



## Tactics of oversight: A speculation

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*Magnification. Acceleration. Contagion. Traversal.* The internet is by no means the first medium that, when new, prompts terms like these. Nor is it the first medium to give rise to a restless, negative dialectic of hope and disappointment, of utopian expansions and chastened contractions. It happened with the launch of the World Wide Web in the mid-1990s, and it happened with the tide of uprisings in the Middle East around 2010.

Every time, there is a fresh surge of what Britta Ohm calls *democracy-confidence*. New hope that the magnifications, accelerations, contagions, and traversals of media affordances will afford the marginalized and the minoritized new visibilities. The kinds of visibilities that will not just bring political recognition but also put the powerful on the hook. Because, as Nida Kirmani notes, the sort of state violence that zones of exception enable is not exactly a matter of *invisibility* but rather of a lopsided regime of visibility where “the state escapes all forms of accountability and treats the bodies of the populace as both objects of threat and fascination.” And because the lopsided regimes of visibility are classed, raced, and gendered, so too are the surges and the subsidences of democracy-confidence.

But in complex ways. A minority, one might say, is marked. Both in the sense of being particular in relation to the unmarked generality of the majority and, very often, as being pre-targeted for violence. This is why, as Mikaela Chase shows, elite, highly educated minorities like India’s Jains are so intensely ambivalent about being visible *as* a minority. On the one hand, they want to preserve and protect their particularity, especially against majority misunderstanding and suspicion. On the other hand, their “relationship to minority status remains fraught with aversion to the stigmatization of inferiority and weakness associated with it.” Such aversion can, Chase reminds us, lead a privileged minority into complicity with state violence against more vulnerable minorities.

The example of the Jains is interesting, too, because it puts a particular twist on the persistent question of the politics of visibility. Visibility can suddenly become awkward, when a minority practice – in this case *sallekhana*, or fasting to death – becomes a public scandal. But on the whole, elite minorities will often tend to

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welcome visibility, as long as their privileges are protected, whereas for more vulnerable minorities, visibility is always potentially both lifeblood and trap. But the Jain fast to death represents a limit to, an outer edge of an ascetic ethic of nonviolent withdrawal. As such, it is perhaps not only the ostensible controversy of facilitating or advocating suicide that is at issue. From the perspective of a system of hypervisibility like the contemporary mediasphere, any kind of withdrawal at all is suspect. Needless to say, as the papers in this special issue make abundantly clear, *voluntary* withdrawal from visibility – as opposed to enforced invisibility – is itself a privilege, a response that only some can afford. Every renouncer needs a sponsor, even if it is only a passing almsgiver.

Every new medium appears at first as a dematerialization of prevailing social relationships, and, for all the bold talk of progress, as a tremor in linear time. Revenants bloom unpredictably even as we are fast-tracked into the future. But is it fair to say that the internet, more than any previous medium, thrives on a fantasy of sheer virtuality? Certainly, we seem constantly to have to remind ourselves that whatever happens online cannot be understood without considering its offline complements.

Any tactics of visibility require an active calibration of the shifting relation between a medium and its living circumstance. Cinema, for all that it is a technology of mass display, still ultimately involves specific occasions of exhibition. A filmmaker like Iffat Fatima, Max Kramer writes, “constantly monitors the sensorium of her practice while traveling along with her film, fine-tuning tactics of framing through bodily co-presence.”

But one cannot travel along with one’s social media posts. That’s why, perhaps, the physical complement to digital visibility becomes that much more charged. The relation between online and offline visibility is never clear or obvious. As Carola Lorea et al. observe, “This accelerated and unprecedented visibility in cyberspace [...] does not necessarily translate into an increased visibility in the social and political public space.” Perhaps this is why a certain insistence of the physical body seems so often to accompany fleeting flashes of digital activism. Kirmani vividly conveys the affective force of online videos made by female relatives of forcibly abducted Balochi men, tearfully pleading with the Pakistani authorities for their return. But it’s as if these flashes of online intensity rest on a stable bed of immovable offline bodies alongside physical seats of power: “family members engaging in sit-ins at strategic locations, either in front of press clubs or close to government offices, holding photos of the disappeared and demanding accountability from the state.”

And yet the internet also reverses the relation between the evanescent and the durable. Flesh and blood bodies come and go, some more suddenly than others – not least in the age of the global COVID-19 pandemic, when *going viral* abruptly stopped being mainly a digital metaphor. Whereas online bodies live on, subject only to link rot. And even then, these digital avatars might not slip entirely out of sight but rather slip their virtual moorings and start popping up in entirely unexpected places.

Again, living a minoritized life means living a particular relation to the internet’s peculiar blend of anonymity and visibility, where one person’s trolling is another’s stealth protection. It seems significant that *untouchables* appear in these papers at both extreme ends of the visibility spectrum. As Dalits, they are the ones that are

historically refused and abjected – and therefore also the ones that stand to gain new recognition but perhaps also new kinds of suffering from enhanced visibility. But the dream is that visibility might produce new protections. Ohm describes “the mutation of ‘untouchability’ into a contingent state of desirability that supplanted every possible scrutiny of practiced untouchability against Dalit Muslims.” She quotes a Dalit Muslim speaking to the media: ‘Of course people are afraid [...] but usually they tend to think that if you’re famous enough they won’t touch you.’

I called this text *a speculation* partly because I wanted to give myself permission to be playfully serious. Speculation means sustained contemplation and consideration. Amid fraught visibilities, it is itself an *act of looking*. Speculation is of course also a kind of gambling, a matter of *looking so as to know when to act*. When it comes to financial markets, a responsible speculator is always supposed to do their due diligence. But when it comes to concept-work, speculation itself *is* a kind of due diligence. A sustained act of looking labour against the mechanization of concepts, against concepts defined and then deployed as anchors of meaning, even as a kind of armor. Against the fixity of definitions, higher definition seeing.

It’s hard not to feel that concepts are owed a bit more. That they are in fact due a diligence that might, speculatively – that is, by allowing them a different kind of visibility – let them breathe. As it turns out, once upon a time a *speculator* was also an occult kind of seer, someone who was able to register the yet hidden, the virtual potentialities of worlds – and therefore, given the right conditions of possibility, also of words. So in this speculative spirit, I want to consider a couple of the words that are hard at work in the framing of this collection and then introduce one of my own.

Take *precarity*, a word in busy circulation nowadays. As the editors of this collection note, to be precarious means not just to be vulnerable, not just to be living in conditions of heightened uncertainty, but more specifically to depend on *the will and pleasure of another*. To be precarious, then, implies a delicate relation to the attention and recognition of someone or something else. The Latin *precarius* points to a question of *mercy*. The *precarius* appeals to the *mercy* of another by means of *entreaty* or *prayer*. What if we considered minority tactics of visibility as a kind of entreaty or prayer, directed at a source of mercy? That source of mercy might be known, or it might be unknown. It might be a personified sovereign, a public, a divinity, or even another that is internal – or extimate – to the entreating subject. The minority entreaty is often, as democracy-confidence demands, for recognition. But it might also be more.

*Tactics*, for instance. Following Michel de Certeau’s influential distinction between strategy and tactics, we have tended to understand tactics as everyday, situated, ephemeral weapons of the weak. A close-quarters recourse of those for whom the infrastructures that would support something as far-reaching as a strategy are simply not available. But in a more general sense, a tactician is one who understands *the arts of arrangement*; they are an *adroit manager of the actions* that can turn the way things are to advantage. It’s no accident that those who are precarious are also generally skilled at the arts of arrangement, simply because being at the mercy of another means that you have every incentive to learn to pay exquisitely close attention to the affordances of the relation on which you depend. These are the affordances that come into sharp relief, for instance, whenever democracy-confidence

collapses. We could say, even, that democracy-confidence is the oft-disappointed belief that the arts of arrangement will not be necessary.

Perhaps the tactician is the dialectical double of the speculator. All tactics, all arts of arrangement, are speculative; they always involve a wager on what, of anything, might emerge. And all speculation is tactical. Not just in the sense that to speculate is to take a position on a tactical wager. Also in the sense that the kind of deep seeing that I am trying to retrieve from *speculation* involves a finely attuned sense to the hitherto hidden (virtual) affordances of an art of arrangement.

And so we arrive at the term to which I'd like to devote some speculative due diligence: *oversight*. What is *oversight* in the age of digital visibility? Might we speak of tactics of oversight much as the editors of this special issue speak of tactics of visibility? Oversight is a contronym, a Janus word; it's a dialectical word that contains its own contradiction. Oversight means both seeing everything and not seeing everything, missing something. What follows is a speculation in four acts.

**Oversight 1** *Surveillance* literally means oversight. *Surveillance* travels from French to English in the 1790s in the wake of the Revolutionary Terror, when municipal surveillance committees were formed to keep a watch on suspect people and their tactics. Today we are supposed to feel alarmed about *surveillance capitalism*, but panoptical metaphors don't really work anymore. This is a tricky point, because it can certainly often feel as if the eyes of the state via Big Tech are everywhere. Kirmani quotes an interlocutor in Balochistan: "I know that they must have software, they know who is doing what. I can't rule out that they are watching me, you, and everyone, and they know what we are doing. They keep an eye on everything... Social media is dangerous for the activists who are using it."

But there is nothing homogenous or smooth about this surveillance. This is not an evenly distributed gaze. Rather we have sudden and unpredictable lurches between inattention and too much attention. One minute no one's there, or perhaps you're being 'seen' – whatever that means when the observer is a machine. The next the Prime Minister calls you personally, as in the story that Kirmani tells of Haseeba Qamrani, whose brother and cousin were abducted by the Pakistani security forces. In the age of digital visibility, perhaps this queasy sense of disproportion applies to both sides of the power relation, although certainly not evenly so. For is it not the case that, by means of social media, 'the people' also sometimes intrude on the state uncomfortably and unpredictably, refusing to remain the kind of abstract 'population' that the impersonal work of governmentality desires?

*I know they must have software, they know who is doing what.* But the relation between the two parts of this statement aren't clear these days. Because what kind of 'knowing' is involved when software is doing the 'seeing'? What kind of translation between data points and oversight is happening here? The question isn't even just at what level of resolution one is being observed. It becomes an *ontological* problem: as *what kind of thing* am I being seen– name, biodata, vital statistics, clusters of clicks, a blip on a graph? And what does 'seeing' mean when

we don't know what or who is watching and what kinds of objects the watcher – machine and/or human – is looking for or even capable of recognizing?

Of course, Michel Foucault's point about Jeremy Bentham's panoptic prison design was that it, too, was a machine; the prisoners in the circle of cells would internalize the sense of being watched, whether or not anyone was in the central tower at any given time. But digital oversight is different: you can be pretty sure that some kind of watching is happening, but it's hard to know what kind of seeing that watcher is capable of or oriented toward. *Can* it have oversight? Here, again, democracy-confidence, insofar as it depends on *recognition*, is likely to wobble, since this seeing is in no reliable sense a scene of intersubjectivity.

**Oversight 2** How about oversight as a *seeing that is more than seeing*, that goes beyond what we typically mean by *vision*? During their discussion of the sensory registers of Matua ritual, a Dalit religious practice, Carola Lorea et al. are led to ask “how the visual itself may already be an impoverishment to certain political articulations.” What happens, they ask, to sonic-haptic religious and/or political practices when they go online and have to adapt to the ocular-centric modality of a Zoom meeting, a Skype call, or a prerecorded video?

For one thing, we should be careful not to naturalize a sensory ideology that believes that seeing is always a distancing sense as opposed to, say, the presumed proximities of touch. The gendering of these modalities is clear enough in the Matua example, as in so many other settings. Online visibility tends to privilege men in these ritual settings, partly because men are more likely to control smart phones and computers, and partly because online visibility puts complicated pressure on patriarchal expectations of women's public modesty.

But as Lorea et al. note, the predominantly visual register of online ritual also enjoys an elective affinity with mainstream Hindu devotional seeing, *darsana*, thus further disadvantaging a Dalit practice that isn't primarily ocular, but rather premised on “salvific sound and collective displays of touchability.” That said, the invocation of darsanic devotional seeing is also a useful reminder that seeing itself can be a deeply participatory, even haptic sensory register – a seeing that is more than seeing. This isn't just a South Asian thing, although we do have many accounts of televisions becoming devotional objects during the screening of mythological epics in that part of the world. Similarly, televangelists in the Global North have been known, long before the pandemic, to encourage their devotees at home to reach out and touch faith by touching their screens.

We might, then, imagine this version of oversight as synaesthetic seeing, a seeing that, consciously or unconsciously, always involves traces or specters of other senses, even when what is ostensibly happening is a reduction to ‘mere’ vision. Consciously, we might understand ourselves to be suffering “touch starvation” (Pierce in Lorea et al.), especially during times of enforced Zoomification. And the phenomenal shift is real, to be sure. But just as Henri Bergson preferred to think of encountering an image less as a matter of perception than as a kind of

*attentive recognition*, so a complex sensorial archive is always at work even in the seemingly narrowest channels.

**Oversight 3** Oversight as what is *overlooked* – or, better, actively *unseen*. Every order of visibility presumes zones of invisibility. But it's also a question of who sees what and when. And how much work goes into not just keeping certain people, places, and practices out of sight, but also the labour of seeing two conflicting realities at the same time.

This kind of oversight – oversight as overlooking or unseeing – is how ideology works. How reality doesn't have to be consistent. How it doesn't collapse in the face of contradictory evidence. Take Ohm's interlocutor Seema in Patna who, as a Muslim, appears to believe in the Narendra Modi government's propaganda about "Gujarat being a good place for Muslims now." At the same time Seema is quite willing to accept as valid Ohm's own eyewitness testimony that things in Gujarat are in fact quite different on the ground. Overseeing here isn't just overlooking evidence to the contrary as if it didn't exist, as if you were pretending it wasn't real. Rather, it takes what doesn't fit, acknowledges it, and somehow incorporates it as unproblematically compatible with what you already want to see and believe about the world.

**Oversight 4** is a kind of *supervalent seeing*, and in that sense the counterpart to oversight 3. Where oversight 3 overlooks to unsee – which, again, is not at all the same thing as not seeing – oversight 4, *supervalent seeing*, emphasizes the *over* in overseeing. A capacity to see what isn't *yet* there but could be there. A virtual seeing, a sense for incipience. But also a seeing in which the sources of its intensity – its *insight* – are concealed even from the seer, and which therefore requires the training of particular qualities of attention to *what arrives* on the scene of visibility.

Oversight in this *supervalent* sense can be paranoid, a seeing *too much*, a constant conviction that things are more than they seem to be. OK, OK, sometimes a pipe *is* just a pipe, but at the same time there's always more to things than meets the eye. Not that what matters is necessarily deliberately hidden or obscure, more that as yet it only exists potentially, as a plausible/fanciful affordance of what is plainly visible. Just because you're paranoid...doesn't mean that the signs aren't there.

In Shakespearean times, 'overlooking' could imply a sinister activating capacity, the ability to inflict the evil eye. Nowadays, 'the people' and 'the population' are the objects of routine surveillance by those in power. But in this age of hypervisibility, rulers too cannot do without spectacle, without constant self-staging. And is it not the one who constantly thrusts themselves onto the public view, the one who is perhaps addicted to visibility, who has the most to fear from the evil eye? One imagines – why not? – an anxious prickling of the tyrant's scalp as the spectral breeze of visibility whispers by. Then again, these days social media try to make visibility-junkies of all of us. Amassing 'likes' is a far cry from securing recognition. Or is it? In any case, it's always dangerous to overlook the overlooking of the evil eye.

Overseeing in the supervalent sense I'm pursuing here can also be creative, even utopian. Kirmani draws on Carlson and Frazer's work on indigenous Australian social media use: "an affective politics of hope for an otherwise marginalized group – an opportunity to imagine a different kind of future." What gives this hope its affective charge? Perhaps precisely this supervalent capacity of overseeing, of sensing the so far virtual potentialities embedded in the world that is to become otherwise. This is the other side of overlooking as casting the evil eye: gathering the forces that are latent in a visible circumstance and channeling them not into anxiety and misfortune, but rather into a prefiguration of the world one desires. This is also what collective ritual ecstasy can enable: a shaking loose of the boundaries of settled selves, a crowd-ed permeability to the reality of worlds that are on the cusp of becoming. Lorea et al. describe a scene of Matua collective effervescence as a gateway to transformation: "loud musical performances, thunderous drums, mutual hugging, collective crying, and visceral collective dance" leading to "an altered state of consciousness, termed as the highest state of meditation."

One might get carried away – it's potent stuff. But there's always the dismal business of *communicative capitalism* to bring us down to earth with a thud. Then again, that's exactly the problem: that we tend to imagine anything with the word 'capitalism' attached to it as a zone of constraint, determination, and fixity as against the utopian horizons of transformative seeing. But doesn't communicative capitalism, the capitalization of experience, work through the same incitements and containments as more 'creative' forms of overseeing? Doesn't the attempted commodification and branding of identity grapple with the same lively energies, the same volatile affects, as the countermagics we might try to mobilize against it?

*Magnification. Acceleration. Contagion. Traversal.* Sure, things have speeded up, although velocity is always relative to expectation, experience, and attention. A thousand transformations can happen in the blink of an eye if you know how to look. Tactics as *the art of arrangement* goes hand in hand with being skilled in speculation as an *art of attention*. If anything, it's here that communicative capitalism is dangerous. Not so much in its capacity to enclose experience for profit – experience always exceeds any fences you put around it; if nothing else, the unconscious will take care of that – but rather in the sheer clutter and noise of its active attack on the arts of attention.

I'm suspicious of the whole narrative about a supposed *decline of symbolic efficacy* – as if there was a time in the past, in another world, where we could be sure about what things meant, and signifiers reliably did the work that we expected of them. This is the same kind of thinking that presumes that people used to live stable, traditional lives but nowadays all that once was solid has melted into air and we are left clinging to freely circulating fragments of meaning.

No, things were always unstable, although in some times and places it has been easier to unsee it, to imagine that all the evidence doesn't unseat the fantasy of a fixed reality. Meaning has always been a gamble – which is to say a fertile field of speculative overseeing. Why else would the natural magicians of past centuries, not to mention the Church, have expended so much time and energy trying to stabilize it in the form of tables and charts of cosmic correspondences and sacred orders? Mistaking these tables and charts for the way people in centuries past actually

experienced the world is like confusing the confident ideological discourse of the ‘science’ of marketing and consumer behaviour for the always-experimental games of incitement and containment that comprise actually existing publicity.

So when we speak of ‘capture’ we should not imagine it as an appropriation that fixes or contains visibility or meaning. It is certainly true that communicative capitalism is always trying to find ways to *capitalize* capture. But the routinization and repetition of the patterns of oversight that make such capitalization imaginable is always at odds with its own purpose. Every magic spell exhausts itself, insofar as it tries to deny that its efficacy depends on powers and potentialities that exceed its script. Powers of magnification, acceleration, contagion, and traversal.

There’s no denying that stereotypes, commercial or political, can be durable and powerful. Schaflechner calls it “affectivism”: the mobilization of stereotypes, “sedimented frames of identity,” as a tactic of visibility. But I would argue that the durability and power – yes, the “affectivity” – of such sedimented frames of identity depend less on a stabilization of meaning than on an organization of collective anxiety. The key lies less in convincing everyone that x group has y appalling characteristics – after all, there is always plenty of evidence to the contrary. Rather, the key lies in presenting stereotyped images as the medium through which a simmering anxiety about imminent catastrophe – often for very real underlying reasons – can appear to be at once activated and contained in and by those stereotyped images. If in fact such sedimented frames of identity *were* about the successful stabilization of meaning, then there would be no need for the paranoid and hyperviolent ‘acting out’ – riots, pogroms etc. – that typically punctuates any politics that thrives on racial, ethnic, or communitarian stereotypes.

It’s all too understandable that, faced with a constant threat of violence, one might assume a habitual posture of defensive hypervigilance, of scanning the horizon for incoming disasters. I write this as the Palestinians of Gaza are suffering through what increasingly looks like a campaign of total obliteration. It’s easy to feel that any speculative talk of visibilities at a time like this is an indulgence, perhaps even unethical. And it’s hard to understand how the flood of images coming out of this latest catastrophe seems to have no power to stem the tide of mass murder.

But is not this impasse, too, part of what the war machine depends on? Is it not our duty to sustain whatever tactics of oversight we can – actively and experimentally – so that when this crime finally exhausts itself, nothing will be overlooked?

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