

NUCLEAR COINCIDENCE AND THE KOREAN AIRLINE DISASTER

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Oliver Clubb. *KAL FLIGHT 007: THE HIDDEN STORY.* Sag Harbor, N.Y.: The Permanent Press, 1985.

Alexander Dallin. *BLACK BOX, KAL007 AND THE SUPERPOWERS.* Berkeley: U of California P, 1985.

Murray Sayle. "KE007, A CONSPIRACY OF CIRCUMSTANCES." *The New York Review of Books*, 25 April 1985.

A piece of Nuclear Criticism, this analysis of the unaccountable wandering and cruel downing of Korean Airline flight 007 aims to position itself in relation to other accounts of the incident according to the fundamental rule of this specific kind of critical activity, the rule of giddy incompetence.¹ The moment an essay adopts the rhetoric of technical competence in the service of establishing historical truth or political certainty, it ceases to be nuclear criticism, and becomes something else—political science, perhaps, history or journalism. The nuclear critic eschews the claims to competence and certainty, not insofar as he is not in fact "a professional of strategy, diplomacy or nuclear techno-science" [Derrida 27] (though the writer may be), but because in principle he assumes in his discourse the implications, the opportunities, as well as the constraints, of the standpoint of narrative temporality that has become possible by virtue of what Jacques Derrida has called the "*fabulous textuality*" of the nuclear phenomenon. In order to be fabulous, nuclear criticism must not only be incompetent, it must also be funny; if it is not, then it has jumped too far too fast to the end, or beyond the end, to view the world from some divine perspective of its having been destroyed. It ceases to be nuclear the moment it adopts the lugubrious tone and lurid pathos of prophetic language, all the while viewing the horror on the model of some previous "holocaust," from the mortifying but epistemologically confident, risky but still safe, perspective of what has elsewhere been called the nuclear sublime [cf. Ferguson, "The Nuclear Sublime"]. Its pious tone is the sign that the discourse has misconstrued the necessity and the difficulty of rethinking the end, of reinterpreting our whole temporal relation to the nuclear condition. The solemnity is a hint that beneath the surface there is some premium of pleasure being gained or of profit being made.

¹*Incompetence re-evaluated as a condition of nuclear criticism is an already fully articulated invention of Jacques Derrida in "No Apocalypse, Not Now (full speed ahead, seven missiles, seven misses)," Diacritics 14.2 (1984): 20–32.*

Unlike other wars, which have all been preceded by wars of more or less the same type in human memory . . . , nuclear war has no precedent. It has never occurred itself; it is a non-event. The explosion of American bombs in 1945 ended a "classical," conventional war; it did not set off nuclear war. The terrifying reality of the nuclear conflict can only be the signified referent, never the real referent (present or past) of a discourse or text. At least today, apparently. And that sets us thinking about today, our day, the presence of this present in and through that fabulous textuality. . . . For the moment, today, one may say that a non-localizable nuclear war has not occurred; it has existence only through what is said of it, only where it is talked about. Some might call it a fable, then, a pure invention: in the sense in which it is said that a myth, an image, a fiction, a utopia, a rhetorical figure, a fantasy, a phantasm, are inventions. It may also be called a speculation, even a fabulous specularization. The breaking of the mirror would be, finally, through an act of language, the very occurrence of nuclear war. [Derrida 23]

Total nuclear war does not refer to anything that is or ever has been, so far; its real referent is in some still hypothetical future. Until the mirror is broken, we are suspended in this hypothetical phantasm, in which all our plans and all our strategies, personal and public, are conditioned by a non-real referent, one which until today exists only as a thing without a model, about which we can only talk, and opine, and hope. If the mirror breaks into total nuclear war, if we were to escape the condition of the phantasm, and enter the so-called real, the entry into the real of total nuclear war is expected to coincide, according to the fable, with the exit from all textuality, fabulous or otherwise. On that day, the fable has it, there may be no discourse left, no memory and no work of mourning capable of registering the then real referent: there will have been no more letters to take the news that there were no more letters. The conditions for any cultural record of the mirror having been broken will by virtue of its shattering cease to exist; the escape out of this imaginary relation to the nuclear phenomenon will have coincided with the end of the archive.

The practical or pragmatic implications of this nuclear perspective, the standpoint of temporal narrativity which it imposes, have already begun to affect our culture, massively, and to determine our cultural productions in ways we are only beginning to discover. The dilemma is that we are obliged to become the cultural historians of a time without a model, anticipating in the tense of the future anterior a decisive historical possibility which, if it occurs, our culture might never view historically. We are left to become the historians of the future, to invent its history before it happens, because if it happens, it may never have a history – if the fable means the end of disciplined memory. If it will have been the case that there was no future, then the only existence the future may have for us is behind us, is in the present imagined from the anticipatory standpoint of its having already occurred.²

The mirror of speculation or specularization through which the nuclear critic views an event, like the downing of the Korean airliner, may be considered to be an altered temporal frame or context, which allows the event to be read and interpreted differently than if it were considered by the scientist, the historian, or the technically competent journalist, whose theoretical interest would be in determining the truth of the event with the greatest plausibility, for the purpose of eventually drawing political and technical conclusions. The

²The paradoxical grammatical structure which such a fable proposes might be characterized as a negative future anterior. It corresponds to the narrative possibility which Gerard Genette has uncovered in his analysis of the Proustian text, under the term "analeptic prolepsis" [Discours du récit 64]. The rhetorical dilemma is doubled by a logical one we have treated elsewhere [Klein, "Under Pragmatic Paradoxes," Yale French Studies 66]. Its implications were first published by D. J. O'Connor in *Mind* (1948) and by Jacques Lacan in 1946 in *Ecrits*: "The Class-A Blackout Paradox and the Three Prisoner Problem." In both those examples of what O'Connor first called "pragmatic paradoxes" the effective truth of a proposition appears to depend on the precipitation or haste with which it is discursively produced. Delaying the production of the proposition has the surprising consequence of making its truth impossible to be determined or of making what was true false. An extended analysis in detail would be necessary to show that the possibility that the logical truth of a proposition affecting the future may be determined by the timing with which one anticipates the future is precisely the paradoxical condition that the fabulous textuality of total nuclear war has made effectively real.

nuclear analysis of the event unfolds in a time in which 007 has not yet become a historiographical text but is no longer a burning actuality. The event has receded far enough in time so that historians have emerged to situate the incident in a wider context of events. The force and acuity when it first hit the headlines, the penetrating sharpness of its immediate implications recedes, but it does so slowly. Even now, it could be argued, we are still perhaps not quite out of the orbit of the power of 007 to define relations between the United States and the Soviet Union.³

The nuclear critic is situated in a strangely intermediate time. Without the leisure of the historian endlessly, generously to delay drawing conclusions, with the precipitation that results from situating the event in the fiction or fable of total nuclear war, the critic must write from the head-long perspective of an urgently anticipatory sense that the event may still be alive and affecting our lives, that our future may still be at stake in it. The difficulty of gauging the epistemological implications of this intermediate narrative time (what it allows us to grasp, to conceive and know concerning the nuclear event) may perhaps be best appraised if we try to think some alternative to the categorical opposition separating the interpretations with which the US and the SU essentially characterized the "wandering" of 007, an opposition which has been repeatedly mirrored in the most recently published accounts. The more uncertain project of thinking some alternative to the purely haphazard consequence of inadvertence or bad luck on the one hand, and on the other, a motivated incursion into the airspace of an enemy for the purposes of spying, neither accident nor provocation, runs against the grain of traditional diplomatic conceptions.

Richard Ned Lebow has analyzed the calculated use and interpretation of coincidences in the midst of conventional diplomatic crises. In an article in *The Naval War College Review* entitled, "Accidents and Crises: the Dogger Bank Affair," Lebow writes:

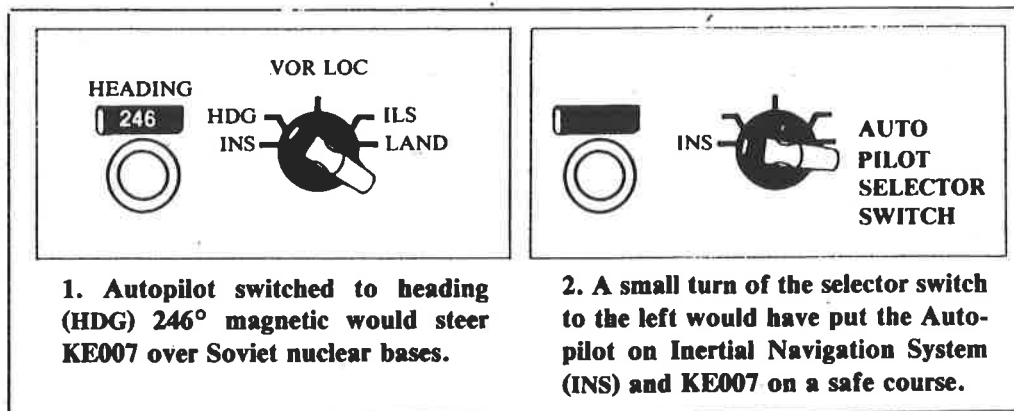
Before proceeding with the study it is necessary to acknowledge that the meaning and operational significance of accidents are highly subjective and depend almost entirely upon the context in which accidents occur. Accidents can be treated as deliberate provocations or, vice versa, by any of the parties involved. The interpretation policy makers choose will generally depend upon their desire to avoid or precipitate conflict. In extreme circumstances, the party who has been injured may choose to exploit the incident as a casus belli. To do so he will attempt to portray the incident as a premeditated provocation on the part of the adversary. [Lebow 67]

The whole premise of the historian's argument is that events being observed may be interpreted by diplomats. In a pre-nuclear analysis of events, the decision to interpret the event as an accident or provocation could be made, as one says, after the event had occurred, after the relevant powers had investigated and determined what exactly had actually taken place – just as both sides did after the Russian shelling of British fishing boats in the Dogger Bank affair (1904). For Lebow, the fact that the meaning and "operational significance" (presumably the perlocutionary effect or performance of the meaning) of accidents are "highly subjective" requires that we examine the "context" on which the interpretation of the accident depends, the calculation of advantage and disadvantage around which the diplomatic interpretation may be presumed to turn. But the nuclear event, because of its speed and its implications of totality, constrains the choice of diplomats and military men attempting to observe the occasion of its fall. A new speed, a new fiction, brings about a new logic of interpretation. The necessity of envisioning a counter-offensive response before the missile hits, before the event is given, means that the response in some sense must precede the incident – is already part of the incident before it happens; the response to the event, leaping ahead to the consequences following the event, precedes it and shapes the spectacle of what may be observed to transpire. Because of its annihilating totality, there is no posterior context to summon outside of the nuclear from which one can ponder choices of

³Thus on 26 March 1985, when Major Nicholson is killed while spying in East Germany in what the Soviets insist, and the US denies, was a "forbidden military zone," Secretary Weinberger will blame the incident upon the Soviets' "KAL syndrome, of shooting first and asking questions later" [NYT 26 March 1985].

action. The injured party will not enjoy the luxurious time of diplomatic distance from the event that allows one to choose whether or not to exploit the accident as a *casus belli*. Instead, he must try to determine in these swiftly passing moments, before the end, whether he is not actually already at war, and this determination of the character of the incident, before it happens, may itself initiate a war. Under these circumstances, the judgment of the meaning of the incident – that the war has already begun – is a proposition whose truth may never be able to be verified from beneath the rubble occasioned by its “operational significance.”

The diplomatic dilemma mirrors our own narrative position, which wants to situate itself outside the conventional explanations, between accident and provocation, but not in any place that could be mistaken for a third skeptical position.⁴ We are trying to envisage a fourth way of looking at the event, from the perspective of its frame, its conditions of visibility, whatever, from the beginning, permitted it to be seen and read under diametrically opposite versions of accident or conspiracy, by the governments themselves and by all the posterior commentators, but which framing is also within, an internal limit or margin, both insofar as the event may not be over yet and as its being over may be simultaneous, in the fable of nuclear war, with the impossibility of ever observing it from a position beyond its end. The frame is not the context of the event – what one calls the history of East-West relations – nor is it the text itself, the strict factual evidence of what occurred. Between the totality of the surrounding context and the actual material circumstances of the event, the frame, perhaps, is all that one can really observe when the facts are lost forever, as they say, at the



bottom of the sea, and the decisive question of some future history of East-West relations is at this moment being written.

By pointing to the framing conditions of visibility, and reading the obscure density of the language which composes that frame, we are also describing the risk of hallucination, of imaginative transformations of perception to which all sides are susceptible. Our analysis indicates, for example, the degree to which one must begin to take seriously the accusatory rhetoric of the SU and the US when each insists on the other’s malevolence with the phrase, “it is hardly a coincidence.”

Significant coincidence.

In order to disclose its volatility, its dangerous nuclearity, we need to consider the downing of KAL 007 as a coincidence, the coming together in a single moment of time of two entities belonging to absolutely different ontological realms (say, the realms of detective fiction and the material conditions of airline navigation), which consequently can have no strictly causal explanation, but which, touching, nevertheless appear to be motivated by

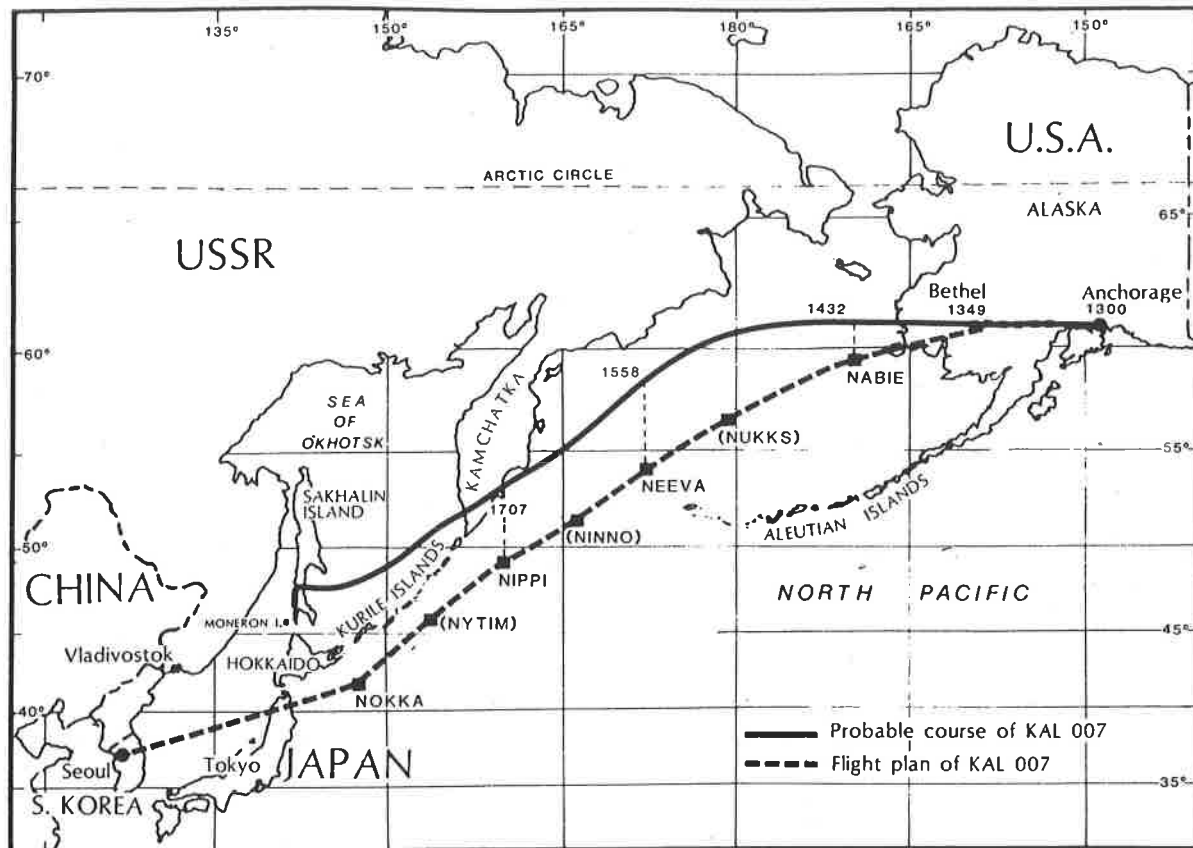
⁴We identify the third skeptical position with the splendid book of Alexander Dallin, *Black Box, KAL 007 and the Superpowers*.

some significant necessity, some deep affinity of meaning. The word itself is normally used to designate the accidental character of some conjuncture, in the sense of mere coincidence, but one distinguishes it from accident itself because of the *appearance* of some resemblance between two heterogeneous events. Whenever that resemblance appears to acquire the strength of some motivated necessity, then one might further speak, as Jung does, of "significant coincidence" [*On Synchronicity* 7].

Significant coincidence may be defined as a conjuncture of events so unlikely or implausible that to call it accident seems less reasonable than to assume some intentional, motivated connection. One may think of significant coincidence as a pragmatic pun. Two events, like two words, which have absolutely different terms of reference, no possible historical or causal relation, may in some purely exterior or formal feature so resemble one another, that the mind begins to lend them some deeper implication of meaning. When one encounters puns of that high order in poetry, where some anagrammatic reading produces different words out of the same elements, or where the same word can be read as itself and another which it closely resembles, the question of poetic intention inescapably arises. The question of accident or necessity insists more urgently the more strongly the pun can be read, the more persuasively the superficial resemblance can be interpreted to coincide with a deeper implication of meaning.

The principle that governs that reading is parenthetically enunciated by Freud in "Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria": ". . . (It is a rule of psychoanalytic technique that an internal connection which is still undisclosed will announce its presence by means of a contiguity – a temporal proximity – of associations; just as in writing, if "a" and "b" are put side by side, it means that the syllable "ab" is to be formed out of them)" [Freud 55]. So too with coincidence: between airline flight 007 and secret agent 007 there is only an effect of the signifier, the contingent contiguity of a flight number, a spy, and an incident on a border; but under a certain interpretive pressure, the superficial resemblance becomes the place where two radically different realms share their identities, unexpectedly exchange some common intention or motive, acquire something like the unity and unicity of a single syllable. What gives coincidence its remarkably telling and compelling power is the character of objectivity it assumes, at the same time that it is exactly attuned to the position of the particular subject it befalls. The observation of a coincidence implies an interested interpreting subject who finds that an incidence insists with a precise pointed significance – for it. Thus from the Soviet vantage it hardly seems an accident that the course of KAL 007 happened to coincide with the course of a US RC-135 spy plane, and that subsequently its course coincides with the airspace over two of the most sensitive Soviet military bases in the Pacific. But from the vantage point of the US, the flight "deviation" of this particular plane does not seem so surprising at all; it may in fact be inevitable given the thousands of flights along this Pacific route each year. Thus, what seems a telling coincidence to the collective subjectivity defined by Soviet leadership seems merely accidental to observers of the scene who do not share the same national subjectivity.

From the instant KAL 007 appeared as an unidentified blip on the radar screen of Soviet defenders, this incident has had the notorious opaqueness and pointed significance to precipitate a crisis of confrontation between the US and the SU, and to provoke a torrent of divergent interpretations and representations. Since the truth of what caused the plane to deviate so wildly from its programmed path and to ignore the Soviet attempts to force it down lies lost in the black box, the cockpit recording device, at the bottom of the Sea of Japan, in order to judge the truth, we are left to weigh the diverging interpretations of the event advanced by the different sides, on the basis of circumstantial and very partial evidence. It is as if the event itself, about whose truth one can no longer ever be absolutely certain, will have acquired its truth and significance exclusively from the interpretations that have been placed on it by each side; those interpretations, in turn, have had the effect of truth, have acquired their own irrefutable reality, insofar as they have colored – some might even say determined – the history of SU-US relations for over two years. We have sought to study these divergences of national perspective as they were expressed in framing narratives of the event, which, in the very shape of their literary qualities – metaphor, allusion, rhetoric of all kinds – serve to constitute what could be called its rhetorical truth. In particular, we have taken as our texts the Reagan administration media blitz which began within twenty-



Map 1. Route of KAL 007, Route R20, and checkpoints.

four hours after the event and continued for several weeks, the detective narratives which have been published in the twenty-five months since the incident, and finally, the official Soviet version as presented by Marshall Ogarkov, nine days after the incident. Because of the way it summons the fabulous contextuality of total nuclear war, we have followed the question of coincidence as a thread through these different narratives. We treat coincidence as a symptom of the new narrative temporality with which we are brought by the nuclear fable to interpret what used to be called the history of an event. In this analysis of what we are calling "nuclear coincidence," we have often found what Freud first enunciated about his study of dreams: that "the coloring and shading of *how* a thing is said" is often as important as what is said [Freud x].

Before proceeding to the substance of this analysis, we should pause before the most striking coincidence in this interpretive space, the number of the fateful Korean airline flight itself. We have tried imaginatively to reconstruct reactions in official Moscow and in Washington when the literary allusion concealed in that number revealed its surprising countenance. Like a little demon or troll, like an unexpected pun or significant lapse, its appearance on the teletypes must have raised eyebrows, or elicited groans.

The US statement dismissed the Russian insinuation concerning 007 as "ridiculous"; the flight number could have been nothing else than a trivial coincidence. What spy, they must have asked, would broadcast his motives by adopting the signature of Bond? We know the SU's reaction. Entirely consistent with their initial responses, as we will see in more detail, they were persuaded that the US intelligence forces specifically chose that flight number *in order* to send them a signal. In their minds that choice is perfectly congruent with the fact that from the beginning the US had *wanted* the spy plane to be shot down, *in order* to mobilize world opinion against the SU, at a crucial moment when cruise and Pershing missiles were being installed on the soil of Europe. Consequently, the SU thinks the US cynically signaled its intention to defy the Soviet air defenses, in an act that was brazen and provocative. The first sign they cite of that cynical provocation, of the openly challenging invitation that demands a response, is the number of the airliner, the signature of Bond. To the

SU, the repetition of the signifier 007, in two domains which ought to have no connection between them (the world of Bond and the real world of airliners) is a clear, unambiguous sign of US intentions; it was read from the beginning as the motivated and cynical sign of a nefarious aim. The signature of Bond is considered by the Soviets to be as cynical and provocative as the flight of the plane itself—over and out of, then over again, then turning around in Soviet airspace. To the US this is of course preposterous.

But suppose for a moment we were to adopt the less malevolent hypothesis, of the *Los Angeles Weekly* and imagine that 007 was being used by sub-rosa intelligence agencies to “light up” SU defense responses as far away as Moscow. If we allow ourselves for a moment to entertain that more plausible conspiratorial hypothesis, how can we help but wonder whether the intention to use 007 was not something else? Far from wishing to be provocative, might not the CIA have rather assumed that the number was the perfect cover for spying? Who, on the evidence of such a ridiculous coincidence, would believe that the CIA could have been so stupid as to tip its hand, unless one imagined that it were a sharp stupidity, an oxymoron, that concealed its secret under the guise of appearing stupidly to reveal it? The CIA might have used 007 *in order* to convince the world that the wandering of the plane was unconnected to spying, on the principle that revealing the secret may be the best way of conveying the impression that one has nothing to hide.

But suppose one were diverted into imagining that the number simply escaped their attention altogether, as they failed to make the connection between Flight Seven, as it was called, and 007, the written number-become-hieroglyph of espionage. It may have entirely escaped the notice of the putative planners of the plane’s incursion that, rebus-like, the written decimal form both connotes espionage and, like two eyes and their arch, 007, enacts the gesture of suspicion. It might have never occurred to anyone to make the connection between the written and the oral form of the number, until the moment when the number came screaming over the news wires, and the Company, as at a bad pun, let out a collective groan. The groan is a sign of embarrassment, the discomfort when something that should have remained hidden is revealed. One can suppose that 007 was an instance of what the spy most fears—the recurrent nightmare—the capacity of his unconscious to betray him into letting slip what he has taken every conceivable rational precaution to conceal. What the SU read as a conscious provocation could, given the same attribution of motives, be taken to be a lapsus, an involuntary revelation of the mechanism that undoes all loyalties in the paranoid universe of stealth, where each side is trying to determine its strategies in terms of what it can see the other side seeing about itself. Hallucinatory effects and effects of coincidence acquire, in this space, uncanny power to become the bases for fateful decisions.

Detective Narratives: Conspiracy or Accident?

On 1 September 1983 Korean Airline flight 007 twice crossed into Soviet airspace and overflew its two most sensitive military bases in the Pacific, first the enormous submarine base and missile test landing site at Petrovsk, at the farthest eastern end of Kamchatka peninsula, and then, further west, the submarine pens and fighter airports on Sakhalin island, the last defense point before Vladivostok, the headquarters of the Soviet Pacific command. After two and a half hours of continuous tracking, the SU air defense command ordered the termination of the flight, and 269 people lost their lives—most if not all of them innocent, many of them children—in the worst single killing of civilians by the Soviet military since the Second World War. Questions of responsibility, of guilt as determined by law remain to this day undecided, dependent as they are on establishing the public truth of what actually occurred. In the wake of what was quickly labeled “The Korean Airline Disaster,” many have heeded the imperious call of its unexplained violence and have stepped forward to tell the story and draw the lessons of KAL 007.

Oliver Clubb, who entitles his book, *007, The Hidden Secret*, agrees substantially with the authorized Soviet version of the event as it was proffered by Marshall Ogarkov, who affirmed that this flight’s incursion into Soviet airspace was no “incident” but a carefully planned American intelligence operation carried out with cynical disregard for human life. The aim was to “tickle” the SU air defense system, in order to gauge its responses back along

the chain of command to Moscow; the US may also have had the deeper purpose of disrupting the world-wide movement toward disarmament. Clubb has no new evidence for this; he constructs his argument for conspiracy on the basis of already published material whose use is predicated on a few rhetorical and logical premises.

Near the beginning of his third chapter, Clubb, for example, describes how in "a dramatic Moscow press conference on September 9, the chief of the Soviet General Staff, Marshall Nicolai Ogarkov, asked some pointed questions about the inactivity of [the air traffic] control system during the KAL airliner's long off-course flight" [Clubb 23]. Clubb's procedure is to pursue conspiratorial conclusions with his own pointed questioning. His book is composed of a series of short chapters, most of which pose a question and offer an implicit answer – in their title:

Chapter 2: "How could flight 007's navigation equipment fail?" [It couldn't.]

Chapter 3: "Why did ground controllers fail to warn the airliner?" [Because it was on an intelligence mission.]

Chapter 4: "What did U.S. intelligence know – and do?" [Everything – and nothing.]

Chapter 5: "How did flight 007 elude Soviet air defenses?" [Defenses were jammed.]

Chapter 13: "Would our leaders risk lives?" [Yes.]

By framing much of his analysis through a series of questions, Clubb acknowledges the uncertainty which must surround any investigation of this obscure event, the "hidden secret" his title proclaims; but his questions become tendentious and rhetorical through the prosecutorial vigor of their address, and the rather blatant way they are designed to elicit one unmistakable answer.

In order to embarrass the official US explanation of 007 with the accumulation of those questions, Clubb has to appeal to an argument about the implausibility of a plurality of accidents. A single accident, he suggests, might conceivably have caused the flight deviation, or the failure to warn the wayward craft, or the overflight of a crucial Soviet base, or a missed signal from a Soviet interceptor, but when a *whole series* of "accidental" circumstances combine "fortuitously" to produce this "incident" and when, *in fine*, it serves to create a political and intelligence bonanza for Reagan administration policy, then, Oliver Clubb concludes, it is time to look for another explanation. He writes,

In sum the Reagan Administration's explanations for how KAL Flight 007 happened to "stray off course" and get shot down two and a half hours later rest on a whole series of extremely implausible circumstances. If the Administration's explanation for even one of these circumstances were invalid, the entire case for an "accidental flight" would come crashing down. Yet the odds against all of these virtually inconceivable errors of commission and omission taking place as described are astronomical. The logical and factual absurdities in the Reagan Administration's account suggest that we have been presented with a cover story. [Clubb 52]

A series of implausible circumstances is what Clubb calls the concatenation of coincidences that punctuate the administration's account of what transpired on the night of 1 September and what it knew about what was taking place. According to Clubb, not only does the accumulation of possible but implausible conjectures itself heap up an overwhelming weight of persuasion against the possibility of the administration's version of events, but the whole chain of explanation depends on the fragile consistency of every one of its links, each one of which is implausible on the surface. At work in Clubb's rhetorical assumptions is that logic underlying Jung's significant coincidence, which determines that certain accidents are so unlikely to occur as to be incapable of being mere accidents when they do. When they are said to happen in series, as Clubb claims the administration says they do, then that constitutes *prima facie* evidence of some motivating intention (like spying or lying) organizing and directing the "accidents," endowing them, now no longer random-seeming, with the cumulative force of some unmistakable, articulated significance.

Yet it is just such an analogous chain that leads another commentator, Murray Sayle, to speak of a "conspiracy of circumstances" in order to account for what he considers to be the purely accidental character of the Korean airline disaster. Writing in *The London Times* and *The New York Review of Books*, Sayle evinces contempt for those enamored of the romantic

world of espionage who have turned the 007 incident into "an adventure playground for conspiracy theorists" [Sayle 49]. Sayle does not look for a puppeteer behind the scenes, but meticulously attends to the determining circumstances of the incident in all their specificity of detail.

In his narrative, Sayle demands several virtues of himself and his reader. First he abjures invoking the context of East-West rivalry, until the incident has been apprehended as a discrete, unitary event, whose moments may be described as factually and clearly as possible. He then assumes the burden of a certain ascetic discipline in declaring this "a case that cries to heaven for logical rigor, divorced as far as humanly possible from shock and horror—the scientific approach in short" [Sayle 44]. Finally he invites the reader to become acquainted with those details of navigation technology which other commentators have ignored. Putting himself among the clergy of those who know the arcana, he writes:

I have also had some experience flying in the cockpit with American and other civil and military pilots, in Vietnam and elsewhere and even a little experience of Soviet military methods of intelligence gathering (having been arrested and interrogated in Prague in 1968). These details are not the basis of an argument from authority or, I hope, a case of vile self creeping in, but they are intended as a caution. Little if any evidential value can be given to arguments by lay people about a pilot's behavior if they have no experience of what a pilot navigating an aircraft could or could not have seen, or what a fighter pilot at night must or could not have recognized . . .
[Sayle 44]

One hears beneath Sayle's pious hope the assertion of another message. The wealth of experience exhibited by Sayle's vile self, with whose pronouns this passage bristles, is intended on the contrary to guarantee the validity and objectivity of the factual conditions that this self narrates; that objectivity in turn insures the truth of its interpretation of the event. Sayle counts on the rhetorical device of using the prestige of the narrator to guarantee the truth of the facts he narrates.

By contrast with the world of conspiracy theories, in the unfolded space of Sayle's narrative, accidents can happen. According to Sayle, KAL 007 flew off course because its autopilot was not guided by its Inertial Navigation System (INS), but instead, was allowed to stay in a magnetic "heading mode" of 246 degrees. In this mode the auto pilot would still signal to the pilots that they had reached each check-point on the journey, even if, as was the case, they deviated as far as 200 miles north of their assigned course. Such a fundamental error was due, according to Sayle, to a "conspiracy of circumstance," where the factors at work were threefold. 1) *Human fallibility*. While the pilot may have been paying a courtesy call on his most distinguished passenger, US Congressman Larry MacDonald,⁵ the co-pilot, Sayle speculates, failed perhaps to notice that the plane was in a "heading mode" instead of the much more accurate INS mode. 2) *Technical limits and malfunctions*. The RC-135 spy plane, which the US belatedly acknowledged had passed within seventy kilometers of KAL 007, could not, says Sayle, have warned the airliner that it was approaching Soviet territory, since it is technically a "purely passive" recorder of electronic transmission, not a fully manned command and control platform like an AWACS plane. 3) *Special circumstances and "evil chance."* This "pyramid of errors" and circumstance could only have built to a disaster because of three coincidences that come, according to Sayle's account, near the end of the flight, by "evil chance." The expression approaches being an oxymoron: it figures forth the co-incident of two heterogeneous spheres—the randomness of accident and the motivation of malevolence. To Sayle, it only seems as if the concatenation of chance were obeying the descending line of some tragic destiny, as if 007 were the name of a modern tragic hero,

⁵The conspiracy theorists on every side, right and left, have seized upon the coincidental irony that Congressman MacDonald, a former head of the John Birch Society and the most fiercely anti-communist member of Congress, should have fallen victim to the most deadly Soviet air attack since the War. On the right it is suggested that the plane was shot down because he was on it; on the left, it is hinted that he knew 007's true mission and had volunteered to court death in the maw of the juggernaut.

whose unwitting hubris, overflying and nearly escaping from two of the most dangerous places in the world, prompted the fatal series of coincidences that occurred during the final moments, when the Soviet fighter was positioning itself for attack, and that sealed its fate. Sayle writes:

By a bizarre coincidence, with overtones of Greek tragedy, it was exactly that very hour and minute that KE007 was to be shot down, 365 miles off track over Sakhalin Island, well outside the limit at which the INS alert lights would have come on. One minute after the failure to report, the Japanese air controllers, the world's most meticulous in such matters, would have asked KE007 why the aircraft had failed to report its position, and the whole pyramid of errors would have instantly collapsed.
[Sayle 53]

Sayle's rhetoric takes him, imagining the disaster, from Greece to Egypt, from the flight of Icarus to the magic of the pyramids – where gnomic mysteries are highly visibly concealed in great crypts above the ground, piled up masses designed to culminate in a single, small, fateful point at the apex. One minute later, and the fact that they were now flying 365 miles off track would have resulted in their failing to be alerted by the INS light to report their position to the Japanese air controllers, and the controllers, "the world's most meticulous in such matters," in turn would have urgently alerted them, on time. Only exactly the smallest "window of time," within a space and time that is meticulously organized by control from the ground, would permit such a pyramid of errors to build to its tragic point; the evil chance seizes its moment of opportunity, what the Greeks call its *kairos*, in an exact moment and place that allows for the implausible thing, what was considered to be the impossible thing, to occur. "The fighter cannot have been in the vicinity of the airliner for more than a minute at which exact time, by an evil chance, the crew was busy with a routine message to Tokyo, and the co-pilot (on the side of the aircraft that the fighter approached) would have had his map light on to see the knobs and switches of his radio" [Sayle 54]. Only if the fighter approached abeam of the airliner at exactly the wrong minute, not a minute sooner or later (at the instant when too much light made it impossible to see), could the impossible come to pass. Yet even that was not enough to produce disaster; by the worst of one more additional piece of evil chance, a further incredible piece of bad luck, the fighter also approached on the wrong side. The essential coincidence is supplemented with a second one, much less exacting in itself, pushing not nearly as far to the limits of what is plausible; it appears indispensably necessary nevertheless to supplement the first, according to the same principle of proliferating, coincidence we found implicitly in Clubb's argument, but one that serves rhetorically to allow Sayle to draw an opposite conclusion. The accumulation of the series of misfortunes lends the narrative some higher power of persuasion by being a moment of the mathematical sublime; the mind reels at the statistical prospect of coincidence following on coincidence in an absolutely implausible fashion, all the while tracing the irremediable line of a tragic destiny like that of this uniquely fated plane. Sayle might agree with Clubb that the disastrous contingencies which took down KAL 007 are improbable, but he would argue, given the number of flights crossing the oceans, that such accidental deviations must be statistically inevitable. Whereas for Clubb, the whole series of coincidences is *prima facie* evidence against the administration's narrative of the flight and death of 007, for Sayle the concatenation of ever more unexpected conjunctures, becomes the asseverating token of an evil destiny, the decisive proof that this conspiracy of circumstances precluded a conspiracy in fact. A proliferating chain of coincidences, within the perspective of detective narratives, argues rhetorically for both the absence of any motivation and its opposite.

Through the way Sayle's narrative concatenates events and circumstances, we feel the single power of each nonnecessary contingency to be that slight difference that makes all the difference in the world, like the centimeter at the end of Cleopatra's nose. The smallest possible accident becomes a negative oracle, an ironic synechdoche for the totality of the most awesome destiny. Sayle offers a compelling visual emblem of this in two diagrams of the Auto Pilot Selector Switch, one in the (fatal) magnetic heading mode, and the other in the correct INS mode. The caption explains: "A small turn of the selector switch to the left would have put . . . KE007 on a safe course." Here, a mere shift of a position, the width of

the slimmest arc, the smallest turn *ad sinistra* carries the figure of the whole tragic irony which shadows human history.

Sayle's reconstruction of the incident can only make all the pieces fit with the sort of cutting and forcing which is endemic to most interpretation. A particular deployment of narrative—the subtle and “life-like” step-by-step recounting of “facts”—is as decisive for establishing the persuasiveness of Sayle's account as the inquisitive detective form of interrogation is rhetorically essential to Clubb's being able to foster dark suspicions about the “hidden secret.” In order to disallow the sort of questions that fuel conspiracy theories, Sayle, in particular, must sustain the narrow, technical focus of his explanations. The analysis can then largely by-pass the cold war context which, Sayle acknowledges, would allow such an accident to have some determining power. Thus, Sayle does not pay adequate attention to the immediate, operational status of the superpowers' system of deterrence. Our own analysis would stress that aspect of the functioning of the system which is structurally paranoid: the way, in order to function at maximum effectiveness, it must constantly *imagine the possibility of conspiracy.*

Border Mechanisms

An immensely complicated system, operating at tremendous speeds, in the context of total mutual destruction, needing to imagine the possibility of conspiracy for the purpose of its optimal functioning, is the place where technology and fantasy may come together in surprising ways. Coincidences, when they occur in that realm, may be the sign of madness: let us say, the madness of signs, with all their determined oppositions and contradictory tendencies, determining the construction and operation of systems designed to perceive an enemy, whose recognition is almost simultaneous with his destruction, to whom blindness is instantly equivalent to one's own. To what extent does what can be perceived in the space of the air depend on the pre-existing interpretations, built in to the capabilities and operation of the technology, that must confirm the necessity of the paranoia? That necessity is reinforced by the fact that the whole assortment of Elint, “electronic intelligence” gathering devices—phase radar that displays the whole horizon, satellite, perhaps even shuttle reconnaissance, air to ground and almost certainly ground to air capabilities for listening in on communications—all the multiple mechanisms that contribute to “seeing” in the air are constructed with the inherent capacity to observe the frequencies, the capacities and the condition of the analogous mechanisms that are observing its observing. The interpretation upon which each side determines the truth of what it sees depends on the evidence it has of what the other side can see of the conditions of its being observed.

The conundrum is not an abstract one; it governs the rhetoric and the strategy of the whole US response to the incident, from the beginning. The question of what it could see through the mediation of the various devices with which it “sees” what happens in the space of the air, in the airspace, above those sensitive borders, was raised very early in the incident in the first press conference of Secretary Shultz. The spare presentation of the “facts” of what the US knew about what had transpired bespoke a rhetorical intention to allow the facts to speak for themselves, with the concise authority of self-evidence. One hears the note of that rhetorical strategy in Shultz's answer to a question about where in the Soviet hierarchy he supposes the decision to shoot down the plane had been made. “I'm relating the facts as we have them at this point, and I can't go beyond the facts I have here. I am not going to speculate about it. I am trying to put forward the facts as we know them . . .” [*The New York Times* (hereafter *NYT*) 1 September 1983]. By omitting any reference to the US and its intelligence services as watching or recording the event as it is unfolding, Shultz occults the active interpretation which lies behind this official reconstruction of the event, and lays claim to the position of an omniscient narrator who is absent from the time and space of the event, which he nonetheless fundamentally comprehends. The text of his press conference produces a simulacrum in language of the event that aims to be the transparent, self-verifying testimony upon which a classic case can be closed. The Soviets did not fail to note the strategy and denounce it. In the initial Tass statement, they make the point: “It is indicative that now, post factum, the American side not only officially admits the fact of that plane's

violation of Soviet airspace, but also cites data which indicates that the relevant US services followed the flight throughout its duration in the most attentive manner" [NYT 1 September 1983]. But of course the SU did not need the evidence provided by Shultz; Marshall Ogarkov in his press conference can state as a manner of absolute certainty what the US knew about the flight of 007, on the basis of SU tracking of US tracking of the plane.

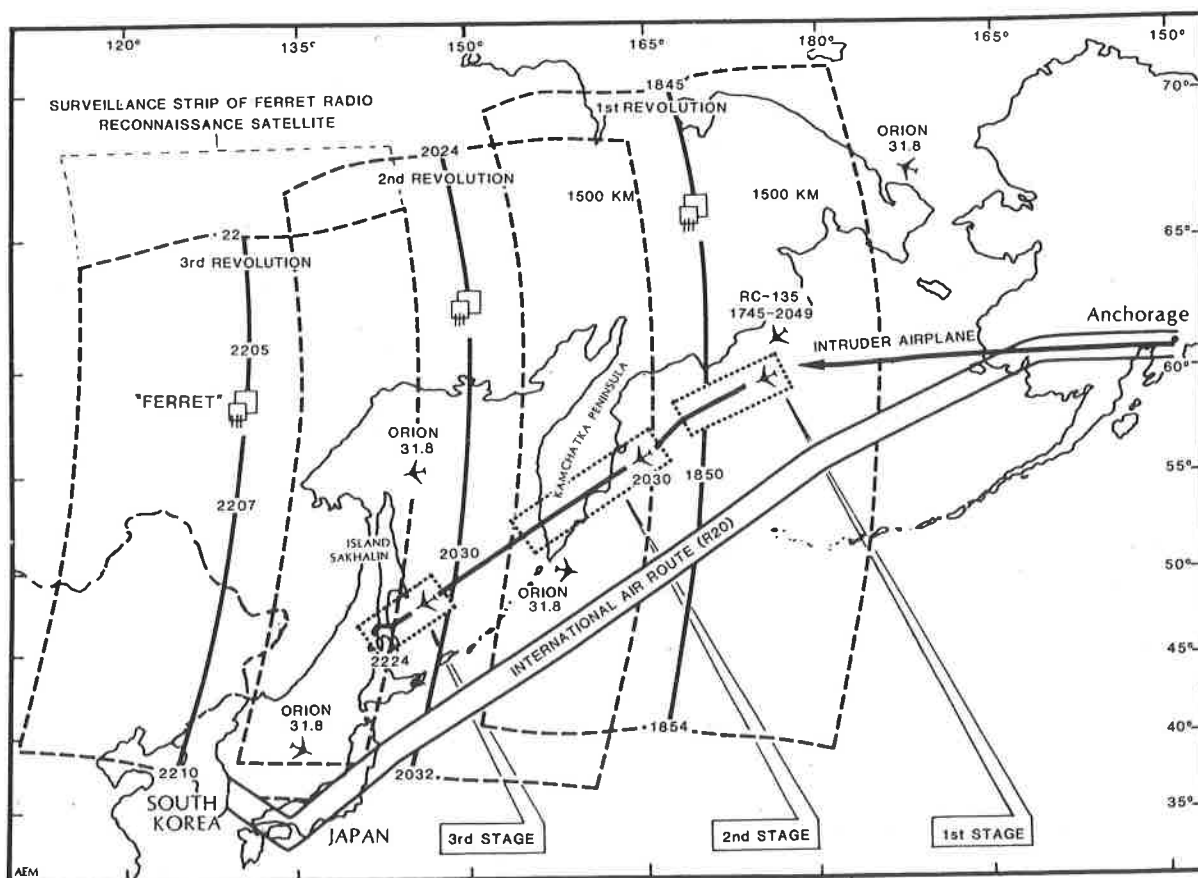
Q. Could the United States ground services that directed this flight observe that the plane was deviating from the established international route?

A. There is no doubt that they could. It is absolutely ruled out that the ground services did not notice this deviation. [Marshall Ogarkov's press conference, The Current Digest of the Soviet Press (hereafter CDSP) 35 36 5]

The extent to which the SU organizes its response on the basis of what it sees the US seeing, and by implication to some abysmal infinity, what it sees of US seeing of its seeing what US sees, constitutes what we are calling a structurally paranoid condition built into the very mechanisms at the border.

The Korean airline disaster unfolds in a place where the farthest extremity of the US (the westernmost island of the Aleutian chain) is separated by only 250 miles from the farthest eastern extremity of the SU (Kampuchea and the Kuriles), at this liminal place where West meets East, in the zone of time where the day before is the day after. Of all the aporia into which KAL 007 flies, none is more pervasive and persuasive, particularly on the Soviet side, than the idea of an inviolable border. According to the "Law on the USSR State Border," which had been revised a year before the incident in response to other incursions, the border guarantees the peaceful labor of the Soviet worker and is the "embodiment of a state's territorial integrity, political independence, sovereignty and unity" [CDSP 34 51 15].

But what is a border? "The USSR state border is a line and the vertical plane running along this line, which defines the limits of the USSR's territory—land, water,



Map 5. Three successive revolutions of U.S. reconnaissance satellite during KAL 007 flight (Soviet map).

underground – and its airspace” [ibid.]. Imagine the line and the (invisible) vertical plane that emerges from this line – dialectically – and finally the three-dimensional vertical wall that penetrates into the depths of the earth and acquires density in the air above the ground. This vertical wall runs along the line which is itself both visible and invisible, an actual physical entity, yet something much more transcendental. This can be seen from a contradiction within the law of the border. On the one hand, it provides that the border of the SU is established “on land, according to topographical lines and points or clearly visible landmarks, and . . . on unnavigable rivers (streams) along their middle or the middle of the river’s main arm” [ibid.]. On the other hand, “The USSR state border running along a river (stream) lake or other body of water does not shift when there is a change either in the contour of the banks or in the level of the water” [ibid.]. The border is defined in relation to the clearly visible; but when what is visible is altered, the border remains unchanged.

The Law of the Border states in its preamble that the SU “proceeds from the principle of the inviolability of state borders, which are the embodiment of a state’s territorial integrity, political independence, sovereignty and unity.” That the border – this abstraction of line and plane – should become the “embodiment” at the periphery of the state’s most central essential constituents is the phantasmatic wish that governs the whole diplomatic organization of space and time across borders, particularly hostile ones. But that wish is a contradictory and impossible one, because the boundary or border is in its material reality a surreal object – the incarnation of an impossible dream – the dream of a materialized line and an immaterial plane. The border is the fiction, the sacred perimeter which encloses the dream of unity; all the more reason that its contours must be maintained with unyielding force and persistence.

In this universe, coincidences are often the sign of the wishfulness with which both sides repress the conditions of their radical uncertainty. It is a trivial fact that the Korean Airline disaster occurred 44 years to the day after the beginning of World War II. But consider the weight of the interpretation expressed in the Soviet narrative of the extraordinary coincidence surrounding the early years of the unnamed Soviet fighter pilot “who was the first to intercept the violator, while it was still over Kamchatka” [*Izvestia* 13 September 1983; cited in *CDSP* 35 37 8]. As he told his story to the reporter from *Izvestia*, the first interceptor of 007 is doubly-crossed by the flight of the U-2.

“I come from the Urals,” he began. “My father was a locomotive engineer. He often took me with him on runs. That was a wonderful time: my father would be driving the train, and I would be next to him in the locomotive. You know how uniquely beautiful the Urals are! One day our freight train was stopped on some nameless siding. Not far from the railroad track my father and I saw a crowd of people. They were standing around some strange heap of wreckage. It turned out that only a minute before our arrival a plane had crashed there. It was the U-2 spy plane that [Gary] Powers had flown. We looked at the debris for a long time. I recall my father saying ‘The scum, they keep trying to sneak in. It’s good we have the means and the men to wipe them out of the skies.’

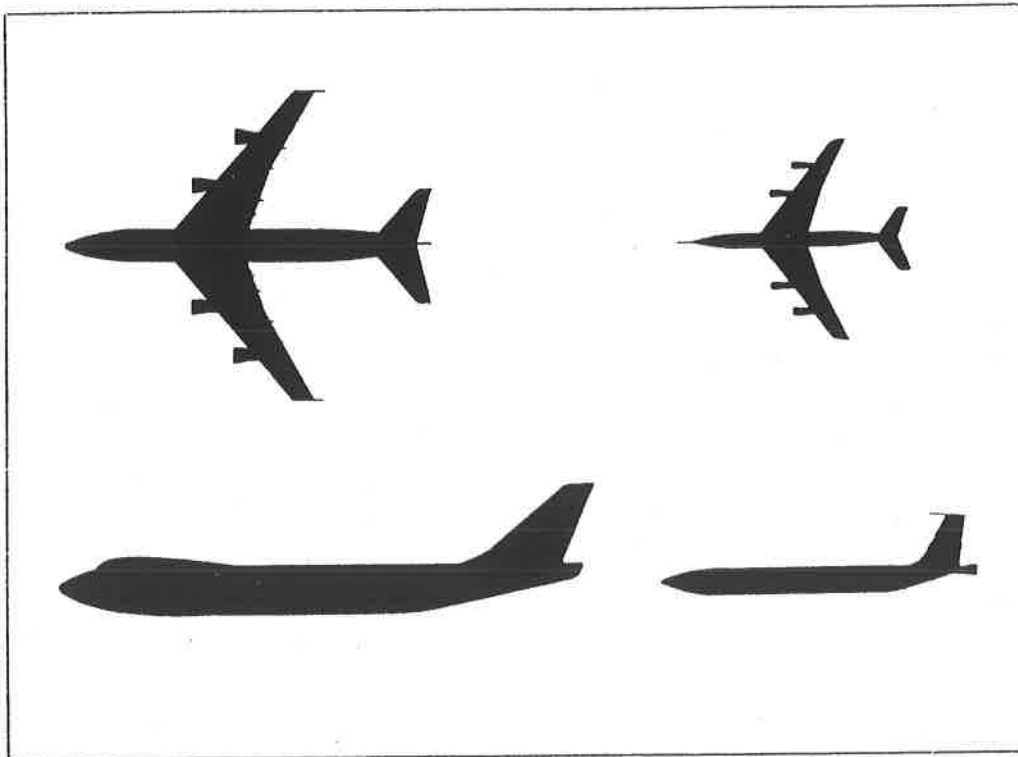
“As he stood by the pile of American debris, my father voiced such admiration for our missile troops that had shot down the U-2 and spoke about the military in general with so much pride that his words remained with me, and when the time came to choose my path in life, I chose the path of a military fighter-pilot.” [CDSP 35 37 8]

Some principle of novelistic irony brings the boy, in this Soviet narrative, to exactly the spot where “only a minute before” the U-2 had crashed, so that it might become the starting point and the still obscure end point of his path in life, a crossroads where his future intersects his past. Even if the anecdote uses the dramatic power of coincidence principally to draw a lesson about continuity – that of Russian history with its mountains, the alliance of sons with fathers, of process with origin – coincidence itself is punctual; it requires the double occurrence of two events at the same time. It has no history or no future, since it is the surprising conjuncture of what cannot, of course, be anticipated, the precise convergence of two terms that can have no relation between them which determines its specific

nature. Coincidence falls out of the blue, with all the prestige of the sky, there where – or so it seems in a nuclear age – the most aggressive confrontations occur.

The U-2 lies in a strange heap, by a nameless siding, the irremediably other, the last smoking remains of that sneaking scum which threatened to stain the pure transparency about the uniquely beautiful Urals, but which our admirable missile men – these men of “means” (firing them) – had wiped from our skies. The wishfulness to restore some purity (by shooting missiles) not only makes sentimental use of the coincidence that links the first interceptor of 007 with the men who shot down the U-2; its rhetorical use as significant coincidence reinforces, by its implacable ratio, the identification the Soviets have unwaveringly wished to make in fact between the Korean airliner and a spy plane. For according to *The New York Times*, high figures in US intelligence services have confirmed, several weeks after the event, that at no time did the Soviets ever think that the plane they saw on their radars was anything but a RC-135 Elint-gathering spy plane. The aggressive conviction with which the Soviets held on to that view of what they were “seeing,” despite its difference in size and profile from a Boeing 747,⁶ is retrospectively illuminated by the significant coincidence that links the first Soviet interceptor of 007 to Gary Powers. Suppose it did not have to be invented for propaganda purposes, but had actually occurred. The material coincidence, the conjunction of things that have no plausible causal connection, points nevertheless to some deeper, invisible connection which has not yet come to light, like that between the paranoid aggressivity of myths of contamination and staining and the “perception” of the Soviet air defense as it interprets the blips on its radar screens as planes (as stains) that can be seen in the air.

Both Clubb and Sayle are convinced that they have mastered the enigma of the flight and the shooting down of the plane, and can tell their readers “what really happened.”⁷



A Boeing 747 and the smaller Boeing 707, which, suitably equipped, is flown as the RC135 intelligence plane.

⁶President Reagan in his speech on 5 September said that “the 747 has a unique and distinctive silhouette . . . there is no way a pilot could mistake this for anything other than a civilian airliner.”

⁷Rather than putting the title of Sayle’s article on the cover, the editors of *The New York Review of Books* offered the more alluring headline, colored red and in tabloid-style: “The KE007 Disaster: Murray Sayle Reveals What Really Happened.”



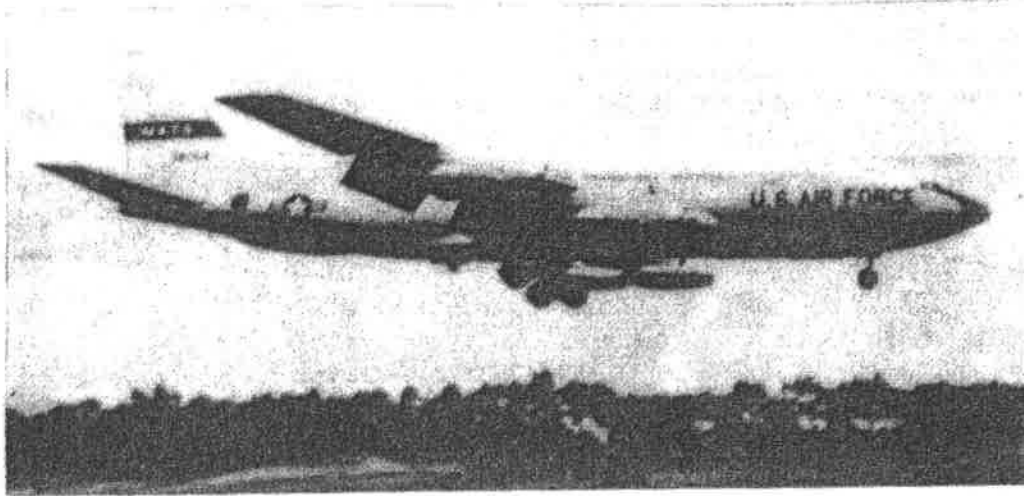
KAL 747

Whether one agrees with the conclusion of the one or the other, it is consoling to be told whodunit. Both writers have assumed the analytical role of detective-heroes whose explanations will heal a society disrupted by the presence of unburied and unexplained corpses. Their role is legitimized by the purity of their objectifying intellectual passion; unlike other observers, they seek not revenge, but the restoration of the narrated order. The dead cry out from their watery grave for justice, and in the last two years Clubb and Sayle are only two of the many investigators who have felt called by the duty, Antigone-like, of covering their remains and laying them to rest by weaving the shroud of a definitive explanation over the rent in reality caused by the unexplained obtrusion of their death. The detective's perspective locates the motivation of the event in a universe of deliberate intention and flawless execution, where conspiracies in fact or of circumstance accomplish their deadly aims to meticulous perfection. This framework prepares the spectator for a certain genre of precise chronological narrative that one recognizes as belonging to that climactic and masterful moment of repetition and revelation which occurs in detective fiction, in the wake of the discovery of the criminal. It also authorizes the confident analogy that in conclusion links us all, "exactly," with the passengers on flight 007 and makes the detective-hero the master of the *synechdochal* coincidence between the particular and the general. In order to use 007 as a "metaphor" of our nuclear condition, in order to explain, as metaphor is supposed to do, the unknown with the known, one must believe that one can determine objectively the nature of the event itself, which, being understood, can then serve as the first term of an analogy for the whole. If one is going to be a detective one should, of course, be a good one, but being a detective, in certain paradoxical circumstances, like those of Oedipus, the first detective, may be a way of continuing the crime. The fact that the detective-narrator is himself the criminal figures forth the tendency of narrative inherently to produce criminal mystery, the enigma whose solution is an ethical imperative. When the narrator cannot be trusted because he is the criminal, the very framework of narrative is being distrusted, what it allows us to see in a space that is supposed to be neutral, but is already highly overdetermined by versions of truth and falsehood, of borders and rivalries.

Both Sayle and Clubb, from their diametrically opposite but equally poised positions, set in terms of the traditional diplomatic distinction between accident and provocation, are equally unable to account for the various coincidences that star this flight, what it is about KAL 007 that resists explanation according to the principles of detective fiction. They miss everything that belongs to a wider framework or context that we are calling nuclear which produces effects more surprising and less susceptible to narrative resolution.

By contrast, Alexander Dallin, in his book *Black Box, KAL 007 and the Superpowers* never assumes that he already knows where to look for answers to the questions raised by this incident, and the nuclear context is more subtly used to inform his argument. Dallin is scrupulous in distinguishing what it is that can be certainly known, what may be plausibly assumed, and what belongs to the realm of pure conjecture or hypothetical speculation.

Twice, however, on the same page Dallin evokes a "strange" coincidence, an "odd" coincidence. It occurs in the chapter, "Explications and Explanations I," under the heading, "Mysterious mission?" at the moment he is obliged to take up the fourth and most distasteful reason "that might account for [the plane's] deviation from the normal track which had been prescribed by its computerized flight plan," the possibility of some "deliberate action by at



RC-135

least some of the crew in fulfillment of a surreptitious assignment or mission." He begins with a characteristically emphatic assertion of his skeptical position: "It should be said emphatically that there is no solid or conclusive evidence in support of this hypothesis – no more than there was for any of the earlier three ["innocent" versions] we have sketched above. By the same token this one deserves to be considered as seriously as were the other three" [Dallin 45].

After acknowledging that US agencies have in the past used civilian airplanes for intelligence purposes, he insists that there is no certain information "in the unclassified literature" (a qualification that sounds like a hint) that such use of commercial airlines has been made during the past ten years. Nevertheless, he notes the surprising rapidity with which the US government automatically "took charge" of the event – as if his own instincts and long experience with diplomacy had given him a flair for the timing of crisis management so that the slightest hint of precipitation might, in his expert nose, be the most powerful signal that something was up. But instantly, the strong suspicion is surrounded by a disclaimer: "On the face of it, it was a South Korean aircraft carrying nationals of a number of different countries, and the United States did not have an automatic mandate to 'take charge.' Yet the fact that it did, whatever one may think of it, scarcely strengthens the case for US responsibility for the plane's fate" [Dallin 45].

Once past the ritual of skepticism, he is left to confront the evidence of several coincidences and the implications of their proliferating doubleness.

It has likewise seemed a strange coincidence that on the two occasions when, during the past fifteen years, a foreign commercial airliner has illegally overflown Soviet territory, it has been a South Korean plane both times – and specifically deviating quite substantially from its flight plan to fly over the two most sensitive military areas of the Soviet Union, i.e., the Kola peninsula in 1978 and the Kamchatka-Sakhalin-Vladivostok area in 1983. Yet there is no way for us to push this argument further: it might have been a coincidence, and then again it might have been something else. [Dallin 47]

That two events should occur so far apart in time, at different places and under different circumstances, is ordinarily reason to suppose that there is no connection between them, that they constitute two independent occurrences; nevertheless, in both "recent" cases, "during the past fifteen years," it was a Korean airline extensively deviating. The two events must be simultaneously far apart – separated by a seeming infinite distance of mediations – in space and time, and yet contemporary, belonging to the same sphere of influence in order to be thought to coincide – perhaps significantly. But the discourse of coincidence needs further always to supplement itself with more coincidence and doubling. In this first case, Dallin spells out the ratios: in two cases of illegal overflight it is two Korean airliners specifically "overflying the two most sensitive military 'areas' in the Soviet Union." The "areas"

may be quite different in their respective size and homogeneity but the code which wishes to identify these areas demands a proliferating identity of terms.

The multiple coincidences between these two Korean flights discursively exert powerful pressure to unify them in a single event, to suspect some motivated intention between them, some agency in common directing both intrusions. According to the metonymic principle, *ce qui s'assemble se rassemble* [whatever assembles resembles], metonymic contiguity produces a metaphorical unification of "two separate aircraft" that permits them analogically to exchange their identities, to signify one another, in a process of judgment we are calling, following Jung, "significant coincidence."

The same mechanism of judgment appears to have everything to do with the way two flight paths were seen that night, on the screens, in the airspace, in the minds of the Soviet Air Command which followed KAL 007 along its bizarre itinerary in and out of its borders and which twice repeated the order to fire rockets to the pilot of the needle nosed SU-15 interceptor flying behind the airliner. The view or vision is given a time frame which begins with the Soviet's first detection of the RC-135 reconnaissance plane, a military version of the 707, outfitted with the most advanced reconnaissance (and, quite conceivably, radar jamming) capabilities, at 13:45 Greenwich time (about 2:45) in the morning of the first day of September on a clear night, with some clouds, under a full moon. It ends at 6:24 a.m. local time, when "its flight was stopped," on orders from the Soviet Air Defense Forces in conformity with the recently promulgated law concerning the SU state borders: "It is the sovereign right of every state to defend its borders, including its airspace" [CDSP 34 51 15].

The Soviet version was presented at an unprecedented two hour press conference given by the Chief of the General Staff, Marshall Nicolai Ogarkov. Displaying what all observers agreed was a remarkable mastery of detail, he presented the Soviet's "factual data on the individual stages of this provocative flight." According to the Marshall, those facts have been established on the basis of "a thorough investigation" by "a highly qualified special state commission" including specialists from every appropriate department: "It has been proved irrefutably that the intrusion of the South Korean airline's plane into Soviet airspace was a deliberate, carefully planned intelligence operation" [CDSP 35 36; NYT 5 October 1983]. Ogarkov, standing in front of a large wall map, points to a darkly shaded area, the focus of a strange patrol.

I want especially to call your attention to the fact that the South Korean plane entered the detection zone of Soviet radar systems in an area that is constantly patrolled by American reconnaissance planes, particularly RC-135s [confirmed in NYT 5 September 1983]. This time we detected an RC-135 reconnaissance plane in this area at 2:45 a.m. local (Kamchatka) time on Sept. 1. As registered by Soviet radio systems, for two hours it conducted a somewhat strange patrol here. At 4:51 a.m. Kamchatka time, another plane with a radar blip analogous to that made by an RC-135 was detected in the same area and at the same altitude – 8000 meters. The planes approached each other (up to the total merger of the blips on the screen) and then proceeded together for some time (about 10 minutes). Then one of them, as has been repeatedly observed earlier, headed for Alaska while the other one headed for Petropavlosk-Kamchatsky. Naturally, Soviet Air Defense Command posts drew the conclusion that a reconnaissance plane was approaching the USSR's airspace. [CDSP 35 36 2]

The KAL plane entered the Soviet's radar detection zone in "an area that is constantly patrolled by American reconnaissance planes," and it is seen to cross paths with just such a plane that happens to be flying a mission at exactly that place, in the electronically vibrant space above the narrow sea that separates East and West, at just that time. The two planes, "with the radar blip analogous," approach one another "up to the total merger of the blips on the screen," which is already suspicious given that the merging of blips is a standard ploy for trying to dupe the radar into confusing the location of the planes. They continue together for about ten minutes – indistinguishable, a single merged blip – and their coincidence is read as the sign that the two separate planes have entered into some significant intentional communication. The SU tracks their mutual course, sees them seeing one another in what from

their radar appears to be something close to visual contact. The US administration insists that the two planes never got closer than 75 nautical miles during "the mission orbit" of the RC-135.⁸

To strengthen beyond all doubt their case that KAL 007 was on an espionage mission, the SU published a map intending to show that 007's suspicious flight over Soviet bases "just happened" to coincide, not once but three times, according to the proliferative logic we have observed, in both time and place, with the overflight of a US ferret satellite capable of recording Soviet electronic activity triggered by KAL 007's intrusion. Whatever the truth value of these claims – and the US found them not even worth responding to – this map, with its concentric paths, is a visual index of the persuasive power of "significant" coincidence.

For the Soviets, the conjunction of the Korean airliner and the RC-135 at 1600 hours signaled once and for all the purposeful mission of flight 007: having crossed paths with the spyplane, it "went straight for Petropavlosk in Kamchatka" with the deliberate intention of violating borders. All their assumptions about the mission of the plane seemed to have been determined by the initial "rendez-vous."⁹

Aviation Week and Space Technology in an editorial attacks the logic of the self-evident conclusion to which Marshall Ogarkov and earlier the air defense chief had "naturally" arrived on the basis the fact that the two planes, their blips merged, flew for-sometime together: "The logic of a commercial airplane from any country exchanging secret messages with an RC-135 before embarking on a clandestine mission – all in full view of surveillance radar and monitoring antennas – is too idiotic to contemplate even in a spy novel" [12].

The SU sees the coincidence of two planes, sees the attempt to be unseen on the radar screen, and "naturally" draws the conclusion that it is seeing the approach of a spy plane. The Soviets should have known, said President Reagan in his speech on 5 September, that "the 747 has a unique and distinctive silhouette . . . there is no way a pilot could mistake this for anything other than a civilian airliner." What is more, the State Department added, "The intrusion of KAL 007 should have been a strong indication that the plane was civilian" [NYT 6 September 1983]. Indeed if the Soviets suffered any confusion about the identity of the two planes, the mere fact that they believed the plane was a US reconnaissance plane should have been taken as evidence, says the statement, that the plane intruding was *not* an RC-135. Because US reconnaissance planes do not enter Soviet territory: "They know that our aircraft do not enter their airspace" [ibid.]. But in the *Denver Post* on 13 September two former Air Force intelligence specialists and RC-135 crew members [Tom Bernard and T. Edward Eskelson] wrote that the National Security Agency which controls RC-135 flights, sometimes plotted courses "so they will intentionally penetrate the airspace of a target nation." And *Time* magazine reports in its 12 September issue that US reconnaissance planes flying near Soviet borders "have triggered the firing of more than 99 Soviet ground-to-air missiles, so far without a hit." From the US point of view, the intrusion should have been a highly visible sign of something – a civilian plane – which in fact the SU, by every account, appears never for a moment to have envisioned, having read its intrusion as a highly visible sign that it was spying.

A situation of reciprocal watching, of tacit assurance that the other is watching and knowing, would seem to insure against fundamental misapprehension. But in this instance, the practice of mutual vigilance brings no transparency of meaning; it rather opens an abyss of seeing and being seen, so that in the space into which KAL 007 flies the possibility of perception cannot be disentangled from the problematics of interpretation. The chief of the Soviet air defense command, Col. Seymyon Romonov, in the first detailed Soviet reaction,

⁸In *The Nation*, David Pearson argues that the administration's assertions are not necessarily contradictory with those of the SU that claims the two planes made their rendezvous after the mission orbit was completed. Pearson in fact argues that the RC-135 followed KAL 007 much farther than carefully worded official statements imply.

⁹On 7 October, more than a month after the incident, David Schriban reported in the *New York Times* that unnamed US intelligence experts say "they have reviewed the available evidence and found no indication that Soviet air defense personnel knew it was a commercial plane before the attack" [NYT 7 October 1983]. Contrary to early Reagan administration claims, from the beginning the SU never wavered in its assumption that it was dealing with an intruder spy plane.

noted of the Boeing 747: "Its contours greatly resemble those of the American reconnaissance plane RC-135" [CDSP 35 5; NYT 5 September 1983]. President Reagan insists on the unique and distinct silhouette of the plane, Col. Seymyon speaks of the resemblance of contours. The difference belongs to the nature of shadows. On the one hand, the contour or profile is, like a shadow, some essential ratio or resumption of the thing itself, so that things die, it is said, when they lose their shadow. Soldiers "identify" aircraft by learning their profile, their minimal identificatory features. On the other hand, the contour or profile, being only a shadow of the thing is easily misleading or misread, the way a hand's shadow can be now a dog, now a rabbit. The evocative power of shadow theatre derives from that aporetic nature of the contour – which is both the guarantee of identity, "unique and distinctive," and the medium of confusion and dissemblance – "its contour resembles."

At a time when the US military is actually nearing the deployment of stealth technology, the threat from ground-hugging subsonic cruise missiles below is much more imminent and pressing than the more widely advertised but still largely mythic menace of Star Wars at the speed of light. *Stealth* may be the truth of Star, not the side the President is publically inclined to identify with, but the real focus of the current military obsessions. How to be invisible to the eye of the radar, how to present a profile that the radar can be deceived into not seeing, that will not be seen as a prominent blip – a power like that of the actor's ultimate illusion, making himself invisible before the eyes of the spectators. If in Klauswitz's famous dictum, "deception is the essence of warfare," then we may speculate that becoming invisible, thus rendering effective defense impossible, must be the goal and dream of every attacking force.

If the race to develop stealth technology figures in the KAL 007 episode, then the Soviet version of the incident would argue that the US agencies constructed an "intentional coincidence" of civilian plane and military function. The intruder plane was designed to draw a full defensive response, which could then be recorded and used in developing attack scenarios. At the same time, the plane could be represented as something other than what it was so as to occult its true mission – a "stealth mission" in the service of stealth technologies. The Shultz news conference figures in this setting as an exercise in "stealth rhetoric," which, inaugurating the swift barrage of simplistic accusations directed at the SU, will help conceal the fact that, whether by original design or lucky contingency, US military agencies gained significant espionage advantages from its overflight of Soviet bases. SU interest, as reflected in the Ogarkov news conference, would then consist in appearing to have lost no advantage, so that exchanges at the level of official rhetoric correspond to the competition in stealth which operates in the air.

Conclusion.

At the speed at which perceptions and judgments must be made in a nuclear age, when launching the attack and accomplishing it have become all but simultaneous, where the distance between sides has shrunk almost to zero, one cannot rule out the possibility that effects of coincidence, produced by unconscious aggression, may trigger paranoid fictions inherent in the technology and systems themselves. To be this kind of "nuclear trigger" it must be a co-incidence in which the nation has a stake, provokes strong moral judgment, and becomes an oracle of the Other's enigmatic and dangerous intentions.

Thus, for example, if there is an ambiguous event on the border which threatens national security, accompanied by anger at the death of innocents, one is projected into an interpretive crisis where "seeing" and communication might be as difficult as it was for Soviet interceptors on the night of 1 September 1983. Then the incident might be read as a sign that the war has *already* begun, and is about to begin in earnest. Because of the accuracy of new counterforce weapons, huge advantages accrue to the country whose strategic weapons are fired first. In such a crisis, one's relation to war, which one does not have time to "declare," must be the negative "future anterior." Political leadership must decide whether an early retaliatory or anticipatory presumptive strike has become essential to insure some form of national survival. Because nuclear war is so terrible for all, we speculate that it can only be triggered – as something which will be neither simply an action nor an event – by precisely an incident or coincident read as malevolent intention, calling for a concerted response that

will cut losses which suddenly appear inevitable. This is the strange temporality of the beginning of nuclear war: not to start, but to continue a war which can be construed as having already begun, becomes the only scenario by which the national leadership can envision national survival.

The downing of KAL 007 shows us the way our history is open to coincidences which could someday appear (or disappear) as critical turns within the narratives of the future. Just as in the physics of sub-atomic particles where there is inverse relation between the observer's ability to measure simultaneously the mass and the velocity of a particle, similarly there may be an absolute limit on our ability to determine and know simultaneously both the time and the implications of the occurrence of a nuclear event. Our study of the KAL 007 suggests just such a limit. When it comes to that posture and machine called nuclear deterrence, and owing to reasons as various as the legal and historical character of nation states, the accelerating development of faster and more precise technologies, the psychodynamics of rivalry and paranoia, there may be an absolute limit to the ability of political leaders and military planners to see, know, anticipate, and defuse the coincidence which, intersecting in fateful and unforeseen ways with both the systems of defense and the political moment, could become nuclear.

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