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Security Dialogue 2008; 39; 155

DOI: 10.1177/0967010608088773

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Beyond Risk: Premediation and the Post-9/11 Security Imagination

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In the context of the 'war on terror', techniques of imagining the future have taken on new political significance. Richard Grusin has coined the term 'premediation' to describe the way in which news media and cultural industries map and visualize a plurality of possible futures. This article examines the relation between the politics of risk and premediation as a security practice. Premediation simultaneously deploys and exceeds the language of risk. Its self-conscious deployment of imagination in security practice feeds economies of both anxiety and desire.

Keywords 'war on terror' • risk • premediation • security • stress testing

Imagine your most unthinkable nightmare of the next terrorist attack. Now try to imagine something even worse. (Fagan, 2001)

9/11 ... signalled a shift to ... a desire for a world in which the immediacy of the catastrophe, the immediacy of disaster, could not happen again – because it would always already have been premediated. (Grusin, 2004: 21)

Introduction: 'A Failure of the Imagination'

IN THE CONTEXT OF THE 'WAR ON TERROR', techniques of imagining the future have taken on new political significance. As noted by Mark Salter (2008), the 9/11 Commission blamed the failure of secret services to foresee and prevent the attacks on a 'failure of imagination', while it commended those government agencies that had 'speculated' about the military and juridical consequences of suicide hijackings (9/11 Commission, 2004: 346). We find a very similar argument in the report of the British Intelligence and Security Committee enquiry into the 2005 London bombings. The

Committee's report draws out its main lesson to be 'the need to get into "the unknowns" – to find ways of broadening coverage to pick up currently unknown terrorist activity or plots' (Intelligence and Security Committee, 2006: 35–36). The London report calls for 'imaginative ways' to increase intelligence-gathering, map terrorist associations and assess the future development of possible plots. The 9/11 Commission report, by comparison, offers the curious recommendation of 'routinizing, even bureaucratizing, the exercise of imagination' (9/11 Commission, 2004: 334; quoted in Ericson, 2007: 39). The challenge, writes the Commission (2004: 346), is 'to flesh out and test . . . scenarios, then figure out a way to turn a scenario into constructive action'.

Imagined terrorist futures have become ubiquitous in media, policy and consulting. Richard Grusin has coined the term 'premediation' to describe the way in which news media and cultural industries map out 'as many of the possible worlds, or possible paths, as the future could be imagined to take' (Grusin, 2004: 28). For example, one member of the Bush administration recounts how, in the days and weeks after 9/11, White House Situation Room meetings were dedicated to imagining the worst: 'What about poison in the New York reservoir system? What about a private plane flying into a nuclear reactor?' (Taylor, 2007: 5). Or, as one journalistic celebration of premediation puts it, 'Imagine your most unthinkable nightmare of the next terrorist attack. Now try to imagine something even worse' (Fagan, 2001). Such imaginative practices respond to the 9/11 Commission's call for scenario testing and are thought to enable the *preemption* of security threats (see, for example, Dershowitz, 2006). Though not new, the political importance of premediation and its ability to inform security action in the present has significantly increased in the post-9/11 context.

This article examines the relation between the politics of risk and premediation as a security practice. Premediation simultaneously *deploys and exceeds* the language of risk. Although often couched in terms of risk management of the terrorist threat, practices of premediation exceed the logic of risk calculation and self-consciously deploy imagination in their scenarios, worst-case narratives and disaster rehearsals. Of course, risk management itself has always had to deploy imagination in order to offer a statistically categorizable and calculable world to policymakers, crime fighters and health specialists. Its techniques of calculation were never obvious and objective, but required careful cultural constitutive work (du Gay & Pryke, 2002; Callon, 1998; Miller & Rose, 1990). However, the present article argues that the self-conscious appeal to imagination in current security discourse, and the call to get into the 'unknown unknowns' (Donald Rumsfeld, quoted in Rasmussen, 2004: 381), foster new conjunctions of governing and expertise that are in urgent need of analysis. What visual and discursive methods are deployed in order to image terrorist futures? How do these speculative methods enable

action in the present? How is responsibility for present action displaced through a narrative of the future? What role do these imaginations play in bringing about the futures they are supposed to describe or preempt? The purpose of the article is not so much to reject practices of risk and premediation outright, but more precisely to think through their governing effects and political implications.

One way of addressing these questions concerning security premediation is by enquiring into the latter's presuppositions and histories. Where do we find genealogies of the creative imagination of disaster and catastrophe? The article argues that one important strand of the genealogy of contemporary security imagination may be found in representations of financial risk. For one thing, the so-called new terrorism is imagined to be global, fluid and dispersed, not unlike global financial markets themselves (Knorr Cetina, 2005). Moreover, in the domain of finance, we find long-established practices of conjuring multiple futures, both glorious (to entice investment) and catastrophic (to 'prepare' for crashes and panics). In this sense, finance was perhaps the first modern practice squarely oriented toward the uncertain future as a source of both threat and opportunity (Martin, 2004). Moreover, security and finance should not be seen as two separate domains. Financial speculation is a security technology in itself: one that seeks to secure a fickle future, tame uncertainty and insure against disaster (Aitken, 2006; de Goede, 2005). Contemporary security premediation, in turn, is also properly financial in multiple senses. The object to be secured, for example, is both the material financial infrastructure of cities like London and New York, and the wider ability of citizens to spend, invest, do business (Johnson, 2002; Le Billon, 2006). Finally, important preemptive security actions are economic and financial: blacklisting and asset-freezing are designed to enable disruptive action against those who could not be successfully tried with criminal charges (Vlcek, 2006).

The article starts by exploring the connections between premediation and risk and their deployment in contemporary security practice. It then offers a reading of the assumptions and histories of security premediation by examining, first, the resonance machine of the 'new terrorism'; and, second, how financial practices, including stress testing, have enabled cultural economies of imagining the future. These past debates on the legitimacy of colonized futures in finance offer fruitful starting points for questioning contemporary security imaginations and their political effects. We will see that premediation may have performative effects, while simultaneously displacing political responsibility for these effects. The conclusion of the article examines ways in which cultural discourses of premediation may be redeployed in order to revisit such questions of political responsibility.

Premediation

For Grusin (2004: 19), the post-9/11 cultural landscape is dominated by a logic of premediation, in which 'the future itself is . . . already mediated' (see also Bolter & Grusin, 1999). In this landscape, the role of news media increasingly consists of 'not reporting what has already happened, but of premediating what may happen next'. As example, Grusin (2004: 27) notes that the run-up to the 2003 invasion of Iraq was accompanied by an 'onslaught of media coverage' that premediated every possible aspect of the war: when it would commence, who would be in the coalition, how quickly Saddam would surrender, and how postwar Iraq might take shape. According to Grusin (2004: 27), this allowed the 'networked news media to increase their ratings . . . as well as to engage in a kind of audience testing on how best to cover the war when it did occur'.

Premediation is a promising term to denote the discursive economies through which terrorist futures are imagined, because it draws attention to the cultural practices of mediation at work. It draws attention to the cultural work performed by news media and entertainment industries, as well as by security 'experts', consultants and policymakers – whom Didier Bigo calls the 'managers of unease' – in envisioning possible terrorist futures (Bigo, 2002; see also Huysmans, 2006). The close conjunction between the Hollywood culture industry and these 'managers of unease' has long been noted by authors like James Der Derian (2001), who coined the term 'military-industrial-media-entertainment network' to denote this nexus. For example, Der Derian (2005: 30) notes how, shortly after 9/11, the Institute for Creative Technologies in California – which, according to its website, is dedicated to 'building partnerships between the entertainment industry, army, and academia' – began to gather Hollywood screenwriters and directors in order to 'create possible terrorist scenarios that could be played out in their Marina del Rey virtual reality facilities' (see also Campbell, 2003: 59–64; Boggs & Pollard, 2006).

Security premediation is enabled through a broader turn to risk management as a security technology in diverse domains of modern life (Simon, 2007; O'Malley, 2004). In the 'war on terror', technologies of risk management foster new security initiatives, such as automated passenger screening at borders and the risk-based detection of suspicious financial transactions (Amoore & de Goede, 2008; Amoore, 2006; Sparke, 2006; Zureik & Salter, 2005). This deployment of risk in the 'war on terror' articulates two worlds of post-9/11 globalization: the world of legitimate and productive movement that is to be fostered and expedited, and the world of illegitimate and suspect movement that is to be stopped, questioned and detained. It is on the basis of risk assessment and calculation that 'legitimate' flows of money, goods and people are to be separated from the suspect, illegitimate and underground.

As Sparke (2006: 13) writes of risk-based 'smart border' technologies, their promise is to deliver 'economic liberty and homeland security with a high-tech fix'.

Risk and premediation, then, proceed from a shared desire: to imagine, harness and commodify the uncertain future. They share a technological history through their appeal to uncertainty as both a source of threat *and* a spur to creativity. As Pat O'Malley (2004: 4) shows in his exploration of particular representations of risk in management literatures, uncertainty was never *just* a threat to be subdued or eradicated, but was always celebrated for fostering 'entrepreneurial creativity' and 'transformative power'. According to O'Malley (2004: 5),

Uncertainty . . . is to be the fluid art of the possible. It involves techniques of flexibility and adaptability, requires a certain kind of 'vision' that may be thought of as intuition but is nevertheless capable of being explicated at great length in terms such as . . . 'governing with foresight.'

Both premediation and (particular forms of) risk management straddle the paradox of celebrating uncertainty while desiring to eradicate it – fostering booming business practices in the process (see Baker & Simon, 2002b; Lobo-Guerrero, 2007).

At the same time however, there are substantial differences between risk assessment and what Grusin calls premediation. Most importantly, premediation is not chiefly in the business of *forecasting*. As Grusin (2004: 28) argues, 'premediation . . . is not necessarily about *getting the future right* as much as it is about trying to imagine or map out as many possible futures as could plausibly be imagined' (emphasis added). Thus, whereas the logic of risk and forecasting centres on *prediction* of the future, premediation is more self-consciously 'creative' in imagining a variety of futures – some thought likely, others far-fetched, some thought imminent, others long-haul – in order to *enable action in the present*. This is a difference, not just in logic or purpose, but also in method: as Grusin (2004: 29) puts it, 'a weather map does not pre-mediate tomorrow's storm in the way in which it will be mediated after it strikes'. Instead of the disembodied, statistical and at least seemingly objective method of the forecast, premediation scripts and mediates multiple futures 'in ways that are almost indistinguishable from the way the future will be mediated when it happens' (Grusin, 2004: 29). Arguably then, premediation is not about the future *at all*, but about enabling action in the present by visualizing and drawing on multiple imagined futures (Amoore, 2007b). Indeed, as we have seen above, the 9/11 Commission emphasizes precisely this call to action in the present when it understands the challenge of imagination to be 'to figure out a way to turn a scenario into constructive *action*' (9/11 Commission, 2004: 346, emphasis added).

Through its self-conscious deployment of imagination, premediation can

be understood to address itself to *risk beyond risk* (Ewald, 2002: 249). The imagined catastrophe driving premediation is seen to be simultaneously incalculable *and* demanding new methodologies of calculation and imagination. In this sense, it is akin to a politics of precaution, which, according to Claudia Aradau & Rens van Munster (2007, 2008) is the *dispositif* through which the 'war on terror' has to be understood. 'Precautionary risk', write Aradau & van Munster (2007: 101) 'introduces within the computation of the future its very limit, the infinity of uncertainty and potential damage.' It is in this very computation of the future at the limit, of course, that financial practices are historically experienced. Indeed, Melinda Cooper (2006: 119) draws out this affinity with speculation when she writes of the logic of precaution: 'If the catastrophe befalls us, it is from a future without chronological continuity with the past. Though we might suspect something is wrong with the world . . . no mass of information will help us pin-point the precise when, where and how of the coming havoc. *We can only speculate*' (emphasis added).

Consider, by way of example, the multiplication of disaster scenarios that are regularly played out across media and urban landscapes post 9/11. Ostensibly to test the 'preparedness' of emergency services, such scenarios entail detailed imaginations of, for example, 'dirty' bomb attacks, the explosion of radiological devices or anthrax spreads. Jonathan Raban captures contemporary security practice particularly well in his novel *Surveillance*, which stages an out-of-work actor, reduced to doing occasional TV commercials, who finds profitable new employment playing the lead casualty in Department of Homeland Security TOPOFF disaster exercises. The actor stars in what are deemed 'realistic' scenarios to be acted out and recorded as emergency response 'dress rehearsals'. Such scenarios are imagined in substantial detail. For example, one of the exercises entails the explosion of a

dirty bomb (two thousand pounds of ammonium sulphate, nitrate and fuel oil, mixed up with fifty pounds of cesium-137 in powdered form) . . . in a container supposedly holding 'cotton apparel' from Indonesia, recently unloaded from a ship docked at Harbor Island [in Seattle] (Raban, 2006: 6).

Raban's novel also includes a CNN showing of a scenario in which Omaha comes under attack from a 'crop duster [that] had sprayed the business district with ricin and killed five thousand imaginary people' (Raban, 2006: 13).

Although the importance of premediation to inform security practice has accelerated since 2001, the detail with which disastrous futures are imagined is not necessarily new. Joseph Masco documents how nuclear tests in the 1950s, which set out to measure 'how a "typical" American community would look after a nuclear attack', entailed detailed imaginations of destruction. 'An elaborately rendered town was built on the test site,' writes Masco (2006: 65-66). He continues:

[Its] buildings were carefully constructed, furnished with the latest consumer items . . . and stocked with food that had been especially flown in. . . . Residences were populated with mannequins dressed in brand-new clothing and posed with domestic theatricality – at the dinner table, cowering in the basement, or watching television.¹

Masco's example demonstrates that what is at stake in the catastrophic imagination of premediation is nothing less than the destruction of American consumer culture. However, the detail with which catastrophic futures are imagined speaks to two further elements of premediation that may be drawn out. For, if the purpose was (just) to test security responses, would not a crude narrative of the imagined catastrophe suffice? Would food have to be especially flown in? Would mannequins have to be arranged with such care? Undoubtedly, and this is the first point, the material and symbolic investments into terrorism scenarios fulfil the function of radiating competence, planning and management. If the real disaster cannot be managed and foreseen, then at least the imagined disaster can prove the competence of authorities (Clarke, 1999).

At the same time, however, perhaps there is no better illustration of the 'neurotic citizen' at the heart of premediation than the perverse detail with which disaster is imagined in such scenarios. As Engin Isin (2004: 225) argues, the subject called upon in risk practices is *not* to be understood as a 'rational, calculating and competent subject who can evaluate alternatives with relative success to avoid or eliminate risks'. For example, the regular revelation that one is much more likely to die in a car crash than a terrorist attack seems to have little bearing either on financial investments made in the 'war on terror' or on popular anxieties (Adams, 1995; Kluger, 2006). In this light, the subject of risk is interpellated as a neurotic subject, one who is governed through 'anxieties and insecurities', striving to attain the impossible in 'absolute security [and] . . . absolute safety' (Isin, 2004: 232). This does not necessarily mean that we are *all* neurotic citizens now. However, it is important to draw out how the detailed imagination of disaster scenarios has the potential to feed contemporary neurosis, which rational risk calculation, even if it were possible, cannot overcome. Moreover, the neurotic citizen, precisely because of his insatiability, offers an unprecedented commercial promise.

Resonances of the 'New Terrorism'

The impossible desire of the neurotic subject for absolute security and absolute safety as perceived by Isin is translated in the 'war on terror' into a

¹ See also Graham (2007).

vision of 'zero risk'. This vision promises to secure not just against calculable security threats, but also against those 'unknown unknowns' that exceed calculation. This logic is captured by Ron Suskind (2006) in *The One Percent Doctrine*, which holds that authorities should act to preempt security threats even if there is only a 1% chance of a particular threat coming to fruition. As US President George W. Bush himself put it in his famous West Point speech, 'If we wait for threats to fully materialize, we will have waited too long' (quoted in Suskind, 2006: 149). This is the logic of preemption, in which new imaginative technologies have to be deployed in order to detect and disrupt possible plots at the earliest stage.

Preemption as a security practice *requires* premediation, or a resonating fiction of a disastrous future about to unfold. What, then, are the narratives of contemporary security premediation? It becomes clear that current terrorism scenarios coalesce around the presupposition that terrorist attack is imminent, in our midst and catastrophic. This imagination of an 'omnipresent enemy who could be anywhere, strike at anytime and who in fact could be "among us"', according to Jordan Crandall & John Armitage (2005: 20), fosters a 'productive economy of fear'. Few have done more to foster this economy of fear than Paul Wilkinson of the St Andrew's Centre for the Study of Terrorism and Political Violence, perhaps the most well-known proponent of the discourse of the so-called new terrorism. According to Wilkinson (2003), the 'new terrorism' – of which al-Qaeda is presumed to be the 'archetype' – distinguishes itself by three factors: its 'universalistic ideology', its 'world wide network of operational and preparative cells', and the 'nature and scale of the violence [it] employs'. Writes Wilkinson:

New Terrorism groups are based on trans-national networks of cells, preparative cells, affiliated groups and support networks, have multinational composition, and do not need to rely on a state sponsor for securing funding, weapons etc. and specialise in suicide no-warning attacks . . . aimed at inflicting large-scale loss of life.

The cultural narratives of the 'new terrorism' include, for example, the sleeper-cell scenario (Ericson, 2007: 42; Salter, 2008). The appeal of the sleeper-cell scenario is based on its parallel deployment in popular culture, policy papers and juridical argument. While providing the plot structure for a popular TV show, it is also a juridical fiction that enables unprecedented legal action to be taken. It is precisely its deployment in a variety of forms and channels that enables the *resonance* of the 'new terrorism', understood as the way in which 'heretofore unconnected or loosely associated elements *fold, bend, blend, emulsify, and dissolve into each other*, forging a qualitative assemblage' (Connolly, 2005: 870; emphasis in original). It is this qualitative assemblage, purposefully designed by no one individual or group, but resonating through cultural practice and political possibility, that enables a politics of preemption far exceeding the 'strike' in Iraq (see Bialasiewicz et al., 2007).

The sleeper-cell scenario envisions either a local al-Qaeda affiliate ready to strike, or, more recently, 'clean skin' cliques of radicalized local Muslims who become willing to deploy violence. The most famous actually prosecuted US 'sleeper cell' was the Lackawanna group, which consisted of six Yemeni-Americans, some of whom had attended training camps in Afghanistan (before 9/11). In the summer of 2002, it was asserted that this was the 'most dangerous terrorist group in America'.² The group was placed under FBI surveillance, which revealed nothing but 'the men to be engaged in ordinary lives' (Chesney, 2005: 41). However, the CIA pushed for preemptive action against the men to be taken regardless of their implication in criminal behaviour. According to the CIA, authorities should not focus 'too closely on the narrow question of whether the men could be linked to a crime', but should engage the 'broader issue of whether the men posed a danger' (Chesney, 2005: 42).

The action against the Lackawanna group offers a poignant illustration of Suskind's 'One Percent Doctrine'. When, on the eve of the first anniversary of 9/11, the FBI assured its colleagues in the CIA that it was 99% certain that it could prevent the men from attacking, this was deemed unacceptable under the 'rules . . . at the time', according to legal scholar Robert Chesney (2005: 42). Preemptive action was taken against the men, who were arrested and prosecuted according to an entirely new juridical logic that argued that the men had materially supported terrorism by '*receiving* training and by providing *themselves* as personnel' (Chesney, 2005: 43; *emphases in original*). The Lackawanna Six were given prison sentences of between seven and ten years each, and now number among the few successful terrorism convictions in the USA.

The Lackawanna conviction illustrates how security action and juridical development depend upon cultural narratives in which it is imagined that dispersed and fluid terror networks are about to enact the worst. Discourses of the 'new terrorism' play an important role in fostering this particular imagination. It is important to note that it is not just gung-ho terrorism 'experts' and self-appointed managers of unease that propagate the discourse of the 'new terrorism': it has important sociological lineages, too. For example, Karin Knorr Cetina's (2005: 213) recent conceptualization of contemporary terrorism as a 'global microstructure', akin to the fluid transnational operation of financial markets, offers its own version of the 'new terrorism' as a 'hydra of destruction'. As Knorr Cetina (2005: 214) puts it, 'the new global terrorism . . . illustrates the emergence of global microstructures; of forms of connectivity and coordination that combine global

² In an interview with PBS, former FBI director of counterterrorism Dale Watson says: 'To say that they were the most dangerous terrorist group in the United States – I wouldn't necessarily approve of that, because I have seen enough to know that they probably didn't have the means or the capabilities at that point to do something'; see PBS Frontline (2003).

reach with microstructural mechanisms that instantiate self-organizing principles and patterns'. Perhaps unwittingly, Knorr Cetina's exploration of the shared temporal experience of a global yet diffused and diasporic community of Islamic terrorists affirms much of the current conceptualization of the new threat inside security establishments. The RAND Corporation's visualization of netwar, for example, as Samuel Weber (2005: 102) shows, similarly conceptualizes an unconventional enemy held together by doctrinal leadership and the 'stories that people tell'. In this sense, sociological analyses of the terrorist threat participate in the resonance machine that not just engages in the coinage of the 'new terrorism', but also enables pre-emptive action.

Thinking the Unthinkable

Although Grusin understands premediation to be a post-9/11 practice (as well as a specifically American phenomenon), it is important to note that the commodification of the uncertain future is *not* new. Financial risk was always about imagining futures in order to secure *and* make profitable the present. Seemingly an eradication of uncertainty and volatility, speculation has always exceeded risk and entailed important imaginative elements through which the future was both envisioned and brought about (de Goede, 2005; Stäheli, 2007). The speculative practices of the *dispositif* of precaution, then, have their genealogies partly in financial speculation.³ Examining this financial genealogy offers inroads into critical reflection on contemporary security premediation.

A key difference between contemporary security imagination as deployed in the context of the 'war on terror' and the history of financial speculation, of course, is that the latter is practised in imagining *the best*, not the worst. Projections of a glorious future and untold riches have historically been developed in order to entice investment and convince speculators to part with their money. Anna Tsing (2001: 159) uses the term 'conjuring' in order to discuss the kind of premediation at work in financial speculation:

In speculative enterprises, profit must be imagined before it can be extracted; the possibility of economic performance must be conjured like a spirit to draw an audience of potential investors. . . . Yet conjuring is always culturally specific, creating a magic show of peculiar meanings, symbols and practices.

³ Clearly, we could look elsewhere for the genealogy of security premediations. A rich history of utopian and dystopian imaginations both enabled *and* potentially critique contemporary security premediation (see, for example, Jameson, 2005).

Conjuring, in Tsing's reading, is a performance, a magic that is culturally embedded and operates through historically contingent social fantasies. One of the 'chief puzzles' (Tsing, 2001: 161) of financial conjuring, of course, is why it works (or fails to do so), but the cultural embeddedness of the scenario undoubtedly plays a role here. What can be successfully conjured, which imaginations are specifically appealing, varies across time and place. Many examples of felicitous conjuring could be explored, from the orientalist imagination of pristine and uninhabited Indonesian mining grounds discussed by Tsing herself, to the outlandish schemes documented by Charles MacKay ([1841] 1995) that gave rise to one of the first speculative bubbles in the 1840s, to the 'new economy' narratives in which offices, products and even profit were thought no longer necessary in order reap the rewards of speculation (see, for example, Thrift, 2001). The point to make about these cultural conjurings, however, is that they are not sufficiently understood through the history of actuarial practice. Although the rise of statistical risk was indispensable to the creation of financial markets, the history of speculation is not reducible to it and depends intimately on social fantasies of untold riches and historical disjunctures.⁴ Indeed, according to Urs Stäheli (2003: 248) speculation worked historically not (only) as an actuarial calculation, but as a 'public spectacle whose spectacularity is created by its noisy and chaotic character'.

The full details of cultural conjuring, clearly, become documented and analysed at the moment when speculation goes bad: it is when speculative bubbles burst, new management theories are debunked, and gold is *not* found in the Indonesian forest that public, media and policymakers pour over the narratives that enabled the investments in the first place and attempt to draw out 'lessons for the future' (which are themselves a form of conjuring, serving to stabilize and normalize financial practice in the wake of a bad speculative episode). While particularly practised in imagining the best, then, financial practice also offers important starting points for understanding and analysing technologies of imagining the worst. Indeed, it is precisely through the coining of 'lessons learned' that darker futures became more routinely imagined in financial practice. For example, after the infamous failure of hedge fund Long-Term Capital Management (LTCM) in 1998, so-called stress testing became more widely deployed by financial institutions. Stress testing entails the imagination of unexpected and apparently unlikely events, and calculating their effects on a company's portfolio. In the words of one journalist, stress testing 'is akin to gathering campfire stories of mythical

⁴ Elsewhere (de Goede, 2005), I have argued that the concept of calculable risk was crucial in legitimating practices of financial speculation that remained contested as immoral gambling until well into the 20th century. However, it is clear that speculation preceded and continues to exceed the domain of statistical risk – as is illustrated precisely by the fact that episodes of 'crisis' are retroactively understood as having been caused by 'irrationalism'.

monsters and Biblical floods in the markets, and trying to imagine how you would deal with them' (Dunbar, 2000: 138). Under the Basle II Accord, regular stress testing has become compulsory for financial institutions, and the Bank of International Settlements offers an inventory of scenarios to be played out, including crashes, panics, inflation, bubbles, unprecedented Chinese booms, unprecedented Chinese busts and, of course, terrorisms of many varieties and durations that could make the 9/11 Commission envious (Bank of International Settlements, 2005; see, in particular, pp. 16-23). This does not mean that LTCM itself did not use stress testing: Dunbar (2000: 187) recounts how LTCM's managers spent hours thinking about 'what happens if there's a magnitude ten earthquake in Tokyo, what happens if there's a 35 percent one-day crash in the US stock market'. They failed to imagine, of course, the one thing that in the end became the direct cause of LTCM's demise, namely a Russian default on rouble-denominated debt.

Stress testing, operational risk management and catastrophe insurance are all instances of the bureaucratization and routinization of 'thinking the unthinkable and quantifying the unquantifiable' in financial practice (Swiss Re, quoted in Bougen, 2003: 258). The methodology of thinking the unthinkable, while continuing to deploy the language of risk, clearly exceeds established techniques of statistical calculation and risk management. Philip Bougen's (2003: 258) investigation into catastrophe insurance emphasizes the 'particularly fragile connection to statistical technologies' deployed in pricing and selling products that include protection against natural disasters like hurricanes and earthquakes, but also against social 'catastrophes' like satellite failure, labour disputes and, of course, terrorism. According to Bougen (2003: 258-259), reinsurers themselves understand their calculative practices to be closer to 'alchemy' than statistics, although they continue to articulate their responsibility in terms of 'disciplined underwriting' and risk 'diversification'.

By comparison, Michael Power's (2005) investigation into the emergence of *operational risk* as a category that determines the amount of reserves to be held by financial institutions to cover loss from diverse disasters, including fraud, management failure and 'rogue' trading, also reflects the methodological problems involved. Although, of course, all statistical methodology involves a degree of imagination and contingent classification, this is arguably even more so in the case of something like operational risk. In the absence of data on historical catastrophic events, banks turn to the inclusion of data on 'unexpected losses' and 'near misses' (Power, 2005: 587), as well as 'scoring systems which emerge from consultative, focus group processes' (Power, 2005: 593). These techniques operate 'at the limits of formal knowledge' (Power, 2005: 593) and draw on social imagination, fear and fantasy. At the same time however, they work to give the appearance of bringing the unmanageable and unthinkable within bureaucratic control, in order to, as Power (2005: 596)

puts it, 'assuage our deepest anxieties and fears about uncontrollable "rogue others", and to tame monsters which have been created and nurtured by the financial system itself'.

Indeed, it becomes important to ask, as does Masco (2006: 2), 'what kind of cultural work is performed in the act of making something "unthinkable"?' Perhaps three tentative answers can be given here. First, as Masco (2006: 3) himself points out in his ethnographical investigation of the 'unthinkability' of nuclear disaster in the Cold War era, such an act produces 'its rhetorical opposite, namely, a proliferation of discourses about vulnerability and insecurity'. This is also a lesson of Tsing's analysis of the performativity of the conjurings required to entice financial investment. Regardless of whether gold was really to be mined in the Indonesian forest, the conjurings of Canadian investment company Bre-X succeeded in bringing about financial flows and popular investment (Tsing, 2001: 158; Tickell, 2003). It is disturbing to contemplate that security premediation may have similar performative effects. In Raban's novel, the TOPOFF exercises confront citizens with the fragility of their urban lives. As the exercises create roadblocks, smoke plumes, traffic jams and disaster scenes all across the city in the name of security, they leave the novel's protagonists bewildered and afraid. 'How could you explain to a child that "homeland security" meant keeping the homeland in a state of continuous insecurity?', wonders one of the characters (Raban, 2006: 14).

Second, as Jenny Edkins argues, calling something unthinkable or unimaginable is a strategy of depoliticization. 'Unthinkable becomes unspeakable, and so 'we are excused from further enquiry' (Edkins, 2003: 176). Of course, Edkins's analysis of Holocaust testimony deals with questions quite different from the exploration here. Still, a parallel may be drawn: stress testing also depoliticizes. Ostensibly a strategy for taking seriously the very worst in financial practice, stress testing and operational risk offer a fantasy of bureaucratic control while depoliticizing, as Power pointed out, the larger political issues of the rogues produced by the system itself.

Third, I would emphasize that articulating the unthinkable by necessity leaves things unthought – as, for example, in the case with LTCM, which went bankrupt precisely through the one thing it failed to imagine. It is interesting to see, more generally, that stress testing often is *not* particularly imaginative. Frequently, stress scenarios are based on events that have already occurred in some form or another: a stock market crash, a hedge fund default, a radical increase in oil prices. Rather than, as Grusin (2004: 28) has it, articulating 'as many of the possible worlds, or possible paths, as the future could be imagined to take', premediation includes some things into the symbolic order while leaving others out. In this sense, premediation draws 'lines of sight' that are necessarily incomplete and insufficient in themselves (Amoore, 2007a). This inclusion-by-exclusion of some unthink-

ables into the symbolic order depoliticizes them, makes them profitable and potentially plays a role in bringing them about.

Economies of Premediation

Security premediation, stress testing and the politics of preemption, as we have seen, operate in the name of a vision of zero risk. Simultaneously, however, they foster booming new business practices. The commodification of risks thought to be 'beyond insurance' fuses specific practices of governing with commercial opportunity (Baker & Simon, 2002a: 11; Ericson & Doyle, 2004). As Crandall & Armitage (2005: 20) put it, contemporary militarization runs on an economy of *desire* as well as an economy of fear.

This combination of economies of desire and fear is poignantly illustrated by the business practice of London-based firm Risk Management Solutions (RMS). Specialized in insuring against natural catastrophes such as floods and earthquakes, since 9/11 RMS has become one of the major global terrorism insurers, and it is particularly active in propagating the idea that terrorism can be risk managed. RMS collates and adds up data from major and minor 'terrorist' attacks around the world (from al-Qaeda to Hamas, from FARC to Timothy McVeigh), in order to produce a coherent, global terrorist threat that can be measured, mapped and made profitable. The firm represents the terrorist threat as coherent, as catastrophic, but also, crucially, as rationally manageable. At the heart of this fantasy of manageability is the assertion that terrorists are rational (which contrasts with some political assertions that terrorists are abnormal or psychopathic). As stated in its brochure 'Managing Terrorism Risk', 'Al Qaeda and its associate groups have developed a highly systematic approach to selecting their targets. As more attack case studies emerge we see a process of research and evaluation for targets that fit the terrorists' strategic and tactical objectives' (RMS, 2003: 9).

In tandem with this appeal to rationalism, however, the business practices of RMS pivot on a variety of technologies that are better understood through the lens of premediation, including probabilistic loss analysis, impact calculations, attack simulations and scenario planning. The RMS brochure presents, for example, a map of a (fictional) American city that has been colour-coded with 'the identification of targets that would provide the highest "utility" to the terrorist', based on a simulation of 'the decision-making that terrorist groups go through in their targeting'. Alongside this identification of the vulnerability of urban public and commercial sites is a table pointing out that 'soft targets', including tourist attractions, metro stations, shopping malls and business districts, have seen little increase in security since 9/11 – presumably making them ready for further investment (RMS,

2003: 8). In its own words, RMS offers target analysis from the 'terrorist's point of view', writing:

based on this method, some 3,400 targets across the U.S. have been selected for modeling specific attacks. These fall into 25 different categories ranging from government buildings and public infrastructure through to commercial and private property. Detailed data have been compiled about them to establish their 'utility' to the terrorist, the likely level of security, and other factors that affect target hardness (RMS, 2003: 9).

The brochure offers, next, a dispersion model of a fictional anthrax attack on a downtown area, which can be varied according to three different magnitudes and eight different wind speeds. The model calculates 'damage footprints' and the dosage experienced by 'occupants of buildings downwind'. The model is preceded by a discussion of the 'New al Qaeda', which is conceived of as being marked by a particular flexibility and adaptability. According to the brochure, 'Al Qaeda constantly struggles to adapt itself to a new, less congenial operational environment. During this period of adaptation, there could be continued smaller scale attacks . . . mostly against accessible, soft targets' (RMS, 2003: 3). Pictures of proponents of the 'new terrorism', including Magnus Ranstorp, Ron Gunaratna and various RAND associates, illustrate the brochure throughout.

RMS's target maps, impact footprints and attack simulations entail particular modes of visualization that – just like the calculative technologies deployed in stress testing – exceed the dry, disembodied and at least seemingly objective positioning of statistical risk calculation. The colourful images of fictional American cities under attack – interspersed in the brochure with photographs of real violence and portraits of 'experts' – offer attractive and spectacular visualizations of catastrophic futures about to unfold (see Campbell & Shapiro, 2007). In fact, Grusin's (2004: 28) argument that premediation is akin to the 'logic of designing a video game', with multiple and algorithmically determined paths and possibilities for the player/viewer, seems to bear out in the RMS models. These images do as much to project and produce their *own* authority within the 'new terrorism' resonance machine as they do to foster their public's fragility, enticing it to invest in security hardware, terrorism insurance and, of course, the risk models themselves.

Louise Amoore (2007b: 140) coins the term 'vigilant visualities' to conceptualize the modes of seeing that enable a politics of preemption, commenting that 'contemporary modes of watchful politics are particularly geared to the anticipation of events, deploying a kind of precautionary principle that governs through the suspicion of a possible future threat'. What is important about vigilant visualities, according to Amoore, is how they turn suspicions, anticipations and imaginations into 'actionable intelligence'. In this sense, and as briefly noted earlier, premediation is not so much about the future as it is about governing the present – both in terms of enabling security action *and* in terms of enticing investment.

Indeed, terrorism scenarios and the ambition of viewing the world 'from the terrorist's point of view' entail what Peter Galison (2001: 30) calls a 'bizarre, and yet pervasive species of Lacanian modeling' that encourages Americans and Europeans to see themselves and their infrastructures through the enemy's eye. Galison (2001: 29) shows how postwar American urban planning was informed by a security discourse that appealed to the planners to 'imagine the worst' and see their cities through the 'bombardier's eye'. Such security imagination entailed identifying attractive targets on the American continent, which, in turn, had substantial influence on present urban planning decisions. These became motivated by desire to seek dispersal in order to preempt the enemy's attack. As Galison (2001: 30) puts it, 'each community, each industry, each factory was pressed into service this way, pressed to *see itself this way*. . . . This was an enlistment, an attempt to draw localities into a frame of mind, a form of moral-cartographic vision'. In this way, the very urban fabric of postwar America was directly influenced by speculative security imaginations.

The flexible disaster imaginations deployed by RMS and companies like it are akin to the processes of 'Lacanian modelling' as analysed by Galison. These processes deploy and exceed practices of modern risk calculation. On the one hand, as Galison (2001: 17-19) demonstrates, calculative risk practices were fostered that entailed geographical and demographic assessments of vulnerabilities, target zones and safety lines. On the other hand, these assessments were self-consciously speculative: they were not so much based on prevention of statistically measurable occurrences as they were based on the imagination of unique and unprecedented disaster scenarios, such as the 'imagined case of a Hiroshima-scale nuclear weapon detonated several thousand feet above a 260-acre rectangle in Manhattan':

How many of the 35,000 people residing between 59th and 72nd Streets . . . would become casualties if a weapon were to be exploded at 2am? How many minutes' warning would they have to take shelter? How much radiation would they receive? Would a firestorm erupt? (Galison 2001: 20)

Just as this kind of disaster imagination structured postwar urban dispersal in the USA, contemporary security premediation influences urban built environments through what Stephen Graham (2006: 258) calls, partly with Jonathan Raban's words, 'a sense of imminent but inexact catastrophe, lurking just beneath the surface of normal, technologized, (sub)urbanized everyday life'. The 'reengineering' of the spaces of everyday life – which include not just urban infrastructures but also, for example, financial architectures (Atia, 2007; de Goede, 2006) – exceeds risk calculation insofar as it depends upon the proliferation of discourses of fear, coupled with demands for absolute safety (see Graham, 2006: 258-260). Practices like those of RMS inevitably produce a sense of fragility of the self, for the multiple scary sce-

narios and attacks imagined in the RMS document, accompanied by images of real violence and fires in their brochures, do little to make one feel secure. This fragility and insecurity, in turn, is what fosters the profitability of RMS and companies like it (Ericson & Doyle, 2004).

Conclusion: Premediation and Opposition

For Grusin (2004: 21), premediation emerges out of a cultural 'desire for a world in which the immediacy of the catastrophe . . . could not happen again'. In this logic, it is not so much the catastrophe that is to be avoided at all costs but the immediacy that accompanies the *unexpected* catastrophe. 'Like the Pre-Crime unit of *Minority Report*', writes Grusin (2004: 36), 'premediation seeks to prevent the future by premediating it – to make sure, in some sense, that the future never happens.' We have seen that premediation both deploys and exceeds discourses of risk. In particular, conceptualizing contemporary security risk through the lens of premediation emphasizes that risk management in the 'war on terror' entails an economy of anxiety *and* an economy of desire, in which the neurotic citizen's demand for zero risk bears an important commercial promise. Premediation's orientation to actionable intelligence in the *present*, however, differs from risk's orientation to the future, which is more akin to forecasting or predicting.

Perhaps precisely because of its ability to foster current action, we could argue that premediation has *itself* become the catastrophe (Coutin, 2008). Not only does security premediation offer a fantasy of control and rational management of the uncertain future that 'depoliticises the limits of knowledge' (Best, 2006: 13–14); more worrying still is the fact that premediation is performative. This does not mean that disastrous imagined futures will inevitably play out, but it does mean that the imagination of some scenarios over others, the visualization of some futures and not others, entails profoundly political work that enables and constrains political decisionmaking in the present. We have seen that the sleeper-cell narrative enables juridical action and legal change. We may similarly ask how TV's premediation of the Iraq war analysed by Grusin had an effect on the actual unfolding of the war when it happened. Perhaps even more than *fostering* imagination, premediation *limits* our imagination and the uncountable ways the uncertain future *could have* played out. Moreover, premediation fosters societal fragility in a number of ways (see also Ericson, 2007). We have seen that the disruption of daily life and the visualization of disaster feed into popular feelings of insecurity. Premediation has the ability to foster societal fragilities and resentment, while disregarding its present victims as 'collateral damage'.

It is imperative that the catastrophes caused by premediation should

become the subject of political debate. What should be called for in such political debate, however, is *not* necessarily the abandonment of imagination itself. Premediation does not bear a singular political promise, to be appropriated only by the 'new terrorism' resonance machine. Instead, as Rita Raley (2007) points out, premediation can function as an important form of cultural critique, for example in the form of 'post-apocalyptic or otherwise catastrophic futures' imagined in science fiction (see Jameson, 2005). As Coutin (2008) argues insightfully,

when risk is rendered catastrophic yet incalculable, oppositional discourses and tactics, like security discourses themselves, *must enter the unknown*, not to minimize the unknown through knowledge, but rather to use its temporal rift to redefine the security project itself (emphasis added).

Coutin herself looks to the sci-fi movie *Minority Report*, among other places, to find the temporal rift that has the ability to politicize premediation. This film, in which future perpetrators of crimes are preemptively arrested on the basis of evidence provided by three 'precogs' with predictive powers, has the ability, in Coutin's (2008) reading, to 'bring the future into the present in a way that challenges the security apparatus'. In the film, it turns out that the precogs sometimes disagree, and that they have the ability to issue 'minority reports'. These minority reports are disregarded, and the certainty accorded to the precogs' majority report by security agents becomes the catastrophe itself, as protagonist Agent Anderton is falsely accused and persecuted (Shapiro, 2005: 29-30).

Another example that plays with, and in fact ridicules, the temporal implications of disaster rehearsals and terrorism scenarios, albeit not in the sci-fi genre, can be found in Don DeLillo's *White Noise*. Although first published in 1984, this novel captures important aspects of security premediation that are becoming a central element in the 'war on terror'. In the novel, a private consulting firm called 'Advanced Disaster Management' operates the SIMUVAC programme, a state-sponsored exercise simulating and practising evacuations in case of disasters such as 'radioactive steam, chemical cloudlets, [or] a haze of unknown origin' (DeLillo, 1999: 206). As it happens, a real industrial accident occurs *before* a planned simulation, when a toxic cloud spills nearby a residential area and the area has to be evacuated. When the novel's protagonist, Jack Gladney, arrives at the evacuation centre on the night of the toxic cloud, filled with anxiety that he may have been exposed to the chemicals in the air, it becomes clear that the consulting firm is using the real evacuation to test its objectives for the planned practice. When Gladney asks one of the officials how it is going, the answer is particularly revealing of the absurdity of the ambition to routinize the imagination. Says the official:

The insertion curve isn't as smooth as we would like. There's a probability excess. Plus which we don't have our victims laid out where we'd want them if this was an actual

simulation. In other words we're forced to take our victims as we find them. We didn't get a jump on computer traffic. Suddenly it just spilled out, three-dimensionally, all over the landscape. You have to make allowances for the fact that everything we see tonight is real. There's a lot of polishing we still have to do. But that's what this exercise is all about. (DeLillo, 1999: 139)

The event with the 'real' toxic cloud shows precisely that the unpredictable cannot be prepared for – as it is more messy, chaotic and, well, unpredictable, than any simulation – and it forces the rescue workers to 'take their victims as they find them'. In this manner, DeLillo draws out premediation's relentless ability to disregard and disavow responsibility for present victims, in favour of polishing the models.

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