Reading the Surface: Body Language and Surveillance

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Abstract

This article explores the role played by body language in recent examples of popular culture and political news coverage as a means of highlighting the potentially deceptive character of speech and promising to bypass it altogether. It situates the promise of "visceral literacy" – the alleged ability to read inner emotions and dispositions – within emerging surveillance practices and the landscapes of risk they navigate. At the same time, it describes portrayals of body language analysis as characteristic of an emerging genre of "securitainment" that instructs viewers in monitoring techniques as it entertains and informs them. Body language ends up caught in the symbolic impasse it sought to avoid: as soon as it is portrayed as a language that can be learned and consciously "spoken" it falls prey to the potential for deceit. The article's conclusion considers the way in which emerging technologies attempt to address this impasse, bypassing the attempt to infer underlying signification altogether.

Keywords: Body language, surveillance, poker TV, *Lie to Me*, lying, homeland security.

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The opening sequence of the pilot for Fox TV's *Lie to Me*, a police procedural devoted not to forensic science but to body language, portrays the lead character, deception expert Dr. Cal Lightman, expressing his disdain for speech. "I don't have much faith in words myself", he says, after being told by the belligerent lawyer for a white supremacist that his client won't talk (*Lie to Me* 2008). Lightman explains to the lawyer, "Statistically speaking the average person tells three lies per 10 minutes of conversation." He nevertheless continues to question the reluctant suspect, discovering where a bomb has been hidden by gauging the non-verbal reactions to his verbal probes. As Lightman speaks, the camera provides cues as to where his attention is directed: to tiny twitches in the suspect's lips, a tightening of the throat, and a partial movement of his shoulder. When a fleeting expression lets Lightman know that he has correctly guessed the location of a concealed bomb, the lawyer objects and Lightman responds, "What do you mean? He just *told* me!" (*Lie to Me* 2008). If the suspect's words have been filled with indignant denials, lies, and misdirections, his body has been speaking the truth, albeit unwittingly. The next scene portrays Dr. Lightman in didactic mode, translating the suspect's gestures for an audience of law enforcement officials – and also for the show's viewers – into the emotions they express. If the diegetic tutorial leaves viewers hungry for more, the show's viewers can also go to the show's Web site to see how the plot points are based on actual research on body language and micro-expressions.

The combination of instruction and entertainment in *Lie to Me*, which relies on the research of the show's advisor, expression expert Dr. Paul Ekman, places it in an emerging multi-genre constellation of programming devoted to what might be described as the promise of visceral literacy: the attempt to bypass the vagaries of speech to get at the true underlying sentiments that speakers all too often attempt to mask. Joining *Lie to Me* in this inter-genre programming mix are a range of reality shows that feature lie detection – perhaps most notably Court TV's *Fake Out*, in which a former FBI profiler trains contestants in the art of lie detection, and also MTV's *Exposed*, in which prospective dates are subjected to voice stress analysis. Alongside such shows we might include the frequent use of lie detectors on a range of reality shows as well as recurring news analysis segments that feature "body language experts", including Tonya Reiman and Joe Navarro, who look behind the words to reveal what newsmakers are allegedly thinking and feeling. As the introduction to one body language segment devoted to the 2008 U.S. presidential campaign on CBS's *The Early Show* put it, "You heard what the candidates had to say last night during the presidential debate, but did you hear what they didn't say, did you *see* what they didn't say? There's a lot to be learned from their body language" (*The Saturday Early Show* 2008, 27 September). Both *The*

Early Show and Fox News's Bill O'Reilly feature recurring body language segments that double as tutorials in how to read the body language of others.

This chapter approaches the recent constellation of instances of body-language analysis in popular media –portrayals of the attempt to bypass the level of conscious discourse by turning to the body – as characteristic of emerging logics of surveillance associated with the mobilization of the spectre of risk in a reflexively savvy era in which self-presentation is relegated to the realm of façade and speech (political speech in particular) to that of stagecraft. It is worth noting at the outset that a paradox lies at the heart of such logics, which portray surface appearance as a means of discerning a hidden yet directly accessible inner state. In advocating what seems at first a radical empiricism, they simultaneously project beyond surface appearances to hidden, underlying truths. The distinction between depth and surface, reality and appearance gets flattened into the realm of appearances, some of which can be dismissed as misleading or inessential, others of which, at least to the initiated, allow essence to come to the surface where it can "speak" for itself. The paradox is a familiar one with a long history in the analysis of facial expression and body language. The social function of such analyses varies with historical context. Thus, an early analysis of physiognomy (dubiously) attributed to Aristotle, evinces a mania for classification and categorization as means of making sense of the natural world, whereas the 18th century physiognomy of Lavater (and his followers) embraces the Enlightenment notion that surface signs provide access to the hidden, underlying truths accessible to practitioners of science. The 18th century techniques of both physiognomy and phrenology asserted that an inner (emotional, psychological) state manifests itself, albeit indirectly, in physical forms that can be detected at the level of appearance. In each case the mental or emotional is linked to the corporeal in a directly legible way. To invoke the Hegelian terms used by Dolar (1994), an "infinite judgment" that posits the identity between matter and mental life is at stake in such claims: a particular arrangement of muscles or bony bumps is equated with a mental state or psychological disposition. As Dolar puts it, in a different context (the identity of use and exchange value in Marx), in such "infinite judgements": "The 'immaterial' equals the 'material,' the 'supersensible' equals the 'sensible...'" (1994: 68).

Although 20th century forms of body language analysis which, broadly construed, range from the analysis of non-verbal communication (popularized as an academic discipline in the 1970s) to lie-detection technology, do not necessarily share the Enlightenment conception of underlying truth, they reveal a bias toward the notion that bodies may speak more honestly than words. Even while dismissing the notion as naive, Burgoon, Buller & Woodall note that, "nonverbal behaviors are assumed to be more truthful and therefore more trusted….In fact, research shows that when verbal messages contradict nonverbal ones, adults usually believe the nonverbal message" (1996: 7-8). Much of the academic and popular literature on body language reproduces the notion that non-verbal expressions tend

to be more spontaneous or difficult to control than speech, if only because of the complexity of keeping track of and managing the various dimensions of gesture, expression, posture, and so on. The popularized promise of body literacy, especially as espoused in a range of self-empowerment books on body language (see, for example, Reiman, 2008; Navarro, 2008, Hogan, 2008; and Kinsey, 2008, to name a few), reproduces the promise of bypassing appearance to get to an underlying sense of accuracy or authenticity. Geoffrey Beattie, who served as on-air psychologist and commentator for the *Big Brother* reality TV show in the U.K., promises in his book that those who master his theories of gesture analysis – based in part on his study of interactions on the reality show, "may also learn to read minds in a very real and in a very scientific sense" (2003: 37).

It is not so much the validity of such claims that this article explores nor the various qualifications of non-verbal communication as more or less accurate than speech (surely it serves as an important dimension of communication), as the context in which they acquire meaning and allure as a means for bypassing the slippery medium of speech and the potentially deceptive nature of its content in an era of generalized risk and savvy scepticism. The promise that viewers can learn to read the hidden truths revealed by the materiality of the body links together a constellation of cultural developments ranging from the proliferation of self-help body language books in the past decade or so, the emergence of the forensics-oriented police procedural (which focuses on detection equipment and lab work) as well as TV shows like *Lie to Me* and *The Mentalist*, the use of body language in news analysis, and new forms of marketing and deception-detection technologies.

Perhaps the clearest contemporary examples of such developments are provided by cutting-edge neuroscience applications, including the 2008 decision by an Indian court to convict a suspect of murder based on readings from an electroencephalogram. The brain scans were processed by software that, "tries to detect whether, when the crime's details are recited, the brain lights up in specific regions — the areas that, according to the technology's inventors, show measurable changes when experiences are relived, their smells and sounds summoned back to consciousness**" (**Giridharadas 2008). The equation here is between material traces – the electrical impulses in the brain – and memories of lived experiences. The software's designer claims that the machine can differentiate between memories of events recounted by others and those directly experienced by the subject under investigation. Highlighting the affinity between law enforcement and marketing, a similar equation is embraced by the developing "science" of neuromarketing, in which focus group research is replaced by brain scans that measure affective response to advertising campaigns. The equation here is between blood flow in the brain and desire. As one press account of neuromarketing researchers at a company called the BrightHouse Institute put it, a "glowing yellow dot near the top of the brain…was the magic spot – the medial prefrontal cortex. If that area is firing, a consumer isn't deliberating...he's itching to buy" (Thompson 2003).

It is crucial to such accounts that the physical data not be subject to conscious mental control – that it remain automatic and immediate, and thus inert from the perspective of self-conscious reflection. Otherwise, the promised short-circuit becomes subject to the same forms of reflexivity associated with conscious speech, and is no longer a short-circuit at all. The promise of direct access to the underlying emotions, impulses, and memories behind a manipulable façade is predicated on this inertness – its non-reactivity to reflection. If, for example, one of the shortcomings of focus-group marketing is that consumers may not know exactly what they want and that they can be influenced by the process itself, the supposed advantage of neuromarketing is that this short-circuit that provides direct access to desire: "M.R.I. scanning offers the promise of concrete facts – an unbiased glimpse at a consumer's mind in action. To an M.R.I. machine, you cannot misrepresent your responses. Your medial prefrontal cortex will start firing when you see something you adore, even if you claim not to like it" (Thompson 2003). Even, presumably, if you do not know you like it.

Generalized Suspicion

The obvious difference between the marketing and detection examples is that whereas the latter attempt to circumvent deliberate deception, the former claim access to truths about consumers they may not know themselves. Both rely on forms of monitoring that detect activity supposedly beyond the reach of an individual's deliberate control over self-representation. What unites these forms of monitoring is a faith in direct access to hidden depths combined with a reflexive savviness toward discourse proper – the understanding that, for example, speech can be deceiving, caught up in forms of power or ideology as well as in deliberate forms of deception. This combination of generalized scepticism with a seemingly naive faith is not an unfamiliar one in the current conjuncture. In his lament on the fate of critique in a terminally savvy era, for example, Latour (2004: 228), describes the neighbour (in his Bourbonnais village) who looks down on him as a dupe for believing mainstream media accounts of the September 11 attacks rather, presumably, than the conspiracy theory outlined in Thierry Meyssan's bestseller, *L'Effroyable Imposture*, which claims the attacks were secretly orchestrated by the U.S. government. A similar combination of generalized scepticism with willing suspension of disbelief is the stock-in-trade of the U.S. right-wing publication *Human Events* (described by firebrand right-wing pundit Ann Coulter as the "Headquarters of the Conservative Underground") which debunks mainstream media and political narratives even as it barrages readers with get-rich-quick schemes and miracle cures. There is at times a tragicomic complementarity between the feature articles, which routinely ridicule global warming claims and social welfare programs, and the ads, which promise instant wealth and promote

miracle cures for cancer.[1] The articles criticize social programs even as the ads market snake-oil substitutes to fill the needs the debunked programs address.

Žižek (1999) has described this combination of scepticism with naiveté as symptomatic of the decline of symbolic "efficiency" – the faith in grand narratives that might serve as ground and guarantee of shared meaning in a society. He sees Beck's (1992) analysis of the risk society as symptomatic of the decline of one of these narratives: the notion that science might serve as a guide for human action and a means of adjudicating between competing claims about environmental risks produced by human activity. The result is an ersatz democratization of competing claims in which the criteria for adjudication are themselves called into question, and hence the resurgence of conspiracy theories alongside the debunking of dominant narratives. As Žižek (2001) puts it,

> The problem is not that…conspiracy theorists regress to a paranoiac attitude unable to accept (social) reality; the problem is that this reality itself is becoming paranoiac. Contemporary experience again and again confronts us with situations in which we are compelled to take note of how…the 'big Other' that determines what counts as normal and accepted truth, the horizon of meaning in a given society, is in no way directly grounded in 'facts' as rendered by the scientific 'knowledge in the real.' (219)

If paranoia is not the defining mistake of conspiracy theory, he goes on to argue, category confusion is: the problem is a conflation of the hermeneutics of suspicion as "a formal methodological stance", with "the positivization of this suspicion in another all-explaining global paratheory" (220). It is this confusion that licenses the implicit message of publications like *Human Events* and Meyssan's work: conspiracies are all the more believable precisely because they run so astoundingly counter to the received wisdom – they gain their legitimacy through the thrill of being illegitimate and their appeal to the desire of what Lacan (1973-4) calls the "non-dupe", who seeks above all not to be fooled.

The goal of the non-dupe is to bypass symbolic representations through direct access to reality, an attitude that lends itself to forms of monitoring – such as body language analysis – that take place, as it were, beyond the back of the subject. In this regard, it underpins forms of surveillance designed to circumvent deliberate control over self-representation. The background risk, as symbolic efficiency falls prey to debunkery, is that of being taken in by representations. Proliferating forms of monitoring and surveillance mobilize this risk and promise to help manage it. It is possible to trace this logic in the generalization of savvy skepticism – what Žižek describes as the subjective response to "reality itself…becoming paranoiac" – from the micro-level of interpersonal relationships to the macro-level realm of the so-called Global War on Terror. At the interpersonal level, the forms of identity play that Turkle (1997) associated relatively early on in the internet era with online subjectivity are paralleled by the subsequent proliferation of techniques for online monitoring and background checking. Turkle made the connection between the performative character of identity online and the deconstruction of grand nar-

ratives and subjectivity relatively early on in the internet era: "In my computer-mediated worlds, the self is multiple, fluid, and constituted in interaction with machine connections; it is made and transformed by language" (1997: 19). The online world that captivated Turkle – that of role playing in virtual fantasy worlds – has been far outstripped, suggestively, by the proliferation of social networking sites that facilitate always –on forms of mutual monitoring. If MUDs allowed one college junior interviewed by Turkle to play the multiple online roles of a seductive woman, a "cowboy type", and a "rabbit of unspecified gender" (1997: 22), Facebook, by contrast, makes it possible for a college student to lose his girlfriend because he portrayed himself as single online.

Turkle's analysis suggests that the internet thematizes an understanding of the constructed nature of representation characteristic of a population that has grown up with a reflexive understanding of media representation, exemplified by meta-coverage and meta-programming (news about the constructed character of the news and television about TV). Pushing the argument still further, Coleman (2003) suggests that the interactive capacity of the internet appropriated by programming formats like *Big Brother* (that rely on viewer feedback), "makes all representations of reality vulnerable to public challenge and disbelief" (35). Coleman's analysis suggests that there is a politically empowering character to such challenges, perhaps because of their apparent kinship with a notion of the public sphere in which political viewpoints are subject to critique. However, the post-deferential politics Coleman invokes, in which the pleasures of everyday sociality are privileged over stuffy forms of political deliberation, does not lend itself to the forms of rational critique invoked by Habermas (1962/1991). They fit rather, with what Massumi (2005) has described as the "affective fact" associated with the threat of risk in the neo-liberal era: a fact that generates its own truth while effectively displacing the debunked ideals of rational-critical deliberation: "The breakdown of logico-discursive reasoning and the accompanying decline of the empirical fact does not of course mean that there is no longer any logic – or any facts. There is a tautological logic that tends to prevail, and a new order of facts associated with it emerges" (7). Such facts are visceral – a directly intuited gut reaction that short-circuits the potential deceptions of both rationality and deliberation.

If the notion of post-deferential and post-ideological society invoked by Coleman (2003) is of a piece with scepticism toward grand narratives and thus the decline of symbolic efficiency identified by Žižek and the rise of the "affective fact" described by Massumi. It is also characterized by a structure of feeling in which the invocation of such narratives reeks of undemocratic elitism. As Coleman (2003) puts it, a post-deferential culture is one in which,

> The element of performance within shows like *Big Brother*...are also manifestations of testifying and witnessing which, at least for some people, provide a more authentic sense of accountability than parliamentary debate or political interviews. Moving

> from *the* political speech to everyday speech is not to abandon politics, but to mediate it in a more accessible and humane way. (35)

This formulation of the politics of everyday speech has a close affinity, in other words, to the fascination evinced by Bill O'Reilly's body language segment with the underlying emotions and interpersonal dynamics of political actors rather than in the deliberative *content* that serves merely as the occasion for their appearance. Body language monitoring transposes elements of political deliberation into the register of personal authenticity. On one such segment, for example, body language analyst Tonya Reiman suggested that vice-presidential candidate Sarah Palin may have lost an opportunity to look sympathetic when her debate opponent Joe Biden referred to being a single father after the death of his wife and one of their children. Reiman gave her seal of approval to Biden's emotions: "Whenever we get very emotional, we look down. And he was. The catch in the throat, that's you know, an involuntary muscle. It just gets caught…And that's a true emotional response" (*Fox News: The O'Reilly Factor* 2008). However, she faulted Palin's reaction to Biden's emotional display: "instead of looking at him making eye contact, which would have been very powerful. Instead, she chose to basically keep that smile pasted on her face and ignore that" (*Fox News: The O'Reilly Factor* 2008). None of which had as much to do with the issues being debated as with the perceived authenticity of the candidates in their treatment of one another – and the implicit impact of these performances of sociability, witnessing, and testifying on a voting public seeking a visceral connection to the candidates.

If generalized scepticism serves as an alibi for attempting to bypass the level of discourse in the political sphere through recourse to more "direct" forms of monitoring, the generalization of surveillance in the post-9/11 era turns this logic back on the populace. One of the hallmarks of the so-called Global War on Terror declared by George Bush is the ubiquity of potential threat: since terrorists don't clearly identify themselves, suspicion is generalized; since they use unconventional forms of warfare, virtually anything can be redoubled as either target or weapon. As Xavier Raufer, the director of the Department for the Study of the Contemporary Critical Menace at the University of Paris II, puts it, "previously clear distinctions—between attack and defense, the state and civil society, the public and private sectors, civilians and the military, war and peace, police and army, legality and illegality—are becoming blurred" (Kamien 2006; 132). We might add to this list of blurred boundaries that between citizen and suspect, as evidenced by the forms of covert surveillance of the civilian population practiced by the Bush administration.

It is against this background of reflexive suspicion associated with the demise of symbolic efficiency, that the promise of more direct forms of access via techniques for body monitoring takes shape. For the purposes of this argument, the turn to the body might be understood as one manifestation of a more generalized (and self-defeating) attempt to circumvent the level of discourse. Other forms of

information gathering serve a similar purpose, such as, for example the collection of patterns of social interaction or movement throughout the course of the day that reveal either unconscious or disguised tendencies. The goal is to obtain information about monitored targets that escapes strategies of dissimulation or self-deception. We might describe such forms of monitoring as attempts to gather useful information about potentially deceptive or misleading forms of self-representation (that is to say *all* conscious forms of self-representation) while bypassing or sidestepping self-conscious forms of communication. Which is not to say that such forms of monitoring are separable from, say, face-to-face interaction. To detect whether someone is lying according to the body language experts, you have to get them to speak. In this regard the attempt to bypass the vagaries of speech also relies upon the incitement to discourse: the more speech and gestures available to the analyst, the more raw material for interpretation, the more potential truth-revealing leaks.

Lie to Me, for example stages the split between conversation and body reading – it is in the space between what the words and the body say that the analyst inserts his or her interpretation. Suggestively, it is this same space that is invoked by Oliver Sacks (1985) in his account of the reactions of patients with global aphasia and tonal agnosia to a speech by then U.S President Ronald Reagan. The former group could comprehend the body language of the president but not the meaning of his words, the latter could understand the words but not their intonation or the body language. Both apparently found the speech unconvincing. As Massumi (2002) interprets the story, "'The Great Communicator' was failing to persuade...To the aphasics he was functionally illiterate in extra-verbal cueing; his body language struck them as hilariously inept...The agnosiacs were outraged that the man couldn't put together a grammatical sentence or follow a logical line to its conclusion" (40). If the integration of words and gestures, viewed uncritically, might serve the purpose of deception, the role of the body language expert is to take them apart, with the focus on the content for the purposes of interpreting the gestures. Much the same might be said of other forms of scientific psychology that ask test subjects questions not to evaluate the content of their answers but to observe the physiological signs that accompany them. As the Web site for "Project Implicit", an online battery of association tests that gauge varying response times puts it, "It is well known that people don't always 'speak their minds,' and it is suspected that people don't always 'know their minds'" (IAT Home 2008). What the tests do, in other words is sidestep self-understanding and self-representation to get at these recalcitrant minds directly. The next two sections take up the impasse of such approaches through examples from popular culture: the tell-reading tutorials on televised poker, and the body language segments in political news coverage.

It Takes a Liar…

Against the background of the Global War on Terror, it is possible to trace a constellation of popular culture formats that might be loosely grouped in the category of "securitainment" – a hybrid genre that provides instruction in strategies for risk management and security training as adjuncts to its entertainment content. Such cultural forms cater to a neo-liberal culture of ongoing self-training (see, for example, Palmer 2002 and Ouellette and Hay 2008). In the category of "securitainment" we might include such television programs as *Fake Out*, a Court TV show that offers instruction in lie detection from an FBI profiler, *It Takes a Thief*, which teaches viewers how to secure their homes, Australia's *Border Security: Australia's Front Line*, a reality show about customs workers, and a similarly themed American reality show, *Homeland Security USA*. What these shows have in common is not just the theme of securitization but also an instructional/informational element that caters to the interactive ethos of the digital era. If the boundaries between civilian and soldier are blurred in the war on terror, such programming reinforces this porosity: the instructional components of the show take on practical salience in an era of generalized risk.

This article argues that another show which partakes in the logic of securitainment, although less obviously, is the televised version of the *World Series of Poker*, which provides tutorials in the management of (albeit contrived) risk and, especially, in monitoring strategies for reading the bodies of others who are attempting to deceive you. Tournament poker serves as a metaphor for the universalisation of suspicion – a microcosm of the decline of symbolic efficiency. The only guarantee at the poker table is that nothing anyone says can be trusted: the oft-cited though rarely enforced rule is that the only information a player is explicitly forbidden from sharing with other players during game play is the true content of his or her hand. In a world where everyone is expected to lie, the one form of deception ruled out is lying in the guise of truth.

The default language of the table, then, is body language. As 2004 World Champion Tim Raymer put it in an interview on the World Series of Poker, "it's about gathering data: reading tells is an important part. I like to look at the chest to see how fast they're breathing" (*World Series of Poker* 2007, episode 4). He describes the importance of monitoring the veins in his opponents' necks, following their hand movements and talking to them not to listen to the content, but to gauge their reactions, their tone of voice, their apparent confidence level. As commentator Vince Van Patten put it when describing the chatter at the poker table, "there is a method in their madness, they are looking for some information: a few little tells any little edge they can get" (World Series of Poker, 2007, episode 7). Indeed, conversation at the poker table is not about what is said, but about *how* it is said. As on *Lie to Me* (which might also be the title of a poker show), speech is a ruse for eliciting somatic signals. Similarly, on the show *The Mentalist*, the main character, who, like Cal Lightman in *Lie to Me* is portrayed as an

expert in reading body language, grabs the wrist of someone he is interrogating, listening to the words, but lining them up alongside the pulse. Poker pro Phil Gordon, who has hosted a celebrity TV poker show and written a guidebook about poker strategy, claims that for the trained player, "Getting info from other players is relatively easy, you just have to know what to look for…it's not particularly the answer, but it's the style in which someone answers that gives away the strength of their hand" (World Series of Poker, 2007, episode 7).

On The *World Series of Poker*, home viewers are schooled in the art of detecting "the tell" – the spontaneous gestures that, like the "microexpressions" studied by Dr. Paul Ekman, provide information about the underlying emotional states of players. Slamming your chips into the pot aggressively, for example, is a tell. Leaning back is a tell, as is leaning forward; a show of strength means weakness, and vice versa. As *Celebrity Poker Showdown* host Phil Gordon, put it, "looking directly at your opponent is a sign of weakness. You're trying to look at your opponent to look strong; but if I have a *good* hand, why would I want to intimidate my opponent?" (*Celebrity Poker Showdown*, 2005, Tournament 7, Game 2). The goal is to learn the significance of signals that are supposedly harder to control than words – to believe only your own eyes, never the other players' words. As in the case of other forms of what I am calling securitainment, the spectacle of lie detection on poker TV serves as a tutorial. "This is a lesson for the players at home", is the repeated refrain of the show's hosts, who understand that the TV episodes are advertising for a booming ancillary market in learn-to-play products, and for the tournaments whose jackpots increase in proportion to the number of participants they draw from the audience ranks. Instruction is also a form of recruitment.

The case for treating poker TV as a form of securitainment is based not just on the fact that it provides instruction in risk calculation and people monitoring, but in the way it relates the two. Risk is in part a function of the reconfiguration of discourse and the competitive conditions at the table: all are pitted against all in such a way that none can be trusted and everyone is a strategic liar. Moreover, the risk starts anew with each fresh deal since the history of the cards is obliterated with each shuffle. Walter Benjamin highlights the disjointed character of gambling, noting its affinity with the alienation of the division of labor: "Since each operation at the machine is just as screened off from the preceding operation as a coup in a game of chance is from the one that preceded it, the drudgery of the labourer is, in its own way, a counterpart to the drudgery of the gambler" (1930/2006; 114). What Benjamin calls drudgery is the result of the alienation that makes it impossible to cognitively map any relation between subsequent instances of activity. Each deal, each cast of the dice, each turn of the wheel represents a new start – or a kind of inane repetition independent of previous activity. The artifice of the gambling table is to separate risk from any historical context –

even the mathematics of probability place a ban on the notion that a previous cast of the dice might influence subsequent ones.

The de-historicized sense of risk parallels the mobilization of the spectre of the war on terror, which in its emphasis on securitization, interrogation, and surveillance backgrounds any attempt to, as it were, "make sense" of the threat or to situate it in a historical context. Former Homeland Security Director Tom Ridge's "readiness" campaign framed the implicitly ahistorical character of the threat by comparing terrorist attacks to natural disasters: "Families in Florida prepare themselves for the hurricane season; families in California prepare themselves for earthquakes. Every family in American should prepare itself for a terrorist attack" (Ad Council, 2003). This de-contextualization of terrorism parallels, as Rapping (2004) suggests, the de-narrativization of risk portrayed on reality shows like *Cops* (and poker TV), whose twilight landscape of strip malls and trailer parks is populated by characters, "that embody a proneness to random, sporadic violence that is represented as a permanent condition of human, or rather subhuman, nature. They are simply violent in ways that make no sense at all. We get no 'story' of any kind onto which we might hang a diagnosis or criminal profile" (22). The result, she argues, is what might be described as an actuarial approach to criminal risk resulting from a constant and irrational element of contemporary life (like the hurricane season) and justifying increasingly comprehensive forms of monitoring and oppressive forms of policing. Much the same can be said of the proliferation of the *CSI* franchise, whose plausibility is based not on any attempt to make narrative sense of the ubiquitous and insistent background of extreme crime, but on the explication of detection technology, which serves as the hero of the self-replicating format.

Similarly, an overview of the emerging policy-oriented literature on homeland security reveals that the risk of terror takes on the characteristic typical of Beck's (1992) conception of reflexive risk – disturbing precisely because of its incalculable and unpredictable nature. Even if such risk is reflexive – somehow related to human activity – any attempt to narrativize it is nonetheless foreclosed: deliberation over history and politics cannot provide access to a risk that is, by definition, at least from the recent U.S. policy perspective, an *irrational* one. Risk management in this context relies on universal suspicion, surveillance (since everyone is potentially lying), and general mobilization (citizens must take on some of the duties of defence).

Consequently, homeland security campaigns call for the population to serve as an extension of the monitoring apparatus of the state, instructing the populace in some of the "tells" of potential terrorists (wearing unseasonably bulky coasts to conceal explosives, and weapons, etc.). Life in the era of universal risk is, to put it bluntly, one big crap shoot and survival skills include preparation, alertness, and training in the ability to read others, calculate risk, and respond accordingly. The intersection of game theory and war strategy has a storied history that entered the

computer era and went mainstream in the post WW II era scientific community. What poker adds to the risk calculation process in the era of the so-called global war on terror is the cultivation of monitoring strategies associated with, as the poker wisdom puts it, playing the player and not the cards.

Despite the recurring invocation of battle and fight metaphors, it is perhaps fair to say that both poker and the war on terror share the characteristics of neo-liberal forms of risk mobilization. The hallmarks of neo-liberalism include the responsibilization of the citizenry in the face of an array of economic, security, social, and health risks, along with the de-differentiation of the roles of citizen, police officer, and entrepreneur. As Lupton (2006) puts it, "risk strategies and discourses are means of ordering the social and material worlds through methods of rationalization and calculation, attempts to render disorder and uncertainty more controllable. It is these strategies and discourses that bring risk into being, that select certain phenomena as being risky and therefore requiring management either by institutions or individuals" (98). Thus at least part of the commonality between the lessons of the war on terror and those of poker TV might be attributed to their positioning within the constellation of neo-liberal strategies for the mobilization of the threat of risk.

This commonality has not been lost on the security sector, which has not only borrowed surveillance systems from one of the leaders in the field, gambling casinos (O'Harrow 2005), but is funding research on the strategies of body language analysis promulgated by poker TV commentators. The U.S. Department of Homeland Security has budgeted some $3.5 million for research at Rutgers University to develop, "a lie detector capable of interpreting facial expressions and body language… scientists believe small movements such as shoulder shrugging or hand gestures can be analysed by computers to tell if someone is telling the truth" (Engineer 2005; 7). *Time* magazine has reported that in the U.S., "tens of millions to hundreds of millions of dollars are believed to have been poured into lie-detection techniques as diverse as infrared imagers to study the eyes, scanners to peer into the brain, sensors to spot liars from a distance, and analysts trained to scrutinize the unconscious facial flutters that often accompany a falsehood" (Kluger 2006). One government contractor, No Lie MRI has announced plans for, "a brain-scan lie-detection service" (Kluger 2006).

Psychotic Politics

The political analogue of citizen tutoring in a realm of reflexive risk and savvy skepticism is the instruction in "reading" politicians provided by the analysts of political body language. If the responsible citizen needs to be ever-vigilant for risk and deception, this same imperative is turned back upon the political sphere that helped mobilize it. The result is an analysis of political discourse that attempts to reveal the true character of politicians by setting aside the content of their finely-

spun speech and focusing on their bodies. The combination of savvy skepticism with a desire for unmediated access to a politician's "authentic" character is symptomatic of the demise of symbolic efficiency. It is a combination that Žižek defines as a form of social psychosis, referencing his interpretation of Lacanian psychoanalysis: "psychosis involves the external distance the subject maintains towards the symbolic order…*and* the collapsing of the Symbolic into the Real (a psychotic treats "words as things'; in his universe, words fall into things and/or things themselves start to speak)" (1996; 196). It is a world in which brain scans reveal murderers, a fleeting micro-expression can give away a lie and George W. Bush can imagine the possibility of pushing aside the language barrier to gaze straight into Vladimir Putin's soul.

The Bush presidency might be described, in these terms, as the embodiment of the logic of the decline of symbolic efficiency and the rise of the affective fact: the apotheosis of the role of visceral literacy in the triumph of the postmodern right. Far from representing a reaction to the deceptions, obfuscation, and recalcitrance toward public accountability of the Bush administration, the generalization of savvy skepticism anticipated them. From the start Bush played the role of the non-dupe and the body-language communicator – the politician who warned us of the duplicitous character of politicians and their savvy speech, directing his scorn toward the policy wonks like Al Gore and their naïve faith in reasoned analysis, bookish intellect, and the potentially benevolent role of government bureaucracy. During the 2000 campaign Bush's approach recalled Lacan's description of the knave who doesn't shrink from the burden of "realism": "that is…when required, he admits he's a crook" (Lacan 1997: 183). One of the signature quotes of Bush's 2000 campaign was his explicit mistrust of politicians themselves: "We don't trust bureaucrats in Washington, D.C. We don't believe in planners and deciders making decisions on behalf of America" (Mitchell 2007: A27). In a sense, the public had no right to claim that it had been deceived or misled by the Bush administration, which had signalled its understanding, in advance, that government was not to be trusted. Perhaps this is why indignation toward the various transgressions of the administration was so lacklustre, even in the face of activity that would have made Nixon blush: indignation is the province of the duped, not the savvy populace and the candidate who takes on, "the burden of 'realism.'" Moreover, Bush modelled his own visceral appeal, making fun of his awkwardness with language and having recourse instead to his Texas style and swagger, while at the same time showcasing his own ability to cut through the verbiage to act on gut instinct (Suskind, 2004). Bush was the Texas poker player, cards close to his chest, taking in the souls of others at a glance, and at the same time appealing to the confidence inspired by his own demeanor.[2]

In such a context, perhaps it only makes sense that political coverage would recruit body language experts to "read" politicians the way Dr. Cal Lightman reads suspects. But when political discourse is pushed to the side, the leftovers are

merely broad generalities about perceived character traits. We learn whether someone seems to feel confident at particular moments, what their general disposition is toward a political rival (often, unsurprisingly, antagonistic), whether their emotional declarations are authentic or staged. When Hillary Clinton endorses Obama at the Democratic National Convention, we are told, for example, that she falls short on the enthusiasm scale. According to body language expert Joe Navarro, the problem lay in her hands: "we look for hand gestures to tell us what's important. So, you know, when we see them out, when we see them up, this is significant. And, you know, we saw them just a few times last night, but not enough. This was not an impassioned speech" (*CBS News: The Early Show*, 2008a). As for Sarah Palin, we learn perhaps unsurprisingly, the (affective) "fact" that she is a family person, "Well, you can see she's comfortable with her family. The family is comfortable with her. And a lot of times we – the public – picks up on little subtleties. And what we can tell is that she's a loving mother, a caring mother, but a focused mother," (*CBS News: The Early Show*, 2008a). In short we learn the kind of banalities that Hegel attributes to the soothsayers of physiognomy, "As regards their content, however, these observations are on a par with these: 'It always rains when we have our annual fair,' says the dealer; 'and every time too,' says the housewife, 'when I am drying my washing'" (193).

Partaking of the logic of securitainment, political body language experts are framed not just as analysts, but also as tutors, providing expertise to a populace faced with the risk of possible deception. To the extent that politicians are, in this type of analysis, judged on their interpersonal skills and the alleged authenticity of their emotions, the ability to discern these is readily transferable to other realms of social life. To put it somewhat differently, by setting aside its specific content, such forms of political analysis transpose political discourse into the realm of everyday social life by mediating them in what Coleman (2003) describes as " a more accessible and humane way". This notion of political authenticity is perhaps what an anonymous political consultant was relying on when he chided political reporter Ron Suskind and other critics of George W. Bush for judging the president's political competence by his apparent incuriosity and lack of detailed knowledge of the issues. The consultant suggested that what Suskind did not understand was that Bush related to his supporters on a more direct level: "They like the way he walks and the way he points, the way he exudes confidence" (2004).

Since body language analysis readily defaults from political content to personal authenticity, it is a skill that transfers easily from the realm of politics to that of daily life, business, and social interaction. We are also invited to train ourselves in the art of visceral literacy in order to be able to perform optimally in each of these realms. As *Today* show host Matt Lauer puts it, in one of his introductions for Joe Navarro, "So…if it's a science, someone like you can use this in your daily life and teach others how to use it in their daily lives?" To which Navarro replies, "Absolutely" (NBC News: *Today* 2007). As in the case of the poker shows, the

expert consultants explain literacy skills that, if audiences learn them well, will help them navigate a social landscape in which speech and appearances can all too often be deceiving. Suggestively, the realms of politics, business, and social life require the same skills, according to Lauer, "…being able to decode more subtle nonverbal cues may be the secret to success in business and in love" (NBC News: *Today* 2007).

However, there is a paradoxical double logic to the more direct and immediate language of the body – at least to hear the experts tell it. Just as the "speakers" – those giving off unconscious cues – are not necessarily aware of the signals they are sending, so too do these signals convey meanings to us in ways that we may not realize. When someone, for example, signals confidence, this confidence is apparently automatically conveyed – which is why, for example, Palin presumably lost points with her audience for not showing empathy to Biden. To interpret the signal is simultaneously to posit how it will be received. Two conversations take place simultaneously at two levels: one at the level of speech that is subject to reflexive savvy skepticism, and another, at the level of the body, in which signs are sent and received, exempted from reflexive forms of examination and critique. Thus, Lauer ends his segment with Navarro by noting that, "if you're in social situations and you're not quite communicating what you think you're communicating, maybe stop and take a look at your body language. It might not be what you're saying; it could be what you're doing" (NBC News: *Today* 2007).

The reflexive move – breaking the "code" of body language – collapses the difference between these two levels. The emergence of the body language expert signals the moment when this language becomes conscious of itself. Similarly, the process of interpretation signals the end of immediacy. Once we understand that, as Navarro puts it, "we're constantly transmitting. We're sort of billboards" we can attempt not just to learn the language but to turn it to our particular ends (NBC News: *Today* 2007). Thus, the character of Joe Navarro – news analyst, security expert, and poker tutor – helps bring the argument full circle. In addition to his news gigs, he serves as an instructor at the World Series of Poker Academy, which offers seminars in anticipation of the "main event" – the tournament featured on the *World Series of Poker* television show: "I tell players I'm going to teach them what I've learned through my work in counterintelligence, catching spies…There's no reason poker players should not be aware of why we do these things, why people behave the way they do" (*New Zealand Press Association* 2008) In his seminars, Navarro argues that breaking the code of body signals allows them to be put to use. His video lessons, compiled in his *Read 'Em and Reap Poker Course: A Spy-Catcher's Video Guide to Reading Tells*, advises players to cultivate an air of confidence at the table by using body language at the table to signal to other players the messages you want them to receive. In a segment on hand gestures ("steepled" hands project confidence), Navarro advises his viewers

to, "Use this information both to guard yourself, to read other people and also use it effectively in bluffing" (Navarro 2007).

What he gives with one hand – the promise of direct access to underlying emotional states – he takes away with the other by demonstrating how, once deciphered, such signals can be put to use. Now, when a poker player sees an apparent tell, the question that immediately arises is whether it is a deliberate one calculated to send a particular message by simulating immediate access to underlying emotional states. The result is a form of reflexive self-undermining that Hegel anticipated in his critique of physiognomy: "in this appearance the inner is no doubt a visible invisible, but it is not tied to this appearance; it can be manifested just as well in another way, just as another inner can be manifested in the same appearance. Lichtenberg therefore rightly says [in his critique of physiognomy]: 'Suppose the physiognomist ever did take the measure of man, it would require only a courageous resolve on the part of the man to make himself incomprehensible again for a thousand years'" (1807/1977: 190-1).

Conclusion: The Grand Narrative is Dead – Long Live Symbolic Efficiency!

The analysis of body language finds itself caught in the impasse it sought to evade. In conceding the demise of symbolic efficiency it attempted to bypass the symbolic register altogether, envisioning a direct, ostensibly unmediated (and, hence, paradoxical) form of communication. However, the attempt to repress symbolic mediation resulted, perhaps unsurprisingly, in its return: body language takes on the character of the forms of symbolic discourse it sought to replace. The promise of immediate access to hidden depths has once again receded. Perhaps this is one of the reasons for recourse to brain scan monitoring technologies: the hope that these will retain the promise of direct access because it is harder to control the blood flow in our brain than our expressions and gestures.

The prospect that these high-tech forms of depth detection may face a similar fate is perhaps anticipated by the development of an alternative form of monitoring, one that dispenses with the depth model altogether. In a much-hyped issue of *Wired* magazine, info-trend guru Chris Anderson argued that the advent of data warehousing at an unprecedented level, "offers a whole new way of understanding the world" which renders theory and depth models obsolete: "Out with every theory of human behavior, from linguistics to sociology. Forget taxonomy, ontology, and psychology. Who knows why people do what they do? The point is they do it, and we can track and measure it with unprecedented fidelity" (Anderson 2008). This new form of understanding neatly complements the demise of symbolic efficiency – it collapses the gap between sign and referent by remaining agnostic about causality and meaning. Since, as Anderson (2008) puts it, "[c]orrelation supersedes causation" in the petabyte era "No semantic or causal

analysis is required." Nothing to debunk – just patterns generated by the process of what Ian Ayres (2007) calls 'super crunching' breathtakingly large amounts of data. The goal here is to bypass the tricky realm of meaning by dispensing with depth altogether in order to generate patterns that predict without explaining anything. If a search algorithm spits out the information that someone who drives a Mercury is more likely to vote Republican or to respond to a particular type of advertising appeal, the question of why remains moot. It is a pragmatic, instrumental mode of anti-understanding. It cuts the Gordian knot of explanation by dispensing with it altogether and substituting correlation.

The enthusiasm for the power of "super crunching" in the petabyte era is of a piece with a contemporary constellation of savvy attempts to bypass the debunked level of discourse and get things to speak for themselves – but what we are trying to get them to say has shifted. No longer do we ask them to explain themselves, to provide insight into hidden truths, rather we array appearances into algorithmic patterns to predict likely responses. In the case of the database, things speak to us not from the depths of inwardness, but from the complexities of the surface, forming pattern whose robustness varies directly with the comprehensiveness of the data set. As Anderson (2008) puts it in his essay on "The End of Theory": "With enough data, the numbers speak for themselves."

The catch, of course, is that this new form of understanding is limited to those with access to giant databanks and tremendous processing power. If practical knowledge in the petabyte era means having access to and organizing incomprehensibly large datasets, it is a form of knowledge destined to be monopolized by the few (at least for the foreseeable future). In this regard it reinstates a certain asymmetry characteristic of surveillance – one that is mimicked by emerging forms of peer monitoring facilitated by social network applications like Facebook, which organize and present growing amounts of data about our "friends" to us. Not so long ago, the effort of determining the daily activities of hundreds of acquaintances would have been a laborious, time-consuming task. Thanks to Facebook applications, all we have to do these days is log on and scan the incoming alerts, watching as they accelerate in frequency and complexity. Perhaps these applications can be understood as one way of mimicking the data-crunching mode of understanding outlined by Anderson at the level of interpersonal relations. The goal is not to decipher the content of a conversation – indeed conversation is not the point and can be bypassed entirely on Facebook – but rather to accumulate and scan patterns of information that are automatically collected and relayed from online "friends". In this regard the users of Facebook come, in certain respects, to imitate (on a much smaller scale) the forms of monitoring practiced by commercial data miners. In the era of Facebook and Google, when you meet someone new, you can background check them online. Students have told me, for example, that they "friend" potential dates on Facebook to do background research about them online, learning details of their tastes and personality – without necessarily

having to talk to them – before meeting up again. In other eras this behavior – researching detailed information about a relative stranger's likes and dislikes, favorite moments, the people they are close to – might have been considered borderline stalking. In the database era it is an increasingly automatic practice of both screening for potential risks and incompatibilities as well as figuring out how to get the most out of the next encounter (just as marketers attempt to sell more effectively by tailoring their appeals to specific individuals based on their tastes and past behavior). The multi-functionality of background checking is emphasized by online sites like Abika.com which offers to background check individuals for a range of purposes from job screening to law enforcement, to trying to figure out how to impress a date. In this de-differentiated era, monitoring becomes the common denominator for an increasing range of strategies for both minimizing risk and maximizing returns on investments of time, energy, labor, and emotion. Perhaps unsurprisingly, forms of scanning and monitoring associated with social networking can readily be put to use by everyone from law enforcement agent to marketers and potential employers. Consider, for example the use of Facebook by New Zealand police to catch a thief who removed his face-obscuring balaclava in front of security cameras: "Queenstown police used the social networking site Facebook to post surveillance pictures, which were later recognised by users," (*The Southland Times* 2009).

The development of a monitorial model of social interaction, in which discourse can be replaced by data scanning – tracking Facebook updates, twitter posts, personal blogs, and so on – lends itself to this kind of multi-purposing. It is not an entirely new mode of social interaction – one-way forms of monitoring, scanning, and information gathering are perhaps integral components of human sociality (we constantly collect observations and make inferences about others). However, the development of the technology combined with the mobilization of the specter of risk and the fate of symbolic efficiency help to reposition it as a practice that meets the imperatives of an era of information and communication glut. The depthless mode of knowledge via correlation perhaps addresses the impasses of savvy reflexivity, but it is a way of knowing that favors those who own and control the databases. One response might be to suggest with Lyotard (1984) that the databases be thrown open. This seems unlikely in an era in which their privatization promises to become increasingly profitable. It perpetuates the logic of generalized monitoring and fails to address the discrepancy in processing power and access to algorithms. Access to databases is one thing – making sense of them quite another. Rather than generalizing the mode of instrumental and correlational knowledge invoked by Anderson – an actuarial model of correlation, induction, and prediction best suited to marketing and public relations – perhaps an alternative is to rehabilitate the non-self-identical and contradictory character of the symbol itself: the fact that, for example it can be inadequate to the reality it designates – or vice versa. Žižek (1999) highlights the role that symbolic efficacy plays

in opening up a space of possibility beyond the seemingly irrevocably given character of directly experienced reality. Symbolic efficiency, as Žižek puts it, relies upon, "the distance (between 'things' and 'words') which opens up the space for…symbolic engagement" (1996: 196). That is to say it is the paradoxical space of the symbolic that opens up the possibility that things might be otherwise than how they "directly" seem. Rather than subordinating and suspending the realm of discourse to attain an unmediated essence, or alternatively attempting to limit knowledge to the surface play of correlation and induction (both surveillance-oriented approaches), it means thinking the relationship between these two: sacrificing our savviness to, what (with a nod to William Blake) we might describe as a radical naïveté.

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Notes

1 The snake oil ads pedalled by *Human Events* are a fascinating genre that recall an earlier era of patent medicine ads, complete with heavyset headlines, and long explanations by an array of experts complemented with testimonials from miraculously cured customers. The ads trace a landscape of anxiety about health, environmental and economic concerns. The general tone of the ads is provided by a couple of the headlines: "If you want an opportunity to bank SAFE, annual gains of 65% while you lie on the beach in some exotic location then...You Must Respond To This Letter NOW!" and "What if I were to tell you that a billion-dollar drug company discovered a true CURE for cancer...and told no one?" The full ads are available online at: http://www.investorsdailyedge.com/ad/mediaads/bndeagle022509.html?fc_c=1368349x2852852x61007965 and http://www.isecureonline.com/Reports/HSI/LHSIJB07/?fc_c=1315494x2636898x61007965.

2 The apparent refutation of the Bush era represented by Barack Obama's decisive victory in the 2008 US Presidential elections may represent not the politics of the non-dupe, but, rather a skepticism toward the impasse of generalized skepticism itself. More likely what is at stake is a contest between, on the one hand, the postmodern right epitomized by the Tea Partiers, Palinites, and "birthers" (who question whether Obama was born in the US), and, on the other, the Obama-style attempt to reinstate some notion of shared reality based on recourse to logico-discursive analysis. Žižek (2009) had described this latter attempt in terms of the task of asserting "a new 'ordering' against the capitalist disorder" (p. 130). In this context, the appearance of shows like *Lie to Me* and *The Mentalist* (both developed prior to the start of the Obama administration) should not be read as a critical reaction to the Bush era, but rather as continuous with poker TV, body language news analysis segments, and so on.

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