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HOW TO DISCOMFORT A WORLDVIEW?

Social Sciences, Surveillance Technologies, and Defamiliarization

Rocco Bellanova and Ann Rudinow Sætnan[1]

Discomforting Worldviews

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This chapter proposes two thinking exercises to nurture researchers' ability to discomfort (their) worldviews. We believe these thinking exercises can help us, and perhaps others, to achieve *estrangement*: i.e. to produce descriptions of our research objects that open them to new, and possibly alternative, relations with and among them. This requires some level of unsettling both for researchers and their research objects. Our ambition is not to deny or debunk worldviews. Our goal is to provisionally break them apart, to destabilize them, to separate the *worlds* from the *views*, and then reunite them by emphasizing their constant and dynamic mutual construction.

Let's admit from the very beginning that we feel uneasy about worldviews in general. It is this very compound noun—*worldview*—that makes us wary. When taken apart, these two powerful terms of social sciences can still be contested. The question of the *world* stands for the question of what should be studied: the acceptable or relevant research object. Arguing about the (best) *view* is arguing about how things should be studied: the acceptable or relevant method to be adopted. While the question of the world brings us into the field of ontological debates, arguments about view generally push us into epistemological battles (see the introduction to Part I of this volume).

When a worldview is uttered, the world, the view, and the relationship between them are presented as stabilized, at least for that researcher on that topic. The notion of a world-view relationship tends to fade, and the stabilized set is presented as a matter of personal conviction, not open for debate. For a reader with a positivist or rationalist bent, once authors have declared their worldview, the distortions that world-view relationships may create can be corrected for; research objects will be brought to their true nature, and researchers

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will be more disciplined in their quest. Surely, this is decidedly too simplified a synthesis of the diverse roles that worldviews play in mainstream approaches to social sciences research. Yet, it has the merit of emphasizing how much worldviews can sideline (in spite all epistemological and ontological controversies), and in particular the techniques that support, like scaffoldings, the emergence of a given world-view relationship.

Admittedly, there is little novelty in this—especially for researchers familiar with Science and Technology Studies. Our sketch of the powers and (al)lures of an uttered worldview is reminiscent of Donna Haraway's work on *situated knowledges* and thus of the "varied apparatus of visual production" needed to achieve them (1991, p. 195). More generally, we both know all too well the struggle of social sciences research: the difficulty of adopting, crafting, and mastering methods and tools (Aradau, Huysmans, Neal, and Voelkner, 2015). We are aware they appear less solid and consistent than the seemingly ready-made research instruments at the disposal of other sciences. We are also mindful of the challenges to providing a consistent account of our research objects, not to mention the troubles of critiquing them (Salter, 2012). Then, if we have no truer worldview to propose, how dare we mess around (to paraphrase Law, 2004) with others' worldview(s)?

We believe we do not come empty-handed to the readers. Here, we propose to play with *symmetric dispositifs* and *wildlife pictures* as thinking exercises. Their common goal is to achieve *estrangement*, or *defamiliarization*. This is a literary device early 20th century Russian formalists called *ostranienie*, and already used by earlier authors to "make things strange" (Ginzburg, 2001). It is not a frontal critique; it does not unveil a truer nature of things. But it promises possible new relations to what we believe we already know. As such, it may help revive the desire to explore, test, and fasten alternative world-view relationships, or it may highlight the (absurd) mechanisms of everyday life power relations.

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Estrangement is a device: a technique to be adopted explicitly and a method to be adjusted rather than automatically applied. Its ultimate objective is to provide a description where the readers can still relate to what is told: which is something other than usual but no(t too much) less consistent. The following exercises are based on our direct experience in attempting to use this device and achieve consistent analyses of surveillance practices and their images, metaphors, and allegories. We propose techniques we have tested, or are currently testing, and we run them on concrete cases. These are no sure recipes. We make no claim to be exhaustive in their presentation. We merely aim to start a conversation that focuses less on the deep theoretical implications of methods, and more on the everyday scholarly practices of description and analysis.

Estrangement Exercise #1: Symmetric Dispositifs

Exercise #1 is about the effort to approach symmetrically the knowledge practices of the researcher and of the research object. It builds upon, and possibly

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responds to, a double fascination: for socio-technical assemblages as research objects, and for dispositif(s) as a conceptual notion guiding the researcher.

Socio-technical assemblages are material bundles of actions in which humans and non-humans participate and relate (see Chapter 18). Prominent examples in the field of International Relations are drones and airport controls, databases and profiling systems, software, and critical infrastructures (Amicelle, Aradau, and Jeandesboz, 2015). Given our strong research interest for surveillance practices, as well as for the role of science and technology in the making of societies, we often end up investigating some sort of socio-technical assemblage.

Figure 3.1 shows a specific socio-technical assemblage in action: a millimeter waves body scanner, or "security scan". There are humans (travelers and an airport security official) and non-humans (the scan machines and their software, but also other scanners for hand-luggage and removable barriers). The setting is the Amsterdam Airport Schiphol, Netherlands, where this surveillance technology has been deployed at the joint initiative of the airport's authorities, the Dutch Customs and the Dutch National Coordinator for Counterterrorism and Security (Schiphol Amsterdam Airport, 2012[?]). At the core of this socio-technical assemblage stands the generation of knowledge: the scanner's software analyzes the response of millimeter waves bouncing back from the traveler's body, checking whether prospective passengers conceal items prohibited

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FIGURE 3.1 Dispositifs in action

Source: Amsterdam Airport Schiphol, June 2015, Schiphol, Netherlands.

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aboard planes. The result of the analysis is displayed on the screen attached to the scanner (visible at the center of Figure 3.1), and thus communicated to the airport security officer operating the machine. If the software detects something "abnormal", it screens a pictogram providing basic information on the area of the passenger's body that the security officer must double-check with a pat-down search. In short, it is the capacity of this assemblage to produce quite a sophisticated form of knowledge that makes it function as the key element of passenger surveillance at Schiphol.

Several researchers (among many: Bonditti, 2012) have found in the notion of *dispositif* a conceptual tool to better grasp the heterogeneity of assemblages and the knowledge practices at their core. According to Foucault, dispositifs are operators of power, "strategies of relations of forces supporting, and supported by, types of knowledge" (1980[1977], p. 196). At the same time, they are also sites and grids of analysis (Foucault, 1978). The problem for many researchers is that, as Pottage notes, "there is no ready-made theoretical formula for a good dispositif" (2012, p. 182). He continues: "Le Corbusier once observed that buildings were not things that one talked about, but things that one walked through [. . .]. One might say something similar of Foucault's dispositifs" (Pottage, 2012, p. 182).

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Walking through Foucault's diverse dispositifs one can appreciate their double functioning mentioned here. For instance, in Foucault's work on sexuality, the "dispositif de séxualité" is able to generate a specific form of knowledge through a series of elaborate techniques. At the same time, Foucault himself is able to study the same through the setup of his own dispositif, and the definition of "rules" and "cautionary prescriptions" to inform his research (1978, p. 98). Yet, these rules are crafted during the walk, based on the research exercise carried out on the specific dispositif-as-research-object chosen. In other words, at least two forms of knowledge generation are always at stake: that of the socio-technical assemblage and that of the researcher. In-between the two, there is an echo—the calibration of the researcher's dispositif is based on the ability to keep walking the tortuous becoming of the dispositif selected as research object.

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The first part of this estrangement exercise is to take seriously this possible symmetry between the researcher and the research object: between the dispositifs at play, between their forms of knowledge generation. Postulating symmetry does not mean that all methods and forms of knowledge are identical, but that they all deserve attention, and that their possible interactions and influences should be investigated. Then, if "types of knowledge" support "strategies of relations of forces" (Foucault, 1980[1977], p. 196), in which kind of power relations is the dispositif-as-method of the researcher enmeshed? Which are the (new) world-view relationships that the researcher is testing, fastening together and proposing? Making explicit a possible answer to these questions is the second part of this exercise.

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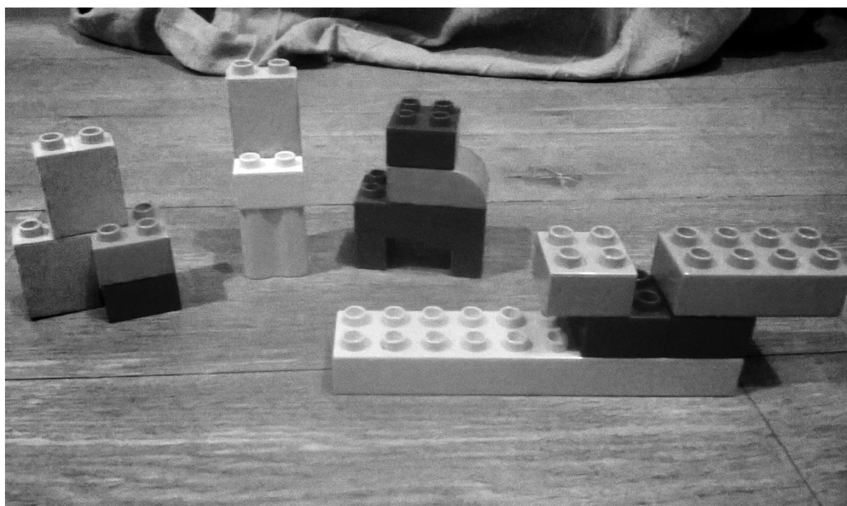

FIGURE 3.2 Crafting dispositifs

Source: Ludivine Damay, 5 May 2014, Gembloux, Belgium.

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All in all, this exercise promises a double defamiliarization. On the one hand, it reminds us that security and surveillance socio-technical assemblages produce some forms of knowledge. And yet, that despite their edginess, research objects tend to become all too quickly commonplace, their participation in the creation of powerful worldviews forgotten. On the other hand, this exercise also questions our research routines that, notwithstanding disciplinary and epistemic controversies, tend to forget their entanglements with research objects. It reminds us that researchers craft their own dispositifs in relation with the objects of research. These dispositifs are made of composite rules and elements, possibly as consistent and versatile as Lego-like constructions (see Figure 3.2). Thus, it reminds us that scholars do not produce only science but also technologies, and that these technologies (may) matter politically.

Exercise #2: And Now for Something Completely Different

Exercise #2 starts from difference and looks for unexpected similarities. Anything different will do. Football? Architecture? Cake-baking? We stumbled onto using bird-watching.

This was where the collaboration between us began—with a discussion about being caught in surveillance "webs": What happens when you are "caught on camera" or registered in a database and struggle to get out? Often you wind up even more tightly entangled. That reminded us of an image of a hawfinch

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caught for banding (Figure 3.3). The moment this image came to mind was not so much the making of a metaphor or allegory as the initiation of a short chain of free associations between an image and a research finding.

Yet this picture does not immediately represent a research finding. It rather became its "exergue", i.e. the initial epigraph that—as Derrida (1996, p. 7) notes—"serves to stock in anticipation and to prearchive a lexicon which, from there on, ought to lay down the law and give the order". Said otherwise, this photo of a temporarily captured bird estranged us from more "typical" images of surveillance studies (be they CCTV cameras, panoptic watch-towers, or ever-growing databases). Ultimately, it pushed us to think about the politics of data protection and surveillance as potentially co-constitutive.

Compare this picture with Figure 3.1, of the Schiphol Airport security scanners. Both visualize socio-technical assemblages. Both concern the (benevolent) surveillance of mobility. Both aim at generating knowledge about those who circulate (passengers or birds) and potential risks threatening mobility. But they "stock" a different "lexicon", obliging the researcher to check again whether the two images are naming the same problem, and, what's more important, to question again what research problem is at stake. To borrow from Alena Drieschova (Chapter 2), starting with different images shakes our "micro-foundations", making us more aware of how our encounters with research objects may influence how we organize our research.

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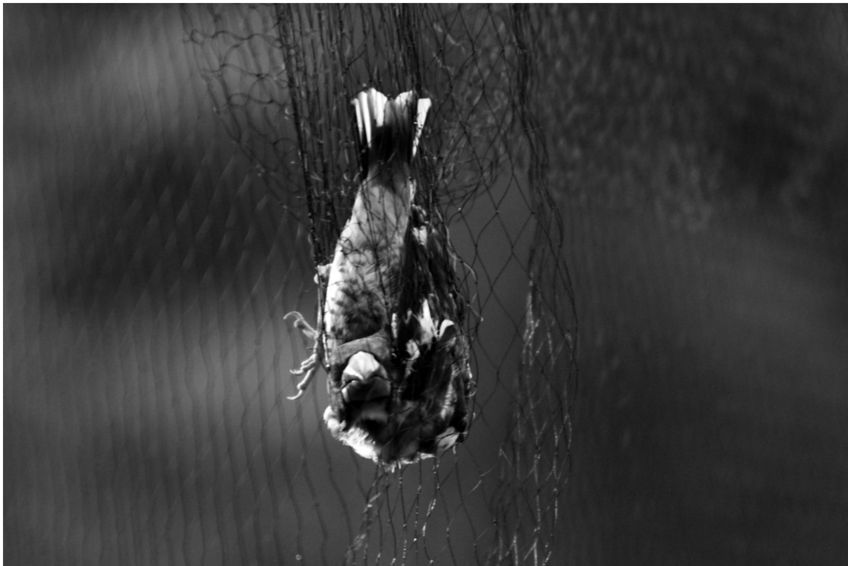

FIGURE 3.3 Entangled

Source: Ann Rudinow Sætnan, 25 August 2013, Melhus, Norway.

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The photo of the hawfinch produced also a second effect. Once defamiliarization shifts our view to a different world (and our own way to see that world), other images may also come to mind when thinking about entanglement, and may stock very different lexica. Figure 3.4 was used when discussing how Barad's (2007) use of the term "entanglement" had set its mark on two recent conferences (Sætnan, 2014). AuQ11

Here the chain of association, the stock of shared concepts in the overlapping lexica, became longer. It's not just that the branches and the Guira cuckoo's "hair" seem tangled. One image can be worth a thousand metaphors. In quantum physics, entanglement is about how apparently separate objects nevertheless act on/with one another as part of the same phenomenon. So do apparently separate species. Thorny, tangled acacias offer protection, nest support, camouflage, and in some seasons food. Birds perform seeding and fertilization. The chains—of symbiosis and of association—are potentially endless. New "lexical entries", so to speak, occurred to us even after the editorial was published, entangling more and more concepts.

Metaphors/analogies/images mobilize the familiar to understand the unfamiliar (Blizzard, 2000). In our joint work, we now use wildlife images to defamiliarize—showing the once familiar in a new light, highlighting previously AuQ12

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FIGURE 3.4 In a tangle

Source: Ann Rudinow Sætnan, 18 August 2014, Entre Rios, Argentina.

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overlooked properties. Even so, once one familiar concept (symbiosis) has helped us get acquainted with a new one (entanglement), won't we need to seek out new images so as not to let established ascriptions of similarities limit our sense of the associated object, so as not to turn both symbiosis and entanglement into clichés (or does the image do just that?). We want to jolt our thoughts out of comfortable ruts, discover something new, not just repeat the already taken for granted. But then again, ascribing odd similarities to an image is not just a technique for discovery. It can also be a technique of distortion.

Anthropomorphization—ascribing human traits to non-human entities—is one example of such distortion. Anthropomorphization is a no-no in many contexts. It does not so much metaphorize the image, seeking parallels, highlighting and exploring ever-new traits in either object, because the traits postulated are presumed false. This bird probably isn't angry (see Figure 3.5). Birds may well have emotions, but it's unlikely they show them in facial expressions. What looks like a scowl here is just bill shape and plumage pattern. Then too, anthropomorphization is a show of arrogance, declaring the "other" to be "like us" while also making fun of it for being unlike us and thereby inferior. Anthropomorphization can be fun, but it does not teach us much about the anthropomorphized object (here a bird) or about the compared object (ourselves).

This exercise brings us to the edge of estrangement. Are we, the authors, being self-ironic or just self-contradictory (mimicking the bird in Figure 3.6)?

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FIGURE 3.5 Stop anthropomorphizing me!

Source: Ann Rudinow Sætnan, 27 October 2012, Trondheim, Norway.

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FIGURE 3.6 Are you being self-ironic, or just self-contradictory?

Source: Ann Rudinow Sætnan, 1 October 2012, Budapest, Hungary.

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How about both? Couldn't self-irony and self-contradiction both be good de-/re-familiarization techniques, heightening (at least once realized) self-awareness and thereby other-understanding?

Conclusion (Or: A Conversation in the Guise of a Third Exercise)

We were invited to share our worldview on *science, technology, and arts in international relations*. We decided to respond to this invitation together, two researchers in social sciences with different backgrounds and experiences. We decided to do so not because we share a common worldview, but because accepting this invitation was, in itself, a precious exercise to continue our conversation about how to study and speak about surveillance and security technologies and practices.

The thinking exercises just discussed may prove a useful warm-up for rearranging, every time anew, worlds and views. These exercises are not aimed at deconstructing the research objects or the validity of science, but at paving the way to alternative but still consistent forms of relations with our research objects. The question of methods continues to be widely discussed in the field of International Relations (i.a. Aradau et al., 2015; Salter and Mutlu, 2012). We have no ambition to lay down new methodological foundations. In fact, our suggestion is to rather shift the attention to the scaffolding organizing our worldviews. This way, we want to remind ourselves, and our readers, that

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social scientists produce techniques and dispositifs too, and cannot do otherwise in order to make social sciences.

Then, these conclusions can be better framed as a further estrangement exercise, as an explicit conversation about the very possibility to conclude a research. This is no trivial issue: conclusions are a key element in the functioning of social sciences, the site where consistency seems paramount and decisive. How do you (not) conclude? Every text must end. Every ending is likely to be read as a conclusion. Such is the convention of academic literature. And yet, do we need to conclude? Would concluding imply a stabilization, and thereby a betrayal of our goals? Can you end by stating that you need no conclusion? Can you end with some sort of destabilization of the preceding text, a sense of discomfort? A conversation between the two writers of this chapter unsettles any desire for stability:

ANN: Old neuron links I thought I'd forgotten are suddenly resonating in my mind. I am reminded of my classic music training from half a century ago. Every piece "must" end in a resolution of the key (my teachers were obviously not fond of Stockhausen). To end before—or beyond—that resolution is discomforting. I am also reminded of the episode in *Big Bang Theory* when Amy tries to train Sheldon to be less obsessive about resolution—stop before the end of the tic-tac-toe game, before the clown pops up from the jack-in-the-box, before the last line of the song, before the senten AuQ13

ROCCO: Conclusions are painful: this sort of trial by fire where you feel the pressure to summarize what you did and what the main findings are. And yet, I'm always more intrigued by thick descriptions and analytical passages, or by the twists of the story when it comes to fiction. There may be an exception: the finale episode of the TV series *The Sopranos*. The very last episode does not end, it is discontinued by the screen going black in the middle of a scene. Such an abrupt conclusion became a TV cult, so that I *had* to watch and capture this precise moment. But even in this case, no discomfort. Most probably because I had not seen the rest of the episode, and the rest of the season, and so on. By its last season, I was no more familiar with a fiction I used to love. The conclusion was remarkable but had no real grasp on me as a spectator.

ANN: Do we need to irritate? Can we? And even if we do, have we discomforted only the reader but not our own premise? This would be unfortunate, as the aim was to discomfort a worldview, and thus to prevent a too premature closure of the possibilities of research. Defamiliarization is not breaking all relations, but somehow making them more vibrant and making us more aware of our situated perspective.

ROCCO: If we have to conclude, then we may want to learn how to estrange the reader, the colleague, the "object" of our research without irritating them. If defamiliarization ultimately aims at reigniting desire, then let's strive for devising a form of critique that invites us (the researchers, the

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readers, possibly the actors at stake) to long for political alternatives, rather than denunciation and debunking.

ANN: Ah, so *that*'s been our goal? Like Goldilocks in the forest we seek not too much comfort, but also not too much discomfort. Eventually we hope to get it just right. J

Note

1. We thank J.P. Singh, Renée Marlin-Bennett, and Madeline Carr for organizing the ISA STAIR workshop and for their feedback on the chapter. We also thank Antoinette Rouvroy for suggesting the image of "research scaffoldings" and Benjamin de Carvalho for convincing us to watch "The Sopranos" finale.

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