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Where on Earth are you?

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THE ONE BORDER we all cross, so often and with such well-rehearsed reflexes that we barely notice it, is the threshold of our own home. We open the front door, we close the front door: it's the most basic geographical habit, and yet one lifetime is not enough to recount all our comings and goings across this boundary. What threshold rites do you perform before you leave home? Do you appease household deities, or leave a lamp burning in your tabernacle? Do you quickly pat down pockets or bag to check you have the necessary equipment for the journey? Or take a final check in the hall mirror, 'to prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet'?

You don't have a slave to guard your door, as the ancients did, so you set the alarm (or you set the dog, *cave canem*). Keys? Yes, they're in your hand. You have 'the power of the keys', the right of possession that connects you to thousands of years of legal history, to the rights of sovereigns and states, to the gates of salvation and damnation. You open the door, step through, and turn to close it – through its diminishing arc, the details of your life inside recede. 'On one side, me and *my place*,' Georges Perec wrote:

> The private, the domestic (a space overfilled with my possessions: my bed, my carpet, my table, my typewriter, my books, my odd copies of the *Nouvelle Revue française*); on the other side, other people, the world, the public, politics. You can't simply let yourself slide from one into the other, can't pass from one to the other, neither in one direction nor in the other. You have to have the password, have to cross the threshold, have to show your credentials, have to communicate … with the world outside.

You lock the door. You've crossed the border. You've ignored Pascal's warning that all humanity's misery derives from not being able to sit alone in a quiet room. When the Savoyard aristocrat Xavier De Maistre was sentenced to six weeks' house arrest for duelling in 1790, he turned his detention into a grand imaginary voyage. 'My room is situated on the 45th degree of latitude,' he records in *A Journey around my Room*. 'It stretches from east to west; it forms a long rectangle, 36 paces in perimeter if you hug the wall.' And so he sets off, charting a course from his desk towards a painting hung in a corner, and from there he continues obliquely towards the door, but is waylaid by his armchair, which he sits in for a while, poking the fire, daydreaming. Then he bestirs himself again, presses north towards his bed, the place where 'for one half of our life' we forget 'the sorrows of the other half'. And so on, 'from the expedition of the Argonauts to the Assembly of Notables, from the lowest depths of hell to the

last fixed star beyond the Milky Way, to the confines of the universe, to the gates of chaos'. 'This,' he declares, 'is the vast terrain which I wander across in every direction at leisure.'

Whether around your room in forty days, or around the world in eighty days, or around the Circle Line in eighty minutes, whether still or still moving, the self is an act of cartography, and every life a study of borders. The moment of conception is a barrier surpassed, birth a boundary crossed. Günter Grass's Oskar, the mettlesome hero of *The Tin Drum*, narrates, in real time, his troubling passage through the birth canal and his desire, once delivered into the world, to reverse the process. The room is cold. A moth beats against the naked light bulb. But it's too late to turn back, the midwife has cut the cord.

Despite this uncommon ability to report live on his own birth, even Oskar's power of self-agency is subject to the one inalienable rule: there is only one way into this life, and one way out of it. Everything that happens in between – all the thresholds we cross and recross, all the 'decisions and revisions that a minute will reverse' – is bordered by this unbiddable truth. What we hope for is safe passage between these two fixed boundaries, to be able to make something of the experience of being alive before we are required to stop being alive. There's no negotiating birth or death. What we have is the journey.



Detail from 'Needle Series' No 3 by Stephen Rothschild.

On the evening of 3 October 2013, a boat carrying more than five hundred Eritreans and Somalis foundered just off the tiny island of Lampedusa. In the darkness, locals mistook their desperate cries for the sound of seagulls. The boat sank within minutes, but survivors were in the water for five hours, some of them clinging to the bodies of their dead companions as floats. Many of the 368 people who drowned never made it off the capsizing boat. Among the 108 people trapped inside the bow was an Eritrean woman, thought to be about twenty years old, who had given birth as she drowned. Her waters had broken in the water. Rescue divers found the dead infant, still attached by the umbilical cord, in her leggings. The longest journey is also the shortest journey.

Already, in the womb, our brains are laying down neural pathways that will determine how we

perceive the world and our place in it. Cognitive mapping is the way we mobilise a definition of who we are, and borders are the way we protect this definition. All borders – the lines and symbols on a map, the fretwork of walls and fences on the ground, and the often complex enmeshments by which we organise our lives – are explanations of identity. We construct borders, literally and figuratively, to fortify our sense of who we are; and we cross them in search of who we might become. They are philosophies of space, credibility contests, latitudes of neurosis, signatures to the social contract, soothing containments, scars.

They're also death zones, portals to the underworld, where explanations of identity are foreclosed. The boat that sank half a mile from Lampedusa had entered Italian territorial waters, crossing the imaginary line drawn in the sea – the impossible line, if you think about it. It had gained the common European border, only to encounter its own vanishing point, the point at which its human cargo simply dropped off the map. Ne plus ultra, nothing lies beyond.

I have no theory, no grand narrative to explain why so many people are clambering into their own hearses before they are actually dead. I don't understand the mechanisms by which globalisation, with all its hype of mobility and the collapse of distance and terrain, has instead delivered a world of barricades and partition, in which entire populations seem to be living – and dying – in a different history from mine. All I know is that a woman who believed in the future drowned while giving birth, and we have no idea who she was. And it's this, her lack of known identity, which places us, who are fat with it, in direct if hopelessly unequal relationship to her.

Everyone reading this has a verified self, an identity, formed through and confirmed by identification, that is attested to be 'true'. You can't function in the world without it: you can't open a bank account, get a credit card or national insurance number, or a driving licence, or access to your email and social media accounts, or a passport or visa, or points on your reward card. You can't have your tonsils removed without it. You can't die without it. Whether you're conscious of it or not, whether you like it or not, the verified self is the governing calculus of your life, the spectrum on which you, as an individual, are plotted from cradle to grave. As Pierre-Joseph Proudhon explained, you must be 'noted, registered, enumerated, accounted for, stamped, measured, classified, audited, patented, licensed, authorised, endorsed, reprimanded, prevented, reformed, rectified and corrected, in every operation, every transaction, every movement.'

Proudhon, who wrote this in 1851, was the first person to style himself an 'anarchist', so naturally he blamed the state for everything. And this makes his jeremiad insufficient for today (as I suspect it was in his time), because it presents us as passive victims of this overdetermined onslaught of verification, rather than hyperactive participants. We are, as Terry Eagleton put it in the *LRB* (1 June 2000) (/the-paper/v22/n11/terry-eagleton/qui-s-accuse-s-excuse) , 'a fanatically voluntaristic society', obsessed with public self-exposure and suspicious of 'reticence or obliquity'. But we all have what Milan Kundera calls the 'epidermal instinct to defend one's personal life'. Never mind the front door, back door, garage door, car door (and the petrol cap), or the safe, or the desk drawer containing your life insurance policy, just think of how many other locks you use, every day, all day: on your computer, your phone, Facebook, Amazon, bank account, credit card – all those memorable dates and memorable digits and memorable passwords and memorable answers to memorable questions that we store in

some special key room inside our brain.

But then think about the vast amount of detailed personal information we release into the atmosphere, all the time. You can't see it, but there's an endless belch of digital exhaust coming out of the smartphone in your pocket. If you've got an Apple watch, or a Fitbit bracelet, it's coming off your wrist. Even when idle, these devices are sending and receiving hundreds of thousands of communications to and from servers across the globe, independently of you, but using your identity. It's not identity theft, because you've consented to it by dint of the numberless pages of small print you've neglected to read. Your identity is being trafficked and traded, with your permission, by interested parties about whom you know nothing. If any of your devices has geolocation technology, and you haven't turned it off, you're now transmitting your exact location to God knows who or what, silently bip-bip-bipping like a little sputnik.

If you use a registered Oyster card to make journeys in London they will be tracked through a microchip embedded in the card, a tiny electronic system known as RFID, or Radio Frequency Identification, which contains your data in the form of a unique code that signals who you are, how much credit you have, the number of the credit card you used to pay for it. This chip has a miniature antenna which, when activated, sends and receives information to and from an external database, via the reader in the gate. You don't actually need the card at all, it's just a convenient casing for the chip. Once the reader confirms your identity, the separation barrier opens to let you through – another border crossed, another layer of identity fat acquired.

These integrated chips or circuits are everywhere, the invisible key of all identity verification. There's one in your credit card, in your car key, your phone, your work ID and entry card, your passport. If you're a criminal out on licence, or a registered asylum-seeker outside a detention centre, or a newborn baby in some hospitals, there's one in your ankle tag. If you're a dog, there's one between your shoulders. Human microchip implants are not yet widely available, but I found a web-based company called, with admirable frankness, Dangerous Things, which sells a 'sterile injection assembly' kit, currently reduced from $67 to $39. This kit enables you to push a chip, encased in 'borosilicate biocompatible glass', through your skin – the epidermal border – and once lodged there it will engage in a lively conversation with your computer or other smart devices and do all sorts of things for you, like open the car door or turn the heating on or tell your doctor you're having a heart attack. Implantable GPS-enabled chips are still theoretical, but could make it possible for a person to be located anywhere in the world by latitude, longitude, altitude, speed and direction of movement. Useful if you've been kidnapped in the Western Sahara, or you're lost in the car park at Westfield shopping centre. Useful, too, if you're tracking migrants.

Identity is established by identification, and identification is established by documenting and fixing the socially significant and codifiable information that confirms who you are. This process is called biometrics, literally 'life measurement', and its purpose is to reformulate identity as collectable, readable, exploitable data. In other words, you are a database from which some sort of content is extracted or 'captured', then algorithmically encrypted and stored for retrieval in a much larger database. Biometrics include personal information, behavioural traits, and unique physiological characteristics such as DNA, blood group, fingerprints, facial geometry, iris features, dorsal vein patterns.

In Proudhon's day, the manufactories of the verified self were still paper-based – and it's worth noting that it was the mass production of paper in the 15th century that revolutionised the keeping of records. It's a case of function following form: just as, later, the skyscraper followed the invention of the elevator, so the great chancelleries of the world were built on paper. Today, although we're still afflicted by endless paper forms, the constant production and maintenance of biometric data is principally driven by smart technologies of the sort I've been describing.

THE FULCRUM of the digitally verified self is the electronic passport. Most of the time, my UK e-passport won't transmit data because it has no power source of its own, but it wakes up when it enters the electromagnetic field of the reader installed in smart border control systems. Once it's powered up, the chip identifies itself by sending a 'unique identifier' to the reader, and when this is accepted, it transmits its content using a digital signature to confirm the authenticity of that data. It's a double-lock system, designed to prevent your electronic identity being stolen and cloned by hackers. Currently, the data on my chip are the same as on the front inside page of the passport: first name, family name, date of birth, sex, nationality, document serial number, issuing state, expiry date – a coupling of me with the authority of the state that confirms this is me. The e-passport also contains a digital copy of the photograph I submitted along with my original application.

The passport photo is the court with no appeal, the one 'likeness' guaranteed to show you looking the way you never want to look. Paul Fussell called it 'the most egregious little modernism', redolent of 'the world of Prufrock and Joseph K and Malone', and indeed every time my photo is scrutinised by a passport officer, it's as if I've entered that same world of anxiety and disassociation. As Stefan Zweig put it, I cease to feel as if I quite belong to myself. I split off from my bureaucratic double, and then the passport officer waves me through and I lurch at the insult – you really believe that's me?

They know it's me. The digital copy of my photograph in the microchip is a JPEG that can be enlarged to a far higher definition than the little cut-out on the passport. This means that my unique facial geometry can be read by Automated Facial Identification software that traces the precise distance between my eyes, nose, mouth and ears. This is the reason we're not allowed to smile when we sit for the photograph. Smiling was banned in 2004 along with frowning or raising eyebrows because this software treats the face as a blank somatic surface, scraped clean – exfoliated – of all affective expression, in order to be differentiated from other faces. It's a search for fixed markers, not a full cartographic survey.

Passports, in one form or another, are as old as the hills they allow us to pass, but their use was far from systematic until the First World War. Before then, Zweig tells us, 'one embarked and alighted without questioning or being questioned,' and 'frontiers … were nothing but symbolic lines which one crossed with as little thought as one crosses the Meridian of Greenwich.' Zweig himself travelled from Europe to India and America without ever having possessed or even seen a passport. Come the war, he continues,

> nationalism emerged to agitate the world … and the first visible phenomenon which this intellectual epidemic of our century brought about was xenophobia; morbid dislike of the foreigner, or at least fear of the foreigner. The world was on the defensive against strangers, everywhere they got short shrift. The humiliations which once had been devised with criminals alone in mind now were imposed upon the traveller, before and during every journey. There had to be photographs from right and left, in profile and full face, one's hair had to be cropped sufficiently to make the ears visible; fingerprints were taken, at first only the thumb but later all ten fingers; furthermore, certificates of health, of vaccination, police certificates of good standing, had to be shown; letters of recommendation were required, invitations to visit a country had to be produced; they asked for the addresses of relatives, for moral and financial guarantees, questionnaires, and forms in triplicate and quadruplicate needed to be filled out, and if only one of this sheaf of papers was missing one was lost.

Zweig's relationship to the passport was troubled – he suffered every rubber stamp as a 'stigma', every interview with a border official as a 'humiliation' – but for others it opened a door onto the world. Having a British passport, Naomi Mitchison remarked, made her feel like 'the spiritual heir of all the milords who have in the grand commercial past swaggered over the continent'. There are still plenty of milords a'swaggering. I haven't been able to confirm this, but I think the UK passport is the only one to include inherited or honorary titles as part of the verified self. The government's guidance on the correct use of titles in passports is hilarious. For example, issuing officers must know that the daughter of a baron or life peer, if unmarried, is known as 'Hon.' followed by her first name and surname; but if she's married to a knight or baronet then she's 'Hon. Lady' followed by her surname; and if she's married to a commoner she's just 'Hon. Mrs' followed by her surname. There are pages and pages of this U and Non-U, posher-than-posh tosh. The guidance also states that 'a title of nobility should always be checked against the entry either in Debrett's Peerage, the latest edition of *Who's Who*, or the appropriate edition of the *London Gazette*.' If in doubt, passport officials are advised to refer to a line manager, who presumably has received advanced training in the subject from Nancy Mitford.

The British passport itself is still a swaggering thing, with a power of Open Sesame that places it first in the world (shared with Germany) for visa-free travel – currently to 173 countries and territories. The Eritrean passport, by contrast, offers visa-free access to just 34 countries, ranking it 101st, tied with Nepal and the Palestinian territories. Somalia, with access to only thirty countries, claims the third lowest rank, just above Iraq and Afghanistan. These bottom-liners are unofficially classified as what the French sometimes call the 'petits pays de merde' – shitty little countries – and most of the visa-free travel on offer to them is to other shitty little countries. To visit the UK, they need a visa. The Home Office doesn't publish annual figures for UK visitor visas (as opposed to work or long-stay visas) issued to Eritreans and Somalis, but it's safe to conjecture they're very low, maybe in the hundreds. We are first-class citizens, they're 101st, and 104th-class citizens, respectively – which is the reason they take the smuggler's boat (for which the ticket, by the way, is considerably more expensive than a flight to Heathrow from Asmara or Mogadishu).

The visa – from the French *visé*, 'having been seen' – is another key document of the verified self. Without it, those Eritreans and Somalis on the boat heading for Lampedusa were invisible, unseen, well before they disappeared into the water. I suspect most of them didn't possess passports either: they belonged to the new, mobile population known as the 'sans-

papiers', the undocumented. There are several reasons for this, including the fact that people fleeing failed or repressive states to seek asylum elsewhere tend not to advertise the fact beforehand by walking into a government passport office. Hence the role of people smugglers in the Scramble from Africa (and they might have learned a thing or two from the Scramble for Africa, which generated the biggest people-trafficking operations in history).

LIKE the passport, the visa has a long history, but its usage has been substantially reinforced in the post-9/11 context. The radical shift in the policing of territorial access is most evident in the United States and the European Union, whose cherished liberal principles of openness and mobility – whereby the limits of geography are not the limits of our lives – are now being walled in behind a policy of exclusion. This is the liberalism of possession, defended by ever thickening borders, sharply rising enforcement budgets, new and more invasive surveillance technologies, and other mechanisms of exclusion of which stricter visa regimes are one powerful example. Where the visa used to be a stamp in the passport, or a document, it's now the polished artefact of the post-9/11 smart border, complete with its own embedded chip.

The majority of passport applications do not involve being interviewed (unless you're unlucky enough to be called in by the UK Border Force for an 'identity interview'). The state accepts, instead, the testimony of a respectable member of the community that you are who you say you are. But the visa application involves you presenting your embodied self alongside your textual or digital double. In 1919, Ezra Pound was held up in Paris for hours by an American official who doubted his bona fides, and he was still fulminating about this delay over 'folderols' eight years later. Today, although you still have to be seen, you can offload some of the botheration by paying an agency to deal with your application. The Russian embassy in London has outsourced its visa section to a company called VFS, and if you're queue-averse you can pay a little extra to loll about in 'the comfort and privacy' of the 'premium service lounge' at its centre near the Barbican. If drinks and snacks and a 'complimentary Russian phrasebook' aren't sufficient enticement, you can pay a bit more for the Portable BIO-Kit Service, whereby 'a team of experienced officers can come to your home or office to check your visa application documents [and] collect your fingerprints.' Er, I don't think so.

The visa application form is a genre unto itself. And it's an object lesson in miniature of the borderline personality disorder of the nation state: it's here that its deepest fears are laid bare alongside its delusions of grandeur. You could write the history of the modern world through visa forms, but I've limited myself to a superficial survey. It's sufficient, however, to suggest that global inequality can be measured through a comparative study of these forms. If you're trying to visit any of the premier league countries, you have to answer scads of questions, but if they're bottom of the table or relegated countries, it's a much thinner process. Rich countries with expensive, IT-driven border systems can afford to embed biometrics – including fingerprints – in the visa. Poor countries are still at the rubber stamp level of technology. Rich countries use English, the international language of visas, fluently. Poor countries don't. Rich countries can afford to turn down visa applications, poor countries can't.

Here are a few distinguishing features from the visitor visa forms I've looked at: Pakistan asks you to supply an 'identification mark', and state your blood group, religion and history of military service. Burma relies on a self-description: you must state the colour of your hair and

eyes, your height and your ‘complexion’. The Democratic Republic of Congo asks that you supply evidence of ‘good moral character’, and confirmation that your host in the DRC is a ‘physical or moral person’. Japan is particularly interested to know if you use marijuana, opium or stimulants. Papua New Guinea, which offers special visas to Yachtspersons, Comedians and Gospel Groups, requires a ‘good health certificate’, chest X-ray, HIV test result and statement of good character ‘from your local police authorities’. China asks if you have a ‘serious mental disorder’ or infectious pulmonary tuberculosis. Saudi visas are in the gift of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. You must state your religion, and agree to respect Islamic traditions, including the ban on alcohol and drugs, contravention of which, the form warns, is ‘punishable by the death penalty’. The Solomon Islands caution that all declarations on their visa form must be ‘true in both substance and in fact’. Just about every country wants to know if you’ve been involved in prostitution or the sex trade, except Thailand.

Russia’s visitor visa form asks you to list every country you’ve been to in the past ten years. But so does the UK form, which, at 12 pages, is a real potboiler. Its principal fascination is with how much money you have – income, stocks, shares – and how you spend it, but it also wants to know if you glorify or justify terrorism, if you are generally of good moral character, and whether you have any spent or unspent convictions including traffic offences.

Finally, the Big Daddy, the peak of the moral high ground that is the US visa form. This encompasses forced sterilisation, prostitution, communicable disease, polygamy, ‘moral turpitude’, espionage, the trafficking of ‘confidential US business information obtained in connection with US participation in the Chemical Weapons Convention’, torture (a terrible practice which as we all know is scorned by the US) and terrorism, physical or rhetorical. And, yes, the question about membership of the Communist Party is still there.

We’ve all marvelled at the logic of asking a torturer or a terrorist to volunteer the fact. Indeed, the idea that any of us is treated as a trustworthy witness to ourself in this age of surveillance seems weirdly anachronistic. But the tick-box confessional is less mystifying than it seems. The authorities know that self-incrimination is utterly improbable – what they’re looking for is a fast track to deportation in the event that you’ve made a false confession. In other words, you don’t get kicked out for being a terrorist, but for lying about it on your visa form. This makes the visa a more powerful instrument of exclusion than the passport, which, in theory at least, offers the holder some protection. The visa is also a more intrusive contrivance, because it’s concerned not only with identity, but with intentionality, with the Cartesian principle that what really matters is going on inside your head.

Gone are the days when we could puncture the seriousness of all this, as the British journalist Gilbert Harding did by writing ‘Sole purpose of visit’ next to the question, ‘Do you intend to overthrow, by force, the government of the United States?’ This is the age of extremely bossy borders, and you don’t mess with the rules or their enforcers. You trawl out your spent driving convictions, you enclose your chest X-ray and all the other folderols, and then you sign your confession. It’s a sober affair – unless you’re using the Mexican visa form that ends with the invitation to ‘please sing in the box’.

This one jubilant opportunity excepted, to cross a border legally is now a long-drawn-out act of obedience, a hushed processional from consular office to immigration desk. At the airport,

we advance, with the miniature steps of geisha girls, towards the apparatus that sees, sees into, scans and filters us. We yield to verbal instructions issued in what Auden described as the 'peremptory tone reserved for … children one cannot trust/Who might be tempted by ponds or learn some disgusting/Trick from a ragamuffin'. We remove our jacket, shoes, belt, and hold aloft our cosmetic secrets in a see-through plastic bag. Without protest, we shuffle in our socks towards the pat-down, or into the machine that sees through our clothes without us having to take them off (they're known as 'porno scanners' in the security industry).[1]

This behaviour is so removed from the normal circumstances of our lives (bar a medical examination) that it can only be viewed as an act of submission, and indeed border crossing points – especially at airports – are carefully designed to induce this disciplinary state, shaping traveller flows to aggregate and separate passengers so that they have no option but to toe the line. (It's the same design principle as the Ikea store layout.) We submit because we believe it makes us safe, that a picture of our genitals is a fair trade for a safe flight. But, as the independent security researcher Evan Booth has established, it's possible for terrorists to build lethal weapons using only items for sale at the shops beyond the security checkpoints. Booth himself designed and built an arsenal of fully functioning weapons from such retail items, including a fragmentary grenade that he made out of a coffee tumbler in less than eight minutes. (Apparently, the spikes from the crown of an eight-inch Statue of Liberty make ideal shrapnel.) Booth's website, terminalcornucopia.com, includes a video of him firing a breech-loading shotgun made from a deodorant aerosol, cans of Red Bull, nine volt batteries, tape, dental floss, tin foil, a hairdryer, a fridge magnet clip, and a condom.

The aim of Booth's low-tech experiments is to expose the security rigmarole as a hugely expensive piece of theatre staged by high-tech boyos cashing in on fear. Smart borders are a bull market for these professionals of unease, who were the first to see, beyond the smoking rubble of the World Trade Center, a new frontier opening up. As the then US transportation secretary, Norman Mineta, warned the Senate Appropriations Committee in May 2002, 'We've got every salesman – 20,000 of them, I think – approaching us about how they've got some machine that will take care of everything we do, including not only detecting explosives but athlete's foot as well.'

Every cracker-barrel sage and soapbox booster turned up for the party. One of them was Paul Ekman. He's a psychologist, professor emeritus at the University of California and founder of the Emotional Intelligence Academy. In 2009, *Time* magazine ranked him one of the world's hundred most influential people. When he began his research in the 1960s, he told himself: 'I've got to unpack the face. It [is] a gold mine of information that everyone [has] ignored.' So he created an 'atlas of emotions', with more than ten thousand facial expressions, some of which are so tiny they only last one 25th of a second. If you can learn to spot these 'micro-expressions' you can become a human lie detector, Ekman claims, because 'when people are being deceptive they leak the truth, and you can be trained to see and hear this leakage.' Ekman uses his Facial Action Coding System to train border officials and other security enforcers 'to read and understand what others are thinking and feeling from information they give off'.

Thus, the verified self becomes a perpetual confession in which your body and mind are testifying for you without you even realising it. There you are, trying to look innocent, and all

the while your stream of consciousness is pooling at the feet of Ekman's truth professionals. This is Klondike gold, and the US government has invested more than a billion dollars in getting hold of it through an Ekman-inspired programme called Screening Passengers by Observation Techniques, or SPOT. The programme has been rolled out in every major US airport, and according to a document leaked in March last year, it works on a points system: too much yawning, add one point. Whistling as you approach the screening process, add another point. A cold stare, arrogance, rigid posture all get two points. Fidgeting, one point. Also on the checklist: wobbling Adam's apple, excessive throat clearing, exaggerated or repetitive grooming gestures, wearing improper attire for location. If your score climbs to six or higher (out of a possible 92), the SPOT-trained Behavioural Detection Officer will pull you out of the security line for closer inspection.

Giving testimony to a congressional hearing in 2011, Ekman claimed that border officials trained in his methods were up to fifty times more effective than their untrained colleagues at spotting high-risk passengers. This contradicted an earlier independent report which concluded that 'people (including professional lie-catchers with extensive experience of assessing veracity) would achieve similar hit rates if they flipped a coin.' Two years ago, the US Government Accountability Office agreed there was no scientific evidence to support the programme and recommended limiting its funding until the Transport Security Administration (TSA) could prove its usefulness. The review is still underway.

The first TSA officer ever to be killed in the line of duty was a Behaviour Detection Officer. Gerardo Hernandez was shot on 1 November 2013 in Los Angeles International Airport. Was he so focused on micro-expressions that he didn't see the gun in his assailant's hand? Or were the shooter's facial actions strange islands in Ekman's atlas, yet unknown and unmapped? Or was the incident a desolate example of the folly of Ekman's claim to have developed a scientific method for the detection or inference of future behaviour? According to a recent investigation conducted by undercover teams from the Department of Homeland Security, officers trained in Ekman's techniques failed to spot fake weapons and explosives in 95 per cent of instances.

One more thing about Ekman. He claimed in an interview that the first time he saw Bill Clinton, during the 1992 Democratic primaries, he detected a 'hand-in-the-cookie-jar' expression. So he contacted someone on Clinton's communications staff and said: 'Look, Clinton's got this way of rolling his eyes along with a certain expression, and what it conveys is "I'm a bad boy." I don't think it's a good thing. I could teach him how not to do that in two to three hours.' Evidently, Clinton failed to take up the offer, but Ekman's boast that he can use the same technique for discovering a lie to cover one up saves me from having to develop any further critique of the flaws in his multimillion dollar enterprise.

The SPOT programme may yet be dropped, but the theory behind it will not. Ekman's so-called science of facial coding is now the gold standard system of post-9/11 'face of terror' security solutions. Automated Facial Expression Analysis, heat cameras that detect blush responses during deception, sensors that track pupil dilation and a machine called the Automated Virtual Agent for Truth Assessments in Real-Time (AVATAR): these and other devices all target the face as a dynamic field of classifiable information about the individual.[2] They don't just measure you, they're geared to unlocking the emotional, affective truth of you

and binding it into information networks. It reminds me of L. Ron Hubbard's hilariously misdescribed Church of Scientology, whose members undergo mental 'auditing' with a confessor who uses an 'electropsychometer' to detect and record minute changes in electrical resistance through the body. Scientologists claim this e-meter allows auditors to 'see a thought'.

I DON'T WANT to be 'audited' by John Travolta, or any other policeman of the soul. And as I shuffle towards the immigration desk after the plane has landed, I don't feel grateful for the final act of examination that awaits me, with all its sophisticated accoutrements of 'social sorting', 'digital discrimination' and algorithms to separate friend from foe, verified from unverified.

Here we are in the brightly lit arrivals hall (the better to see you with, my dear), the in-between space of two worlds, the sterile testing zone. We stand behind the line, until we're summoned to complete the liturgical procedure with an agent of God sitting in a glass pulpit. Questions are asked. We believe we are answering truthfully, but what do we know? The self has its own internal borders and secret corridors, full of dark things we have yet to acknowledge as our own. And anyway, who are you to ask? No, don't go down that route, your face might betray your rebellious thoughts.

The one time I queried this disciplinary state – very politely, or so I thought – at US immigration, I earned a big stamp in my passport that read, in uppercase, 'PAROLED', and I had to find a judge to review my case within two weeks or risk being deported. I was successful (the judge was a preppy in a polo shirt who admired my British accent), but for years after, on every visit to the States, the red stamp marked me out as a heretic. Now, with a clean passport, I have been rectified, as Proudhon would put it. I behave like a docile, obedient subject. But once I've crossed the border my face turns into the emoticon for, 'I feel like a lamppost that's just been urinated on.'[3]

I suppose the emoticon culture gets what it deserves: an emotional economy, generated by computer modelling and regulated by algorithms, that translates the subjective self into objective data. It's nonsense, of course. No algorithm can break open the encryptions and fantasies of the inner self, any more than the professors of the Academy of Lagado in *Gulliver's Travels* could extract sunbeams from cucumbers. It's the quantifying spirit of the Enlightenment gone mad – or madder, given that Swift thought it was pretty nuts at the time – where the obsession with collecting, listing, measuring and categorising everything drives us into the expectation that by so doing we can solve a mystery.

In John Updike's *Roger's Version*, a graduate student tries to convince his professor that he can prove the existence of God using a complex procedure in computer graphics. Updike uses this plotline to stage a theological debate in which the student's attempt to beat a path to God is viewed as an act of profanity. The debate is heavily influenced by the work of the Swiss theologian Karl Barth, who insisted that 'there is *no* way which leads to this event … there is *no* faculty in man for apprehending it.' That's the whole point of having a God, Barth was saying, yet 'our arrogance demands that, in addition to everything else, some super-world should also be known and accessible to us.'

The politics of scrutiny will not suffer the crick that can't be cracked. Total knowability is the objective, and, its high priests say, we have the technology to achieve it. This is not a conspiracy (and if it were, it would involve Facebook and Google, as much as, if not more than, the state): rather, it's a trajectory. The super-world's gravitational pull is apparently irresistible. Who knows, perhaps it can be reached. Sometimes a destination exists simply because enough people believe it does. Take, for example, the European Agency for the Management of Operational Co-operation at the External Borders, known as Frontex, and its vast surveillance system, Eurosur. Their joint operations across the entire European common border and beyond are supported by what Frontex is touting as 'the system of systems' – a network of technologies that, when fully amalgamated, will deliver 'the frictionless circulation of identity data within a single globalised market of information'. In other words, a super-world – let's call it the Technicum – where the whole order of society and its component parts (us) is revealed. And not just as it is today, but as it will be tomorrow, because the key mission of the system of systems is predicting the future.

It works like this: National Co-ordination Centres in the EU member states pump intelligence and biometric data into Frontex's Situation Centre, where algorithms sweat day and night to identify patterns and trends so that 'a continuum of security threats [can be] pursued *and anticipated* through digital traces and their perpetual recombination.' The idea is that the risk-based calculations provided by the algorithms allow Frontex to monitor and react to the future: a report commissioned by the agency recommends that border guards be trained in 'future thinking'. The report also quotes the (dead) management guru Peter Drucker, who said that 'the best way to predict the future – is to create it.' Well, Frontex has had a decade to perfect its crystal ball gazing since it was set up in 2004, and unless I missed the press release, it didn't predict that in 2015 alone, more than one million unauthorised migrants would cross the European border, with the unintended consequence that the Schengen Treaty now looks as small as the town in Luxembourg where it was signed. This is what hypervisibility failed to see.

No worries, Frontex has just been awarded a 54 per cent budget increase by the European Commission, which should pay for some tinkering with the software. And there's hardware to be maintained too: unmanned drones, coastal radar systems, thermal and infrared sensors, surveillance cameras (also known as 'game cameras'), snare nets, pepper spray, and a whole lot of steel fences, razor wire, spotlights and weaponised watchtowers.[4] We don't come across any of this, because we're first-class citizens and we don't travel in inflatable toy boats. But in case we're in any doubt, this is what it looks like: a war on immigration, or a war on the global wanderings of the unverified self.

'The system of systems' is a military term that embraces the doctrine of 'total interoperability' and 'full spectrum dominance', whereby warfare becomes 'a permanent boundless exercise … against a wide range of non-state adversaries'. Not the Thirty Years War, or the Hundred Years War, but the for ever and everywhere war – war itself as a kind of super-world. When I look at images of the militarised European border at, say, Melilla or Ceuta – places I hope never to find myself in – I see the technologies of a medieval siege repurposed for the Technicum. This medieval modernism is born of a fatal resolve to keep the outsider out, to separate the verified from the unverified. But because it requires the systematic enactment of suspicion, it's also a demonstration of the weakness of the strong. You can't win security if you don't know what it looks like. Every Maginot Line, sooner or later, is an Imaginot Line.

On 8 July 2013, the newly elected Pope Francis, on his first official trip outside Rome, arrived by boat at the island of Lampedusa to commemorate the thousands of migrants who have died crossing from North Africa. After casting a wreath into the water, he celebrated mass on the sports field that doubles as a migrant reception centre. He delivered his homily from an altar constructed out of an old fishing boat. 'Where is your brother?' he asked.

> Who is responsible for this blood? In Spanish literature we have a comedy of Lope de Vega which tells how the people of the town of Fuente Ovejuna kill their governor because he is a tyrant. They do it in such a way that no one knows who the actual killer is. So when the royal judge asks, 'Who killed the governor? they all reply: 'Fuente Ovejuna, sir.' Everybody and nobody! Today too, the question has to be asked: who is responsible for the blood of these brothers and sisters of ours? Nobody! … the globalisation of indifference makes us all 'unnamed'; responsible, yet nameless and faceless.

The faceless unnamed. Not the anonymous clump of one million migrants, but us, verified down to our eyeballs, yet unseeing and unseeable behind the high wall we have built to protect ourselves from the disordered, unauthorised, unregistered others beyond. Is this what the system of systems delivers, something 'so perfect that no one will need to be good', as Eliot wrote in 'Choruses from the Rock'? If so, then it places us, as well as those we exclude, in jeopardy. It brings us no nearer to God, or the super-world or whatever you want to call it, because, as Eliot warned, it mistakes information for knowledge, and knowledge for wisdom.

All migrants know that the reply to the question 'Who on earth are you?' is another question: '*Where* on earth are you?' And so they want what we've got, a verified self that will transport them to our side of history. Thus, the migrant identity becomes a burden to be unloaded. Migrants often make the journey without identity documents, and I mentioned one reason for this, namely that the attempt to obtain them in their country of origin can be very dangerous. Others lose them at the outset when they're robbed by police or border guards, or by people traffickers en route. Many destroy them deliberately because they fear, not without reason, that our system of verification will be a mechanism for sending them back. In Algeria, they're called *harraga*, Arabic for 'those who burn'. And they don't only burn their documents: many burn their fingertips on hobs or with lighters or acid, or mutilate them with razors, to avoid biometric capture and the prospect of expulsion. These are the weapons of the weak.

The boat carrying more than five hundred Eritreans and Somalis sank off Lampedusa in October 2013, barely three months after the pope's visit. Whether they had lost their identity papers, or destroyed them, when facing death the people on board wanted to be known. As the boat listed and took on water, and with most of the women and children stuck below deck, those who knew they wouldn't make it called out their names and the names of their villages, so that survivors might carry ashore news of their deaths.[5] There isn't really any other way: there's no formal identification procedure for those who drown. In Lampedusa's cemetery, the many plaques that read 'unidentified migrant' merely tell us that people have been dying in the Mediterranean for at least 25 years – more than twenty thousand of them, according to current estimates.

Everyone must be counted, but only if they count. Dead migrants don't count. The woman

who drowned while giving birth was not a biometric subject, she was a biodegradable one. I don't want to reconstitute her as a sentimental artefact, an object to be smuggled into the already crowded room of my bad conscience. But I do want her to be known by more than just the number she was given after being hauled out of the water – 288 (and 289 for her baby) – because otherwise the story of migrants remains infinitely reproducible to the point of abstraction. For the past two years, I've searched for something by which to identify her. I'd all but given up when, just a few days ago, I stumbled across an article by Mattathias Schwartz, a journalist who visited Lampedusa after the tragedy. He found a survivor who turned out to be the woman's partner and the father of her baby. Her name, this man said, was Yohanna. In Eritrean, it means 'congratulations'.

Footnotes

1 These full-body scanners are also installed in Israeli checkpoints in the occupied territories, supplied and maintained by the British-Danish company G4S.

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2 According to the Department of Homeland Security, 'Individuals flagged by the AVATAR then undergo a secondary screening with a human field agent. There are hundreds of psychophysiological and behavioural cues (e.g. body language, vocal, cardio-respiratory, eye behaviour) that can be used to determine whether a person is credible or may pose a risk … An operator using the AVATAR can choose one of several virtual agents – male or female, stern or friendly – to interview people and customise for language preference.'

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3 'This impartial dog's nose/scrutinises the lamppost. All in good order./He sets his seal on it and/moves on to the next' (Basil Bunting, 'The Passport Officer').

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4 The border fence of the future may be invisible, according to Peter Andreas in the journal *International Security*: 'virtual' fencing may use non-lethal microwave technology developed by the Pentagon that creates burning sensations without actually burning the skin.

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5 It's common for migrants to write their names and the phone numbers of their families inside the hull, or on their T-shirts, when they embark or when the boat begins to struggle in the water.

Letters

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Frances Stonor Saunders is right to note that images of borders structure and organise our lives (*LRB*, 3 March). When she sees ‘in the moment of conception … a barrier surpassed’, her perception of the (active, intrepid) sperm penetrating the (passive, docile) egg is shaped by a scientific imaginary that maps masculinity and femininity onto reproductive cells. But as feminist philosophers of science have pointed out, these dynamics have been projected onto the sperm and the egg. As Emily Martin wrote in her classic paper ‘The Egg and the Sperm’ (1991), the two ‘stick together because of adhesive molecules on the surfaces of each. The egg traps the sperm and adheres to it so tightly that the sperm’s head is forced to lie flat against the surface of the [egg’s] zona, a little bit like’ – she recalls an image used by researchers at Johns Hopkins University – ‘Br’er Rabbit getting more and more stuck to Tar Baby the more he wriggles.’ These images matter: they anchor our association of woman with passivity in a bowdlerised ‘natural’, which we imagine as untouched by culture even as we sculpt it to fit our mores.

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