

Blinded by surveillance

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Brunton and Nissenbaum emphasise that successful obfuscation must be highly sensitive to context and purpose: do you want to buy time, cover your tracks or conceal your identity? Your answer to such questions should shape the tools you employ.

The most complex questions are addressed in chapter four, which considers how obfuscation can be justified. The authors' primary aim is clearly to provide those practicing and designing obfuscation with a ready means of responding to objections that they are engaged in antisocial, destructive behaviour through free-riding on online communities or using up valuable bandwidth. Rawls' maximin principle provides a neat response to such criticisms: in assessing data practices we should favour those which maximise the position of the worst off; the status quo clearly does not meet this requirement and obfuscation is therefore justified. Perhaps more insightful, however, is the suggestion that informational asymmetry involves a violation of autonomy of the kind described by Philip Petit in his account of republican freedom. On this view, obfuscation is justified because we are currently subjected to the arbitrary will of those who control data collection and analysis and, as a result, are not truly free.

Perhaps because of the concern to be concise and practical, the book rarely ventures beyond the possessive and distributive epistemology that has come to represent an article of information age common sense. Knowing involves holding information and transmitting it from actor to actor, and obfuscation appears as a strategic move in a field structured by the circulation of data. This is, of course, an at least partly true representation of our current predicament. However, it risks marginalising those aspects of obfuscation which might involve the assertion of a fundamentally different subjectivity to that imposed by the data-harvesters. The power asymmetries identified in the book are not simply a matter of the possession and control of information; they relate to the very nature of the subjectivity available to us. Before information can circulate, be fought over or distributed, individuals must be moulded into the right kinds of actors and their relationships, actions and preferences rendered into fungible data – into exchange values. This occurs at

the cost of their autonomy, individuality and spontaneity. Obfuscation is potentially an act of resistance in the face of this process, rather than a strategic move on the pre-existing terrain of information. The dangers of pursuing obfuscation in the absence of such considerations are apparent in Brunton and Nissenbaum's concern that Anonymouth's 'statistically bland prose' would prevent the emergence of a modern Tom Paine. Nevertheless, by reviving a tradition of progressive opacity, *Obfuscation's* call to throw sand in the gears shows the degree to which we can turn systems of data-mining against themselves and begin to exercise the autonomy which they serve to suppress.

Matthew Fluck

Blinded by surveillance

Simone Browne, *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2015). ix+213pp., £70.00 hb., £19.99 pb., 978 0 82235 919 7 hb., 978 0 82235 938 8 pb.

Surveillance is not blind. Massive, generalised and indiscriminate surveillance might nowadays be pervasive, but the blanket nature of some surveillance practices should not make us forget that they are governed by specific purposes, and that they produce distinct impacts in relation to race and gender. Surveillance is not fortuitous, and its technologies are not neutral, undiscerning or colourless. Simone Browne's *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness* documents the non-blindness of surveillance with vibrant detail. It bridges the (cosmic) gap between the fields of surveillance and black studies, guided by a cultural studies' will to embrace potentially anything as a source of edifying light. Bringing into her discussion heterogeneous historical records, contemporary art and Hollywood blockbusters, the book travels through the history of black lives under surveillance, so illuminating its connections with anti-black racism. Indeed, *Dark Matters* connects the roots of surveillance itself with the transatlantic

slave trade, drawing parallels between Michel Foucault's reading of Jeremy Bentham's notorious prison model, the Panopticon, with the plan of the *Brooks*, a slave ship. It links *The Book of Negroes*, as cardinal archive of fugitive slaves, to the contemporary regulation of mobilities, and traces the ties between lantern laws in eighteenth-century New York City and the disciplining force of hypervisibility, as well as between slave branding and biometric border technologies.

All these accounts are used to display what Browne calls 'racialising surveillance', that is, enactments of surveillance that reify boundaries along racial lines, potentially resulting in discriminatory and violent treatment. Racialising surveillance would not just be surveillance that sorts out, but an exercise of power that reifies race, as well as possibly gender – the surveillance that puts things in a certain order and a racialised order in place. As a mirroring concept, she mobilises the notion of a dark *sousveillance*, which would relate to those tactics used to move out of sight, the strategies underpinning a flight to freedom, and, more generally, the charting of modes to respond to, challenge or confront surveillance. Yet, *Dark Matters* also aims to do more than throw light on all these issues. It argues that the very genealogy of surveillance is grounded in blackness, and that its historical foundation is contained inside the historical foundation of slavery. Surveillance is in truth the fact of antiblackness, Browne contends, alleging that an understanding of the ontological conditions of blackness is thus integral to developing any general theory of surveillance. The argument is as illuminating as it is provocative, albeit built, in part, upon some obscure assumptions, and occasionally casting some deep shadows.

It is unclear, for instance, why any coupling of slavery and surveillance should primarily be settled on American chattel slavery, disregarding any other of its previous and later manifestations, most notably Roman slavery. The life of Roman slaves is conceivably at least as equally suited to portray the embodiment of life without freedom and to testify to the inscription of the commodification and disciplining of human beings not only on and through their bodies, but also through other means, includ-

ing the architecture and practice of law. Roman law, indeed, considered slaves to be property, and silenced their voices by preventing them from informing about any crimes unless interrogated under torture; men and women were dispossessed of themselves and rendered as inaudible and invisible as convenient. While this could lead to relevant insights on the interconnections between surveillance, slavery and their various techniques, Browne prefers to look at them exclusively through the lens of the American slave trade, so concluding that everything is, fundamentally, about a commodification of blackness.

Blackness is certainly the critical focus of Browne's concerns, and her insistence on more or less exclusively tracking its legacies eventually affects the whole analysis of how surveillance operates, especially the intersectional dimension of her investigation. Browne's rendition of the experiences of black women in the context of aviation security, expounded on the basis of a reading of the TV series *South Park* (cultural studies etiquette *oblige*), eventually tells us very little about contemporary surveillance and women. A better insight could probably be obtained by listening to Chino Amobi's *Airport Music for Black Folk*, even if Amobi might be rather less popular than Eric Cartman. A more thorough understanding of the challenges faced by feminism in light of modern surveillance would need to follow Safiya Umoja Noble, whose extensive research on algorithms and female oppression clearly shows that misrepresentation in online search engines is not a problem exclusively affecting the lives of black women and girls.

As blackness is constantly put forward as the main issue at stake, *Dark Matters* also ends up turning a blind eye to the numerous settings where modern surveillance is not fundamentally about reifying anything at all, but, on the contrary, about dismantling the possibility for the subject to reclaim any personal territory or identity. The case of the language testing of asylum seekers, lightly touched upon by Browne, has been further dissected by British-Lebanese artist Lawrence Abu Hamdan. His work on the analysis of speaking in the procedures to obtain refugee status puts on record the policing

of belonging through laws and science, showing that in many instances the problem is not to be ascribed to blackness, or to anywhere in particular, but to the pseudo-scientific dispute of self-identification by the apparatus of the state. This is directly related to the question of how to conceptualise resistance to racialising surveillance. If surveillance is about slavery, escaping might be a good option. *Dark Matters* hints that we should ask ourselves whether we wish to constantly surrender our bodies as data, as if that was in fact an option. If surveillance is framed as anti-blackness, going back to black(ness) might be a decisive counter-surveillance trick, but, then, performing whiteness or trying to pass in terms of race and gender (to the extent this is inspired by the narratives of runaway slaves) could also be regarded as genuine revolutionary moves. After much travelling through the dark side of surveillance and its sufferings, Browne ends up somehow oddly celebrating the sharing of style tips to confuse artificial intelligence, along with some other accidental counter-performances and symbolic gestures of defiance in the face of the white gaze, without really questioning the limits and effectiveness of these confrontations.

In this context, what really stands out as a perplexing gap in the argumentation of *Dark Matters* is a deeper reflection on the relationship between surveillance and the Black Lives Matter movement. Triggered by the murder of Trayvon Martin in 2012 by a Neighborhood Watch volunteer, Black Lives Matter is unquestionably rooted in a reaction against surveillance's violence, a visible answer to the barbarity of the gaze. Additionally, the movement has, since then, been regularly reignited by images of brutal anti-black racism, often obtained from police car and body cameras, as well as smartphone and CCTV footage, that incarnate a paradigmatic instance of complicated (non-exclusively dark, non-exclusively white) *sousveillance*. Thinking about surveillance from this standpoint could have made more explicit the tensions between the blackness of surveillance, on the one hand, and on the other, what the Dutch research and design studio Metahaven term 'black transparency': that is, the potentially disruptive uses of counter-information. Oscillating between the accidental disclosure of secrets and the systemic con-

cealing of information, black transparency is not a straightforward remedy, and certainly not the contrary of surveillance. It is rather a counter-weapon acknowledging that surveillance is an exercise of power, and a reminder that, because it is not blind, surveillance can never be subverted by simply being dodged, played around or reversed.

Gloria González Fuster

French philosophy today

Christopher Watkin, *French Philosophy Today: New Figures of the Human in Badiou, Meillassoux, Malabou, Serres and Latour* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016). 272pp., £24.99 pb., 978 1 47441 473 9

Following an earlier study of 'post-theological thinking' in the work of Alain Badiou, Quentin Meillassoux and Jean-Luc Nancy (2011), Christopher Watkin's new book on several contemporary French philosophers considers the way in which they approach human beings. It explores both how they understand what is distinctively human, and how they present this distinctiveness in relation to broader forms of life, existence or being. The more open and inclusive their figure of the human, Watkin argues, the more successfully it evokes the peculiarly elusive and multi-faceted nature of its object.

Watkin structures his account of the five thinkers named in the subtitle of his book in terms of a broadly linear story of progress; one that begins with a relatively closed and thus relatively limited and exclusive figure of the human, and that culminates with a maximally open celebration of human actors as part of an all-inclusive relational field. The beginning and end points of this trajectory are marked by Badiou and Bruno Latour, respectively, with Meillassoux, Catherine Malabou and Michel Serres marking so many successive stages along the way.

Watkin rightly sees how Badiou's conception of truth-affirming subjects, despite the 'inhuman' austerity of his underlying ontology and the 'immortal' or 'super-human' inflection of the truths that