# a. SQUIRE

## ON STEALTH

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[Silence] is a presence
it has a history a form
Do not confuse it
with any kind of absence.

Adrienne Rich, 'The Dream of a Common Language'

In her 1987 examination of the consciousness of Torinese workers born between 1884 and 1922, Luisa Passerini remarks that during her interviews with them, there was a palpable absence of any remorse or condemnation towards their experience of Mussolini's fascist dictatorship. This lacuna may, in her words, 'be interpreted as symptomatic of an internal block arising from a cultural hostility to a power which was, at the same time, accepted on a day-to-day basis.'[1] Their silence is laden with information, and it is precisely this truth which disturbs Passerini; for it is within their silence that we find evidence of their traumas.

The hormones epinephrine and corticosterone, which are secreted by the adrenal glands, work to regulate the consolidation of long-term memory. An overload of adrenaline, however, can in fact break down this neurological system and so 'bleach' memories of their intense horror.[2] Areas of the brain essential for translating and storing information, such as the frontal lobe and the thalamus, become imbalanced and disconnected, and leave the limbic system, which is neither conscious nor literate, responsible for forming imprints of traumatic experiences. These unmoored memories must then be interpreted through what is missing, not what is told.

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When TASER International rebranded in 2017 it took its new name, *Axon*, from the company's line of body-worn cameras, pivoting ostensibly from electroshock weapons to, in its own corporate parlance, 'a model driven more by data and devices.'[3] In 2009, four years after the release of the TASER CAM – an optional accessory mounted beneath the taser to record audio and video while the weapon is in use – Axon had introduced its first body camera, the *Axon Pro*. The new product was designed to be head-mounted and to upload footage to the proprietary online storage software, *evidence.com*. The company have since issued six generations of body cameras, which are used by 17,000 law enforcement agencies worldwide.

Programmed into the system of an Axon body camera is a default 'buffer' mode.[4] When the camera is initiated, its buffering begins; in this elliptical interval, which may last up to thirty seconds or until the 'event' mode is activated, the camera captures video but no audio. Should the event mode be activated, the silent footage captured directly before will be saved and attached to that event in the camera's permanent memory. If it is not, however, the footage will be erased. Axon states, 'this feature is intended to capture the video of an incident just

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[1] Luisa Passerini, *Fascism in Popular Memory: The Cultural Experience of the Turin Working Class*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 195–201.

[2] Bessel van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (New York: Penguin, 2017), 363.

[3] Laurel Wamsley, "Taser Changes Its Name To Axon And Offers Free Body Cameras For Police", National Public Radio, 7 April 2017. https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2017/04/07/522878573/we-re-more-than-stun-guns-says-taser-as-it-changes-company-name.

[4] myAxon, "Legacy Guides / Axon Body", last modified 24 August 2023. https://my.axon.com/s/article/Axon-Body---Pre-event-buffering?language=en_US#:~:text=the%20ON%20position.-,With%20the%20camera%20turned%20on%2C%20the%20Axon%20system%20is%20in,memory%20while%20in%20BUFFERING%20mode.

before an agent's activation of event mode'.[5] The witnessing of an unfolding incident is thus choreographed by the camera's user; not only is the inception of the visual record at the discretion of that agent, but also the corresponding audio. In 2016, 93% of prosecutors' offices used body camera footage to prosecute civilians, and only 8.3% of the time used it to prosecute officers.[6]

Though different forms of silences – one, an intimate and psychological response to trauma; the other, a system programmed into an electronic device – there is an affinity between them in that both work to simplify narratives. As conspicuous silences, they escape contradictions and uncomfortable truths that may promote or make room for interpretations challenging those of, in these cases, the Torinese workers and the police. Akin to Passerini's muted subjects, the subjects of Axon's lenses attest, in their mimed actions, to lopsided powers.

Adjusting results so that inconsistencies are flattened out is so widely accepted a data practice within official statistics that it is regularly adopted by statisticians to satisfy demands for increasingly coherent and singular datasets. Political sociologists Stephan Scheel and Funda Ustek-Spilda have argued that such adjustments seek to make the unknown appear known. These practices are often utilised by governments and public institutions, allowing them to present mutable dynamics as quantifiable, so that they might more easily be analysed and addressed. Scheel and Ustek-Spilda identify the use of one such technique, which they call 'recalibration', for the levelling of migration figures in time series databases, to disguise discrepancies which have arisen out of changes in methodology.[7] The term 'recalibration' has multiple connotations, namely: 'to make small changes to an instrument so that it measures accurately' and 'to change the way you think about something'.[8] For Scheel and Ustek-Spilda, however, it is more importantly used to circulate non-knowledge about an object whose data is being collected. Recalibration targets those whose data is most vulnerable, and therefore more easily dissolved, forming from it a stable and manageable reality which in turn mis/informs public and politic.

Migration figures, which are 'slippery and ghostly' to statisticians seeking accurate measurements, but remain integral to public policy debates, are often subject to recalibration.[9] The aim in these cases is to present migration as something experts and governments can quantify, measure, and therefore, create evidence-based responses to.[10] After Estonia's 2011 census, statisticians were made aware of 71,000 people recorded on the population register who had not been enumerated on the census. Deciding what to attribute this error to, they analysed the residency status of all missing individuals by assessing so-called 'signs of life'.[11] The signs of life they sought were any transaction with a state institution. Detecting no signs of life for 40,240 of those missing from the census, the statisticians decided to categorise them as emigrants. Subsequently, all migration figures and census data between 2000 and 2011 were adjusted to fit with this new evidence and to avoid jumps in demographic data. The key aims of this recalibration were to present migration data as knowable, and government and state institutions as knowledgeable. One statistician involved stated, 'we can say plus-minus 10,000 people and it would be a very exact number from a statistical point of view. But our customers want even more precise numbers... and we work for our customers'.[12] Their customers, such as the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), are then able

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[5] myAxon, "Legacy Guides / Axon Body", last modified 24 August 2023. https://my.axon.com/s/article/Axon-Body---Pre-event-buffering?language=en_US#:~:text=the%20ON%20position.-,With%20the%20camera%20turned%20on%2C%20the%20Axon%20system%20is%20in,memory%20while%20in%20BUFFERING%20mode.

[6] Linda Merola, Cynthia Lum, Christopher S. Koper, and Amber Scherer, "Body Worn Cameras and the Courts: A National Survey of State Prosecutors", (Fairfax County, VA: Centre for Evidence-Based Crime Policy, George Mason University, 2016). https://bwctta.com/sites/default/files/Files/Resources/BWCProsecutors.pdf.

[7] Stephan Scheel and Funda Ustek-Spilda, "Migrants: Omitting and Recalibrating," in *Data Practices: Making Up a European People,* ed. Evelyn Ruppert and Stephan Scheel, (London: Goldsmiths, 2021), 125-158.

[8] Scheel and Ustek-Spilda, *Data Practices,* 150.

[9] Ibid, 156.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Ibid, 144.

[12] Ibid, 156.

to turn these figures into visualisations, presenting themselves as competent authorities 'with the expertise needed for successfully implementing projects of migration management'.[13]
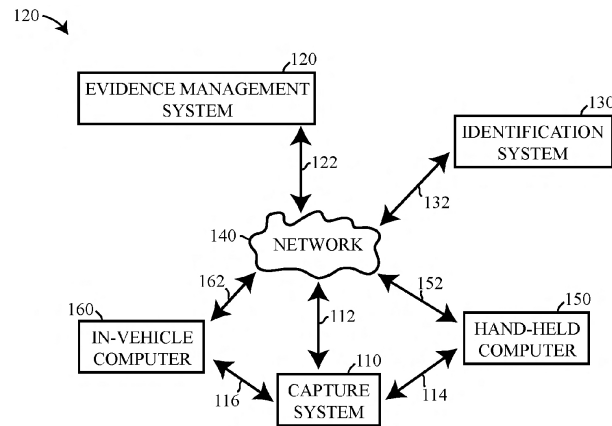
Figure 1    *Ecosystem for Evidence.* Source: Axon.

Axon is to law enforcement agencies what recalibration is to the IOM. In the first line of the company's principles Axon declares itself to have been 'built for [its] customers', echoing almost verbatim the voice of the statistician.[14] Described as a group of systems that cooperate with each other to 'collect, manage, identify, categorise, and process evidence', Axon's *evidence ecosystem* 'prepares' captured footage prior to its packaging as evidence (see figure 1).[15] When an officer docks their camera to charge, the footage is automatically uploaded to *evidence.com*. While they are retained on this system, videos can be reviewed, their titles edited, and copies redacted and cropped. Recordings not invoked for legal proceedings are deleted within 31 days. Even prior to this, Axon have always already exercised a mode of recalibration with the 'pre-event' buffer which, as filmmaker Theo Anthony has observed, 'is standard in most police departments not by law, but by software default'.[16] The buffer inscribes the corollary notion of the spectral 'non-event', which emphasises the footage collected during those first 30 seconds as marginal and superfluous information subordinate to the 'event'. The buffer is, moreover, a tactical zone, its footage resembling to the police what the migrant data represents to the statistician: a ritual sacrifice.

Section 1.3 of the 2022 *Body Worn Video Cameras (BWVC) Policy Framework* issued by the UK Ministry of Justice states that the devices work 'to provide a clear and irrefutable record of events'.[18] Bodycam footage, which is partially purged of audio and subject to the myriad of data practices constellated in Axon's 'evidence ecosystem', appears however to operate in reverse, making room for speculation if not fabulation. While 'fabulation' can often be used in a positive sense – and is arguably critical to Luisa Passerini's subjects who deploy it as an enabler of a new reality and a new past, a chance to gain autonomy over their biographies – in a judicial realm, it rewrites narratives to suit certain institutions or persons circumscribed within them. The calculated inaudibility of the footage shot in the buffering mode, therefore, establishes silence as a generative site.

Evidence in a legal context does not, theorist Thomas Keenan writes, close the case, but rather opens it.[19] Film-as-evidence, then, becomes a catalyst for debate. In the early 20th century, when (silent) film was first introduced

[13]  Scheel and Ustek-Spilda, *Data Practices*, 140.

[14] Axon, "Principles". Accessed 11 September 2023. https://uk.axon.com/company/principles.

[15] Womak, et al., 2018, Systems and Methods for Supplementing Captured Data, US Patent 0121738, filed 27 October 2017, and issued 3 May 2018.

[16] Theo Anthony, "All Light, Expanded", 2021. Accessed 15 July 2023. https://alllightexpanded.com/.

[18] Ministry of Justice, United Kingdom, *Body Worn Video Cameras (BWVC) Policy Framework,* issued 20 September 2022.

[19] Thomas Keenan and Hito Steyerl, "What is a Document?", *Aperture*, Spring 2014, 58–65.

to courtrooms, jurists were uncomfortable with the unusual persuasiveness of the medium, calling for witnesses to communicate what was in the footage and testify to its reliability.[20] In other words, footage was transcribed. It became illustrative, secondary to speech, negotiable, and potentially dismissible. Far from a protective mechanism, as *the right to remain silent* would imply, the silence of the buffering mode begs for contamination and misinterpretation, creating fictions which shape reality.

The diagram below constitutes the final visual mechanism in Axon's evidence ecosystem. Its purpose is to identify certain patterns of crime, and in doing so to aid Axon in its supposed pursuit of greater '*public safety*'. It depicts a series of incidents surrounding a traffic violation. I have accessed 10 such illustrations and I am unable to make sense of them. They are cryptic tapestries of numbers and marks; they lend the appearance of transparency but remain opaque.
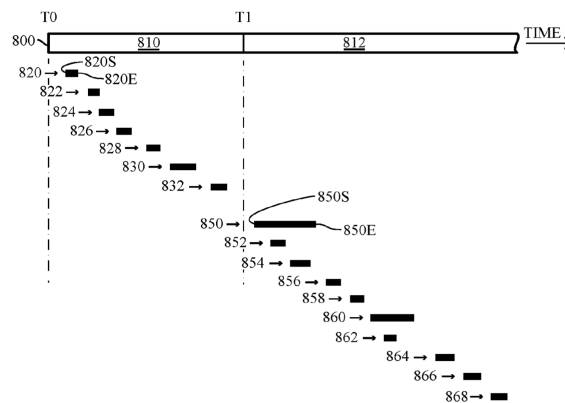


Figure 2    A police officer travels south on 5th Street. While driving the body camera captures images of several street signs, including that of 5th Street. As the officer approaches Elm Avenue, they turn on their vehicle lights to pull over a car for a traffic violation. The officer states for the record that he is performing a traffic stop, including a description of the location. The car being stopped pulls over, and the officer parks behind. Exiting the cruiser, the body camera captures an image of the pulled-over car and its license plate. Source: Axon.

Scheel and Ustek-Spilda allude to this unintelligibility of data, arguing that the recalibration of Estonia's population size led to inconsistencies with wider international databases, which were 'only visible to experts... the average user [would] hardly notice [them].'[21] Data visualisation deliberately sets out to make it indecipherable, masking the limitations and uncertainties – the inconsistencies and untruths – which typically haunt datasets. These graphical representations are used to exploit their ability to hold secrets which are legible to few. Institutions and systems can then make them freely accessible, with the knowledge that ultimately they lie latent. They exist in stealth mode.

Later in the *BWVC Policy Framework* is the proviso:

> The coverage captured by BWVC provides only a limited view of an incident; showing only one angle; it does not record what might be happening behind the lens or behind the user who is filming; it does not record smells, feelings of tension or the atmosphere building up to; or surrounding, an incident.

Nor does it record the police officer. They, too, operate in stealth mode; their camera affording them invisibility. Indeed, Axon cameras are programmed with their own 'stealth mode', for those situations where the agent 'may

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[20] Louis-Georges Schwartz, *Mechanical Witness: A History of Motion Picture Evidence in U.S. Courts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

[21] Scheel and Ustek-Spilda, *Data Practices,* 154.

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wish to turn off the lights on [their] camera', thereby concealing its use.[22] They may see without being seen, and (for up to thirty seconds) hear without being heard. We have no choice, therefore, but to study what there is not; to presume that the ceaseless silence which surrounds these mechanisms is in fact not a void, but noise.

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While looking at the brain scan of an individual asked to recount a traumatic experience, the psychiatrist Bessel van der Kolk observes that the subject went 'numb', her mind 'blank', and nearly every area of her brain evidenced 'markedly decreased activity' (see figure 3).[23] This response entails a complete severance from sensations, and is known in clinical terms as dissociation disorder. The scan is almost hollow, bar an array of sporadic black markings similar to those in the Axon diagram. The brain's vacancy, however, is what enables van der Kolk to diagnose his patient.

Central to dissociation is the axon, the part of a neuron which is responsible for relaying electrical signals by way of the synapse to the dendrite within the brain and the rest of the body. The synapse is a small gap between two neurons, acting as a buffer through which signals are carried by neurotransmitters from one neuron to the next. Dissociation is often stimulated when neurons in the brain's posteromedial cortex transmit signals synchronously at a heightened frequency, thus overwhelming the nervous system.

It is within the buffer between axon and dendrite that thoughts, impressions and impulses pass. The gap is a facilitator of communication. The silent buffer of the Axon body camera mirrors the synaptic buffer of the nerve: a necessary mechanism to mutate, modify and make malleable our thoughts and responses. Its silence is not an absence; neither is the synapse an obsolete emptiness. When silences and absences are dissociated from their frequent weaponisation, when they are left alone to secretly and unobtrusively permeate, perhaps then they may work to expose a reality, which words and evidence have so far failed.
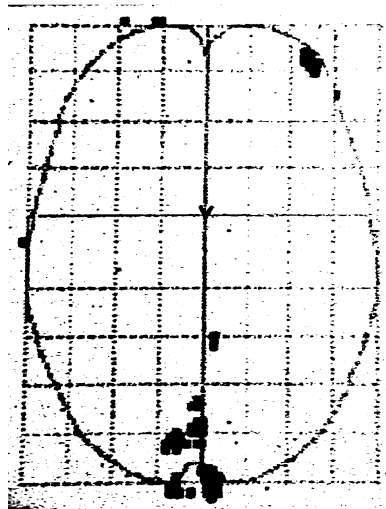


Figure 3   Brain scan showing blanking out or dissociation in response to being reminded of a past trauma. In this case almost every area of the brain has decreased activation, interfering with thinking, focus, and orientation. Source: *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*. New York, Penguin.

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[22] Axon, "Axon Body - Enabling Stealth Mode", last modified 24 August 2023. https://my.axon.com/s/article/Axon-Body---Enabling-stealth-mode?language=en_US.

[23] Van der Kolk, 150–152.