Sovereign terror, legal style, Giambattista Vico, and the military drone as rhetorical archetype

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Introduction

Here come the eagles. There go the locusts. The sky delivers the hand of God as well as fallen angels on their Hell-bound descent. We welcome the spring sunshine, and shelter from the cyclones. Rain gives life while space junk burns through the stratosphere. From above comes the invisible hand of capitalism, apportioning wealth and destitution, and manufacturing privileged oases alongside toxic ruins. Airplanes deliver emergency food-aid and tons of bombs. Gods and monsters dwell in deep space, so in the sky, as on earth, humanity can greet its most perfected and horrendous mutations. And from our airspace descends the topic of this article – drones. Drones, or unmanned aerial vehicles [UAVs], deliver figurative payloads that interconnect the political, religious, capitalistic, visual and visceral global society. Drones are marvels of technological achievement that make our movies more beautiful and our militaries more terrifying; they observe and record the world in exciting new ways while facilitating powerful new forms of surveillance. UAVs entertain recreational drone racers and UCAVs (unmanned combat aerial vehicles) disintegrate children. And as humanity faces this somewhat new aerial power, drones must be reconciled with conventional social institutions, including the powers of law and rhetoric, which provide the interpretive framework for this essay’s assessment of the relationship between drones and style.

I argue that stylistic patterns of archetype usage reveal how societies understand drones and that differing rhetorical conceptions of the archetype of airborne power influence the social institutions that regulate UAVs. Thinking stylistically – through figures and tropes (elocutio) – humanity has configured itself as a global drone society. By drone society I mean that drones manifest a specific contemporary worldview that, with the cognitive assistance of rhetorical tropes, is imbued with historical knowledge of airborne power. People fall into typical antithetical patterns of depicting the positive and negative forces that descend from the sky, and drones, too, are understood for their beneficial and dangerous capacities according to repetitive commonplace tropes that are connected to the intellectual, ethical, technological, and political capacities of drones to wield a trinity of powers – observation, authorisation, and execution. Drones, as institutionalised manifestations of the archetype of airborne power, surveil, police, and punish, delivering law, just and unjust, unto populations. Thereby they enter into a multiplicity of legal structures, judicial and extrajudicial, from banning drone flights over crowds to facilitating lawless assassinations. As drones enter into legal understanding via rhetoric and embodied experience, the stylistic patterns of drone discourses interconnect with other historical, archetypal, and stylistic conceptions of airborne dangers and panaceas. In this way, patterned, stylistic depictions of drones perpetuate an ancient thought pattern – fear of death delivered with terrifying force by omniscient and omnipotent sources, countered by worship of the life-giving foundational principles of authority that support institutions, including religions, governments, and

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economies. As a counterforce, these institutionalised powers necessitate and compel resistance to drone society.

In order to analyse the central archetype of drone society, I invoke Giambattista Vico’s theory of “poetic wisdom”. Vico provided a historical methodology for interpreting how fundamental elements of style – metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche and irony – reveal the origins, status quo and future trajectory of societies via the transformation of the language used to describe, narrate and connect its vital archetypes. According to Vico, “popular traditions [and myths] always have a public basis in truth, which explains their birth and their preservation for many years by entire peoples.” Popular drone truths, or drone common sense, exemplify how and why airborne power possesses authoritative force. The combination of common sense and authority provides the foundational logic and ongoing institutional legitimation of drones.

Although rhetoric undergirds all of his work, Vico is conducive to an analysis of style, legality and weapons because not only is law “paradigmatic for Vico” and his rhetorical theory, but his historicist perspective facilitates linking the past and present. Looking backward, Vico understood ancient Greek rhetoric as the origin-point of both a “universal right” and subsequent legal systems. And cognisant of the co-development of military-research sciences and law as, respectively, fundamental instruments and a systematic “complementary aid” for inquiry, he presciently understood the militaristic trajectory of modern advanced study, while also identifying a specific correlation between successful warfare and successful eloquence. In these ways, Vico facilitates understanding of how durable stylistic patterns perpetuate drone society’s thinking about airborne power, and reveals a particular legal style characterised by figurative vagueness.

I begin by elucidating how Vico provided a methodology of rhetorical criticism. Then I use that methodology to analyse some of drone society’s commonplace tropes for the archetype of airborne power to demonstrate how institutions reflect common sense rhetoric and vice versa. I conclude by suggesting that Vico’s methodology is generalisable to myriad topics and worthy of uptake.

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The Emergent Methodology of Vico’s “Poetic Wisdom”

Vico’s theory of “poetic wisdom” provides a somewhat idiosyncratic model of rhetorical criticism. Poetic wisdom demonstrates how the “four master tropes” validate the thought patterns that formulate interpretive, archetypal worldviews. From analyses of the master tropes in action, a methodology emerges from Vico’s New Science that shows how collective common sense and style configure drones as the contemporary iteration of the archetype of airborne power.

In short, Vico’s critical methodology uses etymology, analogy and ingenium to explicate how a society’s collective common sense, or sensus communis, reflects that society’s institutions via rhetoric and vice versa. Ingenium is the most vital aspect of the methodology, and likely the least familiar. Vico defined ingenium as “the faculty that connects disparate things and diverse things.” The sharpest thinkers, according to Vico, “are able to find a likeness or ratio between things very different and far removed from one another, some way in which they are cognate, or who leap over the obvious and recall from distant places the connections appropriate for the things under discussion.” Together etymology, analogy, and ingenium divulge imaginative, unexpected, and revelatory historical connections. Ingenium, first and foremost, “is the mother of poetic inventions” and therefore the driver of the poetic wisdom that defines drone society’s common sense.

Vico’s concept of poetic wisdom focuses on the multidirectional thinking and abstract reasoning that rhetoric and the master tropes empower. Vico used his facility with ingenium and tropes in New Science to survey world history, and by doing so, he demonstrated the interaction of commonplace rhetoric and common sense. Vico defined sensus communis as both the “unreflecting judgment shared by an entire social order, people, nation, or even all humankind” and “the guiding standard of eloquence.” When common sense matches common rhetorical patterns, the institutions and other works that develop in that period reflect a society’s poetic wisdom. For Vico, New Science’s “master key” unlocks the “poetic wisdom” materialized by the origins, structures and transformations of societies such that rhetoric provides the empirical evidence of collective human understanding. “All the primary figures of speech are corollaries of poetic logic”, he wrote, referring to the way that languages reflect thinking and vice versa. The connections between thought and style become collective wisdom when the same concepts appear again and again in different languages across time and space to form similar social institutions (e.g. families, religions, governments). Inventive connection-making reveals a “history of human ideas”, adds words to the universal “conceptual dictionary of human social institutions” and underpins a “philosophy of authority”. Thus, historical usage of archetypes, novel drone tropes, and institutional formations provide the evidence to make assertions about drone-society thinking.

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11 Vico, Most Ancient Wisdom, p. 102.
12 Ibid. 162; and Vico, Study Methods, p. 13.
14 Ibid. 24.
15 Ibid. 128-131.
Vico’s methodology hence entails evidencing the master tropes to make connections that demonstrate how social institutions emerge from rhetoric and how rhetoric transforms institutions. Using ingenium, as described by Vico scholars, empowers critics to “make connections among disparate elements” with a type of “patternning” that “constructs knowledge” in conjunction with the full range of topics and the master tropes. Ingenium creates poetic wisdom when “one image seeds the next; one word, one symbol, one myth leads to another, not through any logical extrapolation but through an endless social dialectic between public language on the one hand and a culture’s changing sense of self on the other.” These “great chains of images” and “etymologies … function always as parts of a great puzzle, as means by which disparate items are bound together or things unknown produced from what is familiar or near at hand.” In the end, these “linguistic expressions may be used to determine the world view of a historical period”. Thus, the master tropes function as the evidence to make large etymological, theoretical, symbolic, and argumentative leaps in order to explain social transformations. So, more than a “reductive” limiting principle that “impoverishes” the concept of rhetoric, concentrating attention on the master tropes opens up the entire global, historical, empirical database of language, liberating critics by encouraging them to delve into the numerically sublime network of potential linguistic connections. A critic can employ Vico’s rhetorical methodology by locating a topic, and seeking understanding of it via inventive assertions about the historical relationships between institutional power, common sense and style.

An instructive example of how Vico’s critical methodology works and how he envisioned it functioning is evidenced by New Science’s frontispiece, which serves as a type of Enlightenment-era infographic of the book’s argumentation. Observe the interconnections of the frontispiece’s objects and concepts.

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16 Hobbs, Rhetoric on the Margins of Modernity, p. 90.
18 Ibid. 232 and 195.
All the elements of the frontispiece are metaphoric, synecdochic and metonymic representations of human society. Among many other tropes, readers observe the eye of God (synecdoche) radiating the ray of providence (metonymy) onto metaphysic’s (metonymy for Vico’s axioms, postulates, and definitions) breastplate jewel (metaphor). Providence reflects into Homer (an archetype), the founder Greco-Roman culture, culture that is symbolised by a series of visual metaphors collected at the bottom of the image to represent institutions such as medicine, government, religion, law and language. These tropes connect the divine to the human, ancient prehistory to Vico’s time, and ancient Greek to the vernacular terms each reader of New Science uses to name these objects. The whole image elucidates the inherent connection between rhetoric and universal, collective common sense, or poetic wisdom. Yet, as much as it explicates New Science, the frontispiece is a thoroughly ironic construction of society. This Eurocentric image subverts his arguments about universality even as ironic ingenium still connects them to the world’s cultures. Vico’s methodology thus connects far-flung trope to far-flung trope to interpret the entries in his universal dictionary, which would include UAV as a recent addition.

Piracy, whose archetypal powers arise from the depths rather than descending from above, further exemplifies Vico’s methodology. To explain piracy, Vico began with the metaphorical source of pirate power, Neptune, whose fundamental importance comes from the pre-historical, ubiquitous coining of words for water as another entry in humanity’s universal dictionary. As Vico explained, people “at first, pointing mutely … believed they interpreted [things] as the substances of the sky, earth, and sea, which they imagined to be deities; and, trusting the truth of their senses, they believed they were gods.”23 Being a powerful entity that controls weather patterns, tides, tsunamis, and the fates of all sea-goers and shoreline dwellers, “Neptune is portrayed as armed with the trident he used to make the earth quake”, Vico noted, and “with this trident, Neptune made people’s cities, terre, quake in fear of his raids.”24 Vico asserted that “fear of divinity … is the first and most fundamental basis of a commonwealth.”25 Vico thereby linked divinity and sovereignty via the trident/weapon metaphor while terre established the antithesis between sea and land. Two opposed sovereign domains entailed competing divinities, asymmetrical arsenals, and differing loci of jurisprudence. By invoking the land/sea dichotomy, Vico moved into a consideration of pirates as a more specific manifestation of “inhospitality” as the “basic principle of the ancient law of war”, which both dictated seeing “foreigners” as “perpetual enemies” and justified raids against enemies “by land and sea”.26 Thus, with the prehistoric deification of water and earth, the bases of sovereign power, law and warfare ensued before common sense us vs. them binaries became codified in the diplomacy and international laws that protect nations from each other and from pirates,27 if not from hurricanes, maelstroms, and other materialisations of Neptune’s trident.

Homer, as the central example in New Science, synthesises Vico’s methodology. Homer reflected the common tropes of his era that over time became archetypal, and

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23 Vico, New Science, p. 158.
24 Ibid. 284.
25 Ibid. 280.
26 Ibid. 285-288.
thereby Homer also became a model archetype. By modelling archetypes, Homer proved foundational for Greek society’s collective understanding of both itself and its institutional rationale. After Homer narrated the Iliad and the Odyssey, Greeks could “imagine human behavior only in terms of the striking archetypes of their illustrious exemplars”, such as Achilles, Odysseus, Agamemnon, Helen, etc. Over millennia innumerable tropes have adhered to these heroic archetypes. Vico explained that generalisations about personality types depicted in the two popular tales concretised into foundational principles via constraints introduced by poetic language. He wrote “poetic archetypes … represent the manner of thinking of entire peoples” by “magnify[ing] the ideas of particular things” and imagining ways to express them as general maxims. In this way, poetic archetypes provide the foundational trajectory for the co-development of rhetoric and society. They do not disappear. Rather, they attain, maintain and lose social power over time as new tropes transform the original models. Homer thus initiated a process that generated common sense out of poetic particulars. In turn, Greek nationalism developed from Homeric archetypal metonym, “because these Greek peoples were themselves Homer”. Homer the archetype therefore became valorised for his synecdochic relationship to the whole of the Greek population, his metaphorical representation of history, and his mythic capacity to metonymically switch between being the cause of Greek society and an effect of it. This foundational valorisation of Homer, though, was ironic for Vico because Homer was just a random poet-commoner who used commonplace tropes to narrate the commonplace topics of his era. Greek doxa remains rooted in Homeric narrative, even as contexts have changed, and therein lies the particular Greek “conceit of the nations” or its amplified nationalistic ego.

Even though a generic archetype remains perpetually vital, the name and form of archetypes keep transforming via humanity’s multitude of languages and the proliferation of tropes within each language. From one perspective, Vico held a somewhat traditional view of archetypes, defining them as “certain imaginative general categories”, “what myths are in essence” and “simply the most complete ideas of human types in each genre”. They are “imaginative categories or universals, to which … men could assign all the particular species that resembled them.” Yet, Vico emphasised that the functional role of archetypes is to move thought back and forth between the general and the particular, the whole and the parts. “Philosophical statements approach the truth as they ascend to universality. Poetic statements gain certainty as they descend to particulars”, Vico wrote. Trope, and especially metonymy and synecdoche, aid this movement. As human inventions – from technologies to personality types – become the archetypes that infiltrate commonplaces, their designs provide the conventional, patterned style of their social

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28 Vico, New Science, p. 381.
29 Ibid. 365.
32 Ibid. 382.
33 Ibid. 355-363.
34 Ibid. 76.
36 Ibid. 93.
37 Ibid. 95.
embedded-ness by indicating how tropes interconnect them. Many topics, artefacts and archetypes remain static, even as new topics, artefacts and archetypes emerge. Tropes empower understanding of the interconnectedness of the model archetypes and their new impermanent iterations. In this way, of all the theorists of archetypes, Vico is perhaps closest to Marshall McLuhan, who defined an archetype as “retrieved awareness or consciousness” and “consequently a retrieved cliché” to which “other archetypes’ residues adhere”.\(^3^8\) Over time, archetypes pick up and cast off attributes according to differing tropes. The master tropes render the same experience into different words, names and phrases that in turn metaphorically, synecdochically, metonymically and ironically spin off new variants that add polysemy and nuance to old archetypes.

Thus, archetypes facilitate the use of the master tropes, the tropes in turn reify archetypes, and Vico has provided a somewhat eccentric methodology for rhetorical criticism that mobilises etymologies, analogies and ingenuity to reveal how societal institutions form according to underlying rhetorical patterns. The methodology developed in New Science might seem chaotic and unbounded, but it is exactly this multifaceted characteristic of Vico’s version of philological empiricism that explains how any iconic person or object can accrue so many different meanings, interpretations and judgments. Hence, I now turn to an analysis of UAVs and drone society’s version of the archetype of airborne power. Like the archetype of Homer both reveals a dense network of tropes that have defined what it means to be Greek and represents the best and worst of human behaviour, the archetype of airborne power as materialised by UAVs reveals a dense network of tropes that interconnect the people and institutions that attempt to manage drone society’s laws and ethics.

**Drone-Society Style: Tropes, Surveillance and Extra-Judicial Killing**

Drones, with their capacities to surveil and destroy, revise an archetypal symbol that fits well within the analytical domain of New Science. Drones connect to the frontispiece’s sword, divine omniscient eye, and the authority established by their iconic proximity. Vico wrote that the frontispiece’s sword “represents the public wars waged by the cities, which originated in brigandage and piracy” and is “supported by the fasces”, a symbol for administrative authority.\(^3^9\) The frontispiece sword and fasces symbolise the interconnection of weapons to societies and their legal structures, while also indicating that rival populations’ power rests upon both military might and self-centred, nationalistic conceptions of justice.\(^4^0\) By contemporary metaphorical extension, the sword symbolises drones and the fasces symbolise contemporary constitutions, treaties and other legal documents. This visual analogy alludes to the ways that the master tropes connect all drone-society stakeholders to each other across demographics, economies, political hierarchies and locations, as do all analogous weapons and other airborne dangers and panaceas in a vast terminological and conceptual network of surveillance and “rhetoricoviolence”.\(^4^1\) As drone society’s tropes depict the archetype of airborne power, their proliferation shows what different populations think about drones and reveals the sources of drones’ legitimacy.


\(^4^0\) *Ibid.* 16 and 28.

\(^4^1\) Heather Ashley Hayes, *Violent Subjects and Rhetorical Cartography in the Age of the Terror Wars*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), p. 34.
and illegitimacy. I therefore suggest that the tropes that inform drone common sense configure the authority of governmental, legal and social institutions and vice versa. Drones possess the power of their own holy trinity – omniscience (observation), omnipotence (policing) and killing (sovereignty) – which metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche and irony elucidate as contested drone common sense.

The most common UAV metaphor – “drone” – comes from Middle English and refers both to male bees whose sole task is impregnating queens and to monotonous buzzing sounds. The most eloquent drone wisdom, once connected to its archetypal model, becomes the template for all the imitative, banal bee clichés that follow therefrom. Vico noted that “when people can form no idea of distant and unfamiliar things, they judge them by what is present and familiar”, and so buzzing, swarming bees have come to represent black-boxed drone technologies. Contemporary drone bee and bee-vision metaphors connect the divine power of omniscience to the capacities of drones to surveil and record the world, so the commonplace tendency to call UAVs drones makes sense when people see them flying about mindlessly collecting data, like bees collecting pollen.

As drone operators record the world for monetisable data, like scouts surveilling fields for blooms, drone businesses seek distant markets desirous of drone delivery services for everything from dry goods to human organs. While common usage of drone has become modified to now connote mindless workers rather than impregnators or idlers, the monotonous buzzing sound of the bees still fits its etymological sonic origins. These mundane bee-like UAV attributes have necessitated and codified a number of standard non-military drone guidelines that are iterated in numerous government documents, like India’s “Digital Sky” initiative: thou shalt not fly drones near airports and international borders. Thus, the drone metaphor helps to mandate that drone operators must work within standard legal protocols at the same time drone operations, sometimes mindless, perturb the limits of changing regulations.

Drone cameras, sometimes regulated but often not, reimagine the world through bees’ eyes as a type of “drone vision”. Drone vision gets earthbound humans to see the world as drones do, as in the infamous grainy images of US extrajudicial assassinations in the Middle East that might, if distribution spreads, increase public demand for accountability for drone warfare. But drone vision can see in high resolution too, providing novel, beautiful cinematographic perspectives of, say, Rift Valley waterfalls or bombed-out Aleppo. Drone vision enlivens and enhances our films, amateur videography and journalism by emplacing the viewer in a bee-like aerial position that increases the amount of available visual data. Conversely, with its “dull repetition, indolence of movement, and lacunas and banalities within visual narrative”, low-quality and repetitive drone footage might be

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42 Vico, New Science, p. 76.
43 For an introduction to the rhetorical implications of surveillance, see the Surveillance/Rhetoric issue of African Yearbook of Rhetoric, 3(1), 2012.
just plain boring.\textsuperscript{47} Whether exhilarating or boring, though, video and photography enthusiasts can see the world with metaphorical bee vision.

As a counterpart to drone vision, the apt blended metaphor “drone porn” connotes the voyeuristic pleasure introduced by UCAVs’ recording and killing capacities,\textsuperscript{48} and indicates that drone cameras are sophisticated enough to create erotic surveillance footage.\textsuperscript{49} People knocking and shooting privacy-invading drones out of the sky demonstrates that most people do not want to be subjected to drone vision’s gaze, which elucidates another commonplace drone principle that law has yet to well regulate: thou shalt not record me without my permission. Everyone’s power to avoid getting “shot” with a drone camera would seem to validate shooting down drones. But, “don’t shoot it out of the sky – report it”, advised one British Columbia police officer, adding “if you want to shoot something, shoot it with your camera.”\textsuperscript{50} Apparently drone repellent mobilises surveillance technologies as neighbours become reconfigured as antagonistic spies. Yet, when drones threaten privacy, common sense dictates that individual rights to privacy trump any public right to surveillance.

Drones are insect pests.

Beyond omniscient privacy invasion, all-seeing deities render judgments and inflict punishments according to the laws written in their name, and such is the case when drone surveillance intersects with drone violence. So rather than buzzing, the etymology of “drone” indicates, via Swedish and German etymologies, that to drone is to roar, or for a UAV, to announce its violence capacity.\textsuperscript{51} David Gregory noted the “genetic pathways between WWII-era hornet/weapon metaphors and what the Pashtun now call the \textit{machay}, the bees that have their own deadly sting.”\textsuperscript{52} Other common drone metaphors, such as “Reaper” and “Predator”, further draw attention to the mindless, buzzing activity of worker-soldiers who serve a centralised authority, but who might deliver their sting without warning anytime one hears their approach. The buzz is “the sound of terror”.\textsuperscript{53} When drones impinge on foreign airspace, they focus attention on the bee’s stinger and the judicial powers of injuring and authorising injury, especially as controlled by the most notorious user of UCAVs, the United States military.

Drones society’s central metonymy involves the substitution of the causes and effects of drone warfare whereby American sovereignty (cause) represents the violence delivered by its Predators and Reapers (effects) and vice versa. Vico defined

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{stahl} Stahl, “What the Drone Saw”, p. 663.
\bibitem{drone} “Drone”, \textit{Oxford English Dictionary}.
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the somewhat flexible concept of metonymy as substituting cause for effect (and vice versa) and substituting an attribute of a thing for the name of a thing (and vice versa). Specifically, “drone strike” and “targeted killing” metonymically condense the complex interactions of the US, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Yemen, Sudan and elsewhere, and the international laws and treaties that legitimate (or not) UCAVs. These metonyms connect destruction and bloodshed on the ground to the jurisprudence that is supposed to govern UCAVs. Even as other countries increase their drone programmes this metonym iterates and reiterates the common-sense association of UCAVs with the US’s tens of thousands of War-on-Terror drone sorties. Blood on the ground, in Waziristan, for instance, is thus the effect of the US’s technological and extrajudicial control of airspace, while the same blood comes to define the unethical character of US sovereignty.

The sovereignty/killing metonym contained within “drone strike” implicates American society’s responsibility for its militarism. The US’s UCAV programme has broken or stretched multiple domestic and international laws, including breaching the US Constitution’s Fourth Amendment protections against illegal searches, bypassing the mandate for the US Congress to approve declarations of war, impinging on international borders and airspace without permission to carry out acts of war, assassinating its own citizens without due process (e.g. Anwar al-Awlaki and Samir Khan), and generally trouncing international standards for the conduct of war. The US Air Force defined “air and space power” as “the synergistic application of air, space and information systems to project global strategic military power”, but drone strikes connect the UCAV programme to drone society’s other key metonym – “targeted killing”. As Paul Virilio has noted, “the violence of speed has become both the location and the law, the world’s destiny and its destination.” With their combined powers of surveillance and violence, informatics and missiles, drones can become a type of remote constabulary that culminates in a brutal police raid reconfigured as targeted killing. The US’s UCAV programme corroborates that the new airborne logistical powers of communication and killing unofficially undermine global legal structures with a novel, automated and remote police brutality, despite the Department of Defense’s mandate to abide by international law of war protocols.

The obvious way to observe the metonymic power of drone strikes and to define the encroaching imperialism of American sovereignty is to visit violent places, to descend from the height of generalisation into the philological particulars and listen to the common-sense testimony of victims. As Vico noted, when the truth is elusive, people “hold to what is certain” and nothing is more certain than the blast of drone strike. For the foreign populations below American UCAV flightpaths, targeted killings and drone strikes have metonymically come to encompass almost the entire

58 USAF, Targeting, p. 88.
meaning of the US as a country. Khalid Raheem, a drone strike witness from Pakistan, testified that,

“We did not know that America existed. We did not know what its geographical location was, how its government operated, what its government was like, until America invaded Iraq and Afghanistan … Now we are always awaiting a drone attack and we know it’s certain and it’s eventual and it will strike us, and we’re just waiting to hear whose house it will strike, our relatives’, our neighbors’, or us. We do not know. We’re just always in fear.”

In the drone-strike metonymy, the effects of terror and killing represent the US’s causal reliance on aerial attacks, eclipsing the US’s territory, population and government in symbolic importance. When foreign populations understand the US via its UCAV programme, the indiscriminate mandate of targeted killing with drone strikes invites potential terrorist blowback. Peter Sloterdijk has noted that when terror and terrorism descend from the air to transform the sky into a battlefield with “assaults on the environmental conditions of the enemy’s life”, enemies “are helpless to counter” the “atmoterrorism” of war as it “becomes indissociable from an extra-judicial trial”. Drone violence thus symbolises American-style justice. As the lawless signifiers of the American regime, drone strikes and targeted killings motivate Pashtunwali – “revenge for the death of a close relative or fellow tribesman”. In circular fashion, the same metonymic relationship between cause (terrorism) and effect (the War on Terror) comes to represent the US’s mass-mediated popular understanding of its relationship to the Middle East.

The certainty of drone violence also shapes the US’s reactionary legal interpretation of the metonymy of drone strikes and targeted killings. On 12 December 2013, a General Atomics Predator approached the al-`Amri or al-Tisi family’s wedding party’s convoy in Aqabat Za’j, outside the city of Rad’a, Yemen. The drone operator launched a Lockheed Martin Hellfire Missile. And another. And another. Twelve dead and fifteen injured. According to Abdullah Mabkhut al-`Amri, “we were in a wedding, but all of a sudden it became a funeral … We have nothing, not even tractors or other machinery. We work with our hands. Why did the United States do this to us?” The singular truth of this drone strike, however, is vexed by the proliferation of the multiple probabilities and “numberless” falsehoods that could be derived from the same incident. The answer to al-`Amri’s question is that the US targeted the wedding convoy because drone operators decided that the victims were terrorist militants, and because US UCAV operators can use almost any justification to target anyone in the name of American sovereignty.

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64 Vico, Study Methods, p. 19.
US UCAV targeting policies import the vagueness of drone metonymy to legalise drone warfare with the assertion that the goal of national security justifies any instance of lethal American sovereignty.65 “For an operational plan that includes the option of lethal force against targets other than identified HVTs [high value targets], an explanation of why authorising direct action against targets other than identified HVTs is necessary to achieve U.S. policy objectives”, according to the Presidential Policy Guidance used by Barack Obama.66 For the Obama administration, that Yemeni wedding-party victims were not HVTs mattered little in terms of the legality of the drone strike, since “terroristic security threat” is all that the US UCAV mission planners need to see, think and say about Middle Eastern populations in order to justify violence. UCAVs thus deliver a particular vague legal style that uses sovereignty/killing metonymy to legitimate any act of war. Whatever the drone observes, the drone can mindlessly sting.

Sovereignty/killing metonymies empower the US government’s sense of divine authority67 in addition to empowering the convenient legal exceptions that the US uses to further legitimise its UCAV programme. For instance, the 2009 Military Commissions Act contains multiple exceptions to its detailed legal procedures, exceptions that declare drone strikes legal whenever the conduct of warfare makes legality and justice inconvenient, or when, in the words of former US Attorney General Eric Holder, another “nation is unable or unwilling to deal effectively with a threat to the United States”.68 According to Giorgio Agamben, “the normative aspect of law can … be obliterated and contradicted with impunity by a governmental violence that—while ignoring international law externally and producing a permanent state of exception internally—nevertheless still claims to be applying the law.”69 Hence the Obama administration used states of exception to transform specific bureaucratic legal rhetoric into ambiguous drone pseudo-law that Ian Shaw and Majed Akhter call “lawlike” or “lawlite”.70 The nebulous foreign incapacity to guarantee US security, as an exception, is lawlike because, as soon as the Military Commissions Act details legal UCAV protocols, it diverges from and contradicts the legislation by appealing to wartime sovereignty as a means to authorise almost any drone strike or targeted killing. Thus, the US government understands UCAVs through common sense metonymic sovereign conceit that overrides international

66 Ibid. 4.
collective common sense understanding of targeted killings as unethical, extrajudicial assassinations.

Sovereignty/killing metonymies also inhibit resistance to drone society by concealing accountability for targeted killings behind the broad ambiguity and applicability of lawlite’s exceptions. Oppositional common-sense perceptions of drone strikes and targeted killings tend to categorise people into two possible personalities – those who condone drone strikes and targeted killings according to the ethics and legalisms used by the US, and those who condemn them and the perfidy of lawlite extrajudicial exceptions. Advocating drones therefore entails advocating American sovereignty, and resisting drones entails resisting American sovereignty. Anti-American sentiment can hence appear as anti-drone sentiment, or “droneism”, a kind of technological, rather than racial, bigotry.\(^{71}\) As central metonyms for the US, drone strikes and targeted killing have become defining features of Barack Obama’s presidency, as indicated by the common sense of the popular “I have a drone” internet meme.\(^{72}\) Martin Luther King Jr.’s “dream” of African-American dissent and political power transformed, via metonymy and collective *ingenium*, into a nightmare of extrajudicial airborne terror in which holding people accountable, including Obama, presents a daunting legal challenge.

President Obama’s close association with drone strikes points toward drone society’s primary synecdoche that identifies drones with the governmental systems that control them and vice versa. Closely related to metonymy, synecdoche uses a part to represent a whole or a whole to represent a part. This synecdoche defines the US as a drone-centric society. In short, the whole of a country that deploys drones can be represented by that one part of its arsenal. When UCAVs act as proxies for sovereign power by performing remote-controlled mobile surveillance, psychological manipulation and military punishment, that one technology should represent the entire American governmental apparatus becomes common sense.

Identifying the whole of the US with a part of its arsenal implies that drones are the definitive American social force. American drone sovereignty appears global because it deploys the most UCAVs, and this drone synecdoche connotes ever-encroaching empire. Academic assessments of drones tend to reiterate this common-sense synecdoche by which a technology becomes a new global sovereign entity that governs common sense, emotions and actions. The “tactical imagination” of UCAV deployment aims at perfected global “panoptic surveillance”,\(^{73}\) which supports the “technological rationality” of drone strikes that seek “global mastery”.\(^{74}\) Foucault has argued that a theoretical perfected panoptic surveillance, now by necessity updated with contemporary UAV optic technologies, would inscribe governmental power into individuals such that they observe, police and even punish themselves.\(^{75}\) Global mastery entails a global system, but when one country’s military dominates UCAV


\(^{72}\) Kevin Howley, “‘I Have a Drone’: Internet Memes and the Politics of Culture”, *Interactions: Studies in Communication & Culture*, 7(2), 2016, pp. 155-175.


usage, in turn, US drones seem to dominate both the US and the world. The weapon/state synecdoche is often iterated in drone scholarship to the point of becoming a clichéd academic meme, including my own usage of drone society. For Ian Shaw the US has created a “Predator Empire”, while for Grégoire Chamayou the US is a “drone state” and for Laurie Calhoun it’s a “drone nation” to synecdochically encompass, respectively, America’s ambitions, government and identity.76 McLuhan asserted that “new clichés or new technological probes and environments have the effect of liquidating or scrapping the preceding clichés of cultures and environments created by preceding technologies.”77 So, according to McLuhan’s logic, drone scholars follow drone common sense by replacing the “nuclear state” with the “drone state”. Thereby history, too, becomes UCAV-centric when “the age of the drone”78 replaces the nuclear age in a chronology of dominant American weapons technologies. History is a “rag-and-bone shop” littered with abandoned weapons clichés, in McLuhan’s words, while the archetype of airborne power remains vibrant across time.79

Irony often supports or subverts the other drone society tropes, demonstrating how differing perspectives construe drones as historically banal and as an unprecedented terror weapon. Irony is a “falsehood which reflection disguises in a mask of truth”, Vico wrote.80 Commonplace ironies that purvey euphemistic appeals to humanitarianism and energise archetypal Hollywood movie plots indicate that what I have called drone society is an artificial fabrication. The irony of the drone-society construction demonstrates that the advantage of Vico’s method is also its greatest risk, for when one centres any term, concept, institution or important entity and uses etymology, comparison and ingenium to identify and formulate the connections empowered by the master tropes, the results can be as reductive as they are revelatory.

Drone lawfare indicates that the complicated arguments for and against drone surveillance and drone strikes often retread all-too-familiar ironies based on “humanitarianism”. “The principle of humanity requires us to use weapons that will not inflict unnecessary suffering”, said Eric Holder, for instance.81 Even though the inhumanitarian toll of wedding-ceremony drone strikes is obvious, UCAV operators have been removed from direct battle, making the act of killing videogame-like82 and bolstering arguments that UCAVs preserve “life” rather than dealing death. Allison Rowland demonstrated that the Obama administration attempted to justify its UCAV programme with this “commitment to the sanctity of ‘life itself’” that “performs humanitarianism” by associating drones with life-affirming medical metaphors, such as “cleanliness, sterility, and [the] precision of surgical operations” that configure the

77 McLuhan, From Cliché to Archetype, p. 118.
79 McLuhan, From Cliché to Archetype, p. 158.
80 Vico, New Science, p. 162.
81 Holder, “Attorney General”.
82 Gregory, “Lines of Descent”.
enemy as a “cancer”. Irony thus matches domestic common sense, which will always be more attuned to preserving the home country’s soldiers at the expense of the enemy’s, and contradicts the “unbearably human” common sense of bombed populations for whom the US’s claims of “humanitarianism” can be nothing but ironic.

And when UCAVs kill, they also mislead with a pretence of power. Ironic drone power belittles the persuasive force of the US’s poetic wisdom but leaves technological power intact. Nancy Struever made a vital point that examining law with Vico means that “traditional constructs of ‘justice’ and ‘power’” cannot have an “edge” in legal contemplation. As positive law, commonplace UCAV legal stylistics lack nuance and just reiterate the binary of lawful vs. extrajudicial killing. Yet, Struever continued, “the distinctively human communicative capacity … is ‘the art of words’ that can represent good as evil, and evil as good. Insofar as they lack this capacity, bees have a social advantage over us.”

Ironically, the buzzing of drones forces humanity to rehash traditional antithetical ethical arguments about justice and rhetoric, which displays the archetype of airborne power’s sovereignty over language itself. Such nonhuman agency dehumanises humanity in the name of autonomous technology and ironises humanity’s lethal complicity. UCAVs and tedious legal argumentation that justifies slaughtering non-combatants in Waziristan with appeals to humanitarianism and lawlite legal exceptions only possess as much power as the sensus communis cedes to them.

Perhaps the best exemplar of ironised terroristic drone society that connects global surveillance’s informatics, policing, and targeted killings is portentous, but thoroughly fictitious. The 2014 Hollywood blockbuster Captain America: The Winter Soldier mobilises the generic white superhero-saves-the-world from an autonomous technology-out-of-control plot. In this film, the terminator technology is a UCAV system that uses artificial intelligence to surveil everyone’s internet and social media data, targeting anyone who might dissent against a neo-totalitarian, global US regime. The movie’s exterministic AI-UCAV weapon aims to slaughter only imaginary victims, but the US Department of Defense’s Minerva Initiative, which seeks to predict dissent and terrorism based on patterned internet usage, teaches that the plot is all-too plausible. The movie ends, and although its storyline feels ominous, UCAVs still lack omniscience, omnipotence and sovereignty. The Minerva Initiative is not operational, but like all of humanity’s monsters “The Terminator” is ironically real because it mirrors common sense thinking through archetypes.

Thus, as people’s metaphors, metonymies, synecdoches and ironies position and reposition the institutional primacy of drones, humans and law, drone-centric

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89 The official Minerva Initiative website (https://minerva.defense.gov) has eliminated most descriptive content about the project.
common sense poetic wisdom, situated in between generalities and particulars, expresses both humanity’s precariousness and hope for technological security. Drone society as revealed through its tropes is only as factual and fictional as the facticity of Vico’s representation of all societies across time and place. Both Vico’s New Science and drone society are based upon common sense as revealed by everyday use of the master tropes that communicate stable, clichéed archetypes of airborne power, among many others. In place of Vico’s frontispiece, imagine an ironic frontispiece for this article: it depicts a lightning bolt emanating from Neptune’s trident, reflecting off Vico’s own mind’s eye, down onto Captain America and his patriotic shield, which converts the lightning into a stream of binary that illuminates an array of contemporary institutional symbols – a UCAV resting upon the US Constitution and UN and Geneva conventions. Nearby lie a pile of money, a small globe, a smartphone, an oil drum, and an ornate Pakistani wedding dress.

Conclusion
Just like Vico’s presentation of poetic wisdom, I have barely scratched the surface of the archetypal significance of drones and their tropes. Vico’s methodology, which links generalised concepts to the empirical evidence that shows how societies base their institutional common sense on rhetorical style, empowers critics to use ingenium to make connections across times, places, and languages by exploring etymologies, making comparisons, and finding representative examples of commonplace rhetorical expressions. The network of commonplace metaphors, metonymies, synecdoches and ironies that emerge from all corners of drone society provide an empirical foundation for analysing how the global community configures drones as a site of conceptual and material antagonism. Yet, drone society is an ironic, artificial fabrication. Vico’s methodology is risky and open to charges of inadequacy owing to the sheer numerical impossibility of making all potential analogical, stylistic and etymological connections. However, any rhetorical network that emerges from the method creates provocative revelations about how social institutions operate according to diverse versions of common-sense poetic wisdom – in this case, legality and sovereignty operate according to banal entomological vagueness. This advantage makes Vico’s methodology worthy of uptake as means of analysing competing rhetorical domains.

My interpretation of Vico’s methodology and my analysis of drone tropes indicate that people depend upon both incontrovertible facts and ironised constructions to understand complicated networks of sovereignty, legality and ethics. A Vichian analysis of tropes and archetypes shows how they illuminate the origins, transformations and stagnancy of social institutions as they attempt to create just societies. Sometimes, though, injustice ensues, often at the expense of enemy populations, but often enough for domestic populations too. Humanity’s worst and most unjust monsters have empirical rather than fictional origins, just as tropes come from common sense experience rendered into rhetorical form. Drone terror is as real as sovereign power can deliver and as real as the common-sense tropes that victims use to speak unspeakable violence.

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