

The huntsman's funeral: targeting the sensorium¹

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Abstract

Using Foucault's early radio address 'Utopian body' as a starting point, this paper examines the role of sensorium in the production, circulation and legitimisation of knowledge, especially as it pertains to an understanding of a transparent operation of senses. Using targeting as an example of the ways in which the senses combine with transitive grammar to reinforce specific notions of the subject and subjectivity, the article offers a variety of visual texts and grammatical examples (namely the middle voice) to consider the ways in which Foucault's writings in *The birth of the clinic* and 'Utopian body' both subvert common-sense understandings of transitivity, the subject, the body and the senses (again through targeting) and reinforce them. The article includes a brief foray into teletechnologies and urban attacks.

¹ This paper was written for a conference held at the University of South Australia in Adelaide in July 2009. As such, it bears the marks of a paper written to be read, and I hope readers will indulge these rhetorical qualities.

The title of this conference reminds me of the work edited by Jonathan Arac shortly after Foucault's death entitled *After Foucault* (1989). This title got me thinking about the temporal-spatial ambiguities that reside in various prepositions. After Foucault can mean post-Foucault (as in beyond him or once we have absorbed his work) as well as in homage or imitation of him – as in a novel after the style of author X. Its opposite, before Foucault, provides much spatial and temporal ambiguity if not outright contradiction. 'Before' temporally indicates something occurring previous to something else, a predecessor, and is thus spatially behind us as we envision time's arrow in a linear fashion. But 'before' spatially means in front of something, as in before the bar or Kafka's 'Before the law'. All of this has real resonance, in a more Derridean than Foucauldian fashion, when approaching Foucault's massive and massively influential corpus. Therefore, I have roughly structured this talk around three such ambiguous prepositional phrases: after Foucault, before Foucault and with Foucault. This structure replicates the movement and language of the chorus in Greek drama – the strophe, anti-strophe and epode – which follows an almost dialectic movement but one without resolution. The chorus sings a stanza and moves in one direction (strophe), provides another, sometimes contradictory statement, moving in the opposite direction (anti-strophe) and then sings the final stanza while stationary near its original spot (epode). The choral dance allows a return that is not a return, a dialectic resolution that leaves the resolution unfinished and the competing dynamics at play.

All of this seems productive for thinking through a problematic found in Foucault's writings. Foucault's corpus reveals him as a thinker obsessed with materiality, especially of space and the body, but also as one whose thought on technology is almost singularly immaterial, concentrating on discursive domains and their institutional manifestation. This is nowhere more apparent than in his engagement with technology and their relation to the senses. Though he often engages perception and the foundational power of empiricism in its emergent and institutionalised forms, Foucault also invokes unmediated senses and an uncertainty surrounding the materiality of them. His engagement with the western construction of the sensorium is as provocative as anyone's and equally as problematic, in that all sensoria suffer the vagaries of empiricism and corporeal manipulation. Taking a short and early radio address called 'Utopian body' (Foucault 2006) as a starting point, I wish to range across a number of related topoi directly and obliquely relevant to Foucault while

considering how we can think after, before and with him on these issues, which seems to be the challenge proffered by his work.

In ‘Utopian body’, a piece only recently available in English translation, Foucault says ‘this body is light; it is transparent; it is imponderable. Nothing is less *thing* than my body: it runs, it acts, it lives, it desires. It lets itself be traversed, with no resistance, by all my intentions’ (Foucault 2006, p. 231). That he intends the initial articulation of this statement to be made in a disembodied manner – that of radio broadcast – reinforces, perhaps unconsciously, this transparency of the body. The statement about the ideal absent body is contradicted by his next set of statements: the body becomes visible and noticeable at that moment when something disrupts the smooth operation of the system, when the body does not work properly or pain enters the frame. The contradiction finds a resolution that is not a resolution according to Foucault: when the body is in trouble, we can move it; but in order to move it, we must use it to move. In other words, the body is the vehicle, recipient and actor. It is all part of the transitive sentence: subject, verb, object. Such a consideration provides a space where we can think with Foucault on the senses, their operation, technology, grammar, materiality, and so on.

The utopian body is an incorporeal one – the senses immaterial and invisible in their engagement with the world. The body and the senses, like technology and ideology, work best when they seem not to be operative at all, when the medium disappears into function and action as intention incarnate. Bruno LaTour finds in Peter Sloterdijk’s large work known as the *Spheres trilogy* an argument about the management of the sensorium that underpins ‘industry, commerce, laboratory science, surveillance technologies, and public debates’ (LaTour 2006, p. 106). Sloterdijk argues that this management is the by-product of technoscience’s desire to escape the sensorium: to use the sensorium to break its own grip. This is, of course, the idealism that does not negate empiricism but which instead makes it possible. Our senses can overturn or refute doxa at the drop of an apple or the kick of a rock. However, they can also be duped, enhanced, modified, mutated, blunted or sealed. They are always forever mediated – indeed they are media itself. Yet with empirical power and seduction, we can be lulled into a belief in a universal essential body transparent in its operation that we can refer to as a grounding ontology, especially within the domain of a transitive grammar that posits the sovereign subject controlling objects in the world. This is where we turn to next.

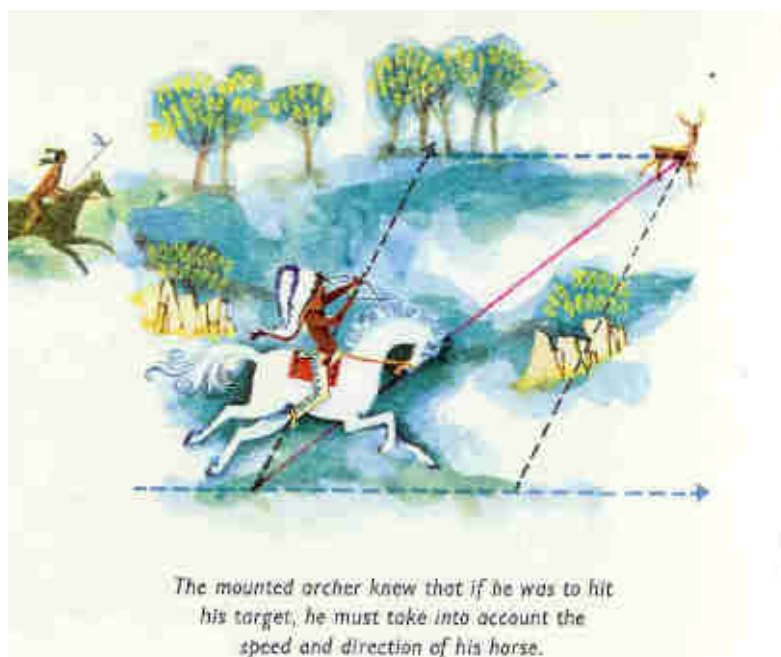
Before Foucault



Des Jaegers Leichenbegängnis [The huntsman's funeral] by Jacques Callot (17th century)

Though mostly noted for his haunting and horrific engravings documenting the Thirty Years War, Jacques Callot also produced parodic images, such as *The huntsman's funeral* (date uncertain but likely around 1620) from the early seventeenth century, which became a popular image in children's literature in the nineteenth century. The engraving strongly links sensibilities from the Baroque era with those of specific Romantic writers, ETA Hoffman being amongst the most obvious. The role of grotesque laughter hinting at larger existential realities glimpsed through absurd cruelty and human folly forms the essential basis of these links. *The huntsman's funeral* provided inspiration for, or at least programmatic justification for, Mahler's earliest full-blown parodic and grotesque march in his first symphony – a shockingly unnerving gesture that leads neatly to Shostakovich and the role of parodic engagement with the military atrocities upon which royalist and nationalist ideologies are built and celebrated that so dominates twentieth-century aesthetics. The image's parodic qualities are blatant, humorously suggesting more of a celebratory march than a dirge of mourning carnival instead of elegy (think the second line of a New Orleans jazz funeral). The animals do not seem terribly bereft at the huntsman's passing, with fox and boar shedding crocodile tears.

The interest here, though, is of another kind of parody: a parody of transitive grammar and transparency of the senses in action as they pertain to targeting. This 'common-sensical' view is illustrated, appropriately enough, in an image from a 1950s children's science education book.



Source: Hogben (1957)

The illustration tells us about physics, ballistics, relative speeds, calculation and the subject-centred control epitomised by targeting – here, again, in the form of a hunt in nostalgic and exoticised mode as an indigenous activity in the Americas via Hollywood. The grammatical and semantic point emphasised is the transitive and detached one of the hunter (subject) targeting and shooting (verb) a deer (Bambi’s mother perhaps but a grammatical and semantic object regardless), with control centred in one portion of the tableau and a telos or aim (literally) manifest in the engagement.

Returning to *The huntsman’s funeral*, we can just as easily read the image as a parody of this construction of intentionality and mastery. It can be read as an allegory of the ineluctably co-constructive nature of the act of targeting. The huntsman is only a hunter through his act of hunting, and thus forest fauna are only prey by dint of the same act. The action of hunting, the verb, tethers the subject and object together making them inextricably intertwined and participatory. As with the sovereign subject and the transparent body, transitive grammar makes targeting at one level appear to be following our inherited ‘common-sense’ model of a subject acting on and manipulating objects. In order to do so it must mystify the relational dimensions of actions linking actors. This inherited ‘common-sense’ set of relations found in the child’s educational picture obscures the interdependence found in Callot, thus making ‘common sense’ that which mystifies. With targeting, as the Callot image allegorises, we

witness something like ‘the middle voice’, where the subject and object become what they are through the action binding them together, not as discrete entities in and of themselves separate from the event. Stephen A Tyler, writing about the middle voice, says that it is

participatory, and subjects emerge or undergo change as the interactive process from which they cannot distance *themselves* ... It will have been necessary to think of media without the idea of mediation, without the idea of subjects and objects independent of the media that will seemingly have linked them. (1993)

After Foucault

The term ‘target’ as both noun and verb in English is deeply connected to the Greek word *skopos*, which is the etymological and epistemological root of our various scopic regimes, including targeting, surveillance and observation. The term originally designated a watchman or a watcher and, later, one who seeks out and marks the object of some game or quest. At the same time, the *skopos* is also the object on which one fixes one’s eye, the mark itself, the target. Plato and Aristotle both use *skopos* in this sense, as synonymous with *telos*, the object or aim of an action or passion as well as the process that leads to the goal.

Skopos thus functions as a hinge that joins and at the same time separates the marker from the mark. It is attached both to the one who aims and to what is aimed at, detaching them at the same time and then moving to another mark. It therefore connects the watcher not just to something watched but to the conditions of his/her watching per se, where watching becomes an act with an end that at once belongs to it (i.e. to watching) yet does not belong to it. By an oblique process the term for watchfulness becomes the term for target as well, leading us back to Callot’s image in that each element of targeting (or watching of hunting) is implicated in the other.

But this is not how we envision targeting. Our common-sense understanding of it is the unmediated kind, in which the verb disappears in the consummation of the subject’s sovereign action. We see this in the following text from an advertisement for an attack helicopter.

We made it beautiful. Because it's the last thing some people will ever see. The AH-1Z. First, it frustrates the enemy with a Target Sight System that detects, recognizes and identifies them at extreme ranges ... Finally, if you wish, it permits the enemy to view a state-of-the-art helicopter like no other. (Bell Helicopter Textron Ad)

The advertisement sums up our common-sense view of vision, agency and targeting as manifest in military techno-science. 'If I had to sum up current thinking on precision missiles and saturation weaponry', said former US Under-Secretary of Defense, WJ Perry, 'I'd put it like this: once you can see the target, you can destroy it' (cited in Virilo 1989, p. 4). Sight, dominant in the age of empirical science and the sensorium that age generated and that remains our inheritance, is frequently detached from the relational nature of the gaze and the act of observation, a point Foucault makes at length. This military scenario retells the tale of targeting we have just have considered: agency resides autonomously in the body of the pilot, and we have a story of techno-science working in harmony with the senses to create a more efficient and transparent body.² Seeing conflates with killing as prosthetically enhanced senses close the gap of perception and remove the distinction between apprehension, thought and action. The transparent, utopian body that the pilot has become echoes perfectly the argument about 'the clinical gaze' in Foucault's *The birth of the clinic* (1994).

With Foucault

The perception of perception and how it is instrumentalised, rendered material to be mystified as immaterial common-sense operation (as in our targeting examples), is the ostensible topic of Foucault's *The birth of the clinic*, the subtitle of which, after all, is *An archaeology of medical perception*. The topic of the book is how we have come to consider perception, that is how we have arrived at our perception of perception, with the two notions of the term – the immaterial and material – substantively reinforcing one another in the hermeneutic circle of solipsistic objectivity. Thinking with Foucault, we can return to the problems of the senses and their simultaneous materiality/immateriality, active/receptive dimensions, and transitive/middle voice grammatical operations.

² This is clearly an issue pursued further into the virtual by Jean Baudrillard (1995) in essays on the Gulf War as well as by Paul Virilio in his *The vision machine* (1994), *War and cinema* (1989) and *Desert screen* (2002). I also argue these points more fully in relation to Baudrillard in certain parts of *Baudrillard now* (Bishop 2009).

Foucault's reading of the emergence of 'the clinical gaze' repeats the common-sense transitive nature of our perception of perception found in our discussion of targeting as well as the mystification it relies on. The clinical gaze 'refrains from all possible intervention' (1994, p. 108) and must be transparent in its operation. He writes that 'the clinical gaze has the paradoxical ability to *hear a language* as soon as it *perceives a spectacle*' (p. 108). The logic and desire here can be found in the control, speed and transparency of sensory input and action available to the pilot in the Apache attack helicopter: that is, the disappearance of the gap of perception into the simultaneity of sensing and acting. The view of the enhanced targeting system in the cockpit is but a variation of the clinical gaze.

Though I have some issues with the exclusively discursive problems Foucault attributes to the clinical gaze as opposed to the actually mediating nature of the senses, what I wish to shift to here is a brief take on the 2008 terrorist attacks in Mumbai in relation to the transparent body and the clinical gaze. The simultaneity of sensory response and action found in the clinical gaze and in the helicopter pilot is fully on display in these theatrical and mediated attacks. The strategic use of Google maps, GPS, frequently swapped SIM cards, sms, encrypted emails and other tele-technological devices appropriates these sensory extensions that allow for the reinscription of transitive grammar and non-participatory relations into broadcast media. The terrorists used these to make their own sensory perceptions instantly and transparently become actions mobilised against the very technologies that are largely, and accurately, read as means for spatial control. Thus they placed their bodies in the centre of this urban space to reconfigure it and the power relations the tele-technologies portray. Just as the clinical gaze depended on rendering the invisible visible to the knowledgeable perceiver, according to Foucault, so the terrorists made themselves visible to the world through the very means and technologies designed to keep them invisible.

These were irregular and asymmetrical attacks carried out against a population that did not know they were at war, that did not see itself as a target until the irreducible relationality of targeting made it visible, as 'total war' and the Cold War have done since the middle of the twentieth century (see Bratton forthcoming). Similarly the citizens' cityscape was recast as a war theatre, its invisible daily violence made visible through the thoroughly transparent bodies of the terrorists acting in accord of subject-controlled techno-science, targeting and

transitivity. The social and political circuitry of the cityscape mirrored the instability and reversibility of its IT circuitry and infrastructure. Google Earth became a medium for target planning and strategic movements as well as for counter-movements by citizens fleeing the attacks. Its reversible use signals the inescapable middle voiced nature of targeting. The lesson of this appropriation, according to Benjamin Bratton, is ‘we do not control even what we control’ (forthcoming). To amplify and modify this point, all bombing is suicide bombing. And that is the lesson of the failure to understand relationality within targeting, the fallibility of the senses, and the opacity of the transparent body.

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