

Article

Seeing through the Data Shadow: Communing with the Saints in a Surveillance Society

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Abstract

The political theologian Amy Laura Hall has recently suggested that the proliferation of security cameras can be read as an index displaying the quality of a given community's social fabric. The aim of the paper is to show why this is a plausible reading of the Christian tradition that also helpfully illuminates the various cultural phenomena in western societies that are collectively indicated by the label "surveillance." The Swedish theologian Ola Sigurdson's account of modern regimes of perception substantiates this latter claim. An alternative political proposal is then developed around an account of the divine gaze that differs from the panoptic gaze of modernity. This theological positioning of the trusting gaze as ontologically fundamental for human community is paired with an acceptance of the limits of human sight and the multivalence of human knowing. The paper concludes by highlighting the importance of the gaze of the saints in training Christian vision to see beyond the characteristic ways of seeing and participating in the social organism characteristic of modern liberal surveillance societies. This conclusion implies, further, that one of the most important ways that the most denuding aspects of the surveillance society can be resisted is by drawing the gatekeepers who do the watching out in to public converse.

Introduction

In a 2014 editorial in her local newspaper, the American theologian Amy Laura Hall publicly mused on what a recently installed traffic camera said about her own community. In the camera, she said, she could not help but see concrete evidence of an "absence of neighborliness"—one that she resented (Hall 2016: 31). What we don't need more of around here, she wrote, is more automated law enforcement. What we really need is genuine community. In a real community you will have to deal with overly nosy neighbors telling you off for driving too fast or running a red light, but the excesses of neighbors are vastly preferable to the unblinking eyes of law enforcement cameras.

Hall immediately complicates this apparent pitting of neighborliness and surveillance in a zero-sum contest by appealing to two novels by Margaret Atwood. One of Atwood's most famous futuristic dystopias, *The Handmaid's Tale*, depicts a society whose totalitarian rule is organized around a religiously fueled nostalgic romanticism. Hypermodern social surveillance has become the norm but masked in the trappings of a pre-mass production artisan culture. Propagandistic state-sponsored unity rhetoric saturates a society that is fundamentally violent and coercive. Atwood herself seems to be proposing that the dystopian vision George Orwell developed in *1984* is less a novel about the dangers of the all-seeing eye of the telescreen and more about the *politics* of surveillance. Like Orwell, Atwood warns her readers against any political culture in which people are systematically trained to surveil each other. A

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surveillance society, they agree, is not really a *human* society at all, since in it each person is pitted against one another and even their own best interests.

Hall highlights Atwood's emphasis on the social mechanisms of surveillance.

The surveillance that goes on in *The Handmaid's Tale* is principally interpersonal, not technological. One of the warnings Atwood gives is against nostalgia for the "good old days" when things were supposedly simpler, before instant pudding and instant text messaging. In her new dystopian trilogy, which begins with *Oryx and Crake*, Atwood turns her critical insights on technology, describing a society where people have become separated even from their own bodies through the pervasive use of visual technologies. Under perpetual scrutiny through surveillance, people in that imagined future try to internalize the cameras, so to speak, watching others on screen and filming themselves obsessively. In the process, they become alienated from what most of us today would think of as citizenship, neighborliness, or love. (Hall 2016: 32)

Is surveillance an artifact of technology or is surveillance technology a projection of the human desire to control through the monitoring gaze? In Hall's view, Atwood's insight is that we can begin our analysis from either pole. The *morally* crucial point is that what is most important to notice about either social configuration is the way that it institutionalizes forms of life that attempt to minimize the places where we can *risk trusting* one another. In this article, I suggest that this is a crucial insight to dwell on if we are to think in both a critical and a constructive way about the politics of contemporary surveillance societies. Cultures of trust are hard to build and maintain, and within the social order that is modern globalized capitalism, rarely does setting up a camera foster trust.

Here Hall gently pillories the contemporary fad of touting the crime-reducing, mistake-eradicating, civility-producing, efficiency-enhancing effects of routine camera surveillance. Put a camera in an operating room, factory floor, police vest, car visor, office break room, or classroom and good outcomes are sure to result. Not so long ago, Hall observes, similarly pitched "scientific breakthroughs" had apparently proved the "discovery" that "when orderlies, nurses, and doctors communicate with one another in the care of patients, fewer practitioners make mistakes" (Hall 2016: 33). It is not difficult to imagine levels of police civility being raised by good training in non-combative communication techniques. In Hall's view there is only a superficial resemblance between the reduction of police brutality complaints after concerted training efforts versus the introduction of cameras on police vests.

Answering the pervasive dehumanization of racism with the further automation of police officers is to live in a logic that is the opposite of incarnate solidarity. It is to accept alienation as reality. As a Christian I cannot abide that. In case you are not a Christian...please consider two things. First, clear-as-day footage cannot mend the cracks fracturing a city. New Yorkers can tell you that [The reference is to the 2014 killing of Eric Garner by NYC police. (See Taibbi 2017)]. Surveillance technology is a sterile gimmick, at best, when what we need is more transparent, embodied, committed communication with neighbors who live as strangers. Second, repeatedly in American history people who benefit from inequality have divided working people...by pitting us against one another. (Hall 2016: 64)

Too many surveillance camera discussions assume that a trusting or at least peaceful community can be sustained without doing any serious thinking about which practices build—and which erode—trusting communication. But if communities are to be sustained, this problematic is inescapable, since risking open communication is the ineradicable fundament of any genuine *care* for others. One obvious eroding factor of this trust is the setting up of a power dynamic between those who can oversee others and those who cannot. And as recent election meddling has so fulsomely displayed, those who can see have the power almost effortlessly to foster division "pitting us against one another."

It was feminist concerns that initially guided Hall to some of these insights. Women working in hospitals, schools, or shops complained that increasing levels of video surveillance were inhibiting rather than

enhancing their caring and service work. Having been tasked with caring for and serving, they were at the same time being tracked by inscrutable and unknowable oversight that they could only experience as distrustful. This is a rich vein that deserves further attention, perhaps by attending to the harrowing tales of youth attempting to negotiate life lived in the social media universe. Youth too are discovering that even their most determined attempts to become caring human beings are snuffed out by the visually ordered community that they are able to access in the social media universe. Rana Dasgupta has recently recounted what she calls “The First Social Media Suicide” (Dasgupta 2017). Océane was a seeker for genuine meaningful human community, and as a conscious act of resistance to what she experienced as an uncaring culture in France had completed her training as a care home worker. Among teenagers in France, she was also a well-liked personality in the social media universe, despite the fact that she often complained that the acid cynicism of the social media culture demoralized her. Her search for a more caring community came crashing down after being viciously raped by her boyfriend, and she live-streamed her suicide before thousands of viewers a few days before her nineteenth birthday. Being widely watched seems again to have failed to bring about sustaining human communion.

There is a wider theology of risky vulnerability at stake here for Hall. Hall refuses to define ethics and the work of theology in abstraction from issues of transparency as they relate to interpersonal trust-building. In order to counter the dominant picture of transparency with its grounding in universal suspicion she, like other cultural commentators, is pressing the question of *which* forms of transparency and communication build trust (Eggers 2013; Atwood 2013; Brock 2014).

In order to do this, we modern westerners need to become a bit more aware of the cultural forces currently at work, discourses that deeply shape our understanding of the various relationships between surveillance and human intimacy. Hall takes it as revealing that ours is a society in which a well-known Hollywood musician who has been romantically linked with a long list of A-list movie stars can admit in an interview with a magazine having worldwide distribution,

...to having viewed 300 photos of women’s private parts before crawling out of bed some mornings. What made me sad then and still makes me sad now is that this man felt safer with photographs and films of parts of women than with a real woman herself. I wish for him the courage to wake up each morning with the same, real person and know himself beloved. (Hall 2016: 41–42)

Hall does not see this as an isolated instance and spots not dissimilar cultural trajectories in other cultural domains. The rising numbers of MOOC (massive open online courses) style currently popular in some universities suggests a devaluation of real teaching, which “requires a kind of trust and openness to new ideas and new voices that real intimacy also entails” (Hall 2016: 42). Real human relationship, in sum, grows from daring to risk, relating to people in all their unwieldy unpredictability. “Sex, love, teaching, and preaching should be about real people—smelly, scary, and beautiful” (Hall 2016: 43). In the volume in which Hall published a selection of her newspaper columns, she reflected on what sort of speech act such an article might represent when penned by a theologian. She proposes that such writing should be called political theology, but only if her approach is carefully distinguished from the form that it is currently taking in the (English-speaking) theological academy today. In her view the main practitioners defining that discipline address themselves far too univocally to policymakers and decision-makers, even when they are emphasizing the importance of grassroots activity such as community organizing (see Biggar 2011; Gregory 2010; Mathewes 2008; Bretherton 2014).

Hall’s vision of political theology is more radically democratic. This leads to a rival account of political leadership. In her view the political leadership that is appropriate for the Christian theologian is one that responds to a felt responsibility to articulate as clearly and publicly as possible the goods a particular community needs in order to flourish. And the voice used should conform to this aim. Moral pronouncements must not be uttered from the high seat of scientific expertise. A voice must be found that can draw everyone in the community into an open conversation. What makes a theology genuinely *political* is the theologian’s willingness to actively, and vulnerably, foster forms of socially elaborated trust by the means of sustained conversation. “This is a moral conviction in itself—that sustained

conversation about a polity, or about being a people, with real people, discussing our best judgments about living together, is the way God intended for us to be together at our best” (Hall 2016: 33).

Each theologian, then, faces a question about how they will position themselves in front of the public. Will they strike the pose of the “leader” or “visionary?” Defined in whose terms?

[A] “visionary” in Christian terms is someone who sees visions of God’s graced reality, and tells of those visions as part of a conversation. A “visionary” in business-speak (a language popular in some theological circles today) is someone who stands out in front of other people and tells them where they should be going. I aspire to be a visionary in Christian terms. (Hall 2016: 34)

It is the claim of the Christian communion of saints called the body of Christ that Hall sees as the vector having broken her out of the dominant, but credulous, belief that surveillance is largely benign. Having been positioned within the rich communion that is the body of Christ, she instinctively experiences the surveillance camera as one of the proliferating tiny tombstones to the trusting relationships that she believes to be essential to true human community. She has tried to put this perception to words in a local context for a local audience. And she has considered the forms in which that ought to be communicated amidst open and respectful disputes about the good of particular communities.

In this essay I want only to travel a few steps further down the path Hall has marked out for us. The questions she is negotiating are very much at the forefront of discussions in political philosophy about the place of surveillance in a just society (Cinnamon 2017). In engaging these questions in the particular idiom of theological thinking, she displays the characteristic traits, and culture-critical power, of the demands of the gospel on the Christian theologian as they engage these questions in public.

I want to further propose that the Swedish theologian Ola Sigurdson can shed light on the path opened by Hall. His *Heavenly Bodies: Incarnation, the Gaze and Embodiment in Christian Theology* (2016) offers an encyclopedic account of modern regimes of perception as well as a robustly theological analysis of the developments that have positioned our present in its current historical configuration. In a first section, I survey the narrative he develops of historical developments in modern western cultures of seeing, what he calls the scopic regimes of modernity. In a second section, I suggest how the combination of Hall’s insights and Sigurdson’s cultural narrative gives us fresh purchase on the theological and so moral reality of surveillance. A final section proposes that a close consideration of the Christian tradition of divine seeing, rather than *valorizing* surveillance, positions human beings as vulnerable to relationship in the way Hall has emphasized. Resistance to the most denuding aspects of the surveillance society means taking the risky step of talking—including to those who surveil us.

One last preparatory clarification. In this essay I talk primarily about cameras. The reader, however, should understand that I take cameras as standing in for any sensor that translates motion in the material world into electronic data—from buying something with a credit card, to logging on to our computer, or making a phone call, or posting on a social media platform, to showing our face in a certain part of town (Lyon 2014: 23–25). Thus in interrogating the cultural role of cameras, I am in fact investigating only the most visible of the myriad sensors that are constantly gathering raw data for sifting intelligent machines. I take these to be the essential features of what we have come to call a surveillance society.

I. Evolutions in Scopic Regimes

Sigurdson’s work helps us to see that Hall may well be warranted in assuming that the appearance of a camera marks a moment of withering and displacement of previously dominant ways of seeing the world. What seems indubitable is that the proliferation of cameras tells us *something* about the shifting grounding of communal life. The question is what. Though most humans do have sensory organs, including eyes, seeing is much more than an aggregate of the sensations produced by those biological organs. We have to think no further than the practice of reading to realize that reading is not a process of sensing and then interpreting sensation. Reading only happens because we recognize a set of shapes on a page as words

without any intermediate act of interpretation. This practice of reading helps us see the cultural traditioning of sensation (Sigurdson 2016: 172). One way to articulate the separability of the biological conditions for sight from their historical and cultural conditioning is to speak of a person's "gaze."

Sigurdson's grounding assumption is that sight is unavoidably reciprocal. Thus, sight is ineradicably communal. We are placed in a world that looks on us, and we look out on a world that looks back at us. As the illustration of reading highlights, the ways we see each other are learned, and what is learned is always culturally specific. We have been taught what is worth seeing, how and who to see, and that the screening of some regions of perception and the highlighting of others is *constitutive* of what we call "the human gaze" (Wigorts Yngvesson 2015). We can think of the autistic condition as a counterfactual, as a condition that is disorienting because of difficulties in absorbing the biological and cultural practices of screening out all sorts of sensations (Bogdashina 2010). Sigurdson uses Christian Metz's term "scopic regimes" to designate specific culturally elaborated configurations of seeing and not seeing. Where and how people look is constitutive of what counts for them as community. "Every culture attempts to colonize the field of vision—to determine who is visible, who is invisible, who is 'allowed' to see, and what visibility, invisibility, and vision signify," Katja Silverman observes. "This colonization has real consequences; we are psychologically and socially constrained by the visual categories into which we are slotted" (Silverman 2015: 149). Scopic regimes are thus a bit like grade school in that those who "look right" are in, while those who don't are out.

In designating what appears to us at all, scopic regimes serve as carriers of wide ranging but unspoken cultural rules for what is worth attending to and what is worth ignoring. In Sigurdson's account, different times and places can be characterized as variegated fields of scopic regimes. While the configuration of a given epoch most often has a recognizable profile.

one can speak of a more or less open conflict between different ways of seeing, where there can nevertheless very well be a way of seeing that dominates during a particular period. In other words, it is as unbelievable that modernity, for example, would be a cohesive epoch as it is that its scopic regime would be one and only one. Nor is there just one single field of human activity that completely determines the scopic regime. (Sigurdson 2016: 154)

This caveat in place, Sigurdson does think that it is possible to make a few broad generalizations about some of the characteristics of the scopic regimes that dominated in different historical contexts and periods.

For instance, in the early fifteenth century, Renaissance artists developed a set of innovative perspective painting techniques. Prior to this, painters had tended to vary the size of the subjects being depicted according to the importance they wished to ascribe to them. Renaissance painters began to rethink this convention, composing their paintings around a set of converging lines that meet in the eye of the observer. By means of this more linear division of the field of sight, a more perfect illusion of distance and depth was created without the stereoscopy of human eyes.

These technical developments drew attention to the reality that art is not a mirror but an interpretation of the visual world to the viewer. And with different techniques come different implications for what is depicted and viewed. Perspective painting, for instance, places the bodies of both the painter and the observer outside the flow of time. The gaze of the perspective painter is able to produce depth and space that looks the same to the one-eyed as to the two-eyed observer and also to future observers over indefinite time scales. These painters had learned to see the world in an active and ordering manner that was at the same time newly distanced and that withdrew the observer from the visual equation entirely.

In Sigurdson's narrative, this innovation finds its philosophical pinnacle and further development in the work of René Descartes, who inaugurated the early modern scopic regime in his wholesale sidelining of the physical organs of sight (most explicitly in Discourse 5 of his *Optics*, cf. Silverman 2015: 18–19, 33).

Descartes broke with tradition when he argued that light was a material substance with a concrete existence. He compared light to a cane for the blind in an attempt to explain its function with common metaphors—sight likened to touch—and he used mathematics in order to understand how it functioned. Descartes believed that sensation itself was a function of the brain, not retina. (Sigurdson 2016: 157)

For him the seeing that is in the conscious mind is the *real* seeing; bodily sensation is only a medium. Sight was thus defined as an artifact of the mind's ordering of sensation, neither sensation nor the world being intelligible if severed from the operation of the mind. This is why Descartes understood the human mind as the organ which alone could master all time and space by way of sight, so associating light with knowledge so powerfully that it became the root metaphor of the whole cultural movement. Sigurdson thus finds himself agreeing with Michel Foucault (as most famously recounted in his *Discipline and Punish*) that Jeremy Bentham's panoptical apparatuses were the paradigmatic practical and social culmination of the early modern scopic regime.

The invention of photography in 1839 inaugurated the late modern scopic regime. The camera is a machine that was immediately seen to be producing images more convincing than any humanly mediated witnessing. We may be able to remember something clearly, but when we tell someone else of it, in picture or narrative, we cannot authenticate that it actually happened. This, as Roland Barthes observes, constituted the power of the Photograph. "The photograph's essence is to ratify what it represents...no writing can give me this certainty. It is the misfortune (but also perhaps the voluptuous pleasure) of language not to be able to authenticate itself" (Barthes 1993: 85). "A picture is worth a thousand words" succinctly sums up the change. There is self-evidence about a photograph that makes it hard for the viewer to resist the sensation that the camera has self-evidently captured a moment in time. The conceit of the photograph is for the first time in human history to offer us in the temporal present the past in a form as certain as physical presence. Barthes thus concludes, "It is the advent of the photograph...which divides the history of the world" (Barthes 1993: 88).

Yet this capture of time is always and only of the past. Thus this freezing of time by the camera also kills and entraps.

The scopic regime that was characterized by the photograph thus in a certain way entailed both the reinforcement of the earlier scopic regime and its eventual fall. The camera could give an illusion of a gaze unbounded by time and space, a purely registering gaze, through its technical possibilities. Such a conception of the camera's unhindered gaze was, however, nothing but an illusion. If the human being was subject to time, rather than its master, and if her gaze was challenged by the camera itself, her claim to a knowledge uncorroded by time could be challenged. (Sigurdson 2016: 165)

As living beings, the very structure of human looking is confronted by the photograph in which there are no living beings. To be captured in a photograph is to be frozen in a way that can only be a harbinger of death. To be in a picture is to have been captured in a form of cultural remembering that will someday be looked on by a loved one to recall what we were like when we were alive.

Summarizing Sigurdson's argument thus far: The Renaissance perspective painters saw the world through the viewpoint of an imagined spectator. Descartes saw the world from the seat of the mind's consciousness. The photograph was a realist image eternally frozen in time and perspective and in principle produced by no human eye at all. In each of these scopic regimes, the relational component of seeing is being continually whittled away. Seeing is being rendered progressively more asocial as images become more disembedded from time and living human relationship.

Surveying these earlier scopic regimes helps us to gain some critical purchase on the changes that have led some observers to suggest that we are now entering the post-photographic era. The perfection of the digital photograph inaugurated this era around 1989. The digital revolution means that "it is no longer necessary to imagine that the subject we see in a picture really *was there* when the photograph was taken. ...the photograph is no longer an index to reality but has become virtual" (Sigurdson 2016: 165).

The import of this change must be carefully considered. Only because the expectation that photos could not be easily manipulated was still functioning could a picture of a naked girl (Phan Thi Kim Phuc) running away from a napalmed village puncture a nation's will to continue the barbarities of the Vietnam War. Even today images like that of the drowned Syrian refugee child (initially reported as Aylan Kurdi) being carried up the Mediterranean beach can still sway the political will of a whole nation. But this is only possible to the extent that the scopic regime of modernity is in good working order, meaning that pictures are still trusted to reflect reality and are supported by trusted framing mechanisms (Shirbon 2015). The debates about the context and meaning of the picture of Phan Thi are illustrative of the fragility of the impression of realism produced by a picture, as from the very first the picture immediately became a site for the contestations of competing nationalist propaganda (Grice 2012).

In the scopic regime opened by digital photography, however, the computers in most homes in the west have enough computing power to effect almost undetectable alterations of pictures. So while high modernity had sanctioned venues for the framing of photos to establish veracity (such as the *Life* magazine in which the picture of Phan Thi appeared), the digital age has drastically increased the pressure on these framing mechanisms to establish the credibility of a picture.

Sigurdson is not proposing that the camera can no longer give us the sensation that we are viewing a realistic depiction of a point in the past. It is still possible to experience a photograph as a depiction of events that actually happened. We can even still experience a photograph as having captured social relationships transcending mere physical bodies. But what his work highlights is that ever more sophisticated cultural framing apparatuses are needed to communicate through such images and that the cultural apparatuses that allow us to do this are fragile. The artist Haley Morris-Cafiero, for instance, poses in public places in a way that draws attention to her non-standard body while remotely snapping pictures of the disdainful body-shaming gazes of those around her (Morris-Cafiero 2015). In order to position readers to experience the photographs as depictions of real events rather than as posed or digitally manipulated, she surrounds them with real e-mails from people who have viewed her exhibitions. Though the disdain on view in the images is paralleled by the abuse she received in writing, the convergence remains circumstantial. We find it plausible to read her photos as depictions of real happenings, but we must concede that they might also be staged. In our age of digital manipulation of fragmenting political trust, the point is that it would no longer be sufficiently clear what to make of the images were Morris-Cafiero simply to publish them.

The proliferation of cable channels and internet sites over the last few decades has further strained the cultural forms capable of framing photographs in a manner that we experience them as undeniably true depictions. The recent canonization of the term “fake news” points to the death rattles of this framing capacity. Sigurdson's observation is that the relations of the media to images and viewers are being so drastically repositioned in our time that “the post-photographic gaze can hardly be said to resemble the gaze that characterized the scopic regime of the photographic era” (Sigurdson 2016: 168). Whereas the high modern scopic regime gave central place to the photographic image understood as uncontentiously depicting reality, this regime is being “displaced in favor of a ‘polyscopic’ regime, where eventually the pretension to truth is instead a question of the particular contexts where the picture is used, rather than a pretension to truth that resides in the image” (Sigurdson 2016: 169).

Sigurdson's argument suggests why the high modern commonplace a picture is worth a thousand words might need to be rewritten for a digital age: A picture demands a thousand relationships. In admitting the cultural-historical substrate of all our sensations—that the picture is a “take” on the world, our experience of the photographic image as a realistic depiction is unsettled. We are brought back to Hall's emphasis on the importance of interpersonal trust: we see as we do, and we trust what we see, because we are part of a history of seeing. And the history of our time suggests that any trust we might have in the veracity of an image today will finally rest on our trust in the one who has shown it to us. Our politics is teaching us that we should no longer trust our eyes.

II. The Death of CCTV

With this tracing of the evolution of modern scopic regimes, Sigurdson has thus brought us back to Hall's insight—that scopic regime change reveals the inescapable role played by seeing in the arrangement and rearrangement of interpersonal relationships. Sigurdson has helped us give philosophically and culturally elaborated flesh to Hall's suggestion that some changes of scopic regime are lamentable for what they say about the decay of more life-giving configurations of human relationship.

Let me be clear: neither I nor Sigurdson are claiming that images are “objective”—they were *always* shaped and contextualized in order to convince. It is therefore probably most accurate to say: the photograph offers a realist *perspective* on the world in that in a specific cultural context we experience it as a picture of a “real” past moment. But this experience of realism does not grow from a realist *account* of the world. Jacques Ellul has drawn attention to the psychological aspect of viewing the photograph that is directly linked to the place of our experience of sight and to our visual memories. More powerfully than the memories of other sorts of sensory experience, we experience our sensation of sight as comprehensive and irrefutable.

No matter how insignificant it may be, the visual image is always rigorous, imperative, and irreversible. I saw what I saw. I cannot change this image. I cannot change the reality which is conveyed to me in this way, except through my action. ...each image [thus] could be, and is in fact, eternal. (Ellul 1985: 8–9)

Given the typical configuration of the human body and mind, the human capacity of sight produces characteristic and predictable problems in our capacity to be self-critical of our visual memories. Whether an inheritance of our origins as sight-hunters or for some other reason of brain structure, the psychological prominence of sight in the human mind seems indisputable.

At night, when I cannot see, a certain distance is established. This explains why the day's events become so painful at night: the distance between me and the world around me allows for reflection and meditation. ... The image prevents me from taking my distance. And if I cannot establish a certain distance, I can neither judge nor criticize. ... In spite of the frailty we have all observed in a person's testimony of what he has seen, everyone has the same certainty about anything he has seen. He has seen reality. (Ellul 1985: 10)

Sigurdson's history of scopic regimes has given us better purchase on how the techniques of perspective painting or photography manipulate this characteristic difficulty of humans to gain critical distance from their visual experience. What we call “illusion” names the various sleights of hand by which people, such as performing magicians, are able to make others experience something that never existed as indubitably real. This raises the unsettling thought that the whole contemporary problem of surveillance may be the most blatant exposure of the Achilles' heel of the Enlightenment revolution. Though sight gives us undeniable power to survey and so control the world, it comes with an associated weakness—our biologically and psychologically embedded susceptibility to being manipulated through it. In many respects, modern surveillance is simply a game of being able to see without being seen in order to control the world. It is the Enlightenment dream come to fruition.

What the camera adds is the power to see at a distance. It is the first machine for generating visual data: a mechanical certification that something exists. The lie of the camera concerns *what* has existed, not *that something* has existed, proposes Roland Barthes (Barthes 1993: 87). It is the power of the photograph and data apparently to authenticate a moment of the past (even if only a past nanoseconds old) that drives us to clarify how representative we will take it to be of reality. Do I, and will I, see beyond the trace?

Photographic subjects always offer details that protrude beyond the cultural coding within which we receive and read them. The photograph contains angular features to which we can cling in a way no aberrant detail in a painting can, which is different again in kind from the wayward pixel. Barthes presents himself as one of the last witnesses to this capacity of the photograph to hold before us an excess of the

real past within a record of the past (Barthes 1993: 94). But as a witness to a fading scopic regime, he believes that reflecting on the photograph reveals a choice each one of us faces before all mechanically produced and therefore supposedly mechanically authenticated records of the past. “The choice is mine: to submit its spectacle to the civilized code of perfect illusions, or to confront in it the wakening of intractable reality” (Barthes 1993: 119). Updated for our day, I take Barthes to be pressing a single, crucial question. Will we live as if all the things that data can model are reality or as agents who never cease to point out the gaps and curious outcroppings that allow us to recall that data are always *only* a shadow of the real? Signs of the presence on which all data shadows rest remain for those who wish to see.

Barthes’s observations suggest that scopic regimes develop precisely because, with the rise of all mechanical recording of sensation, there have always been data shadows. But they fall for the same reasons. Because all data are dependent on cultural context, their apparent power to self-authenticate inevitably decays. This is an artifact of the reality that no mechanical sensor can offer us reality shorn of all interpretation. Every camera has to be positioned and calibrated to pick up the aspects of reality that the one positioning them takes to be real.

We need look no further than CCTV to see that it is not its power mechanically to produce true images that drives its proliferation, but the *social* order in which its image gathering is embedded. CCTV can only continue to configure our social relations as long as most of us believe that images self-evidently depict reality. And this order is already beginning to fray in describable ways. One hint that the CCTV society is a relic of a photographic scopic regime is the rise of whole TV series detailing the exploits of a thief who proceeds by hacking surveillance mechanisms (the critically acclaimed American drama–thriller television series by Sam Esmail, *Mr. Robot*, is in its third season as of 2018). The social order whose icon is the sensors of CCTV will be under increasingly severe strain in a world where it becomes commonplace knowledge that security feeds are digitally encoded and stored on hard drives susceptible to all manner of manipulation.

III. Talking to the Watchers

If images are going to confront us as depicting real happenings that demand our response, their objectivity as representations will have to somehow be sustained. But as Sigurdson has pointed out, “Such an objectivity is never innocent.” Nevertheless, the attempt to reconstruct representations of events that we experience as objective is a task worth engaging, he believes, “precisely because ... its embodied status can become a responsible knowledge, that is, a knowledge that it is possible to localize and so bring to account” (Sigurdson 2016: 171). If we want to be responsive as a political community to children burned by our bombs or drowned by our political policies, we need ways of communicating that are experienced as conveying reality. But which reality? Whose gaze?

It is here that we must revisit what I have called the Achilles’ heel of the Enlightenment, its understanding of vision. That vision was often linked by the main Enlightenment figures in a deistic fashion with the timeless, disembodied God’s eye viewpoints. As Sigurdson has indicated, it was these viewpoints that came to dominate early modern and photographic scopic regimes. But Sigurdson’s proposal is that these scopic regimes must not be identified with a properly Christian theological account of vision. He suggests (following Donna Haraway) that a more traditionally Christian understanding of the human gaze is closer to the dispersed scopic regime of the digital age, which has come to terms with the inescapability of an endless struggle with the interpretative layering of seeing. Human perceiving is never morally neutral. Its perspectival partiality is always in constant need of critical engagement (Sigurdson 2016: 171). Sigurdson suggests that it is in the incarnation of Jesus Christ himself that we see that the deist picture of God having a monoscopic, placeless, and timeless gaze was never really even God’s view. God becoming flesh, and so a creature with limited powers of perception, is the crucial clue that human perception is ineradicably embodied. Unlike the timeless God of Plato and Descartes, the God who became flesh reveals that to be

flesh *is* to be inextricably embedded in temporally contingent relations, always both actively reaching out and passively acquiescing to the events of the creaturely realm.

I do not have the space to go into more elaborate theological and biblical arguments that Sigurdson adduces in support of this claim. What follows is one of his summary comments, which I take to articulate in a more openly theoretical register the insights that organize Hall's gaze:

[R]eflection on how visual experiences are possible is not independent of a reflection on how we live, including the question of which rituals form our lives. The experience and the understanding that are needed for a particular way of seeing can demand long periods of "practice" in order to be able to be embodied, especially if this way of seeing runs counter to the sight conventions of the dominant scopic regime. Avoiding perceiving the world as solely an object for our theoretical gaze can involve practice in watchfulness, or in theological terminology, an ascetic practice. (Sigurdson 2016: 180)

My suggestion is that Sigurdson has more explicitly articulated why a robustly Christian account of seeing can make sense of Hall's reflexive experience of a traffic camera as the occasion for lament. It is a sign of her having been traditioned in a community that understands rich human communion as built on trust and risky, embodied communion. Much as in reading we simply see black and white shapes as words, to be traditioned into the life of the body of Christ is to learn to read social converse differently than the world of modern surveillance culture. Where some see proof of the investment in law and order, others see the withering of trusting community.

Let me make explicit, in conclusion, the theological claims that are positioning my reading of Hall's politically engaged and articulate seeing. Her "vision" of a "graced social order" emerges from a "long period of practice" in that collective worship of Jesus that is called the body of Christ. Among the gathered saints she has glimpsed a rival social order sustained by a different way of seeing, an order brought to life by the Spirit. This community sings as did Simeon upon seeing the infant Jesus: "My eyes have seen your salvation, that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel" (Lk 2:31–32). Introducing this biblical reference exposes two further premises of my account: that the body of Christ is a trans-temporal community of praise that human beings can only encounter in concrete times and places and which finds its shape around the canonical scriptures (Banner 2016; Brock 2016).

Christians confess that the scriptures reveal the truth of all world occurrence in a manner that the camera could never do—the methodological bedrock of the Christian confession is that the Bible's truth (however we read it) is *more* true than any claimant to any other supposedly more "objective" truth. Any sensor that seems to give us "objective" truth must therefore be viewed with skepticism. Where historicism points to the historical embedding of sensation in cultural developments, for Christians the claim of the scriptures to reveal the truth generates a different form of skepticism about any data that present themselves as objective. But both meet in the awareness that reality must be read and those readings handed on to others if we are to have political society at all.

With its claim to relay the story of God with the world as perceived by the saints, the witness of scripture thus reveals the inevitable partiality and susceptibility to producing illusions of all data produced by mechanical sensors. Put in theological terms: No photo, video, or data stream offers us the presence to one another on which the Christian life depends—that discernment of the shape of the social body and in our time and place that is the *sine qua non* of Christian community. Ultimately the demands of Christian discernment and discipleship direct the attention of Christians to what sensors cannot capture: acts that display hardness of heart, growth and decline in sensitivity to the joys and pains of others, the signs of strained relations—the telltale signs that signal the fraying of trusting communion (Brock and Wannewetsch 2016: 97–102).

The community that has learned the importance of detecting and responding to these realities is, in short, one whose gaze has been altered by the impact the light of Jesus has shed on human history. This altered

gaze has not come by way of transcending the physical and temporal. The spiritual beholding of social dynamics that is capable of sustaining loving communion is one that instead completes and fulfills visible seeing. The gospel writers regularly remark on the power of the gaze of Jesus to reveal the hidden and unseen outcasts of his time: the leper, the unclean, the foreigner. This is why the community inaugurated by Jesus is one that puts pressure on every scopic regime to ask “who is being hidden away here?” and “what power differentials are exposed when we investigate who *gets* to hide and who is *made* to hide?”

My reading of Hall’s emphasis on political theology as inviting us into the messy business of converse with real live human beings I take to be an internalization of this gaze of Jesus that continually invites all people out of hiding and into public converse. The promise of the Holy Spirit is nothing more than the pledge of a Jesus who remains visibly active, not above, but within everyday human seeing to continually bestow this Spirit-gifted gaze. It may even be, as some have proposed, that such a reconceptualization of what counts as a life-giving gaze could in turn position us to understand mechanically gathered data in a wholly different and more connective manner (Silverman 2015: 8).

I am ultimately pressing in these concluding remarks the question of how Christians are properly to locate God’s seeing trinitarianly. Sigurdson’s emphasis on the *humanness* of God’s gaze in the incarnation, the emplaced temporal aspects of the divine gaze, is a theological retort to the modern view of secularity that leapt off from deist assumptions about the all-seeing atemporal father God (Lyon 2014: 25–27). Sigurdson is tacitly drawing on a theological assumption of Martin Luther’s, that the gaze of Christian faith must be constantly focused on the human God in order not to be swallowed in terror by the all-seeing God whose righteousness, and so deserved judgment, is annihilating for humans. Luther makes this point by way of a hermeneutical prioritizing of the gospel and Pauline depictions of Jesus over those contained in Revelation.

Christ is not a cruel master; He is the Propitiator for the sins of the whole world. If you are a sinner, therefore—as indeed we all are—do not put Christ on a rainbow as the Judge [Rev. 4:2–5]; for then you will be terrified and will despair of His mercy. No, grasp the true definition of Him, namely, that Christ, the Son of God and of the Virgin, is not One who terrifies, troubles, condemns us sinners or calls us to account for our evil past but One who has taken away the sins of the whole world, nailing them to the cross and driving them all the way out by Himself. (Luther 1963: 37–38)

My parallel emphasis on the role of Christian seeing within the communion of saints travels along lines opened up by speculations like Augustine, who suggested that what is theologically illuminating about the gaze of angels is that in them we have an example of creaturely seeing whose prime characteristic is to see what God perceives in local places and through limited creaturely senses (Augustine 1998: X.15). What we learn in the gaze of the incarnate Christ as learned in the communion of saints is that there is good reason to risk trusting, bodily engagement with our neighbors, as difficult and messy as this will be.

In other words, to confess one’s self a human member of the body of Christ is to confess that one must be traditioned in the gaze of the incarnate Christ. This is therefore simultaneously to confess oneself as within, and so bound to learn from, the gazes of the saints who have been captured by that gaze throughout time and space. All these gazes situate and shape the Christian’s gaze by gazing on us. Situated by these gazes, we learn to see a different reality in our own local context, we learn the importance of asking *which* gaze is determining us, and *what type* of gaze we are under—trusting or suspicious, loving or acquisitive? Only with these methodological claims in place can we affirm the visions of the apocalyptic literature of Christ as a beast covered with eyes (or four beasts, which the early church linked with the four gospels in Rev. 4:8), one body comprising many sensing bodies. This is in fact how Paul depicts the body of Christ, as a body whose characteristics are most obviously that of a nervous system, a political body constituted and held together by sensory connection linked to acts of service to one another (Brock 2011).

My theological conclusion, then, is the proposal that one of the signal contributions Christian theologians can offer their contemporaries is rooted in the scopic regime Christian faith opens up. “Christian faith

entails a specific gaze on the world, a particular way of looking, yet nothing so special that this particular vision of faith would not be found in the extension of our natural vision” (Sigurdson 2016: 243). As those who confess that God has graciously regarded them, the Christian believer is thus claiming to have been drawn by the Spirit into the community of those who, having beheld God in return, are discovering themselves amidst a new social order. A God-bequeathed faith is embraced for its power to reconfigure our sense of who counts as worth seeing and who does not. This reconfiguration is therefore an establishing of the new links and ligaments of a rival social order—and with it, all human relations.

This last claim might seem to some a step too far. My political proposal is that the gaze learned in this rival social order may foster critical purchase on characteristic gazes of the surveillance society, gazes that hold its social order in its recognizable shape. One obvious implication of Hall’s proposal is that those who care about the shape and health of their communities ought to attempt to foster relations of responsibility and accountability by opening conversations that include the silent watchers. The first step in any such project is the fostering of heightened sensibilities about the importance of a trusting vulnerable communion of the sort that we have outlined. Political change will not be possible until a broad base of citizens have become aware that the social media universe is not an extension of their old networks of relationality, but a *replacement* of them. Here their sharing of personal information is not only organized by the aim to profit from them, but is utterly defined by its surveillance functions. As John Lanchester observes:

Facebook, in fact, is the biggest surveillance-based enterprise in the history of mankind. It knows far, far more about you than the most intrusive government has ever known about its citizens. It’s amazing that people haven’t really understood this about the company. ... What Facebook does is watch you, and then use what it knows about you and your behavior to sell ads. I’m not sure there has ever been a more complete disconnect between what a company says it does—‘connect,’ ‘build communities’—and the commercial reality. (Lanchester 2017: 16–17)

If the proposal outlined in this paper is valid, then this heightening of citizen awareness will need to be teamed with attempts to draw all those whose work goes on in zones plastered with signs that say “no cameras or recording devices” into public converse. One of the characteristic divisions of a surveillance society is between those who are privileged to oversee data archives and those who are not (Cinnamon 2017: 615). This is a separation that must be challenged. Since there is power in being able to watch while controlling one’s visibility, it is almost inevitable that challenging this separation will need to be accomplished by law enforcement efforts, and in this respect recent election tampering investigations seem a fortuitous opening (Shane 2017; Elgot 2018).

The main suggestion of this paper, however, is that such efforts cannot be sufficient. Direct conversations with the people sitting behind the screens and overseeing the automated analysis gathered by sensors must be initiated. The human agents involved must be personalized in order for conversations to be opened in ways that might begin to foster trust. To call for such efforts at least draws attention to the lack of public conversation about surveillance in general. Yet if any lasting legal change is to be effective, it is this risky and vulnerable pre-political reaching toward genuine interpersonal relationship that must be continually invited.

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