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In sheep's clothing: mammalian morphologies and aerial infrared surveillance

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From high above, a helicopter's thermal imaging camera sweeps the desolate Icelandic landscape, on the hunt for a heat-bearing body on the run. Suddenly, the camera detects radiation but, moving closer to get eyes on their target, the pilots spot only a sheep grazing below. As the chopper veers away, having come up empty-handed, the animal's woolly hide is thrown off to reveal Halla, an environmental activist who has hidden her heat signature within the carcass of the dead sheep. As this scene from the Icelandic-Ukrainian film *Woman at War (Kona fer í stríð)* (Benedikt Erlingsson 2018) intimates, Halla's efforts to sabotage the aluminium industry that devastates her country have made her a wanted woman. To escape detection, Halla eludes state and corporate surveillance time and again through elaborate costuming: in the course of the film, she swaps clothes with her twin sister, disguises herself as a gardener, poses as a teacher, a cousin, a lover, and so forth. But it is Halla's turn as a sheep that allows us to gain a fresh purchase on the use of the thermographic camera as a surveillance technology that gives rise to morphological indistinction between species.

In what follows, I argue that we should take this instance of a woman momentarily rendered indistinguishable from a sheep not only as a playful swapping of identities but also as a sign of surveillance thermography's epistemological limitations. Infrared imaging's inability to differentiate human mammals from non-human ones would seem to introduce the feminist possibility that this technology could abet life in evading the strictures of gender and species. And yet, the production of such morphological indistinctions are nonetheless formed by militarized ways of seeing. Far from that utopian escape inhabiting an indistinct identity might appear to be for a woman such as Halla, the security state's technophilic dream of outsourcing the production of biopolitical taxonomies to surveillance technologies ultimately renders this indeterminacy the occasion to reassert power's reliance on the sovereign decision.

Today it is a critical commonplace that the adoption of aerial thermography that detects infrared radiation invisible to the naked eye has normalized militarized ways of seeing civilians while deepening control over populations already subjected to military and legal force. Indeed, one consequence of aerial infrared imagery, according to Lisa Parks, is that this form of visualization,

turns all bodies into indistinct human morphologies that cannot be differentiated according to conventional visible light indicators, correlated with constructs of gender, race, or class. Seeing according to temperature turns everyone into a potential suspect or target and has the effect of "normalizing" surveillance since all bodies appear similar beneath its gaze. (Lisa Parks 2018, 168)

This is not to suggest that thermal imaging universalizes the experience of surveillance across populations—far from it. Despite its displacement of physiognomic markers that might allocate racial difference, Parks points out that aerial infrared sensing “reinforces already existing power hierarchies by monitoring and targeting certain territories and peoples—such as those in Pakistan, Yemen, and Somalia, or along the US borders—with greater frequency and intensity, designating these areas and people as ‘hot spots’ that need to be preemptively contained” (169). While it’s true that applying technology to established hot spots replicates existing power differentials, Parks’s analysis of thermography does not account for the fact that “all bodies” under the gaze of state surveillance includes those bodies classified as non-human as well.

It is important to recognize that the State’s wielding of infrared imaging is designed to thoroughly penetrate human bodies in order to control biological life, what Foucault has called “a kind of bestialization of man achieved through the most sophisticated political techniques” (as quoted in Giorgio Agamben 1998, 3). However, infrared thermography does not confine its vision to bodies classifiably human; this technology detects heat emanating from all warm-blooded mammals. Infrared energy, in other words, isn’t an attribute particular to the human—it is a transpecies one and thus more properly classified as mammalian. We might say then that infrared imaging achieves not the bestialization of man but, more specifically, the mammalization of the human.

By limiting analysis of infrared imaging technologies to their production of “human morphologies” then, we miss how these tools of autonomous surveillance regularly conscript both human and non-human bodies into the national security apparatus. To acknowledge the expansiveness of this technology’s sweep is to recognize its production of what I call a mammalian morphology—the visual collapse of species difference figured through technological mediation. Indistinct mammalian morphologies are not theoretical; in fact, they occur with regularity at the US’s southern border. For instance, warm-blooded mammals are often the unintended objects of detection by infrared, acoustic, and seismic sensors deployed at the US-Mexico border. In 2011, the Department of Homeland Security and Customs and Border Protection requested a new generation of surveillance equipment that “incorporate[d] a variety of external sensors and/or probes such as, but not limited to, seismic, magnetic, acoustic, IR imager, [and] radiation” that would be sensitive enough “to distinguish individuals and groups of people, as well as telling people apart from animals” (Robert Beckhusen 2013). And yet despite this request in 2013 media reports confirmed that the 12,800 acoustic and seismic ground sensors used to detect migrants crossing the US-Mexico border had “difficulty distinguishing human activity from animals” (Beckhusen 2013) and, as recently as 2019, journalists established that ground sensors continued to generate “many false alarms because calibrating them to tell a person from, say, a deer can be difficult” (Bonnie Berkowitz, Shelly Tan and Kevin Uhrmacher 2019).

To be sure, the carceral fantasy of the current US administration is that border surveillance technologies such as infrared imaging will fully automate the process of incrimination: if a body’s thermal signature is detected crossing a national border at an unauthorized point of entry, the thinking goes, that body reveals its own criminal intent. But to acknowledge the non-human mammals—deer, sheep, and what have you—that regularly wander into these zones of intensive surveillance is to give the lie to this technoscientific fantasy. Caught within the web of digital detection, the non-human

mammal testifies to the failure of autonomous surveillance technologies. In fact, the indistinction that characterizes the generalized mammalian morphology produced by such forms of surveillance technology means that human intervention is called upon to distinguish the innocent animal from the guilty human. In this way, the capture of non-human mammals as bodies of surveillance affirms that automating political techniques doesn't do away with the sovereign decision, rather it reanimates the decision for a new era of autonomous security technologies.

It takes a work of art like *Woman at War* to help us see the political potentialities inherent in thermography's mammalian morphologies. In one respect, the film helps us visualize how eluding the security state might be a matter of recognizing that every human body emits a radiant energy that exceeds the bounds of the human in its fundamentally mammalian quality. To be sure, the possibility of inhabiting a technologically mediated mammalian identity might seem to possess emancipatory potential for feminist media studies scholars since it abolishes gendered identity and moves beyond species difference. And yet, we must remember that this vision of species fluidity is a product of militarized surveillance. Indeed, far from affirming the sort of utopian transpeciation that might allow a woman like Halla to escape the strictures of her gendered human existence, the film shows how aerial infrared surveillance not only recasts her understanding of her movements through the world and her body's temperature fluctuations in newly vulnerable terms, it also produces categorical indistinctions that call forth the reassertion of biopolitics as usual. Returning to the scene with which I began, we see that the pilots' efforts to visually confirm the body their camera detects confess that infrared imaging alone cannot distinguish between life that the state deems dangerous and life that the state deems safe. Instead, infrared surveillance and the like reaffirm the decision at the heart of biopolitics: with their capacity for indistinction, these forms of mediation invite sovereign power to once again parse the mammalian population caught along borders and other zones of indecision where life has already been placed under suspicion.

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