

After an intruder has managed to penetrate deep into the White House, everybody is asking how on earth that could have happened. The response may be a mixture of surprise, anger and indignation. The mere fact that somebody succeeded – despite all security guards, gates, keycards etc. Frightening and impressive at the same time. And something that really should remain an incident.

So the security measures are criticised and fine tuned, and Julia Pierson, current head of the Secret Service, hands in her resignation. She admits she didn't have security up to par. Her replacement, Joseph Clancy, takes no half measures. He observes that training is taking place on a parking lot with improvised gates, but without real shrubbery or a fountain. His conclusion: the security services have no realistic image of the White House. And so he launches a plan to build a 1:1 model of it at the cost of about eight million euros, in which to train for every possible scenario imaginable.¹

I imagine Clancy convincing everybody of the need and necessity by time and again repeating a fear riddled story. His fearmongering pushes the question against whom or what the White House needs protecting into the background, to the point where only the measure itself is debated. So a completely realistic image of the White House will be developed.

There it is, without any context, like a scene, a practice ground, a decor for a bad movie. Script writers are hired to dream up every possible option for an attack. As more practice runs are executed in the model, it becomes more and more realistic; furniture, decorations and people are added. Even the president and his closest assistants make an appearance, be it by body doubles. They perform in the ongoing training that is staged for the army of security personnel. Security measures are implemented in the actual White House, based on worst case scenarios and how they might play out in the fictitious White House. Measures are taken before there is even a hint of actual danger. And so the fictitious world starts entering the real one.

What started out as a desire to create a realistic image of the White House, turns into a hyperrealistic image in which nobody knows

anymore how to distinguish between real and unreal. Security personnel sometimes forget in which White House they find themselves, the president sees certain advantages to having a double, employees mistake real situations for training, and discussions in one White House become mixed up with discussions in the other...

But it hasn't gotten to that point quite yet. As far as we know, training is still done in a parking lot.

Clancy's solution is old school and that is why it gets the imagination going. Considering to spend eight million euros on a physical model, in this era of technology – in which every possible world can be created in virtual reality, in which heat, movement and sound sensors can monitor every twitch, in which cameras with facial and emotional recognition possibilities are available – is nothing if not remarkable. But Clancy realises that any simulation of reality, impacts reality itself, whether you imitate the White House on a parking lot or through VR-goggles. A 'hard' copy implies reality, but in the end, any copy of reality changes it, no matter how life-like and realistic it seems to be.

Making a copy is a tried and tested method of learning and understanding how the original works. The Americans have done it before. They built a replica of an Iranian nuclear facility in the Tennessee woods to find out how close Teheran was to building an atom bomb. That same exercise also helped the Obama administration in testing a computerworm (stuxnet) which, according to Iran, was deployed to sabotage their nuclear program. And in the field of defence and security, duplication is a tried method for deception. Think of a long line of cases or vehicles to disguise which one contains the money or the president, think of mock-ups of installations that create confusing radar images, think of body doubles, think of software that imitates regular computer software while stealing sensitive information. Even the famous NSA headquarters, that shiny black cube, serves mostly as an iconic image, whilst the real NSA work is done in NSA duplications.²

Would Clancy too have calculated that – much like the caves at Lascaux or Michelangelo’s David – the White House copy would slowly replace the original, by which attention would be diverted away from it, leaving it better protected?

Basically, Clancy proposes a form of shadow architecture. Just like companies that keep a second set of books with incoming and outgoing moneys that should remain hidden, the White House copy is meant for testing situations that nobody should see. The structure becomes a scene in which the same defensive operation is continually performed, i.e. protecting the president. And one may wonder how many scenarios could possibly be needed for that exercise.

Conceiving a performance or a scenario is an alternative to making a concrete copy, and it can serve equally well as a way to learn and understand how the original works. It is a well known method in the arts. One tries to imagine how something works, how something is or what could happen – and that is what you show, in a movie, a play, a building, a painting or a text. That which never happened, unfolds realistically before our eyes. What is shown isn’t a reflection of reality as such, but the process of showing it, is.³ Things that are totally absurd or horrendous become imaginable and visible, something you can relate to.

Just like the copy, a ‘phantastic’ scenario can push reality into the background, into oblivion and even reshape it. As long as that happens on stage, or in a movie, it is relatively innocent. The moment the imaginary penetrates the real world, it can have far reaching consequences.

Thinking in speculative scenarios exemplifies this. After 9/11 it has led to numerous measures originating from speculations on safety risks. Even before the danger materialises, it is eliminated pre-emptively.⁴ Thus, the invasion of Iraq appears to be justified by images which ‘pretend’. In 2003, general Colin Powell held a presentation at the United Nations in which he proved Iraq to have weapons of mass destruction. ‘The photos that I am about to show you are sometimes hard for the average person to interpret, hard for me. The painstaking work of photo analysis takes experts with years and years of experience, poring for hours and hours over light tables’, according to Powell.⁵ The photos show unclear structures with yellow blocks of explanatory text. The fact that in one photo buildings are visible that are not present in the next, is presented as evidence of Iraq’s tactics to mislead the inspectors. ‘Powell’s photographs claimed to show what we could not in fact see.’⁶ The Norse inspector’s reaction in which he states that what is presented as ‘a decontamination vehicle’ is in fact a water tank, doesn’t alter anything. Image and reality are no longer corresponding.

Images show, mislead, convince, embellish, veil, hide and manipulate reality. The reality lurking behind the images is more and more difficult to read and therefore easier and easier to manipulate. We simply don’t know anymore what is real and what isn’t. A realistic copy of the White House may seem an innocent, or even grotesque defensive tactic. Essentially it would be an example of the same misleading use of imagery, based on the same kind of speculative scenario-thinking that Powell used so well in his powerpoint presentation. As are the rigid safety regulations that are implemented in cities all over the world. More cameras, more fences, more poles, more eyes are needed to keep the city as it is scripted.⁷ Which is a one dimensional narrative of what a city should be: predictable, safe and clean, stage-managed to the nth degree in an attempt to contain any unforeseen problem.

This military or security infrastructure has a huge influence on the city, though it is usually completely invisible. It turns the city into a façade in which nothing is what it seems to be any longer, a city in which even its inhabitants, ruled by fear and distrust, don’t have to be the persons we think they are. That, it seems to me, should be the real scenario we need to imagine and counter. We have to prevent the city becoming a frozen script, and in fact turn it into an unpredictable play.

¹ Maarten Back, ‘Hoofd beveiliging wil replica Witte Huis; kosten 8 miljoen’, in: *NRC Handelsblad*, March 18th, 2015

² According to John Young (who, together with Deborah Natsios, is Cryptome) in a discussion with Gawker <http://gawker.com>

³ According to the Swiss theater-maker and writer Milo Rau in: Dominikus Müller, *Die Grenzen der Empfindsamkeit*, Frieze d/le No 24, Sommer 2016.

⁴ See also Ulrich Beck on the principles of prevention in his book *Risk Society: Towards a new Modernity*, 1992 (originally published in German in 1986, *Risikogesellschaft. Auf dem Weg in eine andere Moderne*) Also see the research on speculative security by Marieke de Goede, a political scientist affiliated with the Amsterdam University.

⁵ Nicholas Mirzoeff, *How to See the World*, 2015, p.115-116

⁶ Nicholas Mirzoeff, *How to See the World*, 2015, p.116

⁷ The term ‘scripted city’ is coined by Norman Klein