

Datocracy

Annabel Frearson

Imperial College London, London, UK

ABSTRACT

Datocracy is a compound neologism that embraces transhistorical liberations and reconfigurations of data, in its multiple perceptual-linguistic forms, into new value relations and systems of governance, democratic or otherwise. *Datocracy* evolves from the often-violent separation of data from its habitual matrices, by virtue of *dispositifs*, or apparatuses, as defined by Michel Foucault and elaborated by Gilles Deleuze. This paper examines material examples of the functioning of such *dispositifs* through Georges Bataille, Walter Benjamin, François Rabelais (through Mikhail Bakhtin) and William Burroughs. These examples demonstrate how emancipated data are readily recuperated into new relations of governance, as liberatory socio-political tools (or apparatuses), or vehicles of tyranny. In its passage between liberation and recuperation, in its state of utterance, perhaps, data experience a protosemantic moment, a pre-definitional state, which offers the promise of a momentary escape from, or rather within, value relations.

KEYWORDS

Data; *dispositif*; protosemantic; democracy; tyranny; value

Datocracy evolves from the separation or liberation of data (in all its myriad forms, cultural or otherwise), allowing for its reconfiguration by everyman and dictator alike into new value relations.¹ The *dispositif*, or apparatus, in its dynamic connective function, allows for singular gestures to reproduce transhistorically and imperially beyond their site of origin. In the first instance this requires an act of separation, in which a certain violence is implied. This paper examines (trans)historical precursors of extraordinary bodily relationships with data, in its multiple coded perceptual-linguistic forms, as protosemantic *dispositifs* and refractors of governance. Within a datocratic environment it could be said that we are on equal terms with data, but that balance of power is continually shifting through a series of symbiotic, ideological and affective relationships. There is a tipping point between cultural mastery and over identification; the competing agencies now at play in our relation with cultural entities are synonymous with the ‘liberogenic’ freedom of neoliberalism, wherein we are compelled to be free to choose, and to produce our own cultural fulfilment, having already been fully atomised in all aspects of our material and immaterial lives, in line with the production of human capital and manifold externalised subjectivities. Hence, *Datocracy* is an auditory, verbal and conceptual amalgam of data, democracy, totalitarian, de Tocqueville and crass tyranny. It sits between the constraint of the word – the inscribed form – and the freedom of the

utterance; it is this space that I would like to explore, and ultimately question whether the utterance, in its passage from the ‘infomantic’ body, might provide a protosemantic liberation of data from itself.

The motif of the severed finger functions as a performative *dispositif* to demonstrate how a single entity can acquire a ‘strange freedom’, in the words of French theorist Georges Bataille (1897–1962), and separate itself from previous contexts, influences, hierarchies and lineages in order to return in a new system of relations. The severed finger is not just an object of exchange conveying use value or meaning, nor is it merely poetically pleasurable, but it carries through Bataille the wider role of sacrifice, signifying a necessary rupture within the self and within the wider social order (Bataille 1985). German philosopher and critical theorist Walter Benjamin (1892–1940) understands the imperative democratic function of separation that technology affords between the art object and its aura, allowing film as social apparatus both to produce and fuse the heterogeneity of its audience. This same separation is equally open to manipulation in the interests of capital and fascism, moreover (Benjamin 2008). For Russian literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin (1895–1975), words are the medium that is the most sensitive and complicated refraction of socioeconomic governance. He finds through French Renaissance scholar François Rabelais (c.1494–1553) a new conception of value that liberates habitual representational matrices and separates false unities to forge new unexpected relations of objects and phenomena that are born in the verbal (Bakhtin 1981). The written word precedes the spoken word as virus erupting from diseased apes, according to American author and artist William S. Burroughs (1914–1997) who calls for the cutting up and replaying of audio material to subvert the political order and create associations that stick. Sound is separated from its source and words fragmented and disconnected so that only the tone of voice remains (Burroughs 2005).

The *dispositif* fully emerges as a theoretical concept in the 1970s, notably within French film theory, and successively in the writings of French philosopher Michel Foucault (1926–1984) for whom the *dispositif* is the strategic connection or system of relations between heterogeneous elements (Foucault 1980, 194–195). Foucault’s *dispositif* is dynamic, productive and panoptic in relation to historically specific power structures and knowledge. The productive aspect of the Foucauldian *dispositif* manifests itself in a regulatory capacity as through, for example, governmentality and biopolitics that produce new rationalities for population control and the regulated production of life itself. French philosopher Gilles Deleuze (1925–1995) transcribes the outwardly regulatory nature of Foucault’s *dispositif* into a function of ingested, immanent control through which creativity, transformation and production combine to produce the new, the current. Referring specifically to curves of enunciation as key dimensions of the social apparatus, Deleuze emphasises the combined autopoietic and controlling powers of apparatuses (1992b, 164). In his essay ‘Postscript on the Societies of Control’ Deleuze expands on what he considers to be a metamorphosis from Foucault’s societies of discipline into societies of ingested or immanent control. He attributes William Burroughs with naming ‘Control’ as the regime of this ‘new monster’ in which ‘liberating and enslaving forces confront one another’, and in which individuals have become ‘*dividuals*, and masses, samples, data, markets, or banks’ (Deleuze 1992a, 4–5). We will return to Burroughs through the three other male Bs of Bataille, Benjamin and Bakhtin.

In ‘Sacrificial Mutilation and the Severed Ear of Vincent Van Gogh’ (1930), Bataille discusses the case of Gaston F. who severed his own finger in an act of automutilation, apparently following the influence of Dutch painter (1853–1890) Van Gogh’s auricular automutilation. Bataille suggests that this implied causality is coincidental; he proposes that:

Once a decision is reached with the violence necessary for the tearing off of a finger, it entirely eludes the literary suggestions that may have preceded it; the order that the teeth had to carry out so brusquely must appear as a need that no one could resist. (Bataille 1985, 62)

Bataille suggests that the irresistible need produced by the external force manifest in the coincidence of the two automutilative gestures assumes a ‘strange freedom’ that anaesthetises the requisite pain accompanying such actions. Bataille moves through the specificities of Van Gogh’s ‘overwhelming relations ... maintained with the sun’ conveyed through a reading of the relations of objects in his paintings to arrive at the abstracted theme, relation, or mechanism of sacrifice. This allows him to deploy ‘the return of the theme in a new system of relations’. He questions the validity of his own mechanism that makes an associative leap between seemingly singular mad gestures and veritable social functions, and answers his question with a litany of diverse, global and transhistorical cultural examples that involve some form of mutilation to the self or others, including a detailed account of various practices of the ‘ablation of a finger’ (Bataille 1985, 66–69). The apotheosis is reached when sacrificer and sacrificed eventually become one in the form of the self-sacrificing god, in a self-reflexive co-mingling of elements. From this conflated position, Bataille is confidently able to relate Gaston F.’s finger to Prometheus’ famous liver. Having completed the association, Bataille further abstracts the sacrificial mechanism to its essence as standing for any form of ‘radical *alteration* of the person which can be indefinitely associated with any other alteration that arises in collective life’ (such as the death of a relative, initiation rites, harvest rituals, etc.). It has the power to ‘liberate the heterogeneous elements and to break the habitual homogeneity of the individual’ such as in the gesture of vomiting communal food. For in its essence, sacrifice signifies the rejection of that which had been appropriated by a person or a group, and the ‘horrifying eruption’ entailed in sacrifice or automutilation effects the liberating ‘disgorging of a force that threatens to consume’. Bataille continues:

The one who sacrifices is free – free to indulge in a similar disgorging, free, continuously identifying with the victim, to vomit his own being just as he has vomited a piece of himself or a bull, in other words free to throw himself suddenly *outside of himself*, like a gall or an aissaouah. (Bataille 1985, 70)

Sacrifice signifies for Bataille, then, both a rupture within the self and within the social order, and at the same time a necessary function to maintain that order, or system of relations.²

In this respect, Bataille’s correlation of a non-teleological violent gesture to a function of social significance can be connected to the concept of the protosemantic, signifying on the one hand a ‘prestage to linguistic meaning’ (Leinfellner 2001, 227), and on the other, the creation of

associations between words, or between words and objects, that are initially arbitrary (such as a new item of vocabulary and the object it refers to) that will come to be incorporated into a semantic network as a function of repeated exposure. (Seel 2011, 2714)

The convulsive singular act, the meaningless bloody severance – as metonymic protosemantic utterance – thus enters a new, transhistorical system of relations, and becomes discourse.

In his famous 1936 essay, ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility’, Walter Benjamin describes as an act of separation the effect of technology on the art object. Technological reproduction not only separates the art object from its aura – an effect produced by the here and now of the singular work of art, its unique existence in a particular place – but becomes a symptomatic process extending far beyond the realm of art. For Benjamin, reproductive technology such as film enacts a ‘destructive, cathartic ... liquidation of the value of tradition in the cultural heritage’ (Benjamin 2008, 22). This becomes an exhortation for the masses to take control of technology in order to release themselves from their ‘enslavement to the powers of the apparatus’ and not only preserve their humanity, but also to take heed from the film actor who places that apparatus ‘in the service of his triumph’ (Benjamin 2008, 31). Just as Bataille’s severed finger becomes a unified symbol of (self)sacrifice and social cohesion, the unified fragments of the film actor’s estranged performance are reflected in an apparatic mirror that is detachable and transportable, to arrive in front of the masses. The balance now tips in the relation of control from the alienated actor awakening an empowered audience, to the cultish corruption of fascism through film capital. Benjamin also anticipates here the rise of the ‘prosumer/produser’, suggesting that film audiences have become quasi-expert, that any person can lay claim to being filmed, and that readers have turned into writers with an explosion of opportunities for writing and publishing through both the work situation and media. Benjamin also anticipates a mode of post-Fordist human capital when he claims that ‘work itself is given a voice’. Actors, he suggests, are no longer actors, but people portraying themselves (2008, 34). Likewise, within a neoliberal economy, as workers we portray ourselves, described thus by cultural theorist Michel Feher (France 1956–): ‘my human capital is me, as a set of skills and capabilities that is modified by all that affects me and all that I effect’ (Feher 2009, 26).

The explosion by film of the prison-world of the everyday offers a new relation of the masses to the world: in its micro-specificity, temporal-material distortion and topographical promiscuity, film offers new perspectives onto that world, as well as a potential outside. It provides an alternative model, a new law: a new *dispositif*. Benjamin declares: ‘The most important social function of film is to establish equilibrium between human beings and the apparatus’ (2008, 37). Film, as apparatus and social index, both produces and fuses the heterogeneity of its audience.

The novel performs for Mikhail Bakhtin a similar function as the film for Walter Benjamin in defining relations between individuals and society. For Bakhtin, literary texts are utterances tied to particular social subjects in specific historical situations, presenting a form of communication and knowledge. The novel is singled out from other genres by Bakhtin for its ability to combine in a single space an extraordinary variety of social languages and, as such, play a dynamic role in shaping, rather than merely reflecting, cultural history. From his analysis of the novel, Bakhtin extracts a broader philosophy of ‘novelness’, at the heart of which remains the principle of dialogue. Just as a novel is intertextual as both an encounter with plural forms of dialogue and texts outside of itself, so novelness functions as a form of *dispositif* in its conjoining of heterogeneous orders of experience, each with its own discourse, in dialogue with one another. Bakhtin saw the

individual as being striated by the social, with the relation between inner and outer speech, psyche or world less as a dialectical opposition, than differing positions on a shared continuum under the same jurisdiction, namely words: ‘the medium which is the most sensitive and at the same time the most complicated refraction of socioeconomic governance’ (Voloshinov 1976, 87).³

Authorship and perception, then, are forms of governance with the power to attribute more or less subjectivity to characters and, within our dialogic relations with others, we author ourselves. ‘I’ is an empty shifter, a shared tool or *dispositif* that is passed around like the single shared eye of the fates in Greek mythology (Holquist 1990, 28). It is Renaissance author Rabelais who conducts, according to Bakhtin, the ‘most remarkable experiment to re-establish the fully exteriorised individual’, and who provides a radical model of the *chronotope*, a particular literary spatio-temporal apparatus. In his novel *The Life of Gargantua and Pantagruel* (c.1532–1564), Rabelais establishes a new relationship to value wherein everything considered to be of value has the power to expand spatially and temporally. This underlying category of growth is in direct contradistinction to the dominant feudal and religious world view where values are presented in direct opposition to spatial–temporal reality (the great being symbolised by the small, the eternal by the moment, etc.). Bakhtin attributes this turn with a conscious desire by Rabelais to purge the spatial and temporal world of transcendent remnants, so as to create a new chronotope for a ‘new, whole and harmonious man, and for new forms of human communication’ (Bakhtin 1981, 168). Rabelais’ idiosyncratic methodology involves the destruction of all ordinary ties and ‘habitual matrices’ of things and ideas so as to create instead unexpected matrices and connections, with surprising logical links (‘allogisms’) and linguistic connections, including false connections and associations. Bakhtin describes Rabelais’ rationale as liberatory and revolutionary, emphasising the materiality of his method:

It is necessary to liberate all these objects and permit them to enter into the free unions that are organic to them, no matter how monstrous these unions might seem from the point of view of ordinary, traditional associations. These objects must be permitted to touch each other in all their living corporeality, and in the manifold diversity of the values they bear. It is necessary to devise new matrices between objects and ideas that will answer to their real nature, to once again line up and join together those things that had been falsely disunited and distanced from one another – as well as to disunite those things that had been falsely brought into proximity. On the basis of this new matrix of objects, a new picture of the world necessarily opens up – a world permeated with an internal and authentic necessity. (1981, 169)

In order to perform this process of demolition and reconstruction Rabelais builds a series of intersecting yet widely varying themes that centre around bodily acts. The intense corporeality of the series offers for Bakhtin a new positive material relation of the body to the world, a concrete reality that Rabelais presents in great complexity and depth in order to destroy the medieval ascetic other-worldly ideology and the incumbent symbolic abyss it created between word and body, which was perceived solely under the sign of decay and strife. Rabelais thereby restores not only a language and meaning to the body but also simultaneously returns a materiality and reality to language and meaning (Bakhtin 1981, 171). Rabelais combines in one dynamic, living and grotesque image of bodily deformities and perversions, a new and unexpected matrix of objects and phenomena that, Bakhtin

stresses, are born in the verbal: ‘Whatever direct contact these objects and phenomena had with the body was brought about, first and foremost, via a *verbal matrix*, their verbal compacting into a single context, a single phrase, a single compound word’ (Bakhtin 1981, 176). Rabelais deploys this new matrixial paradigm structurally to undermine language in its representation of a fixed world view, making use of the ‘special logic of profanity’ to construct through an unbridled phantasmagoria a verbal series of objects that, as Bakhtin states, are in themselves reasonable, but become monstrous when linked together. Both Bataille and Burroughs would certainly appreciate Rabelais’ highly detailed sausage series with its grotesque obsession with ratified genealogical sequence, as recounted by Bakhtin:

Starting with the shape of a sausage, Rabelais proves, relying on various authorities, that the serpent that bit Eve was a sausage, that the ancient giants who had stormed Mount Olympus and who had tried to pile Mount Pelion on Ossa were half sausage. Melusine was also half sausage, as was Erichthonius, the inventor of the hearse and the cart ... etc, etc. (1981, 181)

Other such unexpected matrices include the theme of arse wiping in the defecation series that enumerates and qualifies the various methods and items used, including a March cat, a basket and a baby goose.

William Burroughs, in *The Electronic Revolution* (1970), considers the word itself as flesh, as a virus and agent of control. He postulates that, contrary to general assumption, the spoken word, as we know it, came *after* the written word. It is ‘WRITING’ that forms the crucial distinction between humans and other animals, exclusively allowing them to communicate remotely through time and space (Burroughs 2005, 4). In this respect, the written word is the *dispositif* that produces colonisation through language. Burroughs’ theory of the word as virus, which he derives from a scientist ‘who really thinks about his subject instead of merely correlating data’ (2005, 5), stems back to an evolutionary moment when a deadly virus contorted the throats of apes allowing for the genetic conveyance (through sexual frenzy brought on by the virus itself) and henceforth perceptibly benign assimilation of speech (Burroughs 2005, 6).

As the conjoining of word and image, the written word is the virus that makes the spoken word possible. The written word is the ground, we could say, for the figure of the spoken word. Humans are separated from animals through the *dispositif* of the written word, which itself is conjoined to the flesh of humans: the word as virus is not an allegorical comparison, as Burroughs states, ‘a virus IS a very small unit of word and image’ (2005, 7). Burroughs takes a tiger’s leap to conjoin the origins of written history, the hieroglyph, the Garden of Eden, and Mayan sacrifice, with the Watergate scandal to demonstrate how such units of word and image ‘can be biologically activated to act as communicable virus strains’ (2005, 7). In the same way that Benjamin exhorts the masses to expropriate film capital and the medium as a whole to avert fascist manipulation, so *The Electronic Revolution* is a call to arms by Burroughs to rewrite history by literally intervening in the mass media using everyday technology which does not require ‘God or super technicians from outer space’ to operate and to change the news through a heterogeneous mix of everyday media. He writes: ‘Playing back recordings of an accident can produce another accident. ... Riot sound effects can produce an actual riot in a riot situation. RECORDED POLICE WHISTLES WILL DRAW COPS. RECORDED GUNSHOTS, AND THEIR GUNS ARE OUT’ (2005, 10–13). Sound

becomes disconnected from its source. Rumours fly; people don't know where they heard it but they heard it; words themselves can be disconnected so that only the tone of voice remains.

Scrambling messages is also a powerful ideological weapon, capable of imposing thought control on a mass scale, and inducing in the subject the impression that the message contains, writes Burroughs, 'his very own ideas which just occurred to him, which indeed it did' (2005, 16). On the contrary, recognition or suspicion by the subject of the 'extraneous origins of voices that are literally hatching out in his head' will induce paranoid psychosis, which returns us to Bataille's case of Gaston F. who interpreted as a scrambled message from Van Gogh a command from the sun to bite off his own finger. Therefore cut/up and playback techniques produce not only ideological effects, but also material symptoms. The line between user and used remains permeable in the datocratic landscape, however, and the very conception of emancipated participation can soon become the shackled mantra of unthinking gestures that serve merely to replicate the communal bodily virus, as Burroughs suggests:

If you want to, scramble yourself out there, every stale joke, fart, chew, sneeze, and stomach rumble. If your trick no work you better run. Everybody doing it, they all scramble in together and the populations of the earth just better settle down a nice even brown colour. Scrambles is the democratic way, the way full cellular representation. Scrambles is the American way. (2005, 24)

The idea of taking control of apparatuses can merely embed one further within the apparatusic system. Therefore, Burroughs proposes an intervention in language itself. He calls for an eradication of the definite article: *THE*, which denies the possibility of any other, and should be replaced by *A*. Further, Burroughs proposes a language composed of tones, hieroglyphs and silences that will 'delete these virus mechanisms and make them impossible of formulation in the language' (2005, 35).

In this respect Burroughs presents a model in which, through a self-reflexive enunciative auto-cannibalism, data might enact its own liberation from itself. Bataille would configure this as a self-vomiting or self-sacrifice. And Bakhtin would reject any firm positioning or inward/outward (endo/ecto) directional impulse, suggesting that we are already in continually variable positions on the spectrum between unique utterances and the social realm; we are our own vomit, our own media and, as such, affective material 'infomantic' entities within the datocratic landscape.⁴ Moreover, given that there is no notional outside to this landscape, we might rather clear within it a greater space for the protosemantic, as a way both to destabilise and materially reconfigure more imaginative value relations.

Notes

1. *Datocracy* is my own term created in a series of playful neologisms, including infomanticism, *LouisQuatorzisation*, and methodology *maudite*, all of which correspond to my thinking around the reconstitution of cultural value in post-digital, economy-of-attention realm.
2. Julia Kristeva later names this function 'abjection' (Kristeva 1982).
3. It is contested that Bakhtin published a number of works under the names of different authors, Voloshinov being one of them (see Holquist 1990, 193).

4. I explore the concept of ‘infomanticism’, a conjoining of information and Romanticism that reflects on and through our narcissistic mediation with sublime data, in *QGJCPLB* (Frearson 2013).

Disclosure statement

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Notes on contributor

Annabel Frearson is an artist and lecturer based in London, UK.

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