

Anecdotal evidence

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La réalité est autre chose. – (Au hasard Balthazar)

When asked to write about recent research I am faced with the problem of reconciling work on visual technologies, environmental issues, de-colonial and indigenous movements, political economy, global media governance, and media arts. Currents of thought link these fields, a general intellectual and perhaps ethical mood, and all are guided by an interest in the materiality of media; they also share a common methodological principle. This principle is largely disparaged among funding agencies as ‘anecdotal evidence’. This article is an attempt to make a claim for the anecdote as a viable and indeed vital form of evidence, with the particular goal of giving students an alternative to the typical approaches taught in methodology courses.

The anecdote has been nurtured in the disciplinary field known as the humanities for more than a century. Its principle is that the unique instance can teach researchers as much as statistical samples or those abstractions that arrive either as axioms (there exists an X such that...) or hypotheses, maps or diagrams. The word ‘unique’ requires stressing. The core of the anecdote is not its typicality but its specificity; its ur-text is Clifford Geertz’s *Thick Description* (1973) but its history includes the tradition of close reading. The humanities have embraced study of individual poems, paintings, performances, or films as well as actions and historical situations. Studying these unique instances is expanded by observations of the unique nature of moments of reception and use – whether the critic’s epiphany or the

viewing habits of a television household. Susan Schuppli's forthcoming research¹ on the evidentiary status of media artifacts points to a further field of uniqueness already explored by archivists: the material specificity of every instance of a photograph or film. There are no two identical books or recordings; each bears the traces of its production and even more so of the vicissitudes of its transmission. This is quite as true of digital media as of traditional forms. All media decay, all accrue the traces of their biographies (what Giovanna Fossati calls the 'archival life' of a medium²), all stories are retold in new circumstances.

The anecdotal method does not imply abandoning other tools. There is a famous conundrum when observing the earth by satellite: the higher the resolution, the less information we have about the location imaged. The extremely high resolution of the anecdotal method provides depth and colour to the generalist findings of methods that deal with multiple instances and large-scale tendencies. Anecdotes test such large hypotheses against the unique qualities of artworks and experiences. The anecdotal method does not abandon the project of making statements about larger, more abstract formations like 'society' or 'cinema' – it grounds them in the specific instance.

A telling example is the concept of photography worked out in Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida (La chambre claire)*. Barthes rests his case on a single photograph and to his unique relationship with it. The anecdote has two forms in *La chambre claire*; first is Barthes' anecdote concerning the unique affective connection he has with this evidence of the past existence of his mother; the second is that he rests this case on an image which he elects not to include in the book. We trust Barthes that such a photo exists (in a way no court of law would) because we have come to admire his scholarship and his emotional honesty in other works. Thus, a third anecdote emerges: the existence of an author – Barthes, who is the unique subject of this affective connection to a photograph whose existence we only know through his description, a description we trust because he and only he is the author of it. It might be surmised that Barthes' determination to hide the image of his mother's body has in it something of the fetish, suggesting in the manner of the psychoanalytic discourse that term comes from; Barthes was unconscious of at least part of the complex of emotions evoked in his viewing and hiding of the picture, at least at the moment of writing when he either does not know or chooses to be silent about this aspect of the bond. Barthes' text is anecdotal in the triple sense that it concerns a unique (and now unrepeatable) experience, that it is itself a unique text concerning that experience, and that reading his text forms

a unique relation between author (or author-function), text, and reader. We enlarge the concept of photography by analysing it through Barthes' eyes and then enlarge it again – or perhaps check and balance Barthes' enlargement – by analysing Barthes' analysis.

Each discipline espouses a particular Good. Science pursues knowledge, medicine pursues health, business pursues wealth, law pursues justice, architecture pursues shelter. When they do not forget themselves the pursuit of the humanities and social sciences is to dispute the relative value of these and other goods, such as beauty and the life of the mind. In this sense the humanities are truly political, devoting themselves to the question 'how are we to live well?' The anecdote is the laboratory in which we can observe the interaction of the rival claims of the disciplines and their consort professions, whether the anecdote takes the form of a novel or an anthropological observation. Geertz contests the laboratory model, arguing that the anthropologist has no way of altering parameters in the manner of a physical experiment. While it is true we cannot falsify the evidence the function of the detail is to provide exemplars of naturally-occurring variables. In anecdotal evidence, fictional or documentary, we observe and seek to understand the relations between differently weighted, competing pursuits, how they encourage or constrain the pursuit of other goods, or how the single-minded pursuit of one may lay waste to all the others.

Media and communications has a special role in this task of the humanities and social sciences. For this family of disciplines devoted to media the interconnection of things (actors, agents, objects, processes) is a given. Media and communications as a discipline analyses the material mediation of these connections; only some of these can be considered communication – many connections are not based on the transmission of messages, more or less well understood, but all without exception pass through some form of medium. This materialist core singles out media and communications from those other disciplines that deal in broader abstractions (society, polity, economy). In leading us to consider the connections between people, technologies, and the physical matter and energy required to build and run them, media and communications opens far more readily to considerations of non-human agency operating beneath, across, and within human activity. In turn this may suggest a kind of Good specific to media and communications: connectivity. From the standpoint of mediation an economy is not an abstract machine ruled by algorithms but a physical process of exchange undertaken in metals, commodities, papers, and bits. Power is only power when it employs the blunt one-way media of missiles and tear gas, the subtler media of parliamentary debate, legislation, and the dimpled chad,

or the complexly interactive media of administration and debate. Thus media and communications' disciplinary offering to the contest of Goods is the ground of any common Good: connection. At the same time we also deal in questions of truth, justice, beauty, well-being, and all the agonistic Goods contesting a place in the pantheon.

Such are the *motives* operating in an anecdote. An anecdote's value can be assessed by two factors: the depth of its revelation and the breadth of motives, of Goods, that it brings into play. Robert Bresson's masterpiece *Au hasard Balthazar* (1966) assembles a series of anecdotes each reflecting on the others, investigating the value of long-suffering, salting its tragic view of life with intimations of transcendence. Any scene – almost any shot – can be treated as an anecdote connected internally and externally to many more reflections on these themes and more: on youth and beauty; on the natural propinquity of newborn creatures; on casual cruelty, starting with the stark interruption of the title music by the harsh brays of a donkey giving birth. The metal of many forms of Good are assayed in the film, but most of all the quality of suffering; the anecdote is both broad and deep. As anecdote it insists that the suffering of even one dumb animal, the renunciation of happiness of even one teenager, must be put in the balance with every claimant to the Greater Good. Adorno argued that the demand that we sacrifice happiness to some other putatively higher but always later goal is an imposition. Deferral is 'a kind of economy of thrift', but 'the compensation promised by civilisation and our education in return for our acts of renunciation is not forthcoming'.³ The sacrifice of happiness to rationality or to deferred gratifications is a truly tragic sacrifice. Happiness is not to be passed over.⁴ In dealing with the various forms of Good that motivate actors or give us a means to judge their actions the anecdote draws us to connect it with the broader world of motives without ever losing sight of the happiness (and its sacrifice) of the unique instance.

Anecdotes are not only about actors, they are also about the contexts of actions, the *determinants* in action in any situation. The intellectual legacies of the last 150 years, from Darwin, Marx, and Freud to the present, not only provide hermeneutic models but also newly discovered or emphasised determinants likely to be in play in any given instance. Today we are interested not only in biological, economic, and psychic factors but also issues raised by feminism, anti-racism, postcolonial and de-colonial criticism, ecological concerns, and the changing features of systems, territories, and governmentalities; at the same time we have become less interested in the influence of gods and other supernatural forces. One powerful quality of the anecdote is its ability to resurrect these older modes of explanation,

to probe the margins of existing understandings of how the world works, to include unique moments of the inexplicable. Anecdotes provide the multiple perspectives that question whether, say, a ghost story is to be understood as a product of a subjective experience of place, a projection of internal states onto a place, a grim persistence of actions over time, or all of these and more. A well-chosen anecdote forces us to confront the operation at the level of the actual event of larger forces. Rosemary Coombe's anecdote about the lawsuit brought against Songhay traders in Brooklyn selling Malcolm X hats is a fine example. Around this ostensibly straightforward event collide trans-Atlantic trade, African-American history, copyright law in the entertainment industry, and the movement to support Black-owned businesses in the United States, to name a few.

This event's significance depends less on the individuality of the actors and much more on the unique constellation of forces gathered around differing ideas of cultural ownership sparked by Spike Lee's film *Malcolm X* (1992). Humanities and social sciences need to build robust and meaningful concepts like 'cultural ownership' but also to recall that the test of such concepts is in great part whether they facilitate the analysis of the specific situations we confront as texts or practices where these and other determinants are in play. Many anecdotes push us towards making a decision on relative values, to side with one party or another, or to testify to the success or failure of a policy. Other anecdotes make such decisions difficult or demonstrate how apparently self-evident decisions may lead to unexpected and unwanted consequences. That is to say that it is also a function of the humanities (and here we join with the arts) not to provide solutions but to raise problems. The anecdotal method is always attracted to the exception (and the exceptional within the typical). Presented with an argument that such and such a policy or way of understanding should work or does work, anecdotalism seeks out the exception where it does not, or the interstice where its success is accompanied by an otherwise unattended flaw. It asks whether we can accept the exception even of one unique instance as the price of our common assurance of success; it tests the happiness ascribed to beneficiaries of policies and knowledge, nagging at any loose tooth or hangnail.

This may explain the exasperation that anecdotal evidence can evince – the assertion that there is always an exception. The exception is precisely the focus of the anecdotal method which seeks out the circumstance where an expected result fails. The administrative mindset is at heart both statistical and consequentialist; it aims to manage not the individual instance but, as Foucault notes, 'an indefinite series of events that...can only be controlled

by a estimate of probabilities'.⁵ While posing as secure and scientific such control will and indeed must sacrifice the aberrant statistic to the larger trend; statistical and probabilistic knowledge count, as truth is found in such regimes. To the extent that it is the task of humanities and social sciences to speak truth to power the anecdote not only raises the unique story under the statistic but asks about the unique way a statistic has been derived and the motives, values, and determinations operating on their formation.

The anecdote is our least superficial mode of enquiry. Sacrificing generalisation and typicality for extremely high resolution, it alone has the luxury of enquiring deeply into the complex of motives and determinants involved in a situation. Both the unconscious and social codes operate between motives and determinants. A critical function of anecdotal evidence is to decide to what degree in any unique instance the anecdote or elements of it fall into one category or another. Polling can tell us that the long-running British soap opera *Coronation Street* is a popular program that is well liked by many people; it cannot tell us about the family and community dynamics operating around the pleasures of watching it – even the informants in ethnographic research on *Coronation Street* may not tell us what they are. They may consciously dress up responses, reject or mock the interviewer, or be unable to articulate (as most people are unable to articulate) the less than conscious particularity of their tastes and pleasures. The ‘how’ of their self-reporting is as germane to gaining access to the fullness of their anecdotes as the cool, anti-Stanslavskian acting demanded by Bresson is to an understanding of *Au hasard Balthazar*.

This observation leads us to another maxim: if we are to gain the most from an anecdote we require the maximum of data that it can yield. Though it may use any one of the many available hermeneutic methods anecdotal interpretation begins not at the level of meanings but at the prior level of mediations – the materials, energies, and connections comprising the event. Both God and the devil are in the details. The wink accompanying a respondent’s report on *Coronation Street*, to return to one of Geertz’s examples, is as vital to understanding the report as an involuntary twitch would be. Thus, if we treat, as an example, the peculiarity of a specific piece of equipment as integral to the full description of an anecdote we might need to observe that photographic emulsions are suspended in gelatine, a substance derived from the corpses of horses and donkeys. The observation itself is then open to interpretation; it might support the view that Bresson’s film is tragic to its core or a contrary view that it is in some degree hypocritical. It may then be important to note that the copy of the film I have is in digital form, on a DVD, bearing the scars of the telecine

process that transferred it from analog to digital, in addition to noting both the generic qualities of the codecs used to store and display the film and the distinctive qualities of both the specific playback machine and the ambience of each viewing.

We then need to understand not only the material we are looking at but how it got to us and the contexts of looking. Most of all, as Linda Tuiwai Smith emphasises, we need to recognise the life of the ‘artefact’,⁶ that an anecdote is not a fact (in either Wittgenstein’s sense of what is the case or in the sense of datum) but a partner in dialogue. This concern alerts anecdotalism to the problem of abstraction as a social reality. A meticulous history of the mediations of economic exchange, one that approaches the media of contracts, tally-books, double-entry book-keeping, filing regimes, and spreadsheets, would also trace the gradual deracination of exchange from the complex cultural negotiation recorded in Geertz’s account of a sheep-raid to the radically disconnected algorithms of automated trading in derivatives. While we have the option of attacking abstraction as a mode of thought that disconnects theory from actuality we cannot refuse to acknowledge the actuality of abstraction itself. Money, once a matter of physical tokens, is now a material abstraction. Other abstractions (honour, for example) have an all too insistent reality in human affairs. Anecdotalism does not begin with meaning but neither can it pretend to escape from it.

Such meaning is not ‘subjective’ in the disparaging sense occasionally aimed at anecdotes. It is rather social – not only noting the meanings that motivate the works we analyse but building on the cultural and intellectual habits of the observer and the skill of recognising and unpacking those habits. Since recounting an anecdote is always a re-versioning the teller has to recognise that their telling (and any interpretations and connections they offer) forms another anecdote to be pored over by another analyst in another time seeking other relevance. Relevance, another term for ‘connection’, ties anecdotes together. When a researcher has amassed enough anecdotes – read enough poetry, seen enough films, observed enough informants – connections always emerge, and each anecdote can be searched for its relevance to another. This is both how we form theories and how, drawing on counter-examples, we dispute them.

Au hasard Balthazar is not told from the donkey’s point of view nor from that of any of its characters but rather from the perspective of an external narrator. One task this creates for the critic (and one pleasure for the viewer) is to descry the gradually emerging sympathies of that unseen, unvoiced narrator, even to guess at the identity. If for example I wish to argue that the narrator is angelic in that in its combination of objectivism and compassion

it navigates between human and divine worlds, that it is restricted to the role of bearing messages between worlds rather than acting in either, I may find my hypothesis confounded by another anecdote from the production, by a closer reading of a different scene, or by a clearer analysis of the relationship between soundtrack and vision or editing. It might be pointed out that an absence in the film is more critical than a presence; the fact that Balthazar does not speak, that the very idea of communication is not in him, gives the lie to my hypothesis. Roger Ebert notes that ‘when Balthazar brays it might sound to some like a harsh complaint’; going on to defuse the observation, he writes ‘to me it sounds like a beast who has been given one noise to make in the world, and gains some satisfaction by making it. It is important to note that Balthazar never brays on cue to react to specific events; that would turn him into a cartoon animal’.⁷ Again, this indicates the importance of observing what is not the case.

There is no reason to believe that Bresson knew GK Chesterton’s poem *The Donkey* (first published in 1900) but once paired it is hard not to hear ‘[w]ith sickening cry and monstrous head’⁸ alongside the birth pang bray that interrupts Schubert in the credits and the water pouring over the donkey’s massive face in the opening scene⁹; or to recall Chesterton’s line ‘starve, scourge, deride me: I am dumb’ at any point in the central part of the film. The childish baptism of the opening and the flock of sheep at the end will inevitably recall biblical motifs to anyone brought up in Christian traditions; however, the specific reminiscence of the Chesterton will only affect readers of English, and a minority of them at that. The suffering of animals might in another perspective evidence a profound concern underlying and even motivating the religious theme; empathy with all life as the moral truth that organised religions erect their fabulous theologies upon. Thus the connection of Bresson and Chesterton might reveal not a common Catholicism but a concern for the beast that they share with Orwell’s Benjamin in *Animal Farm* (1945). At the same time anecdotalism notes that two of these donkeys are made of words and one of film. An appeal to other screen donkeys, perhaps Donkey in *Shrek* (Andrew Adamson & Vicky Jensen, 2001), would appear either less illuminating or suggestive of a certain sentimentality on the part of Bresson’s movie – except that the photographed Balthazar looks so little like the CGI Donkey. Most of all, in Chesterton, Orwell, and Andrew Adamson’s animation, the donkeys do speak in a tradition at least as old as Balaam’s ass. Whether or not Balthazar can be said to ‘speak’ and whether or not (as in the case of Wittgenstein’s lion¹⁰) we can lay claim to understand him, his language is not one of ours. He is radically other.

In the anecdotal method we seek distinctions at least as much as we seek shared features, the nuances that make one rendition different from any other. To insist once more, it is the privilege it grants to the unique that marks out anecdotalism from other methods. It might well be said that the study of unique instances tells us no more than that they are unique. Newton more or less says this very thing:

[t]o tell us that every Species of Things is endow'd with an occult specifick Quality by which it acts and produces manifest Effects, is to tell us nothing: But to derive two or three general Principles of Motion from Phaenomena, and afterwards to tell us how the properties and Actions of all corporeal Things follows from those manifest Principles would be a very great step in Philosophy.¹¹

If all we can say of each object in the world is that it has unique properties, we have learned little. Newton's proposal is aimed at the doctrine of signatures but makes the rational demand that instances are only valuable where they lead to conceptualising general laws. The critique mounted by Walter Mignolo and many others concerns the question of how the extraction of principles and concepts from instances is effected and how in turn they effect those whose instances are treated as falling under the resultant 'manifest Principles'.¹² What does Balthazar gain from Bresson's film or our deliberations about it?

The anecdotal method sets out to recognise the uniqueness of Balthazar. To say the donkey is an other is to evoke Levinas and the idea of 'ethics as first philosophy'¹³ – though Levinas restricts his account of the face-to-face encounter in which we must recognise the unanswerable demand of the other to human interlocutors. We might observe that Bresson gives great attention to the donkey's face and that the moments we are most aware of other parts of the animal are those moments of the worst cruelty, as when Gérard ties burning newspapers to his tail. Cruelty is easier if the face remains unregarded and unrecognised. This is the point of Linda Tuiwai Smith's complaint about the botanist Joseph Banks who accompanied Cook on his circumnavigation of New Zealand. Banks' journal covers a number of topics which were of great interest at that time and was full of comparisons with other places known to the British. The ease with which comparisons could be made reinforces our sense of the imperial gaze with which Banks assessed the land and all that was part of it.¹⁴

Banks' accounts were, in this appraisal, just that – accountancy, in which the description of new things in terms of familiar things is the precur-

sor to their exchange as commodities against the universal equivalent of money. As this process extends into the information economy every item of knowledge becomes equivalent to every other and the very property of otherness is lost. Anecdotalism balks at the first step; the anecdote is always an encounter with alterity and an ethical quandary for which no pre-existing code or rulebook provides an alibi. The principle continues into the handling of the anecdote. As Bresson wrote,

[t]he power your (flattened) images have of being other than they are. The same image brought in by ten different routes will be a different image ten times.¹⁵

To maintain the sacrosanctity of this principle is the one way the anecdote can resist the powers of the archive.

Archives structure knowledge by forming equivalences between items in their possession. This equivalence takes as its formal condition that each item is self-identical. *Hamlet* is *Hamlet*. At the risk of becoming antiquarians caring only for the book but not the text it carries, anecdotalism insists that this copy of the play is not identical even to another copy of the same edition, just as performances of the same company's version of *Hamlet* differ from day to day. More than that, the thing itself, the one unique copy of *Au hasard Balthazar* I work from looks distinctly different on a laptop, a TV, or projected on a screen; it sounds different played through laptop speakers, headphones, or a classroom audio system. Most of all each encounter brings with it other observations: the over-exposure of the farmhouse wall as Balthazar flees the angry farmers after upsetting the hay cart seems somehow, today, more haunting; not just a device to darken the shadow the donkey runs through but something which makes the farm, now up for sale, less tangible, while at the same time evoking Balthazar's exposure to the sun and to the slothful and uncaring master who forgot to set the brake on the downhill run, sent to sleep by the same sun that beats down on Balthazar's brow.

Like the external connections to Chesterton, Orwell, and *Shrek*, these internal mediations are unstable. Each viewing is a new meeting between subtly changing partners. The accumulation of memories of other meetings should inform but never overshadow the uniqueness of *this* encounter. The anecdote is unique but unstable. Not only is each viewing of a scene from Bresson's film different from all others, it is not even identical to itself. The meeting of text and interpreter is never a conclusive unity; in some sense it fails to exist as a resolved totality, retaining the mutual incomprehen-

sion of a meeting between strangers, the fathomless alterity we uncover in ourselves as well as in what we encounter. The risk of allowing a connection to become entrenched would be to place the terminally defined anecdote in an archive, which as Foucault taught us is always an instrument of power, not least power over the objects ordered in it.

The anecdote resists archiving by asserting use-value over exchange-value and in the process emphasising that exchange is not in all cultural or historical circumstances quantitative but a matter of mediations. By insisting that there is no equivalence between anecdotes but only connections, it militates against two features of the archive. First, the anecdote can never be treated as a whole number locked in place in a series of discrete entities. Because it is not self-identical it cannot be equated; because it is unstably connected, it cannot be fixed in series. Second, because it changes – that is, because it is fundamentally a temporal event – the anecdote cannot be locked into the dominant media of our period in history: databases, spreadsheets, and geographical information systems (GIS). These media are fundamentally spatial, converting the chronological design of old ledgers and portolan charts into synchronous fields of an eternal present. The unstill anecdote cannot fit into these regimes of oversight. Instead, the anecdotal method treats spreadsheets, databases, and GIS not simply with suspicion but as themselves formal anecdotes and systems for generating anecdotes, systems to be read and interpreted in the same way as texts and events.

In Foucault's analysis,

the archive is first the law of what can be said, the system that governs the appearance of statements as unique events. But the archive is also that which determines that all these things do not accumulate endlessly in an amorphous mass...it is that which defines the mode of occurrence of the statement-thing: it is the system of its functioning.¹⁶

To suggest that anecdotalism escapes the principles of the archive, the foundations of discourse, would be naïve. What is at stake is the meaning of the term 'unique'. When Foucault speaks of the statement as a unique event he points towards the construction of an entry in the archive as a discrete and identifiable unit, one which, by that token, is placed in a relationship of equivalence with every other discrete unit of discourse. By focusing on the anecdote itself, by insisting on its uniqueness as utterly without equivalent, the anecdote slips the knot of the archival system that ascribes uniqueness to it. In the digital age and particularly in the time of Big Data and digital

humanities, ‘system’ means creating numerical and therefore exchangeable formats for every incidence of what counts as knowledge. Anecdotalism, through its non-identity and its alertness to absence, is as concerned with ignorance as knowledge, with ignorance as profound and demanding as the uncomprehending gaze of Bresson’s donkey. Without being able to annihilate the systemic foundations of knowledge and the protocols for gaining it the anecdotal method makes it as difficult as possible to enter an event into the database. We have all had the experience of trying to conform our ideas, feelings, or opinions to the available responses in a questionnaire. The anecdote is the respondent who writes all over the sheet, draws pictures, crumples the paper, and uses it for a football.

The competition between visions of how we are to live is not only undertaken at the level of logical argument, nor can it be adjudicated by recourse to the majoritarian model of the felicitous calculus. It should be enough to point to the vast and increasing discrepancies between wealth and poverty to argue that the neo-liberal invisible hand of the market will not resolve the competition between different versions of the Good. The market deals only in the trade in goods, in commodities that today include not only things and services but labour, data, and increasingly creativity itself. For Plato the Good was singular; in Aristotle it is already plural – through being a philosopher he sets out to prove that the highest Good is the life of the mind. During the Cold War the United States espoused freedom as the highest Good while the USSR embraced peace. Today we confuse the goods with the Good, Gross Domestic Product with well-being. The only place we can assay such claims is in living experience.

The power of the anecdote is to bring us to the absolute specificity of experience, whether that emerges as an event and the narratives about it, as a poem or film, or as a piece of technology posing as a rational solution to an engineering problem, but often carrying in it historically-charged values. As Jean-Luc Godard put it, ‘tracking shots are a question of morality’;¹⁷ the technique involved in recounting an action is already a statement of value or throws values into question. The insistent materialism of the anecdotal method drags us over and over back to the grit of actuality. In this it has several virtues lacking in other social science and humanities methods. The anecdotal method makes it impossible to ignore the excluded and the effects of exclusion. It forces us to confront the materiality of people, things, and events, and therefore makes us understand that in any event the human cannot be separated from the technical, physical, or organic environments. In this regard anecdotalism is an ecological approach and in that sense is anti-humanist. At the same time, whenever the anecdote is recounted by

a human the humanity of that individual comes under the microscope, in all its diffuse porousness. The anecdote makes us understand the multiple contexts operating in a text or event, a technology or a technique, and in their observation; a process in which it confronts the specific instance in which suffering occurs, happiness is sacrificed, satisfaction dulled, wit blunted. It makes us face up to the cost of a general Good and in that sense can regenerate our ideas of what we might mean by the commons.

In a time when it is possible to imagine every interaction of every cell having its own internet address¹⁸ the anecdote is the one mode of representation which contests the systemic demand that everything be represented as equivalent (*equi-valent*, of a single value) in a single over-arching archive. In the first and last instance the anecdote makes a fundamental ethical demand – that we recognise the otherness of what we encounter, its autonomy, its capacity for happiness and pain, its failure to exist as unified totality. In this we can learn humility and mutuality and begin to take responsibility for our research. In a true exchange both parties gain. We must not only ask what we can learn but what our learning might offer back to the people and things we learn about.

Notes

1. See <http://www.forensic-architecture.org/>.
2. Fossati 2009.
3. Adorno 2000, p. 138ff.
4. Ibid., pp. 70-73.
5. Foucault 2007, p. 20.
6. Smith 2012.
7. Ebert 2004.
8. Boug 2010, pp. 56-68.
9. Macdonald 2007, pp. 446-468.
10. Wittgenstein 2009, p. 235e.
11. Newton 1952, pp. 401-402.
12. Mignolo 2011.
13. Levinas 1989, pp. 75-87.
14. Smith 2012, p. 83.
15. Bresson 1977, p. 17.
16. Foucault 1972, p. 129.
17. Hillier 1985, p. 62.
18. Bratton 2014.

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