Advertising Empire: Reflections on Defense Contractor Ads in Washington, D.C.

Timothy A. Gibson

This essay examines an experience unique to Washington, DC: riding the metro and confronting advertisements pitching billion-dollar combat and military information systems. After offering a short thematic analysis of the imaginative geographies of these ads, the essay moves to a discussion of how these ads obscure the emergence of what Stephen Graham calls a "transnational battlespace"—that is, an still-developing American security strategy which aims to integrate the spaces of "homeland" and "other" under a unified regime of digital surveillance. A concluding section discusses in normative terms the implications of current domestic surveillance initiatives on key values associated with a vital city life.

One of the most important tasks of cultural criticism is to make the familiar strange, and for train commuters in Washington, D.C., there is nothing more familiar than metro ads from defense contractors. The closer your train gets to the Pentagon station, the thicker the ads come, promoting all manner of military hardware and surveillance systems to a captive audience of Department of Defense commuters.

Yet, however familiar these ads may be to DC residents, there is something decidedly strange about them—a point driven home by the incredulous reactions of friends who have visited from out of town. Perhaps such bemused responses should be expected: it is indeed unusual, even in our advertising-saturated age, to confront glitzy messages pitching billion-dollar weapon systems. But I think there is something more fundamental at work in such reactions. I suspect, in fact, that these ads derive some of their shock value from their juxtaposition with the typical visitor's *tour du jour* of monuments and museums. After all, the monuments of the national mall pay tribute to the democratic ideals of an American Republic established in a struggle against a distant Empire. However, a short escalator ride to the underground metro station offers a glimpse of a different America. In this America, Washington is the central node of a sprawling military network, with bases in all regions of the globe, linked in real time by an orbiting web of communication satellites. It is an America eager to secure "earth, space, and cyberspace" (figure 1).

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Figure 1: Raytheon Ad, Pentagon Metro Station

Inspired by such bemused reactions to these ads, a few years back I took the train into two stations near the Pentagon to collect some images. Then, using a broadly semiotic approach, I looked first for patterns in the selection and assembly of textual elements in these ads and then asked how these patterns might promote some interpretations of America's place in the world over others (Leiss, Kline, and Jhally).

Following the work of Stephen Graham, I asked in particular about the *imaginative geographies* evoked by these images. For Graham, drawing on the work of the geographer David Gregory, the concept of imaginative geographies refers to our cultural conceptualizations of place—both the widely shared ways of thinking which make sense of the places we inhabit as well as the spaces of those who dwell outside our daily orbit. For his part, Graham is particularly concerned with *imperialist* imaginative geographies, which, he writes, "tend to be constructed through normalizing, binary judgments about both 'foreign' and colonized territories and the 'home' spaces which sit at the 'heart of empire'" (255).

Focusing on the immediate post-911 context, Graham argues that the architects of the "war on terror" relied heavily upon such imperialist binaries, constructing in particular a sharp division between, on the one hand, the space of the *homeland*, re-

imagined as a bounded but all-too-porous "inside" that must be "hardened" against omnipresent threats, and, on the other, a series of diffuse, disconnected spaces, home to menacing and violent "others." For their part, these others are imagined in squarely orientalist terms, in particular as living in exotic spaces of lawlessness and disorder—the urban "hives" and "nests" of terrorists hiding out in disorganized failed states.

With this discussion in mind, I turn next to the metro ads produced by the Pentagon's most prominent defense contractors. How do these *ads* imagine the spaces of "homeland" and "other"? What relationship is imagined between these spaces? And finally, what dimensions of the evolving relationship between "homeland" and "other" are left *outside* the imaginings of these ads? Overall, what I found in these images were two basic and interrelated themes: (1) the juxtaposition of fear and hope in a dark and troubled world, and (2) the elusive promise of perfect surveillance and knowledge. In my analysis of these themes, I argue that these ads function as an ideological synecdoche, one which shines public attention on one part of the emerging American global security and surveillance strategy, with the result of obscuring the more fundamental (and controversial) whole.

In particular, drawing again on Graham, I argue that while the imaginative geographies of these ads portray an American security gaze that is focused *outward* on the dark spaces of distant "others," the ads at the same moment conceal a more fundamental technological *integration* of "homeland" and "other" under a unified regime of digital surveillance. What you fail to see, in short, when you view these ads from your seat on Washington's metro, is that the technological gaze of the American security apparatus has now become (and perhaps has always been) as focused on the cities and spaces of the homeland as on the imagined urban hideouts of "the terrorists." A concluding section discusses in normative terms the implications of current domestic security surveillance initiatives on key values associated with a vital city life, including especially the often-overlooked value of anonymity.

Any Threat, Any Mission

The first theme of the ads was the depiction of an outside world of threats and enemies, symbolized most directly by another Raytheon ad (figure 2). In this image, the viewer is confronted with a forbidding seascape, where a swelling, choppy sea meets a stormy sky. The depiction of a hostile and dangerous world—a world of uncertain waters wherein monsters lie—is stark. Moreover, the depiction of risk and danger in this image is utterly decontextualized and de-historicized. It is not, in short, an individual adversary that threatens us, but rather, war is in the very nature of the world itself. Raytheon thus stands at the ready to help America confront this dangerous world: any threat, any mission.

Figure 2: Raytheon Ad (close-up), Pentagon City Metro Station

Unlike with most ads, the precise target audience and goal of these fear appeals is difficult to pin down. According to Dan Langdon, vice president of CBS Outdoor, the firm hired by Metro to sell transit ads, some defense firms buy space at the Pentagon station when they are bidding for government contracts, hoping to keep their brands and systems in front of commuting defense procurement officials (Riley, n. pag). Other ads often line the walls of the Capital South station, hoping to draw the eye of Congressional staffers on the way to the Hill, where the ultimate fate of every defense contract is decided. But even when a specific contract is not on the line, Langdon notes that metro ads offer contractors "a great way to…keep a constant reminder in front of influential eyes" (qtd in Riley, n. pag).

Yet I am more interested in what these ads have to say to tourists or commuters who have nothing whatsoever to do with purchasing weapons systems. Communication scholars have long known that saturating the environment with risk messages can have unintended consequences, including what Thomas called "an epidemic of apprehension," wherein the public at large begins to feel that risks lurk "in every aspect of daily life: the air we breathe, the water we drink, the food we eat, the homes we live in…and the work we do" (Feinstein and Esdaile, 113, qtd in Cho and Salmon).

This epidemic of apprehension may be felt with particular force by residents of and visitors to Washington. After all, risk messages about terrorism and violence have become an unavoidable part of everyday life in the District. On the train, crackling metro loudspeakers warn us to scan for unattended bags, and metal detectors (and long lines) await us at nearly every turn. The virtual Washington offered up by the cultural industries is even more frightening. Dramatic television series like Showtime's *Homeland* depict a Washington constantly under siege, and, elsewhere, we can even get a glimpse of Washington's post-apocalyptic future, as happened when *Fallout 3*, a video game released in 2008, depicted Washington as a battered, ruined cityscape overgrown by weeds and choked with rubble. Now add to this symbolic brew of fear and menace the insistent reminders of defense contractor ads: *it's a hostile world out there, dear visitors and commuters, and we should be grateful for whatever protection we can find.*

Figure 3: Boeing and Pratt & Whitney Ad, Crystal City Metro Station

Interestingly, some of the most important communication research on the strategic use of fear comes not from the study of politics, but rather from the field of health communication. Health campaign researchers have learned, for instance, that when it comes to getting people to stop smoking, a little fear is great but too much can backfire (Witte; Witte and Allen). In other words, if the "target" is *too* afraid of

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cancer, she will shut down and go into avoidance mode. However, if the target is just afraid *enough*, and, importantly, if she believes that the recommended action—say, getting "the patch"—will work, then fear appeals can be quite effective in motivating "compliance" (as my health communication friends sometimes put it).

It occurs that this is just what is happening with these ads. The fear appeals—the signifiers of stormy global seas and the implied threats of "today, more than ever"—only work when paired with signs of hope (figure 3). In this case, however, hope comes from something specific: military firepower, delivered, of course, by the defense contractor at a tidy profit. Peace in a dangerous world can be won, these ads connote, but only through (military) strength. Lots of strength (figure 4).

Figure 4: Lockheed Martin Ad, Crystal City Metro Station

The Enemy is Night

One of the more disturbing passages in *Discipline in Punish* comes when Foucault describes the drastic measures taken to combat the plague in 17th century Europe. When the plague appeared, town authorities shut all residents into their homes and forbade all travel or intermingling on pain of death. Then, dividing the town into discrete zones, syndics and guards patrolled the empty streets, stopping at regular inter-

vals before each house to demand that all residents appear before a window to be observed for signs of disease.

Thus, Foucault writes, the chaos and terror of the plague was met by *order*:

> the function of which is to sort out every possible confusion: that of disease, which is transmitted with bodies are mixed together; that of evil, which is increased when fear and death overcome prohibitions. It lays down for each individual his place, his body, his disease and his death, his well-being, by means of an omnipresent and omniscient power that subdivides itself in a regular, uninterrupted way even to the ultimate determination of the individual, of what characterizes him, of what belongs to him, of what happens to him. (197)

Foucault then argues that, for political thinkers and authorities at the cusp of modernity, the plague became a powerful metaphor for all manner of social confusions, threats, and disorders, and the austere order of the plague-stricken town became for authorities less a nightmare than a utopian experiment—an experiment which promised the creation of a perfectly governed and disciplined society (198). The lesson of the plague was, in short, not lost on social authorities: disorder and confusion could be tamed by surveillance and discipline.

One source of disorder in immediate need of discipline, of course, was the unruly city street, particularly in the tumultuous decades of the 19th century. In France, for example, Napoleon III hired Baron Haussmann to root out the dense and tangled medieval streetscape of working-class Paris, incubators not merely of contagion and disease but socialist ferment as well, and replace them with wide boulevards designed to quickly move troops during times of social unrest (Berman). Decades later, in the mid-20th century, modernist planners like Le Corbusier and Robert Moses conceived of the city as a machine organized along rational principles of separation, segregation, and efficiency. Retail would go here, industry there, and housing over there—and all would be connected by a rational grid of superhighways moving people and goods with mechanical speed and precision (Berman). As with Hausmann and Napoleon III, the enemy was the same for these modernist planners: the unruly, rebellious, disorganized city.

This same modernist thirst for legibility, order, and control can be found in many defense-related metro ads. One Raytheon ad, for example, (Figure 5) offers an image of soldiers at night, huddling in an isolated desert and linked to command and control via the glow of a networked screen, while a Boeing ad promises that "the networked soldier never fights alone." In both ads, the "network" is the tether that connects isolated soldiers to the protection of the Pentagon's surveillance grid. Here's where you are. Here's where the enemy is. Here's what to do next. Information—signified by the glow of a combat workstation—thus becomes in the Raytheon ad a beacon that both illuminates and orders a dark and chaotic world.
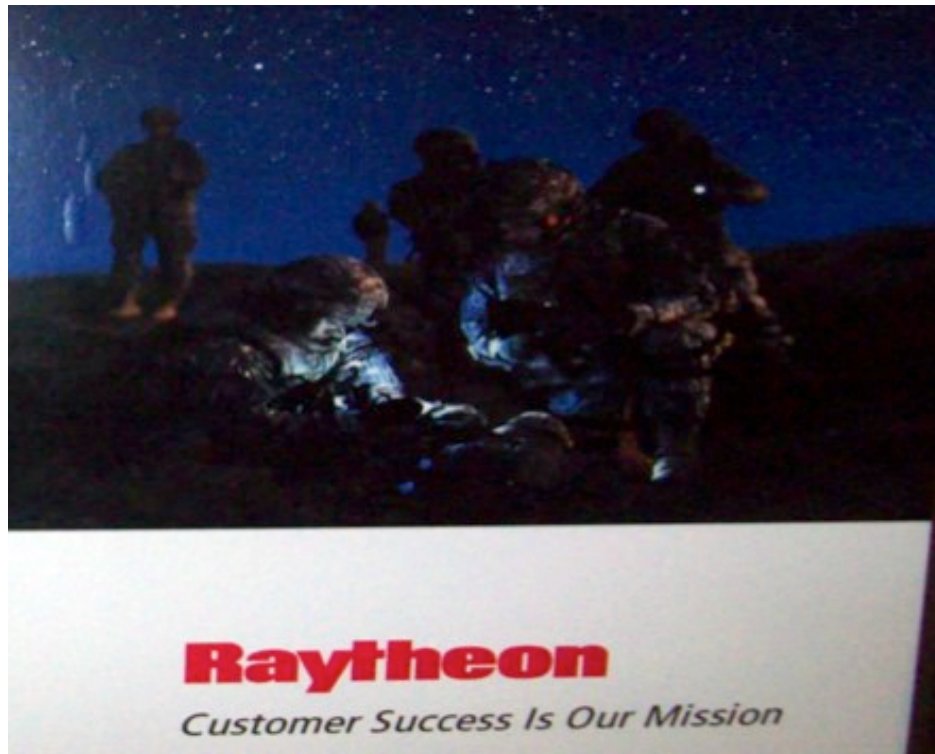
Figure 5: Raytheon Ad (close-up), Pentagon Metro Station

However, the most direct examples of this theme come from DRS Technologies. According to the firm's website, DRS designs military information and surveillance systems, including thermal imaging devices, combat display workstations, and environmental and communication systems (DRS Technologies). But, like Hausmann and Moses pitching modern landscapes to city leaders, ultimately what they *sell* is visibility, legibility, and control.

In this way, common to both of these ads (figures 6 and 7) is the fear of what the military calls "dead ground." As Solovaara-Moring writes, "dead ground" refers to areas "hidden to observers because of intervening obstructions, primarily because of undulations in the surface of the ground but also natural and man-made obstacles" (144). "Dead ground" is thus a space of danger and uncertainty, where unknown enemies might lurk, just beyond the limits of the grid.
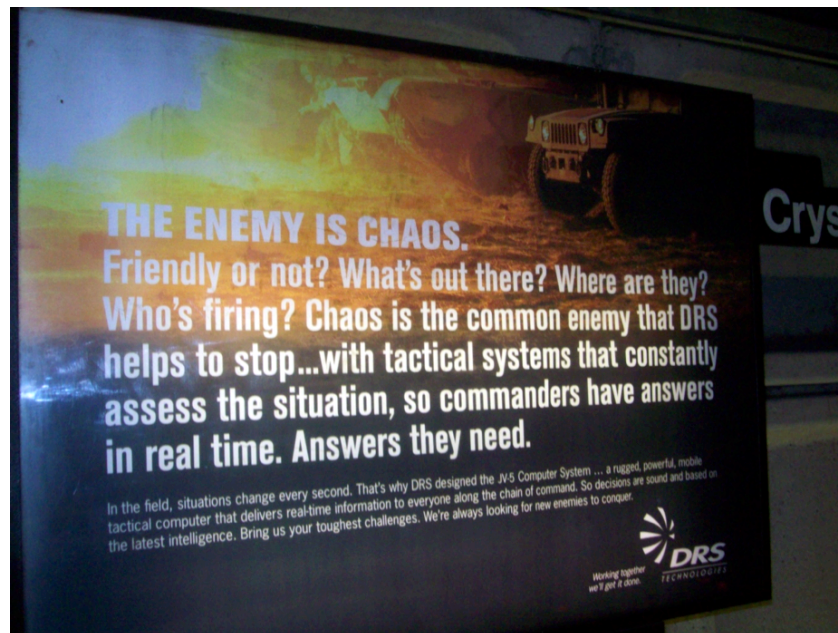
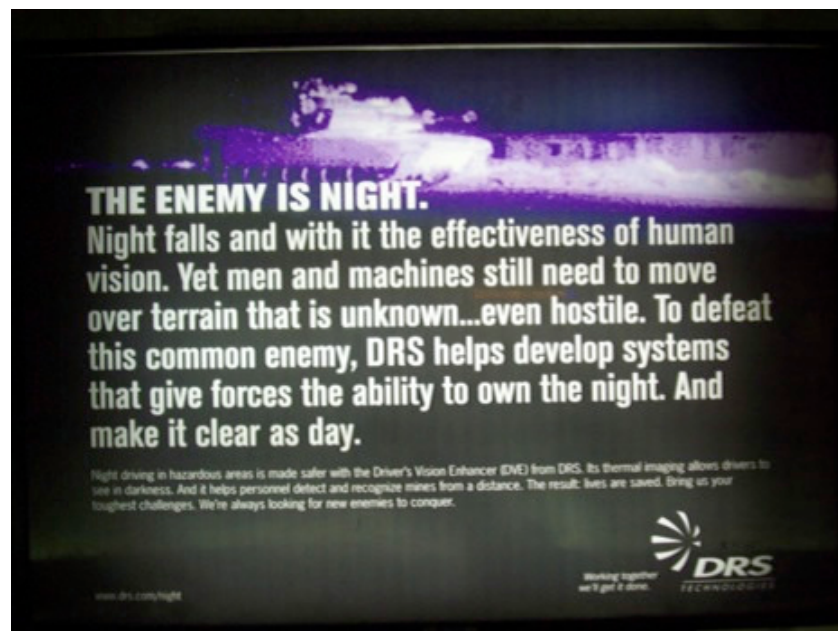Figure 6: DRS Ad, Crystal City Metro Station

Figure 7: DRS ad, Crystal City Metro Station

In the DRS ads, dead ground comes in two forms. If, in the first ad (figure 6) the enemy is the chaos of a battlefield (what's out there? where are they? who's firing?), in the second ad (figure 7), the enemy is night itself—the ultimate "dead ground." In both cases, the ads speak to the reality of dark spaces at the limits of American power, spaces where Empire's maps go blank and where "targets" melt into the shadows. The task of illuminating these dark spaces has been charged to the American military, the instrument, in this case, of a wider desire to expand Washington's maps and link up recalcitrant regions of the world to wider networks of economic and political administration. Fortunately, DRS Technologies stands at the ready to help render the dead grounds of a dangerous, unruly, and unpredictable world *visible* and therefore subject to discipline.

Beyond the Binary: An Integrated, Ubiquitous Battlespace

It would appear, in short, that these metro ads drink deeply from the same imperialist imaginative geographies discussed by Graham and others (Gilroy; Puar and Rai). In particular (and perhaps predictably), these images focus on the spaces of the "other," imagined as a stormy, threatening sea ("any threat, any mission") and a terrain of chaos, disorder, and darkness. The contractors, for their part, offer the hope of extending American power—often in the form of advanced information and communication technologies—into these spaces in the interest of ordering the chaos and illuminating the "dark ground." The gaze of these ads is therefore focused resolutely *outward*, from the vantage of the "homeland" policing its borders and striking against its enemies on "their" ground and not "ours."

This ability to project power *abroad* is of course what first comes to mind when thinking about the relationship between the American military and digital communication technologies. This is no accident. Much of the Pentagon's massive public relations budget is devoted to dramatizing the astonishing technological tools of the US military, in venues as diverse as airshows, television ads, and even via online recruitment applications like the massive multiplayer game, *America's Army*. But in most if not all cases, these technological systems—the networked satellites, drones, and handheld GPS uplinks that can reach virtually any spot on the globe—are shown to penetrate and monitor the dark spaces of the "other." It is *they* who must be tracked and monitored so that *we* can be protected.

With this in mind, what is most interesting about these ads, and about the stark imperialist binaries they invoke, is how they draw attention *away* from an emergent and ambitious national security strategy which takes as its ultimate goal the technological *unification* of these nominally opposed spaces (home/other). As Graham notes, this strategy conceptualizes the globe, including the spaces of the "homeland," as "a completely integrated, transnational *battlespace*" (367). In this transnational battlespace, former distinctions between home and other become less relevant and the key goal becomes the integration of all spaces—from the streets of New York to alleyways of Gaza—under a unified global network of digital surveillance. Within this ubiquitous

field of battle, then, the dark, diffuse spaces of threatening "others" are brought into clearer view at the same time that everyday life back in the "homeland" is subject to increasingly granular levels of monitoring and control (Graham 367).

Overall, however, if the extension of military surveillance and power abroad has been made visible and overt (as in the defense contractor ads), the increased securitization of everyday life in the "homeland" is less visible and less often discussed. Still, thanks to the tireless efforts of investigative journalists, advocacy organizations, and government whistleblowers, the broad outlines of an attempt to map the *domestic* battlespace are beginning to become clear. For instance, as Robert McChesney explains, the National Security Agency has been monitoring domestic phone and email traffic without a warrant (and arguably in violation of federal law) since the program was authorized by the Bush administration in the days after 9.11 (163). Various investigative news reports released at the time of writing describe a program breathtaking in its scope. For instance, with the full cooperation of telecom firms, the NSA has installed sophisticated surveillance equipment at key nodes in the fiber optic networks that form the internet's backbone. According to the Electronic Frontier Foundation, the NSA's "fiber-optic splitters" make instant and exact copies of the data passing through them, with one copy going to the government and the other moving along to the intended recipients ("How the NSA's Domestic Spying Program Works," n. pag). All of this surveillance is, of course, invisible to users, who remain blissfully unaware of this re-routing and copying of their online behavior (Andrejevic 7).

According to recent revelations from NSA whistleblowers like Edward Snowden and investigative journalists from *The Gaurdian*, the NSA, now in possession of floods of personal data, has created giant searchable databases of domestic email traffic, cellphone call records, and individual internet activity (Greenwald, n. pag). These searchable databases are then subjected to intensive data-mining to identify suspicious individuals and social networks. This massive undertaking has in turn required the construction of a new legal and institutional infrastructure. As a result, what was, at the beginning of the program, completely illegal – i.e., the warrantless seizure of domestic communications and the complicity of private telecoms in this seizure—has been made, in essence, retroactively legal with the passage of legislation shielding telecoms like AT&T from liability when complying with government requests for domestic data traffic. Any hopes that the Obama administration might pull the plug on the program have quickly faded, as they have aggressively sought to defend it in the press and in federal courts. For its part, the NSA itself seems quite certain the domestic surveillance program is an entrenched part of American life, so much so that they are currently spending $2 billion on a new facility in Utah to store and process this endless flow of domestic data (Electronic Frontier Foundation, n.p.).

The next technological frontier in this effort to secure the "homeland" battlespace undoubtedly concerns the domestic use of military drones. As the ACLU reports, unmanned aerial drones "are getting smaller, cheaper, and their use is about to blow up" (Fulton, n.p.). When paired with sophisticated cameras, the possibilities for large-scale surveillance are likely to be intoxicating for American security agencies.

For instance, in a recent television report on *NOVA* (PBS), a BAE engineer unveiled (with the Air Force's permission) ARGUS, a super-high resolution camera that can be mounted on a drone and, as Sandra Fulton of the ACLU writes, "is capable of monitoring and recording an entire city at high resolution" (n. pag). From over 17,000 feet above, the ARGUS censor can record moving images of a city-sized area, and the resolution is so fine that analysts can zoom in to track the movements of objects as small as six inches across (Stanley, n. pag).
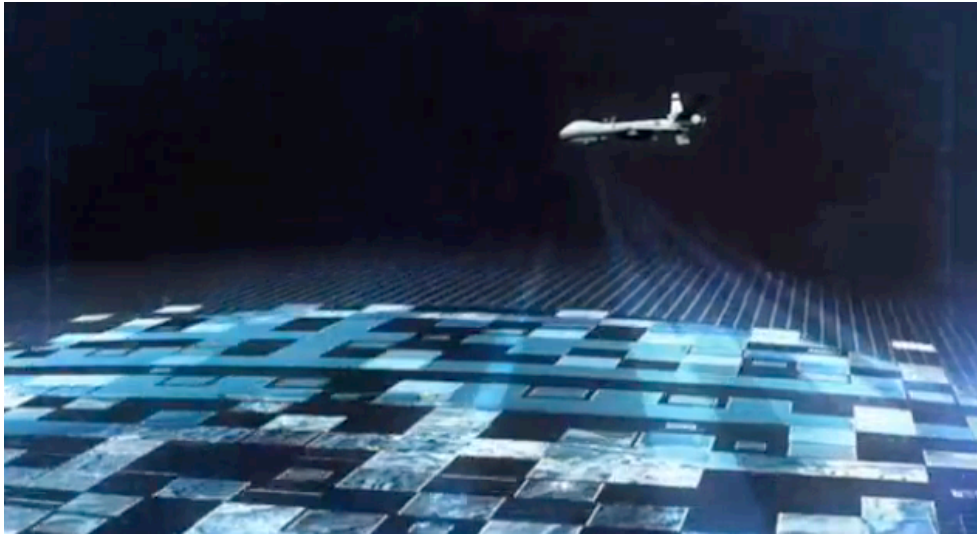

Figure 8: NOVA on PBS: Aerial Drones and ARGUS Cameras[1]

For their part, experts at a recent Congressional hearing on the subject discussed how these sophisticated cameras could then be linked with facial recognition technologies and cross-referenced with locational data tapped from a targeted individual's cellphone. The result of these interlinked technologies would be the capacity for "continuous, long-term monitoring" of entire metro areas, accomplished by machines circling out of sight, thousands of feet above the city, and with data sifted automatically by computer algorithms designed to flag instances of suspicious or anomalous activity (Fulton, n. pag).

Thus, in the end, while the defense contractor ads may alert metro commuters to the persistence of a "war on terror" organized around imperialist distinctions between the spaces of the "homeland" and the "other," they artfully, if surely unintentionally, distract attention *away* from the multiple *domestic* uses to which these military surveillance technologies can be (and are *currently* being) put. In short, in the imaginative geographies of these ads, the spaces that need monitoring, surveillance, and control are

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[1] See video on YouTube: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=13BahrdkMU8

always "out there" and, by shedding light in dark places, defense and security technologies not only protect our soldiers, but they also protect the homeland itself. At the same time, however, back in the "homeland" and unremarked by these campaigns, surveillance cameras silently record our movements, our texts and emails quickly pass through NSA filters, and, perhaps sometime soon, our movements on city streets will be recorded automatically and in high resolution by aerial drones circling silently overhead. Welcome to life in the ubiquitous, transnational battlespace.

Conclusion

What are the implications of this strategy to integrate "homeland" and "other" under a ubiquitous, global system of digital surveillance? For some, the consequences can of course be as immediate and deadly as a targeted drone strike, and bringing the use of these drones under some semblance of the rule of law is an obvious priority. But for the purpose of this essay, I wish to focus on a less dramatic issue—specifically, on how these still-emerging regimes of domestic surveillance threaten values often celebrated as necessary for a vital and fulfilling city life.

Consider for the moment the value of anonymity. In a recent meeting sponsored by the Urban Communication Foundation, a non-profit organization that promotes research on the role of communication in the urban environment, thirty participants (including communication scholars, urban planners, and architects) were asked to articulate the elements they believed were crucial for building a vital—or, in the terms of the meeting, a "communicative"—city. Interestingly, one significant theme in these discussions concerned the value of simply disappearing into the urban crowd. Multiple participants defended, in short, the value of "places to be left alone," and "places where you can hide—allowing for some degree of anonymity" (Drucker and Gumpert 197). In this, the participants were joining a long tradition in celebrating the city as a place to loose oneself, to detach from confining social expectations, to reinvent an identity and start over.

Of course, it is this anonymity, this ability to loose oneself in the city, which is most directly threatened by emerging regimes of domestic surveillance. Already the American urban environment is saturated with digital recording devices. In most cities, local police monitor key public spaces—including, of course, the metro system—with networked CCTV cameras. Thousands of private businesses and landowners also silently record customers and passersby. And, of course, virtually every person on the street carries a cellphone or smartphone equipped with a digital camera (and an upload on YouTube or Facebook is only a click or two away). In this way, all city dwellers now must act with the tacit knowledge that virtually every move they make outside the home can potentially be recorded and shared (Zittrain 200; Andrejevic 212).

Furthermore, as we have seen, more elaborate surveillance systems and technologies are on the horizon. If the prospect of aerial drones capturing individual movements across an entire metro area seems far-fetched at this point, a recent city council proposal in Washington, D.C. would accomplish close to the same thing by network-

ing hundreds of private security cameras into a seamless, citywide digital recording web, one searchable by police in real time (Sherwood, n.p.). Add to this omnipresent video surveillance the revelations about vast NSA archives of person-identifiable and location-identifiable data and the historical promise of anonymity in "the city" – losing yourself in the crowd, leaving your past behind—begins to feel a bit quaint.

At first blush this loss may seem insignificant, especially in exchange for promises of enhanced security and order. But it quickly becomes clear that some of what we cherish about city life depends on tacit expectations of anonymity. Attending a rally or protest without fear of reprisal, for instances, can in some cases depend on the ability to blend into the crowd, especially for individuals already facing some kind of legal jeopardy (such as undocumented workers or individuals on probation or parole). The autonomy and freedom of movement of the city's homeless and dispossessed also depends on an ability to deflect attention and quietly defy a battery of restrictive "civility" laws designed to banish them from gentrifying urban spaces (Beckett and Herbert, 8). In this way, the continuing rollout of digital surveillance technologies poses a direct challenge these quiet evasions, promising instead to radically improve the enforcement of policies of spatial and social exclusion. And for all residents, the freedom of wandering aimlessly through the streets—the pleasures of observing the vitality of city life without being really noticed oneself—is now mingled with the unsettling knowledge that we are always, all of us, leaving untold digital trails, traces, and recordings in our wake.

Of course, the creation of an integrated, monitored, transnational battlespace is still at the early stages, and some of this discussion has therefore remained speculative, pointing to trends and tendencies rather than existing practices. So what is therefore required at this point is a wide-ranging public discussion on the relative merits and risks of the domestic rollout of military-style monitoring technologies. But this discussion will be difficult to have if, as is depicted in the imaginative geographies of these metro ads, our political imagination clings both to imperialist binaries of homeland/other as well as the quaint notion that military-style digital surveillance is concerned with "them" and not "us." We will have to overcome these binaries quickly and expand our political imagination if we hope to preserve the fundamental values—such as the value of simply being left alone—that have long been central to a vital city life.

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