

# EMPIRE OF THE INSENSATE

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JULY 1999: THEY WHO WOULD GIVE UP AN ESSENTIAL LIBERTY FOR TEMPORARY  
SECURITY

We were somewhere around Custer, South Dakota at the edge of the Black Hills when my Nordic colleague got this wicked glint in his eyes. I remember him saying something like “They’re all-day passes, let’s go back and tsek out the monument lighting ceremony...”. And suddenly the rental car had swung around through the scorching heat and soaking humidity, and was hurtling back towards Mount Rushmore (n.b. Thompson, 1998). From Sergio Leone’s taciturn gunslingers to Maurice ‘Morris’ de Bevere’s *Lucky Luke* and Jean ‘Moebius’ Giraud’s *Blueberry*, the peoples of the European subcontinent have a strong penchant for playing cowboys-and-indians. In my colleague’s case this penchant was tempered by a gleefully morbid engagement with the regalia of the federal government that rigorously ensured those cowboys came out the winners every time. Nor was he alone in this. During a stopover at the monument to the 1890 massacre at Wounded Knee just a few days prior, the only languages we heard in the cemetery were French and German.

For me, though, engagement with this federal government was anything but gleeful. *Patriotism* is entirely too close for my liking to *patriarchy*, *paternalism* and *patronizing*, bringing to mind adolescent fears of being sent on compulsory excursions to Grenada, Libya or El Salvador from which I might have returned in a plastic bag. So being dragged to visit Mount Rushmore twice in one day (and with the ghosts of Wounded Knee still dancing at my heels) felt akin to Gutzon Borglum, after smashing his manquettes of General Lee and hightailing it from Stone Mountain, making a u-turn and rushing into the arms of the pursuing Georgian troopers and the Ku Klux Klan (institutions that, at the time, would not have been all that distinct from one another).

Of course Borglum did nothing of the sort. Instead he took up long-term (and un-extraditable) refuge in the Dakotas where, presented with the task of carving the likenesses of frontier celebrities into the geology of his choice, he went one better. Or, at least, bigger. Borglum was one for working large,

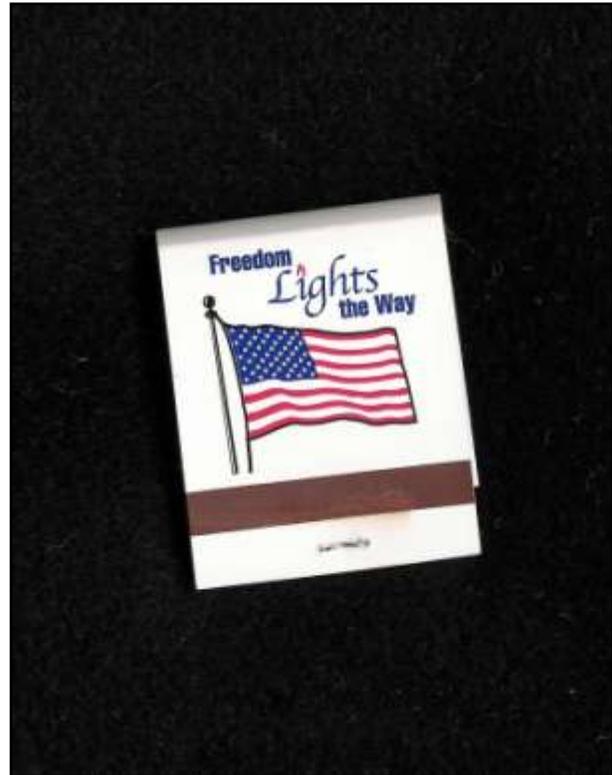
thematically as well as geologically. So why spend one's life pecking out gigantic Buffalo Bills or George Armstrong Custers when there's a *nation* to megalithicize? (Taliaferro, 2002; also Boime, 1998)

Not that monumental bas reliefs are all there is to be found at Mount Rushmore. The inscribed mountain is merely the jewel in a filigreed setting designed to inscribe the nation deep into the visitor's soul. An Avenue of Flags provides a pharaonic processional axis, framing the mountain with banners that represent each of the fifty states. A forecourt is inscribed in perpetuity with the names of those who spent years, even decades, serving their country on the mountain's face. Concession stands mix affordable, instantly antiqued simulations of the nation's foundational documents with four-score-and-twenty-berries ice cream. It is as if every manifestation of *banal nationalism* (Billig, 1995) – every schoolroom pledge of allegiance, every pre-game performance of the national anthem, every Presidents' Day barbecue and every automobile-mounted US flag ever peddled from off a street-corner – has been brought to this one place and refined into an impenetrable concentrate. But all of this is, like the enormous mound of stone tailings beneath the carvings themselves, just the residue of the foundational six-story-high portraits of George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln and Theodore Roosevelt.

Transiting through the age of mechanical reproduction, there is a tendency to collapse these likenesses into a single deified figure, a four-headed American Brahma from whence issues the United States of America itself. As with any such godhead(s), though, many avatars reside within this mysterious one-who-is-four. Washington we have been made to know as the nation's progenitor, Jefferson as its guide, Lincoln as its unifier, and Roosevelt as its champion. Conversely, though, we can also understand this deity as constituting an imperial circle of sorts: Washington as the warrior-hero who refuses the crown; Jefferson as the philosopher-king bearing the light of ancient Athens and Rome; Lincoln as the reluctant-hero who sacrifices himself to conquer internal weakness and division; and finally Roosevelt as the penultimate outcome – the full-fledged warrior-king who begat the Pax Americana to bring the world to heel.

While some more-or-less simplified version of the latter, *triumphalist* reading was evidently fecund in our

heads the day of our (re)visit, it was the former we were avidly encouraged to carry home alongside our replica Declarations of Independence. And it was to this end that the monument lighting ceremony was performed. This ceremony was a complex aggregate of semi-scripted multi-mediation, designed to inscribe in *us* a particular, preferred sense of who we are. And we, in turn, were expected to cognitively inscribe that sense back into the literal inscriptions on the mountain. The ceremony commenced in daylight, well before anything could be effectively lit up at all. It took an increasingly popular American form of which my own redaction of events is itself not innocent: the personal confession. On a large projection



screen in front of an open air amphitheater carefully oriented towards the altar of the mountain, the image of a ginormous Stars and Stripes appeared. Out in front of this stepped a scrub-faced youth in a National Park Service uniform (jarring for a moment, I realized I had subconsciously expected something more akin to George C. Scott as Patton). Gazing up at the flag, our hostess took a microphone and launched into a folksy story of what the flag and, by synecdoche, America meant to her – how as a child her father had her mow the lawn in exchange for her allowance. How this, in turn, taught her to appreciate America as a place of opportunity where honest work yields virtuous citizens free to enjoy the material fruits of their labors.

My accompanying Nord flinched a bit. We had both come for banalized national mythologizing, but public confessions of the personal are neither common nor particularly appreciated in Fennoscandian cultural contexts.

Her testimony complete, the hostess carried the microphone into the audience and, in the style we have become accustomed to from habitual viewings of Montel Williams and Jerry Springer, invited us to testify to what the Stars and Stripes meant to us. The microphone moved about the amphitheater, with what I now perceived as national parishioners interpreting the hermeneutics of the flag as everything from generosity and self-sacrifice to affluence and videogame consoles.

The Nord's flinching gradually became squirming.

And then, unexpectedly, the microphone passed into a heretical pair of hands. A guttural accent rang out through the loudspeakers: "I am originally from South Africa, and flags remind me of how national symbols are so easily used to make us feel okay about doing horrible things to other people."

Now the entire amphitheater squirmed. Most were shifting about in glaringly angry attempts to locate the traitor. For the Nord and me, it was more about sudden concern for the continued physical well-being of the speaker and, vicariously, for our own. I rifled through my head for a follow-up response should the microphone migrate my way. I would answer, I concluded, that the US flag makes me think of the Fifth Amendment to the Constitution – the guarantee of freedom from self-incrimination. There was no need for concern, though, as the microphone was promptly returned to the head of the congregation. Now the climax of the ceremony began. A medley of patriotic words, songs and images swelled from the speakers and from the screen up front while slowly, majestically, banks of spotlights gradually illuminated the mountain from below.

By now, the Nord's morbid engagement had turned into a rapt obsession. He scrutinized montage after montage of waving flags, soaring eagles, and purple mountains' majesties. Visions of *heimatslands* marching through his head, he muttered something to the effect that "this is no different than the fascism Europeans are so familiar with...this looks like the sorts of empires Europe used to run."

I, however, noticed something that salved and settled me for the first time since our arrival, and pointed it out. Running along the lower corner of the projection screen was what had evidently been a

massive rip, now haphazardly repaired and nastily puckered by long jagged strips of duct tape. “There is what’s different” I said. And I sat back to envision a slapdash empire of horseshoes and hand-grenades, exercising a hegemony barely held together with duct tape that nobody could even bother to conceal.

## DECEMBER 2001: TO BE SECURE IN OUR PERSONS

Whether or not duct tape can hold together an empire, for a time a strong new sentiment emerged that it constituted an essential guarantor of our own continued personal well-being. With copious



quantities of duct tape conjoined to plastic sheeting, we could weather the ill- and allegedly anthrax-laden winds suddenly blowing back upon us. Far from being concealed, those thick roles of silvered adhesive tape became prominent fixtures on news broadcasts and store shelves. They took up residence in every ordinary household as a talisman for warding off the diffuse evil

of a Them, a They who is not Us, that abruptly suffused the interstices of everyday life. Nor was *heimatsland* any longer a mere vision marching through some foreign head. It had, as we were endlessly and explicitly reminded, become *the* homeland, our homeland, complete with its own namesake departments and offices to secure both this land and us within it. And in our never-faltering readiness to wield our duct tape, we would each be doing our part to hold ourselves and the homeland together. All in one.

Tape securely in place, we could sally forth fearless but vigilant to do the things we would have done anyway. After all, were we to do otherwise, They would win. So knowing where my own tape was (I had, after all, had the same roll stored in the same place for years), I felt fully prepared and protected to go out and see a movie. But there, on the screen in the darkened auditorium of the movie theater, I came face to face with Them.

By and large, though, They were not so much a Them as they were an It – a mass of undifferentiated black bodies, not a collection of individuated persons, but a swarm that existed in only two states of activity. The first was one of directionless lethargy, milling about the streets in search of either basic sustenance (even to the extreme of stripping corpses) or of nothing determinable at all. The second state was one of hostile excitation. Herein, they took the form of a fleet-footed mob bent upon wiping out anything within reach that was not Them, by means of machine guns and rocket propelled grenades or even just bare hands. On the rare occasions where a figure stood out from this swarm, it took the form of a sly warlord. His expressions ranged from the savage grin to the angry grimace and his actions were confined to barking orders for the destruction of his foes.

And We were his foes, in the form of sorely outnumbered and overwhelmingly white-bodied US Army Special Forces and Delta Force troopers. Unlike Them, We were permitted ample screen time to express histories, biographies, hopes, feelings, and ambivalencies. We had entered the theater of combat for Their own good, to moderate Their savage urges and the lumpen anarchy it had spawned. But in Their benightedness, They did not want Us there, and responded violently. When They killed Us it was on a one-by-one basis. It hurt. When We killed Them it was en masse and carried the emotional resonance of mowing a lawn. There was one exception: that warlord was killed in a lovingly choreographed closing scene that recorded, up close and personal, his shock at being on the receiving end of one of those rocket propelled grenades. His death eliciting tremendous applause and celebratory whoops from the audience.

I had a strong sense of déjà vu upon exiting the theater. While the movie I had just screened, a redaction of the US Military's fatal 1993 misadventure in Mogadishu, had only just been released, I had an unshakeable sense that I had seen this *Black Hawk Down* before. And indeed I had, only a week prior – *The Lord of the Rings: the Fellowship of the Ring*.



In that movie They were orcs, but likewise a mass of undifferentiated dark bodies (albeit with jagged fangs, pointy ears and, perhaps most revealing, black blood). This swarm also existed in only two states of activity. The first state was one of venal squabbling boredom, milling about vast blasted plains in search of captives to torment, torture, and rob. The second state was one of raving hostility. Herein, they took the form of a howling horde bent upon wiping out anything within reach that was not part of Them, by means of siege engines, spears, swords, or even just bare hands. On the rare occasions where a figure stood out, it took the form of a relentless warlord whose expressions ranged from the savage grin to the angry grimace and who barked orders for the destruction of his foes.

Sounding at all familiar yet?

The foe in this picture was a sorely outnumbered and exclusively white-bodied (and male) fellowship of nine more-or-less reluctant heroes from the West. These nine Men of the West were Our surrogates, replete with histories, biographies, hopes, feelings, and ambivalencies. We were impelled into combat for the good of the entire earth – Middle Earth, in this case – to eradicate the bloody panoptic chaos They strove to spread across the world. When They killed, it was on a one-by-one basis. It hurt. When Our fellowship killed, it was en masse, akin to swinging machetes through tangled underbrush. With the one exception of that warlord, killed in a closing choreography that recorded, close-up, his slow and meaty demise by penetrating swordshafts and arrowheads. All to the tremendous applause and celebratory whoops of the audience.

Of course, these are just movies. Stories told in sound and vision for only a few hours each, shadowplays that are mere shadows of what they redact. Which is not to disparage the realities that came into being in Mogadishu that autumn of 1993 – concretes far more complex and painful than those re-scripted for re-enactment in the set-decorated slums of Rabat, Morocco. But it is the fictionalizing translation of the one into the other, and that translation's consonance with other such stories, that is at issue. The Somalis I have know have been far more interested in feeding me sambusas and sharing my Islamo-industrial music CDs than in stripping my corpse of valuables. In fact, they have shown no interest in the latter whatsoever. True, I can not say the same for orcs, but that is merely because I have yet to meet one – or anybody who could be remotely mistaken for one. But what such people do in the flesh seems little related to what we have been convinced these people are terrifyingly prone do to our flesh should the opportunity present itself. So in the convergence of *Black Hawk Down* and *Fellowship of the Ring*, orcs are realized in sight and sound as a corrupted and savage mass bent upon our bloody annihilation, Somalis are equated with orcs through a narrative coincidence in the spatialities of the movie theater and the temporalities of release dates, and the whole then becomes a synecdoche for Them. And They will rend Us

limb from limb should We step out there. And They will, no doubt, by Their very nature, seek to effect a similar rending should they enter in here.

Despite having recovered the storied descent of Somalis from orcs, the onslaught of déjà vu had not abated. So I poked about back over the years (a full two of them, to be precise) and excavated an even deeper cinematic ancestry for Our atavistic aggressors. This one was not human to begin with, nor even independently sentient for the most part. Instead, They were a legion of identical, faintly corroded metal bodies, yet another swarm that existed with only two states of activity: off, and on. When off, they did not do much of anything at all. Once switched on, They buzzed with instantaneous menace and formed into a phalanx single-mindedly committed to wiping out anything within reach that was not Them, by means of laser blasters and missile pods. These battle-droids all looked alike, and had no warlord. Instead, they were remotely controlled by a race of creatures with slitted almond eyes. These aliens dressed in elaborate Mikado-meets-Mandarin costumes and spoke with cartoon Asiatic accents. Neither grinning nor grimacing, these 'Neimoidians' comported themselves with inscrutable diplomatic politeness while coldly plotting their galactic domination.

In this picture, *Star Wars Episode I: The Phantom Menace*, We took the form of a sorely outnumbered order of benign, quasi-mystical knights (but available, at least, in a range of skin colors including mint green and turquoise) charged with the task of compassionately policing the Galactic Order. Our knights came with histories, biographies, hopes, feelings, and ambivalencies – and mowed down the enemy in bulk, to no emotional effect. It is difficult, after all, to mourn the slaughter of battle-droids. But when They killed . . . Well, they did not really kill much at all, having clearly been manufactured with grossly defective targeting technology. Thus the Neimoidian plot was foiled and the Neimoidians force-marched on a Walk of Shame into detention.

This story, of course, could be taken as particularly fantastical science fiction with no real-world correlate. But then I recall the belligerent rhetoric surrounding China's temporary confiscation of an off-

course US EP-3E Aries II spy plane two years later. All the rhetoric surrounding that event tacitly posited the threat of an emergent, and inscrutably duplicitous, Pax Sinica. So it seems willfully disingenuous to deny that the Neimoidian plot recapitulates every japanicked and sinophobic trope to have gained purchase in the prodigious ids of both the Pax Americana and the Pax Europaea. We know these tropes, and they have remained consistent throughout the decades. I recall, for example, the long-standing stereotype of the Red Chinese soldier or the Kamikaze pilot, look-alike fleshly fighting machines ordered out against their opponent in expendable waves. And shortly after screening *Phantom Menace*, I inadvertently re-encountered Hergé's (1936) Tintin adventure *The Blue Lotus*. Set in China, depictions of the Japanese in this story take two forms: the conniving, dissembling diplomat, and the leering, decapitation-happy commandant.

None of this defends Japanese imperialism. The problem comes when attempts are made to declare Their empires bad but Ours good, assuming We are willing to declare Our empires imperial at all. Along these lines it is useful to page through Hergé's (1931) *Tintin in the Congo*. In this volume, We (in the form of Tintin and his friends, agents of the notoriously brutal Belgian Empire) arrive in the Congo to lend Our expertise and common sense to the natives. Throughout, these natives are aimlessly childlike or explicitly simian. They are readily prone to petty squabbling, except when incited by local witchdoctors and foreign adventurers into vicious armed assault en masse. One such assault is even directed against a cinematically projected image of Us, the savage mind here being seemingly incapable of distinguishing the representation from what it represents.

Sounding familiar?

True enough, Tintin's earlier adventures are relatively playful, and he emerges from them unscathed. In the Congo, he leaves the natives so grateful that they take to worshipping idols of both him and his dog, Milou (Snowy). But in its playfulness, Tintin is perhaps the most problematic of all. He is a candy-coating for empire, and I wonder how palatable that coating would have seemed to, say, deposed and

assassinated Congolese Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba, or to the one hundred and sixty thousand Rwandans slaughtered during 1994 in what had been Belgium's Africa. (And then there is Tintin's own euro-obsession with playing cowboys-and-indians, see Hergé, 1932.)

Tintin's early adventures and their constituent Themes, then, complement the concentrated banal nationalism celebrating Our superiority at sites like Mount Rushmore. They comprise a *banal imperialism* that works deep in the background to justify and even render imperative the projection of Our superiority to and over Them. Simultaneously it obscures the fact that such projection is indeed imperialism. Nor is this something relegated to the past. Narrative bloodlines link Tintin's Congolese and Japanese with our Neimoidians, Somalis and orcs. Further, these latter characters do not remain confined to the realm of fiction. Their stories are told in conjunction with very concrete events from the south coast of China to Afghanistan and Iraq. Thus banal imperialism begets what can be named a banal neo-imperialism (assuming there is anything 'neo' about it) that suffuses our present, everyday lives. As an unnamed aid to the George W. Bush administration declared, "We're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality" (Suskind, 2004). It is on movie screens where valiant, vastly outnumbered armored celebrities simulate the defense of civilization against bloodthirsty (and invariably dark) hordes of extras that make-believe realities are acted out to create Our empire for real.

This act of creation is a slippery thing, conflating aliens with Africans with androids with East Asians as an imaginary whole, interbreeding the human with nonhuman, subhuman and inhuman. The deeper one explores the more slippery it gets. Was not the director of *Black Hawk Down*, Ridley Scott, also the director of *Black Rain*, another film profiling Asians as inscrutable progenitors of ritualized violence? Did not Scott cast Congolese to play *Black Hawk Down's* Somalis? Do not *Black Hawk Down*, *Fellowship of the Rings*, and *Phantom Menace* share common cast and crew members? Beneath the ever-increasing density of Scott, Tolkien, Hergé and their fellows, I felt myself drawn inexorably beyond the event horizon of a collapsing century-old pop-cultural black hole. I was held captive in the singularity of an

infinitely regressing procession of Them, feeding off and reflecting and magnifying one another without ever touching ground with an actual Somali or flesh-and-blood Asian. (Much as Hergé himself, according to those Tintinologists I have queried, touched Africa only through the museum exhibitions of imperial booty on display in Brussels, Belgium).

So mired in this deep primeval soup from which They germinate, one final observation struck me. Whether in the cinematic version or its literary (Tolkien, 1993) progenitor, the panoptic chaos reaching for the throat of Middle Earth's Men of the West is not spread by orcs alone. In league with them are the militarized faceless Easterlings and the swarthy fanatical turban-clad Haradrim from the south. And there, consigned to the mythic geography of an imagined ancient world, sat caricatures of the steppe- and desert-dwellers who constitute the entirety of my own ancestry. With this observation, the collapse was complete. I, a native-born citizen of the Pax Americana's very homeland, an unequivocal Us, was also a ravaging automaton-like black-blooded denizen of the savage horde that is Them. Which compels me to wonder, with each reflection I add: do I only make myself moreso?

#### JULY 2002: SECURITIES TRADING

Since the visit to Mount Rushmore, worlds have been changed forever as if by divine providence. For some the change has been qualitative, a sense of unassailability lost, whether to the realized threat of death from above or to the threats whispered by each passing US-flag-festooned SUV. For others half a world away, the change has been quantitative, with the bombarded rubble of already battered lives bounced and bounced again. All these changes have come as though delivered from out of thin air, figuratively and literally.



Nowhere has this aerial menace become more subtly omnipresent than at the hubs of air travel itself. Here, the federal state has assumed a god-like and indisputable omnipotence that seems to work in the most mysterious of ways. Airports have become sites of innumerable mundane disappearances, where the tweezers, lighters, knitting needles or heirloom jewelry that was adjudged fit to fly the trip previous may become contraband the next, or vice versa. Indeed, in the earlier days of the US Transportation Security Administration, some wags asserted that TSA stood for They Steal Anything. And these are but the meanest of disappearances, with travelers vanishing during stopovers and turning up fresh from ghost-flights in far-distant outsourced interrogation chambers (e.g. the case of Maher Arar; see CBC, 2005).

The resultant sense that one's existence may be impinged upon at any moment from any quarter is especially pronounced for those of Us who may also be Them. Will my lighter be apprehended en route,

or will I? Will my flight arrive at its destination or terminate in midair? Which insecurity am I prepared to trade for which other? Can I even have the choice? We who are also They seem especially liable to have it both ways, without ever knowing why. And even if we do not end up having it at all, it is enough to be abidingly conscious that we might. *That* is insecurity.

These bedevilmments danced through my head as I awaited check-in for a research expedition from the US to the Pax Europaea's ever-expanding eastern frontier. And as the line crawled forward, they were afforded plenty of dancing space. But when I finally arrived at the counter, I discovered there was nothing to worry about. The flight was not departing at all. Rather I would have to await another, on account of what was described as some generic 'mechanical failure'. Some prodding, though, revealed the specifics of this failure – the anti-terrorist lock on the cockpit door, something that not so long ago would have been considered a paranoid excess, would not lock. For our own protection, a replacement plane had to be delivered. In the process I would miss my connecting flight, but was to be put up in a luxury hotel at the airline's hub city and provided with an expense allowance for the inconvenience.

The terrorists, I realized, had won...me a complimentary, all-expenses paid evening in one of Europe's hippest urban hotspots. It was only a matter of moments, though, before it became apparent that one person's gain was another's loss. That loser was the fellow traveler in line right behind me.

She looked thoroughly beaten down, with the tic of an added expectation that some further blow was waiting to land upon her at the next inopportune moment. It was apparent she spoke very little English, and was having a good deal of difficulty negotiating just what the delay would mean for her connecting flight which, evidently, departed once every couple days. After checking her in, the desk clerk asked me if I, as the nearest traveler at hand, would accompany this fellow traveler through the security checkpoint and deliver her to her departure gate.

So we set off to walk the labyrinth of switchbacks and examinations that stood between us and the departure lounge. In pantomime and fragments of English, I helped my newfound associate perform the

arcane rituals of submitting her carry-ons (from which nothing, despite an unusually thorough search, was confiscated), passing on cue through the metal detector's sanctuary arch and, once on the other side, negotiating the complexities of complimentary calling cards and gerrymandered area codes to apprise relatives of her indefinitely delayed arrival.

After a fraught phone conversation, the fellow traveler collapsed against the terminal wall and began to bawl with what seemed an endless reservoir of frustration. In broken English mixed with Farsi expletives, she wailed "I am not a terrorist, I blow nothing up. Why do they treat me like this!?" She let loose with the story of how she had lived in the USA and been, as she put it, a "good guest" in the country. She had respected the law, amassed a life's savings and deposited them in a local bank, and then returned to Tehran to discover that the entirety of her assets had been frozen. How she had made this trip back to the USA, been ushered through an infinity of government offices, and, with every meeting, had been told via translators that she could not have her savings back, but was never given an explanation as to why or what she might do about it. And now, her visa reaching its end, she was compelled to return to Tehran no better off than she had been when she had first arrived. Cathartically purged, she wiped her eyes, looked at me, and reiterated, "I am Irani, not terrorist, just because I am Irani does not make me terrorist. I do not hate you."

I struggled to explain how I felt about what she had told me, how disturbing it was, even how I had voted in the previous election. But it was evident that despite her impromptu eloquence in describing her own misadventures, she understood very little of what I was saying. Still, she was appreciative and, so calmed, we entered the departure lounge and found a Farsi-speaking family who shared my companion's itinerary and adopted her into their party. That was the last I saw of her.

Did she ever get home and get her savings back? Under just what rationale were they disappeared in the first place? I still sometimes wonder, and when I do these questions turn my mind to an oddly similar story of disappearances, one found in many parts of Latin America. It tells of a type of human-

looking but vampirish creature that preys on the indigenous populations. In some earliest versions, from the time of 'first contact', the vampires are foreigners whose pale-skin testifies to their bloodlessness, and who require the local people to rectify this deficit. In later versions, the creatures steal not blood but body fat, *greases*. They sell these greases at a profit to local elites and to the affluent up north for the purposes of lubricating industrial machinery. In versions more recent still, the creatures take the form of rich North American tourists who come ostensibly to adopt orphans, but in truth are looking to disassemble them for transplantable organs. This later version has resulted in violent assaults upon numerous would-be adoptive mothers who have traveled from *El Norte* to the village orphanages of Central and South America (Radford, 2000; Honeyman, 1999).

Most recently, this tale has resurfaced half way around the world, with rumors flying across US-occupied Iraq that teams of American and British physicians are extracting transplantable organs both from Iraqi casualties in the field and from prisoners held at Abu Ghraib Detention Facility (Harper's, 2005).

While I am in no position to vouch for, or debunk, these stories, and am dubious of their literal truth, there is something about their mythic content that empowers them as a counter-narrative to the stories told by Tolkien or Scott. The greases-thief and the baby-parts hijacker encapsulate the everyday sensibilities and anxieties of those – like my Tehrani fellow traveler – who have found themselves consistently on the Other side of empire, those whose metaphorical greases have indeed been appropriated to serve distant imperial interests. Can any of us, with a straight face, tell the people of the 'Near East' that their grease in a very literal sense isn't being taken from them? And just where have my fellow traveler's greases ended up?

DECEMBER 2004: SECURE THE BLESSINGS OF LIBERTY

In an oblique way, all this brings me back to some semblance of how I started. I was somewhere around Barstow on the edge of the desert when the traffic started to take hold. Suddenly there was a

terrible roar all around me and the road was packed with what looked like huge rolling billboards, an endless caravan of forty-foot long intermodal cargo containers going at about a hundred miles an hour to Las Vegas. And a voice, my voice (or was it? n.b. Thompson, op. cit.), was screaming: “Holy Jesus! What is in these goddamn things?!”

Greases, of course. In the gas tanks. Lubricating the engines. Transformed into bottomless truckloads of souvenir refrigerator magnets, buffet fixings, cold-cast resin miniature replicas of triumphal arches and statuettes of Augustus and Julius Caesar. Within a few days, one of these miniature imperial busts would accompany me back along this same road, to join the collection of decapitated dictators resident atop my mantelpiece.



All roads once led to Rome. Radiating from out the heart of the Pax Romana, mighty legions used these conduits to forcibly export imperial authority to the furthest provinces. In exchange, the animal, vegetal, and mineral wealth of the provinces was removed back to home. Now new roads lead to a new Rome, a high-rise palace for Caesars fed by an endless convoy of tractor-trailers. This Caesars Palace sprawls widely across the Nevada desert, a continuously metastasizing city unto itself. To visit it is to become lost in a maze of dreamlike architecture that shifts with each visit, a place that interleaves different Romes materialized through the sensibilities of different eras (Raento and Flusty, 2006; Douglass and Raento, 2004). In the brief time since my last visit this eternal city had sprouted a coliseum and, more startling still, a monumental basilica on a previously empty sidewalk. And in keeping with the shared temperament of that long-ago imperial age and this one, this US\$71.8 million, 175,000-square-foot (Southwest Contractor, 2004) basilica – the Forum Shops Expansion – was devoted entirely to the rituals of consumption.

The entrance to the Forum Shops was grandiose. An ornately corbelled triumphal arch studded with black marble(esque?) columns and Corinthian capitals, heads of lions rampant and laurel wreaths all in gilt – an irruption of classical architecture entirely at odds with the supposed democratizing modesty of its Jeffersonian forebears. The interior was more ostentatious still. An atrium of four over-high stories supported by bare-breasted caryatids, sprinkled with statues of emperors and senators in poses of tremendous gravitas, layered with bas-reliefs and ornate *trompe l'oeil* murals. Akin to Rome at its height, the entirety deployed ancient idioms to bespeak great luxury and, perhaps, access to vast pools of affordable labor. Although going ancient Rome one better, say artisans of my acquaintance, labor costs were cut further by producing only some fraction of the murals by hand, replicating them digitally at full scale, and then affixing these print-outs to the basilica's interior surfaces. Further, the *SPQR* could never have imagined spiral escalators, let alone two pairs of them custom-engineered by Mitsubishi Electronics.

The Forum Shops, then, is a Pax Romana condensate. And doing as the Romans did, guests here freely consume all that the world has to offer – the senatorial togs of *Versace*, the planet's herbaria blended into cosmetic potions (their distant provenance carefully called out, as with a skin crème “handcraft[ed]...in remote monasteries in Europe”) at *fresh*. But most telling of all is *Villa Reale*. This boutique, devoted to lavish home furnishings and accessories, features amongst its Louis XIV, Napoleonic and Spanish Imperial churrigueresque housewares reproductions of the bejeweled eggs created for the Czars by Carl Fabergé. Czar, of course, was a slavification of the term Caesar, the Czars bore a version of the latter Roman Empire's emblematic double-headed eagle, which is itself prominently displayed in the window of *Villa Reale*. So here, at a simulacrum of the Pax Romana, deep in the underbelly of the Pax Americana, sits replicated regalia of the Third Rome, the Russian Empire. Nor is this unique to Caesars Palace. Rather, it is stamped across the dissimulated desert by such exhibitions as “Russia! The Majesty of the Tsars: Treasures from the Kremlin Museum” at the Venetian casino-resort, itself a simulacrum of the merchant empire of the ‘Serene Republic’ that was Venice.

Despite this densely layered concatenation of empires, one commonality is carefully avoided – the fact that all of these empires have long ago crumbled into ruins. At Caesars Palace, with the exception of a peripherally located hourly sinking of Atlantis, we caesars all are immersed in *Roma Eterna* as though it truly was eternal, an ancient imperial Rome that is *Our* imperial Rome. It is well repaired and maintained, free of decaying stone fascia and fallen columns. Nowhere is there any indication that empires collapse, inevitably and invariably.

It is, however, what empires do. Or more correctly, it is what they do to themselves. The same reach that projects legions to the far corners of the Pax, and so brings its spoils back to us, becomes overreach and, in so overreaching, empires rip themselves apart (Kennedy, 1987; Modelski, 1987; Wallerstein, 2003). Like the colossal statue of Constantine dissected into stony anatomical extremities strewn through the Palazzo dei Conservatori in Rome, Italy, the imperial body politic is one destined for

dismemberment. Such dismemberment, though, is more akin to vivisection. Empires come apart kicking and screaming. These flailing death throes are expressed in the form of a belligerent combativeness that only further depletes the coffers and hastens the collapse. It is a long-established vicious cycle, but a no less contemporary one. Now, the legions of the Pax Americana stretch from the Korean Peninsula and Singapore the long way around due east to Kyrgyzstan (GlobalSecurity, 2006). (Alternately, we may also think of this reach as obtruding upon the eastern and western bounds, respectively, of the Pax Sinica.) In Iraq alone the resultant herniation of the Pax Americana hemorrhages an advertised US\$7.4 million per hour (AP, 2004) and, according to the US Department of Defense's own confirmation list, an average 64 soldiers per month. All this to supposedly secure a second century of American Pax (e.g. PNAC – Project for the New American Century).



This is not a pretty reality to face for those accustomed to the spoils of empire, and to seeing those spoils as anything other than spoils. Hence the 365-day-per-year, 50,000-person-per-day (Ziegler, 2004) bacchanale that carries on, punctuated only by surprise blips in the day's terrorist threat level, within the luxuriantly triumphal facades of fora like Caesars Palace. This benumbing cocktail of orgiastic self-absorption plus a dash of learned helplessness transmutes Pax Americana into *Paxil* Americana, within which shopping becomes an apotropaic practice – a comforting talisman against imperial collapse and the barbarian hordes just beyond the horizon off whom we have done quite well and who, in our deepest and most denied atavistic fears, will come upon us like Vandals in the night to get their own back. Indeed, our leaders have been explicit that in bellicosely pursuing our new century against the specter of impending collapse, it is each of our patriotic duty to “spend, spend, spend” (Carlson, 2001; Vardie and Watty, 2001).

In the intensifying shear forces created by this occlusion of conquest, consumerism, denial and desperation, new rips open up across the scrim of normalcy that conceals empire from our view. I am thinking, for instance, of a recent newspaper front-page emblazoned with the image of a pair of bemasked and camouflaged US soldiers standing over two screaming Iraqi children. Their parents had just been mistakenly shot dead by those soldiers' comrades. And in the sidebar of this same page, immediately adjacent this photograph, is the lead-in for an article on the best local places to go for the “cuisine delights” of the Middle and Near East (Toronto Star, 2005). Apparently, editors do not think to bat an eye at the neo-aphoristic possibility of having our cake while killing the cook. And apparently, we have strayed quite far from the sermon on Mount Rushmore.

Of course, an early twentieth-century Filipino or a middle-century Haitian (to give just a couple of many possible examples) would not see this detour as anything new or remarkable at all. The body of Mount Rushmore itself has been flawed from its inception, the presidential colossi riddled with continually

opening fissures that demand constant applications of silicon caulk lest the entire edifice fall away in granitic shards. So in some ways, this is all an old, familiar tale.

What is novel, however, is the appearance of ruptures so mind-boggling that neither duct tape nor silicon caulk could repair them were we to apply it thickly across our own eyes. Most notorious of these are the photo-documentations of animal attacks, physical assaults and sexual humiliations to have emerged from the Abu Ghraib Detention Facility. I remain unable to shake the snapshot of Military Police Specialist Lynndie England grinning through her cigarette and giving ‘thumbs up’ while standing before a lineup of naked and restrained prisoners, their heads inserted into what look like nothing so much as shopping bags. And that is just me. Imagine how the same snapshot must read to the families and friends of those bagged prisoners – an American woman standing above a humiliated pile of stripped local men, communicating to the viewer an invitation in the regional gestural parlance to sit on her stiffened male member. Something Spc. England and her superiors knew full well, assuming they had familiarized themselves with their military-issue ‘culture smart cards’(e.g. MCI, 2004). In our own parlance, and in keeping with President George W. Bush’s cavalier “bring them on” challenge to the Iraqi resistance in July of 2003, this is what is commonly termed “asking for it”. Or, perhaps more concisely, “hubris”.

Of course, we are indeed seeing these things, and so ourselves become party to a reappearance of the disappeared. Further, this is a reappearance that actively (or *activistically*) refuses to re-disappear. Consider, for example, the specter of he who has come to be known simply as “Abu Ghraib Man” or, as christened by his captors, ‘Gilligan’ (Salon, undated). He perches precariously atop a cardboard MRE (Meals Ready to Eat) shipping box, clad in a black poncho and a faceless hood adapted from a sandbag, wires hanging from his fingers and appearing to terminate at an electrical junction box immediately behind. This prisoner has become an icon of empire and against it, dramatically re-enacted in street protests and inserted graphically into the interstices of everyday life by means of assorted posters reproducing his outline on everything from traffic-light junction boxes to construction-site walls. At their cleverest, these

reappearances depict head-on the confluence of conquest and consumption, as with the parodies of Apple iPod's postering campaign featuring dancing bodies silhouetted in black against solid florescent-hued backgrounds, with the signature white lines of iPod headphones trailing from their ears. Interspersed with these posters, it is now not uncommon to find on a similarly florescent background the black silhouette of Abu Ghraib Man, white lines trailing from his fingers above a logo reading 'iRaq'.



There has been a longstanding tendency to think of empire at its most vulgar as a thing of the past. But as Abu Ghraib Man insistently points out, the imperial present (cf. Gregory, 2004) now cannot but be widely acknowledged and, in ever more precincts, acknowledged for what it is. Of course, we do still tend to think of empire as dependant upon parading phalanxes of kevlar-armored legionnaires and mighty fleets of missile-studded galleons, the collection of retailable tribute and the dispatch of proconsuls to distant

protectorates upon freshly re-inscribed maps (e.g. Flusty on ‘praetorian globality’, 2004). And, indeed, empire *is* these things. But it is no less legible in, and no less reliant upon, such everyday banalities as eighteen-wheeled intermodal amphorae laden with exotic oils or the box office blockbusters that inventively separate the *populus americanus quiritium* from the *barbarus* (while perhaps bringing over those of us caught in the frontiers between, see Ross, 2005; McKinley, 2005).

Empire is comprised of all these many pieces and more, pieces that must be forced back together again and again as the entire assemblage grows ever more unwieldy and strains to burst apart at the seams. Such force, in turn, makes plain that the term “imperial pax” is an oxymoron. *Pax* – peace – under these conditions will only be maintained for such a necessarily finite time as the violently inherent insecurities of empire are exported to others, elsewhere. And in so doing, and so being, we trade the very possibilities of freedom and security for futility, an impossible perpetuation of empire and its perquisites that, in the last analysis, is the most insecure arrangement of all.

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