

# god's eye

In the 2015 film *Furious 7*, a gang of former street-racers-turned-international-criminals must make the choice whether to hunt or be hunted by the mysterious Deckard Shaw, a former British black ops agent hell-bent on getting revenge for the gang's capture of his younger brother (which took place in *Fast & Furious 6*). As they search for Shaw, the racers find themselves constantly on the defensive, unable to pinpoint his location or predict his actions. Luckily, the racers are contacted by Mr. Nobody, the head of a clandestine U.S. Government force. He offers them a deal: if they help him recover a hacker named Ramsey from terrorist forces, they can make use of one of Ramsey's innovative devices to find Shaw. The device in question is called God's Eye. It taps into anything and everything connected to digital networks—whether security cameras, cell phones, or databases—to instantly find anyone on Earth. It is the aptly named apotheosis of surveillance.

Nearly 300 years before the release of *Furious 7*, the bishop and philosopher George Berkeley penned his most famous work, *Three Dialogues Between Hylas and Philonous*. In it, Berkeley makes the case for what he calls immaterialism—that the objects and matter that make up physical reality exist only as collections of ideas in the minds of those who perceive them. His argument is often succinctly summarized in the Latin phrase, *esse est percipi*: to be is to be perceived. This does not mean, however, that matter outside the gaze of any human does not exist. Reality always exists, for Berkeley, because God is always watching everything, even when no one else is around.

For Berkeley, God's infinite, omniscient vision is the very ground of being. His unending perception extends throughout the world and renders it material. *Furious 7* takes up Berkeley's theories, albeit—as should be expected from a series known for its high-velocity drifting—with a few twists. Even as it eschews divinity, God's Eye portrays an apparatus and regime of surveillance that is nonetheless theological. As described by Levi Bryant, "the distinguishing mark of theology is not the presence of the supernatural or the divine, but rather that of the sovereign that overcodes all other elements of a particular social field."<sup>1</sup> Where Berkeley's God structured being solely in a phenomenological sense, God's Eye and mass surveillance additionally configure social and structural being, producing and molding subjectivities.

Most contemporary writing about surveillance give only a passing mention of sovereignty, favoring instead Foucault's notion of disciplinary society and the panopticon. If the piece is about online or networked surveillance, the common practice is to instead cite Deleuze's *Postscript to the Societies of Control*. Sovereignty, for these writers, is passé. These somewhat naive descriptions of the internet as a purely distributed—or worse, rhizomatic—network seem to severely limit the reach of sovereign power, describing instead the ways power disseminates through methods like protocol.<sup>2</sup> These theories are not incorrect, but rather incomplete. Though Foucault characterized these methods of power as always coexisting as different methods of management, stating "we should not see things as the replacement of a society of sovereignty by a society of discipline," these theories portray power as developing in a linear manner.<sup>3</sup> As a result, they gloss over the important ways in which forms of power intersect. In *A Prehistory of the Cloud*, Tung-Hui Hu offers an alternative, thinking through sovereignty, discipline, and control simultaneously, and locates a resurgence of sovereignty in cloud-based networks, that he calls "the sovereignty of data." It is precisely through the sovereignty of data that God's Eye and mass surveillance exert their power over being.

While describing the power of God's Eye to neutralize Shaw, Mr. Nobody states, "You want to know how to kill a shadow? You just shine a little light on it." Mr. Nobody's platitude here makes explicit the tie between surveillance/perception and the sovereign control over both life (being) and death. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault describes sovereignty as exercised by centralized, visible agents of power. Unlike the more diffuse disciplinary power, sovereign power is clear and observable. Importantly, sovereign power is framed in the negative, through the ability to punish subjects, prohibit practices, and ultimately take lives. It is this negative ability of sovereignty that Mr. Nobody here describes. Operating in the darkness, Shaw is unknowable, little more than a spectre haunting the racers. Once caught in the sovereign gaze of God's Eye, however, Shaw comes into being as an actually existing entity. Intrinsicly entwined with his newfound being, brought about by God's Eye, is also the possibility of his death.

Mr. Nobody's frank description of the sovereign power of God's Eye bears a remarkable similarity to a comment made by the former US Secretary of Defense, William Perry: "once you can see the target, you can expect to destroy it." Both Perry and Mr. Nobody relate perception with what Achille Mbembe has described as the ultimate expression of sovereignty: "the power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die."<sup>4</sup> Here, perception, extended through optical technologies, turns everything into a potential target. To be is to be perceived, but to be perceived is to potentially be no longer. Remote vision here becomes a mode of exercising power at a distance, a way of "looking, then projecting

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the power to kill back into the world."<sup>5</sup> It is no coincidence that this notion of war at a distance is most closely associated with the Gulf War, which is also known as the first television war. Just as God made man in his own image, the U.S. government and army molded subjects into viewers, whose gazes in turn worked alongside the sovereign power of the state.

War at a Distance, of course, now feels obsolete in a few ways. War, for example, is no longer a state of exception, but now business as usual, part and parcel of the normal operations of the state. Distance has been collapsed, and war seeps from the safety of the television screen into everyday life. As perception changes in this new context, the forms of remote seeing described by Perry develop into forms of cloud seeing. The distinctions between comrade, combatant and civilian have eroded, and sight alone cannot tell friend from foe. Instead, patterns emerge from streams of data, and information gleamed from networks concretize identities. To be is to be perceived within the cloud. Accompanying this shift from remote seeing to cloud seeing is a change in the configuration of subjectivity. Where War at a Distance produced the subject position of a viewer, Tung-Hui Hu proposes that this new form of war, "War as Big Data," produces subjects as users, active participants in the security project of the state.

As previously mentioned, Berkeley's argument is often summarized in the phrase *esse est percipi*. There is, however, an ensuing clause that is often dropped in conversations about the work: *aut percipere*. To be is to be perceived or to perceive. Being is not just something passively secured from a higher power, but also something actively produced. This active mode of being is that of the user. Maurizio Lazzarato, in his essay *Immaterial Labor*, describes a fundamental need for subjects to be active, constantly exerting their existence and making themselves visible. "One has to express oneself, one has to speak, communicate, cooperate," he writes.<sup>6</sup> This is the very subjectivity of the user, as enforced and encouraged by sovereign power.

Think of social media, which offers various platforms for interaction. Through social media, subjects (users) make themselves visible to friends, corporations, and government alike. They also take on the role of the surveillor, monitoring and perceiving others. The unifying aspect of nearly all social media, despite its many different forms, is the reification of the social. Networks of friends, acquaintances, and colleagues are made visible, and relations become crystallized into data. Though the effects of social media would commonly be seen as relating to control, instead of sovereignty, they intersect in various ways. Facebook, the most popular social media site in the world, requires that users input their legal information, and encourages them to fill their profile with as much information as possible. Instead of the kind of anonymity with which the internet was originally associated, Facebook enforces state legislation and its rigidly regulated identities. Its business—and it is first and foremost a private enterprise, despite many characterizations of it as a sort of public utility—is to mobilize information supplied by users for targeted advertising. Though ostensibly economic, instead of political, targeted marketing is necessarily entwined with the sovereign state apparatus. Tung-Hui Hu traces the origins of targeted marketing back to the geodemographics of the Eisenhower administration, born out of a need for information-based control of populations. Furthermore, most cloud-based corporations cooperate with the government, either by acquiescing to requests for data, or by selling information, such as flight records and credit data, to them through marketing databases.

Like the feeds of social media, the interfaces of the cloud are determined algorithmically. In the cloud, the algorithm often acts like God. Unseeable and opaque, the algorithm both renders the cloud visible, while simultaneously recording the actions of users. This is a mode of algorithmic perception, which renders a user's very being. In an algorithmically rendered space, to be requires one to be perceived. You are what the algorithm thinks you are. Here too, the active subjectivity of the user is drawn upon, as their actions and data help to construct and refine the algorithm. It constructs an uncanny mirror that projects an identity toward the user, which ultimately the user must embrace and embody. Much like with God, there is no existence within the cloud outside the perception of the algorithm. As Hu states, "the same algorithms that make the cloud usable are the ones that define a 'user' as that ever-growing stream of data to be analyzed and targeted. To use the cloud is to willingly put on an electronic collar; it is to fuse our hunt for data with our identities as marketing prospects. We are both the targets of others and targeters ourselves."<sup>7</sup>

*Esse est percipi aut percipere*: Berkeley's dictum, supercharged through the high-octane plot of *Furious 7* like a car on NOS, helps bring to light the conditions of being within a regime of mass surveillance. Dependent on visibility as the ground from which to emerge, being is destabilized into something more like a process of becoming. One must continually make oneself perceptible and legible in or to exist. It is a kind of being where, as Bifo might say, the soul itself is put to work. Beyond continually rendering the self perceptible, one must actively monitor others as well. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the cloud, where sovereign power intermingles with distributed networks. The omniscient gaze of

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power and the sovereignty of data converge, as a final example of sorts, in the drone. As Gregoire Chamayou states, "the drone dreams of achieving through technology a miniature equivalence to that fictional eye of God."<sup>8</sup> The aerial vision of the drone combines with algorithmic perception to exercise sovereign power from above and afar. Subjects are forcibly made visible, and individuals and networks are condensed and brought into being as targets.

A drone also appears in *Furious 7*. With the aid of God's Eye, one of Shaw's allies pilots a drone that chases the racers through the streets of Los Angeles. Despite the imbalance of power, the racers manage to defeat the drone with the help of their friend Hobbes, who drives an ambulance into the drone, destroying it completely, safe for its camera. As Hobbes approaches the drone after impact, the camera—or more accurately the eye—of the drone, swerves towards him in panic. Hobbes steps on the drone's carcass and looks directly into the eye, before shooting it twice. The shot cuts immediately to a view of the drone pilot, who, as if he had been the one shot, gasps and falls back.

<sup>1</sup> This quote is drawn from the description of his course at the New centre for Research & Practice, "Anti-Oedipus: Deleuze & Guattari Beyond the State," but Bryant elaborates this concept further both through posts on his blog and in *The Other Face of God: Lacan, Theological Structure, and the Accursed Remainder*.

<sup>2</sup> One example of this sort of literature would be Alexander Galloway's *Protocol*.

<sup>3</sup> *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France 1977-78*, 107-8

<sup>4</sup> *Necropolitics*

<sup>5</sup> Tung-Hui Hu, *A Prehistory of the Cloud*, 112

<sup>6</sup> Though the concept of immaterial labor has gained immense popularity as a way of viewing and describing the conditions of being under the cognitive and informational labor of post-fordism, Lazzarato later renounced the term (but not the concept) because this labor, though not centered around traditional modes of production, is very material. The metaphor of the Cloud functions in a similar way, masking the very real, very material backbone of seemingly weightless networked telecommunications. This material underbelly is perhaps one of the avenues through which sovereignty reemerges, since the network infrastructures, were constructed through military projects. State forces too make use of the infrastructure of the net for surveillance purposes, as "the centralization of data in the cloud enables the NSA to install optical splitters inside data centers" (Hu 69).

<sup>7</sup> *A Prehistory of the Cloud*, 111

<sup>8</sup> *A Theory of the Drone*, 37