutierrez describes how the interrogators went as far as to orchestrate a "fake rendition," in order to maximize his sense of physical alienation:

Mr. al-Qahtani... was given a tranquilizer, put in sensory deprivation garb with blackened goggles, and hustled aboard a plane that was supposedly taking him to the Middle East. After hours in the air, the plane landed back at the United States naval base at Guantánamo... where he was not returned to the regular prison compound but put in an isolation cell in the base's brig. There, he was subjected to harsh interrogation procedures that he was encouraged to believe were being conducted by Egyptian national security operatives.¹²

8 Rumney, "Is Coercive Interrogation of Terrorist Suspects Effective?," pp. 483–484.

9 Ibid., pp. 484–485.

10 Ibid., p. 492.

11 Ibid., p. 506 (*italics mine*).

12 Gitanjali S. Gutierrez, "Declaration of

Gitanjali S. Gutierrez, Esq., Lawyer for Mohammed al Qahtani," *Center for Constitutional Rights*, p. 9, online at: http://ccrjustice.org/files/Publication_DeclarationonAlQahtani.pdf.

These techniques serve to create a literal mental “black site”—comparable in theatrical terms to the effect of a “black box” that is meant to provide the audience with the illusion of an event taking place outside of their comfort zone of daily routine—in which all ties with the outside world are cut for the interrogated subject, structurally denying him any sense of belonging within the prison spaces he is forced to inhabit. During interrogation sessions that sometimes lasted 20 hours, sometimes taking place in the middle of the night in order to systematically deregulate his sleep pattern, al-Qahtani was sexually humiliated through strip searches, body searches, and forced nudity, including in the presence of female personnel.¹³ He was placed in stress positions and exposed to low temperatures for prolonged periods of time, threatened and attacked by dogs, beaten, and forced into intravenous therapy in order to prevent dehydration.¹⁴

Jessica Wolfendale, a scholar who has published extensively on the War on Terror’s use of torture, notes that enhanced torture techniques have resulted in deaths, as in the notorious case of Manadel al-Jamadi at Abu Ghraib, whose dead body was photographed after being brutally beaten and hung from the wrists. In contrast to this image that shocked the world, Wolfendale describes yet another, more pervasive and readily accepted image of torture: “Democracies are officially committed to the protection of human rights and require public support for their legitimacy, and thus this aspect of clean torture is extremely attractive to democratic states seeking to use torture and escape condemnation and prosecution.”¹⁵ The need to frame an alternative, more “humanistic”—*clean*—torture reveals the underlying paradoxical reality of Guantánamo.

¹³ For a detailed account on the presence of the female body as a means of torture, see Coco Fusco, *A Field Guide for Female Interrogators* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2008).

¹⁴ Gutierrez, “Declaration of Gitanjali S. Gutierrez, Esq., Lawyer for Mohammed al Qahtani,” p. 3.

¹⁵ Wolfendale, “The Myth of Torture Lite,” p. 52.

The presence of “trained military interrogators, assisted by medical professionals, and authorized by the chain of command”¹⁶ at Guantánamo creates a *stage* that we associate with legitimate authority, rather than the more uncontrolled and improvised space of the black site of Abu Ghraib, where al-Jamadi died due to unconstrained violence, lack of monitoring, and absence of medical personnel.

What makes this interrogation log so important is that the process of subjecting al-Qahtani to the measures of torture is nothing but an improvisational act to arrive at a catharsis—not the gaining of intelligence, but, as Rumney observes, of confession. If we study the log, it becomes clear that the interrogators do not consider themselves to be operating “outside” of democracy, despite being in Cuba and thus in an “extralegal” sphere. Rather, the interrogators seem to regard the black site they have created for al-Qahtani to be the essence of capitalist democracy as such: a space that underwrites the *avant-garde* of capitalist democracy, where its core values and their defense crystallize.

I propose to think of this black site, the black box of the regime of capitalist democracy, as *democracy’s theater of cruelty*, in reference to playwright, actor, and poet Antonin Artaud’s notion of the “theater of cruelty.” In his first manifesto of the same name, Artaud writes: “The theater will never find itself again—i.e., constitute a means of true illusion—except by furnishing the spectator with the truthful precipitates of dreams, in which his taste for crime, his erotic obsessions, his savagery, his chimeras, his utopian sense of life and matter, even his cannibalism, pour out, on a level not counterfeit and illusory, but interior.”¹⁷

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

¹⁷ Antonin Artaud, *The Theater and its Double* (New York: Grove Press, 1958), p. 92.

For Artaud, the notion of cruelty did not mean the promotion of an act of violence against another person, but rather articulated an existential condition that, in all its meaninglessness and desperation, should be embraced and expressed collectively through the space of catharsis that is the theater. Art historian Stephen F. Eisenman, who thoroughly analyzed images made by guards of their tortured victims in Abu Ghraib, notes in this regard that “torturers strive to create an intimate theater of cruelty. Not in Artaud’s sense of an arena in which the performance of terror and frenzy releases the repressed desires of participants and onlookers, but in the sense of a closed and claustrophobic space where victims are made neurotic or even psychotic.”¹⁸

Democracy’s theater of cruelty is thus not a theater in the liberating sense that Artaud had imagined it, who understood cruelty as that which both suppresses and sets us free, nor is it a theater of mockery. It is the actual site where the cultural war between the “freedom-hating terrorist” and the “freedom-loving West” is played out down to the last meticulous detail. And its dramaturge is Dick Cheney, US Secretary of Defense at the time of the Bush administration, who “personally approved 16 of the aggressive interrogation techniques for use against Mr. al-Qahtani.”¹⁹

The log begins by describing the creation of the conditions of the black box itself as the first act of torture: the guards make it impossible for al-Qahtani to grasp the time of day and the direction towards which he, as a Muslim, is supposed to orient his prayers five times a day. These obstructions render him incapable of performing the scenario that habitually grounds

¹⁸ Stephen F. Eisenman, *The Abu Ghraib Effect* (London: Reaktion Books, 2007), pp. 101–102.

¹⁹ Gutierrez, “Declaration of Gitanjali S. Gutierrez, Esq., Lawyer for Mohammed al Qahtani,” p. 2.

him in day-to-day life and set the theatrical stage for the guards to subject the body of al-Qahtani to a complex set of contemporary cultural iconography.

On 20 December 2002 at 5:00 a.m., the interrogators accept al-Qahtani’s request to pray, but only on condition that he write down the location and point of contact where he obtained his visa to travel to America: “Detainee complied and was taken to another interrogation booth where a Bin Laden shrine was constructed. Detainee was told he could now pray to his god—UBL. Detainee was apprehensive and started to walk out of booth. Detainee was not allowed to leave and interrogator played the call to prayer. Detainee began to pray and openly cried.”²⁰ The idea that military officers take time to compose a shrine within the prison infrastructure seems bizarre, but while reading the log it seems likely to presume the possibility that the interrogation is not meant to gain any information at all, as no actual questions seem to be asked of al-Qahtani. This is where the claim to gain intelligence reveals itself to be a disguise for the attempt to gain a confession—not of hard facts, but of an ideological crime. And this ideological crime is not to be a Muslim as such, but rather, is constituted by the fact that al-Qahtani turns to a false god; that is, a belief system irreconcilable with the culture of capitalist democracy that the torturers wish to inscribe upon him. In other words, the crime is not Islam, but that the prisoner is able to resist inscription into the ideological frame forced on him by sustaining own faith.

One of the most striking deployments of contemporary culture in the process of torturing al-Qahtani involves music, and it is

²⁰ In Vincent W. J. van Gerven Oei and Jonas Staal, *US Army Torture Devices* (Amsterdam: Gallery Masters, 2007), p. 30. The publication includes the full, annotated

interrogation log and can be accessed online at: <http://www.jonasstaal.nl/empathy-usarmytorture.pdf>. UBL is an abbreviation for Osama Bin Laden.

mentioned frequently in the log as shaping his sleeping and waking patterns. The most detailed description can be found in an entry that dates 4 December 2002 at 1:15 p.m.: “Corpsman checked vitals—OK. Christina Aguilera music played.”²¹ According to several online playlists gathered by journalists, “Fuck you God” by metal band Deicide was the most frequently played song, followed by “Enter Sandman” by rock band Metallica, “White America” by rapper Eminem (ironically, the song is a critique of the Bush administration), and “Bodies” by metal band Drowning Pool. Also accompanying the soundtrack of rock, metal, and rap were theme songs from popular children’s television shows such as Barney the Dinosaur and Sesame Street.²² According to one Iraqi prisoner, the guards referred to the area in which prisoners were forced to listen to this music as “the disco.”²³

In “the disco,” al-Qahtani was also forced to actively study and compare in great detail various images of pin-up girls and pornography while being fed non-halal food from chain

²¹ Ibid., p. 13. It has been said that this concerns her song “Dirrty,” whose lyrics gain a dramatic dimension in the context of torture practices.

²² Sean Dodson, “The US military’s torture top 10,” *The Guardian Music Blog*, 28 February 2008, online at: <http://www.theguardian.com/music/musicblog/2008/feb/28/theusmilitarystorturetop10>.

²³ The reactions of the musicians upon hearing that their work was used as a means of torture is even more revealing than the choice of music itself. James Hetfield, lead singer of Metallica, has stated: “If the Iraqis aren’t used to freedom, then I’m glad to be part of their exposure.” Steve Asheim, drummer for Deicide, questions whether forced exposure to music can be counted as torture at all: “These guys are not a bunch of high school kids. They are warriors, and they’re trained to resist torture. They’re

expecting to be burned with torches and beaten and have their bones broken. If I was a prisoner at Guantánamo Bay and they blasted a load of music at me, I’d be like, ‘Is this all you got? Come on.’ I certainly don’t believe in torturing people, but I don’t believe that playing loud music is torture either.” In Clive Stafford Smith, “Welcome to ‘the disco,’” *The Guardian*, 19 June 2008, online at: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2008/jun/19/usa.guantanamo>. Drowning Pool’s bass guitarist, Stevie Benton, has said: “I take it as an honour to think that our song could be used to quell another 9/11 attack.” In Duncan Campbell, “Musicians condemn use of their songs as instruments of war,” *The Guardian*, 11 December 2008, online at: <http://www.theguardian.com/music/2008/dec/11/gunsroses-elvis-presley-human-rights>.

restaurants, such as McDonald’s, located in the military complex. Although pornography, pop music, chain stores, and fast-food restaurants may seem to be the hallmarks and symbols of Western “liberation,” in the context of Guantánamo they gain extremely oppressive dimensions. Or rather, it is precisely in this context that the extremely oppressive dimensions already present in these symbols of so-called liberation become unbearably visible. This violent choreography, which includes the bizarre staging of a barbecue “birthday party” for the prisoner, who was forced to don a “happy Mohammad mask,”²⁴ is topped off by what the guards refer to as “Arab lessons”: the interjection of scholarly voices who, in between the prisoner’s subjection to Guantánamo’s “disco,” critique him for his lack of actual knowledge or observance of Islam.²⁵ In this way, al-Qahtani’s own performative, religious “script” is penetrated and distorted, overwritten and replaced step-by-step by the codes of democracy’s theater of cruelty. The tragic climax of the interrogation takes place on 10 January 2003 at 22:45 hrs, the first time the guards allow al-Qahtani a moment of respite. The log states: “Interrogator allowed detainee to choose a topic to talk about.” And then, from within this obscure dark infrastructure of the state of emergency, the log consequently notes that the “[d]etainee wanted to talk about dinosaurs.”²⁶

Nothing in the interrogation logs strikes me as more tragic than this, a question about dinosaurs, asked within the realm of

²⁴ On 2 December 2002 at 10:30 a.m., the log mentions: “Control began ‘birthday party’ and placed party hat on detainee. Detainee offered birthday cake—refused. Interrogators and guards sing ‘God bless America.’ Detainee became very angry.” In Van Gerven Oei and Staal, *US Army Torture Devices*, p. 12.

²⁵ On 14 December 2002 at 1:30 p.m., the log states: “Detainee was given a Koran to

read along with the interrogators to see the verses for himself. It should be noted that the detainee had trouble finding verses in the Koran as if he had rarely read a Koran himself. He also read the Koran as any other book where devout Muslims will ‘sing’ or chant the verses as they read. Detainee seemed self-conscious about his trouble with the Koran.” In *ibid.*, p. 23.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 45.

other false symbols of liberation: Christina Aguilera, McDonald's, *Playboy* magazine, all coalescing into a shocking and violent whirlpool. And amidst this brutal reality, a single response emerges from the body of the tortured, one that attempts to relocate his disastrous present by reaching back into prehistory: a talk about dinosaurs as an antidote to the universe of hamburgers and pop-porn stars, the figure of the monumental *Diplodocus* as the last beacon undisturbed by these false symbols. Al-Qahtani seems to be reaching for a point as radically outside the oppressive symbolic realm of Guantánamo as possible.

However, it is the guard who is in charge of the dinosaurs' history, and his answer is logged as follows: "Interrogator gave history of dinosaurs and talked about the meteor that wiped them out, and equated this event with nuclear war. Detainee expresses great ignorance about dinosaurs and space, topics that are taught in US grade schools."²⁷ The Guantánamo interrogation takes the form of a perverse pedagogy that demands al-Qahtani submit himself to the guard's historical narrative: the black site refers only to itself, the space where history is endlessly restaged to serve the purpose of the victor, the interrogator. By means of the Guantánamo interrogation logs we arrive at a disturbing understanding of our own culture. What al-Qahtani is forced to experience as an extreme form of mental torture forms the everyday décor of life for those in the Western hemisphere: everywhere we observe the symbolism of a radicalized consumer society, its constellation of chain stores and hamburger-nudity envelop us. Only, the experience of their sounds, images, and general consumption tend to be seen as proof of our freedom rather than acts of torture. Thus, al-Qahtani makes us sensible to the permanent mass cultural

²⁷ Ibid.

torture that is endured in the form of capitalist democracy. Democracy's theater of cruelty in Guantánamo is only a concentrated version of the mass culture torture that forms the extended theater of capitalist democracy itself.

In modern times, the theater is, at best, a space in which we confront in detail the choreography of our day-to-day lives: the choreography of our politics and communities with their rituals, presumptions, and myths. It is not the case that only fictitious scripts are read aloud and played out in the theater; the space of theater deepens our awareness of the underlying theatrical and choreographic staging of our own day-to-day existence. Theater, in other words, is permanent; its official space forms a moment in which we recognize, reflect, and analyze the conditions that define our daily roles as performers, which appear concretized on the theatrical stage.

The black box—or black site—of Guantánamo Bay functions in a similar way. It is not so much a space of exception, but rather a space of condensed violence and cultural oppression that allows us to understand the extended theater that sustains it. It allows us to understand the permanent "state of exception" that defines the relation between the state and its subjects in capitalist democracy, what we have just discussed as "mass cultural torture" through reports of a prisoner's experiences at Guantánamo. But this leaves unaddressed the larger choreography, the stage directions that make democracy's theater of cruelty a reality. Having briefly touched upon the manner in which the Geneva Conventions were bypassed in order to legalize torture, and the role of Cheney as dramaturge when dictating the codes of conduct for the carrying out of torture, I would like to ask what exactly are the conditions on the geopolitical stage that make this extended theater possible. What, since 2008, when enhanced interrogation techniques were at

least formally designated as illegal, has become of our place in democracy's extended theater of cruelty?

A 2014 article by journalists Jeremy Scahill and Glenn Greenwald, investigating leaks by former National Security Agency (NSA) employee Edward Snowden, reveals how the collection of so-called metadata obtained through electronic communication devices, such as phones and computers, forms the prime source for the identification of a suspected terrorist to be killed in a drone strike. If a person is pinned as a terror suspect based on his or her first- or second-hand contacts with other suspected terrorists, the phone is used to indicate his or her position on the globe for what are euphemistically referred to as "precision strikes": "The agency often identifies targets based on controversial metadata analysis and cell-phone tracking technologies. Rather than confirming a target's identity with operatives or informants on the ground, the CIA or the US military then orders a strike based on the activity and location of the mobile phone a person is believed to be using."²⁸

All too often, this speculative evidence gathered from a compository model of metadata proves to be faulty, resulting in the murder of many innocent civilians along the way.²⁹ Research projects such as *Out of Sight, Out of Mind* (2013–ongoing)

²⁸ Jeremy Scahill and Glenn Greenwald, "The NSA's Secret Role in the U.S. Assassination Program," *The Intercept*, 10 February 2014, online at: <https://firstlook.org/theintercept/article/2014/02/10/the-nsas-secret-role/>.
²⁹ This brings to mind the fact that in Guantánamo Bay, many were unsure about the reason of al-Qahtani's imprisonment in the first place. Rear Admiral Thomas Jr., in charge of drafting a report on the history and security risk of al-Qahtani in 2008, wrote that: "Detainee's file does not indicate why

he was sent to JTF-GTMO; however, it is highly probable that his transfer was due to suspicions of detainee being a UBL bodyguard." In this sense, the practice of "death by metadata" simply seems an institutionalization of a purely speculative practice of detaining, or in this case, even killing individuals. In JTF-GTM-CDR, "Recommendation for Continued Detention under DoD Control (CD) for Guantanamo Detainee, ISN US9SA-000063DP (S), p. 7.

have estimated that a total of 3,213 people have been assassinated so far by the drone program of the Obama administration—from which the information on 175 children and 535 civilians deaths have been declassified, as well as 50 so-called "high-profile" targets, leaving thus 2,453 victims unaccounted for:

The Obama administration classifies any able-bodied male a military combatant unless evidence is brought forward to prove otherwise. This is a very grey area for us. These could be neighbors of a target killed. They may all be militants and a threat. What we do know for sure is that they are targeted without being given any representation or voice to defend themselves.³⁰

The supposedly juridical basis for the drone assassinations and their "collateral damage" can be found in the "white paper," a document that became public in early 2013. Titled "Lawfulness of a Lethal Operation Directed Against a Citizen," it argues that forming an "imminent threat" provides enough constitutional guarantee for the legitimate "targeted killing of a US citizen who has joined al-Qaeda or its associated forces."³¹ According to Scahill, the US Justice Department continued to broaden this notion of an "imminent threat"—which in itself already cancels the possibility of due trial—even further, so as to include preparations for a speculative attack, arguing that military action in such a case would be nothing but a preemptive act of self-defense.³² Or, to put it correctly: a preemptive strike against

³⁰ Pitch Interactive, *Out of Sight, Out of Mind*, animated infographic, 2013, accessed 17 July 2014, online at: <http://drones.pitchinteractive.com/>.

³¹ Department of Justice White Paper, "Lawfulness of a Lethal Operation Directed Against a U.S. Citizen Who Is a Senior Operational Leader of Al-Qa'ida or An Associated Force," *Federation of American*

Scientists, 8 November 2011, p. 1, online at: <https://www.fas.org/irp/eprint/doj-lethal.pdf>.
³² Jeremy Scahill, "Dirty Wars, Continued: How Does the 'Global War on Terror' Ever End?," *The Nation*, 29 October 2013, online at: <http://www.thenation.com/article/176869/dirty-wars-continued-how-does-global-war-terror-ever-end#>.

the preparations of what at a later stage could become an imminent threat.

Whereas democracy's theater of cruelty in the context of Guantánamo attempts to inscribe and enforce upon the prisoner a specific cultural order through torture, the drone program *erases* the subject to be tortured altogether. In contrast to the attempt to inscribe a specific order through torture upon an individual in order to make him confess to the historiography of a dominant order, the case of drone assassinations directly inscribes a specific historiography by literally destroying all physical obstacles that block its narration. One might say that history is now written, narrated, or blasted directly upon the earth as a preferred map on a 1:1 scale.³³ In other words, we are moving from an inscription upon the *single body* to an inscription on the *body of the earth itself*. Art historian Stephen Wright argues for practices of art on a 1:1 scale as a mode of action to overcome processes of representation that obstruct our direct engagement with the world: in his view, the ideal map of the world is the world itself. There are some relevant sources from within the military industrial complex that actually engage with the concept of art, specifically when it concerns drone programs—and the drone as a kind of avant-garde art object—which makes it relevant to keep Wright's notion of 1:1 practices in mind.

Scahill and Greenwald quote a former drone operator of the Joint Special Operations Command on the deployment of the drone-operating program GILGAMESH. On the issue of the many innocent victims of drone strikes, the operator responds: "This isn't a science. This is an *art*."³⁴ Here, the word "art" is

³³ Stephen Wright, *Towards a Lexicon of Usership* (Eindhoven: Van Abbemuseum, 2013), pp. 3–5.

³⁴ Scahill and Greenwald, "The NSA's Secret Role in the U.S. Assassination Program" (italics mine).

not meant to indicate a practice more elevated than science, but rather, the very opposite: "art" is evoked to justify an excuse or shortcoming. The reason that the drone program is an art is that the precision strikes are not yet precise enough; to become perfect, the operating program will have to become a *science*. Interestingly, in contrast to Sun Tzu's famous first principle in *The Art of War*, which maintains that "the art of war is of vital importance to the State," it is the "*science of war*" here that is valued as crucial to the state. Art in the context of drone warfare is thus merely a speculative field that precedes the definition of a proper science: it is the *collateral damage* of science.

Sun Tzu's art of war had anticipated a war in which mass technology was not yet present. His was an art in service of crafting the state as a goal in and of itself; a state might expand, but its face and mode of expansion are one and the same. In today's politics, however, the discrepancy between a "public democratic face" and the policies of global monitoring, extraordinary rendition, and preemptive strikes are fundamental to understanding our current predicament.

What we witness from the Bush to the Obama administrations is a further articulation of the structures that develop out of democratic decision-making, but these structures turn against the fundamental components of democratic politics such as accountability, legality, and transparency. Indeed, the development of these forms follows naturally from neoliberal ideology, which incessantly argues for the abolition of the state altogether (while also depending on the state to be "bailed out"). These structures are what former diplomat and Vietnam War activist-turned-professor Peter Dale Scott has called the "deep state," a term he borrows from Turkish analysts. The deep state becomes apparent through, for example, assignments "handed

off by an established agency to organized groups outside the law."³⁵ In the context of the War on Terror, writer and journalist Nafeez Mosaddeq Ahmed describes these practices that outsource decision-making to entities that are not held accountable to the public as operating from "a novel but under-theorized conception of the modern liberal state as a complex dialectical structure composed of a public democratic face which could however be routinely subverted by an unaccountable security structure."³⁶

Our age of mass surveillance by secret agencies in "democratic" countries, assisted by the massive amounts of data handed over by corporate entities like Internet service providers and social media companies, has led to the rise of new political structures that fall outside the democratic control of the people, and often even of politicians alike. It becomes clear through the CIA's extraordinary rendition flights to black sites, drone interventions, and the private mercenaries of Blackwater in Iraq that we are dealing with various political substructures that are needed to maintain the hegemony of capitalist democracy, but which cannot be legitimized within democratic discourse itself. In order to maintain the legitimacy of a government under people's rule, a *parallel government* is needed—that which the father of public relations Edward Bernays long ago articulated as "invisible government."³⁷ Thus, the black site of democracy's theater of cruelty is not "outside" of our political order; rather, our political order exists because of this so-called exception. It is the foundational space of capitalist democracy, though we do not always recognize it as such

³⁵ Peter Dale Scott, *American War Machine: Deep Politics, the CIA Global Drug Connection, and the Road to Afghanistan* (Lanham: Roman & Littlefield, 2010), p. 2.

³⁶ Nafeez Mosaddeq Ahmed, "Capitalism, Covert Action, and State-Terrorism: Toward

a Political Economy of the Dual State," in *The Dual State: Parapolitics, Carl Schmitt and the National Security Complex*, ed. Eric Wilson (London: Ashgate, 2012), p. 53.

³⁷ Edward Bernays, *Propaganda* (New York: Ig Publishing, 2005), p. 37.

while we are situated in it. To become sensitized to its mechanisms of mass torture requires that we recognize the stakes and possibility of actual liberation or transgression. As philosopher Slavoj Žižek writes, the efforts of organizations like WikiLeaks and whistleblowers, such as US soldier Chelsea Manning and systems administrator Edward Snowden, "render public the unfreedom that underlies the very situation in which we experience ourselves as free."³⁸ The body of al-Qahtani plays a very similar role in this regard: his torture through symbols of so-called liberation makes us aware of the mass cultural torture that we endure every day under democracy's expanded theater of cruelty—not as exception, but as *rule*.

Graphic designer Daniël van der Velden notes that for political scientist Francis Fukuyama the central role of art at the end of history would be that of *ikebana*, the Japanese art of flower arrangement. Ikebana effectively reflects Fukuyama's idea that the world is inherently perfect if only we find the right *prism* through which to approach it, the right *order* and *arrangement*, which for Fukuyama translates to the political arrangement of liberal democracy.³⁹ As we know, Fukuyama has partly distanced himself from this earlier stance due to the rise of biotechnology, which has altered our notion of humanity altogether, and with it, the ethical conditions that define the framework of liberal democracy.⁴⁰ Given these transformations, it does not come as a surprise that Fukuyama's notion of art has changed as well. In an article from 2012, Fukuyama explains his transition from an initial investment in *ikebana* as the *art*

³⁸ Slavoj Žižek, "How WikiLeaks opened our eyes to the illusion of freedom," *The Guardian*, 19 June 2014, online at: <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/jun/19/hypocrisy-freedom-julian-assange-wikileaks>.

³⁹ Daniël van der Velden, "Wij kunstenaars

en ontwerpers" [We artists and designers], *HTV de Usberg* 82, February–March 2010, online at: http://moudenampsen.files.wordpress.com/2013/05/poster3en4_vdvelden_oudenampsen.pdf.

⁴⁰ See Francis Fukuyama, *Our Posthuman Future* (New York: Picador, 2002).

of the end of history into an investment in the properly speculative art of drone building as the *art at the end of the end of history*:

For the past couple of months, I've been building myself a surveillance drone. My craft consists of a remotely controlled quadcopter—a small helicopter with four rotor blades that looks like a flying X—with an onboard video camera that sends a live feed back to my laptop base station. It also transmits telemetry data about its altitude, speed, bearing, and location from its onboard global positioning system receiver. In the future, I plan to equip the aircraft with an autopilot system that will allow it to fly from one GPS-specified location to another without my having to pilot it.⁴¹

Whereas at first, universalized liberal democracy represented the glimmering hope of a final world to come, now its precious values require the protection of proper technological tools. This technology itself embodies the threat of biotechnology, the mechanical extension of the soldier in the form of a drone. And despite making worried comments about the ease with which citizens and “terrorists” could use drones for wrongful purposes—citizens and terrorists, after all, are becoming increasingly difficult to distinguish in political discourse—inevitably leading to more severe government restrictions on the private use and ownership of drones, Fukuyama ends on an ambiguous note: “Only when people start thinking through the nature of a world in which drones are cheap and ubiquitous will they start to get worried. That's why I want to build mine now, before the government makes them illegal.”⁴²

⁴¹ Francis Fukuyama, “Why we all need a drone of our own,” *Financial Times*, 24 February 2012, online at: <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/9cc59dce-5e27-11e1-8c87-00144feabdc0.html>.

⁴² *Ibid.*

Fukuyama's concern is as much about the misuse of the drone against the state as it is about the curtailing of the rights of citizens to privately own drones themselves. Indeed, the art of drone building and its use take place at a complex moment in time, during which the role of the government as both protector and opponent—and even possible assassin—of its own citizens is questioned by the experiences of insurgent bodies like al-Qahtani or Snowden. These insurgent bodies are also inherently *stateless bodies*, whether in asylum in Russia (Snowden) or in permanent detention in Guantánamo (al-Qahtani). They are who should have been erased, yet they have resisted erasure, continuing to cast their presence in ways that make us sensitive to the outer consequences of democracy's theater of cruelty.

The space between those situated in the condensed black sites of democracy's theater of cruelty and those outside have already been made visible by figures like al-Qahtani, and they are closing in. In the sea of metadata that forms the choreographed space of our word today, the difference between appearing and disappearing can be determined by the difference of a phone call—what Greenwald and Scahill refer to as “death by metadata.” What lies beneath the fields of metadata, the collateral damage generated by an art of a technological society perfecting itself into science, is not only us, but the assassination of history altogether. The stateless bodies in revolt are our guides in the resistance to this collective assassination, guiding us towards the possibility of a future history.