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Red Dot Sight

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## RED DOT SIGHT

*Colin Milburn and Rita Raley*

In 1977, *Newsweek* magazine reported on the new laser-sighted American 180 rifle, describing it as a futuristic “Buck Rogers gun” equipped with a laser diode for casting a concentrated beam of light: “Sighting the gun projects a very visible red dot on the target, and that’s where the bullet goes” (“The Buck Rogers Gun”). Laser-assisted weapons such as the American 180 emerged in the public consciousness firmly associated with science fiction, the fantastic gizmos of Buck Rogers and Flash Gordon. The future-ladenness of such weapons was already clear in 1967 when the Pentagon tested a laser rangefinder in Vietnam, promoting the claim that the “army of the future” had landed, although it would be another decade before commercial laser sights and rangefinders were marketed for police and civilian use (Baldwin). Yet even as such devices became more familiar and widespread, their science-fictional aura lingered.<sup>1</sup> In 1995, for example, New York City police officials described a policy to arm transit officers with a new weapon—a 9-millimeter service pistol with a small laser sight—as “the first step in a ‘Star Trek’ vision of the future of policing the subway system” (“Lasers to Be Tested”). More recently, the XM25 Individual Air Burst Weapon System, a grenade launcher that uses a laser rangefinder to explode grenades in mid-air near a designated target, has been called a “Judge Dredd weapon” in reference to the comic book and film character (“Army Starts Testing”; “Green Berets”).

To be sure, science fiction has provided some of the most iconic images of laser-assisted weapons—among them, the AMT Hardballer .45 long slide with laser sight wielded by the time-traveling cyborg in *The Terminator* (1984). Recall also the assassin’s laser depicted in an early scene of William Gibson’s *Neuromancer* (1984):

Afterimage of a single hair-fine light of red light. Seared concrete beneath the thin soles of his shoes. Her white sneakers flashing, close to the curving wall now, and again the ghost line of the laser branded across his eye, bobbing in his vision as he ran.

*(Gibson 39)*

Such images from science fiction have reinforced a popular mythology of precision and instantaneity. As Charles Goff, the owner of American Arms International—the manufacturer of the American 180 rifle—enthused way back in 1977, “It’s like a ray gun would be. All you have to do is flip on the light and zap! It’s instantaneous” (Goff quoted in “Buck Rogers Gun” 56).

Today, the red dot is ubiquitous, no longer localized to science fiction. It is now a common trope of action movies, political thrillers, police procedurals, first-person shooter games, reality TV, and the nightly news. Yet even as it has become part of everyday realism, the laser-sighted weapon

remains a technology of speculative media: it projects an image of risk through a single ray of light, a tiny mote of illumination that speeds ahead and enjoins the present to catch up. Indeed, it becomes an imperative. As described by the 1977 *Newsweek* story about the American 180, the dot is both a harbinger of things to come and a command to obey: “Follow the red dot” (56). Certainly, we recognize the stakes of either obeying or disregarding such an order. It is a matter of life or death on the line. But exactly to address these stakes, these hazardous conditions, we propose to follow the red dot as a media object—a phantasmatic figure of precision targeting—as well as the focal point of a way of seeing that is endemic to the era of laser weapons.<sup>2</sup>

This is what we call *red dot sight*: a mediated perspective, an orientation to risk that re-dimensionalizes the optics of threat perception around a crimson speck of light. Red dot sight—the shooter seeing the target, the target seeing the dot—reduces the space and time for any possible response to an absolute minimum. Because it leaves no room for doubt, it compels instantaneous assent or reaction. The threat is clear and present: the scope for analysis or deliberation constricts toward a zero-dimensional point, collapsing the speculative future into local immediacy. The dot has such persuasive force, for both shooter and target, because it indexes the high-tech hardware behind it, the industrialization of targeting that has guaranteed its lethal precision.<sup>3</sup> According to a 1974 advertisement for the American 180, for example, the promise of speed and exactitude (“Just put the red laser dot on the target and squeeze them off ... the rounds go exactly where you see the dot”) is backed up by a regulated system of engineering expertise, innovation, and ingenuity (“This weapon is an all-new American design manufactured to stringent specifications”) (Figure 17.1). Yet red dot sight is nothing merely technological, nor is it restricted to a particular configuration of marks or marksmen. Rather, it is an imaginary vantage in a scene of targeting, a contraction of the axis of sight to the point where both subject and object of targeting converge, as if occupying both sides of the dot at once. As we see in the American 180 advertisement, the photographic perspective situates the viewer in a foreshortened space—a constricted corridor, a flattened cone of vision centered by the red dot—looking at once forward and backward along an invisible radius that draws everything together in deadly intimacy, ahead of time: “This weapon commands instant respect without firing a shot.” Significantly, it is the viewer of this scene whose respect is commanded—the viewer, the target audience, who is as much a target of red dot sight as the man on the stairs, as much a targeter as the policeman holding the gun. Whosoever sees the red dot is laser-locked, preemptively drawn into an all-new dimension of trouble: a proleptic future that orders everyone to fall in line, on the dot.

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There are two predominant modes of red dot sight, each associated with a particular kind of weapon accessory: reflex sights and laser sights. Both are means of target acquisition, but a reflex sight works by reflection whereas a laser sight works by projection. Ever since their invention in 1975, reflex sights that use a red laser-emitting diode (LED) to generate an illuminated reticle—a dot reflected on a combining glass and visible only to the shooter—have been specifically called “red dot sights.”<sup>4</sup> In contrast, laser sights emit a coherent beam of light that is visible as a small spot even at great distance. The media regime of red dot sight therefore comprises both a reflexive form, where only the shooter sees the red dot marking the target, and a projective form, where the red dot is potentially visible to the shooter and the target simultaneously.

Of course, there have been many other innovations, many other ways of weaponizing light since the 1970s. In addition to an assortment of red dot reflex sights and laser scopes, various other combat optics with similar features have appeared over the last 40 years. For example, the Advanced Combat Optical Gunsight, developed in 1987, provides rifle snipers with a highly magnified view of a target and a reticle illuminated by radioactive tritium. So too a significant amount of military R&D has focused on battlefield combat lasers (Freedman; Hecht; Seidel; Singer). In 2005, Sheldon Meth, a program manager for DARPA’s Tactical Technology Office, claimed that “the age of the



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Over 1200 pinpoint rounds per minute day or night is what the American 180 delivers. In dim light or darkness you can forget about "sight picture". Just put the red laser dot on the target and squeeze them off...the rounds go exactly where you see the dot. The Laser Lok sight is Ni Cad battery powered and self-contained. The American 180 fires .22 caliber long rifle ammo from an easily loaded drum magazine. Accuracy is high since recoil, body rotation and barrel climb are almost nil with this cartridge. Ammo costs are low and the American 180 will handle any point-style bullet on either full or semi-automatic. This weapon is an all-new American design manufactured to stringent specifications. It has been tested in Artic cold and muggy heat without malfunction. Can be assembled and disassembled without tools.

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Figure 17.1 Advertisement for the American 180, *Gun World*, February 1974

military laser is about to arrive” (191). While he noted at the time that most military uses of lasers were limited to sighting targets or guiding ordnance, he ventured that the future would see all manner of tactical laser weapons on the battlefield: “While I hesitate to admit that I am a Buck Rogers or Star Trek fan, I have to say it is fascinating how science fiction can anticipate reality” (191). Reassessing the status of military lasers and other directed energy weapons in 2010, the physicist and novelist Doug Beason, a retired U.S. Air Force colonel as well as the former Associate Laboratory Director for Threat Reduction at the Los Alamos National Laboratory, reiterated the current situation: “Directed energy is not science fiction. These are real weapons being tested in real scenarios” (12). Therefore, he suggested, the full implications are already inevitable: “National leaders will soon have the ability to instantly deter threats anywhere in the world with infinite precision at the speed of light” (10). While such an exquisite vision of full-spectrum deterrence may yet remain a twinkle in the eye, there are today a host of battlefield lasers beyond sights and guidance systems, including antimaterial lasers (lasers designed to disable vehicles or missiles), antisensor lasers (lasers that scan for optical sensors or signs of other lasers), and antipersonnel lasers (for example, blinding laser grenades, which were banned by the United Nations in 1995, or laser dazzlers, which disorient and cause temporary visual impairment) (McAulay; McCall; Zohuri). Many

of these weapons and devices expand the regime of red dot sight, even though they may not involve red dots as such.

After all, regardless of its connections to any particular devices or technological genealogies, the projected image of the red dot epitomizes the promissory grammar of weaponized light, the entire discourse of high-tech optical targeting—precisely as a signifier of collapsed futurity. At this point, the red dot is a cliché, an image that everyone can call to mind and reference. Even as it has been separated from real material contexts, dislocated from actual battlefields or hunting grounds, the repetition of the red dot across any number of news reports, documentaries, marketing brochures, video games, television shows, and Hollywood films has made the logic of high-tech targeting visually comprehensible and ordinary, naturalized by the representational processes of popular media. Yet the familiarity of the red dot, the fact that it is a cliché, has not diminished its signifying capacities or its future-shaping effects. On the contrary, the regime of red dot sight depends on *recognition*. It requires recognition of the red dot's indexical function (i.e., pointing to some high-tech targeting apparatus), its metonymic function (i.e., designating the targeting circuit, the relation between the mark and the marksman, the object and subject of high-tech targeting), and its metaphorical function (i.e., implying a conditional future that will have been, its subjunctivity already falling behind the speed of actual events). To be sure, at the moment of recognition, the red dot already anticipates, or we might say premediates, the shot (cf. Grusin). It prefigures the shot to come by recollecting other red dots that have come before: an icon of the high-tech targeting industry and the militarization of light, as well as a warning, a foretoken image with the power to entrain the future through its promissory grammar alone.

In 1995, for example, when the New York transit police announced their Star Trek-like “experiment” with laser-equipped pistols, a police spokesman described their intended effect: “If you’re a bad guy and you see the red dot on your chest, you’ll probably realize you’re in trouble. And you’ll comply” (Lieutenant Valentino quoted in “Lasers to Be Tested”). In this speculative scenario, dreamed forth by police authorities, the imagined second-person target (“you”) comes to realize the danger, the threat implied by the red dot, only to the degree that he simultaneously recognizes himself as a stock character in a conditional, subjunctive narrative (“if you’re a bad guy”). Yet the compulsive force of the red dot, which seems to be the consequence or conclusion of this speculative story (“If you’re a bad guy and you see the red dot ... you’ll comply”), actually works retroactively, like a self-fulfilling prophecy. That is to say, if you see the red dot on your chest, you realize that you are already (presumed to be) the bad guy, in trouble even before the trouble starts. If you comply, you confirm that you were the bad guy all along—or rather, you acknowledge that you have been put in this role, whether you fit the description or not—and therefore prove yourself a legitimate target of red dot sight. If you do not comply ... well, you already know what follows the red dot.

The red dot is a technology of control for managing bodies and populations according to a “calculus of probabilities,” which, as Gilles Deleuze noted in a 1986 lecture on biopolitics and Foucault, “is much better than the walls of a prison” (Deleuze quoted in Nail 256). Its purpose here is to introduce a certain fear and expectation, in other words, the calculus of risk (“you’ll probably realise you’re in trouble”). Yet in defining the zone of trouble—a sharp point of light at the center, that is, the origin of an expanding circle—the red dot takes command by reducing risk calculation to a simple algorithm: if compliance, continue; else, game over. Indeed, the power of the red dot to regulate the variables in a local zone of trouble was clear as soon as the first laser sights came on the market in the 1970s.<sup>5</sup> For example, in 1979, *Science Digest* described the capacity of the American 180 rifle to create a “risk reduced” environment, thanks to the red dot and its outsized “reputation with persons on both sides of the law” (Marsh 9–10). On the one hand, the dot disciplines the wild trigger fingers of law enforcement: as one police officer in Fort Lauderdale said, “We have pointed out that the laser beam is a safety feature because we fire only when the red dot is on the suspect and that eliminates bullets flying around the city” (George Long quoted in Marsh 11–12).

On the other hand, the dot reconfirms the futuristic image of the “Buck Rogers gun” and its “recognized damaging impact” (Marsh 10). As it moves around, preceded by its own reputation, the dot recodes a zone of trouble as a rule-bound space, almost like a game: “when inmates in a Utah prison were creating trouble, the red dot playing across the prisoners’ chest sent them hurrying to their cells” (Marsh 12). Play along, follow the red dot. In the words of one corrections officer at Utah State Prison two years prior, “When I put that red dot on some of them ... they got back in their cells but fast” (quoted in “Rifle With Laser Sight”). Or, as *Newsweek* recounted in July 1977, “one robbery suspect surrendered the moment he faced the red dot, even though he had a fully loaded automatic rifle at his side” (“Buck Rogers Gun”).

As these examples indicate, red dot sight does not necessarily bring a particular future into being; it is not actually deterministic, insofar as the possibility of *not* shooting is innate in its structure. But it works as a deterrent by virtue of the belief in its machinic precision, the recognition of its fatalist grammar (“zap! It’s instantaneous”). In this way, red dot sight concretizes the conditions of possibility for a particular enactment of the future. It reduces a complex system, all of the variables that make accuracy or predictability so fraught with uncertainty, and isolates it to a situation, a scene—a single dot—in which the outcome would seem absolute, a binary option: shot or not.

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Paul Virilio has described the apparatus of global vision after World War II, when deterrence strategy came to be based on the “ubiquitous orbital vision of enemy territory” (2). It is not simply that the “war machine” and “watching machine” co-exist but that they have become mutually constitutive, even synonymous—a principle that has extended into the age of satellite surveillance and drone technologies (cf. Parks and Kaplan; Shaw). Yet deterrence strategies for the combat zones of the present have often emphasized precision targeting in contrast to orbital vision, which is to say the visualization of targets in areas that are not perfectly available to the regime of total illumination from above. The red dot thus trades the fantasy of total coverage for the virtuosity of precise coverage. The promise of precision targeting is that uncertainty and risk are contained, if not wholly eliminated. “The system is absolutely devastating. There is no way you can miss,” concluded a counter-sniper expert in a 1982 U.S. Customs Service report on the Laser Products LPC-700 laser-aimed revolver (quoted in Vartabedian). “You’re never going to hit the neighbor or the dog or the kids,” averred Jack Kelley, the VP of marketing for Laser Products (now SureFire LLC), seemingly flush with enthusiasm at a moment when his company was on the brink of selling this weapon to a number of government agencies around the world. “With this you are performing neurosurgery. It really is a surgical instrument” (Kelley quoted in Vartabedian).

Questions of veracity aside, the overhyped precision of laser-assisted weapons conceals the more general and abstract nature of targeting, which occurs well before the line of sight has been established—the targeting before targeting. As Samuel Weber puts it, “The act of targeting is an act of violence even before any shot is fired” (105). The red dot creates a target literally on the spot. It anticipates what is to come but it also renders the apprehensive dimension of targeting—in other words, the identification of the enemy as such—visible and verifiable. In this respect, the practice of targeting must be understood as relational and differential, constructing a target within a larger system of other potential and actual targets. “To target,” as McKenzie Wark suggests, “is to isolate something against the dense, tense fibers of the network, maybe to destroy it, but always to assign it a unique value” (149). The gamespace logic of targeting is discriminatory—each thing, node, piece defined in relation to other things. If the target is identified or classified by negation, if the target is marked as such in relation to that which is not a target, so too does the shooter stabilize as a subject in relation to its object. “Targeting turns time and space from a disconcerting experience of flux into conditions of self-awareness,” snapping self and other into relational focus, locking them in position (Wark 128).

Despite whatever actual distance there may be between shooter and target, the red dot affords a fantasy of one-on-one combat. Yet the purported sensation of proximity, up close and personal—shooting as neurosurgery—serves as an alibi to disguise the depersonalized act of killing that is the particular hallmark of a regime of industrialized violence. As Slavoj Žižek argues, the mythologizing of embodied battle has the effect of allowing us not to see what warfare has actually become: “It is thus not the fantasy of a purely aseptic war run as a video game behind computer screens that protects us from the reality of the face to face killing of another person; on the contrary it is this fantasy of face to face encounter with an enemy killed bloodily that we construct in order to escape the Real of the depersonalized war turned into an anonymous technological operation” (77). Red dot sight, promoting the fantasy of the “perfect shot,” obscures the automation of contemporary warfare by affirming the romance of a clean kill.

In that red dot sight isolates or reduces the complex networks of modern combat to a moment, a singular encounter, it offers the possibility of reinstating the human agent as the central figure of command and control. Yet to the degree that laser sight manages, directs, and focuses the faculty of human sight, it simultaneously renders distinctions between human and machine vision necessarily unstable (cf. Johnston; Virilio). Expertise—being a good shot—even seems strangely superfluous, at least in the exaggerated discourse of device manufacturers and enthusiasts. It is not simply that “there is no way you can miss” but that expertise becomes a particular affordance of the hardware, available to everyone. Charles Goff, when promoting the American 180, was reported to “thrust” the rifle upon the secretaries of potential buyers, “who often learn[ed] to handle it in fifteen minutes” (“The Buck Rogers Gun”). The practice of laser sighting—replicated through different devices, weapons, and media—reconfigures the embodied user, realigning skills and training to the projected beam. Here, too, we must consider Virilio:

Weapons are tools not just of destruction but also of perception—that is to say, stimulants that make themselves felt through chemical, neurological processes in the sense organs and the central nervous system, affecting human reactions and even the perceptual identification and differentiation of object.

(6)

But the reordering of perception around red dot sight is not produced by any weapon alone; in other words, it is nothing exclusively tied to the hardware. Rather, red dot sight refocuses sensory experience—in particular, it heightens the sense of apprehension, reconstituted as a twisted amalgam of control, militarism, and libidinal investment—exactly due to its grammar of anticipation, its proleptic futurism.

The appearance of the dot may thus even incite feelings of expectant arousal, a carnal sense of intimacy—in touch with the future. According to some gun enthusiasts, the primal scene shaping their interest in firearms, their general responsiveness to high-tech weapons, was the first sight of a laser sight: “Without a doubt, one of the most noteworthy ‘gun porn’ moments from my youth was when Arnold Schwarzenegger acquired ‘the .45 longslide with laser sighting’ in 1984’s ‘The Terminator’” (Cantrell). Red dot sight, seeing red, entails a kind of cyborg erotics. It is a form of militarized perception that, as Jordan Crandall suggests, fuses “technological innovation and the erotic charge of combat.” It comes as no surprise then that manufacturers and marketers of laser scopes should elicit such feelings through the language and imagery of gunplay kink—the sight itself displayed as the ultimate hardware fetish: “This scope is as sexy as it gets” (2A4Life). Yet such an appeal to cyborg erotics, even if evidently figurative, nevertheless insists on the inadequacy of the present, encouraging a sensitivity to the human body as insufficiently precise, lacking accuracy, deficient in regard to the high-tech future. In the year 2013, one jokester summed it up like this: “It’s 2013 scientists. Why do I still not have a laser sight on my penis?” (SkyWarpIsBetterThanStarScream). Whereas mere mortals may yearn for such enhancements, according to the secret lore of

the Internet, certain superhuman icons may already be living this science fiction dream: “Chuck Norris has a Predator-style triple laser sight on his penis” (Chorris). Such jokes indicate how the regime of red dot sight fashions the laser scope not simply as an optical assist but as a prosthesis, a supplement to normal marksmanship that extends the body into the domain of speculative media as such.

For example, in 1988 the British company Imatronic released the LS45 Laser Aiming System on a wave of exuberant claims: “Tomorrow’s sights ... for today’s handguns,” offering the allure of “space age solutions to handgun aiming problems” (Milek). Since then, the appearance of the Imatronic LS45 in a variety of science fiction films—including *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991), *Predator 2* (1990), *District 9* (2009), *Leprechaun 4: In Space* (1997), and *Universal Soldier* (1992)—has perpetuated the idea that this weapon upgrade puts users in touch with the future, redressing their “aiming problems” with “space age solutions.” These films each suggest the increasing obsolescence of the human body under the regime of red dot sight. In *Universal Soldier*, for example, the resurrected supersoldier Luc Deveraux (played by Jean-Claude Van Damme), his cyborg hardware overheating, strips nude at a cheap motel just as a squad of other supersoldiers armed with LS45 laser-sighted weapons arrives to take him out. Moments later, recovered from his overheating, Deveraux hides in the same bed with a naked couple as another supersoldier enters the motel room, the red dot of his LS45 playing back and forth across their foreheads. The caress of the red dot, threatening instant death even as its passage means a reprieve, a little more life to come, maps this zone of trouble: a scene of copulation, conjunction, that is less about the juxtaposed bodies of the heterosexual couple than about the intercession of the cyborg supersoldier between them, desire interrupted by high-tech hardware. It allegorizes the way in which red dot sight invades even the most private spaces, the fantasy of the perfect shot to come retracing a militarization of flesh that has already occurred—the cyborg already hiding in the bed. It represents a condition of almost-thereness, endlessly deferred yet already here.

★ ★ ★

Red dot sight establishes the conditions by which a specific future might be precisely enacted: a kill. But at the same time, it remains open to the possibility of the kill not taking place, the residue of uncertainty accounting not only for the shooter’s skill and other material variables (a misfire, a bad angle, an unexpected dust storm) but also for the fact that the target is likewise an agent in the system and participating in the calculus of risk, albeit from the other side.

Consider the film *Phone Booth* (2002), an 80-minute captivity narrative that unfolds in real time. The setting is the eponymous glass phone booth, one of only two that Verizon still owned at the time of filming. Stuart Shepard, a self-absorbed New York publicist played by Colin Farrell, is held hostage by an unseen sniper. We are meant to understand “Stu” from the start as a dubious character in need of some moral correction. Stu has sought out the phone booth in order to court a potential mistress, but is first interrupted by a pizza delivery man whom he quite sharply dismisses, before proceeding with the call that he has apparently been repeating daily, in the same booth. After his unsuccessful appeal for a date, the phone rings, he answers, and discovers almost immediately that the caller can see him and has been surveilling his calls (his surprise at which is almost as retro as the phone booth itself). The drama escalates when the mysterious caller announces that he has Stu in his sights, specifically in the telescopic sight of “a .30 caliber bolt action 700 with a Carbon 1 modification and a state-of-the-art handheld tactical scope,” which is shortly confirmed with the sound of the rifle cocking. Just before he perceives the red dot on his chest, Stu is asked to sense the target: “Can you feel it?” the caller asks, “The heat of it?” “It,” the red dot, signifies a threat that may not be realized. “You’re doing so much better than the others,” the caller tells him, referring to two previous victims, a pedophile and an inside trader, who failed to “come clean” or “make amends” and were therefore shot. The caller insists that the targets were somehow responsible for their own situation, their sitedness in the sights. This is the seemingly psychotic logic of the



sniper as moral vigilante. Yet it is also an incisive emplotment of red dot sight, which collapses the distance between target and shooter as if they were virtually one and the same. All targets are made responsible for their own targeting; all shooters are now also targets. “Take a look at where I’m going,” the caller says, and Stu looks at his chest to follow the movement of the red dot, to see and implicate himself as target.

In a pivotal moment, Stu is assailed by a pimp seeking to defend two women who work for him and had wanted the phone. The battle becomes triangulated: Stu is desperately pleading for his own release from the caller while at the same time pleading with the pimp to leave him alone in the booth. “Do you need help?” the caller asks in one moment and then, after the pimp has picked up a baseball bat and marches back toward the booth, demands, “Get rid of him!” We cut to a long shot of the pimp seen through a simulated reflex sight, as if the weapon and camera had fused, and hear the sound of the cocked rifle. The film then shifts to slow motion as the pimp begins his countdown to an assault. Stu sees to his horror the red dot clearly projected onto the pimp’s white t-shirt—which is to say, he inhabits the perspective of red dot sight—and begins in that instant to regard not only his own safety but also the safety of others.

Stu seems to acknowledge responsibility, as if he were capitulating to the caller’s insistence that this entire situation is Stu’s own fault, that Stu—even though he is the primary target—is paradoxically his own sniper, and also responsible for looping the second man into the targeting circuit. The question of his culpability is introduced when the caller offers to shoot the pimp: “I can make him stop, just say the word.” “Can you hear me?” he goes on to demand, to which Stu replies, “yes.” Then: “What?” “Yes!” This moment of targeting is rife with hesitation (will Stu redirect the line of sight to himself? will the sniper pull the trigger?) and uncertainty, but it culminates in fulfillment: the sniper does indeed fire.<sup>6</sup> The sense of temporal foreshortening here—the pimp dies before he even sees the danger, before any onlookers realize that he had been targeted—certifies the ongoing deferral of Stu’s own assassination as a structure of indebtedness, as if Stu were living on borrowed time.

*Phone Booth* reinforces the lethal certainty of red dot sight even while highlighting its conditionality, attesting to the way in which the dot re-dimensionalizes the scene of risk. There is no time, no space to flee. Stu is pinned down, his physical world reduced to the confines of the phone booth. Yet he is virtually linked to the unseen shooter: the red dot and the telephone line plot an axis between them, a radius of the zone of trouble. Along this line, the subject and object of targeting converge with surprising intimacy. As the dot plays over Stu’s body, the caller goads him, “Come now, Stu, you can feel it.” Locked in a circuit of recognition, Stu is made to believe that he has, in effect, made himself a target, that he has targeted himself because of his bad behavior (a literal character assassination), and the sniper at the other end of the red dot is merely the belated fulfillment, suturing the past and future together in the discrete red node on Stu’s chest. To be sure, the actual identity of the sniper remains absolutely unknown: the threat is incorporated and then neutralized through the discovery of the body of the pizza delivery man left holding the gun, while the “real” sniper walks away from the scene, letting Stu know that he is still out there, still watching. The film thus ends with Stu continuing to see himself through the perspective of red dot sight, still potentially in the circuit of sniper and target. Which is to say, Stu complies—even though he is no longer directly under the gun.

When the red dot appears, the future contracts into absolute immediacy. After all, by the time you see that you are a target, you are as good as dead. It is a common joke in sniper media, of course. For example, in one iteration of the “Most Interesting Man in the World” online meme—based on the Dos Equis beer advertising campaign—the Interesting Man notes, “I don’t always notice the sniper, but when I do it’s too la—” (Figure 17.2). He cannot even complete the sentence, because the red dot means that time is up. Yet somehow, in this exact instant, he recognizes his own misrecognition as a pattern (“I don’t always notice ... but when I do ...”). Indeed, this little joke reflexively shows how a crimson mote of light now signifies a fatal collapse of temporal

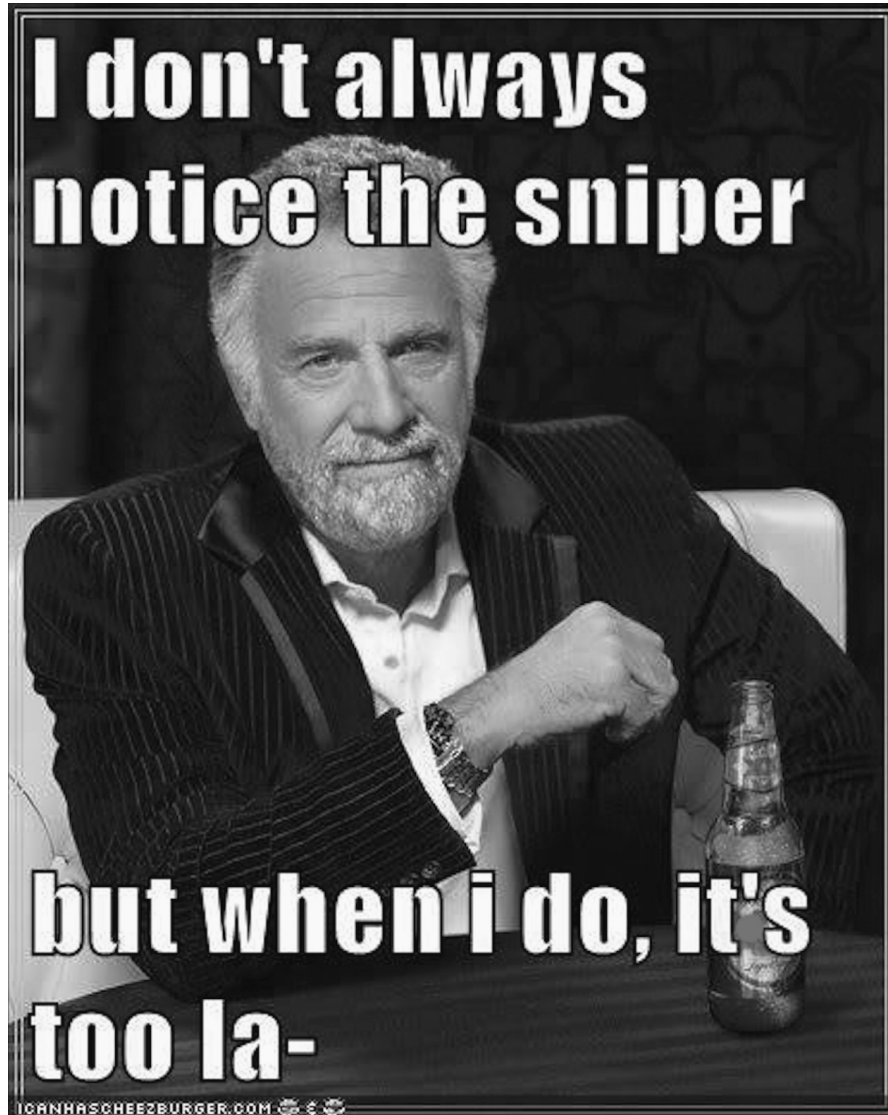


Figure 17.2 Anon, image macro created at I Can Has Cheezburger?, posted at Joy Reactor, 30 March 2010, <http://joyreactor.com/post/567342>

order—an imminent shot that may have already fired—precisely because its media repetition has given it this meaning. Red dot sight is therefore nothing merely technological, bound to the hardware. It describes a way of seeing that perceives precision targeting everywhere, prospectively and retroactively, even in situations where there is no gun at all.

This aspect of red dot sight is underscored in the final episode of the television drama *Breaking Bad* (2008–2013). Walter White, the notorious chemistry teacher-turned-crystal meth kingpin, has lost his drug empire. Knowing his own death to be imminent, he devises a plan to leave his remaining ill-gotten fortune to his son. He breaks into the house of his former colleagues Gretchen and Elliot and advises them of his scheme:

On my son's eighteenth birthday, which is ten months and two days from today, you will give him this money in the form of an irrevocable trust. You will tell him that it is his to do with as he sees fit, but with the hope that he uses it for his college education and the betterment of his family.

To secure this arrangement, Walter draws attention to two red dots that have suddenly appeared on Gretchen and Elliot's chests. He says,

Don't move. Don't, don't dare move a muscle, you don't want them to think that you're trying to get away. Just breathe. Just this afternoon I had an extra \$200,000 ... I gave it to the two best hitmen west of the Mississippi. Now, whatever happens to me tomorrow, they'll still be out there, keeping tabs. And if for any reason that my children do not get this money, a kind of countdown will begin. Maybe a day or so later. A week. A year. When you're going for a walk in Santa Fe or Manhattan or Prague, wherever. And you're talking about your stock prices without a worry in the world. And then, suddenly, you'll hear the scrape of a footstep behind you, but before you can even turn around—pop!

(“*Felina*”)

The scene is about securing compliance but also a kind of investment strategy—made crystal clear by Walter's reference to stock prices—which aims to control a speculative globality (“Santa Fe or Manhattan or Prague, wherever”) through the rhetoric of prolepsis (“before you can even turn around—pop!”). The inculcation of red dot sight is a way of locking the future into place, pinning it to the once-and-future dot. It persists, in perpetuity. Yet Walter has not, in fact, hired the “two best hitmen west of the Mississippi” to keep tabs for the rest of eternity, monitoring a perennial debt. This, it turns out, is a lie. Instead, Walter has provided his goofy stoner buddies Badger and Skinny Pete with simple office laser pointers, tools of corporate life that exactly reproduce the media regime of red dot sight—no bullets required. So we see that, if red dot sight relies on an *instantaneous* recognition of the sociotechnical meanings of the dot—the indexical, metonymic, and metaphorical aspects—it propagates without verification or substantiation as a *persistent* re-dimensionalization of the risk landscape, the zone of trouble, that leaves no room for discernment or reflection (“but when I do it's too la—”).

For example, in one episode of the cartoon series *Family Guy*, the buffoonish protagonist Peter Griffin tackles a Hindu man after seeing his tilak: “Look out! Oh, I thought that dot on your head was from a sniper rifle.” Peter does not perceive himself as the target of red dot sight, but he misidentifies himself in relation to it (Figure 17.3). Seeing the red dot, he reacts without hesitation; it may already be too late, but he tries to preempt the bullet. Of course, the narrative frame provides television viewers ironic distance: we know that Peter misrecognizes the tilak for a laser-scope beam, and we know that, had he paused and observed instead of springing to action, he would have discovered the threat was no threat. The same ironic distance then allows further meanings to become clear: a white man assaults a brown man due to a misunderstanding of religious practice; Peter injures the Hindu man while playing hero, saving him from a danger that is only in Peter's mind; the logic of preemption inadvertently leads to an actual violent act by trying to prevent an imaginary one; and so forth. And yet, even with ironic distance (knowing that Peter doesn't know), we only get the joke if we have already recognized the structure of red dot sight. Moreover, getting the joke may distract us from actual risk, a point emphasized by a deleted scene from that same episode: a follow-up joke, another turn of the ironic screw, in which the Hindu man comes back to Peter later with a bleeding hole in his head, announcing, “You were right!” before falling down dead. This deleted scene, which must be considered something of an alternate history in the world of *Family Guy* (a show that nevertheless abounds in contradictory narrative twists and canon-resistant cutaways), reinforces the sense that red dot sight necessarily compels a *virtual certainty* even within the domain of uncertainty, preemptively justifying action even when the nature of the risk is unrecognizable. Just because we didn't see the sniper, doesn't mean he wasn't there.<sup>7</sup> At least, this is how it seems under the purview of red dot sight.

Is it satire, or straight-up realism? On a Sunday evening in June 2000, a uniformed patrol officer responding to a call of “unknown trouble” in an apartment complex located in the Watts



Figure 17.3 “The Father, the Son, and the Holy Fonz,” *Family Guy*, 2005

neighborhood of Los Angeles reportedly “observed a laser light targeted at his upper torso” (LAPD). The Los Angeles Police Department press release about this incident, which notes the address but not the neighborhood, implicitly invokes a racialized imaginary of risk to explain an encounter between a 26-year-old officer on the street and a “shadow of a figure at the window behind the laser light.” The officer’s purported “[fear] that he was being targeted” prompted him to shoot preemptively at the figure in the window: a security decision that enacted a particular risk calculus, the virtual certainty inherent to red dot sight.<sup>8</sup> But this was a scene of misrecognition, once again, another iteration of “I thought I saw”: the presumed sniper revealed himself to be an unarmed juvenile who had been using a laser pointer in a mimetic performance of targeting. The red dot had been misinterpreted precisely as anticipated, its meanings predetermined—indeed, overdetermined. To see the dot is to recognize that a target has been acquired, even when it is simulacral. Under the regime of red dot sight, snipers are not anywhere, because they are everywhere.

★ ★ ★

Preemptive, proleptic, and overdetermined, the semiotic status of the dot seems quite secure—it presents itself as secure. It belongs to a closed circuit in that one knows what is to come. But red dot sight seems to offer a more static version of the future than is actually possible. That is, its anticipatory logic suggests a circuit that contains a temporal lag, an interval, in which the promise of attachment may be broken. The red dot may point, as it were, to something that is never to come. It contains the promise of attachment—the completion of the circuit, the firing of the shot—but we can always find slippages or misfires in the interval, in the moment of recognition, the terrain of the exploit.

The 2008 film *Wanted*, for instance, frenetically thematizes the potential to interrupt red dot sight. *Wanted* is manifestly concerned with targeting—and especially the figuration of targeting as a promissory contract—even in its very title. The narrative concerns a secret fraternity of assassins

given kill assignments that have been encoded into fabric by a “loom of fate”; these are contractual “orders that must be executed.” Wesley (played by James McAvoy) is a newbie assassin-in-training. As the supposed target of a rogue fraternity member said to have killed his father, Wesley is brought into the fold and trained to intercept the bullet that is coming for him. There is a familiar aspect to the story of an ordinary if somewhat abject guy who needs to be taught to discover his latent inner reserves—in this instance, to redirect his superhuman sensory perception so as to transcend the physical laws of time and space, to both evade and curve the trajectory of bullets. In its opening scene, the red dot is projected on top of a woman’s bindi (recalling the conflicted semiotic registers of *Family Guy*); Mr. X sees the dot, but before he can fully complete the warning, “Get down!,” she has been assassinated. It establishes the familiar zone of trouble, with all its temporal foreshortening. But the rest of the film is about the subversion, the denaturalization of red dot sight through the renovation of perception and the remediation of the body. As a member of the fraternity says at the start of his training, “I’m the repair man.” Wesley asks, “What do you repair?” The answer is profound: “A lifetime of bad habits.” Wesley’s eventual ability to reroute the bullet and elude red dot sight is figured in terms of speculative fantasy, an impossible skill rendered plausible by the magic of special effects. But the capacity of potential targets to thwart or even seize the apprehensive force of the red dot, to turn its proleptic grammar back on itself, nevertheless inspires actual practices of circumvention—attempts to resist compliance—in contemporary zones of trouble.

For example, a tactical art project by Michael Naimark enacts a practice we might call counter-targeting (cf. Raley). Way back in 2002, Naimark was one of a small but growing number of art-activists working to draw public attention to what we can retrospectively understand to be a radical transformation in surveillance practices and technologies, as cameras became ever more ubiquitous and surveillance took different medial forms. With a nod to *Star Wars*, Naimark expressed concern with the “dark side” of these technological developments, the threat to privacy, and the emergence of a brave new world of lateral surveillance. His response was a project he called “camera zapping,” which is both “robust metaphor” and actual technique. In his reflexive account of the formation of his research questions and subsequent development of an “anti-tool,” he describes his discovery of the means by which one can repurpose, appropriate, or otherwise hack a laser pointer such that it can be used to interrupt the operation of a camera: “The results were striking. The tiny beam neutralized regions of the camera sensor far larger than the actual size of the beam. Properly aimed, it could block a far-away camera from seeing anything inside of a large window.” In other words, “zap!”—a camera can be instantly, albeit temporarily, counter-vailed. On the basis of this discovery, mined from the “gold vein” of military literature, Naimark assembled a set of prototypes for tactical tools and tested the effects of different classes of lasers on cameras at distances up to 200 meters. He ended with a “rather serious” zapper comprised of a rifle scope, laser gun sight, and tripod, as well as a small, handheld device, in the event that “one wanted to scare away a news cameraperson”: an elegant weapon for a more civilized age. His artist statement offers photographic documentation of failed photography (the potential frustration of a voyeur or policing agent) and gestures toward the project’s more expansive purpose, namely, to imagine how one might circumvent or evade the targeting process and opt out of surveillance regimes. “One role of the artist in the contemporary world,” he explained to the *New York Times*, “is to hold a mirror up to society ... and the artistic angle is in exposing and revealing and provoking things” (quoted in Markoff).

Performing exactly this function of critical speculum, the *Armored Dove of Peace*, an intervention attributed to the provocateur, guerrilla artist, and social critic Banksy, offers an altered perspective on the regime of red dot sight (Figure 17.4). Situated on the wall of the Palestinian Heritage Center in Bethlehem, it was originally claimed as part of Banksy’s seasonal fund-raising exhibition, Santa’s Ghetto. The artist moved the show from London to Palestine in December 2007 to help revitalize the area, which had seen a decline in tourism after construction began on the West Bank barrier



Figure 17.4 Banksy, *Armored Dove of Peace*, 2007

Source: Google Earth screen capture

wall. Communicating through representatives, he asserted at the time, “It would do good if more people came to see the situation here for themselves. If it is safe enough for a bunch of sissy artists then it’s safe enough for anyone” (Frenkel). One of a series of stencil works sprayed on or near the wall, the *Armored Dove of Peace* is now one of the highlights of an unofficial Banksy Bethlehem art walk, which also includes his *Walled Off* hotel. The dove holds a green olive branch, after Pablo Picasso’s *Dove of Peace*, and is—in the style of many of the anonymous artist’s graffiti works—subtly but deeply biting. Wearing something like a flak jacket (the “armor” of the title), the dove is stationed unambiguously in the sights, its breast targeted by crosshairs and a red dot, a speculative line of fire that could be traced back across Manger Street to an approximate origin—a watchtower on the barrier wall.

How are we to regard this deployment of red dot sight? In this context, facing this wall, the indexical function of red dot sight is perhaps superfluous. We need no additional reminder of the structure of militarization and securitization that informs the red dot, its conditions of possibility. But we need also to take account of the armored vest, which the dove wears as if it, too, were aware of the security apparatus, apprehensive of the possibility of indiscriminate targeting and needing preemptively to guard itself against the possibility that snipers might take a shot.

The dove itself—or is it the artwork?—is positioned as a target. Indeed, the surface was “riddled with bullet holes” at the time the mural was painted, some of which have now been covered over with posters (Harrison). “Peace,” then, as instantiated in the figure of the dove, is always under threat, threatened by its perception of itself as a target. What hope for peace if the dove needs to wear a protective vest? It is embedded from the outset in the very conflict from which it seemingly tries to escape. It matters not at all if the armored dove of peace reinforces or subverts the structure of red dot sight, because by the time it flies, aiming for an impossible future—peace as the target, wanted and in our sights—well, it is already too late....

## Notes

- 1 On the role of science fiction in the discourse of laser weapons, see Fanning; Haley; Hecht; Slayton. On connections between science fiction and military technologies more generally, see Dedman; Franklin; Gannon; Gray; Milburn. One striking aspect of the early market for laser gun sights in the U.S. is that it included not only military and police customers but also survivalists. The Laser Products company, for example, advertised in survivalist publications and reinforced the survivalist anticipation of apocalyptic futures (Vartabedian).
- 2 On the history of military perception and the weaponizing of vision, see Bousquet; Crandall; Kaplan, *Arial Aftermaths*; Lenoir and Caldwell; Stahl; Terry and Kelly; Thornton; Virilio.
- 3 On the social construction of high-tech targeting and the rhetoric of speed, precision, and surgical strikes, see Chow; Cooper; Kaplan, "Precision Targets"; Phillips; Scarry; Slayton.
- 4 The Swedish company Aimpoint claims to be the "originator of the red dot sight." The letter "o" in their brand logo is even punctured by a red dot. In 1975, the company released the Aimpoint® Electronic reflexive sight, advertising it with campaigns focused on hunting. Today, Aimpoint promotes its red dot sights as sleek devices laden with a long history of scientific expertise: "We've done the science. You pull the trigger" (Aimpoint).
- 5 The zone of trouble conjured by red dot sight is one example of the displacement of temporal uncertainty (what does the future hold?) onto spatial management; see Aradau and van Munster, "The Time/Space of Preparedness." Such displacements have intensified over the last 40 years. "Precautionary risk" has now become a dominant spatializing logic of governmentality and securitization, especially after 9/11; see Aradau and van Munster, "Governing Terrorism Through Risk."
- 6 There are other aspects of uncertainty (was "yes!" a performative or an answer to the question?) and responsibility (the caller implicates Stu in the assassination by retroactively converting his assertion into a command: "you oughta be more careful with what you say").
- 7 On the ways in which snipers and sniper media cultivate paranoid forms of perception, see Shell.
- 8 On preemptive security practices as performative exercises in "routinizing the imagination," see de Goede et al; Thomas.

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