

**How to discomfort a worldview: symmetric dispositifs and wildlife pictures. Two thinking exercises (plus one) for achieving estrangement\***

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Abstract

This chapter proposes two thinking exercises – or techniques – to nurture researchers' ability to discomfort (their) worldviews: *symmetric dispositifs* and *wildlife pictures*. We believe that these thinking exercises can help us, and maybe other researchers, to achieve *estrangement*; i.e. to produce descriptions of our research objects that make them open to new, and possibly alternative, relations with them and among them. Our efforts are not to deny or debunk worldviews, but rather 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. Practicing and embracing estrangement may help revive the desire to explore, test and fasten alternative world-view relationships, and – especially when security and surveillance technologies are at stake – it may highlight the (absurd) mechanisms of the power relations of everyday life.

“Habit ruins everything in the end, doesn't it? Perhaps *that's* what we're all looking for - desire undiluted by habit.”

“The Russian Formalists had a word for it,” said Morris.

“I'm sure they did,” said Philip. “But it's no use telling me what it was, because I'm sure to forget it.”

“*Ostraniene*,” said Morris. “Defamiliarization. It was what they thought literature was all about. ‘*Habit devours objects, clothes, furniture, one's wife and the fear of war... Art exists to help us recover the sensation of life.*’ Viktor Shklovsky.” (Lodge, 1984, pp. 77, italics in original)

## **Introduction: questioning worldviews**

The aim of this chapter is to propose two thinking exercises – or techniques – to nurture researchers' ability to discomfort (their) worldviews. We believe that these thinking exercises can help us, and maybe other researchers, to achieve *estrangement*: i.e. to produce descriptions of our research objects that make them open to new, and possibly alternative, relations with them and among them. This requires some level of unsettling both for researchers and their research objects. Hence, our efforts are not to deny or debunk worldviews, but rather 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. First, let's admit from the very beginning that we feel uneasy about worldviews in general. According to the *New Oxford American Dictionary*, a worldview is “a particular philosophy of life or conception of the world”. To be clear, it is not that we have

not developed in our everyday or academic life any “conception of the world” or that we are uninterested in a “philosophy of life”. 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. On the one side, the question of the *world* stands for the question of what should be studied: the acceptable or relevant research object. On the other side, 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 (cf. Marlin-Bennett, 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. Better (or worse) still: by presenting a worldview, the notion of world-view relationships tends to fade. 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 will be more and more disciplined in their quest. Surely, this is decidedly a too simplified synthesis of the diverse roles that worldviews play in mainstream approaches to social sciences research. Yet, it has the merit to emphasize how much worldviews can sideline (in spite all epistemological and ontological controversies): the techniques and apparatuses that support, like scaffoldings, the emergence of a given world-view relationship.

In fact, there is little novelty in the above. Our sketch of the powers and lures of an uttered worldview is reminiscent of the work of Donna Haraway advocating not only the relevance of *situated knowledges* but also of the “varied apparatus of visual production” needed to achieve them (1991, p. 195). More in general, we both know all too well the struggle of social sciences research: the difficulty of adopting, crafting, mastering or fine-

tuning methods and tools (Aradau, Huysmans, Neal, & Voelkner, 2015; Savage, 2013), which all tend to appear less solid and consistent than the seemingly ready-made and robust microscopes, telescopes and multiple apparatuses at disposal of other practices of science (Barad, 2003; Stengers & Bensaude-Vincent, 2003, pp. 117-119). We also fully understand, and share in everyday work, the challenges to provide a consistent account of our research objects, not to speak of the troubles of proposing a critique of them (cf. Salter, 2012). Then, if we have no truer worldview to propose, how can we even dare to start messing around (to paraphrase Law, 2004) with other worldviews?

We believe that, with this chapter, we do not come empty-handed to the readers. Below, 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” theorized by Russian formalists with the name of *ostranienie* at the beginning of the XX century, but already used by earlier authors to “make things strange” (Ginzburg, 2001). It is not a form of frontal critique; it does not unveil a truer nature of things. But it promises new possible 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 the power relations of everyday life. Its final goal 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.

Again, estrangement is a device: a technique to be adopted explicitly and a method to be adjusted rather than automatically applied. The exercises below are based on our direct experience in attempting to deploy this device and achieve consistent analyses of security practices such as body scanners or passenger data surveillance and surveillance studies' images, metaphors and allegories. We propose techniques we have already tested, or that we 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 methodology, and more on the everyday practices and consequences of specific techniques of description and analysis.

### **Estrangement exercise #1: symmetric dispositifs**

Exercise 1 is about the effort to approach symmetrically the generation of knowledge operated by the researcher and by the object of research. It builds upon, and possibly responds to, a double fascination: for socio-technical assemblages as research objects, and for dispositif(s) as (a) conceptual notion(s) guiding the researcher.

Socio-technical assemblages are material bundles of actions in which humans and nonhumans participate and relate (cf. also Brennan, chapter 21, this volume). Prominent examples in the field of International Relations are drones and airport controls, databases and profiling systems, software and critical infrastructures (cf. the recent special issue of *Security Dialogue* on “Questioning security devices”: Amicelle, Aradau, & 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.

Below (image 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, in the Netherlands, where this surveillance technology has been deployed on the basis of a 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

analyses the response of millimeter waves bouncing back from the traveler's body, checking whether prospective passengers conceal items prohibited aboard planes. The result of the analysis is displayed on the screen attached to the scanner (visible at the center of the image below), and thus communicated to the airport security officer operating the machine. If the software detects something "abnormal" on the passenger's body, it screens a pictogram providing basic information on the area of the body that must be double checked by the security officer with a pat-down search. In short, it is the capacity of this assemblage to produce a quite sophisticated form of knowledge that makes it function as a surveillance device.



Image 1) *Dispositifs in action* (photo by Amsterdam Airport Schiphol, June 2015, Schiphol, Netherlands)

Given the heterogeneity of the elements participating to socio-technical assemblages and the “will to knowledge” characterizing many of them, it should come as no surprise that several researchers (i.a. Bonditti, 2012; Ditrych, 2013; Thomas, 2014) have found in Michel Foucault’s works on *dispositif* a conceptual support. According to Foucault, dispositifs are operators of power – “strategies of relations of forces supporting, and supported by, types of knowledge” (1980(1977), p. 196) – and at the same time sites and grids of analysis.

As the picture below (image 2) pretentiously attests, I (Rocco) have been no exception: I also fell under the spell of the notion of dispositif. Powered by generous doses of caffeine, I embarked in a tentative exegesis of Foucault’s own use of both the concept and the term ‘dispositif’. And this was no easy challenge, because, as noted by Pottage:

*there is no ready-made theoretical formula for a good dispositif; Le Corbusier once observed that buildings were not things that one talked about, but things that one walked through ('on ne discourt pas sur un bâtiment, on le parcourt'). One might say something similar of Foucault's dispositifs. (2012, p. 182)*



Image 2) *Too many dispositifs?* (photo by RB, 29 June 2013, Oslo, Norway)

Walking through Foucault's multiple dispositifs one not only appreciates their double functioning mentioned above. A closer look at the relationships between dispositifs as research objects and as researchers' method invites one to take seriously the practices of knowledge generation of the socio-technical assemblages at stake. The productive tensions among the three dispositifs are particularly evident in Foucault's work on sexuality, where the 'dispositif de séxualité' is able to generate a specific form of knowledge through a series of elaborate techniques, while Foucault himself is able to sketch a study of the same through the definition of "rules" or "cautionary prescriptions" (1978, p. 98). And 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. 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 stake, between their forms of knowledge generation. Postulating symmetry does not mean that the two methods or the kinds of knowledge generated are identical, but that they both deserve attention, and that their possible interactions and influences should be investigated.

Then, if “types of knowledge” support “strategies of relations of forces”, 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.

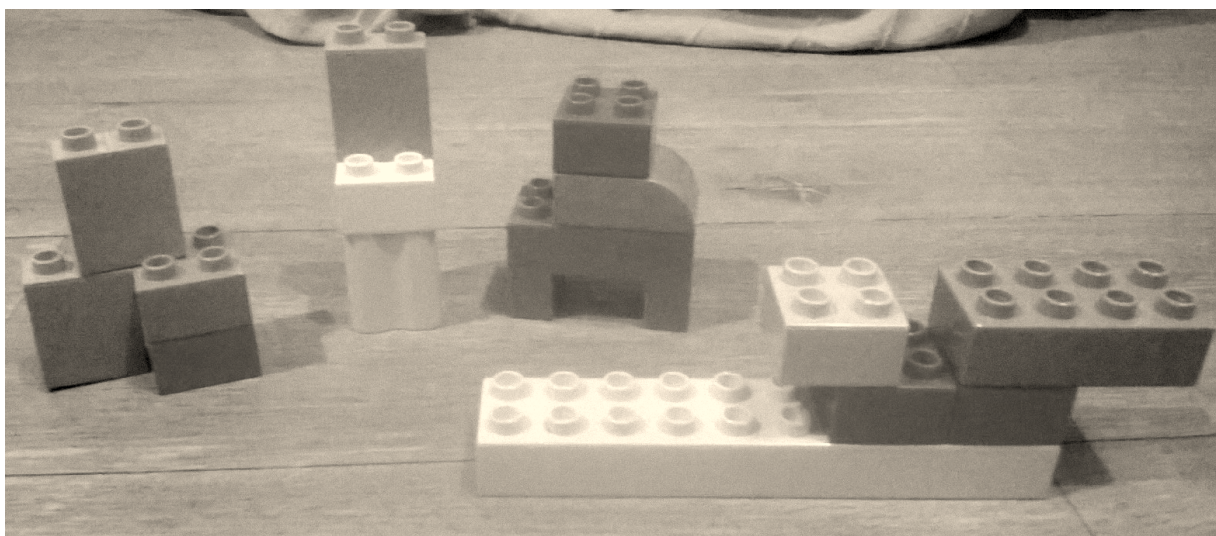


Image 3) *Crafting dispositifs* (photo by Ludivine Damay, 5 May 2014, Gembloux, Belgium)

All in all, this exercise promises a double defamiliarization. It reminds us that security and surveillance socio-technical assemblages produce, or participate in, some forms of knowledge. That despite their edginess, research objects tend to become all too quickly commonplace. This exercise also questions our research routines that despite disciplinary and epistemic controversies tend to forget their entanglements with research objects. It reminds us that researchers craft their own dispositifs also in relationship with the objects of research, and that these apparatuses are made of composite rules and elements, possibly as consistent and versatile as Lego-like constructions (cf. image 3 above). 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 is about starting from difference and looking for unexpected similarities. Anything different will do. Football? Architecture? Cake-baking? We stumbled onto using bird-watching.



Image 4) *Entangled* (photo by ARS, 25 August 2013, Melhus, Norway)

This was where the collaboration between the two authors of this essay 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 the authors of this image of a Hawfinch caught for banding. 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 the picture (image 4) did not immediately or merely represent the research finding. It came to occupy a different function in the economy of the research: it became its initial epigraph (or ‘exergue’). As Derrida notes:

*[a]n exergue serves to stock in anticipation and to prearchive a lexicon which, from there on, ought to lay down the law and **give the order**, even if this means contenting itself with naming the problem, that is, the subject. (1996, pp. 7, emphasis in original)*

Compare this picture with the image of the Schiphol Airport security scanners discussed above (image 1). Both visualize socio-technical assemblages, both concern forms of (benevolent) surveillance of mobility, both aim at generating knowledge. But they “stock” a different “lexicon”, so that the researcher is obliged to double check again whether the two images are naming the same problem, and, what’s more important, the researcher is obliged to question again what is the research problem at stake. To borrow from Drieschova (chapter 3, this volume), starting with different images shakes our “micro-foundations”, making us more aware of how our research may be influenced by our encounters with research objects.

Other images may also come to mind when thinking about entanglement, and these may stock very different lexica. This one (image 5) was used when discussing how Barad’s (2007) use of the term “entanglement” had set its mark on two recent conferences (Sætnan, 2014).



Image 5) *In a tangle* (photo by ARS, 18 August 2014, Entre Rios, Argentina)

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, in some seasons food. Birds perform seeding and fertilization. And the chains – of symbiosis and of association – go on. Endlessly. New "lexical entries", so to speak, occurred to the authors even after the editorial was published, entangling more and more concepts.

Metaphors/analogies/images mobilize the familiar to understand the unfamiliar (Blizzard, 2000). In this article, the authors use wildlife images to *de*-familiarize - showing the once-familiar in a new light, highlighting previously 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 ☺)? The authors 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:



Image 6) *Stop anthropomorphizing me!* (Photo by ARS, 27 October 2012, Trondheim, Norway)

Anthropomorphization – ascribing human traits to non-human entities – is one example of such distortion. Anthropomorphization is a no-no in many contexts. It doesn't 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. 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 doesn't teach us much about the anthropomorphized object (here a bird) or about the compared object: ourselves.



Image 7) *Are you being self-ironic, or just self-contradictory?* (Photo by ARS, 1 October 2012, Budapest, Hungary)

This exercise brings us to the edge of estrangement: are we, the authors, being self-ironic or just self-contradictory? 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?

### **Conclusions, or: a conversation in guise of third exercise**

The authors 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.

While the above thinking exercises have been proposed with no ambition to become a new pedagogy, we deem – based on our experience – that they may prove a useful warm-up for re-arranging, every time anew, worlds and views. These exercises of adjustment between worlds and views are not aimed at de-constructing 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. They are modest proposals and we are aware that the question of methodology is no novelty, with many voices already speaking in the field of International Relations (e.g. Aradau & Huysmans, 2014; Lacatus, Schade, & Yao, 2015; Salter & Mutlu, 2012). Yet, we argue that our approach is quite original compared to more analytical discussions about epistemic systems because it invites us to discuss the scaffoldings as much as the façade of the building (or its interior). This way, we want to remind ourselves, and our



readers, that social sciences produce techniques and apparatuses too, and probably cannot do otherwise.

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 science, the moment 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 discomfoting. 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

*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, at the risk of losing any credibility as researcher, I continuously tend to forget conclusions – I'm always more intrigued by the description and the analysis, or by the twists of the story when it comes to fiction. Still, there is an exception: the end of the series *Sopranos*. I loved the series but I gave up watching it somewhere through the last two seasons. Then a colleague spoke about the

very finale of the series, its abrupt discontinuity and the black screen – and I fast-forwarded to the last episode seeking to capture the 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. I had already no more on-going relation with that series: the conclusion was remarkable but had no real grasp.

*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. De-familiarization is not breaking all relations, but somehow making them more vibrant and making us more aware of our situated perspective.

*Rocco*: It may sound paradoxical, given the quite pedagogical tone of this chapter and the bizarre style, but I would like to conclude with a sort of pledge: to learn how to estrange the reader, the colleague, the 'object' of my research without irritating them. To strive for devising a form of critique that invites us (the researchers, the readers, possibly the actors at stake) to long for political alternatives, and eventually emancipates critique itself from the all too frequent vocation of merely denouncing the actors at stake, or of nurturing their feeling of guilt (Calvino, 2011(1980)).

*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 ☺

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