



Making Sense of Things

Archaeologies of Sensory Perception

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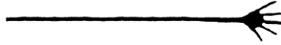
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Face/Off: A Neomaterialistic Study of the Face

Johan Normark



*He lost all his power
The king has lost his face*
(Dirkschneider, et al. 1980)

This text shall focus on some of the sensorial parts that create a human subject. It shall therefore focus on 'prehuman' processes in the sense that the human subject emerges from non-human components. The human subject is always in a state of becoming and it emerges through morphogenetic processes, not from a predefined genetic design. She is an emergent whole, emergent from a broad set of component parts that create an assemblage that we call a human subject (DeLanda 2006; Deleuze and Guattari 1987; Ingold 2000; Protevi 2009).

Of interest here is the treatment of senses, or rather their associated organs, in art. Fairly common in the Maya area in southern Mexico and northern Central America is the intentional and partial destruction of monumental art, especially monuments with the king's face (Fig. 1). Apart from the eyes, the ears and the mouth were sometimes destroyed in the same act of mutilation of monuments. It appears that the goal was to deprive the king of his main perceptive capabilities. This defacement indicates that the portraits were vital and that the face was crucial for the king's identity (Houston et al. 2006). However, the portrait was not only an index of the king and the divine power the ruler was considered to manifest. It was also an important part of the State.

Assemblages

The subject of this text should be seen as an example of the lowest scale of a multi-scalar and non-anthropocentric approach based on Manuel DeLanda's (2002, 2006) *assemblage theory* which is an elaboration of Gilles Deleuze's and Felix Guattari's (1987) ideas. In recent years, the assemblage concept (*agencement* in French) has become increasingly important in the social and human sciences. The concept has been used in the actor-network theory (Callon 2005; Latour 2005), but above all it has been used in Deleuzian perspectives. An assemblage is formed of interacting heterogeneous elements (*multiplicities*) that create an emergent whole which has a territory consisting of two axes. One axis opens up (*deterritorializes*) or closes (*territorializes/ homogenizes*) the assemblage and the second axis performs material and expressive functions (Deleuze and Guattari 1987). Every deterritorialization leads to new constellations through *reterritorialization*.

Buildings, artefacts, sculptures, and portraits are multiplicities consisting of many histories that link to other multiplicities and draw some attributes but not others. Further, "multiplicities are not like the



Figure 1: Part of Panel 3 from Cancuen. Copyright Jorge Perez de Lara.

interlocking pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, which fit together to reveal a single picture. Histories may overlap and contradict each other, have varying intensities, durations and stabilities” (Murphy 2006:12). Hence, instead of asking what a portrait was I will be focusing on its connections through *involution* (or how the interior of one entity connects to its exterior). The portraits, buildings, etc. were only what they were depending on what they connected with, not because of an essence (Normark 2010). There are variations of flows of humans and materials that can create diversifying yet stable formations by linking parts with other parts. These assemblages can never form a united whole like a jigsaw puzzle (Murphy 2006).

Murphy defines an assemblage as an “arrangement of discourses, objects, practices and subject positions that work together within a particular discipline or knowledge tradition. It is not the list of elements that make an assemblage consequential, it is what they made possible by the ways they articulated each other” (Murphy 2006:12). Hence, “an assemblage, in its multiplicity, necessarily acts on semiotic flows, material flows, and social flows simultaneously” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987:22-23).

The process of emergence of assemblages is similar to the one found in complexity theory (Beekman and Baden 2005; Protevi 2009). Heterogeneous elements reach a self-organizing transitional phase (deterritorialization) where the new assemblages emerge (reterritorialization). These assemblages form a new population that generates other assemblages, etc. This multi-scalar approach works from a heterarchical ontology of flows. There is no hierarchy between what is socially constructed and a real world. There simply is a real world that is constantly in a process of change.

Saddle, horse, bow and rider form an assemblage as do car, driver and road. These are all arrangements of discourse, objects and practices that work together. The assemblage must be a working unit but the component parts can be part of other assemblages as well and the assemblage may be a component part of another assemblage. The assemblage is lived and produced rather than being symbolic, representational and signifying. Functions, such as sensing, singing, eating and mating, are therefore territorialized within the assemblage (Parr 2005:68).

Likewise, a portrait of a king is the territorialization of kingship. The greater assemblage we are concerned with in relation to the royal portrait is therefore that of *ajawlel* (kingship). This consists of the king

in person, the royal court, buildings, monumental art, artefacts, estates, etc. It also consists of titles and activities such as dedication, feasting, calendar rituals, and so forth. The king is the focal point around which the assemblage takes shape. The smaller assemblage we are concerned with in relation to this portrait is the sensorial assemblage related to the depicted organs.

The assemblage of senses

DeLanda (2006) begins his assemblage analysis with subhuman parts, such as the senses, that create a human subject. The subject emerges through external relations, i.e. it can only emerge and exist if the components interact with other components and assemblages (involution). The senses must therefore interact with external features. The Maya area offers a rich source for studying the senses from such a perspective. Houston and others (2006) show how the senses, experience and emotions were represented and manifested during the Classic period. In their book the authors primarily follow the Aristotelian senses (sight, hearing, smell, taste and touch). However, since a sense is a psychological method for perceiving the world and oneself, a capability to register external stimuli, contemporary neurologists suggest that there are at least five additional senses among humans and even more among other animals. People also have thermoception (perception of heat and cold), nociception (perception of pain), equilibrioception (experience of position and acceleration, i.e. balance), proprioception (perception of one's own body), and interoception (perception of the body's internal physiology). Undoubtedly, the Maya material can be used to understand some of these perceptions as well, particularly heat and cold. However, in this text the focus will be sight.

A subjective experience is created through distinct and individual sensory impressions according to DeLanda. Every form of impression (visual, auditory, passion, desire) is a singular individuality and existence (a *haecceity*). They are heterogeneous and cannot be reduced to their component parts. Ideas that arise from these impressions are direct copies without any representational filter. An idea only has a lower intensity than the impression. Our habits of grouping ideas and comparing them transform a population of individual ideas into an emergent assemblage. Habitual repetition creates a stable identity for the assemblage and habits

sustain the association of ideas. Hence, the human being is habitual and creative at the same time (DeLanda 2006).

To believe in the ideas brings them closer to the impressions. However, it is often the intensity of a belief that drives social action rather than its linguistic proposition and semantic content (DeLanda 2006). Thus, human agents probably did not understand the monumental iconography from the cosmological and symbolic details described by various Mayanists. Instead, monumental iconography worked like Gell's (1998) sense of art and agency. The iconography directly affected the viewer. It was designed to affect, not to be analyzed. It was the intensity of the beliefs associated with the impressions of viewing the iconography that created a ritual arena. The iconography was also a way for a ruling regime to direct the ideas into a homogeneous form (what often is termed ideology). These ideas would then affect their components (the impressions) as well. This brings me to the *regimes of signs*.

Regimes of signs and perceptibility

Deleuze and Guattari (1987:111) "call any specific formalization of expression a regime of signs, at least when the expression is linguistic. A regime of signs constitutes a semiotic system. But it appears difficult to analyze semiotic systems in themselves: there is always a form of content that is simultaneously inseparable from and independent of the form of expression, and the two forms pertain to assemblages that are not principally linguistic."

Thus, the regime of signs emerges from an assemblage and therefore linguistic expressions and iconography are always part of a greater assemblage. For example, the word for face (*baah*), the baah hieroglyph, a depicted royal face and the real royal face are always part of the ajawlel assemblage that is emerging in different contexts. The signs are emergent properties of a flow. This means that I am not primarily looking at iconography as representations of a world 'out there'. At best, the images and words point towards something other than the object itself since depictions of faces are something other than the faces they are believed to represent. They are singular existences and create their own realities, but they are always part of a greater assemblage. From this assemblage meaning may arise, but never without the parts being interconnected.

These regimes of signs are also regimes of perceptibility. Murphy (2006:24) calls “the regular and sedimented contours of perception and imperception produced within a disciplinary or epistemological tradition its ‘regimes of perceptibility’ /.../ Produced by assemblages that are anchored in material culture, regimes of perceptibility establish what phenomena become perceptible, and thus what phenomena come into being for us, giving objects boundaries and imbuing them with qualities. Regimes of perceptibility populate our world with some objects and not others, and they allow certain actions to be performed on those objects.”

Hence, what we know, express, perceive and write has a non-linguistic material and prediscursive content (Kullenberg 2008). Therefore, I do not ground my interpretation in ideology/cosmology. The regimes of signs and perceptibility are more complex than being reducible to ideology/cosmology. Deleuze and Guattari define four regimes of signs but they believe there may be more. These are: *presignifying*, *signifying*, *postsignifying* and *countersignifying*. They tend to be found in all social formations in a mixture. A social formation is not synonymous with a regime of signs.

The presignifying regime is pluralistic, heterogeneous and polyvocal and cannot be defeated by the deterritorialized *master-signifier* (a sign that moves around and determines and territorializes expressions into homogeneous forms) (Bonta and Protevi 2004). The king is such a master-signifier and as a sign it can emerge at many places (as portraits, temples, etc.) and capture the ‘meaning’ of the place, to interrupt the presignifying flow. On the other hand presignifying signs do not become self-evident meaning as in the signifying regime. This is a rather ideal state of affairs since a presignifying regime is always affected by prevailing signifying regimes of various scales. From a perspective where we see the whole Maya area as a culture, the Maya iconography could be seen as heterogeneous and polyvocal since there are great differences between various regions. However, on the level of the polity the iconography is less heterogeneous. Here the polyvocality has been captured/*overcoded* by a master-signifier. Overcoding overrides heterogeneous codes and creates a homogeneous substance, a signifying regime of signs.

In signifying regimes signs only relate to another sign through the master-signifier. The master-signifier is the Despot/king and its hierarchy. Everything can be accounted for by the signifying regime of kingship in the Maya area during the Classic period. The king is the centre and everything emerges from or is linked back to him. The monumental

faces/masks that emerged on Formative period monumental buildings indicate the beginning of this signifying regime. The signifier itself is nothing but a black hole, devoid of content. It is covered up by a *Face* to hide its own emptiness, such as the Christ or the Virgin or the State itself (Bonta and Protevi 2004:142). In Prehispanic times the Face would be the royal face on stelae and other monuments, only there to give an impression that its signifying regime/ 'ideology' can account for everything.

However, signifying regimes emerge at many levels, from the family to the State. The Father is the master-signifier in the patriarchal family and the head of the Catholic Church. The Father overcodes other expressions of the mother and the child. The signifying order can therefore overcode the presignifying regime or other signifying regimes by populating it with signifying signs, such as monumental architecture, stelae, etc. (Bonta and Protevi 2004:130). This is what occurred in the Maya area.

The postsignifying regime is that of betrayal and escape from the signifying regime. It forms the autonomous subject which is rational and conscious. However, the vanguards of the postsignifying regime, such as missionaries and scientists, only establish the signifying regime that follows them (Christianity and Major Science). They implant subjectification in presignifying regimes (Bonta and Protevi 2004:129). The king's royal court was populated by scribes and other specialists. These were the ones aware of the flaws of the signifying regime emerging from the ajawlel assemblage and they had the potential to betray and escape it but they still maintained it through their actions. They were the ones overcoding the presignifying regimes with royal architecture and sculpture. However, I would not stretch the argument and say these people were part of a postsignifying regime because in the postsignifying regime the Book ('Bible') takes the place of the Despot's (the ajaw's) face. In Deleuze and Guattari's (1987:140) own words: "*The book becomes the body of passion*, just as the face was the body of the signifier. It is now the book, the most deterritorialized of things, that fixes territories and genealogies." No such scripture existed in the Prehispanic Americas. Popol Vuh and earlier codices did not have such a function although Popol Vuh established genealogies.

Finally, the countersignifying regime relates to free-moving ('nomadic') thought and works as a *War Machine* against the overcoding of the State (Bonta and Protevi 2004:73). I will return to this last regime of signs and the War Machine below.

In Deleuze and Guattari we have a far more complex scenario than simply ideology or cosmology. As they show, there are many expressions circulating simultaneously which the defaced monuments probably indicate.

Sight

Faciality is the expression of the signifying regime and the Face is its reterritorialization (Bonta and Protevi 2004:84). Whenever the royal Face was carved the signifying regime of ajawlel was reterritorialized. All depictions of faces are not expressions of the signifying regime but the signifying Face goes back to a master-signifier: the king or kingship. By constantly showing his face, the king projected his central role in the signifying regime. The king striated space, i.e. placed signs (temples, range structures, ballcourts, stelae, etc.) that overcoded otherwise heterogeneous expressions. Symptomatically in Classic Maya iconography, the king was portrayed as the centre, an egocentric space. The royal body was a static point around which everything else circled but he was also a restless force from which other activities emerged (Houston et al. 2006:7). The king was the source for fertility, etc. This was an overcoding of the actual presignifying processes that do occur in 'nature.'

What we know of past senses in the Maya area derives from a signifying regime and the ajawlel assemblage which the glyphs and depictions were parts of. There appears to have been a perceptual and interactional field that included at least royal and divine bodies and actions. The *y-ichnal* expression of the Classic period is cognate to the contemporary Yucatec *y-iknal* (Houston and Taube 2000:287). *Iknal* is either a habitual place with a fixed position in space or it is a corporeal field of interaction that is not fixed in space. It is connected to the corporeal actions of an agent, often in front of the body (Hanks 1990:91). The *ichnal* may have shifted as deities associated their *ichnal* with different place names. *Ichnal* also related to what was 'down' and to the 'left' from the ruler's point of view. Thus, it seems that broad visual fields emerging from the king were more important in the architecture than sightlines through different openings or corners (Houston and Taube 2000:288). Therefore, Houston sees *ichnal* as a possessed particle that may explain the concern with certain architectural forms, such as the plaza since these can be observed from one point (Houston 2006:140). Plank (2003) has further argued that buildings had their own *ichnal* and hence they were part of the king's person. The very portrait had its own *ichnal* or was part

of the king's distributed ichnal and they were placed in open areas and the king's perception was therefore widely distributed.

The signifying regime indicates that the individual organs of the king could make their own decisions. The eye was procreative since it affected and changed the world which it saw. It was not a receiver but reached out to absorb the world (Houston 2006:141). The sun was also associated with the eye, perhaps because of the sun's association with light. The solar sign *k'in* sometimes replaced the eyes in the iconography. One of the royal titles was *k'inich ajaw*, meaning 'sun-faced' or 'sun-eyed' lord (Houston and Taube 2000:282). Hence, the eye formed assemblages with the sun, much like Schiffer's (1999) *externs*.

In *Popol Vuh*, the early Colonial period Kiche account of creation, the first humans were blinded so that they would not be all-seeing and all-knowing like the creator gods themselves (Tedlock 1996). The destruction of the ruler's eyes may have been part of an act similar to the one mentioned in *Popol Vuh*.

What happens when we no longer have sight? Here the blind person's experience of the world may be of interest. Ingold (2000:271) asks "can the blind person /.../ ever enjoy an experience comparable to that of the sighted of being placed in something like a landscape that can be taken as a totality, with its infinitely variegated surfaces, contours and textures, inhabited by animals and plants, and littered with objects both natural and artificial?" The rationale for this question is that it is usually argued that it is with our sight we get an instant feeling of being in a landscape. Likewise, the ichnal of the portraits of the king had both an instantaneous and a durational coverage of the locations where they were installed. However, a blind person needs to touch his/her surroundings and it takes a great deal of time to experience the surroundings. Hearing is also experienced as being directed since sounds often come from one location and disappear quickly. Sounds are fragments of the whole world the sighted can see. Therefore, can a blind person sense the surrounding landscape in an instant and carry on doing so like a person with his/her sight intact?

According to John Hull, who was not born blind but became blind later in life, rain can create such an experience. Rain drops fall everywhere and at the same time around the blind person. They reveal the details of the surfaces where they fall. Rain therefore brings contours to everything and a steady rain creates a continuous acoustic experience. Ingold (2000:271) concludes that "rain does for the blind what

sunshine does for the sighted, bathing the world in sound as the sun bathes in light.”

Whereas hearing can be used to experience the surrounding world, the eyes are more crucial for one's identity. Our own visibility, our own identity, is confirmed through others' sight. To see a person is to know that one can also be seen. But not being able to see creates a feeling of not having a face. If one is invisible to others then one is also invisible to oneself. I can feel my own face and others can see it, but it remains invisible to me. Where others see my face I see the world (Ingold 2000). Maybe this is a reason why mirrors were important in the royal courts of the Maya area? In this case they may have been a way to confirm one's own identity rather than to see into a spiritual world, which is the usual interpretation.

In John Protevi's study on political affect he shows how one's 'humanity' is recognized through the sight of the face. Early on infants can recognize faces, which creates emotional bonds and protoempathic identification. People often read subjectivity behind the face (they form a theory of mind) (Protevi 2009:128). Thus, most human beings have a strong inhibition against face-to-face killing since one identifies oneself with the victim. Military training has to overcome this inhibition (Protevi 2009:146). Thus, the "face of the enemy has profound inhibitory effects; the blindfold on the victim of a firing squad enables the shooters by breaking eye contact between victim and executioners" (Protevi 2009:28).

To remove the eyes and sight of the royal Face may have allowed an affective break with the king or the State. Without sight, the face, assemblage, and identity began to be deterritorialized, to be forgotten (Mock 1998). Without the sight or other perceptive senses of the king's distributed portraits the signifying regime associated with the ajawlel assemblage could be deterritorialized.

War Machine

The royal body, face, sight and identity were parts of a political and military assemblage. Hence, the royal face and its senses mirrored social and political conditions. The Face in Maya monumental art was a crucial part of the State Apparatus. Its defacement indicates a process counteracting the workings of the State Apparatus. This gives me reason to mention the War Machine, which is a logic that coun-

teracts the State's striations, it *smoothens* space. Thus, for Deleuze and Guattari (1987), war (or conflict) is separate from the State since the War Machine is decentralized and self organizing, a deterritorializing process opposing the territorializing State. Still, the State attempts to control the War Machine for its own use, in the form of military institutions. Although no standing armies are known from the Maya area they had martial organizations (Hassig 1992).

There is always a tension between the State and the War Machine. Usually the War Machine is controlled by the State but in for example fascist states the War Machine has constructed its own State Apparatus. The danger with this, as Deleuze and Guattari exemplify with the Nazi regime, is that the War Machine is suicidal. It will destroy itself and if it has taken control of the State, the State will go down as well.

I argue that it was this War Machine, and its associated counter signifying regime, that defaced the master-signifier of the State Apparatus – the royal Face. This includes buildings and other objects as perceptive entities. The destruction of perceptive organs in monumental art and termination rituals of buildings was a deterritorialization of identity and of the king's political-military assemblage. This does not mean, however, that the War Machine was that of another polity. It may just as well have emerged within the same territory.

Still, the likelihood is that it was usually a 'foreign' War Machine that brought about the defacement, but we seldom have evidence of who committed the act despite the common correlation between defacement and warfare. For example, in the Upper Pasión area in Guatemala, the small centre of Cancuén emerged as a major political actor in the mid to late eighth century AD. King *Tajal Chan Ahk* ruled the site from 757 to around 799. He is also responsible for the construction of a large palace complex at the site. Judging from his royal titles (the emblem glyphs), he also controlled a neighbouring site called Machaquila. He was succeeded by *Kan Maax* who apparently did not rule for long. Around 800 Cancuén was attacked, probably by Machaquila. The king was killed and buried in a shallow pit. Over 30 people were executed and deposited in a water cistern (Barrientos 2008).

Panel 3 at Cancuén is a ballcourt panel showing the preceding ruler, Tajal Chan Ahk, a *sajal* ('subordinate lord') and an *ajk'ubun* ('bookkeeper') (Fig. 1). All have their faces mutilated, probably as a result of this attack. This is the last we hear of Cancuén. Its political assemblage was absolutely deterritorialized. Whether foreign enemies

destroyed the eyes on the ballcourt panel as part of the destruction of the polity, or the remaining population did it as an act of veiling the preceding dead king's eyes, is not known. In any case, the kingship of Cancuén lost its Face and power.

However, there were other processes going on where it was the State Apparatus that blinded the ichnal of the portraits or buildings, but did not necessarily deterritorialize the identity; rather, it territorialized it by concealing the ichnal from the surrounding world by protecting the Face. This concerns the common practice of covering older temples and monuments by a new building, such as Rosalila at Copan (Agurcia 2004) or Stela 31 at Tikal which had been partially defaced. Here the perceptive organs were veiled by construction masses, but this was done by the State Apparatus rather than by the War Machine. This was like wrapping the temple or the Face in a bundle (Wagner 2006). We know that some monuments were 'unwrapped' when they were dedicated which may indicate that they were wrapped with cloth like a bundle during the transport from workshop to the place of dedication or final carving. The king was also 'bundled' into accession (Houston et al. 2006:83). The unwrapping of both king and monument was a way to create new assemblages where the portrait's face gained sight and identity and became part of a greater assemblage. The other process, to be bundled up, territorialized an already existing identity and protected it from the deterritorializing War Machine.

At the end of the Classic period the ajawlel assemblage disintegrated throughout the lowlands. Its regime of perceptibility ended. Every regime of perceptibility creates its own modes of imperceptibility. The regime of ajawlel therefore produced domains of imperceptibility that fell outside the possibilities of knowledge. To create knowledge means to create a tunnel where other things are not chosen (Murphy 2006:91). Countersignifying regimes that emerged in other assemblages may have picked up what were imperceptibilities in the ajawlel assemblage and formed new regimes of perceptibilities. The very act of defacement may have been a way to end one regime of perceptibility.

Conclusion

So what can a Deleuzian perspective tell us that has not been said before about the defacement of monuments in the Maya area? Firstly, it sets the act as an expression of one or several regimes of signs/perceptibili-

ties. Hence there is not one 'meaning' behind the act, nothing that can be reduced to an arborescent model of interpretation such as Maya culture or Maya cosmology. Secondly, the 'agent' behind the act is not reducible to a single human agent either. The very act was the result of an assemblage that intensified in a particular time-space segment (the monument). Thirdly, by viewing the Face as not just a representation of a king /despot, but also as the expression of the greater State assemblage, it is pointed out that the defacement of monuments and covering of monuments were related acts, but with quite different expressions.

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