

TO POSITION, DEPOSITION, AND REPOSITION

The Division of Meaning and Power



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Politics of the Gaze, Allen Feldman
NYU, Winter 2011

There are two sides to any form of mediated experience: the person that is looking, and that which is looked at; the subject and the object. There is a gaze - a state of being in the medium that positions a body as a subject witnessing another body as an object. Certain forms of positioning of the subject before an object create for a particular understanding of the object's relationship to the subject. Depositioning of a body can have a debilitating effect, and I will show how depositioning has been used throughout history as a political maneuver to claim and deny power. However, depositioning can also allow for *repositioning*, a change in position from which new understandings and relationships arise. I will conclude this discussion with an exploration of speed and technology as forces for changing positioning.

I. Position

Positioning allows for us to have an understanding of ourselves as individuals, and our place in a cultural context. In *Paper Machine*, Derrida engages in a discussion of positioning before paper as a medium. He argues that paper is a multimedia. For instance, he describes writing on paper as a "vocal line." In this regard, when one positions oneself before a page of paper, the position activates the paper, bringing it into a multi-mediatic audiovisual realm. The act of reading a text on a page lets the person reading hear the author's voice, or their own voice; or perhaps even reading it aloud activates that text. Conversely, there is the act of writing; being before the paper medium, a blank canvas, and imprinting it; recording ideas by marking and inscribing onto the sheet. This is the act of creation of the object by the subject; externalization. An idea in the mind of the subject is externalized into an object mediated by the paper. The object of the idea codified and manifest through language in-

scribed on paper. “What we have here is an apparatus, and already a little machine for two hands.” (Paper Machine, 50)

In Hal Foster’s paper *Death in America*, the event that gives rise to trauma has no position. However, Foster also references Michael Warner in saying that the mass subject cannot witness itself except through the body of the other. In the context of the subject-matter of the paintings and artwork of Andy Warhol, the body of the other is used as a proxy for a subject that can appeal and relate to the masses. Warner writes: “In the figures of Elvis, Liz, Michael, Oprah, Geraldo, Brando, and the like, we witness and transact the bloating, slimming, wounding, and general humiliation of the public body. The bodies of these public figures are prostheses for our own mutant desirability.” (Warner, 250)

Through the mediation of Warhol’s paintings, the mass subject is able to observe itself, or rather individuals of the mass are able to relate themselves as one with the mass through the relationships established by the celebrity figure that stands in place for the mass. The celebrity figure represents mass ideals, cultural norms, interests, and feelings. In this case, the position of the subject and object are one and the same. The paintings act as a mirror; the mass sees itself reflected in the body of the other that represents the mass.

II. Deposition

How can one distinguish between the idea of a subject positioning and becoming de-positioned before an object that is being perceived? A de-positioning disrupts the relationship between the subject and object, isolating and confounding the subject, stripping away the subject’s power and agency.

Bunn discusses in his essay *Morbid Curiosities* that there really is no position for the native being represented in the frame of landscape painting, he is a "provisional subject." Bunn defines his notion of provisional subject-hood as "a moment when, for discursive or ideological reasons, a figure is temporarily precipitated out of the background mass, as though by brief metamorphosis." (45) In Bunn, the topic of "provisional subjecthood" is brought up in the context of the native pictured in the foreground of the Thomas Baines



painting "The Death of Colonel Fordyce." (pictured above) The native in this scene fluctuates between figure and ground. Camouflaged into the environment, he is given a position of surveillance, strength, and agency that is deprived of the befallen British soldiers in this scene. The native is hidden, whereas the soldiers are weak and exposed.

We are at once lead to believe that the scene depicted is being viewed through the eyes of another native, who is positioned a few yards back. So, there are two positions being

discussed here; the position of the native in the scene from who's perspective the scene is depicted, and the position of the individual observing the painting itself. Since the painter is European, he depositions himself whenever he positions himself before the canvas. Such landscape paintings of the Eastern Cape of the colonial warfare during the 19th century serve to document and share the experiences of British soldiers. In this particular painting, the native subjects the British soldiers who find themselves deposed in an alien land.

In *The Cold Gaze*, Anton Kaes provides us with a critical evaluation of Fritz Lang's film *M* in order to discuss the topic of positioning as a political factor in the context of surveillance. In the film, surveillance allows for the criminal child murdered to be observed at a distance, having been marked with the letter M in chalk on his back. Kaes writes: "Vision and surveillance guarantee discipline and control." (115) Kaes's discussion on the role of surveillance in society is based in Michel Foucault's thoughts on "The Examination" as discussed in *Discipline and Punish*. Foucault writes:

Traditionally, power was what was seen, what was shown, and what was manifested and, paradoxically, found the principles of its force in the movement by which it deployed that force. Disciplinary power, on the other hand, is exercised through its invisibility; at the same time it imposes on those whom it subjects a principle of compulsory visibility. In discipline, it is the subjects who have to be seen. Their visibility assures the hold of the power that is exercised over them. It is the fact of being constantly seen, of being able always to be seen, that maintains the disciplined individual in his subjection. And the examination is the technique by which power, instead of emitting the signs of its potency, instead of imposing its mark on its subjects, holds them in a mechanism of objectification. In this space of domination, disciplinary power manifests its potency, essentially, by arranging objects. The examination is, as it were, the ceremony of this objectification.

Foucault points out that the positioning of a figure of authority behind a cloak of invisibility is essential to manifest disciplinary power, and that disciplinary power lies in the act of objectifying those being examined. In this case, positioning of the subject outside the view of those being observed, ensures that those being observed have no way of objectifying their subjectors. Power is stripped away from those being surveilled, by stripping them of a position as subject. After all, what you cannot observe, you cannot objectify.

In her book *Torture and Truth*, Page Dubois describes how ancient societies denied slaves the right to subject-hood. She tells of how slaves were tortured in order to obtain from them *objective* accounts for use as evidence in court. In this context, the slave exists in a curious position that floats between subject and object. To the state, the slave is viewed as an object with no free will, a body without logos, or reason (Dubois, 52). The court assumes that a slave, undergoing torture will always tell the truth, like a video camera or tape recorder, simply recalling what he or she observed. From the perspective of the state, the slave is an objective medium, recounting the truth as it occurred. In truth, the slave, like any medium can only offer a subjective account. Especially under the influence of torture, the slave will undoubtedly give unreliable, false information far from the truth.

III.Reposition

A deposing will almost always resolve itself in a repositioning. A subject can change positions, becoming deposed in order to become repositioned. This might occur rapidly, or over an extended period of time, depending on the specifics of the situation. creating for a new relationship and a new understanding of the object by the subject. Nearly any form of *positioning* requires the subject to become *depositioned* from a former way in

which she were positioned. In certain instances, repositioning provides the subject with a new perspective that allows for a reconsideration of the subject.

There are many different ways in which the subject may become deposed. In the case of the Mirror Stage as discussed by Lacan, the positioning of the subject (a child) before the object (herself) through the medium of the mirror allows for a shift in thought that creates a reconsideration of the child's concept of "self." For Lacan, the Mirror Stage is a highly significant event in the course of a child's development of self-consciousness. The mirror causes a fragmentation of the body-image (Lacan, 4). The mirror allows for the child to see its own body fragmented and dispersed in multiple places at once. Whereas before the child was only able to see parts of its own body by directly looking at oneself unmediated, in the mirror the child sees its entire body; its head, its face, or only pieces, scattered here and there. This creates for a new understanding of "self" as something not at once contained in the one place of the body; but rather a self that is manifest in many places at once.

Similarly, for Wolfgang Schivelbusch, with the advent of high-speed train travel a new position was created from which a division of subject and object was born. Before the advent of train travel, travelers were very directly engaged with their environments. However with the advent of travel by train, "the speed and mathematical directness with which the railroad proceeds through the terrain destroy the close relationship between the traveler and the traveled space." (Schivelbusch, 53)

The position of the traveler-subject within the confines of the train car lead to a smothering of the senses, divorcing all but the visual perception of a distant background landscape scene mediated by the frame of the train car window. The loud roar of the train

engine took away any aural experience of the landscape. Likewise, the confines of the train divorced the sense of smell of the traversed environment. The fast movement of the scene before the train car window served to destabilize the foreground, blurring it and making it imperceptible to the eye. As such, a flattening of the scene occurs where focus is brought to the background in the distance.

Ironically enough, the depositioning of the traveler from within the environment to a space where the subject and object are divided by the frame of the train car window created for a stable position from which a flattened landscape scene could be perceived as object. This new position lead travelers to observe the landscape as an object, no longer a part of their environment, and divorced of immediacy. Panoramic travel at once created for a depositioning from one form of perception, resulting in a positioning for a new form of perception.

Derrida once more brings up the topic of reading and writing of text from the position of the reader in the preface to *Plato's Pharmacy*. He writes:

Adding, here, is nothing other than giving to read. One must manage to think this out: that it is not a question of embroidering upon a text, unless one considers that to know how to embroider still means to have the ability to follow the given thread. That is, if you follow me, the hidden thread. If reading and writing are one, as is easily thought these days, if reading *is* writing, this oneness designates neither undifferentiated (con)fusion nor identity at perfect rest; the *is* that couples reading with writing must rip apart. (*Pharmacy*, 63)

The reader, positioned before a text, does not simply process the words on the page, but actively constructs--through a number of associations with other words, other texts, and other events and experiences--a text of her own. (Spurgin) Let's consider the reader's posi-

tion. The reader is physically positioned before a text, engaging the text with their gaze, at once reading and writing. The reader is also positioned within a certain context, a culture, space, and time which effect their understanding and interpretation of the text. Derrida cleverly confides how text(ure) is “woven,” a living organism that evolves over time. (Plato’s Pharmacy, 52)

It can be said of language in general; meanings of words change, they are born and they die, get translated and mistranslated. As a text is copied, its position also changes. A repetition is never a true copy, as with each copy as well as with each reading, a depositioning must occur. We can consider the spacing between marks (graphemes) as an analogy for repetition (copying) and how the only thing that can ever be repeated is the failure to repeat. In this respect, position changes with each copy because there is a spacing (in time and place) between each repetition that creates for a new position. A spacing in time, because creating a copy must always take some amount of time, and a spacing in position, because a copy cannot exist within the same space as the original, unless it destroys the original.

In the act of reading/writing positioning and depositioning occur largely unconsciously. However, depositioning of the subject can also be used as conscious political act, condemning a traditionally assumed position by the subject. Such is the case with Ruben Salvadori, a young photo-journalist whose recent project “Photojournalism Behind the Scenes” aims at disframing the “reality” represented in conflict-image-making by photojournalists. In his position as a photojournalist for an Israeli photo agency, Salvadori became interested in the process by which the conflict-image is staged and constructed by the media. In a spoken presentation on Photojournalism Behind the Scenes, Salvadori tells us of how he came to

this project during his time as a photojournalist documenting the Palestinian-Israeli conflict in Silwan, an Arab village in east Jerusalem. "What really interested me wasn't the Palestinian throwing a rock or the soldier shooting tear gas or grenades, which are over-seen, but an element that often we do not see and that is kept out of the frame: the photographer... I started questioning our role in these situations, how our presence can influence the events we witness and how the process of conflict-image-production works."



In his photo-essay, Salvadori depositions himself as a photographer to an anterior position outside of the traditional photographic frame; taking pictures of the photographers taking pictures. Here, the politicized gaze, positioned from the perspective of an image-maker, a photographer, activates the object being photographed; the Palestinian youth engaged in conflict. Salvadori engages in a critique of photo-journalism; he points out how photojournalists are engaged in a process of false image-making, by deposing himself

from the traditional point of view of subject-object relationship between war-photographer and those engaged in the conflict. Showing the photographer in the act of image-making, Salvadori breaks out of the frame, placing himself in a position from which we can examine the process of image-making. In his discussion, Salvadori juxtaposes the shot being taken by the photographer, with a shot of the photographer engaged in the act of creating that photograph. In his own words, Salvadori's photo essay engages in the "creation and destruction of drama." "This project is an attempt to play with the creation and destruction of drama, breaking the taboo of the invisible photographer and including him in the frame, therefore showing how the massive attendance by the Media makes the conflict become a show in which the photographer is an actor and has his own role." With his project, Salvadori calls out attention to the real which lies outside the composed "reality" of the picture-frame.



Jean-Luc Godard too uses the subject of film in the context of his film *Notre Musique* at once discussing and disrupting image-making. The film opens with a sequence of war imagery from various films; mixing the real with constructed or re-constructed "realities." Some of the films depict documentary footage, whereas others are fictionalized, or re-constructed histories. The series of fast cuts and variety of footage being shown successfully deposits us, the film viewers become overwhelmed and lost in the barrage of graphic and violent imagery. In one respect, this introduction can be interpreted as communicating the ineptitude of film, or any medium, for that matter, to communicate truth. Whether it be documentary footage, reconstruction of history, or complete fictionalization fails at capturing the truth.

Early on in the film one of the characters says "Those who act never have the ability to say or think adequately about what they do. Conversely, those who tell stories don't know what they're talking about." Immediately following this statement is a scene in which a large group of people are all being handed glasses of wine, which they readily begin to drink, as if imbibing the "reality" as told/composed by others/mediatic representation of the "real."

About mid-way through the film there is a scene in which the professor character played by Godard himself is giving a lesson to his film students. He says: "Yes, the image is joy. But beside it lies the void. All the power of an image can only be expressed through it. They say our language arbitrarily divides up things in reality. And they say this as if it were our fault." Following is a powerful scene in which the professor presents his students with a series of shot and counter-shot images.

IV. Repositioning Forces of Speed and Technology

In addition, speed can be a powerful force for destabilizing the position of the subject. Paul Virilio engages in a discussion on speed as a deposing force that gives rise to dangerous situations and accidents. He argues that technological developments are focused on ever increasing speeds, but with high speeds comes higher propensity for accidents to occur. From Featherstone's *Speed and Violence*: "Virilio refers to the concept of motion sickness or 'kinetosis' to show how the mimetic bond between humanity and technology leads to dizzying speeds that cause the self to become disoriented and decentered." (14) Virilio extends this idea of the dizzying dangers of speed to advancements in information technology; wherein following Moore's Law, the speed of computers is growing exponentially as their size shrinks exponentially. Virilio cautions on the dangers of reliance on high-speed technology; fantasizing of disasters that occur when technology fails. Virilio is a doomsayer presenting a very cautionary and apocalyptic view of technological growth.

As a counterpoint to Virilio, the contemporary inventor, writer, and futurist Ray Kurzweil offers an alternative, optimistic vision of technological progress. In *The Singularity is Near*, Kurzweil plots biological evolution, major paradigm shifts, and canonical milestones, demonstrating exponential acceleration of progress in all these areas. Allow us to consider deposing resulting from acceleration as a precursor to a paradigm-shift. Kurzweil's plot of paradigm shifts was gathered from fifteen different lists of key events including the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, the American Museum of Natural History, Carl Sagan's "cosmic calendar," and others. A few examples from the canonical milestones list compiled by Theodore Morris in *The Limits of Complexity* include:

- The Big Bang and associated processes: 15.5 billion years ago
- First multicellular life (sponges, seaweeds, protozoans): 1 billion years ago
- First hominids, first humanoids: 28.5 million years ago
- Domestication of fire, *Homo heidelbergensis*: 325,000 years ago
- Development of the wheel, writing, archaic empires: 4,907 years ago
- Industrial revolution (steam engine), political revolutions (France, USA): 25 years ago
- Internet, human genome sequenced: 5 years ago

The length of time in between such significant historical events has been decreasing since the birth of the universe at an exponential rate. Kurzweil prophesies that exponential acceleration of technology will lead to a “singularity” at which there will be an explosion of advancements so extreme we will no longer be able to foresee what is to come. Each paradigm shift is a direct result of a depositioning. Some major technological milestone such as the advent of writing, invention of the wheel, steam engine, or the Internet causes for a depositioning, a shift in perspective, and resultingly, a shift in thinking about and perceiving the world. In Kurzweil’s view, there will soon come a time when humanity will merge with technology becoming one with the medium of information technology.

Virilio also speaks of accelerating speed in a textual sense. “He is highly critical of forms of articulation that embrace speed and collapse content in order to organize faster structures.” (Featherstone, 16) But as Featherstone makes clear, Derrida, like Kurzweil also “embraces speed as signs of unrealized potential.” “In "No Apocalypse, Not Now" he explains how the value of the aporia of speed may lie in its destructive function, its ability to destabilize existing structures and suggest the emergence of new forms of political organization.” (17) Though, this view is in contrast with Kurzweil who seemingly views speed as a constructive aspect of evolution:

The rate of paradigm shift (technical innovation) is accelerating, right now doubling every decade. The power (price-performance, speed, capacity, and bandwidth) of information technologies is growing exponentially at an even faster pace, now doubling about every year. This principle applies to a wide range of measures, including the amount of human knowledge.

Kurzweil sees speed as a factor for positive change in the world. While Virilio would prefer things to slow down, and is against the idea of trying to keep-up with the speed of the modern world, Kurzweil imagines a future in which man will merge with technology, and we will become able to augment our minds and bodies in order to keep up with the exponentially accelerating speeds of technological evolution.

Ernst Bloch however speaks of how technology can also be a force for alienation and estrangement; are other ways in which a depositioning can take place. In his essay *Alienation and Estrangement*, Ernst Bloch speaks implicitly of a stable position, a natural state of being, if you will, that is disrupted by the process of alienation in modern society in the 1970's:

In contemporary life the external environment has made us alien to ourselves. We exist in an uninviting, unhappy, and involuntary externality, which in no way relates to our being. Thus, the old sense of "alien country" is still present-the word alien once signified misery, as well as insanity. Today we experience this sense anew, although not as characteristic of a far-away, strange land, but at home in our own world, where our lives have been sold, turned into commodities, reified. (Bloch, 121)

In *Notre Musique*, the Native American characters quote Mahmoud Darwish, imploring us: "Isn't it about time, stranger, for us to meet face to face in the same age? Both of us strangers to the same land?" "Both of us strangers to the same land, meeting at the tip of

an abyss.” The moving poem hints at the fact that this alienation is now shared. The Native American and the white man, both deposed, alienated by contemporary society, undergoing the same woes can now finally meet as “strangers to the same land” on equal footing.

Bloch believes in some sort of natural state or position that is human; where love, friendship, and family are accessible. As he puts it, “being at home in oneself” is the preferred position, but this position is unstable in contemporary society; “The general condition of society, however, is bound to impinge on these havens; even inside them, one can only rest, not change course.” (122) For Bloch, alienation and estrangement causes a deposing, a loss of position from which one can relate with their world, and understand themselves (self-alienation). But, he asserts that there is a way out; Bloch is hopeful that a repositioning will take place in which “instead of self-alienation, self-confrontation might become possible.” Once man has finished discovering technological alienation, it will begin to disappear and a repositioning will take place, to a position in which “man's relation to nature might become concrete again.”

Bloch contrasts the darkness of alienation, with the surprise, awe, and inspiration that comes from what he calls “estrangement.” Estrangement is also a form of deposing in which the subject has a confused or unclear relationship with the object that is experienced as being “strange.” I would equate this notion of estrangement to the notion of the sublime; awe-inspiring experience that might come from gazing upon some vast natural vista. In this event, the subject, unable to clearly understand what they are looking upon, is unable to reflect upon it, and may lose oneself in the scene, becoming euphoric and disembodied in the presence of the strange or awesome. Bloch writes that “The strange externality purposes to let the beholder contemplate experience separated, as in a frame, or height-

ened, as on a pedestal.” Bloch also discusses this experience of estrangement in the context of spoken or written language. “Techniques like the ‘aside’ or the significant ‘throw-away’ are related effects which increase attention and seem more sinister or betraying when they break-unheedingly, as it were-out of the expected course of action.” Estrangement and alienation manifest as respectively beneficent and evil forces of depositioning.

Bloch’s notion of estrangement may be equated with Derrida’s writings on text as well as Godard in his film *Notre Musique*. Derrida utilizes “play” in his writing style. He plays with language in order to demonstrate that language is meant to be played with. This is the basis of his discussion in the introduction to *Plato’s Pharmacy*. There is an estrangement that occurs when language is used in an unexpected way. The reader is startled, the position is jostled, and a new relationship between the texture object begins to form. Similarly, in *Notre Musique*, the unconventional structure of the film depositions the viewer. The multiple overlapping plot-lines, character visitations, soliloquies, and montages flow seemingly non-sequitur, disturbing the viewer, at once jostling us into a new position from which a wider panoramic view can be accessed.

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