

# Driven to extraction

Forensic Architecture, ed., *Forensis: The Architecture of Public Truth*, Sternberg Press, Berlin, 2014. 744 pp., £22.00 pb., 978 3 95679 011 9.

The US military has become so adept at gathering data that it is now, according to an article in the November 2014 edition of *National Defense Magazine*, 'drowning' in its own digital morass. The promised bailout comes in the form of so-called 'computer vision' technologies that relieve human operatives from having to process visual information by eye. Instead of rooms full of people cleaning up fuzzy images frame by frame, new software is able to sharpen video in real time. With so much imagery, claims Sean Varah, CEO of Silicon Valley-based video analytics company MotionDSP, 'you have to use computer vision technology to extract information.' The automation of image analysis clearly raises a number of troubling issues regarding the substitution of human interpretive capacity with algorithms, but the broader assumption grounding Varah's efficiency claims is that images are data reservoirs from which stuff can be extracted – literally, drawn out.

Whether or not people or machines are doing the extracting, the hinge here, it seems to me, is the question of what it means to be drawn out. Is information dragged out of data, like a body from a swamp hoisted into visibility by the hook of the penetrating gaze, human or otherwise? Or is it produced – drawn out, drafted – through the act of capture and conversion into meaningful forms? The notion of writing with light gave photography its name, the shapes of things rendered by what Henry Fox Talbot called the pencil of nature. But do the forms need to precede the drawing? This is not posed as a philosophical query as such but as a question regarding the nature of evidence. Computer vision does not fix a blurred image but makes a clear one out of blurred data – blurred in the sense of there being not enough received data to make a clear image without adjustment. The object is not the issue; the form of the image is what matters. While this is patently disturbing if we subscribe to the notion that evidence is made up of the unadulterated facts of the matter, the question remains as to whether the room full of human analysts is any less engaged in the construction – as opposed to the discovery – of information than the computer program. Computer vision, we might say, is simply quicker on the draw.

Varah is clearly not troubled by any semantic slippage in his use of the term 'extraction' and simply means to say that technology can meet the objective better and faster than its human equivalent. He certainly does not intend to suggest that evidence is made rather than found. Yet it is precisely in the making, the drawing or marking out of evidence, and in the capacity of technology to render making as finding, that the visual presents itself as a vital space of opportunity for Silicon Valley and military R&D. The real-time production of information through computer vision is a means of manufacturing a pristine image realm within which the referent is no more than the sludge left over from a dematerialized high-def picture process. Computer vision promises the fulfilment of the dream of information as commodity-form, the labour and struggle of interpretation zapped to oblivion by massive processing power, where the image is always already its own interpretation, rinsed of conflict or challenge that might inhibit its endless circulation as self-evidence.

An achieved computer vision-enabled utopia would have no need for a public forum for debate and negotiated truth-finding since data and truth would be coterminous. Until then, there is enough blur in the images to require critical forensic examination. 'States and corporations', Eyal Weizman writes in the introduction to the dauntingly data-heavy collection *Forensis: The Architecture of Public Truth*, 'can mobilize large resources to construct their claims. But the nature of struggles for justice is that they must run counter to dominant and dominating narratives.' In order to challenge as lies the 'well-constructed facts' of technocrats in the employ of rich states and corporations, the technologies of surveillance and intelligence-gathering must be 'mobilized in order to engage with struggles for justice, systemic violence, and environmental transformations across the frontiers of contemporary conflict.' Hence the dual valence of the term *forensic* as pertaining to the public forum and to the crime scene.

The book, published on the occasion of an exhibition at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin, presents the work of the architects, artists, filmmakers, lawyers, and theorists directly involved in or otherwise associated with the Forensic Architecture project in the Centre for Research Architecture at Goldsmiths College, University of London. It gathers forensic investigations undertaken by the project and its collaborators, research and essays that situate contemporary forensic practices within broader political, historical and aesthetic discourse. Case

studies include citizen-video analysis of the shooting of Palestinian demonstrators by non-lethal munitions on the West Bank; an investigation of death camp sites in the former Yugoslavia; an inquiry into the use of white phosphorous munitions in Falluja and Gaza; an examination of covert drone strikes in Pakistan, Yemen and Gaza; an interrogation of environmental violence and genocide in Guatemala during the early 1980s; and a forensic oceanographic study of the so-called 'left-to-die' boat carrying migrants fleeing Tripoli in 2011. In each case the investigation necessitates the production and analysis of mountains of, among other data, maps, charts, diagrams, infographics, screengrabs, satellite images, architectural drawings and numerous forms of photographic evidence.

Faced with the apparent seamlessness of state and corporate 'well-constructed lies', the major challenge for these forms of counter-hegemonic forensic research is to locate moments of ambiguity in the evidence, the ostensibly irrelevant or irritable noise in the signal. It is precisely in what Weizman calls the 'weak signals, often at the threshold of visibility' – the blur that computer vision and other corporate techno-fixes would erase at source – that activists must pursue the 'fragility' of their truth claims 'against the flood of obfuscating messages, of dominant narratives, fabricated noise, and attempts

at denial'. The investigations often turn on a crack in a building, a faint line in a single video frame, a few scattered pixels, a fugitive blur. For Weizman, the proliferation of digital technologies has produced 'new visibilities' uncontained by corporate and state machineries and new, accelerated modes of dissemination via phones, clouds and social networks. These technologies, he writes,

have expanded the capacity to bear witness, but they have also transformed the meaning of testimony, and to a certain extent eroded its sanctity. Today there are many photographers and spectators but only a few witnesses in the traditional sense. While the number of images and available information in the public domain has been amplified, bringing new sights, sounds, and issues into the eyes and ears of an extended polity, these images also call for new practices of trawling through, looking at, and looking again, interpreting, verifying, decoding and amplifying messages and broadcasting them further.

The result, as the work collected in *Forensis* shows, is a kind of counter-torrent of 'other' information extrapolated out of 'material and media flotsam'. Nothing is irrelevant; every hair, flake, particle and pixel is mobilized as the unruly excess of science, gathered to leverage its 'aesthetic power' to refute 'state-sponsored mechanisms of denial, obfuscation,



and manipulation that were established by those that control not only the depth of space, but also its interpretation’.

It is the emphasis here on the aesthetic power of the critical forensic project that distinguishes it from ‘peer-reviewed science’ with its superior firepower and arsenal of ‘hard evidence’. In this asymmetrical struggle, connecting aesthetic practice, activism and science is intended to open up pockets for public debate in fields otherwise dominated by state- and corporate-funded experts. Here, the making of truth – as opposed to objectively locating it – is acknowledged at the outset as an intrinsic part of any investigation rather than something to be denied or erased. Truth, for the critical forensic investigator, is multiply performed, staged, constructed, pieced together, shaped, narrated and dramatized. Sensitivity to form – forms of matter, representation, dissemination – reflexively includes the process of truth-making as part of the project. Furthermore, matter itself is grasped in its sensorial capacity, able to ‘detect, register, and respond not only to contact

and impact, but to influences in its environment and to remote presence’.

This is where architecture is positioned as the ‘kernel’ of the multidisciplinary field that *Forensis* elaborates, since for Weizman it is the building surveyor who properly understands that a building is responsive to all manner of external influences; architecture, then, is ‘aestheticized to its environment’. The job of forensic aesthetics thus becomes a process of bringing matter to the forum through various modes of prosopopeia – giving form to the language of things. If this sounds much like the way conventional forensic evidence might be used in court – letting the evidence speak – the key difference lies in a commitment to aesthetic modes of apprehension; to ambiguity, excess, performativity and theatricality. The non-conclusive, improvised, transformative energies of data are conceived not as a resource to be mined but as a medium through which new modes of understanding might be created.

John Beck

## Fun and games

Richard Barbrook, *Class Wargames: Ludic Subversion against Spectacular Capitalism*, Minor Compositions, Wivenhoe, New York and Port Watson, 2014. 444 pp., £25.00 pb., 978 1 57027 293 6.

In 1965, Guy Debord of the Situationist International patented a tabletop wargame, *The Game of War*, which he had invented ten years previously. Just over a decade later, he went into partnership with his friend, the film producer and radical publisher Gérard Lebovici, to produce this and other wargames commercially. Another decade on, and after Lebovici’s assassination, their company finally published Debord’s game and its accompanying handbook. In 1991, three years before his own suicide, Debord demanded that all of his books, including *The Game of War*, be withdrawn from publication and pulped.

For many critics, Debord’s turn to boardgaming during the self-imposed isolation of the later years of his life has remained a biographical oddity, even an embarrassment in relation to his fierce theoretical output from the 1950s to the 1970s. More recently, other critics have allowed *The Game of War* a place in a narrative of Debord’s life’s work, normally as part of his late emphasis on strategy and the theory of warfare. The game and its handbook were republished in French in 2006 and in English in 2008;

around the same time, Alexander Galloway and the Radical Software Group reinterpreted the game for the digital age – their version is available online. Debord seems to have anticipated the multivalence of his game, its richness for biographical speculation as well as theoretical inquiry. ‘The surprises vouchsafed by this Kriegspiel [sic] of mine seem endless’, he writes in his autobiographical *Panegyric* (1989); ‘I rather fear it may turn out to be the only one of my works to which people will venture to accord any value.’

*Class Wargames: Ludic Subversion against Spectacular Capitalism* documents the efforts of Richard Barbrook and the Class Wargames group to play, share and discuss Debord’s game. The group plays other wargames, but focuses on Debord’s version, of which they have made a short film and a reproduction of the modernist board and pieces manufactured for Debord. Since 2007, the group has played the game at exhibitions and conferences around the world; reports from these matches serve as the primary structuring device of *Class Wargames*. Importantly, the function, lesson or significance of the game is