The Hegemony of Tabloid Geopolitics: How America and the West Cannot Think International Relations beyond Conflict, Identity, and Cultural Imposition

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Mission of the Afrasian Centre for Peace and Development Studies

Poverty and other issues associated with development are commonly found in many Asian and African countries. These problems are interwoven with ethnic, religious and political issues, and often lead to incessant conflicts with violence. In order to find an appropriate framework for the conflict resolution, we need to develop a perspective which will fully take into account the wisdom of relevant disciplines such as economics, politics and international relations, as well as that fostered in area studies. Building on the following expertise and networks that have been accumulated in Ryukoku University in the past, the Centre organises research projects to tackle with new and emerging issues in the age of globalisation. It aims to disseminate the results of our research internationally, through academic publications and engagement in public discourse.

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The Hegemony of Tabloid Geopolitics:  
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The American imperial power, in the formal representation it makes of itself, has war as the privileged, indeed unique, form of the attestation of its existence. Alain Badiou, *Infinite Thought*.1

Despite the claims about the apolitical and disinterested nature of the pursuits of higher learning, activities undertaken under the rubric of area studies, such as language training, historiography, anthropology, economics, political science, and so forth, are fully inscribed in the politics and ideology of war. Rey Chow, *The Age of the World Target*.2

The [Traditional] Warrior will fight to keep, and even increase, America’s vast power. T-Warriors understand that the United States is a righteous country that has in our brief history freed billions of people from political enslavement. It was our might and money that brought down Tojo, Hitler, and the Soviet Union... Traditionalists are fighting for their neighborhoods, their country, and their world. Since there’s a huge amount at stake, the traditional cause must become a way of life. There are no “weekend warriors” in this culture war. We are in it to win it... It is now time to get back to basics, to develop a personal strategy designed to keep your family and country protected from those who would do us harm. Bill O’Reilly, *Culture Warrior*.3

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American Tabloid Punditry and the Relentless Call to War

Critical reflections on the power, hegemony, or *imperium* of the West today—and above all the United States—cannot fail to notice the role played by media pundits, public intellectuals of statecraft, pseudo-experts in security and technology matters working for think-tanks or private institutes, and former politicians or military commanders turned television, radio, or newspaper chroniclers in determining for the global public what counts as truthful, meaningful, urgent, consequential, and expedient in everyday life. What can be called the tabloidization of everyday life in the West and throughout its globalized extensions (but principally in the United States) is a phenomenon through which various public figures rise to prominence in order to control what is said and seen in what Judith Butler has labeled the “public domain of appearances.” More than this though, tabloid scribes and orators are also eager to redesign the contours of what this public sphere is or rather ought to look like. In the course of this generalized exercise of hegemonic (tabloid) discursive policing and reproducing of society and culture, new seemingly authoritative and authoritarian agents/actors emerge from the global media to try to explain to largely mesmerized audiences what counts as meaningful language and what does not and, of course, who is to be valued as a speaking subject and who is not. Often, particularly when times of war, national securitization, and fortification of the homeland are being proclaimed, who is being devalued as a potential speaking subject also means identifying who must be cast aside, vilified, dehumanized, abjected, and sometimes, eventually, killed.

A critical reflection on the power *and* terror of hegemonic tabloid discourses in (Westernized) public culture(s) needs to start with the agents/actors—or more precisely the media (understood broadly)—from which both the content and the form of the message, once again a message of danger, fear, insecurity, terror, destruction, and war, emanate. Note, however, that starting the critical analysis from the perspective of the tabloid media agents, of the producers of the discourse and its many supplementary representations, does not imply that agency, intentionality, or even a certain subjective will to control, dominate, or cast away others must necessarily be granted to those purveyors of the tabloid narrative or image. Rather, I prefer to deal with these

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discursive producers as media, that is to say, as models, signifying apparatuses and codes, or systems of objects with a technical capacity to generate all sorts of truth-effects and meaning-effects in society/culture. In the tradition of critical thinkers of the late modern or postmodern condition such as Marshall McLuhan, Jean-François Lyotard, Michel de Certeau, Fredric Jameson, or Jean Baudrillard (among others), one can analytically target a center of operation or a point of generation of hegemonic discourses/representations, any hegemonic discourse/representation, without having to fall back onto the belief in the required presence (behind this discursive/representational performance) of an omniscient and all controlling actor/agent.

The point of departure for the critical reflection I initiate in this paper takes us back into the tabloid (media) universe, into this discourse-generating and reality-constructing domain where much of what passes for official meanings and taken-for-granted understandings of the public domain today is put together, processed, and broadcast to audiences, often throughout the world. In the tabloid media universe, American television pundits have been particularly clever at mobilizing messages, sounds, images, and other formal effects likely to guarantee mass public appeal. One such popular, successful, and (in)famous American pundit is Bill O'Reilly. Since 9/11, conservative, populist, and loud-mouthed Fox News Channel talk-show host Bill O'Reilly has taken upon himself the task of defending and protecting American lives. His show, *The O'Reilly Factor*, an hour-long infotainment, current events, and topical issues daily review, has been at the forefront of American tabloid media and popular culture since the late 1990s. O'Reilly’s opinion on the world out there and on the state of the United States seems to matter to many Americans. And his opinion matters as much for its content (a politically, culturally and morally conservative, pro-government and pro-military content) as for its form. The *O'Reilly Factor* and O'Reilly’s take over of everyday culture through the use of multiple media channels (popular books, the internet, opinion pages in daily newspapers, interviews on other television programs, radio talk-shows, and so on) are intent on producing the impression of news reporting, information providing, facts revealing, and truth gathering to millions of Americans when all that O'Reilly really wants to do is convince his audience members of the moral superiority and greater commonsensical value of his personal beliefs, generally based on nothing other than his own experiences, but beliefs nonetheless presented as objective, factual, and definite. The shock-value of his interventions is aimed at eliciting public support or popular scandal by inspiring awe or creating fear among his audience members. Presenting Americans with a daily succession of problems or crises generally caused by or further aggravated by his preferred scapegoat figures—the left, the “mainstream media” (anything but Fox), academics, war protestors, foreign
countries, and of course the terrorists—O’Reilly imposes himself to the American public as the only one capable of providing answers, solutions, comfort, and, of course, the “truth” in times of uncertainty and doubt. As O’Reilly puts it in one of his books, “your humble correspondent” simply writes or talks “for everyday Americans who are fighting the good fight.” By depicting a dangerous and often terrorizing world that America must protect itself from on a daily basis and leaves little comprehension for average American “people who do not have much control or authority over the pace or the content” of what is happening out there, O’Reilly puts himself in the position of the number one tabloid intellectual or, rather, pundit of statecraft in the United States today.

The popular and populist medium that O’Reilly, beyond his own person or personality, has become is, in a way, the prototypical dominant tabloid geopolitical discourse in the United States in the first decade of the new millennium. In more ways than one, the O’Reilly phenomenon and its discursive/representational strategies reveal in a condensed fashion many of the techniques, ideas, ideologies, and often desired practical outcomes produced by tabloid geopolitics in American popular and political culture since the late 1990s.

Tabloid geopolitical images and discourses (like O’Reilly’s, but also many others in today’s American popular and political culture) excel at convincing their audiences that the American nation is constantly in danger, that American people are about to be attacked, and, ultimately, that war is the most common, normal, almost natural response to these tabloid media-induced fears. O’Reilly’s claim to provide a “no spin zone” inside which facts about the world out there and the United States’ role and place in it can be presented and “truths” can finally be revealed to American citizens is not unique. It is not novel either, as it may be thought to be part of a longer tradition of public paranoia in US politics and civic culture. O’Reilly is not even a model for such tabloid geopolitical productions of fear, terror, and war. Rather, O’Reilly and his tabloid media are better interpreted as symptoms of what has become of American public culture or political debate in an age when a war on terror has grafted itself onto the reality-making and truth-producing operations of the media.

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7 Ibid., p. 4.
8 Debrıx, Tabloid Terror, chapter 3.
Tabloid Discourses of Danger, Fear and Terror

For more than a decade now, American (geo) politics has fallen prey to what can be described as a popular or tabloid discursive style of truth telling. Influenced by the growing presence and power of television talk-shows, sensationalistic news reporting, and political punditry in everyday life, many American intellectuals of statecraft (including some who hoped to shape the foreign policy of the United States in the post-Cold War era) chose to adopt a format of presentation of what they affirmed were the contemporary geopolitical realities that would be eye-catching, fear-inducing, spectacular, shocking or scandalizing, and overtly simplistic. Such intellectuals of statecraft were intent on replicating the appearance of truth, honesty, frankness, urgency, and populist concern that pundits like O’Reilly made use of when trying to appeal to American audiences. In this context of tabloid punditry and its mimicking by public intellectuals, in the late 1990s, several self-proclaimed geopolitical and international relations scholars came up with narratives of danger, security, national defense, war, and terror designed to tell US citizens who they were, where they were situated, what they had to worry about, whom they needed to oppose and often demonize, and why the United States absolutely had to prevail in world politics in the new century. Very often, such simplified, jargon-free, graphic, sensational, and terrifying yet commonsensical and comforting (to some Americans or Westerners anyway) tabloid geopolitical stories were supplemented by cartographical depictions (maps often) that were supposed to help audiences/readers to better imagine or visualize the identified threats, problems, or crises.

This media punditry-influenced tabloid genre of (pseudo-academic) geopolitical presentation did not have to wait for the terrorist attacks of September 11 to be deployed. In many ways, the discourse of tabloid geopolitics started to proliferate its truth-effects and meaning-effects in American public culture by the late 1990s. Tabloid geopolitics emerged as the result of (or found an opportunity presented by) the so-called geopolitical insecurities and anxieties that floated around Western policy and academic foreign affairs, national security, and war-making circles in the aftermath of the Cold War (where questions about the possible obsolescence of the state and its national borders, deterritorialization and globalization, the so-called ends of both geography and history, and so on were introduced) than as the immediate outcome of post-9/11 American desires to recapture a sense of national identity, international supremacy, and victory through war after the terrorist attacks. At the same time though, there is also no doubt that 9/11 would provide tabloid geopolitical culture with a new ideological dimension and a new imperative global mission.
Robert D. Kaplan was one of the leading American tabloid geopolitical scholars in the 1990s whose writings and cartographical renditions sought to influence popular American understandings of global political realities. His 1994 essay published in the *Atlantic Monthly*, “The Coming Anarchy,” and the subsequent expansion of his argument in a book-length manuscript set the tone for the establishment of the dominant tabloid geopolitical discursive/representational “truths” that would be revealed at the end of the millennium and in the early twenty-first century. Kaplan’s text also provided US readers with basic rules of formation for this mode of political geo-graphing. As Geroid O Tuathail has noted, while geopolitics historically has sought to present itself as a scientific and systemic (and allegedly objective) mode of knowledge, description, and analysis of political realities situated “out there,” in the so-called material domain of political relations between states and their governments and militaries, it is in fact “not a concept that is immanently meaningful and fully present to itself but [is rather] a discursive ‘event’ that poses questions to us whenever it is evoked and rhetorically deployed.” More recently, Matthew Sparke has indicated that geography itself (not just political geography or geopolitics), as indeed geo-graphy or earth-writing, is a series of processes—many of them textual, discursive, and representational—that seeks to provide the public, from political or scientific elites to citizens and consumers, with spatial conceptual and categorical realities that are made to appear natural, normal, or given when in fact they are the product of particular scripts and other constructions of meaning and knowledge. Thus, Sparke writes, “the ‘geo’ is constantly being ‘graphed’."

Kaplan’s strategy of producing panic-inducing but attention-grabbing sensational narratives or graphing of the global political “geo” throughout the 1990s and in the new century was thus not inherently novel. As many critical scholars mentioned, it was part and parcel of geopolitical writing. What was more innovative about Kaplan’s geopolitical renderings was his decision to adopt a mode of writing and imaging that would target low to middle brow readers/audiences. Far from presenting himself as a

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14 In this manner, Kaplan’s writing and style were reminiscent of some efforts deployed by American magazines during the Cold War (the Reader’s Digest in particular) to produce a popular geopolitics of us
geopolitical intellectual steeped in disciplinary, academic or scholarly debates and intent on providing expert knowledge (often to political elites), Kaplan’s style had more to do with everyday American tabloid culture, and this type of geopolitical truth-telling would have more in common with daytime talk-shows on US television networks or with the growing trend found in all sorts of American media (from radio to the internet) since the mid 1990s for exuberant, rant-driven, and high-ratings producing punditry (such as O’Reilly’s).  

In his book *The Coming Anarchy*, for example, Kaplan’s tabloid intent was to try to revive political realism as a form of popular foreign policy making analysis (and to resurrect the ideas of the national interest, of the protection of US borders from “dangers” such as illegal immigration, global diseases, terrorist attacks, or underdevelopment and poverty, and of the resecuritization of society) by providing his readers with vivid doomsday scenarios, images of impending disasters, and imaginary maps that would reveal the inevitable contagions and threats. As a result of such spectacular depictions of geopolitical dramas and traumas leaving the US population with nothing but fear, a rallying of the nation behind state-centered political realist views was hoped for and strongly desired by Kaplan. Mixing graphic but clearly written and generally gripping descriptions of the world “out there” that he, Kaplan, had seen first hand through his many travels to the anarchical “outside” with his own imaginary maps meant to visually reproduce or mimic the global geopolitical chaos and its danger for the United States first and foremost, Kaplan’s discourse was representative of what can be called tabloid realism. Tabloid realism, as a political geo-graphic genre or discursive formation, consisted in proliferating various textual and cartographic strategies, techniques, and representational layers of meaning that would become their own (and often the only) points of reference for or material proofs of the dangers of the world “out there,” threats that nonetheless required the nation-state “in here” to desperately return to political realist policies, tactics, and ideologies.

With the advent of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the tabloid realist style of popular geopolitical writing and representing started to evolve. As some of the doomsday scenarios tabloid realists had written about actually took place “in here” and not “over

-versus them, America and the West versus communism and the Soviet Union. On the popular geopolitical effect of *Reader’s Digest*, see Joanne Sharp, *Condensing the Cold War: Reader’s Digest and American Identity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).


16 Debrix, ibid., pp. 164-8; see also Simon Dalby, “The Pentagon’s New Imperial Cartography,” pp. 460-72.
there,” and as the realist principles they had sought to revive through their simulated discourses and cartographic fictions proved somewhat powerless in the face of terrorism and the war on terror, several tabloid realists (Kaplan and Samuel Huntington in particular) chose to maintain the style of tabloid truth-telling mobilized in the “new” realist popular geopolitical productions. But they now tried to adapt the political, ideological, cultural, and often moral substance of this popular discursive mode to what they thought were the new post-9/11 geo-graphical urgencies. Along the way, a somewhat novel breed of aggressive, vengeful, warmongering, idealist, and generally imperialistic intellectuals and pundits of statecraft emerged and embraced the tabloidization of popular geopolitics in order to produce multiple volumes and other media-filtered narratives/images that were intent on explaining to the public the new geopolitical requirements of the US war on terror. A few critical geographers and international relations scholars—including myself—chose to refer to this apparent discursive turn as a matter of tabloid imperialism.  

The passage from tabloid realism to tabloid imperialism was more than a mere technical discursive readjustment or fine-tuning. Unlike tabloid realism, tabloid imperialism became a matter of deploying vivid, gruesome, real, or factual situations and so-called events, and, more importantly, of attaching those phenomena to larger-than-life and ideationally superior reasons, rationalizations, and ideologies, so that Americans could not just fear or panic, but also could hate, abject, dehumanize, and agonize over life and death. The new tabloid imperialistic scenarios provided by (mostly American) intellectuals and pundits of statecraft were not concerned with simulating new referential domains characterized by inevitable threats or contagions (as in Kaplan’s earlier tabloid productions, for example). They were now interested in recapturing what they claimed was good old representation, and in extracting from it images, symbols, and messages that could help to better produce new meanings, realities, and truths by idealizing, rationalizing, and (conveniently also) glossing over those that “we,” Americans or Westerners, now had no choice but to alienate, bestialize, or murder through what were often depicted to be “our” heroic acts (or those of “our” heroic warriors). Whereas simulation of doomsday was a crucial technique for tabloid realists like Kaplan, tabloid imperialists openly embraced transcendence and sublimation as discursive, representational and, finally, ideational strategies. As many in the media noted, the vividness of the terrorist attacks in New York had made

17 Dalby, “The Pentagon’s New Imperial Cartography,” p. 469. Although Sparke does not use the term “tabloid imperialism,” Sparke writes about something he calls a “much rougher-edged national-imperial geopolitics, an imagined geography of uneven and occupied space associated with ideas of an assertive and unilateralist American Empire.” See Sparke, In the Space of Theory, p. 245.
Hollywood-type *trompe l’œil* fictions look obsolete. Tabloid geopolitical scientists no longer had to craft virtual dangers in order to encourage American citizens to be afraid, seek revenge, assault others, and support endless wars.

With tabloid imperialism though, the public domain of appearances was just as saturated, controlled, and put to efficient uses as it was before 9/11. In fact, tabloid imperialism, making itself the discursive echo chamber of many Bush administration policies both at home and abroad, intensified the demands on the public sphere and on what could be said or seen. As intellectuals and pundits of statecraft became apologists for the American war machine and its agents of agony, the popular and political tabloid requirement was now to produce realities, facts, and truths that could evoke ideas and ideologies capable of surmounting or vanquishing terrorizing sights, thoughts, images, and events such as those that started to periodically stream out of Iraq. Among the tabloid imperialistic demands now imposed onto American political and popular culture was the obligation to see the war in Iraq and the actions of US soldiers over there as the making of morality and humanity in the Middle East. As a blatant ideological instrument, tabloid geopolitics as tabloid imperialism in the aftermath of the US invasion of Iraq turned into not just a discourse that tried to regulate what could be said or not said in American public culture. It also became a discursive and representational censor that sought to keep control over the field of appearances by repressing haphazard events and spontaneous critiques that were not allowed to count as events, and as such generally could not be seen or heard by members of the public.

**Tabloid Geopolitics and the Defacing of the Other**

Judith Butler has argued that public debate in the United States since 9/11 has been characterized by an exclusion of most forms of dissent. Public discourse, Butler goes on to remark, has been dominated by a “climate of fear in which to voice a certain view is to risk being branded and shamed with a heinous appellation.”  

Inside the contemporary spaces of alleged open dialogue of the Westernized global mediascape, critical reflection has thus been made obsolete, useless, and possibly dangerous for the nation and its people. Henry Giroux adds that, “[j]ust as violence is staged as a global spectacle, language, sound, and image lose their critical functions as they are turned into weapons to combat an enemy that is ubiquitous and to glorify a politics mobilized around an unrelenting campaign of fear.”  

Butler’s and Giroux’s insights are

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perspicacious commentaries on the powerful and dreadful consequences of the ideological work of imposition, control, and hegemony of tabloid geopolitics as a discourse of fear, terror, and war.

As I have mentioned above, tabloid geopolitics is a set of discursive and/or visual representations that seek to take over the American cultural landscape in order to determine what can or cannot be said in the public domain in the new millennium. To repeat, by dictating what will be legitimately uttered or not, tabloid geopolitical discourses and representations also decide who will count as valued speaking subjects, as subjects capable of pronouncing “truths.” In addition, the prevailing tabloid texts, sights, and sounds reveal to their readers/viewers/listeners what or who is not worthy of interest or, worse yet, what or who needs to be dehumanized and possibly destroyed. This hegemonic tabloid discursive and representational production of so-called meaning and truth constantly threatens speaking subjects—whoever they are, and whatever they may want to say—with a potentially “uninhabitable identification” (as Butler puts it). Speaking subjects (“us” and “them”), if and when they dare to speak, are interpellated into compliance with the dominant narratives and images and forced to accept that they are not allowed to voice doubt.

But perhaps more than an inability to speak or voice doubt, what I think ultimately defines these tabloid geopolitical discourses that the West/America have been so intent on producing over the past ten years is a capacity to encourage (Western/US) audiences to reject and possibly destroy the other through what I call a defacing of the other. In an age when control over the field of appearances matters as much as if not more than control over the production of the discourse, a visual or visible apprehension of the public sphere inside which “us” and “them” are meant to occupy or inhabit a place—often the same place—is generally the main way members of the public, all of “us,” are enabled to grasp the meaning of who “we” are, where “we” are situated, what is happening to “us,” and how “we” are to live. In this context, tabloid geopolitical discourses are powerful, not only as linguistic or rhetorical constructs as I intimated above, but also as narrative and representational productions that make possible certain visual apprehensions, acceptances, and rejections. Put slightly differently, the imaginary and metaphorical potency of tabloid geopolitical discursive formations is perhaps what primarily leads to the fateful consequences of these hegemonic discourses, particularly in the context of the various forms of violence (from war, to torture, to

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20 Butler, Precarious Life, p. xix.
mass murder) that become some of the most readily available (because visible and visual) ways of dealing with others.

From this perspective of the visual appeal—or rather the seduction of imaginary and visualized forms—of violence inflicted onto various figures of otherness and difference, Butler’s critical analysis is useful. Even before the traumatic results of the US invasion of Iraq became evident to many, Butler had found it necessary to turn to French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas’ ethics, and in particular Levinas’ notion of the ethical demand made upon us by what he called “the face of the other.” Butler had turned to Levinas’ own attempt at rethinking the other through a problematization of his/her face—an eminently visual, metaphorical, and imaginative apprehension of the other—in order precisely to try to rediscover a sense of human dignity, of humanity, in everyday life (and also in order to try to challenge the tabloid geopolitical discourses of normalization of war, terror, and violence).

Butler called for a return to the precariousness of life, of every human’s life. The face of the other, Butler explained, makes a demand upon me that is imperative and yet not obvious. Levinas clarified this demand in the following manner: “the face is the most basic mode of responsibility... [It is] the other who asks me not to let him die alone, as if to do so were to become an accomplice in his death.”²¹ Levinas added: “Thus the face says to me: you shall not kill.”²² Levinas’ ethics of the face is more complex than a traditional Judeo-Christian call to altruism that, at some level, this demand from the other and his/her face appears to be. Butler clarified that this demand is a plea to recognize the fragility or rather precariousness of the other. At the same time though, an understanding of the precariousness of the other also forced a revelation of my own fragility, of the vulnerability of my own life.

Still, this recognition of a precariousness of life was, once again, more than an apprehension of the other as an alter ego, another self whom I would be obligated to keep or protect. In fact, Levinas added, the evident fragility of the other and his/her face is actually, for me, a temptation to kill (him or her). This fragility is my own opportunity to destroy that (or s/he) which may become a threat to my own life. Thus, Butler continued, the precariousness of the face of the other brings to me a contradictory request. On the one hand, I am commanded to preserve this vulnerable


other as I would myself (as if it were me). On the other hand, the other tempts me with the desire to kill, to annihilate, and to turn the vulnerability that is facing me into a murderous act. Butler argued that the full complexity of the Levinasian ethical demand through the face of the other was embodied in this precariousness that depends upon maintaining this double possibility, this moral tension. As she put it, “the non-violence that Levinas seems to promote does not come from a peaceful place [or peaceful ethic, or purely altruistic moral command], but rather from a constant tension between the fear of undergoing violence and the fear of inflicting violence.”

Indeed, the moral tension created by the precariousness of the other’s face appears to me as a dual anxiety that, for Levinas (and Butler), ought to be kept intact (or in suspense) since it governs my moral actions and, ultimately, may limit my recourse to violence and destruction. The fear of doing harm onto the other, of defacing him/her, is constantly confronted with the fear about my own death, my own disappearance, and my own survival that is at stake if I do not take advantage of the other’s vulnerability and kill him/her. This tension must remain, Levinas and Butler intimated. It is a tension between “two impulses at war with each other.” But, Butler suggested, “they are at war with each other in order not to be at war.” The ethical tension brought up by the other and his/her face was salutary for Levinas (and Butler) as it maintains the wars, destructive actions, and other forms of violence that I might otherwise undertake inside me, and it prevents me from taking this agony outside of myself, toward others whom I would have to kill.

Thus, according to Butler, the return to non-destruction in the era of America’s and perhaps the West’s war on and of terror requires a double but complementary movement. It requires that a tense but necessary balance be restored between our fear of the other and our fear to cause harm to the other. Internal or personal psychoses and traumas, impossibilities to decide, undecidabilities may emerge as a result, but may also leave “us” (and “them”) better off than turning our fears into vengeance, retribution, and war. But for Americans to accept to live with those kind of psychoses and traumas, with incomprehension, after 9/11 and after the war in Iraq, also requires that the therapies readily prescribed by our contemporary tabloid geopolitical public comforters and media counselors be refused, as these tabloid pathologists’ discourses, intent on finding the “truth” about the trauma in the form of others to be abjected and killed, typically cause far more damage than good (to the other and his face, but to “us” too).

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23 Butler, Precarious Life, p. 137; my inserts.
24 Ibid., p. 137.
25 Ibid., p. 137; author’s emphasis.
Butler is on target when she argues that all the dominant media and public representations, discourses and images of and about America at war “seem to suspend the precariousness of life.”\textsuperscript{26} They deface the other, deprive him/her of a face, and prevent us from being able to see his/her face differently or perhaps not to capture it in order to better get rid of it. Butler writes that it is at the level of representation that the challenge to the defacing of the other needs to take place. She further adds that “representation must not only fail, but it must show its failure.”\textsuperscript{27} With Butler, I want to argue that any attempt at restoring the balance or tension between the apparently contradictory impulses to kill and to fear to kill require some representational violence, some discursive rupture, some interruption of the tabloid geopolitical discourse, and, finally, some failure of the image. Moreover, restoring the precariousness of life (of our lives and others’) may demand a certain politics of resistance, one that I believe is neither active nor passive but rather opportunistic, that is to say, seeks to take advantage of chance-events present here and there in everyday culture for those representational ruptures or failures to be evidenced. It is toward those conclusions that I now want to drive the critical reflection in this paper by suggesting that, despite the power or hegemony of tabloid geopolitical discourses/representations, there may still be ways for us all of rethinking violence, otherness, and the face (of the other) differently. Crucial to this attempt at rethinking otherness and difference in the era of the war on terror (and of its discourses and representations of terror) is the idea of not avoiding—and perhaps enabling—confrontations between instances of violent defacing and failures of hegemonic representation. This may also entail a basic reconsideration of our own (typically modern and Western) ways of approaching the other, of our established methods and forms of knowledge of and about the other.

\textbf{Toward the Failure of Representational Violence}

In her latest book, Rey Chow notes that one of the main traits of Western modernity—of which the current hegemonic discourse of tabloid geopolitics may be seen to be an extension—is its emphasis on capturing the world, so-called reality out there, with the eye or as a visual experience. To conceive of the world visually (and metaphorically and imaginarily, I would add) means to establish the primacy of the eye, but also of the individual subject (the “I”) as he or she who is endowed with a specific and often superior visual and conceptual acuity (with an “eye for things,” as we like to say). This, Chow indicates, was well understood by Martin Heidegger for whom “the world has

\textsuperscript{26} Butler, \textit{Precarious Life}, p. 143.

\textsuperscript{27} Butler, \textit{Precarious Life}, p. 144; author’s emphasis.
become a ‘world picture’.”

Chow adds that, as the modern/Western world becomes a picture, something to be visually caught and optically fixed, “men struggle to conquer the world as their own particular pictures, bringing into play an ‘unlimited power for the calculating, planning, and molding of all things’.”

Thus, Chow goes on to argue, to capture the world visually, and to battle “among men” to do so, is also to understand the world “as an object to be destroyed.”

As an object of vision through which the eye/I affirms himself/herself, the world becomes a target of attacks. Indeed, through the apparatus of vision (and the power of individual visual perspective), Western subjectivity struggles—within itself and by eliminating non-Western entities or beings—to impose its domination by way of ongoing and endless endeavors at capturing other places in order to better transform or erase them. To transform and erase are forms of capture, modes of targeted visual ownership. These are impositions of the subject’s eye/I through a violence of perspective and representation that often anticipates an ensuing and perhaps inevitable turn to physical force. Additionally, this commonplace or “routine violence” of the modern West (as we may be tempted to call it, following Gyanendra Pandey’s reasoning) taking place through a varied arsenal of visual, metaphorical, and imaginary representations works at multiple levels (local, national, regional, global, and imperial perhaps) in order to saturate the space of the other and turn it into that which the West takes as its own (either by assimilation, absorption, rejection, or eradication).

It is in this critical context of Western modernity’s long quest toward a conquering of the world and toward a desperate imposition of itself by way of visual targeting that I want to resituate the issue of the hegemony of tabloid geopolitics in this concluding section. I want to do so particularly because (as I explained above) many of the material consequences and/or political and cultural effects of tabloid geopolitical discourses are to be apprehended in a mainly visual and representational manner, that is to say, as (media-filtered) optical and spectacular, metaphorical, and imaginary relations made possible or rendered “normal” (to global audiences) as a result of representational violence or force. Specifically, I want to suggest that one of the keys to the problem of contemporary representational violence is the way that “we” in the late modern West learn to apprehend, target, understand, acquire knowledge about, and eventually capture that which is said/represented to be other. In other words, and to more directly connect this argument to the previous theorization of the other and his/her face and to the

29 Ibid., p. 31.
30 Ibid., p. 31.
problematization of the elimination of the precariousness of life, looking at the face of
the other differently, in a manner that may keep at bay “our” impulses to go to war and
destroy the other, entails a basic revisiting of the modes and methods of knowledge, of
the disciplinary practices that we employ and that supposedly teach us how we are to
make sense of what is presented as foreign or alien. This, critical scholars like Chow,
Michael Shapiro, Timothy Mitchell, and many others have suggested, amounts to
having to destabilize and perhaps fundamentally reconsider what in Western
educational circles is typically referred to as area studies or comparative analysis
(across social sciences and humanities fields or disciplines above all).\textsuperscript{32} Indeed, as
Chow puts it, “area studies capitalize on the intertwined logics of the world-as-picture
and the world-as-target, always returning the results of knowing other cultures to the
point of origin, the eye/I that is the American state and society.”\textsuperscript{33} In other words, what
belies most scholarly attempts in the (late) modern West and throughout its globalized
beyond at learning about and arriving at a so-called comprehension of other cultures,
places, and individuals is first and foremost a desire to define and impose oneself, a
way for the Westernized scholar of modernity of “orienting” himself/herself and his/her
domain of study in such a manner that his/her own world can appear intelligible and
that his/her (visual) perspective can be legitimimized. Edward Said preferred to present
this problematique of Western knowing about and through the non-West as a matter of
orientalism.\textsuperscript{34} Chow describes this phenomenon as a problem of self-referentiality. She
writes that “to be self-referential is, from the perspective of US foreign policy [that she
believes area studies, in the United States at least, primarily serves], a straightforward
practice of aggression and attack.”\textsuperscript{35}

There is no doubt that tabloid geopolitical discourses (such as those described in the
previous sections) and the representations of fear, terror, and war that they enable are
not just hegemonic but that they are also eminently self-referential. Indeed, it is
precisely self-referentiality that ultimately justifies why tabloid geopolitical discourses,

\textsuperscript{32} As Shapiro puts it, “like the subdiscipline of comparative politics, the impetus to knowledge
production in area studies, which also developed during the cold war and articulated the idioms of
political science with those of other social science disciplines, partook of an undisguised, geopolitical
partisanship.” Quoting area studies critic Vincente Rafael, Shapiro adds that “an analysis of key area
studies methods texts reveals that ‘just as the humanities were meant to cultivate a self that was
authorized to transmit the legacy of the past, area studies would develop a body of elite scholars capable
of producing knowledge about other nations to the benefit of our nation’.” See Michael Shapiro, \textit{Methods
also Timothy Mitchell, “The World as Exhibition,” \textit{Comparative Studies in Society and History}, Vol. 31,

\textsuperscript{33} Chow, \textit{The Age of the World Target}, pp. 14-5.


\textsuperscript{35} Chow, \textit{The Age of the World Target}, p. 15.
in the media and among intellectuals of statecraft, have to be mobilized in the first place. But, as Chow clarifies, the requirement of Western or US-dominated self-referentiality in these discourses and representations is also a guarantee that the Western eye/I can go on learning about targeting, capturing, and destroying others. The self-referential capabilities of contemporary geopolitical narratives and visions make sure that the face of the other can never be anything but a sight of enmity, evil, extreme opposition, and often extermination. Put somewhat differently, and to borrow the words of Japanese critical theorist Karatani Kojin, the self-referentiality of the West and its own subjective endeavors at stake in the messages and images of the contemporary war on and of terror is a “solipsistic exercise,” a way of defining oneself through a pretense of discovery and learning of the other. Yet, through this at once epistemological and ontological exercise, the other must always remain defaced, deprived of a context, and endlessly abstracted or decontextualized. As Karatani puts it, “in the abstraction of the otherness of the other, dialogue with this other becomes monologue, that is, monologue (introspection) is seen as identical to dialogue.”

Karatani adds: “In order to criticize this solipsism [or introspective monologue that passes for dialogue], then, one must introduce the other, that is to say, introduce communication with the other in its belonging to a different language game.”

I believe that Karatani’s critical insight connects for us the Levinasian concern with the face of the other to Chow’s problematization of “our” self-referential ways of knowing the other by means of area studies or through comparative analyses. Indeed, as Karatani implies, until some communicability or space of visibility with (and not vision of) the other and its linguistic/representational radicality is enabled or inserted in dominant modes of discourse and representation, the other will only remain the mark of our own conceptual and visual desire to “confront an implacable enemy,” as Harootunian and Miyoshi have put it. Thus, the failure of representation that Butler was mentioning in her analysis of Levinas’ ethics of the face (and that I too wish to encourage here) needs to first take place in some of the most elementary forms, techniques, and methods that “we,” as Westernized humanities and social sciences scholars and students interested in understanding or capturing “our” world, have been taught to use, justify, and reproduce in our academic studies, intellectual projects, or political practices. Failure of

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37 Ibid., p. 36; my inserts.
representation as a failure of a certain vision of the other—and as a first step towards bringing in a different communicability, a certain intelligibility of the other’s radical language or face—requires a failure of area studies. It requires that, as Chow once again argues, scholars “stop and ponder what the gesture of comparing consists in, amounts to, indeed realizes and reinforces.”39

The failure of area studies and comparative analysis as a prerequisite to finding a way out of the defacing of the other and out of the normalized and routinized spectacular politics of violence, terror, and war that this visual capture facilitates is an epistemological break and a different methodological choice. As Westernized scholars, it is also our choice to make, I believe. It is a choice that, of course, may not be validated by prevailing scholarly, academic, disciplinary, or epistemic standards and, as such, may sometimes be institutionally risky. Yet, in the (late) modern West, what better locations could there be than academic and intellectual places to start to perform such a strategic failure, one that, when all is said and done, may be one of the most feasible challenges to the hegemony of tabloid geopolitical discourses? While academic spaces of debate and dialogue will never be able to substitute themselves for the dominant popular discourses of the public sphere, they still enjoy the privilege of being somewhat removed from the direct and forceful scrutiny of those who wish to capture the public domain and turn the world into a target (although it must be said that the space of academic free-speech and free-flow of ideas is increasingly being surveilled and curtailed in the age of the war on terror). Thus, while there is still a bit of time and a bit of space to do so, it is crucial for all of us in academic/intellectual circles who, at some level, make use of the area studies gaze or take part in comparative analytical techniques to initiate a purposeful rupture, an epistemological and methodological interruption of the kind of violations that have preconditioned the imposition of a certain self-referential “linguistic and cultural consciousness.”40

Reflecting upon the issue of the failure of concepts and ideas in the Western philosophical and literary tradition, radical Japanese thinker Takeuchi Yoshimi once remarked that, in the West, when a concept no longer seems to fit reality, an attempt at reconciling the apparent contradiction or at overcoming it is generally undertaken. Whether the concept is refined or sublimated or the reality is replaced or transcended, the concept must go on and, eventually, must find or develop a new place. The concept lives on. By contrast, Takeuchi suggests, in the Orient (as he puts it) and Japan in particular, when “a concept becomes discordant with reality…, one abandons former

40 As Chow once again puts it. See ibid., p. 89.
principles and begins searching for others.” Takeuchi adds: “Concepts are deserted and principles are abandoned… [and] writers abandon words and search for others.” Thus, Takeuchi concludes, in a different, radically other (to the West) tradition, things and concepts often fail and in fact are expected to fail. But “failures themselves never fail.” I would like to suggest that opening up area studies and comparative analyses—or, rather, any academic, scholarly, intellectual, public, and political endeavor that claims to be interested in encountering the other—may demand thinking about one’s self-referentiality and trying to problematize it. But this may not work unless one also adopts failure (of the concept, of oneself, of the image of the other, of one’s visual scheme), not necessarily as a governing principle for one’s pattern of thought, but rather as a loose but inevitable modality of operationalization of knowledge. As a never fully satisfactory and satisfied methodological instrument, accepting that whatever idea, image, word, or event one chooses in order to try to render the world intelligible (to oneself and others) is always a tentative, uncertain, and aleatory performance, and, moreover, that it may fail to reconcile a concept with a reality (and, as such, may never be able to leave us with any coherent image/picture of the world) is a possible and beneficial first step towards avoiding to (have to) deface the other. It is also a first step towards restoring a form of precariousness to life, to ours and to other lives, and to our life as other to others’ lives.

42 Ibid., p. 65.
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