

Informatic Opacity

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As early as the 1970s, Caribbean philosopher and poet Édouard Glissant theorized opacity as an anti-imperial modality of relation and existence. His evocative demand that ‘we clamor for the right to opacity for everyone’ refuses a logic of total transparency and rationality, disrupting the transformation of subjects into categorizable objects of Western knowledge (Glissant 1999: 194). Opacity, Glissant tells us, concerns ‘that which protects the Diverse’, that is, the minoritarian (ibid. 62). Although his writings often evade an engagement with technology—or are overtly technophobic—newfound urgencies arise to consider Glissant’s philosophy of opacity within the context of technics in the early 21st century. Whether innovations in Big Data, secret data sweeps of governmental surveillance, or the growing popularity of the Quantified Self, the world’s people are increasingly reduced to aggregates of parsable data. Alexander R. Galloway and Eugene Thacker have described this era as one of ‘universal standards of identification’ (Galloway, Thacker 2007: 131). Technologies such as biometrics, GPS, RFID, data-mining algorithms, collaborative filters, DNA, and genomics become operational through global protocols that aim to solve ‘today’s crises of locatability and identification,’ for governments, militaries, corporations, and individuals alike (ibid). These identification technologies gain ascendance in a time of neoliberalism, Empire, and control, which subsumes identity and difference into its logic of governance. As such, we bear witness to the continued erasure of embodiment and the coterminous proliferation of what Critical Art Ensemble labels the ‘data body’ (Critical Art Ensemble 2003). Donna Haraway once articulated this problematic as ‘the informatics of domination,’ the coming communications networks of control that translate ‘the world into a problem of coding’ (Haraway 1991: 161/164); a biometric template to police national borders, an instant credit

check to determine economic viability, a gene to determine sexual orientation. Amongst teeming transnational flows of information, Haraway is careful to remind us that, 'People are nowhere near so fluid, being both material and opaque' (ibid. 153). This eradication of opaque excess by informatic standardization Glissant might call transparency. As an Enlightenment principle of universalism, transparency, for Glissant, claims to make a person fully intelligible and interpretable, and thus, is a barbarism, as it destroys the opacity of another.

Opacity is a paradigmatic concept to pit against the universal standards of informatic identification. According to Glissant, opacity persists as ontology - it is the world in relation. Therefore, struggles for opacity are not oriented towards gaining opacity, as we are always already opaque; rather, it is that power violates opacity, which must be resisted as a commitment to anti-imperial politics. This is precisely how opacity makes an ethical demand, as an appeal to prevent its denigration. Importantly, this does not imply that opacity is a stasis or sameness that must be preserved; alternately, it is the world without standard or norm—materiality in durational flux, which is the very aesthetics of the Other, for Glissant. At once ontological, ethical, and aesthetic, Glissant continues to explain opacity as a politics: 'if an opacity is the basis for a Legitimacy, this would be the sign of its having entered into a political dimension... [Opacity] would be the real foundation of Relation, in freedom' (Glissant 1999: 194). A politics of opacity, then, establishes itself in contradistinction to state-based forms of legal recognition, which necessitate the elimination of ambiguity to obtain the rights of a free citizen. Unified as a philosophical concept, opacity provides a consistency for minoritarian forces that are burdened by the norms of the day but can never be extinguished by them.

Informatic opacity starts with the premise that struggles for opacity occupy multiple perceptual and interpretive strata, notably, because being opaque to a person is not the same as being opaque to a machine. Consider a drone: while a drone operator might not be able to

locate a person with their own embodied senses, the thermal imaging system of the drone can achieve this via heat detection. Today, acts against global surveillance exhibit an immense investment in informatic opacity, from protest masks and cell phone signal jammers to online encryption. Although Glissant does not define opacity as tactical, such political techniques suggest that informatic opacity is a practice of anti-standardization at the global, technical scale. As a kind of ontological tactics, it is of and for the minoritarian, who are the most violently impacted by informatic identification standards: transgender persons are subjected to terrorist inspection when their bodies are misread by airport scanners and people of color are profiled by biometric technologies. Crucially, this reveals a crux of informatic opacity: it is both liberating and oppressive. As informatic identification is linked more and more to governance, mobility, and freedom, becoming informatically opaque can have excruciating political consequences, such as the loss of basic human rights. In spite of this, informatic opacity makes a more utopian gesture to exist without identification. Yet, in doing so, it does not ask us to return to Glissant's technophobia, but instead, it offers an infinitely more challenging and utopic proposition: to live with technologies that express the joy of opacity, not its destruction.