Surveillance, the Death of God, and the Desire for Recognition:

This article is pure speculation, in which I hope to link human consciousness, the rise of technology as a mode of metaphysical nihilism, and the Death of God as a wildly premature event; in it I intend to utilise a model of self-consciousness that was originally proposed by the philosopher GWF Hegel in 1807 in order to trace the trajectory of my argument. To do this I will broadly draw upon three philosophers to make my case: Hegel, as mentioned, Michel Foucault, and Martin Heidegger. Hegel is an interesting philosopher to think through this issue because from his perspective of the self's relation to the other surveillance could never be a simple case of domination of one over the other, but will always contain within itself the opposite movement. Thus the dominator, for Hegel, through relying for his or her identity as a dominator upon a dominated other is intimately bound up with the one he or she oppresses. Foucault also, does not understand surveillance to be a simple top-down example of power relations, but rather analyses historical texts to reveal power as operating through surveillance at various levels of discourse. Heidegger, who I use sparingly, provides a way of linking metaphysics with the rise of technology as the last gasp of nihilism. Thus for Heidegger, the so-called Death of God as a moment in metaphysics is revealed for what it is in the technological society.

In this article I would also like to draw attention to the non-visual aspects of the way surveillance, which literally means 'super-vision' exceeds the visual in which it is grounded. So, surveillance is not just the continuous visual gaze directed at human affairs whether through CCTV, or the media, but also constitutes the mass of information gathering through official checks, opinion polls, Twitter, and Facebook updates, even to the very workings of democratic politics. Surveillance is the constant and total exposure of selves

before a fundamentally all-pervasive gaze. In this regard, Youtube, Facebook and Twitter are merely the recent computerisation of that gaze, to the extent that to resist such self-exposure, is felt to be a repression, as Foucault likewise pointed out about the culture of confession.[1] Facebook, in particular, anecdotally seems to provide a sort of ontological guarantee that a Good Time was had by all, with people taking pictures of themselves at various gatherings with the express purpose of posting them on their 'wall': if it can be seen by others on Facebook then the Good Time can achieve an aura of authenticity. Insofar as social reality is sustained in part by common consent there is a kind of queasy anxiety that if the Good Time isn't acknowledged through being seen then it somehow lacks reality.

The purpose of this article is to explore then the idea of the Death of God through the lens of the much-contested Hegelian desire for recognition, the Heiderggerian understanding of technology, and the internalised surveillance in Foucault's analysis of post 18th Century Western Europe. 'God is dead,' wrote Nietzsche, 'God remains dead. And we have killed him. How shall we comfort ourselves, the murderers of all murderers?'[2] Of course, Nietzsche did not mean that there was a God who had actually died; but rather that belief in both the Christian God and Christian morality was no longer possible, and that we must live out the full consequences of that impossibility or risk slipping into a form of idiotic secularist atheism that Nietzsche despised. Nietzsche recognised how much colder the world now seemed shorn of any metaphysical foundation. While the process that Nietzsche drew his readers' attention too over a hundred years ago has undoubtedly increased with secularisation, I would tentatively suggest though that reports of God's death have been greatly exaggerated. Indeed, if one accepts the philosopher Martin Heidegger's thesis that modern technology is the endgame of a metaphysical nihilism that has held sway since at

1 Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: The Will to Knowledge*, (London: Penguin Books, 1998), 60.
2 Nietzche, F., *The Gay Science*, ed. Williams, B., trans. Nauckhoff, J., (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 120.

least Plato, then one can also conclude that the surveillance society is the mechanised resurrection of the God we thought was dead. Nihilism for Heidegger is the coming to fruition of the will to power implicit in all western metaphysics, made explicit in Nietzsche, but in the modern world it is revealed most clearly in technological domination of humanity and nature, turning everything and everyone into standing reserve or resource.[3] At the risk of simplifying his thought, for Heidegger, the transformation (or enframing) of all reality into standing reserve radically limits how Being (*is*-ness) can manifest, in that the more the world opens up as resource the less it can open up as anything else; thus the *is*-ness of things recedes from humanity accordingly. It does not limit Being or beings as such, it limits us as those to whom Being reveals itself. Indeed, this enframing is not reducible to the cogs and engines of actual technology, but rather is inherent in the whole bent of Western metaphysics. He writes:

> The threat to man does not come in the first instance from the potentially lethal machines and apparatus of technology. The actual threat has already afflicted man in his essence. The rule of enframing threatens man with the possibility that it could be denied to him to enter into a more original revealing and hence to experience the call of a more primal truth.[4]

For Heidegger, in enframing even God becomes a mere thing for philosophers and theologians to ponder and represent as an intellectually graspable 'first cause' of all that is.[5] The so-called Death of God, though, within this framework becomes just another movement within the will to power, another mode of revealing that will: and thus God's death allows for that will to take a new form, to incarnate itself within reality as technological domination. In psychoanalytic terms one could say that surveillance is the return of the repressed in an even

3 Inwood, M., *Heidegger Dictionary*, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Inc., 1999), 142.
4 Heidegger, M., "*The Question Concerning Technology"*, in *Basic Writings*, ed. Krell, D. F., (New York: Harper Perennial, 2008), 333.
5 Heidegger, "*The Question*," 332.

more neurotic form which, in this case, is the return of the metaphysical God as the will to power through the technological surveillance of everything.

That is not to suggest that the rise of the surveillance society is directly or indirectly linked to the so-called Death of God proclaimed by Nietzsche, who drew no clearly defined distinction between the Christian God and the God of the philosophers. That is, even without the 'Nietzschean Event', surveillance would no doubt have occurred in one form or another, in that, dead or alive, the metaphysical God associated with technological domination by Heidegger tended toward the same propensity. What is being proposed, via Hegel, is that one of the many possible meanings to be discerned in the rise of surveillance is a highly technological replacement of the God who is absent, and whose absence creates positive effects in Western society at large. That is, if one takes it as a given that humanity as a species both wants to be seen, and to be seen to be being seen, then Hegel's account of consciousness offers a perspective on both what it means to be seen and why. For my purposes I have adapted the narrative Hegel proposes in his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, not to be disingenuous, I hope, but to make room for what seems to me to be implicit in the text.

For Hegel, the self as a consciousness emerges only in relation to an Other. He writes, '*Self-consciousness achieves its satisfaction only in another self-consciousness.*'[6] Here "other-ness" is inscribed at the heart of the self. This means that without an Other the self is internally alienated, adrift in its own lack. Hypothetically, prior to such a relation the self is everything. Eventually, though, it encounters resistance in external objects, which in their otherness represent a threat, because the external object suggests a lack in the self's own sense of self-sufficiency. This lack is felt as desire. For philosopher, Judith Butler, the

6 Hegel, G. W., *Phenomenology of Spirit*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 110.

Hegelian concept of desire is '…the incessant human effort to overcome external differences, a project to become a self-sufficient subject for whom all things apparently different finally emerge as immanent features of the subject itself.'[7] This lack renders the self dependent upon the object, which it attempts to overcome through negating the object that it has encountered. The desire to negate, and the self-certainty it hopes to achieve in negating the object are both seen here to be dependent upon the object that it wants to destroy. Thus, the struggle to overcome further strengthens the otherness and lack at the heart of the self, in that to begin the process of negating and overcoming one must first encounter that which must be negated and overcome. So, one can say along with Hegel, that 'self-certainty comes from overcoming this other: [but] in order for this overcoming to take place, there must be this other.'[8] Once this is realised, the self attempts to claim back from the object a sufficiency through being recognised by the object as self-sufficient. Through being recognised by the object the self hopes to internalise the object's recognition. In order for this to occur the object must also be (or become) a consciousness from whom recognition is possible. Thus the self and the object meet one another as two separate but equal consciousnesses in a battle for recognition. And so they fight. The movement whereby it is only through the other that the self can achieve self-certainty is devastating, leading the self to seek the other's death.

Eventually, one must win, and through this, as Hegel says, '[t]hey *recognise* themselves as mutually recognising each other.'[9] Recognition is gained by the self from the loser, he becomes the master, and the loser his slave. The twist is that the recognition the master achieves is one that comes from a loser-consciousness, which is then internalised in the master. '[T]he outcome,' Hegel writes, 'is a recognition that is one-sided and unequal.'[10]

7 Butler, J., *Subjects of Desire*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), 6.
8 Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 109.
9 Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 112.
10 Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 116.

That is, his self-sufficiency is assured through recognition, but it is assured on the basis of a servile consciousness. The truth of the master's self-certainty is, ironically, dependency; the dependency on himself that he has imposed upon the slave and other "things". This inversion has the same effect for the slave, for whom the truth of his self-consciousness is based upon the master, 'having', as Hegel writes, '[the master] for its essential reality; hence the *truth* for it is the independent consciousness that is *for itself*.'[11] In other words, *you are what – or who - you recognise yourself being recognised by*. The loser, meanwhile, labours for the master to satisfy all his needs, while the master enjoys the material benefits. It is through the work the loser does with his hands that he encounters objects in the world which are independent of both his consciousness and the consciousness of the master. Through working with these independent objects the loser achieves a new kind of independence from which the master is alienated because he is totally dependent upon the loser for all his needs. In this way, the loser achieves through the independent objects a more secure self-sufficiency than the master, and the process ends, says Hegel, if and when the master and the slave are able to meet one another as equals.

In the terms of this article, one can say that central to the concept of self-consciousness as Hegel describes it is the desire to be recognised by an Other in order to provide for the self an ontological guarantee that one is in fact real. Outside of this recognition the only alternative for the self is a form of arid solipsism that knows neither lack nor desire. For Hegel it is only the existence of the other that grounds the self as real for itself. Central to this idea is that in order to have a guarantee for its own self-existence, the self must struggle manfully to glean recognition from the other, which also struggles likewise for recognition. Thus, without the other, without God, the self can no longer claim self-certainty for itself, because its self-

11 Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 117.

certainty was only guaranteed upon the existence of an ultimate Other to be overcome. God, in this scheme, is the concept of the other pushed to its absolute limit;[12] that is, an absolute other grounding the reality of the human self caught within his all-seeing gaze. The Death of God can certainly be seen in this regard as part of the on-going movement whereby humanity historically struggles to ground itself as ontologically real; first through submitting to a metaphysical deity or deities, then through its engagement with material reality in scientific endeavours banishing this God as a source of self-sufficiency. We are, of course, treading here the well-worn path of the conversion of Greek philosophy into Christian theology, of later medieval scholasticism, the development of natural philosophy (science), and the final rise of calculative reasoning in the Enlightenment in which human ascendancy over the ultimate Other of theology/philosophy became a serious possibility. It is because of the dilemma that the contemporary absence of God presents that the self must create a new Other to be an Other for it, and open the door for lack and desire to return. To quote Voltaire – no doubt out of context – 'If God did not exist, we would have to invent Him.' In the present context, one can say that if the supreme other God is dead, then another other must be invented to take his place, to guarantee human self-certainty. And so we arrive at the stage in which humanity finds satisfaction in its material engagement, the modern, disenchanted scientific age. Objects in the world cannot, however, return our gaze, cannot recognise us, and cannot ground us as ontologically real, no matter how much we know about them. Or so it at first seemed. The final part of the parable, I would suggest, needs further investigation.

An historical thread of some importance begins in 17th Century France, where the power of the French State under Louis XIV to amass for itself technologies of information gathering

12 Sartre, J., *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Barnes, H., (London: Methuen, 1969), 266. Sartre says this in reference to two Kafka's stories, *The Trial*, and *The Castle*.

dramatically increased.[13] State institutions such as army and prisons began to take on the clockwork rhythms of surveillance prevalent at the court of the Sun King.[14] Not that information gathering was new, but rather that the depth and scope of that gathering intensified as the role of the state changed and enlarged in people's lives. In this regard, Louis's government, whilst relying heavily on discourses of power and knowledge within the Catholic Church, drew upon and extended the reach of that power and knowledge. For Foucault, a new type of man emerged under the auspices of the kind of gaze directed at it, one submissive and pliable to the authorities. Also, and not unrelated, for Foucault the Enlightenment project of an exalted Reason had cultural and political ramifications, creating in its wake the species of "Man-the-Machine" as an analysable man who is also a manipulable man. He writes: '*The great book of Man-the-Machine was written simultaneously on two registers*: the anatomical-metaphysical register, of which Descartes wrote the first pages and which the physicians and philosophers contrived, and the techno-political register…'[15] For Foucault the pinnacle of Enlightenment surveillance was epitomised by Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon, a prison building designed to expose the prisoners to an ever-present gaze which could never be returned. The more such intense surveillance was internalised in society at large the less necessary it became to have displays of power as public spectacle.

This represented in part the final touches to an ancient Christian attempt to drag the secrets of men's souls from their bodies to make them acceptable before God. Such was the power of this discourse of confession that to not expose oneself to scrutiny became felt as a burden that only more exposure could possibly overcome. In modernity, however, the rise of the State as an apparatus of power blurred the secular/ecclesiastical distinction, and then absorbed it

13 Jay, M., *Downcast Eyes*, (London: University of California Press, Ltd., 1994), 88.
14 Jay, *Downcast*, 409-410.
15 Foucault, M., *Discipline and Punish*, (New York: Random House, 1995), 136.

entirely. More recently the proliferation of salacious confessions takes over from where the old Church Father's left off.

Feeding into these developments was the incredible technical proficiency of artists from the Renaissance onwards to represent reality in precise if ideologically bound detail. Culturally and politically the centre of the visible was moving from the spiritual realm to the secular, forming what Heidegger was later to call a world picture of reality in which what could be known was categorised to the nth degree, and known only through being so categorised. Cumulatively, around the time of the enlightenment, in which an ocularcentric idea of reason as universal truth took centre stage, history entered into what Foucault called the 'empire of the gaze'.[16] Rejecting the godlike ideal spectator of Cartesian imaginings, the new vision constituted for Foucault an epistemic field of knowledge, placing humanity in the uneasy position of ideal observer and the docile observed.[17] Further to this, the Enlightenment break with previous modes of knowledge, in which there was an essential unity of sign and signified in language, unleashed, according to Martin Jay, vision as the principle mode of knowledge acquisition.[18] It is not surprising to note, then, that photography was to be developed largely in early 19th Century France. If one follows the logic of the development of consciousness that has been presented here what seems to be suggested is that the next step in metaphysical nihilism to be taken in the technological realm is the coming to self-consciousness of the network of surveillance we inhabit.

There have also been developments in other areas not obviously related, but which together form a similar trajectory. I would suggest that both the development of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and the rise of technological surveillance in society are of a piece when seen through a

16 Foucault, *Discipline*, 39.
17 Jay, *Downcast*, 393.
18 Jay, *Downcast*, 403.

Hegelian reading of the Death of God. In this sense, AI represents a very ancient attempt to create artificial life that continues to be sought by the present day scientific successors of alchemists and magicians, from Ovid's *Pygmalion*, to the Jewish golem, and Frankenstein's monster. For Heidegger, AI would almost certainly be a particularly sinister development in the technological will to power as metaphysical nihilism.

In distinction from these myths, modern AI can be defined as the attempt via sophisticated experimentation to instantiate the Cartesian *cogito* within a mechanised object, be it a computer or a robot. AI is, then, but one secular strand of a complex series of occult-scientific threads which increasingly viewed humanity, and the whole cosmos, in a mechanised way. Philosopher Richard Tarnas writes:

> The great irony suggested here of course is that it is just when the modern mind believes it has most fully purified itself from any anthropomorphic projections, when it actively construes the world as unconscious, mechanistic, and impersonal, it is just then that the world is most completely a selective construct of the human mind. The human mind has abstracted from the whole all conscious intelligence and purpose and meaning, and claimed these exclusively for itself, and then projected onto the world a machine. As Rupert Sheldrake has pointed out, this is the ultimate anthropomorphic projection: a man-made machine, something not in fact ever found in nature. From this perspective, it is the modern mind's own impersonal soul-lessness that has been projected from within onto the world - or, to be more precise, that has been projectively elicited from the world.[19]

19 Tarnas, R., *The Passion of the Western Mind*, (New York: Random House, 1991), 432.

Butler's definition of Hegelian desire as the overcoming of external differences in order to render those differences as essentially aspects of the subject can be seen to be at play here in the mechanisation of reality. The soul-lessness would itself, according to the dialectic of consciousness, be the truth of humanity as it stands without an Other to ground it, which it then projects onto reality. Humanity's own inauthenticity before itself returns as the "truth" of reality, which can be seen here to be humanity's own inhuman reflection. Heidegger's prediction that under an enframing regime man will fall under the final and decisive delusion that everywhere and always he will only ever encounter himself, reaches here its grisly consummation.[20] From this perspective, the only truth that can be revealed about humanity is precisely the genetically mechanistic account of biological reductionism: i.e., humanity is merely the mechanism for the replication of immortal genes that govern all our behaviour – even the belief about our own freedom. The Death of God, the projection of soul-lessness onto nature, and the attempt to reinstate a totalising mechanical gaze to satisfy the desire for recognition can all be seen to be of a piece with human subjectivity once the means for this development came into being through science. In 2000 Arthur C Clarke published with Stephen Baxter a story, *The Light of Other Days*, with about a near future in which reality, past, present, and future, became accessible to everybody before a technological gaze. In a world before Twitter revelations, Google Earth, Wiki-Leaks, and Facebook updates, Clarke's novel seems to have been prescient in its predictions. What is revealed here is the multifarious nature of surveillance in the way it disseminates power, in that neither national law nor the State are free from exposure.

Without a metaphysical foundation it is likely that Artificial intelligence would have remained at the mythical level. It is significant though that insofar as humanity secures for

20 Heidegger, "*The Question*," 332.

itself an ontological guarantee in the existence of a metaphysical God AI and technological surveillance finds its feet in a philosophical tradition that gradually replaced the reality with a machine. That machine is humanity's own inhumanity reflected back at itself and posited as an absolute Other. Following Hegel's account of self-consciousness, Foucault's analysis of surveillance, and Heidegger's understanding of metaphysics, through modern surveillance and the development of AI we have the flowering of nihilism and the mechanical incarnation of the God who seemed to Nietzsche to be very much dead, but who watches us now from every conceivable angle.

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