Frames from the life and death of Jean Charles de Menezes

Amos Bianchi, Denis J. Roio

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Abstract: This article is a theoretical enquiry about the death of the Brazilian citizen Jean Charles de Menezes, shot in London at Stockwell tube station on 22 July 2005 by unknown specialist firearms' officers. The previous day some stations of the Tube were struck by failed bombing attacks. The police were chasing four suspects. Some hours after the murder, de Menezes was discovered to be innocent and not involved in the terrorist act.

Keywords: critical thinking, apparatus, subjectivation, space, body, image, media, false positives

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2   Premise

The process of subjectivation/desubjectivation is a very effective method of analysis for the contemporary world, which we'll adopt in this paper.

    This method enables one to put the processes of intentional subjectivation/desubjectivation in a system of semantic apparatuses in order to investigate – retrospectively – if there are entirely new processes of subjectivity at work. Or, in other words: how, on 22 July 2005, were the contemporary, hyper- mediatic and hyper-technologic governmental control apparatuses able to reduce de Menezes' identity to his bare life? Seven keywords will suggest a partial, not-exhaustive answer.

3   Apparatus

This research is underpinned by the concept of apparatus, outlined by Michel Foucault as follows

> [it] is, firstly, a thoroughly heterogenous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions – in short, the said as much as the unsaid. . . . Secondly, what I am trying to identify in this apparatus is precisely the nature of the connection that can exist between these heterogenous elements. . . Thirdly, I understand by the term 'apparatus' a sort of – shall we say – formation which has as its major function at a given historical moment that of responding to an urgent need. The apparatus thus has a dominant strategic function. (Foucault 2001, 299-300)

    Foucault's concern was to understand how the subject and object position themselves and give shape to experience by the process of subjectivation: 'C'est . . . le sujet, qui constitue le thème général de mes recherces'. (Foucault 2001, 1042). The history of humanity concerns the ways in which the human race has thus created the fields of objectification, and, in this way, has created itself as subject.

4   Desubjectivation

From a perusal of Foucault, Agamben derives a further strand: the division of everything into two macro-categories: living beings and the apparatus (the historical element). In the following passage the two macro-categories are merged together to create the concept of subjectivity: 'The apparatus is, above all, a machine that produces subjectivity because it is also a machine of government'. (Agamben 2006: 29). But, in another step, the Italian writer allies government apparatus with the most powerful catalyst of apparatuses of the contemporary era, capitalism: 'In the present phase of capitalism, an apparatus does not operate through the construction of a subject, but through the processes of desubjectivation'. (Agamben 2006: 30) And later:

> What is happening now is that the processes of subjectivation and the processes of desubjectivation seem to have become reciprocally indifferent and do not give rise to the reconstruction of a new subject, if not in a phantom form and, so to speak, spectral. In the non-truth of the subject, there is no truth in any form. (Agamben 2006: 30-31)

    In order to identify processes of desubjectivation, and what they consist of, it is necessary to verify in what ways capitalism reveals its apparatus.

5   Space

From Guy Debord, The Society of Spectacle, paragraph 169:

> The society that reshapes its entire surroundings has evolved its own special technique for molding the very territory that constitutes the material underpinning for all the facets of this project. Urbanism –

Figure 1: A CCTV still showing Jean Charles de Menezes at Stockwell Tube station - Photo: PNS

'city planning' – is capitalism's method for taking over the natural and human environment. Following its logical development toward total domination, capitalism now can and must refashion the totality of space into its own particular décor. (Debord 2002, 45)

The city is the proper place for the murder of de Menezes, and a key concept to understand it. Urbanism, city planning, urban space management: by this element of total domination, capitalism takes possession of the space to build its own scenario. City becomes the ideal stage on which capitalism displays its power. But if the city has become the stage of capitalism, the question is: what is performed on it? And what instruments are working?

6   Body

In this scenario of a city the body itself is subjected to a radical transformation, as Agamben states in another writing

the process of technologization, instead of materially investing the body, was aimed at the construction of a separate sphere that had practically no point of contact with it: What was technologized was not the body, but its image. . . To appropriate the historic transformations of human nature that capitalism wants to limit to the spectacle, to link together image and body in a space where they can no longer be separated, and thus to forge the whatever body, whose ´ is resemblance – this is the good that humanity must learn now to wrest from commodities in their decline. Advertising and pornography, which escort the commodity to the grave like hired mourners, are the unknowing midwives of this new body of humanity. (Agamben 1993: 50)

The world suggested by Agamben is a divided world, in which the apparatus of subjectivation (including capitalism) works on the identity of humans until, according to Debord, they become pure image and, ultimately,

their bodies conceived as residual. If the liberal governamentality, theorized by Foucault, still requires the physical existence of the human beings, do the contemporary dataflows and databases open the possibility to the emergence of a new kind of governamentality, by which the relations of power can leave aside the material bodies, the *flesh*? Or could the present 'whatever singularity' be linked to the double-binded practice of the 'just do it', whose fake and faible disembodied communities are global-scale figures, compulsively clicking the button "Add to the basket" in order to buy the spectral image of themselves?

If the body is residual and reduced to pure spectacle, then the exterior image of the human being is the one that survives during the formation of the identity of the individual; and what happens within the space of the city is that the spectacle forges new human identities, reduced to exterior images by its technological apparatus.

Figure 2: The surveillance officer codenamed Ivor is filmed on CCTV following Jean Charles de Menezes ('JC') towards the Tube platform

7   Imago

Imago is the Latin word for image (italian: "immagine"; french: "image"). It has the common meaning of image, but its etymology is interesting: 'imago' was the mortuary mask, made with wax, that was fixed on the face of dead men to reproduce human shapes during ancient pagan rites. Therefore image is, *ab origine*, related to death; it should be said that image returns to presence after death: it is the *representation of an absence*. As Agamben outlines

> the absurdity of individual existence, inherited from the sub-base of nihilism, has become in the meantime so senseless that it has lost all pathos and been transformed, brought out into the open, into an everyday exhibition: Nothing resembles the life of this new humanity more than advertising footage from which every trace of the advertised product has been wiped out. . . The fact is that the senselessness of their existence runs up against a final absurdity, against which all advertising runs around: death itself. In death the petty bourgeois confront the ultimate expropriation, the ultimate frustration of individuality: life in all its nakedness, the pure incommunicable, where their shame can finally rest in peace. Thus they use death to cover the secret that they must resign themselves to acknowledging: that even life in its nakedness is, in truth, improper and purely exterior to them, that for them there is no shelter on earth. (Agamben 1993: 64-65)

The footage of de Menezes is advertising footage from which every trace of the advertised product has been wiped out. The division of his individuality into two poles, pure image (subjected to the CCTV control) and bare life, ultimately cancels out his life.
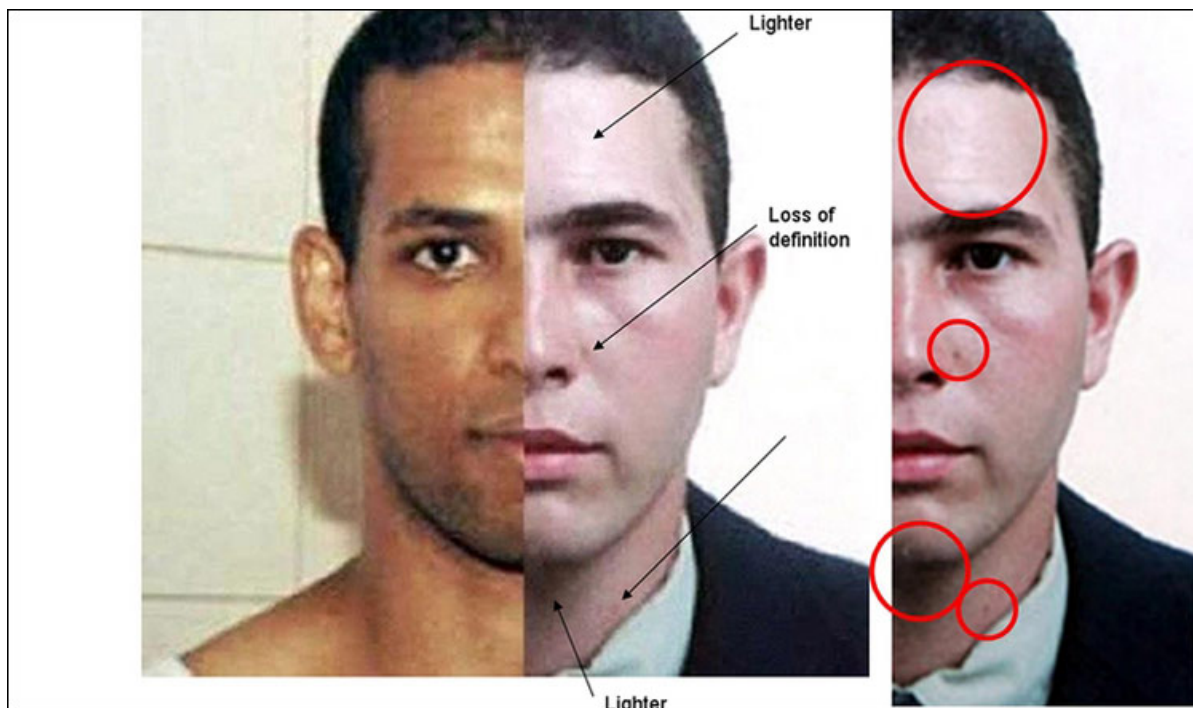

Figure 3: the face shown on the ID of de Menezes is aired on media cut in half, besides that of a known terrorist, to demonstrate their resemblance

8 Media

In *Medienkultur* (Flusser 1997), Vilèm Flusser theorizes that writing has been the act detaching man from magic and opening doors to science. In a further step, he underlines that the modern era is living through a new transition in which contemporary techno-codes move humanity away from texts, because they transform concepts into images. Flusser's discourse is about photography, which, in this sense, is not the representation of a situation, but the representation of a series of concepts elaborated by the photographer in relation to a situation. The imagination of the photographer is mediated by a series of texts, by which it can exist as techno-image. The conversion of texts in techno-images generates a crisis, because the text has to mediate the techno-image without being a programme anymore.

CCTV technology mainly exasperates this condition of absence of control. The apparatus generating techno-images supplies the text, allowing them to be used. CCTV itself is a powerful apparatus of control.

We might ask: if photography is the image of a series of concepts owned by the photographer in relation to a situation, what is the role of a 'CCTV photographer' if the scene shown is the whole world, a singular situation is all the situations, and a single concept is all the concepts? In this context the human being, both at the beginning and at the end of each apparatus, who tries to live in a condition of homeostasis, cannot do anything to control his creation.

Figure 4: The murder scene July 22, 2005

The apparatus of control becomes apparatus out of control. The text that gives birth to the apparatus remains

in the background, as ideology, and the will to panopticon becomes absence of vision.

It follows that the image of human being, transformed into techno- image, is incommunicable, and what remains is just his bare life, for which there is no shelter on earth, as Debord stated:

> The images detached from every aspect of life merge into a common stream in which the unity of life can no longer be recovered. Fragmented views of reality regroup themselves into a new unity as a separate pseudo-world that can only be looked at. The specialization of images of the world evolves into a world of autonomized images where even the deceivers are deceived. The spectacle is a concrete inversion of life, an autonomous movement of the nonliving. (Debord 2002: 6)

9   False Positives (Addendum)

In 2008 the Guardian UK reports plans of MI5, The Security Service of Great Britain, to datamine information out of public transportation: all the information about private traffic flow in England is made available for computational analysis conducted by law enforcement agencies in order to find out hints about terrorist activities.

This might seem just a quantitative change in terms of information processed, but what really happens in this case is that the power of the apparatus increases *qualitatively*: from a situation where, in obtaining private data about a specific citizen, is necessary a legal mandate issued by a judge (or by extraordinary anti-terrorism regulations), to a situation where the whole data about every citizen moving with public transport across a city is automatically examined by national law enforcement apparata. Such a large pool of generic information is not only available for immediate consultation when needed, but constitutes a flow of real life samples which can be constantly analysed in search for deviance patterns and relationships to suspicious individuals.

Figure 5: Brucker-Cohen, POLICESTATE (2003)

The scenario opened by this qualitative change transforms the apparatus in a high speed mechanism that, consequently, also leads to a quantitative change in the order of several magnitudes. At the origin of the new

inquiries conducted by the security devices investigating reality are not humans anymore, but computer algorithms synthesising vast amounts of information on human behaviours whose results are eventually reviewed by humans.

In mathematics the errors grow exponentially when we increase the number of dimensions. The standard mean error formula resumes this concept:

$$SE_x = \frac{s}{\sqrt{n}} \tag{1}$$

While contemporary security research emphasizes on automatic pattern recognition in human behaviour, in a close future mass-analysis can be exercised on the totality of data available; relational networks around suspicious nodes will then be traced through evaluations that will multiply suspicion at a speed that was never seen before.

Illustrative analogies are offered by analysts of the socio-economic meltdown, a contemporary condition that offers vast case scenarios on the total commodification operated by financial algorithms: its causes are popularly ascribed to the financialization (Marazzi 2010) of global economies, while phenomenons described as computational-ism (Golumbia 2009) and informationalism start to acquire importance, helping further comprehension. As Hakken recently stated:

> Notions like "the wisdom of crowds" (Suroweicki 2004) are virtually pure statements of informationalism. In its naive presumption that, as more information is added to the model – that is, the more computable it becomes – its accuracy tends to increase, informationalism becomes an aspect of computationalism. In short, reliance on prestigious, information filled, but systematicity presuming and therefore blind to systemic crisis, and thus deeply flawed, computationalist computing also caused the crisis. In this way, the models contained too much information, on the one hand, while ignoring crucial information (i.e., regarding systemic risk) on the other, because it was not easily quantified. (Hakken 2010)

Algorithmic models fail to incorporate the risks of systemic failure: they presume systematicity, being generally incapable of incorporating "black swan/long tail" risks, like that of general failure.

Let us conclude with what Richard Stallman, a popular developer and independent thinker on civil liberties, responded to our article: he provided this quote of Chögyam Trungpa from Tibet (with foreword by Marco Pallis):

> It is not only such obvious means of intimidation as machine guns and concentration camps that count; such a petty product of the printing press as an identity card, by making it easy for the authorities to keep constant watch on everybody's movements, represents in the long run a more effective curb on liberty. In Tibet, for instance, the introduction of such a system by the Chinese Communists, following the abortive rising of 1959, and its application to food rationing has been one of the principal means of keeping the whole population in subjection and compelling them to do the work decreed by their foreign overlords.

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11   Contributors details

Amos Bianchi (1975) is coordinator of postgraduate programmes at NABA (Nuova Accademia di Belle Arti Milano, www.naba.it). At the same institution, he has been Assistant Professor of Theory and Method of Mass Media, and he is currently Lecturer of Research Methods. He is a Ph.D. researcher of the University of Plymouth, Planetary Collegium, at the M-Node, based in Milan.

Denis Roio aka Jaromil (1977) operates in research and development activities at NIMk in Amsterdam (Nederlands Instituut voor Mediakunst, www.nimk.nl). He is a software developer and artist, board member of Dyne.org and of the Free Culture Forum, Ph.D. candidate of the University of Plymouth (Planetary Collegium, M-Node), in 2009 and together with researcher Brian Holmes he was honoured with the Vilém Flusser Award.