

Cultivating Information, Organizing Culture: Exploring Classification Practices in Modern Culture

Workshop, Copenhagen, 7-8 December 2023

Program and abstracts

Edited by Jack Andersen, University of Copenhagen
Joacim Hansson, Linnaeus University

This workshop is funded by the Carlsberg Foundation

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Program

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Thursday, December 7. Location: Room 21.2.19	Friday, December 8. Location: Room 21.2.19
10.30-11.00: Coffee	8.30-9.00: Coffee
11-11.15: Introduction; Joacim & Jack	9.00-10.00: Keynote <i>Algorithmic thinking and the classificatory imagination</i> ; David Beer, incl discussion
11.15-12.30: Keynote <i>The Archive Machine: Biometric Tools of Inscription, Capture, and Control in the 1920s and 2020s</i> ; Eivind Røssak, incl discussion	10-10.30: Coffee
12.30-13.30: Lunch	10.30-11.45: <i>Classification of sciences: The case of the Norwegian Publication Indicator</i> ; Nils Pharo & Kim Tallerås <i>Classifying Humans in the Age of AI</i> ; Karen Louise Grova Søylen
13.30-15.00: <i>Representing The Aboutness of Fiction: A Comparison of Manual and Computational Perspectives</i> ; Olof Falk <i>Lgbtq+ Literary Fiction Indexing: Lessons from The Queerlit Project</i> ; Koraljka Golub <i>Digitized Dating Life: The Effect of Technology in Young Danes' Romantic Experiences</i> ; Malthe Rye Thomsen	11.45-12.15: What's next and rounding off; All of us
15.00-15.30: Coffee	12.15-13.15: Lunch
15.30-17.00: <i>Selecting everything</i> ; Mats Dahlström <i>Seeking neutrality in a museum classification and its implications</i> ; Admeire da Silva Santos Sundström <i>The Value of Damaged Goods: Experimenting with New Materialist Classification</i> ; Christa Shusko	
19: Dinner at Oyster & Grill, Sjællandsgade 1B (https://cofoco.dk/oysters-and-grill/)	

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Keynotes

The Archive Machine: Biometric Tools of Inscription, Capture, and Control in the 1920s and 2020s

Eivind Røssaak

I use the term “archive machine” to assess some of the technical and social entanglements impacting archives and memory today. In this presentation, I will use this approach to explore how the process of constructing and retrieving an archival document relies on a series of materialities, operations, powers, and connections said to unmask deception. A photograph from the Sámi archives of Norway taken by a eugenics lab in 1922, will start the investigation. An assessment of its arrangement will also enable us to reflect on the archive machine of contemporary digital biometrics.

Despite ongoing efforts to decolonize the archive, most documents pertaining to the Scandinavian colonization of Europe’s only two indigenous peoples, the Sámi peoples and the Inuits, are extremely delicate and complex archival artifacts. The belated Norwegian *Truth and Reconciliation Committee*-report of 2023 made this particularly clear. In an ongoing research project on Sámi metadata enrichment, I explore documents from “early scientific expeditions to the North” as examples of colonial biopolitics. In a rare picture we see the scientists holding their head measuring devices, various calipers, next to their subjects. I interpret this as a metapicture as it foregrounds the anthropometric instruments of inscription, capture, and control. It is a moment of archival self-reflection which reveals some of the concatenations at play in every archival machine, such as its relationship to media technologies (the photograph), measuring devices (calipers), and protocols (metadata).

After the horrors of Nazism, physical anthropology fell into disrepute, but biometrics has become big business through all kinds of facial recognition systems. What can we learn from the critique of colonial anthropology when facing new regimes of biometrics? Do we move from a differentiated and analogue archive machine to one where operations and protocols are automated?

Algorithmic thinking and the classificatory imagination

David Beer

This talk will outline the concept of algorithmic thinking and identify key questions relating to this development. In particular it will focus on the questions posed by the relations and interfaces between algorithmic thinking and classification. The algorithm acts to sort and order in conjunction with modes of category making. The algorithm and the classification operate in conjunction within contemporary media and cultural infrastructures. The talk will reflect on how this set of relations has come to define contemporary modes of cultural consumption. It will narrow this down to the way that classification operates within streaming platforms and think about how the algorithm and the classification combine to shape cultural encounters and landscapes. Making space for a more detailed analysis of the specifics of genre within a range of streaming spaces, the talk will identify how the tensions of algorithmic thinking intersect with what Imogen Tyler has called 'classificatory struggles'. The talk will conclude by thinking about how the proliferation of categories along with the repeated feedback loops of algorithmic selection, sorting and recommendation mean that the ordering of culture occurs within the circulations of what can be thought of as a recursive society.

Presentations

Representing the aboutness of fiction: A comparison of manual and computational perspectives

Olof Falk

The classification and indexing of literary fiction has proven a notoriously challenging area in LIS studies. Those engaging with this task often encounter a multitude of problems that, at times, make the endeavor seem close to unsolvable to a satisfactory degree. The intentional openness of fictional texts, and the recurring problem of how to representatively summarize their aboutness into sets of keywords (such as form/genre terms or subject headings from controlled vocabularies), pose a persistent challenge for knowledge organization theorists and professionals. This presentation attempts to approach the problem from a relatively unexplored angle; namely, that of employing contemporary, computational methods to assist in this task. The presentation departs from a short review of known problems in traditional fiction indexing theory and practice, and draws from actual examples and comparisons from existing library catalogues and organizational systems. In the presentation, examples of general-purpose fiction indexing from the Swedish national library catalogue LIBRIS are compared to indexing performed by Queerlit (a more recent initiative with the specific aim of indexing literary fiction from a LGBTQI perspective). The presentation then introduces the computational method of topic modeling as a means of revealing underlying topical patterns in unstructured fiction collections (in terms of genre and subject metadata). Although often employed by scholars aiming to reveal hidden topics in large collections of texts, topic modeling has seldom been used as a means of organizing fiction collections for library catalogues. Tentative findings from experiments examining the use of topic modeling on a collection of Swedish literary fiction are then discussed in relation to the indexing procedures applied in LIBRIS and Queerlit. The presentation concludes by discussing strengths and drawbacks of each of the three approaches, with particular emphasis on what aspects of fictional content is revealed and what is excluded in each different perspective.

LGBTQ+ literary fiction indexing: Lessons from the Queerlit project

Koraljka Golub

Queer literature scholars have emphasized that fiction is part of the collective history of LGBTQ+ people; it is an important medium for knowledge and self-awareness as well as part of meaning-making processes in which people seek information to help them understand their lives and how to live them differently. And yet there are few overviews of LGBTQ+ literary fiction; what we do know about it is that specific LGBTQ+ themes may have been present, but less overtly represented, at least until the 1990s. Furthermore, the LGBTQ+ spectrum has been unevenly represented, with gay male experiences clearly overrepresented. Transgendered characters appear less often and in less central roles than do lesbian, gay or bisexual characters, while their portrayal is less positive.

The subject indexing of fiction in libraries is usually limited to genre, complemented with facets of time and place. However, users' complex information needs often cover a combination of different aspects, such as specific genres or plot elements, engagement or novelty, and widely used controlled vocabularies do not normally address such information needs well. It has thus been advocated that more subjective aspects of literary fiction known as “appeal characteristics” should be represented: characterization, storyline, frame/setting, tone, and language/style are identified to help users find works like ones they have already enjoyed. However, there are no widely available subject indexing systems for fiction that support the indexing of those aspects.

General controlled vocabularies do not represent LGBTQ+ themes well. There is a long history of critique of biases in controlled vocabularies. Also, terms used by LGBTQ+ people are not always used by the controlled vocabularies. Most Swedish libraries use Swedish Subject Headings (SAO) for the subject indexing of literature (both factual and fictional). The representation of terms for LGBTQ+ people is typically broad – for example, the term “transgendered people” is there but not more specific terms such as “trans men,” “trans women,” or “transitioning.” For children's and YA literature, another indexing system is used, the Children's Subject Heading List. In this system, terms describing LGBTQI are also rather few and general, comprising only the following: “asexuality,” “bisexuality,” “homosexuality,” “homosexual parents,” “non-binary,” “coming out,” “queer,” “rainbow families,” and “transgender persons.”

To address the challenges that LGBTQ+ literary fiction is too sparingly thematically described and that SAO LGBTQ+ terms are too broad and lacking in specificity, the Swedish Queerlit project aims to create a sub-database of the Swedish union catalog Libris covering Swedish LGBTQI fiction, primarily for scholars but also for the general public. In addition to the joint LIBRIS interface, the Queerlit sub-database is searchable through a separate interface supporting advanced search functionalities based on the dedicated LGBTQI thesaurus also developed as part of the project. This thesaurus, the Queer Literature Indexing Thesaurus (QLIT), is largely based on the English-language Homosaurus Vocabulary (<https://homosaurus.org/v3>) used by the Digital Transgender Archive (DTA) (<https://www.digitaltransgenderarchive.net>), among others. Homosaurus was developed to cover a range of varied information resources and its first version dates to 1997.

The QLIT thesaurus comprises selected terms from Homosaurus translated to Swedish. Of the 1,186 Homosaurus terms in 2021 when the work began, we selected those that had been used to index at least one work of fiction in databases using Homosaurus, in this case the Internationaal Homo/Lesbisch Informatiecentrum en Archief (IHLIA) and DTA databases. Those terms were enriched with narrower and broader terms. The QLIT thesaurus was further adapted for works of fiction and to reflect the Scandinavian context. This entailed: adding terms for Swedish minorities; adjusting judicial terms to reflect Swedish legislation; adding terms suggested by end-users in the project's workshops; and adding common symbolic concepts in queer fiction such as “mirrors” (in prose) and “rainbows” (in picture books). The QLIT thesaurus today comprises 848 terms of which 91 are unique to Queerlit, while the remaining 757 have exact or close matches in the Homosaurus. The thesaurus and the search functionalities are further informed by the needs of potential users, including subject experts, librarians, and the general public.

Digitized dating life: the effect of technology in young danes' romantic experiences

Malthe Rye Thomsen

In Denmark, the use of online dating has doubled the last ten years, with nearly 500,000 users in a population of 6 million. Hence, online dating has become a central aspect of Danes' romantic lives. In this presentation, I explore my preliminary data collection on the online dating experiences of young Danish adults (20-30-year-old), particularly exploring the role of classification. Furthermore, I position my PhD project in relation to a main theoretical tradition within qualitative online dating-studies.

In developing a dating profile, for instance on the application Hinge, you are prompted to select six photos to give an impression of who you are and wish to be perceived, as well as your age, height, and neighborhood. Optional details include dating goals, gender identification, education, and occupation, as well as religious and political orientation. Obligatory is as well to pose and answer at least three personel questions like "Which minor things in life I love?", "This year, I really want to start..." or "My typical Sunday is...". Following this, you initiate a process of browsing through numerous potential matches. Individuals interpret each other's profiles, place them into categories and select each other based on these categories, for instance on business features, humanistic attitude, political personality, interest in craftsmanship or artisan occupation. Technology in this way structure users in categorizing other people with significant consequences. Researchers have identified that dating platforms are permeated by a 'rejection mindset,' rooted in ideals of perfection, egocentrism, and fear of not choosing the right match (Illouz 2019; Pronk & Denissen 2020). Consequently, the phenomena of deletion and 'ghosting' (where people suddenly stop responding) have become prevalent and now constitute a central aspect of young adults' dating lives (Konings et al. 2023).

According to several researchers who draw heavily on the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman's influential theory of modern liquid love, this behavior is linked to contemporary marketization, societal emphasis on constant pleasure, and the proposed dissolution of long-term romantic bonds (Bandinelli & Gandini 2022; Bauman 2003; Davidson et al., 2020; Hobbs et al. 2017; Illouz 2012, 2019; Portolan & McAlister 2021; Rask Jepsen 2018). While these critical theoretical approaches are valuable for examining macro-level and structural factors, my aim is more detailed to explore how young adults experience technological conditions in finding a partner. Therefore, I approach online dating with a phenomenological perspective that complements and specifies more structural analyses by focusing on micro-level and personal experiences of contemporary changes in dating and love life.

Selecting everything

Mats Dahlström

Issues of classification and power appear when we digitize printed heritage. A discussion is going on in Sweden about finally digitizing the entire Swedish printed heritage, and in the process doing a whole new retrospective national bibliography. The discussion concerns financing, selection and implementation, much of which boils down to aspects of classification and power.

So, for instance, even if the goal is to digitize “everything”, one cannot escape the need to define this. What is “the Swedish print”? One can delimit it geographically. But the borders and territories of a nation have of course changed several times over the centuries we have had print culture – so should e.g. prints from Finland up to 1809 be included? One can define it by language. But innumerable material has been printed in Sweden in other languages than Swedish. Vice versa, a great many Swedish texts have been printed outside of Sweden. What to do with one of the most important printings in Swedish history, *A Description of the Northern Peoples* by Olaus Magnus, printed not in Sweden but in Rome in 1555, and not in Swedish but in Latin? And when is a work considered printed? Printed by whom and where? Using what specific technology? Is a specific number of copies required? Decisions like this will decide what is included and excluded from the printed heritage.

But there are indeed further decisions to be made when selecting “everything”, but which are not acknowledged in the discussion. One decision concerns the representational level: work, edition or the individual item? A national bibliography is supposed to describe editions, but what one sees on the screen in a digitized collection is usually a specific item, a copy, given the power to represent the whole edition or even the work (occasionally when we are presented with a digital scan and a text transcription side by side, the scan and the transcription stem from two different copies of the edition, or even from two different editions). Although this practice has its risks even for modern industrialized print where variation might occur within the edition, the risks increase with the distance of age and geography (cf. provincial print) between the source document and the digital representation of it. For prints from the older handpress period, variation between copies is the norm, so a single copy is often inadequate to represent the whole edition.

In cases like this, a digitizing project usually selects a(ny) candidate document that happens to be available. But it can adopt a more ambitious and truly bibliographic strategy: to have the posts in the bibliography refer to the edition level, and then associate each post to one or several digitized copies (items). Any library, institution or individual can thus digitize its copy and set up a link between the post and the digital copy, in Sweden or abroad, a form of distributed categorization. The more links, the higher the possibility to account for and to verify the bibliographical post (this strategy has been adopted by e.g. Germany, the Netherlands and Italy).

Digitization emphasizes particular historical materialities at the expense of others. It groups and highlights documents and editions. It is a ceaseless work of categorizing and classifying.

Seeking neutrality in a museum classification and its implications

Admeire da Silva Santos Sundström

The Museum of World Culture in Gothenburg, Sweden holds collections from different countries outside of Europe, among them we will focus on the Brazilian collection which is part of the ethnographical collection from South America¹. The whole collection totalizes around 17481 objects, and they were acquired through different ways, such as “donation, purchase, exchange, collected in expeditions, souvenirs, unknown, dispositions and replicas” with some of the Brazilian artifacts purchased, as Muñoz (2011) pointed out. Furthermore, the purpose of the museum influenced in the categorization of the collections, since at first it was an ethnographical museum; it still holds ethnographical categories for classifying its objects, which are based on the Murdock's Cross-Cultural theory. The museum has digitized its collection, and these ethnographical categories are currently available online on Carlotta Database. It is imperative to engage in a more profound analysis of these categories addressing what they represent and what consequences they may have to the community they are attempting to represent and to museum methods of working in describing and representing objects from different cultures. After the digitization of its collection, the museum also used a classification described as “neutral”. Seeking neutrality, the museum labeled the artefact using its functionality as subject matter, and its typology as categories, as for example: bracelets and necklaces, instead of “adornments²”. They are also classified from their material such as ceramic, wood, or metal. In both examples, the museum provides the audience not only with “a flexible system that can be used and adapted to all kinds of museum collections”, but also with a journey in a catalog of objects disconnected to their meaning. Furthermore, objects from different cultures have been categorized employing the same label, ignoring all the contextualization from their original owners and the representation to the original community. However, classification is not neutral, and when labelling we are creating an identity through surrogates which show, among other things, how the institution understands that culture. Considering this point, we will investigate this attempt at neutrality from the classification theory point of view, considering its implications to the indigenous community, the museum's role as a memory institution, and to the data available in a digital open environment. We intend to highlight some points that the generalization in the classification of indigenous objects may entail. The method is a case study of the Museum of world culture. We will conduct a literature review and to the analysis of the museum's database, we will select some objects categorized as Brazilian items, employing the indigenous databases in Brazil as official sources.

Keywords: Classification. Indigenous collections. Ethnographic museum.

References

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¹ Argentina (1543), Bolivia (2768), Brazil (5530), Chile (314), Colombia (2649), Ecuador (727), Guyana (1015), Paraguay (2419), Peru (286), Uruguay (6), Venezuela (380). The number may not be accurate, as the museum included other countries.

² This term was a literal translation of the Brazilian Portuguese term “adorno”. The term is used in the Brazilian indigenous museum and was selected based on the Dictionary of indigenous craftsmanship

Carlotta. <https://collections.smvk.se/carlotta-vkm/web>

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The Value of Damaged Goods: Experimenting with New Materialist Classification

Christa Shusko

Nearly all cultural heritage institutions possess collections far more vast than they can display—more vast, often, than they can even fully classify. Archives, for example, typically prioritize the description of an archival collection as a whole, though in well-funded and well-staffed institutions, inventories and finding aids are often developed for boxes, folders, and sometimes even individual items. Some of these inventories and finding aids may remain internal to archival staff while others may be accessible to users directly. In recent years, many libraries and archives have employed digitization to highlight more items within larger special collections; visual objects like photographs can serve as especially rich resources in the digital realm. Yet many libraries and archives may be less well-versed in understanding with—and classifying—non-textual objects such as photographs within their collections. It is vital to develop strategies to ensure thoughtful classification and digitization of cultural heritage resources that can benefit not only the institution and the users they serve but can also do justice to those resources themselves.

Damaged photographs can serve as an entry point into critically considering what it is that cultural heritage institutions value—that is, what these institutions consider worthy of classification—in their collections. Choosing to sort in—rather than sort out—these unwieldy objects may offer opportunities to reconsider how institutions and users may find value within cultural heritage collections. Rather than objects to be de-prioritized, concealed, repaired, or even discarded, damaged objects may be valued for the very uniqueness of their ordinary damage. The difficulties posed when classifying these objects (or, to use a new materialist term, things) may likewise benefit the many other things that populate cultural heritage collections. Considering how to classify the edges of collections rather than only their centers may enable more critical classification of collections as a whole. Classifying strangenesses rather than simply samenesses may further generate new avenues for educational, artistic, scholarly, and personal engagement with cultural heritage resources.

This project experiments with an application of new materialist theory to the selection and description of cultural heritage resources, focusing on a small number of damaged photographs from the IKFF Arkiv (Internationella Kvinnoförbundet för Fred och Frihet/Women's International League for Peace and Freedom) in KvinnSam, the Swedish National Research Library for Gender Research, housed at the Gothenburg University Library. Building on new materialism especially as articulated by Jane Bennett, this project posits that the nature of these damaged photographs can draw users into more meaningful relation with these items, their materiality, their histories, their provenance, their maintenance, and their digitality. Damaged objects compel users to reflect on temporality, history, fragility, and persistence. This approach can also highlight the humans (creators, collectors, archivists, conservators, librarians, and digitization specialists) who have enabled these objects to exist and persist prior to, during, and after the digitization process.

Classification of sciences: The case of the Norwegian Publication Indicator

Nils Pharo & Kim Tallerås

The classification and divisions of scientific fields has throughout history been the subject for discussion. From Aristotles to universally adopted classification systems based on academic fields such as DDC and Web of Science Research Areas. There is also, over time, a rich literature that discusses classification as an activity with social consequences and which in various ways can be linked to power relations, for example in the tradition of Bowker and Star (Bowker & Star, 1999; Star & Bowker, 2010).

In 2006 Norway introduced an incentive for scholarly publication (Sivertsen, 2010, 2016), called the Norwegian Publication Indicator (NPI). NPI is used to reallocate a small proportion of the annual institutional funding according to the institution's shares in the total number of publications published by researchers at Norwegian institutions. It also goes under the name 'the Norwegian Model' and has been adopted by other Nordic and European countries.

The indicator classifies scholarly communication and scientific writing along several dimensions:

1. Discipline/subject area classification (One journal --> One research area)
2. Quality level based (0, 1, 2) + level X
3. Funding model, depending on type of institutions

We will examine the power relations that influence the classification taking place in NPI. Suggestions about new publication channels are open for researchers and research administrative personnel at Scandinavian (Norwegian, Swedish or Danish) research institutions, editors and editorial board members from Scandinavian scientific journals, and member of Scandinavian scholarly associations. The system is organized so that scientific panels evaluate publication channels depending on quality and subject area and nominate level 2 channels. The National Board of Scholarly Publishing decides on level 2 and is responsible for acceptance of new channels (Norwegian Directorate for Higher Education and Skills, n.d.-b). Level X was introduced in 2021 to describe channels "where there is uncertainty about approval or rejection" (Røeggen, 2021).

The Norwegian government has decided that the system will no longer be used in the allocation of funding to universities and university colleges, but will be used for statistical purposes and funding of research institutes and health institutions. In Denmark, a system based on similar principles was cancelled recently, whereas Finland also has a system designed similarly.

We will investigate what happens in NPI classification processes. Our research questions include: Why are channels re-classified? This involved studying discussions on the nomination/reclassification of channels between levels and subject areas.

Based on an anecdotal evidence we seek to reveal different classification principles and arguments, including needs within the field, impact/citations, reputation, and needs for calibration between sub-disciplines.

We base our analysis on notes from discussions in the scientific panels and The National Board of Scholarly Publishing and comments made in the Norwegian Register for Scientific Journals, Series and Publishers on level X suggestions (Norwegian Directorate for Higher Education and Skills, n.d.-a).

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Classifying Humans in the Age of AI

Karen Louise Grova Søylen

Classification and categorization practices are central to the algorithmic systems which increasingly pervade our lived environments. Contemporary surveillance culture is permeated by desires to collect, detect, decipher, compute, classify, and penetrate *everything*, including humans. Individuals are automatically assigned into categories based on fixed and presumably stable identity markers such as gender, race, and age, and algorithms and artificial intelligence (AI) are hard at work to map and classify our inner states and moods, our minds. In other words, lived experience increasingly takes place in an environment characterized by the presence of technologies of information gathering, surveillance, biometric recognition, and artificial intelligence, designed to gather, share, sort, and classify data and bodies. Indeed, according to German sociologist Hartmund Rosa, the driving cultural force of the ‘modern’ world is the idea and desire to make the world *controllable* (Rosa 2020, 2).

However, classification practices and categories are not neutral, rather they co-produce social and material worlds (Bowker & Star 2000; Crawford 2021). Importantly, the desires to penetrate the unseen, to see, to sort, gather, hierarchize and classify are deeply tied to the 18th and 19th centuries and the emergence of modernity, and thus they are haunted by questionable ideas from the era of European colonialism and imperialism. This paper offers a reflection on how a range of contemporary algorithmic classification practices speaks to the re-birth of the positivist idea of the body as the site of truth. Pursuing this argument further, I discuss a selection of critical artworks which bring forth various problematic aspects of classifying humans, including American artist Zach Blas’ *Facial Weaponization Suite* (2012-14), American artist Trevor Paglen’s *ImageNetRoulette* (2019) and *Age, Gender and Emotions in the Wild* (2019), and the Danish Artist Duo Hesselholdt & Mejlvang’s *Native, Exotic, Normal* (2016).

Blas’ work protests how biometric facial recognition systems are trained to determine sexual orientation based on human faces, and how facial recognition technologies are shown to be significantly less accurate in detecting people of darker skin. Paglen’s two artworks question the bias and problematic ideas which haunts the training sets used in the development of computer vision to teach artificial intelligence (AI) how to “see”, classify, and recognize humans and their emotions, while Hesselholdt & Mejlvang problematizes the Fitzpatrick Scale, a classification system for human skin tones which was developed by the dermatologist Thomas B. Fitzpatrick in 1975. Incidentally, the six-color Fitzpatrick Scale has been widely used as a standard in machine learning and artificial intelligence for computer vision, and has recently received criticism for being insufficient in this capacity. Employing the artworks as entry points, my aim is to point out various fields where algorithmic classification practices categorize humans in deeply problematic ways, such as according to gender, sexual orientation, emotional states and skin color, and how this contributes to the return of the body as a vulnerable site of surveillance.

