



Digitised Necrophilia: Technology and Psychosocial Orientations in the Age of ISIS and Drone Strikes¹

Remy Y.S. Low

Faculty of Education and Social Work

University of Sydney

remy.low@sydney.edu.au

Abstract

In this paper, I draw on the work of psychoanalyst Erich Fromm and his postulation of fundamental psychosocial orientations of necrophilia and biophilia to reflect on two contemporary exemplars of human-computer interaction: the use of media communications technology by the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) and the military use of weaponised drones. I consider the emergence of these modes of human-computer interaction located at the extremities of our social world as a key historical moment requiring urgent reflection on the interfaces of the psyche, the social, and the digital.

Keywords: Technology, Digital media, Psychosocial, ISIS, Drone, Ethics

Introduction

“No! I got it first!” The screams attracted the attention of several other readers at the local public library where a few bibliophiles – myself included – had chosen to spend their Saturday morning. I looked up to see two young boys who were no more than 7 or 8 years-old at a table engaged in a minor scuffle over a magazine and surrounded by the disapproving looks of a few of their fellow library users. Young people being overly-excited about literature of any form has never really bothered me, even if unlike some of their more dishonest seniors with other types of magazines, they are clearly just looking at the pictures. Smiling to myself at the exuberance of youth that I wished I still had, I just continued scanning the rows for the Dewey code of the book I was trying to track down on Iraq. I had forgone other possibilities that Saturday morning to read up on the background to the current armed conflicts that were tearing that country apart, in particular the seemingly sudden

¹ Paper to the 27th Australian Conference on Human-Computer Interaction (HCI), 7-10 December 2015, University of Melbourne.

emergence of the Islamic State of Syria and al-Sham (ISIS). It was a chilly, miserable morning anyway, I remembered thinking to myself.

A few hours later with my canvas bag laden with books, I made my way to the exit of the library, passing the now vacant table that was the battlefield between the two boys. Their prize now lay unattended, bearing a few creases that I guessed must’ve been a consequence of the struggle. Being curious about what had caused such excitement, I picked up the copy of what turned out to be the *Australian Popular Science* magazine. The cover featured a slick-looking fighter jet without a cockpit. Overlain across the gunmetal grey body of the jet were the words: “The Future of Stealth: Could two invisible drones change war forever?” (Australian Popular Science, 2015).



Figure 1 Cover of Australian Popular Science (January 2015).

Perhaps it's my pacifistic tendencies *vis-à-vis* war, or that what so excited two young children about science was this weapon and not, say, the search for a vaccine for Ebola, or maybe it was just the eerie possibility of unseen pilotless craft with deadly payloads flying around, but I felt a profound sense of being discomfited at that moment. It wasn't till I began writing about ISIS in earnest a few months later that I reflected on what had so disturbed me.

In this short paper, I want to bring together the two contemporary phenomena that preoccupied me as I walked out of that library – ISIS's use of internet media communications and the military use of drones – to consider the psychosocial orientations that may frame human interaction with technology. At the outset, I must admit to lacking intimate technical knowledge of both media production and aeronautical engineering; my preoccupation with both ISIS and armed drones arise from my work and research on the experiences of young people, and what implications these emergent phenomena may have for the way young people come to inhabit the digitally-mediated world. As such, I shall approach ISIS's use of media and the military use of drones as a key historical moment demanding urgent reflection upon the interfaces of the psyche, the social, and the digital. Drawing upon the work of German-American psychoanalyst Erich Fromm, I posit that we can see human-computer interactions as undergirded by two alternative psychosocial orientations: a "necrophilous" orientation that is marked by "the passion to destroy life and the attraction to all that is dead, decaying, and purely mechanical"; or a "biophilous" orientation with "the passionate love of life and of all that is alive" (Fromm, 1973, pp.365, 6). Before considering ISIS and military drones, I will briefly outline Fromm's conception of these two orientations.

Necrophilia and Biophilia

Necrophilia is commonly associated with the sexual fetish for corpses. However, for Fromm, necrophilia is defined more broadly. According to him, necrophilia can be understood more broadly in its literal sense – that is, the love of death – as the passionate attraction to all that is dead and the drive to transform that which is alive into something unalive (see Fromm, 1973, pp.325ff.) Far from confined to a pathological minority of the population, Fromm lists many of the taken for granted characteristics of advanced industrial societies – intellectualization, quantification, abstractification, bureaucratization, and

reification – as symptoms of a necrophilic orientation whereby “living processes, feelings, and thoughts are transformed into things” (Fromm, 1964, p.41). By contrast, the premise of biophilia is that “it is desirable that a living system should grow and produce the maximum of vitality and intrinsic harmony, that is, subjectively, of well-being” (Fromm, 1970, p.98). It is the promotion of “the optimum of growth and well-being and the minimum of ill-being” (Fromm, 1970, p.98). For Fromm (e.g. 1973, p.366), necrophilia and biophilia represent the fundamental psychosocial orientations to life, values and action.

ISIS and the mediatised spectacle of modern terror

How, then, do Fromm’s psychosocial orientations shed light on ISIS’s use of communications technology? In the first instance, it is important to understand the mediatised nature of modern terrorism. Acts of terrorism, as pointed out by many scholars (e.g. Schmid & De Graaf, 1982; Tuman, 2003; Matusitz, 2013), are inextricably tied up with the ecology of mass media insofar as they are “often carefully choreographed to attract the attention of the electronic media and the international press” (Jenkins, 1975, p.4). In communication studies, this is referred to as the “theatre of terror” (see Weimann & Winn, 1994; Tsfati & Weimann, 2002), which denotes the choreographic nature of acts that seek to maximise the terror in potential viewers. As Jenkins (1994) perceptively argues: “Terrorism is aimed at the people watching, not at the actual victims” (p.4). And it is here that ISIS’s use of internet-based communications technology for terrorising audiences can be seen as a manifestation of a necrophilous orientation to human-computer interaction.

As is well-known by now, a large part of ISIS’s media production is devoted to the creation and distribution of brutally demonstrative images of decapitation, execution and violence against its captives in Iraq and Syria (e.g. see Brown, 2014; Carter, 2014; Chulov & Malik, 2015). Apart from the acts of violence in themselves, which are part-and-parcel of modern geopolitics (see Tilly, Rueschemeyer & Skocpol, 1985), what makes ISIS’s actions a symptom of necrophilia with regard to human-computer interaction is its use of human beings as props for the purposes of creating an internet-driven media spectacle. Schmid and De Graaf (1982) have evocatively described the human victim of modern terrorism as “the skin on a drum beaten to achieve a calculated impact on a wider audience” (p.14). Indeed what

makes ISIS peculiar, as many commentators have pointed out, is its deft deployment of the latest media technologies for such ends. Through their al-Hayat media arm, ISIS produces “videos [that] have strikingly high production quality”, observes *Vice News*’s Olivia Becker (2014), noting that “they are shot in HD and include sophisticated graphics and logos.” Indeed, its self-image is so inextricably tied up with social media that the perceptive Middle East political commentator Abdel Bari Atwan (2015) has dubbed it “The Digital Caliphate”.



Figure 2 Still from a video produced by ISIS's al-Hayat Media Centre (2015).

Surely, we might surmise, there is no singular exemplification of a necrophilous orientation than ISIS’s brutal use of human beings as expendable objects for the purposes spreading terror via our screens. However, I argue, the preferred military response to ISIS in the form of military drone strikes also betrays such an orientation.

Remote-controlled killing

Weaponised drones – “Unmanned Ariel Vehicles” or UAVs in technical parlance – have come into prominence as the preferred response to ISIS’s terror campaign (Kilcullen, 2015, p.78). Yet in psychosocial terms, I wonder if this means of combating ISIS seeks to fight necrophilia with even more necrophilia. “Drones are indeed petrifying”, argues Gregoire

Chamayou (2015), because they “inflict mass terror upon entire populations” (p.45). Indeed, the petrification of human subjects into targeted objects of potential death is inscribed into the very way drones operate under military auspices. Chamayou (2015) chronicles two modes of operation that mark drones deployed by the US military that are symptomatic of a necrophilic orientation to technology: the “pattern-of-life analysis” and the “kill box” (pp.46-51, 52-59). In the first place, through a combination of advanced surveillance techniques like phone intercepts and data from cameras on spy UAVs, people in targeted regions have their spatial, temporal and social activities digitally mapped based on their “regularities” (Chamayou, 2015, p.47). From here, any deviation from one’s normal pattern of behaviour triggers suspicion and if such behaviours “correspond to a „signature” of pre-identified behaviour that the United States links to militant activity” (Columbia Law School, 2012, p.8), then one is liable to be fired upon by “pilots” sitting in front of screens thousands of kilometres away near Las Vegas linked by K_U-band satellite feeds. Death is made effective by the combination of the electro-optical/infrared AN/AAS-52 Multi-spectral Targeting System and laser-guided AGM-114 Hellfire missiles with a blast radius of 15 metres and a wounding radius of 20 (Saxena, 2013, p.24). Yet if “spontaneous, alive, and not-routinized” behaviour is what characterises a biophilic orientation (Fromm, 1973, p.291), then do the signature strikes of military drones not compel, with the threat of death, its necrophilic opposite: behaviour confined to “a routinized, stereotyped, and unspontaneous manner” (Fromm, 1973, p.353)?



Figure 3 Drone pilot, from *Rise of the Drones* (PBS, 2014).

In addition to such signature strikes, drones also operate in regions demarcated as target zones through the partitioning of what Husserl (1970) calls “lifeworlds” – that is, “the intuitive surrounding world of life, pregiven as existing for all in common” (p.128) – into discrete digital cubes called “kill boxes” where the remote operators of weaponised drones can unleash their Hellfire (Chamayou, 2015, pp.54-56). Is this not a symptom, to quote Fromm (1973), of the necrophilic “passion to tear apart living structures” (p.332)?



Figure 4 Drone kill box graphic from *Rise of the Drones* (PBS, 2014).

While ostensibly used as a means of “minimizing collateral damage and predicting the lethal effects of military operations” (Wong, 2013), kill boxes in effect demarcate an entire geographical area as “a temporary autonomous zone of slaughter” because “within a given cube, one may fire at will” (Chamayou, 2015, p.55). Within such a frame, the lifeworlds of human beings are transformed into a virtual “hunting ground” with human beings as their digitised prey (Chamayou, 2015, p.52). Having lived through the Second World War, Fromm (1973) lamented the necrophilous killing of thousands through the depersonalised means of bombers that “were killing or burning to death thousands of human beings in a few minutes” from such a height that pilots “were not concerned with killing and were hardly aware of an enemy” (p.346). I wonder what he would have made of remote-controlled drones operating on abstract kill boxes today that proudly bear names like “Predator” and “Reaper”.



Figure 5 Insignia of the USAF MQ-9 Reaper (Chamayou, 2015, p. 92).

Conclusions

Surely, one might ask, don't ISIS and drone strikes represent the deployment of digital technologies at the extremities of our world? Yet as social theorist Achille Mbembe (2003, p.23) has argued following Hannah Arendt, the technologies deployed at the margins of the "civilised world" are liable to have a deadly resonance. One need only recall how the bureaucratic methods used to enact the mass exterminations of the Holocaust in Europe were prefigured in the latter's colonial plantations and settlements (Mbembe, 2003, pp.23-25). The emergence of "theatrical terrorism" (Sanford, 2014) designed for social media diffusion as demonstrated by the killers of British soldier Lee Rigby in London and the "Sydney Siege" gunman Man Haron Monis on the one hand, and the deployment of military surveillance drones domestically in the US and Australia on the other (Lawson, 2014; Dorling, 2015), should give us occasion for pause.

In his writings about technology, Fromm (1970) is insistent that computers are not merely neutral "tools", but are engineered with "built-in and unconscious values" (p.63). If

ISIS's images and drone strikes are symptoms of a necrophilous orientation in human-computer interaction today, what implications are there for those of us who maintain that digital technologies should be advanced toward a biophilous orientation that “wish[es] to further growth, whether in a person, a plant, an idea, or a social group” (Fromm, 1973, p.365)? And more to the point, do the technologies we design, disseminate, and deploy orient us toward treating other beings as manipulable objects, or do they open us up to the manifold potentialities of such beings?

References

- al-Hayat Media Centre. (2015). Retrieved from <https://alhayatmedia.wordpress.com/>
- Atwan, A. B. (2015). *Islamic State: The Digital Caliphate*. Oakland: University of California Press.
- Australian Popular Science (2015, January). The Future of Stealth. Issue 74. Retrieved from <http://www.popsci.com.au/new-issue/issue-74-january-2015,1392>
- Becker, O. (2014, July 13). ISIS Has a Really Slick and Sophisticated Media Department. *Vice News*. Retrieved from <https://news.vice.com/article/isis-has-a-really-slick-and-sophisticated-media-department>
- Brown, M. (2014, June 16). Iraq crisis: ISIS insurgents publish photos of alleged mass execution in Tikrit, as government continues counter-attack. *ABC News*. Retrieved from <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-06-16/isis-insurgents-publish-photos-of-mass-execution-in-iraq/5525342>
- Carter, C.J. (2014, August 20). Video shows ISIS beheading U.S. journalist James Foley. *CNN*. Retrieved from <http://edition.cnn.com/2014/08/19/world/meast/isis-james-foley/>
- Chamayou, G. (2015). *Drone Theory*. London: Penguin Books.
- Chulov, M. & Malik, S. (2015, February 4). ISIS video shows Jordanian hostage being burned to death. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/feb/03/isis-video-jordanian-hostage-burnding-death-muadh-al-kasabeh>
- Columbia Law School (2012, October). *Counting drone strike deaths*. Retrieved from <http://web.law.columbia.edu/sites/default/files/microsites/human-rights-institute/COLUMBIA CountingDronesFinalNotEmbargo.pdf>
- Dorling, P. (2015, February 11). Federal police want to use military drones to spy on Australians from the sky. *The Sydney Morning Herald*. Retrieved from <http://www.smh.com.au/federal-politics/political-news/federal-police-want-to-use-military-drones-to-spy-on-australians-from-the-sky-20150211-13bvbs.html#ixzz3iHscl2cB>



- Fromm, E. (1964). *The Heart of Man: Its Genius for Good and Evil*. New York: American Mental Health Foundation.
- Fromm, E. (1973). *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- Fromm, E. (1974). *The Revolution of Hope: Toward a Humanized Technology*. New York: American Mental Health Foundation.
- Jenkins, B. (1975). *International Terrorism*. Los Angeles: Crescent Publication.
- Kilcullen, D. (2015). Blood Year: Terror and the Islamic State. *Quarterly Essay*, 58.
- Lawson, S. (2014, April 22). Next Moves in Battle Over Domestic Drones. *Forbes*. Retrieved from <http://www.forbes.com/sites/seanlawson/2014/04/22/next-moves-in-the-battle-over-domestic-drones/>
- Matusitz, J. A. (2013). *Terrorism & communication: A critical introduction*. Los Angeles: Sage.
- Mbembe, J.A.(2003). Necropolitics. *Public Culture*, 15(1), 11-40.
- Public Broadcasting Service [PBS] (2014). *Rise of the Drones* [video]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rnhPWC9XG1Y>
- Saxena, V.K. (2013). *The Amazing Growth and Journey of UAVs & Ballistic Missile Defence Capabilities*. New Dehli: Vij Books India.
- Schmid, A.P., & De Graaf, J. (1982). *Violence as communication: Insurgent terrorism and the Western news media*. London: Sage.
- Stanford, B. (2014). Terror on Our Screens: The Common Interest of Theatrical Terrorism. *Social Science Research Network*. Retrieved from <http://ssrn.com/abstract=2494240>
- Tilly, C., Evans, P. B., Rueschemeyer, D., & Skocpol, T. (1985). *War making and state making as organized crime*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Tsfati, Y. & Weimann, G. (2002). Terror on the Internet. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 25, 317–332.
- Tuman, J.S. (2003). *Communicating terror: The rhetorical dimensions of terrorism*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Weimann, G. & Winn, C. (1994). *The Theater of Terror*. New York: Longman Publication.
- Wong, K. (2013, December 3). Obama war chiefs widen drone kill box. *The Washington Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2013/dec/3/pentagon-gives-more-room-for-deadly-error-in-drone/?page=all>



Property of the Erich Fromm Document Center. For personal use only. Citation or publication of material prohibited without express written permission of the copyright holder.

Eigentum des Erich Fromm Dokumentationszentrums. Nutzung nur für persönliche Zwecke. Veröffentlichungen – auch von Teilen – bedürfen der schriftlichen Erlaubnis des Rechteinhabers.

©

The Copyright of all images remains with the owners of the images.