International Intersections
An Interview With François Debrix

By the Editors of Interstitial Journal

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Earlier in your career, you argued that media representations of United Nations peacekeeping missions reproduced images of international order to give the impression that such missions are successful and, in turn, justify the continuance of liberal political landscapes. How has the reliance upon simulation shifted with the advent of modern media techniques, if at all?

Let's not give too much credit to our so-called contemporary media techniques. There is a tendency among theorists—this is not new—to assume that the latest technology or the newest vector of mediatization is so revolutionary that it automatically, in and of itself, transforms our reality, our landscape of events. Simulation, as I understood it (and still do, to a large extent), was never premised upon the existence of this or that technology, this or that medium. This is of course not to say that particular media forms did not matter in the deployment of a certain array of visual simulations. But the point I was trying to make at the time I wrote *Re-Envisioning Peacekeeping* was that there is a certain indifference on the part of the simulacrum vis-à-vis the kind of medium that is being mobilized.[1] In other words, it could be panoptic modes of surveillance; it could be TV programming; it could be a cinema screen; it could be the imposition of a certain humanitarian gaze (things I wrote about before). Simulation does not discriminate between visual genres or techniques. Simulation aims to be all-encompassing, all-consuming, all

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[1] Francois Debrix, *Re-Envisioning Peacekeeping: The United Nations and the Mobilization of Ideology*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press (1999).

make-believe. It aims at a certain global virtualization this way (as Baudrillard so often repeated in some of his later texts). That being said, I suppose that it still matters, if one wishes to look at the effect of the simulacrum in its specific details, to describe how such or such media technique/technology operates and enables a hyperrealization of events here and there. This, I think, is partly what I sought to do when I looked at the so-called making of a liberal global order by way of UN peacekeeping in the 1990s. One probably could do something similar in the post-9/11 decade, focusing on how the visual was mobilized as a 3rd or 4th phase simulation (going back to Baudrillard's four phases of the image/visual), to substantiate the 'reality' of the US-led global war on terror, for example (from the endless replay of the collapse of the Twin Towers to Colin Powell displaying satellite images of Iraqi WMD sites at the UN in the Fall of 2002).[2]

Overall, though, and to return to my initial comment, one should certainly guard against claiming that 'our' new social media (from Internet blogs to Facebook/Twitter and all that) have the capacity to offer a response or resistance to allegedly state-led simulacra (of the kind displayed by Powell/Bush in the prelude to the war in Iraq). As if somehow new social media had the ability to pierce the veil of the simulacrum, reveal the trompe l'oeil as a false/inadequate representation (bring it back to a 2nd phase of the visual, according to Baudrillard's loose nomenclature, once again). We saw a bit of this tendency with the so-called Arab Spring of 2011, as if visual evidence truer than our mainstream media's 'truths' was finally unleashed through "unofficial" alternate visual technologies (cell phone photos and videos, 'real time' Facebook pings or tweets, wikimedia, YouTube, etc.). I must confess that I do not perceive much of a distinction, within our hyper-mediatized global universe, between the so-called simulacrum of 'our' official media networks (and, often these days, their embedded visual reporters) and that other 'mode of visual representation' that is said to come, apparently, 'really', from the ground up (or from down there in the 'political' trenches), thanks to the Twittersphere. Again, when everything is always already hyper-realized and hyper-mediatized, it comes down to which image, presented in which fashion, is more likely to have the most visual impact, that is to say, is more likely to count as the 'real event'. To decide which image is more 'true-to-life' is still not about trying to re-ground the visual representation into referentiality (we gave up on this a long time ago). Rather, it is about figuring out how the image can have the most impact (i.e., be blogged or tweeted about) in the mediasphere (see, for example, how the key part of any political speech these days is that portion of it that is said to have 'gone viral' on the

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2   In *Simulacra and Simulation* (first English translation in 1994), Baudrillard enumerates four phrases of the image/simulacra: in the first phase, a faithful copy is produced that may be taken to be a "reflection of a profound reality"; in the second phrase, signs hint at a perverted reality that they cannot fully capture or reveal; in the third phase, simulacra purport to faithfully represent reality, but have actually become copies with no original; in the fourth phrase, pure simulation transpires, whereby signs merely relate to other signs, dislodging any relationship between simulacra and reality whatsoever.

web or been declared to have received the most tweets; even the so-called 'real news' networks exhort their viewers to tweet them…).

Relatedly, peacekeeping, today, is coupled not only with humanitarian intervention, but also nation-building, as in, for example, the decade-long occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq by Western military forces. Do the struggles faced in these campaigns evince what you have called 'the failure of the visual', and in what ways is the commingling of mediatic simulation and political ideology at play in these conflicts?

First, in terms of 1990s UN ideology and discourse, peacekeeping was already seen by some (then Secretary General Boutros Boutros Ghali, to start with) as a springboard for what they called peace-building, which always had a strong component of nation-building, local institutions-reshaping, civil society-rekindling, etc. All of that is part and parcel of the neoliberal institutional mission/agenda of the UN and, later on throughout the 1990s, of other institutions (such as NATO, for example). For instance, this was the UN's and NATO allies' mid-range vision for Bosnia, both before and after the Dayton peace agreements.[3] What may make us forget about the initial (I mean by that, early to mid-1990s deployment of UN peacekeeping) close kinship between peacekeeping and nation-building—always according to a liberal mode/vision of global social ordering, of course—is that the United States, midway through the 1990s, sort of gave up on this approach after the debacle in Somalia and the fear that they may get sucked into a genocidal conflict in Rwanda. Although, as I hinted at before, the US did go along with the Dayton accords (but only in the context of NATO, and something rather similar took place in Kosovo in 1999). In reality, the US never gave up on nation-building. And the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan indeed revealed this. What changed in the rhetoric, on the US side anyway, is that, after 9/11, American officials did not care anymore, as many had claimed toward the end of the previous decade, if the US military was not trained, equipped, and/or prepared for nation-building. Making the world (and 'us all') free from terror meant that not only the US military (and the coalition of the 'willing') would have to rebuild Afghanistan and Iraq, but it would rebuild the entire world, too, by removing terrorists, fundamentalists, insurgents, and other 'evil' figures wherever they were to be found. Infamously, neo-conservative pundit Thomas Barnett's book *The Pentagon's New Map* sought to offer a blueprint for such a nation-by-nation rebuilding by way of US military might (never mind the fact that, until very recently, the US military was not really prepared for this kind of task).[4]

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3   The General Framework Agreement for Peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina, commonly called the Dayton Agreement, was signed in Paris on December 14, 1995, formally ending the three-and-a-half year Bosnian War.

4   Thomas Barnett, *The Pentagon's New Map: War and Peace in the Twenty-First Century*, New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons (2004).

So, from this perspective, peacekeeping and nation-building seemed to form a continuum of sorts as early as 1991-1992. And, in a way, these two modalities of forceful global liberal (re)ordering have required the presence of the visual, too. But, perhaps more crucially than with peacekeeping, to maintain the control over the visual field is a tricky endeavor in a context of generalized nation-building, particularly when nation-building is to take place in a military way, sometimes through the deployment of martial force and with war-like violence. As we all know so well, from the moment things did not start to go well for US nation-building efforts in Iraq (despite some of the key early visual moments of the war such as the "shock and awe" advance through the streets of Baghdad, the toppling of Saddam's statue, and, of course, Bush's 'Mission Accomplished' speech/photo-op on the deck of the USS Lincoln), one of the foremost preoccupations of the Bush administration was to keep a tight lid on the flow of images coming out of Iraq. Coffins of dead US soldiers were not to be seen, for instance. Pictures of detainees or, for that matter, of detention sites (Guantanamo, Bagram, Abu Ghraib) were not to be taken or released. While 1990s UN peacekeeping had to be seen by all, 2000s US-led nation-building had to be a mostly invisible enterprise. It was, of course, talked about a lot, even critically discussed (as the number of dead US troops mounted). But nation-building, no doubt because it was not going so well, was not something to be shown. One could simply say that it was purely and simply a matter of US official censorship over the visual. Or, perhaps, one could argue that if the visual simulacrum of peacekeeping in the previous decade was supposed to substantiate the reality of a liberal world order in the making in its absence, the overall lack of visuality over nation-building in Afghanistan and Iraq was a matter of dissimulation (hiding the fact that there is indeed something going on, albeit not what one had expected or was supposed to see). From this perspective, one might also be tempted to compare and contrast the 'failure' or 'rupture' of the visual that took place in Mogadishu in 1992 (as I wrote about in *Re-Envisioning Peacekeeping*) with the sudden and unexpected 'irruption' of the images in 2004 when the Abu Ghraib torture photos were released (the first one shut down a certain desired regime of visibility, while the second glaringly exposed the limitations of a hoped for system of invisibility and visual censorship).

But I think it is not enough, in the case of the US military-led nation-building efforts of the past decade, to leave it as a matter of desired visual occlusion or censorship that suddenly may have been torn apart (a la Mogadishu's own 'visual failure' of 1992), particularly after the Abu Ghraib photos were publicized. In a way, the Abu Ghraib photos were not a rupture of the regime of invisibility over nation-building in Iraq and Afghanistan. Rather, at some level, they were a continuation of it. They were outrageous displays of tortured, violated, and dehumanized enemy others, to be sure. They were also, for some, confirmations that the generalized regime of nation-building invisibility in Iraq and Afghanistan did encourage torture

(by trying to hide it) and war crimes. But they also, perversely perhaps, showed that nation-building by the US military was, is, and will be a long, arduous, and protracted task, one that must be left to professional soldiers (who, allegedly, are good at doing their job, even in the face of adversity), away from Western journalists' eyes, and not to those 'few bad apples' (as Rumsfeld put it) who were 'clearly' out of control. At a time when there was a growing debate in American public culture over rights and obligations of citizens (PATRIOT act, limitation of civil liberties, heightened screenings and controls at airports, etc.), possible US torture and illegal detention 'black sites' in 'third' countries, and the status of interrogations of 'enemy combatants' at Guantanamo's Camp Delta, the Abu Ghraib photos were thus able to concentrate much of the public's attention (and sometimes anger) toward these scenes and images, while allowing the broader regime of surveillance, control, detention, torture, illegality, fledgling nation-building, and war-making crucial to the US-led Global War on Terror to continue to take place, largely unchallenged. It is worth noting, by the way, that much of this regime of 'war on terror' supporting, making, or building remains in place today, both within the United States and abroad, even though George W. Bush left the White House some four years ago.

I realize that I am talking about much more than nation-building here. But, thinking about the last decade of US-led Global War on Terror, what I think would have been far more of a so-called failure of the visual is if a constant stream of pictures of, for example, coffins draped with the US flag and coming back from Iraq and Afghanistan had been allowed to take a regular place in our media universe (something which, to this day, has yet to happen; the daily count by some news media of how many troops have died in Iraq or Afghanistan does not achieve the same effect—if nothing else, it sanitizes and de-materializes the ongoing wars for the US public). Despite some attempts by photo-journalists, non-US media networks, documentary filmmakers, and so on to show 'other' pictures about 'our' nation-building war efforts in Afghanistan and Iraq, the US led-Global War on Terror or its long afterglow (it has not been declared to be over, even though the official US rhetoric has shifted under Barack Obama) has yet to witness a rupture in its regime of visual representation.

Over the past ten years, the terror attacks of September 11, 2001 have engendered multiple symbolic meanings in the Western political imaginary, becoming iconic of discourses as diverse as anticolonial resistance and the failures of globalization. To your mind, what impact did the spectaclization of 9/11 have upon our ability to rethink the purpose and promise of liberal governance, particularly with regard to placing the World Trade Center collapse within a larger narrative about endless warfare?

The spectacularization of 9/11 has been very convenient, in more ways than one. Clearly, as many have shown over the years, it has helped to justify all sorts of policies and military actions/responses. In an important way, this spectacular commemoration of the 9/11 attacks—the same images, from different angles and perspectives, over and over; the same narratives, explaining the visual scene and its replay—has also prevented us (in the United States, primarily, but I would also say in the West, more generally) from experiencing the trauma of the event itself, the void, silence, gap that the magnitude of this event could have brought for us (perhaps allowing us to think about our 'responses' to it differently from what we ended up doing). Again, many theorists have written about this, often in compelling ways.

In this context, the endless, spectacular replay of the '9/11 theme' has also facilitated an apprehension of governance—both at home and abroad—having to take place through military means (as I discussed above in relation to nation-building). Put differently, the war on terror has become a convenient proxy for liberal governance/governmentality, as George W. Bush made abundantly clear when, within a year or so of the US invasion of Iraq, he started to talk about the possibility of launching a vast 'free-trade' zone in the Middle East, with Iraq as its US-led center. According to this vision of global liberal ordering, there would be a seamless transition from military might to democracy and human rights and on to neoliberal economics and free trade. Many have pointed out that this was always part and parcel of the neo-conservative agenda (and of Project for the New American Century's proponents, in particular).[5] But as others have suggested (Derek Gregory, for example), this was also close to fairly traditional colonialist and imperialist projects and designs, with colonial empires—think about Great Britain and France in the 18th and 19th centuries—combining the logics of warfare, imposed political occupation and forced legal order, and capitalist gains to great effect.

While all this is no longer performed, officially at least, under the umbrella of 'bringing civilization' to the world's people, it nonetheless has taken place, again in the shadows of 9/11, under the banner of an endless crusade to free the world of 'evil' terror and 'evil' terrorists (thus guaranteeing that both the military crusade and the imperial liberal governance project would not be about to end). As long as the specter of the war on terror remains (even if Obama does not like to use that phrase, the concept is not gone from contemporary Western/US geopolitical rationales), we will have a hard time removing terms such as colonialism, imperium, hegemony, and Empire from the analytical discourse of global (liberal)

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5   The Project for a New American Century was an American think tank based in Washington D.C. Established in 1997 and closed in 2006, the group sought to promote "a Reaganite policy of military strength and moral clarity," and exerted significant influence on the foreign policies of former U.S. President George W. Bush.

governance/governmentality (as Hardt and Negri have noted, for example).[6] Now, this does not mean that we must assume that the United States is and will remain the puppet-master behind all this. Rather, what it means is that the post-9/11 rules of Empire and modalities of belligerent governmentality set up by certain US/Western discourses and beliefs have a way of giving rise to a fairly wide array of political, economic, and cultural formations or assemblages that can produce and reproduce liberal governance effects on a transnational scale (but always with a same kind of military violence, political/legal order, and economic free trade mixture).

In what sense can the apprehension–or, perhaps, incommensurability–of the hegemonic American war machine be understood as based on an ideology of the sublime, and what implications might this have for critiquing the normative dimension of international politics?

I do not really know if we can, or even should, understand the American war machine—or any war machine for that matter—from the perspective of the sublime, although I think I did show in *Tabloid Terror* that there clearly was a 'sublime experience' that was reached by some proponents of a US war machine post-9/11 (and in the invasion of Iraq, in particular).[7] You could find this sense of awe at the sight of US military advances and achievements combined with some sense of incomprehension or almost incommensurability. Something along the lines of "Well, we are not too sure what the US war machine is doing and we are not sure whether it is that successful in combatting 'evil' terror, but we are stunned by the images we see of it." General Tommy Franks' memoirs hint at some sentiment like this several times.[8] But what I called 'tabloid imperialist pundits' and 'intellectuals of statecraft' conveyed a similar message or feeling. I am not totally sure that we can refer to this experience or sentiment as a matter of capturing the sublime. But it does come pretty close to the way Lyotard suggested we can interpret the Kantian sublime, as this aesthetic/affective experience (that may or may not be shared by others) that we can allegorize, laud, indeed be 'in awe' of, but for which concepts, objects, referents, or explanations are lacking. Put differently, we know that the US war machine (in its war against terror) is asked to take charge in a way that we cannot really understand and, perhaps more crucially, control (I'll return to this later when I address the matter of agonal sovereignty). We are not too certain anymore whether it even represents what the US is or wants. We don't know if the warriors are good or evil anymore. But we cannot help being amazed by what is being deployed and sometimes shown, by the deeds of the warriors (beyond political calculations) because we called for them in the first place, because we launched them on this endless and boundless mission (or crusade, as I suggested before). This

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6   See, for example, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's *Empire*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press (2000).

7   Francois Debrix, *Tabloid Terror: War, Culture, And Geopolitics*, London: Routledge (2007).

8   Tommy Franks, *American Soldier*, New York: Harper Collins (2004).

is partly what I read tabloid imperialist pundits to be expressing in many of their texts and public interventions in the years that followed the invasion of Iraq in particular. In a way, not only did they need or want to experience the sublime vis-à-vis war in this manner, but it is almost as if they had to since they called on the war machine in the first place. Again, here, we rediscover the theme/metaphorization developed by Deleuze and Guattari in their essay on nomadism (in *A Thousand Plateaus*) where the state form calls in the war machine at its own risk but, in a way, nonetheless remains thrilled to do so (even if, as Deleuze and Guattari intimate, the war machine has no allegiance to the state form).[9]

As to how this form of analysis about the sublime and the war machine may operate as a critique of international politics, I do not really know. And I would guard against elevating this kind of analysis to the level of a sustained or generalized critique of ideology, for instance. I suppose what I am suggesting is that we may be better off returning to the kind of images or analytical intuitions offered by theorists like Deleuze and Guattari, whose writings evoke the possibility that there may be something of the order of the sublime whenever the state/political institutions turn to warriors to perform whatever deeds they need to perform. I know that, at the time I wrote *Tabloid Terror*, I did intimate the possibility that there may be an 'ideology of the sublime' at play in the context of the release of the Abu Ghraib photos. This seemed to make sense to me in that context at the time. I'm not sure I would disagree with that notion and that reading I did then. But, perhaps with the benefit of some distance now, and perhaps also because I did spend more time looking at the phenomenon of the war machine in *Beyond Biopolitics*, I would say that speaking of the sublime experience in terms of ideology (and thus wanting to develop an ideological critique of it, perhaps for the benefit of international politics) is no longer really warranted. Again, I think I would be more at ease thinking about the possibility that the very exercise or experience of/with the war machine, of/with that which smoothens international space possibly beyond recognition or re-appropriation by the state-form or the state-apparatus, contains a sublime dimension, an imagination that can never be fully expressed, referenced, or put into words. But one that nonetheless, endlessly and fatefully perhaps, always compels state sovereignty (and its proponents/agents) to inevitably return to it and want to make use of it. In a way, I am reminded here of the work that Larry George has done on the pharmakos and war, on how war, the war machine, and war heroes are subjected to a certain form of fatal attraction on the part of the state and state-agents that is both addictive and destructive, enticing and disabling.[10] George does not seek to make any grand claims about the use of war and the state/sovereignty (I believe). But he also does not need to mobilize the specter of an 'ideology of the

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9   Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, "1227: Treatise on Nomadology—The War Machine," in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press (1987), pp. 351-423.

10   See George's "9-11: Pharmacotic War," in *Theory and Event*, Vol. 5.4 (2001) and "The Pharmacotic War on Terrorism," in *Theory, Culture, and Society*, Vol. 19.4 (August 2002).

sublime' in order to demonstrate (often, in a poignant fashion) that pharmacotic war is a US/Western modality of seduction and perdition all at the same time. I think that George's deployment of the image/idea of pharmacotic war captures the ambiguities involved in the experience of the sublime vis-à-vis war and the war machine. Again, we do not quite know/understand what it does; we do sense that it may not always be for our own good; but we are also so in awe of it (the sovereign state indeed is in awe of its destructive fury) that we do not know how to be/live without it. Perhaps, then, tabloid imperialists—but, really, all those who support the idea of the re-empowering of the state through war, who seek to promote state sovereignty at all costs—are today's new futurists, the new fateful 'incendiary poets' (as Marinetti put it) whose thrill and seduction for that awesome materiality they do not fully comprehend drives them to will political collapse and destruction, whether they are fully aware of it or not.

Biopolitics, or the regulation and disciplining of possible forms of life through the assertion of power within governmental regimes, has been used to dissect myriad political institutions that have typically been seen as apolitical, from medical clinics to psychiatric hospitals to state prisons. Why, in your opinion, do we need to move beyond biopolitics, and once we do, what theoretical trajectories await?

We are never without or really 'beyond' biopolitics. This is something that, theoretically and empirically, I have become more and more convinced of since I started to write *Beyond Biopolitics* (with my colleague Alex Barder) and possibly even more so since the publication of this book.[11] The capture or taking possession of the 'biological fact of life' (to use Agamben's turn of phrase) in a wide range of 'political' enterprises—from the practice of sovereignty to regimes of criminality, from health care policies to suicide bombings—is a rather inescapable observation, one that is somewhat corollary to the realization of the death of the subject (or perhaps represents its fatal outcome). Biopolitics further decenters the idea, meaning, and privilege of the individual subject (as an individual body/self with political attributes, or a 'politically qualified life', to continue to use Agamben's language) that had already been announced by critiques of regimes of representation, including those that told us that the 'realities' that now 'mattered' were no longer anchored into logocentric systems of thinking—and valuing— existence and of producing meaning.

To move 'beyond' biopolitics, as my colleague and I tried to indicate in *Beyond Biopolitics*, is to depart from theories that have mobilized the biopolitical theme of late, while also realizing that any such departure is always a recognition that there is no surmounting what, for lack of a better phrase, may be referred to as the

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11 Francois Debrix and Alexander D. Barder, *Beyond Biopolitics: Theory, Violence, and Horror in World Politics*, London: Routledge (2012).

'biopolitical condition'. Thus, I perceive our endeavor in *Beyond Biopolitics* as both an homage to and a critique of those vital (in more ways than one) theories and literatures that have made us understand what is at stake in political operations that have the 'mere' fact of living (as individual bodies, as populations, as a species) as both their object and their objective. And when one approaches what we called 'critical biopolitical theories' from such a perspective that seeks to pay tribute to some truly important—revolutionary, to some extent—critical conceptual visions, while trying to push these analytical insights further, past the point where many left the analytical challenge at, one may realize (as Alex and I did) that there is a violence that appears to escape both the operations of biopower and the theorizations that seek to capture the importance of such operations. There is an excess of life and death, a surplus to the violence that may befall bare life (that, once again, can be destroyed but never sacrificed nor restored to justice) that can prompt us to think that the life-death threshold is not always at play. We referred to this fragmentary, inconsistent, haphazard violence as a matter of dismantling of life itself or of 'pulverization of the flesh', when not even the biological fact of life is at stake anymore. It is no longer a matter of maximizing the life-conditions or vital functions of the body politic. Nor is it about destroying bodies or eradicating certain forms of life in order to 'make life live' or to preserve a certain way of life (often, a liberal way of life, as Mick Dillon and Julian Reid, among others, have shown). Rather, it is about a violence that continues to impact the body or, better yet, body parts, body fragments, possibly bodily or fleshy remains, irrespective of any decision over life and/or death.

We provide in the book a series of images/vignettes about what this may look like (narcos' violence along the US-Mexico border, the effects of suicide bombings, or so-called rogue US soldiers in Afghanistan and Iraq who hunt and kill merely to collect bones). The best way—although very much a tentative and hesitant way—we could account for this scattered violence onto the excesses and surpluses of the body and life was by suggesting that it may have something to do with the singularity of the human, the *ontos* of humanity, or, if you prefer, the fact that the human/humanity has always been understood and experienced as a fundamental and singular unity. This is also why, in *Beyond Biopolitics*, we turn to Adriana Cavarero's eye-opening evocation of horrorism, a graphic, brutally violent, horrendous, and indeed dehumanizing intervention or irruption that renders the very idea of the human (as a unity, as a singular continuum) pointless and purposeless. Again, with this kind of violent theme, we are not completely done with *zoe*, with natural life itself, with bio- or necro-politics (the figure of the unity of the human does continue to recall a vital concern, or at least it seeks to). We still have to deal with the scattered flesh, even if we can no longer tell if such a flesh is human or non-human anymore (or whose/which humanity it may have once belonged to). But the dilemma between a politics that seeks to foster a 'good life' (the life of the citizen, the well-being of the

body politic) and another approach that seeks to produce and mobilize bare or biological life at the heart of power/sovereignty/governmentality practices and strategies is transcended, obsolete, outmoded, and irrelevant. And so, critical biopolitical perspectives/theories need to adapt too. This is where, I think, we tried to conclude, for the time being anyway, our study. Critical biopolitical perspectives cannot just wish for a 'more-than-life' or a 'more-to-life' (survivance, over-living), as we have seen some scholars suggest of late (Butler, Honig, Fassin, among others), hoping—perhaps against all hope—that this can revitalize life, revive bodies that matter, or magically reproduce the conditions of possibility for another human *ontos*. This would be far too easy and convenient. Not to mention that this could also amount to turning the biopolitical critique into an ideological tool, into a discourse that could finally announce the return of the abandoned and the banished, the redemption of life and the salvation of the human. If that is the case, then I suppose that being positioned 'beyond biopolitics' (in the way I have described it here) is also insisting on being able to deploy and maintain a more uncompromising critique within the domain of what today we call biopolitical analysis.

What is 'agonal sovereignty' and how does it help to explain the ontological violence embedded in manifestations of international conflict, like the Guantanamo Bay Detention Center? Moreover, how is a threat to the human condition different from the strategic use of death to mobilize specific forms of political life?

I do not want just to repeat what I have mentioned in my answer to the previous question., so let's just say that 'agonal sovereignty' is a figure that my co-author Alex Barder and I deployed precisely to gesture toward some of the phenomena I described above and toward a certain, different, 'biopolitical' analysis of these phenomena. Our notion of agonal sovereignty owes a lot to Arendt. But certainly not in a conventional way. While a few self-proclaimed 'Arendtian' scholars have objected (sometimes vehemently) to our use of Arendt's notion of agony (as if, somehow, we were to blame for 'fouling' both a concept and a theorist that many want to preserve as models for rethinking the political on a plural basis), our turn to Arendt's language of agony/agonism is purposeful. Viewed from the perspective of a certain orthodoxy in Arendtian scholarship that seems to privilege the so-called intention of Arendt-the-author behind the words found in her texts (this view is still far too predominant, I believe, in American political thought today, even on the part of theorists who claim to be deconstructive), our reading of Arendt's text may be seen as irreverent. But it is textually based and textually motivated, even if it may indeed have to be blamed for not sufficiently respecting or recognizing the 'author principle'.

So, for my colleague Alex Barder and I, agonal sovereignty has Arendtian textual roots. But the notion also goes beyond Arendt (and her vision of the political). For

us, agonal sovereignty is both a surrender and an undertaking. First, it is a relinquishing or surrender on the part of the state-form of competitive and combative actions to the war machine, to agonal heroes whose 'great public deeds' (as Arendt may put it) may never be for the sake of the political or the public to start with. This is, of course, a dimension of political action—agonal or agonistic jousting among political agents in a public setting to reveal the open and free play of political decision/deliberation—that Arendt never allowed herself to think of (even though, as we show in *Beyond Biopolitics*, the possibilities are right there in the Arendtian text). That is, the possibility that the glorious and heroic acts may be used toward goals that will end up subverting the idea of an open, plural polity. But this is also the specter of Carl Schmitt in Arendt's thought/text, or when heroic political deeds become the prerogative of the decisive sovereign (something Arendt, of course, wanted to fend off at all costs). Still, agonal sovereignty, as we mobilize it, is irreverent vis-à-vis Schmitt's notion of the political too (after all, why should so-called Arendtian scholars maintain the sole prerogative of claiming that our reading is hurtful with regard to their privileged author's intentions? By contrast, somehow, it never seems to be as much of a problem to 'open up' Schmitt's text, just as we did with Arendt…). And this leads us to the second dimension of the concept, or agonal sovereignty as an undertaking, as I mentioned before.

Agonal sovereignty evokes relations of force, of war-like violence, and possibly of destructive terror (including the destruction of the political domain) that arise when the sovereign or decider-in-chief calls in warrior heroes to establish and maintain the friend-enemy distinction (which, as we know, for Schmitt, is the mark of the political). As an undertaking, agonal sovereignty is thus a limitless take-over of the fate of the political (particularly when the friend-enemy distinction is transcended into a struggle against evil in a war against terror) by the agonal—combative, competitive, polemical—heroic deeds of the war machine that is solely in charge of determining the contours of what may be left of the political. In a way, in agonal sovereignty, the war machine as imagined by Deleuze and Guattari comes back to haunt (and possibly devastate) the space of the political, not only as Arendt dreamt it, but also as Schmitt sought to preserve it through the idea of the sovereign who is uniquely positioned to decide on the exception. Put differently, under regimes of agonal sovereignty, the exception is not just generalized or normalized (as Benjamin, Agamben, or even Hardt and Negri have insisted). Rather, combative destruction left unchecked at the hands of 'our' warrior heroes opens up a space for the possible erasure of any political project. When this occurs—or, in fact, when this is encouraged, as was the case with the US turn to the war machine in the Global War on Terror (see my answers to some of the questions above)—what Slavoj Zizek astutely called 'abyssal violence' (in his reading of Schmitt) is unleashed, and all sorts of 'political' limits are easily transgressed. One such threshold that is possibly rendered meaningless under regimes of agonal sovereignty is that of life and death,

of biopolitics and thanatopolitics, that many proponents of critical biopolitical perspectives are still trying to base their analyses on. And, as I explained above, when such a threshold or limit is no longer operative, an agony/agonism of violence no longer needs live or dead bodies to proliferate its fragmentary and horrifying effects in the global domain. Thus, in a way, one could say that the agony of the war machine, purposefully or not, prepares the terrain for the pulverization of the flesh and the dismantling of the human, as I discussed above.

Finally, there is a lot of talk about the tension between dialogism and dialecticism in political discourse, today. What, if anything, have you gleaned about the tendency toward the historical employment of one discursive form or the other from your work on the aesthetics of political representation?

To my recollection, I have never mobilized the concepts of dialecticism and dialogism in my work (on language, discourse, representation, the image, etc.). I suppose I could have. But I never felt the need to approach matters of political representation (among other things) from the perspective of this opposition or tension. That being said, there is no doubt that my work has been in line with a certain 'Bakhtinian spirit' of dialogical reading, if you want to put it this way. What I mean by this is that any text or discourse I read or engage with is always found to be in a series of relations, discussions, communications, and significations with other (prior and posterior) textual or discursive forms. In critical/postmodern international political circles, this would probably be closer to what Michael Shapiro and James Der Derian famously referred to as 'intertextual relations'.[12]

Perhaps this is culturally over-determined, but my inspiration with regard to intertextual possibilities has come more from Roland Barthes' idea of writing/reading than from a Bakhtinian dialogical source (although the connections between both perspectives are obvious, I think). What I mean is that approaching textuality, discourse, representation, or indeed meaning from the perspective of what Barthes calls the 'writerly text' (a text always open to—in fact, welcoming of— surplus elements that come from both outside the factual materiality of the textual document and inside the 'readerly' excesses of discourse/representation itself) has had a lasting influence on the way I have gone on to theorize and conceptualize modalities of discursive and non-discursive representations in the so-called global political domain. This is a general approach to dealing with representational materialities that Barthes often refers to as 'critical semiology'. By and large, my take on language (broadly understood) is indebted to critical semiology to the extent that it enables a destabilization of processes and techniques of representation (and of the 'truth-effects' they seek to impose) from the perspective of the text itself.

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12 James Der Derian and Michael J. Shapiro, *International/Intertextual Relations: Postmodern Readings of World Politics*, Lexington: Lexington Books (1989).

Critical semiology does not seek to bring elements of a critique that already exist outside—perhaps waiting to be deployed critically—of regimes of textuality or representation themselves. This is perhaps one of the main distinguishing features between this approach and dialectic modalities of ideological critique, for example. Rather, the general mode of critical semiology (spearheaded by Barthes but also found, in many ways, shapes, and forms, in the writings of many poststructuralist thinkers; note that I am not claiming that Barthes was a poststructuralist, but that his apprehension of the text opened up a space for the work of poststructuralism) seeks to always expect more out of the text or representation. It refuses to assume that meaning has been saturated by a certain representational regime or interpretation and, instead, it embarks upon the challenge of dispersion and dissemination (there is, no doubt, a kinship between Barthes' writerly text and Derrida's notion of writing in the margins). Or, as proponents of intertextuality (starting with Barthes) would argue, the text is not just representative; it is also 'productive' (that was Barthes' term) or, better yet, performative. Perhaps this is the point where dialogism meant to take the text/representation all along: toward modalities of political representation, textuality, and discourse that do not mark or fix the presence/establishment of any political order and power, but rather perform and proliferate political possibilities through the very language, text, discourse, or representation that calls for the political in the first place.