

Editorial: Cunning Within, and Not Before

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The *Musée de la Chasse et de la Nature* in Paris is devoted to the seemingly recondite study of the relation between humans and the natural world, as mediated through the practice of hunting. In a recent exhibition, *Sur la Piste des Vivants* (On the Trail of the Living), a selection of artists were invited to investigate issues surrounding conservation of the forest in the Ardennes region, which is experiencing desertification as a result of the impacts of man-made climate change. Bruno Latour, in his foreword to the exhibition, praises the practices of “tracking”, “capturing”, “trailing”, and “scouring”, which such a project encourages, as a way of breaking down certain barriers between the human and the natural. We are, Latour argues, generally encouraged to survey “nature” from beyond it, to see it as something “out there”, something to which we might have only a glancing, minor form of access. By contrast, “following the animal’s tracks together with the ecologists, farmers and hunters, manifesting their specific ways of viewing the territory, and holding onto it, the artists [give] rise to another perspective on the landscape: not anymore being in front of, but rather within” (Latour, 2017).

In his classic essay *Clues: Roots of an Evidential Paradigm*, Carlo Ginzburg (2013, pp. 87-113) refers to the form of knowledge deriving from tracking and hunting as a “venatic” knowledge. For Ginzburg, it is through the development of hunterly intuition that humans developed the capacity for semiotic manipulations; for Ginzburg “[t]he hunter would have been the first to ‘tell a story’ because he alone was able to read, in the silent, nearly imperceptible tracks left by his prey, a coherent sequence of events” (2013, p. 93). For Ginzburg this capacity for metonymy, and for an instinctual, inductive cunning, retains a popular, democratic character, and is a form of knowledge and of reasoning which he ranges against the lumbering idiocies of abstract thought, which he identifies with the state, and with authoritarian power. Ginzburg identifies a breadth of examples of the binary between abstract and venatic knowledge across the breadth of the Western *logos*, such as between the idealist Realism of Plato and his proto-Fascistic Republic, and the careful attention to symptoms of the celebrated Athenian physican Alcmeon; between the “anthropocentric and anti-anthropomorphic” physics of Galileo, and his contemporary, the physician who “hazarded diagnoses by placing his ear on wheezy chests or by sniffing at feces and tasting urine” (2013, p. 98).

Ginzburg’s analysis can be seen to take up Marcel Detienne and Jean-Pierre Vernant’s (1991) celebrated account of the place of cunning intelligence, or *Mētis*, in Ancient Greek society. Detienne and Vernant consider the importance of the qualities of induction, speed and resilience, which were so prized as the province of the doctor, the fisherman, the sophist. These are the qualities, of course, which were rejected by Plato and the central tendency of Western metaphysics which followed him. This tradition founded itself upon the stable ground of Reason and rejected the *mētis* as too unreliable, too suspect a foundation upon which to build reliable knowledge about the world or our being within it. This “othering” of the *mētis* under the Western *logos* has been redressed from a range of positions, in works by Sarah Kofman (1983), Gilbert Simondon (2014; see also Mellamphy, 2015), Donna Haraway (1987), François Jullien (2004), and perhaps most famously in Michel de Certeau’s (1984) rehabilitation of the knowledge and practices of the walker. The

walker, in a technocratic and nihilistic age of the “non-place” (Augé, 2012), ensures that beneath the “discourses that ideologize the city, the ruses and combinations of powers that have no readable identity proliferate; without points where one can take hold of them, without rational transparency, they are impossible to administer” (1984, p. 95).

These classic accounts of the value of cunning point to its utility for negotiating our current situation, of drawing upon and deploying a marginalised folk knowledge, the better to undo the verities and certainties of majoritarian forms of knowledge and domination. The mētīc is a form of knowledge which rejects abstraction and detachment and emphasises the ephemeral, the contingent, the capacity to undo and elide the ultimate disclosure, the final revelation. The articles in this special issue seek to explore the contemporary value of cunning as a way of being and knowing the world in an age of technoscience and digital networks. These articles examine the capacity of cunning to offer a way of escaping the grip of technorationalism and hypercapitalist exploitation. The writers examine what it is that separates cunning from other dispositions or ways of comporting oneself and one’s body within contemporary media ecologies and before the technological gaze.

In his contribution to this special issue, *Mētīc Action in Digital Culture*, Martin Zeilinger argues for the mētīc’s capacity for resistance to the destructive systems of modern globalised capital. Through a critically engaged reading especially of post-autonomist currents of Marxist theories of the technical relation, Zeilinger argues that while there have been committed attempts on the behalf of globalised capital to recuperate the adaptability and resilient aspects of cunning in order to reinforce capital’s own adaptability and resilience, the mētīc nevertheless retains the capacity to resist foreclosure and incorporation into the tools of modern technocratic and biopolitical domination. Capitalism has always relied upon the nous of its workers in order to further technical innovation, and Zeilinger argues that it is this reliance which represents an Achilles heel – “In order to remain knowledge (in other words, in order to remain useful to capital), invention-power must inevitably retain some of its autonomy; therefore, it also retains some of its capacity for becoming resistant, mētīc action” (p. 19). The mētīc’s quality of always “coming to be” means that it resists enclosure or standardisation, such that “[m]ētīc action exists in a perpetual state of becoming-resistant. It does not aspire to an ultimate Yes! or No!, but, rather, advances with a Boolean True – therein lies its success: it exists, it works, it struggles, even when it takes one step forward and two steps back” (p. 21).

In “*A Way of Life That is Not Entirely Unfortunate*”: *The Peripheral Cunning of Chronic Pain*, Vyshali Manivannan explores the embodied realities of the modern subject within a medical sphere predicated upon abstraction. Manivannan gives a compelling account of the significance of cunning as a means of negotiating the anatomo-clinical gaze by sufferers of fibromyalgia, a form of chronic pain which does not “signify” in the way expected of disease. In *The Birth of the Clinic*, Michel Foucault (1973) argued that the key question of modern clinical interrogation had shifted from “What is the matter with you” to “Where does it hurt?” (xxvi), reflecting a new understanding of disease as that which can be precisely situated within a body understood as a transparent semantic space. Because the fibromyalgic cannot give any simple answer to this question, “she must employ a multisensory peripheral cunning to intuit sensory expectations of how pain should appear and, accordingly, believably, perform the authentic experience of pain she stands accused of faking” (p.

24). Manivannan analyses these performances as pointing towards the potential for revealing the arbitrary and reductive spatial bias of modern clinical diagnosis, “[revealing] to the medical gaze how our bodies are physically random and mechanically disordered” (p. 35), and thus pointing towards the potential to develop new ways of understanding and working through pain which “feel and express both pain and numbness with contextual overtones that dissolve binaries like stoic/weak, masculine/feminine, caring/apathetic” (p. 36).

Other contributors to the volume have developed upon de Certeau’s theory of the walker to consider the tactical as a means for negotiating and resisting the demands of digital networks. In Kate Mannell’s contribution, *Technology Resistance and de Certeau: Deceptive Texting as a Tactic of Everyday Life*, the author explores the significance of ‘butler lies’ – text messages in which the author lies about being indisposed in order to avoid unwanted social contact. Mannell argues that these texting practices constitute a contemporary iteration of de Certeau’s tactics, “a cunning act of resistance” (p. 47) by which to escape the demand of digital networks to be ever present and always available. Through an interview study of young Melbournians, Mannell analyses the butler lie as an aspect of the everyday cunning negotiation of the contemporary media ecology, and a minoritarian form of the disruption of communications logic, noting that “Butler lies, like tactics, are invisible in that they don’t mount a direct attack on mobile technology by resisting or limiting its use. Rather, they leverage the opportunities it affords for easy deception, exploiting its own materiality to momentarily hold at bay the interaction and availability it encourages” (p. 51).

Benjamin Burroughs, in his article *Streaming Tactics*, likewise affirms the continued relevance of such “everyday” forms of cunning by comparing his own experiences in digital streaming to de Certeau’s walker – the online streamer creates their own “style of use” which challenges established notions of copyright and industry logics of curation. Even as practices of streaming have been recuperated as a now sanctioned practice by platforms like Netflix and Amazon Prime, Burroughs still finds himself employing non-sanctioned modes of use, “playing the trickster”, “scavenging for passwords, manipulating technology, and leveraging my network connections” (p. 67). While practices of digital content provision have adapted in order to contend with the challenges to spectatorship posed by unauthorised streamers, Burroughs sees this sort of work as retaining a valuable means by which to trouble the “propre” strategies of media companies, the furtive and unstable practices of streamers serving to unsettle the notion of copyright law as natural and timeless (p. 67).

Yet is there a limit to the benefits of cunning knowledge in the face of global threats such as climate change and mass government surveillance which necessitate global solutions and forms of deliberation? Can cunning knowledge “scale up” in an age of digital networks, or does it remain limited to the partial, evasive practices of the individual trickster? In *Dazzles, Decoys, and Deities: The Janus Face of Anti-Facial Recognition Masks*, Patricia de Vries directs us towards these kinds of questions by positing a sceptical critique of the potential for cunning evasion to constitute a critique of digital surveillance societies. Surveying a series of art works designed to confuse or evade digital surveillance systems, de Vries argues that it is crucial that such evasive tactics do not reassert a simple division between surveilled and surveiller as a “homogenous monolith, and [set] up the human-versus-machine relation as one of opposition” (p. 81). De Vries argues that cunning flight in itself is inadequate as a response to the challenge of digital surveillance networks – what is needed

are artworks which pursue a traversal of the entanglements between surveiller, surveilled, and the broader material infrastructures of contemporary surveillance. De Vries argues for a form of relational critique, which would maintain an immanent and contingent form of analysis, “over and against a binary thinking of neat demarcations and isolated domains, thinking in terms of relations opens pathways to intersectional forms of critique” (p. 83).

Each of this issue’s contributions explore the continued relevance of cunning as a means for negotiating, critiquing, and imagining alternatives to the contemporary technological milieu. They demonstrate the capacity for cunning and the mētē to emerge as a way of undoing the abstractions and reifications of technoscientific capitalism and its demands of us as workers, users, and patients, and to reveal alternate paths through a technological landscape which we are within, and not before.

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