



Building an Ethic of Difference: A Dialogue of Politics in Organizations

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Prologue

The following is a case study of an artifact of surveillance, the ‘TargetVision’, within a business school, and the attempt of two organizational members to respond to this artifact. It is held that the mechanism of surveillance uses the members’ own actions to institute its control, and because of this ambiguity between the subjects and objects of control, a clear ethical space of action is made problematic. In a search to find a coherent ethics of action, two speakers air their perspectives on this space of action from within the organization. Their perspectives are the object of this study. The first speaker, allowing the surveillance mechanism to remain in place, secretly supports the attempts of the second speaker to subvert the mechanism, and in doing so, takes a position of indirect resistance through aloofness. The second speaker, whose response to the first speaker follows, is the one taking active measures to disrupt the surveillance. By doing so, this actor personifies the ethics of control that led to the surveillance, but through this identification, finds a place for personal voice. However, this voice is shown as projecting the wrongs of the TargetVision onto the first speaker, and, in order to avoid the personal identification which was found so problematic in the TargetVision, the second speaker eventually destroys himself, and in doing so ends up in a position similar to the first speaker. Thus, in the end, both positions seek to find a voice through a strategic self-effacement. However, this effacement takes very different forms in the two strategies and each is shown as reinforcing the other in a dialectic of two incommensurable positions.

Both speakers draw on the works of Edgar Allen Poe in their conceptualization of the other, with the first speaker using *The Tell Tale Heart* and the second following *The Cask of the Amontillado*.

The Tell-Tale TargetVision: A Note on Poe

And have I not told you that what you mistake for madness is but over-acuteness of the sense?
(Poe, 1850: 382)

Psychoanalysis is then experienced as a journey into the strangeness of the other and of oneself, toward an ethics of respect for the irreconcilable. (Kristeva, 1982: 182)

I am not the culprit in this story, am not the brilliant madman of Poe's tale, condemned by the beating heart and perpetual gaze of my victim. No, I am more like the officer, who, on a routine inspection, stumbled upon a new perversion of subjectivity, and upon a subtle form of resistance that, despite its simplicity and ultimate futility (or perhaps because of it) showed me a space of ethics within a world of unconventional surveillance.

I had never noticed the looming TargetVision monitors, hanging above every elevator, and around every corner of the department. But to my colleague Poe, as I found out later, the gaze of the screens were crippling to his very being. I called him 'Poe', of course, as a pseudonym, based on a memory of the madman in *The Tell Tale Heart*, who was driven to madness by the ever watching eye of an old man, and who finally put the eye out. The crux of the tale, however, was the old man's heart, which continued to beat in spite of the murderous act, and finally gave the madman away.

But again, the TargetVision, which I later realized was that very eye, was something that I had never noticed in my daily life. Wittgenstein once said "the aspect of things that are most important for us are hidden because of their simplicity and familiarity...and this means: we fail to be struck by what, once seen, is most striking and most powerful" (1999: 129). I first noticed the TargetVision when Poe and I were waiting for the elevator, and he immediately turned the screen off.

Although I hadn't noticed the screen until that point, I didn't have to ask why he turned it off. It became clear at the moment it happened. Or, to be more precise, in the moment that he turned the screen off, I understood what it was that I had missed, not because of his action, but *in* his action I recognized what his action was, what it aimed to, and what it demanded.

From that point I began to watch the TargetVision carefully. At first glance it was simply a television. A television, on every floor of a Business School, around each corner. Someone had decided that from all vantage points in the school, it was important to have a television. The TargetVision, just a television essentially, was everywhere.

The TargetVision's content consisted of streaming stock prices, and information about the business school, streaming also. There were no cameras in the apparatus, as far as I knew, and no orders given from the speakers. Just streams and streams of numbers and words against a kitsch background of pastel waves, or plant life, or an occasional newscast. Three years earlier, crowds had gathered in front of the TargetVision one morning, while behind the streaming numbers, the background showed two airplanes sequentially dive into the glass walls of the World Trade Centre in New York. And

although the buildings had crumbled, the TargetVision still faithfully watched us three years later, with benign information such as streaming numbers.

But Poe turned off the TargetVision at every possible occasion. I never followed suit, but just watched, and felt a simultaneous terror and relief at the disconnection from our informational source. My attempt to understand Poe's relationship to the TargetVision is the theme of this note, and my attempt to place myself in an ethical position with regards to this relationship is its conclusion; I hope to convince the reader that my ethics, which is a coward's ethics, is paradoxically a powerful form of resistance, while Poe's ethics of engagement, which is the basis of all revolutionary goals, never reaches its *telos*, preserving throughout its movement the beating heart of its oppressor, which was, of course, his own heart as well.

But first, the TargetVision. Why was it significant at all? That it drew the reaction from Poe is evidence enough for me that one could be strongly affected by something as seemingly benign as a voiceless stream of facts. But was it naïve to think of facts as 'voiceless'? Why, if it was insignificant, would anyone have installed these television screens in every corner of the building? There must have been some logic in the act, and once brought to attention, I became convinced that the TargetVision was a panopticon.

This conclusion was not at all unproblematic, and I struggled over its implications. Foucault's notion of the panopticon was an all seeing watcher, but where was the eye in the TargetVision? It was the blind eye of Poe's tale, all powerful but unseeing. The force of this blind, film covered eye seemed to emanate from the TargetVision. In particular, the panopticon, as the 'functional inversion' of the traditional notion of discipline by exception, makes discipline more palatable by normalizing it (Foucault, 1995). In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault describes the goal of contemporary forms of control as "an interrogation without end, an investigation that would be extended without limit to a meticulous and ever more analytical observation, a judgment that would at the same time be the constitution of a file that was never closed" (Foucault, 1995: 227). The panopticon takes the place of the juridical subject, displacing subjectivity from its centralized point of judgment and redeploying it into a network of surveillance posts. This structure (or in Lacanian terms, its structured lack of presence, Lacan, 1977) promotes the maintenance of patterns of power and conformity among those who inhabit its space. Knowing they are surveyed, they govern themselves, or more insidiously, they begin to survey themselves.

What made the panopticon so horrifying is perhaps best explored through Kristeva's concept of the abject. Kristeva (1982) described horror as the moment of abjection, the point at which we see ourselves reflected in an other, yet prior to when we can securely objectify and encapsulate that other. The abject is an other that is ripe with our own subjectivity, and is experienced with awe and disgust. We must not abandon the abject, because with it we lose our own subjectivity; in Kristeva's words, we learn to live in the contemporary world when we become one of those who are "reconciled with themselves to the extent they recognize themselves as foreigners" (1991: 195). At the same time, the thought of a watching other, an 'I' outside of 'I', fills us with the repulsion of our primal alienation from ourselves. The abject is, in Kristeva's words 'the desire of the other'.

But this panopticon, this vision which ‘targets’ and catches us in its alien desire, was not like most visions of surveillance. For that matter, it was not vision at all. The TargetVision was a misnomer; it did not watch, but was to be watched. It was an object that *we* watched, and in our watching, submitted ourselves to its passive control. Thus, in a second ‘post-modern’ movement after the generalization of surveillance, the surveyor itself did not adjudicate through its gaze, but somehow turned the tables on its target. We watched the TargetVision, the vision was ours all along! It was a Panopticon, but the optics were our own eyes, and the judgments it doled *were our own!*

Here was the strange subject-object switch made famous by Hegel (1935) in *The Phenomenology of Mind*. We were being watched, but not by the TargetVision, but by its potential to structure our perceptions. The observer becomes oneself through the object, but this object gains its power through the observer, and then uses that vision to target its master. The TargetVision had moved beyond Foucault’s analysis, controlling the passers-by of the business school not by inciting the self-corrective tendencies of those who know they are watched, but by reinforcing the very watching, the watching which, structured by an object-world of stock prices and terrorist threats, *creates itself* in the model of the surveyor. TargetVision exerted its force despite its blindness, and that force was our own.

The protagonist, Poe, poignantly felt this oppression, and thus revolted by shutting the mechanism wherever he passed it. The subject lashed out against the structure, the oedipal child, against the father. Like Oedipus, Poe sought out justice against an oppressor who, in the end, was himself. And like slow dawning of Oedipus that, in the end, it was the mystery ‘Man’ that was the victim of this crime, committed against himself, and his source. As foretold in Poe’s work a century ago, the tell-tale heart beat relentlessly and blinded.

Kristeva tells us that our ethics should embrace the other, not in a totalizing unity, or an evangelical persuasion, but in an acceptance of our nature as foreigners. Watching Poe repeatedly shut off the TargetVision, which, within the hour, was always back on again, I thought about the politics of revolt.

The mistake, it seemed to me, was that Poe revolted against a mechanism that was driven by the subjective gaze. Sympathetic or not, to be lulled by or turn oneself against the TargetVision was to be caught in its trap. It was to affirm the self as self, to realize its possibilities, and in the true German romantic style, to bar oneself from being in constant becoming. That was the trap of management. Work for it, or work against it, but work you continue, and the buried heart beats louder still with revolt.

In the face of this seeming double bind, I proposed what could be called an ethics of cowardice. Like the ethics of ‘otherness’, I proposed to turn the heart away from the TargetVision. The other does not join the march, the union, or send in complaint letters to the Complaint Division. I watch the revolt with glee at the actualization of possibilities, and keep myself as the other. Conscience, as Hamlet noted, is a coward, the tell-tale heart is best stopped not by the dagger of violence, but by the pale cast of thought. Neither here nor there, but not even in becoming, the only ethical space left in the new panopticon, the mundane yet conscious repetition of the stock prices, and the

mundane periodic disconnection of the stream, blend together in the foreigner's curious, aloof and unimposing gaze. When we live in a world where our ills come from our own native hue of resolution, we must bear those ills we have, in order to not create those of which we know not.

I confronted Poe, not to critique his ethics, but to present my own, in the hopes that this would both allow him a sounding board from which his voice could amplify itself, and to allow myself to both plant my difference in a public light, and revel in my own identification with that difference. To my disappointment, he retorted what follows below.

The Truth of Amontillado: The TargetVision Turns Itself Off

The thousand injuries of Fortunato I had borne as I best could, but when he ventured upon insult I vowed revenge. (Poe, 1850: 346)

Inherent in the comments of my detractor (who I call the The-Cool-Observer, for his patronizing rationalization of my being, see Niehbur, 1952) is the antiquated lie of the subject and of the object. Even with the most advanced of techniques (explicitly conjured in rhetoric with sirenic overtones such as 'psychoanalysis' and 'postmodern') for attempting to explain the life-world, the above argument rests heavily on a bifurcation between self and other. I am accused of suffering from a type of malady that disallows my reconciliation with myself. You are told that I hate the father, my own internal system of governance and self-regulation that the TargetVision embodies and indicates, leading me to extinguish a television's piercing radiation. In this tale you, the audience, become Fortunato as my interlocutor attempts to lead you to his lair, whispering, "Let us be off to the vaults; let us make our way to Amontillado."

The-Cool-Observer is only too happy to lead you into the catacombs of his dialectic, replete with the bones of the Cartesians (what a noble family in their time!) who lost their duel with the more-modern mind, relenting under The-Cool-Observer's destruction of their bifurcated soul with incantations like 'post-structuralism' (something you viewed with voyeuristic glee). As you walk among the decay of thoughts-past, and the mould creeps along the damp stone walls of antiquated Enlightenment, which he obliquely references (to your delight), he shepherds you forward with the ignis fatuus of Amontillado's intoxicating truth, that you might understand the underlying, the subconscious, the veiled 'really-real' which has surpassed the démodé reality of yesteryear. As you move you are oblivious to The-Cool-Observer's trowel underneath his cape, enraptured by his necromancing of a better-than-the-old-reality reality.

Along the way he wets your appetite for the truth of the Amontillado by proffering insights into 'real' motivations which are not apparent at first sight. He explains that instead of the classic 'subject' and 'object', the truth of the Amontillado will allow you to have subject and object split into a multiplicity of intentionality, personality, and phenomena. You may understand the seemingly mundane behaviours of everyday-life (i.e., my turning off the TargetVision) with a lens capable of peering directly into the subconscious. In short, The-Cool-Observer knows the language used in the past, knows

the aspects of this language which are now despised, and leads you to believe that, if phrased properly, the world of the subject and object once again makes conceptual sense (“even critical theory... belong[s] to the second-order simulations”, Baudrillard, 2001: 125). In this way, The-Cool-Observer denies his own destruction of the subject and the object for its repackaged, sanitized clone (itself a mechanism of control), for to break from an ever-shifting ‘self-created’ subjectivity would surely lead to schizophrenia (as the mantra goes).

At this moment, when your mind opens to the possibility that a Phoenix can ascend from Enlightenment’s ashes, that Cartesian duality can be transformed into a palatable bolus of interfused self and other, I will see you in your shackles, I will gaze at your smiling face and palms turned towards the sky, while The-Cool-Observer begins to enclose you in your tomb, brick by brick. I must leave you, for I have only enough time to slip out of the vault before The-Cool-Observer lays the last piece of stone, returns to the party, and leaves you caring not because you have again found your subject and object.

My friend, benign as his ‘ethics’ seems, is re-enacting a role often seen in ‘postmodern’ management studies. The ‘postmodern’ scholars attempts to erect a structure meant to replace the edifices of the past. They guide you into the world of the new reality claiming that they will not expose you to the problems of past epistemologies and ontologies (e.g., McKelvey, 1997). They assure you that your voice will be heard, vowing to avoid the ‘totalizing’ speak of the ‘dark side’ which oppressed your subjectivity for so long (Grice & Humphries, 1997). However, in doing this, they recreate that which they most despise, the totalizing speech of self and other. The comments made about me attempt a description of the indefinable and totalize the holiness of my life-world by giving me a name and analyzing my intentionality. It states me as an object, and this aggression will not stand.

‘I’ remember not a single moment when ‘my’ organization as a being could be encapsulated into a form adequately signified by the term ‘Poe’ (further, ‘I’ would have much preferred the term ‘Puck!’). However, this is because, simply, ‘I’ remember not. My memory is as my intentionality: an eternally shifting polyarchy of fleeting voice, enclosed in the vestige of ooze which has been transformed through some freak Darwinian occurrence that may be likened to an accident; ‘I’ am random. The ephemerality of ‘myself’ is indicated simply: When I look for myself I am not to be found, when I examine my body and this hand writing I find I am not there, when I seek help from my friends the empiricists they tell me ‘look closer’ (as described by Wittgenstein) and I become lost in the incalculable milieu of possible selves into which I may split the simulacra. Upon reflecting, ‘I’ am forced into submission under ‘my’ inability to wield a counterweight against Lacan’s (1977: 166) articulation of the Cartesians, “I think where I am not. Therefore I am where I do not think to think.” There is no subconscious, there is no conscious, for there is no I.

What might be called the action of the ‘I’ may only be described as infinitely self-reflexive and without ‘my’ agency. I cannot be held responsible for a conception of myself, much less give insight into the machinations or beneficence preceding the action of pushing a button. For insight into this poorly partialled datum of the illimitable

you must seek the sage, who will tell you to drink from the postmodern cauldron of frog's eyes and periwinkles which he calls 'The Oedipus complex'. As far as 'I' can surmise, 'my' field of operation is 'myself': all is simply life-world. At times the life-world moves, at times the life-world is changed toward a conception it holds called 'those fucking business-people should stop poisoning the life-world with TargetVision', at times this change The-Cool-Observer calls "turning off the TargetVision". There is no ethical space within which this occurs, for there is no ethical space and there is no occurrence; there is no thing. And with this realization, the TargetVision turns itself off.

Epilogue

The informants for this study finished their discussion with consternation, each flustered by the other's opacity, but somehow also reassured by it. Their argument was one site of the dialectic of the observer and the unchecked revolutionary. Through these oppositional forces it may be apparent that, while neither may be said to be truly right or wrong, and both have their merits, they necessarily owe their being to each other and, in their self-revolving, indicate two poles of critical being which should be taken together. On the one hand, the first speaker, accepting the value of resistance but refusing to become complicit in a power struggle that tightens the very knot wound by surveillance, loses the impetus for action but gains a space of freedom through resignation. The second actor, however, by moving into the space of action without looking back, achieves a self-realization through the very 'false consciousness' that they both despise. However, the insistence on, and refusal to define, the 'I' institutes a space for the unreflective, this oppression works most strongly. The first actor, through his insistence on reflection, reproduced the words of an unbearable system, and the second, through his action, reproduced its silence.

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