

**The Self-Torment of the White House Screen:
Language, Lyotard and Looking Back at the War on Terror**

Dougal Phillips

*How many unjust and wicked things are done
from mere habit.
[Quam multa injusta ac prava fiunt moribus!]
Terence, Heauton timoroumenos*

Introduction

In 1983, U.S. President Ronald Reagan proposed the use of space-based systems to protect the United States from attack by strategic nuclear missiles. Known as the Strategic Defence Initiative (SDI) and dubbed “Star Wars” by critics and acolytes alike, the initial centrepiece of the project was a proposed laser curtain emitted from a satellite which was powered by a built-in nuclear warhead. The idea was that the energy from the warhead detonation, when broadcast, would produce an impenetrable screen as a barrier to incoming warheads. After testing failed, this design was quietly abandoned and the focus shifted to mini-missiles based in satellites, known as Brilliant Pebbles. This program was abandoned in 1993 with the coming to power of the Clinton administration. The program was then revived under George W. Bush’s administration as the National Missile Defence system, which is proposed as a fixed, land-based, non-nuclear missile defence sys-

tem with a space-based detection system. Only approximately half of the tests of this system have been successful, and even those were done under what are alleged to be highly controlled circumstances using GPS technology.

Perhaps this is just the *realpolitik* of contemporary military budgeting and the desire for US technology to out-race those shadowy members of the so-called Axis of Evil, but perhaps it also reveals something about the desire of the American Executive to put in place a protective screen against the world in which they find themselves in the early twenty-first century. This article considers the screen as a metaphorical figure for the way in which recent Republican White Houses have engaged with the world, both in a projective and protective fashion. As a thought experiment, we might specifically consider the George W. Bush White House (which includes his Cabinet Secretaries of Defence, State, and so on) as a sort of “desiring-subject” who wishes – fantasizes, even – to bring about a reality for itself; to produce a vision of the world which satisfies its desires for control, order and legitimation.

The nature of the screen is central to our thinking here. With the ubiquity of the CNN-Fox-MSNBC news filter, it is easy to fall back on the primacy of the screen as a media cliché. We need to pull back from this, to de-mediatize the screen and rethink it as an apparatus for the mediation of power rather than a medium for transmission. It must also be noted that the concept of the screen, being widely used, can default to a theoretical legitimation of academic critique of a very real and violent world. Indeed, a consciousness of this danger reflects the nefarious nature of the screen itself. The underlying question here is not whether a theoretical “screen” can be identified in the economy of global politics, but whether the screening of the real is a successful or even *good* apparatus for the mediation of power. Is its use wise, or are its powers of seduction ultimately fatal?

It might be seen that the screen operates dually, as a protective border and as a screening of reality – which is to say, a covering up of certain elements of reality through the projection of a desired image of reality. In the context of the contemporary geo-political scene familiar to us all, we see the constitution of differing “realities” in three separate but conflated wars: the Jihad declared by Al-Qaeda against America and her allies; the Bush Administration’s “War on Terror,” (re-branded in 2006 as the “Global Struggle Against Extremism”); and the military invasion of Iraq for the purposes of removing Saddam Hussein from power. Since we are ascribing a psychology to geo-political desires and manoeuvres, we might as well turn to the mental images and language used by our desiring-subject and his psychic Others. Indeed, the idea of the competing constitutions of the real is

best understood by looking to the discord and overlapping of language in competing political phrase-regimes, all of which are trying claim agency and control over the ever-elusive event. In the light of the work of those who have rethought the trauma and violence of representation and who have sought to show the impossibility of objective representations and world-views – theorists like Jean-François Lyotard, Gilles Deleuze and Jean Baudrillard – we come to see sometimes overlooked discord between the singularity of events and their manifestation in multiplicities of language, thought and action.

Reality and Blowback

Reality, Lyotard tells us, is not a given, “but an occasion to require that establishment procedures be effectuated in regard to it.”¹ So how, we might ask, has the White House tried to effect its desired reality, particularly in recent times? The White House real appears to be very much predicated on a *libidinal investment in the screen*, an unconscious investment which is revealed by the Bush administration’s reliance on rhetoric and imagery to show the world the way they wish it was. I refer here not only to the screen in the televisual sense, but to a more expansive notion. Along with the well-known televisual elements of the contemporary geo-political scene – the Hollywood-designed briefing room, the Fox News agit-prop and the like – we can also include the fantasy-object of the SDI missile screen, the defence initiative force-field intended to girt the United States, protecting it from intercontinental harm. Further, there is the privacy screen (or veil) set up around the operations of the Administration through the workings of spin doctors, who spin a kind of information web, serving as a screen in the sense of a semi-permeable apparatus which lets some things through but traps others. We must also include the problematic concept of immigration screening as a defence apparatus; and the nightmare scenario of a mass screening for infection that accompanies the fear of bio-terror.

In constellation all of these tropes suggest a kind of US campaign of Global Screening, a prophylactic approach to global policy as a strategy for the protection and preservation of the American Way. However, it should not be thought that this structural campaign is merely a defensive manoeuvre against encroaching incursions from an aggressive world. The constitution of a desired American global reality – a “safe” and “free” world – is dependant on the screen-form as an accompaniment to strategic military excursions. Like all military excursions, these come with consequences: from guerrilla resistance in the occupied state itself to what the CIA have termed “blowback”: the phenomenon of previously armed “friends” like Saddam

and Bin Laden coming back to haunt their erstwhile patrons. Going forward, then, the question remains: is it possible for the American state to co-opt resistance to American militarism and insurgency stemming from it, and to fulfil their political and psychological desire for stability once the game of managing blowback from an unpredictable and uncontrollable world has begun?

The screen is both a visual figure – a projection screen on (and through) which we view the world – and a physical field which blocks things out of our space, whether they are missiles, viral particles, or prying eyes. In terms of the image, it is becoming ever clearer that representations and representational apparatuses play a key part in constituting the desired reality of geo-political events, principally through the televisual and the photographic modes – consider the evolution from the blurred, painterly video streams broadcast by embedded journalists during the opening sorties of the Iraq conflict to the on-the-ground real-time coverage of insurgency to which we are now accustomed. What is also clear is that these representations are not always able to be controlled. This was seen most significantly in puncturing of the image of the “clean war” by the leaked torture photos from Abu Ghraib, which revealed a grotesque comedy of abjection and degradation operating at the heart of the supposedly humanitarian liberation of a people. Despite these weaknesses, the screen remains fundamental to the Bush Administration’s campaign for the constitution of *their* real, and in theoretical terms, the screen-as-figure plays an central role in the informational (and libidinal) economies of these realities. But, as we will see, this reliance does not come without a cost.

Perhaps the best way to understand the White House screen is as a psychical necessity within a Lyotardian libidinal economy – that is to say, the desire for protection and for stability demands an investment in the screen. Lyotard’s system for the economy of desire is founded on the idea that the desiring-subject invests the energy of their desire in the screen in a quest for fulfilment, this desire being “captured” and satisfied (to a point) in and on the screen. As Lyotard writes, “the dividing screen or pictorial surface or theatrical frame fulfils a function of enjoyment (*jouissance*), and this function is ambivalent; in it are to be found, in conflict, a regulation of pleasure...”²

The figure Lyotard mobilises is a screen-form which is at once a technical screen, a skin, and a holographic or gel-like membrane which registers movement and energy. In fact, for Lyotard, this screen-membrane is *the* interconnecting fabric of the social network of desire, what he calls *la grand pellicule*. Julian Pefanis suggests that in Lyotard’s phenomenology desire can be figured as the

intense sign read at the surface of the social, *la grande pellicule*. (*Pellicule* read here in both its senses: as a membrane capable of transferring here and obstructing there the flows and investments of a *desire* which is of the order of production, the libidinal economy; and as a photographic film surface, a screen or gel, a thick holographic plate capable of registering the multiple traces of this movement of desire as a *phantasm*).³

Desire, it must be understood, images itself on the screen – it is one and the same as the screen, it is at once the screen’s structure and its subject. Lyotard uses the example of cinema for this libidinal transformation:

This can happen, for example, in the form of a projection into the characters or the situations staged by cinema or, in the case of so-called erotic images, to the extent that the roles presented can directly find a place in my own phantasizing or yet again, more subtly, when the film’s cutting or editing as well catch my desire in their net, also fulfilling it, no longer from the point of view of the image itself, but through the organisation of the narrative.⁴

The screen is offered here as the site of the projection and fulfilment of desire, as a space for montage, the cutting together that forms a net to ensnare desire. In the case of the United States, the desire is to maintain military strongholds at strategic points while simultaneously protect its own body from unhappy consequences or aggression stemming from those extramural military annexes. The screen is then the key strategy in managing the blowback of militarism, as it allows for a controlled stasis in representation, not only to create a convincing reality but also to structure and mediate power. This latter function stems from the structural ontology of the screen itself, a complex operation on which Lyotard attempts to shed some light. We will return to that shortly.

Part of the function of the screen is to control events, to show them in a way that satisfies both the personal desire of the White House and desire of the White House to show a particular scene to the public. In this sense the screen is not only a visual figure but also a figure of language, exactly as proposed in Lyotardian political framework. Lyotard rejects the possibility of a politics based on a single theory that will accurately capture the truth of all social events. This position stems from his reverence for the eruptive capabilities of events, and from his belief in the fundamental limits of representation and the pre-eminence of gaming in language. Lyotard grapples with this over the body of his work, from his earlier ideas on libidinal philosophy to his later work on language games and what he called “paganism” – the acknowledgment of difference and multiplicity in judging

and speaking about events. Perhaps the paramount question emerging in the post 9/11 War on Terror is, then: how might one attempt to engage and control the “event”?

This is your captain

Amongst the many powers of any Executive (such as our White House case study) lies the power of incorporeal transformation: the power to change the status of a subject or body through a performative utterance. This power is analysed by Deleuze in *The Logic of Sense*, where he shows that events are always double-sided, taking place on each side of the constantly moving fissure separating states of affairs and propositions. Just what exactly an event is has been a problem of philosophical thought since the pre-Socratics, and Deleuze’s concept of the event takes after the Stoics, who allowed for “an incorporeal, complex and irreducible entity, at the surface of things, a pure event which inheres or subsists in the proposition.”⁵ As Paul Patton has noted, for the Stoics

events are expressed by means of language, in statements, but they are attributes of bodies and physical states of affairs. Thus, the knife opening up a wound in flesh is an attribute of the interpenetration of bodies, but the event of “being cut” is what is expressed by the statement “He was cut with the knife.” The fact of being cut is a property of neither the flesh nor the knife, it is an incorporeal attribute of the flesh. It is an event which may be expressed in a variety of ways, for example in the statement that he has a wound. On this account, events are the epiphenomena of corporeal causal interactions: they do not affect bodies and states of affairs but they do affect other events, such as the responses and actions of agents. Pure events are both the expressed of statements and the “sense” of what happens.⁶

It is impossible to ascribe an event to an object – it exists both interstitially and across the intersection of bodies and objects. Or as Charles Baudelaire once wrote, in *L'Héautontimorouménos* (“The Self-Tormentor”):

I am the wound and the knife!
I am the blow and the cheek!
I am the limbs and the rack,
And the victim and the executioner!⁷

Baudelaire casts himself poetically across an incorporeal transformation, a concept used by Deleuze and Félix Guattari in their rethinking of semiotics

and signification in *A Thousand Plateaus*, to describe the change in status of a body or the change in its relations to other bodies which occurs when it is subject to a new description. As Patton has shown, what Deleuze and Guattari in fact do is extend J.L. Austin's concept of the illocutionary force which accompanies all linguistic utterance (that is to say, the content of an utterance or statement that, considered performatively, has meaning and effect outside of the propositional content of the utterance). Language, for Deleuze and Guattari (and, of course, for Foucault) involves the attribution or effecting of incorporeal transformations in order to structure the social field and control the constitution of subjects in a malleable real. Thus we have moments of reaching adulthood, becoming unemployed, restoring accountability, preserving deniability and so on – attempts to produce a systematised real based on phrasing. This is related to what Lyotard terms “phrase linkages”: the joining of technically empty phrases: “freedom,” “government,” “democracy,” “justice,” into linkages that preclude their usage in other linkages. The cliché “One man’s terrorist is another’s Freedom Fighter” echoes, however simplistically, the problematic of phrase linkage, or what Lyotard calls *le différend* – the non-negotiable space between different and conflicting “phrase-regimes.”

Lyotard notes, in an interview in the book *Political Writings*, that politics and political acts (such as hijacking), are more complex than being simply a “genre” of discourse: they combine “discursive genres” and “phrase-regimes” which are totally heterogeneous.⁸ He posits the “phrase” as an empty, operative concept, one from which all categories derive, but which itself is not determined by categories. The phrase, for Lyotard, always carries the possibility of linkages between phrases to produce these “phrase-regimes,” and his concern is with the absolute heterogeneity that exists between different phrase-regimes – the gulf that exists, for example, between judgments in the cognitive or epistemic mode and judgments of a political, ethical or evaluative nature. The multiplicity of these language games within the dispersion of statements, each with its own self-generating criteria of meaning, validity or truth, leads to a fundamental dispute – *le différend* – which falls between various discursive regimes.

Lyotard’s relevance to the contemporary scene is thrown into sharp relief by the differing attempts of the various players in the War on (and of) Terror to harness the performative forces of phrase-linkages, competing to set up their own repressive phrase regimes. Considered this way, it becomes immediately clear that the Bush administration, like any other, brings about a multiplicity of *différends*. We see great faith in the power of performative utterance at the infamous Aircraft Carrier Victory speech of May 1, 2003, where not only did Bush declare “victory,” but he was also

propped up by a giant textual-utterance in the form of a banner draped from the Carrier's superstructure: "Mission Accomplished."

"Mission Accomplished" as a phrase linkage – the "mission" is "accomplished" – was delivered in front of 2,000 sailors whose smiles, cheers and claps were captured on live television and seen by millions (indeed, perhaps that was the mission that had been accomplished: to declare victory on TV). Since that day, a radically different reality emerged: at the time of writing, almost two thousand US troops have been killed in daily hostilities (along with somewhere above 25,000 civilians) and violent insurgency in Iraq continues unabated even after the handover of sovereignty.

It is worth noting that one year later Bush defended the speech. On May 2, 2004, Bush said: "A year ago, I did give the speech from the carrier saying that we had achieved an important objective, that we had accomplished a mission, which was the removal of Saddam Hussein." Of course, there's at least one person who disagrees with this, who has a competing phrase regime to the White House's, and who has attempted his own incorporeal reclamation in a juridical setting. Asked his name in the dock on July 1 2004, Saddam Hussein replied, twice: "I am Saddam Hussein, President of Iraq." Even after the corporeal trauma of the spider-hole, of being dragged out, poked and prodded by an occupying force on global television, Hussein incorporeally reclaims his position through the performative utterance. However, his phrase-linkage is rendered void as he is unable to wrest the phrase "President" from within the US phrase-universe. It was what Baudelaire might have called "a false note/ In the divine harmony."⁹

Wresting control of the phrase-universe was more successfully done by another player in the scene I am drawing out: I refer to Ziad Jarrah, one of the 9/11 hijackers, who crashed Flight 93 into a field in Pennsylvania. The transcripts of the cockpit recorder reveals that Jarrah began his address to the passenger cabin, in which he tells the passengers (falsely) that there is a bomb aboard and the plane is going back to the airport, with the customary performative utterance: "This is [your] captain." The Mission is Accomplished. I am the President. This is Your Captain. The existence of competing phrase regimes for the constitution of "realities" continues to play out, in everything from the reserves and prices of oil to the pinning of villainy on various nefarious characters in the Mid-East and Pakistani scene. What this linguistic play ultimately reflects is that we are witness to transparently discordant versions of "reality" in the current geo-political scene, and that the establishment of power is often taken hostage and radically subverted by the uncontrollable powers and failures immanent to language and representation.

Self-Torment and Mimetic Violence

The title chosen by Baudelaire for his poem is not without significance. There is an element of self-torment in investing all one's hopes and dreams in the screen. Lyotard understands the screen as a place where you invest your desire for reality, much as we do when watching a movie or advertisement. We invest our libidinal intensities – our desires for this to be the real world, where people are beautiful, powerful, good, romantic and so on, and what the screen ensures is that this process is self-perpetuating because of a kind of prophylactic protection from other conflicting images. On the screen, signs become ossified into singular objects of meaning, and Lyotard's libidinal philosophy is principally concerned with the prevention of this process and with the preservation of the possibility of multiple meanings and differences.

If we are to read the Bush-Hussein phrase-dispute in terms of libidinal economy, we will see that the transforming of a body into a structure such as "President" is a libidinal investment of a sort, a defeat of the free movement of libidinal energies in order to secure power on the side of the speaking, desiring-subject. I want to suggest that in this economy the screen, acts as what Lyotard calls the "dividing bar." To elucidate this we need to go slightly deeper into the "theoretical fiction" of the libidinal band and its relation to the structural ontology of the screen. The libidinal band is a freely circulating manifestation of desiring intensities, the figural image of libidinal economy. The rapid circulation on the libidinal freeway slows as these intensities become invested in structures in the social field, including ideas and phrases, such as Freedom, Resistance, Government, Terror. Phrase linkages form a disjunctive bar on the libidinal surface, a kind of semiotic fortress, which produces a distinction "this" from "not-this." These representational fortresses have a volume distinct from the volume of the libidinal band, which itself has the form of the Moebius strip, and thus has no inside or out, no border, no "this" and "not-this." There are two key points to take from this rather complex figure. First, that representational structures are dependent upon a hoped-for distinction between "this" and "not-this," or Self and Other. Second, that representation is always a form of stasis brought about by a dividing-screen or bar. So where does this leave "reality"?

Lyotard's theoretical figuration of the screen follows Jacques Lacan, to a degree (although also breaks with him significantly). Lacan explained that the screen acts as a site of mediation, as a defence for the desiring/viewing subject against being captured by the returned gaze of the object. Put simply, in Lacan's formulation of the gaze, the screen works both as a way to

manipulate what people see about the subject “me” and also as a means of allowing me to see objects whilst the screen stands in the way from me being overwhelmed by the full view of the object. In his book *The Return of the Real* Hal Foster neatly formulates the dual capacity of the screen in his reading of an Andy Warhol screenprint of a photograph of a car crash – a kind of double-screen image. Foster notes that the screen is a way of “embalming” or fixing the real, but always remains threatened by a puncturing of this screened real by a return of the repressed “material” real – the capital-R Real in the Lacanian sense.¹⁰ This Real is the uncontrollable, terrifying reality of the world, the Real of violence, unpredictability and trauma. Indeed, the puncturing of the screen by the reality is in itself a traumatic event, as exemplified in the leaking of the Abu Ghraib torture images, where one image rushed in and destroyed a panoply of others, and of course, in the ultimate traumatic puncturing of the screen-space on the morning of September 11, 2001.

Foster reminds us that Lacan observed this traumatic event to be *trou*-matic, as the appearance of a hole in the screen. In French, *trou* can be translated as hole or gap, but also more specifically as a rabbit hole or burrow. What is figured in the hole is, of course, the Lack. As an aside, this provokes the question of what lack is figured in Saddam’s spider-hole, the answer to which might be the lack figured in the name Bin Laden. Emerging like one of Slavoj Žižek’s zombies (he who has not been buried in the proper symbolic manner), Saddam returns as screen for Osama, figuring Osama’s lack in his very presence. After all, if he had disappeared too, then who could we bring forth onto our screens in a controlled and disciplined form?

Saddam’s appearance in the medical videos and in the dock (that is, in our spaces of control) reminds us that there is a mimetic violence in the controlling screen. Explaining this, Lyotard cites Jorge Luis Borges’ story of the *Fauna of Mirrors*. This short story recounts the Chinese Yellow Emperor’s enslaving of the Mirror People, who have been defeated in battle, into forever exactly copying the people of Earth. Nonetheless, writes Borges:

a day will come when the magic spell will be shaken off. The first to awaken will be the Fish. Deep in the mirror we will perceive a very faint line and the colour of this line will be like no other colour. Later on, other shapes will begin to stir. Little by little they will differ from us; little by little they will not imitate us. They will break through the barriers of glass or metal and this time will not be defeated. Side by side with these mirror creatures, the creatures of water will join the battle. In Yunnan they do not speak of

the Fish but of the Tiger of the Mirror. Others believe that in advance of the invasion we will hear from the depths of mirrors the clatter of weapons.¹¹

Lyotard tells us to consider this surface of separation in terms of a libidinal economy that constitutes the subject: “The existence of the subject depends on this dividing wall, on enslaving the fluid and lethal powers, repressed from the other side, to the function of representing the subject.” “Representation,” writes Lyotard, “is thus assumed to be an energetic set-up, whose ruin would be that of the subject and of power.” The screen, as economic necessity, requires a tenuous balance, with some sort of power, however repressed, trapped on the other side.¹²

The screen thus relies on the mimetic violence of the hegemonic Yellow Emperor: You must be the same as Us. In the diffusion of power over the monstrous libidinal band, investment in classical representational structures of governance, freedom and so on allows power to be built up and mediated, and thus controlled. In the case of the dividing screen of the real, the investment in the reality projected onto the screen is ultimately a manifestation of the power of one subject (on this side) over another (the tigers of the mirror on the other side).

However, with this mimetic repression comes self-torment. Baudelaire named his poem after the comic play by Terence, first performed in 163 BC in the Roman republic. Terence worked hard to write natural in conversational Latin, and his style is pleasant and direct, with his *Heauton Timoroumenos* in particular providing a codex of George W. Bush-isms: “Fortune assists the brave”; “While there’s life, there’s hope”; “I am a man, I consider nothing human foreign to me.” The Self-Tormentor in the Terence play is the father who frets over his son’s doings, and perhaps Bush Senior feels somewhat the same. Baudelaire was perhaps more self-aware than either Senior or Junior. As Jean-Paul Sartre pointed out, Baudelaire’s fundamental attitude was that of a man bending over himself like Narcissus – he never forgot himself, never forgot to see himself seeing. “What does it matter,” Baudelaire wrote, “what the reality outside me is made of provided that it helps me to feel that I am and what I am?”¹³ And yet, he always wanted to be his own witness; he knew that he was the wound and the dagger, and he tried to become his own executioner, to become the *Heauton Timoroumenos*. What Deborah Harter identifies in Baudelaire’s poem is “the problematic of ironic consciousness [...] The narration of a fragmented, fragmenting voice whose self-irony moves only further and further into a state of perilous division.”¹⁴

Conclusion

The self-torment of the Bush White House's foreign policy is predicated on just such a perilous division. The attempt to control language and to erect and manage screens on a number of fronts – physical, abstract, psychical – leads to an impossible subject position. Those who have charged themselves with the fight for freedom, justice and humanity have also opened themselves up to worldwide scrutiny through the media and the image-networks of amateur footage and photography. The scheduled event of liberation from oppression escapes control as hapless young American soldiers are pictured as torturers in Abu Ghraib, and the world is shocked, as though the US forces might be playing by a set of rules different to any other army in the world. Indeed, the uncontrollability of the Abu Ghraib event deflated the Hollywoodisation of both 9/11 and the war up to that point. As Jean Baudrillard noted, Abu Ghraib was the opposite of the exhilarating image of the major event of 9/11. It was simply a “non-event of an obscene banality, the degradation, atrocious but banal, not only of the victims, but of the amateur scriptwriters of this parody of violence.”¹⁵ What Baudrillard is observing here is the threat of rupture the screen always carries with itself. In linking this Baudrillardian moment to the continued attempt to impose repressive regimes of phrases and representations on the non-US Other, the question we might conclude with is whether there can be a sustained resistance to representation or expression on the Bush Administration's screen, or whether the US-screen system can ultimately co-opt resistance into the screen itself.

For Lyotard, as for Deleuze, political and economic institutions are inseparable from the processes of desire that would undermine these very institutions. So can desire to resist the constitution of another regime's real bring defeat to that real? It would seem that this possibility exists in the screen's flaw – its provision for traumatic breach in its very structure. The screened real is always under threat of trauma from the material Real bursting its representational hegemony, and the counter-attack to the screen from the other side always exists in the form of potentialised trauma. Indeed, the possibility of violence (including terror) as resistance to another regime's real is by definition an insurgency, a “rising against” a representational structure in the Lyotardian sense, a resistance to another regime's mimetic violence and to their imposition of their phrase universe onto the world.

Perhaps this is because the anxiety of non-existence is the very definition of terror. Lyotard, from his early work on Algeria, comes to define terror as the imposition of a silence, the exclusion of players from language

games or the exclusion of certain games entirely. The imposition of one structure onto the world, the hegemony of a single phrase-universe is the ultimate in Lyotardian terror, and is the primary violence that can be done to the Other. But this Other which is repressed in the mimetic violence of the Borgesian mirror lurks as a constant threat. The various screens all have as their inbuilt flaw a pinpoint, viral vulnerability. Baudrillard touches on a idea related to this problematic of the screen, in his metaphor of the West as pressurized aeroplane fuselage. In the *Transparency of Evil*, he writes:

the pressurized fuselage system of the West, which, having pressurized itself by exclusion of the Other is fatally vulnerable to viral, pinpoint attacks or incursions, perpetual threats to our protected universe which might bring about a “brutal de-pressurization” of our atmosphere (our value-systems).¹⁶

These pinpoint attacks come in the form of the leaked torture photo on the global TV screen, the single terrorist slipping through customs and borders, the missile that the force field misses, the single airborne Anthrax particle. So the libidinal investment in the screen as defence against the real carries with it a sense of security but a false sense of *protection*. Resistance to the screen is fostered by the screen, but the false sense of protection the screen brings is potentially disastrous. Prophylactics is an imperfect science, and perhaps an even less desirable foreign policy.

The more a system can dissimulate resistance to its desired reality the stronger it appears, as in the short-lived *Pax Americana* of the post Cold War era. Lyotard tells us that dissimulation is in fact the key way a system covers tensions of signification, the way the system conceals within itself affects and other systems that are inconsistent with it and with each other. However, you cannot conceal violence done to the screen: that is the logic of the Lacanian hole, wound or stain. It punctures the field of view, traps the gaze, and stares back at you when you’re looking somewhere else, as in Lacan’s famous reading of the Death’s Skull in Holbein’s *Ambassadors*. It is, Lacan told us, the stain on the screen, as the Abu Ghraib pictures stained the fantasy of a “clean” war.

The ultimate question that remains is whether the screening of the real is a successful apparatus for the mediation of power, allowing for domination and political progress, or whether the inbuilt flaw in the screen, the constant threat of the returning Real – or excessive or explosive affect breaching the controlled theatre of representation – is a fatal flaw. Perhaps the only certainty is that this battle continues to be played out. Within this battle, some measure of the self-knowledge shown by Baudelaire would

not go astray:

I am the sinister mirror
In which the Fury gazes at herself.
I am the wound and the knife!
I am the blow and the cheek!
I am the limbs and the rack,
And the victim and the executioner!

In the end, the Bush White House will be remembered as being unable to have seen that the screen is a double edged sword, that you cannot be the dagger without also being ultimately the wound as well – that the distinction between victim and executioner does not exist.

Sydney College of Arts
dougalphillips@gmail.com

NOTES

- ¹ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Différend: Phrases in Dispute*, trans. G. Van Den Abbeele (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), p. 9.
- ² Jean-François Lyotard, *The Assassination of Experience by Painting: Monory*, trans. R. Bowlby (London: Black Dog, 1998), p. 91.
- ³ Julian Pefanis, *Heterology and the Postmodern: Bataille, Baudrillard and Lyotard* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1991), pp. 91-2.
- ⁴ Jean-François Lyotard, "Notes on the Critical Function of the Work of Art," trans. S. Hanson, in Roger McKeon (ed.), *Driftworks* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), pp. 70-1.
- ⁵ Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, trans. Mark Lester *et al* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), p. 19.
- ⁶ Paul Patton, "The World Seen From Within: Deleuze and the Philosophy of Events," *Theory and Event* 1.1 (1997), date of access 08.03.07, http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/theory_and_event/v001/1.1patton.html.
- ⁷ Charles Baudelaire, *L'Héautontimorouménos*, (1855), *Baudelaire: The Complete Verse*, trans. Francis Scarfe (London: Anvil Press Poetry, 1986), pp. 163-4.
- ⁸ Jean-François Lyotard, *Political Writings*, trans. Bill Readings and Kevin Paul (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), p. 299.
- ⁹ Charles Baudelaire, *L'Héautontimorouménos*, pp. 163-4.
- ¹⁰ Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: Art and Theory at the End of the Century* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1996), pp. 132-8.
- ¹¹ Jorge Luis Borges, *Collected Fictions* (Hammondsworth: Penguin, 1970), pp. 67-

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¹² Jean-François Lyotard, *The Assassination of Experience by Painting*, pp. 91-2.

¹³ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Baudelaire*, trans. Martin Turnell (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1950), p. 22.

¹⁴ Deborah Harter, "Divided Selves, Ironic Counterparts: Intertextual Doubling in Baudelaire's *L'Héautontimorouménos* and Poe's *The Haunted Palace*," *Comparative Literature Studies*, 26 (1989), pp. 28-9.

¹⁵ Jean Baudrillard, "War Porn," trans. Paul A. Taylor, *International Journal of Baudrillard Studies* 2.1 (2005), date of access: 08.03.07, http://www.ubishops.ca/baudrillardstudies/vol2_1/taylor.htm.

¹⁶ Jean Baudrillard, *The Transparency of Evil: essays on extreme phenomena*, trans. James Benedict (London: Verso, 1993), pp. 83-4.