

# The forensics of form

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## Abstract

In this commentary, I suggest Ash's contributions can be productively illuminated if we consider his illustration of the forms of bump stocks through the lens of critical forensics. Examining the logic, perspective and spatialization of Ash's flat ontological analysis, and considering resonances in open forensic investigations, I outline further consequences and stakes of this project.

## Keywords

bump stock, form, forensic, ontology

... a white male, aged 64, opened fire from an elevated hotel window on the Las Vegas strip down onto the Route 91 Harvest country music festival, killing 58 people and injuring 851. Out of the 14 rifles fired by the gunman in the shooting, 12 had bump fire stocks attached. The bump stock device replaces the rear stock and pistol grip of an AR-15 or AK style rifle and contains a spring, which allows the recoil from the weapon to push the trigger against the shooter's finger, enabling faster fire than without the attachment (Ash, 2020).

... [bump stocks] ... are designed to be affixed to a semiautomatic long gun (most commonly an AR-type rifle or an AK-type rifle) in place of a standard, stationary rifle stock, for the express purpose of allowing 'rapid fire' operation of the semiautomatic firearm to which they are affixed ... [The bump stock] harnesses the recoil energy of the firearm, providing the primary impetus for automatic fire (GPO, 2018: 13443 cited in Ash, 2020).

James Ash's (2020) paper on 'Flat Ontology and Geography' raises the stakes for ontological considerations in geographical analysis. For Ash, as for other theorists of flat ontology like Marston et al.

(2005), to address ontology in geographical investigations is not to presuppose an answer or suggest a model before asking a question. Neither is it to assume a particular theoretical stance. Rather, for Ash, to think about ontology is to unpack, with forensic scrutiny, the degrees of difference between entities, their forms, and their capacities to 'comprehend' each other. In other words, the 'flat ontological analysis of form' proposed by Ash 'remain[s] focused on questioning what entities are and what they can do'.

I begin this commentary with two extracts from Ash's article because they crystallize, for me, the political stakes of this flat ontological analysis of form, while also amplifying other qualities of this analysis. Ash argues that ontology has explanatory power and informs a politics of access. He writes, 'how entities are differentiated from one another can

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have powerful consequences for who has access to what, when, where and how, which in turn alters the kinds of phenomena and events that are possible'. For Ash, the realm of possibility is dependent on how entities are differentiated or 'de-determined'. Employing the work of Tristan Garcia, Ash de-determines the form of the bump stock to better delineate what a bump stock can do outside of any particular relationship to a weapon or a shooter. This requires considering, among other parts of the bump stock, the 'plastic shoulder', the 'trigger ledge', the 'spring inside the shoulder stock' and 'the grip'. As Ash states, the 'overall form' of the bump stock is 'the combined qualities of rigidity and rebound that shape where the bump stock and rifle ends and thus where the form of the shooter begins'. This point is crucial: a flat ontological analysis of form is an analysis of beginnings and endings; it is about tracing the edges of things.

Ash's paper is notable for its detailed discussion of technical capacity. As he has done numerous times elsewhere (e.g. Ash, 2010, 2013), Ash examines a microcosm of materiality, functionality and operability. In this paper, Ash's approach is particularly recognizable. In reading Ash's flat ontological account of the bump stock, I felt like a disembodied observer looking at a semi-frozen scene. My viewpoint moved around the gunman, holding a rifle away from his body, keeping it tensed between forearms. The bump stock became transparent, revealing its inner springs, compressing and decompressing. I zoomed in to the trigger finger. I observed how the trigger pushed and rebounded against the finger as bullets flew in slow motion out of the gun. This virtual perspective, in which the space-time of the viewer is detached from that of the entity or series of entities in a scene, made popular in films like *The Matrix*, is known as 'bullet time' (Rehak, 2007). It is a three-dimensional, spatialised perspective that occurs during a temporal 'pause' (Rehak, 2007). For me, the quality of Ash's analysis generated this feeling of pause, and a sense of being able to see around objects and through opaque surfaces. Beyond its use in action films, however, bullet-time is a perspectival technique employed by forensic investigations. In the rest of this commentary, I will argue that Ash's paper and

method can be productively complicated if we consider his flat ontological analysis of bump stocks through the lens of critical forensics.

Positioned at the juncture of art, architecture and security studies, critical forensics brings 'new material and aesthetic sensibilities' to bear on state violence, conflict and changing environments (Forensic Architecture, 2014 cited in Apter, 2016: 101). Etymologically, 'forensics' is derived from the Latin term meaning 'before the forum' and 'refers to the practice of making propositions through objects before professional and political gatherings' (Weizman et al., 2010: 59). In partial resonance with Bruno Latour's (1993) 'parliament of things' and Latour and Weibel's (2005) 'making things public', one aim of critical forensics is to amplify the 'speech of things' (Weizman et al., 2010: 61). As Eyal Weizman, Paulo Tavares, Susan Schuppli and Situ Studio write, '[this] can be understood as the process by which material evidence turns into what could be called "material witness," entailing that objects have some agency and that experts act as its translators' (Weizman et al., 2010: 62; see also Schuppli, 2020). Although Ash does not deal with the 'speech' or 'witness' of a specific bump stock, let alone one of the 12 bump stocks employed by the Las Vegas gunman of October 2017, the bump stock in Ash's paper speaks in other ways. Ash's stripped-back analysis, which probes, among other things, the inter-comprehension of trigger ledge, shoulder stock and pistol grip, is both compelling and chilling precisely because it shows us how well-formed a bump stock is for machine-gun type fire. This is one of the strengths of Ash's paper. A flat ontological analysis of form highlights the crucial difference the bump stock makes to the rifle: what it can do.

In contrast to the case files of critical forensics, Ash's paper was not written as a public inquiry into a specific act of violence. My imagination of the 'bullet-time' perspective is probably as much a result of the lack of visual or diagrammatic aid in this paper, as it is a product of Ash's analytical description. Yet, in other ways, the 'bullet-time' perspective of the gunman and bump stock haunts Ash's account of a flat ontological analysis of form. By adding and subtracting qualities and edges, and

by repeatedly moving inside and outside the bump stock, the gun and the human body, Ash produces a temporally bounded, yet spatialised, view. While reflecting on Ash's paper, I could not help but think of Forensic Architecture's investigation into the 2006 murder of Halit Yozgat in Kassel, Germany, a project driven and enabled by digital and 1:1 scale modelling of the internet café in which Yozgat was killed. This model became a stage for reenactments of the movements of bodies and weapons. Forensic Architecture's report states: 'Within the 77 square meters of the Internet café and the 9 minute and 26 second duration of the incident, various actors — including members of migrant communities, a state employee, and the murderers — crossed paths and were architecturally disposed in relation to each other' (Forensic Architecture, 2017: 4). Although Ash's stated intention is to delineate the form of the bump stock as it is 'comprehended' by other forms, the visceral effect of this analysis, for me, is an 'architecturally disposed' or 'polyperspectival' view of the scene of a crime (Weizman, 2019). This visceral effect, co-produced by Ash's writing and my subjective engagement with it, shouldn't be dismissed. Although others will encounter Ash's analysis differently, the aesthetic and expressive dimensions of a flat ontological analysis of form are key to its conceptual contributions and its politicization, just as the distinctive aesthetics of Forensic Architecture's models inform their value for international tribunals and art institutions alike.

Ash's analysis is further complicated through an attention to the body as a forensic site. For, it is not only technical things that are 'de-determined' in Ash's paper. Ash also undertakes a de-determination of the human form. In other words, he subtracts from the human body/brain anything that is 'not necessary' for holding and using the bump stock and rifle, including, 'a sense of sight, smell or hearing, an ability to aim accurately'. By 'removing these qualities, we are left with a fleshy body, including a torso, shoulder, arm, hand and fingers, and presumably a nervous system and brain'. There are at least two consequences of this de-determination of the human. The first is that the human body is broken into pieces, as if dissected on

the operating table, or diagrammed in the court. The second is that the body is detached from a single person's identity and is assessed as another 'thing'. Both of these moves occur in forensic investigations, and both have elicited much critique from researchers, activists and legal experts. Although I am not a scholar of Garcia's work, my sense is that engaging with these critiques would demand some reorientation of a flat ontology of form, especially in relation to human (and nonhuman) bodies. It would demand more attention to the ethics and aesthetics of de-determination. Indeed, more so than the bump stock or the rifle, the body may resist a flat ontology of form, because as neuro- and microbiology teach us, it cannot be neatly de-determined into objects, parts or edges, or assumed to be singular in the first place.

At the same time, Ash's de-determination of the human body echoes Daisy Hildyard's notion of 'a common body, divided into parts' (Hildyard, 2017: 106). The body in Ash's analysis is not only the body of the single Las Vegas shooter, but that of many others too. The sheer number of bump stock-owning, rifle-equipped and otherwise weaponised bodies is underlined in the statistics Ash cites: *283 mass shooting events in the US in 2019 alone*. In the harsh light of these figures, the model of the single gunman in a hotel room expands and stretches outward until it becomes so ubiquitous as to be invisible. The smooth bullet-time view collapses. When context is foregrounded, what happens to the analysis of form? Where does a flat ontological analysis of form end and where does the 'weather' of mass shooting and militarised brutality begin? Can we still speak of beginnings and endings, edges and limits? In this commentary I have briefly gestured to some of the consequences of Ash's ontological analysis through tracing resonances in critical forensic investigations. In my view, Ash makes an important and necessary contribution to thinking about the practical, political and legal implications of ontological claims. However, the stakes of this project are not limited to the politics of access and the commercial availability of particular objects. Rather, they cohere in the 'consistency across various sites, events and encounters' of bump stocks,

semi-automatic weapons and the bodies that repeatedly trigger them.

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