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Surveillance/Counter-Surveillance

Surveillance

The meaning of surveillance can differ insofar as it describes not only the act of »observation of a place, person, group, or ongoing activity in order to gather information«, but refers to a social reality that keeps watch over its subjects to oversee and to direct. This is true especially today, as the historical advance of an intrusive society has gained a trajectory that permeates the foundation of our social institutions. It accounts for the mass surveillance by the NSA and other intelligence organisations in the name of national security, and is responsible for the existing analysis and use of our consumer behaviour by enterprises such as Google, Facebook, or Netflix to enhance our needs and wants.

The science of governance surveillance after all has become a guiding paradigm of maintaining social order that has a practical mode as well as an ideology arm. The practical status of surveillance is most notable in various monitoring devices, among others CCTV, GPS trackers in our mobile devices or the RFID chips woven into our clothes that monitor our every move. The pledge of these surveillance techniques are twofold: the mechanism of surveillance promises security through predictability and assures the demise of dark places, the elimination of secrets, and the extermination of deviance.

Ideologically the roots of surveillance and its present-day doctrine of transparency can be traced back at least to Jeremy Bentham, who in the late 18th century not only masterminded the plan for an architectural structure, the Panopticon, which substantiated his dream of an almighty utilitarian rule, but also formulated its dogmatic properties. Bentham envisioned the erection of a new prison, a circular building that was to be built around a watchtower: »the eye of power« (Foucault). Within his Panopticon no inmate would have the chance to hide nor would s/he have an idea who is watching them, while knowing that s/he is under constant surveillance.

The ideological basis of this system is the utilitarian notion of the gaze. As Bentham, through the lust of watching, envisioned a double benefit: the lust of seeing should on the one hand advance the individual as it energises the vigour of self-stimulation and self-gratification, on the other hand it should promote the moral improvement of society through the process of keeping tabs on everyone. The act of seeing and the knowledge of being constantly watched are conceived as stimulants for the betterment of the individual as well as of society as such.

In an effort to mimic the rhetoric of privacy and its claim to a right »to be let alone« (Warren/Brandeis, 195) the supporters of transparency finally speak of an entitlement to »the right to see« (Brin, 25); a right to see that generalises the motif of the Peeping Tom as a new law. The pleasure principle of seeing is henceforth

introduced to the imaginary substance of society as it connects the nature of man to the technology of surveillance; among other devices the camera is conceived as a neutral and transparent extension of the eye.

With its fixation on the faculties of sight and its emphasis on the visual – not the image or representation surveillance and its dogmatic appendix, transparency, are finally an a-aesthetic and an a-poetic project. To name just the most obvious predicament in this respect: Bentham in his Panopticon imagines the elimination of the shadow – the first palpable sign of a ›natural‹ image. The erasure of shadows further advances his aim as transparency and its kindred spirit, authenticity, argue for the end of mediation and envision the transcendence of time, space, and history; they disregard the grounding of society in the Other and thus discount the social nature of the filters through which we see. In its current state surveillance and transparency are the vehicles that prefigure the elimination of negation as they deprive us from our abilities to say no.

Counter-Surveillance
The mechanisms to counter the rule and threat of surveillance are manifold. They reach, on a practical level, from counter-surveillance techniques taught by spy agencies themselves and include methods to disguise as well as techniques to spot the spotter.

As political as well as aesthetic endeavours the notion to resist surveillance can assume the shape of various tactics and postures. In terms of visuality and in terms of opposing surveillance through the means of aesthetics we can distinguish three distinct approaches that tackle the issue of surveillance and transparency in different ways: first there are purely aesthetic or artistic attitudes, then there is the notion to use the means of appearance as counter-measurements to the pressures of surveillance, finally, there is an ethical and ontological approach that tries to renegotiate the visible by emphasising the need of negation and the substance of the invisible.

The case for an art explicitly against transparency can be traced back in the 20th century almost to its very beginnings. It starts with the Cubists, namely George Braque and Pablo Picasso, and their play on the difference between the physically given and the addition of knowledge, revealing the social nature of the process of seeing and its predicaments in social negations. In recent years the attention has shifted from this epistemological unveiling of the idolatry implicit in the ideology of a neutral viewpoint to the disclosure of the shape of the intrusive society in its present form. Contemporary artists, such as Trevor Paglen, David Huerta or Hasan Elahi, work to make the machinations of the regime of mass surveillance visible.

The use of appearance as a counter-measure to surveillance profits from the weak spots of surveillance. This tactic assumes the acquisition of uncorrupted data and employs the rationale of the war, as its exploits the fog of war, the unknown, and the ambiguous. Its application can be uniformity, over-affirmation, anonymity or just plain invisibility. In respect to art, Laibach, Luther Blissett, and Netochka Nezvanova are the best examples of this approach.

Finally, we can identify a third denunciation against the hegemony of the current transparent society. In an approach that seeks to repel the assumption of today's society, it tackles not only the premises of the need to be vigilant, but questions the underpinnings of the political economy of surveillance. This approach

attacks the very foundation of today's transparent society and its appraisal for neutrality, neutralisation, and accountability. Instead it stresses the significance of the theo-political problem that stands at the origin of the social. It addresses the void of the unspeakable, the real and its existence within symbolic orders, and the human ability to say no. Most prominent representatives of this approach today comprise, for example, the anarchist collective Tiqqun and their revitalisation of the ontological status of life, of its antagonistic nature and its reality as a civil war; the writings of Giorgio Agamben and his insistence on the need for *poiesis* that stands at the centre of formulating alternating forms-of-life, and last but not least Pier Paolo Pasolini, who in his artistic work evokes the martyrdom of the *moviola* (editing suite), a practice that devotes itself to the void and the negative as the ontological basis for a new Christian realism.

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