

Surveillance, Desire, and the Obliteration of the Subject

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In a blog post for *The Guardian*, Zygmunt Bauman suggestively brought together two complementary developments in information technology: the emergence of the drone and the rise of social media.¹ What brought them together in his mind was their shared contribution to the glut of information about persons (and things): on the one hand, the top-down obliteration of privacy, and on the other, the willing production of increasingly fine-grained information about one's activities, communications, thoughts, movements, and more. (As he puts it, "[W]e submit our rights to privacy to slaughter on our own will," and these rights are also subject to slaughter from on high.) He takes these developments as "the most remarkable feature of contemporary surveillance," since "it has somehow managed to force and cajole oppositions to work in unison, and to make them work in concert in the service of the same reality."²

However, it is not entirely clear that drones and social media are in fact opposites. This essay takes as its starting point the Freudian observation regarding the reversible relationship between the drives. This insight—one that the field of surveillance studies would do well to take seriously—is that

monitoring and self-display are not coincidental opposites but rather, deeply related formations. After all, it is too convenient to expect a surveillance society to coincide with the embrace of proliferating possibilities for self-disclosure purely by accident. For Freud and for Lacan, who builds on Freud's arguments in ways that are productive for the study of surveillance, monitoring and self-display are part of the same drive that reverses back upon itself thanks to the introduction of an "other." In this formulation, the reversal takes place twice, which suggests a kind of oscillation of the drives. As Lacan puts it, "This is because, from the outset, Freud takes it as understood that no part of this distance covered can be separated from its outwards-and-back movement, from its fundamental reversion, from the circular character of the path of the drive."³

The notion of a reflexive relationship between monitoring and self-display, or "seeing" and "being seen," resonates right away with some familiar characteristics of the contemporary surveillance society. However, I will only briefly touch on these in order to get to what seem to me some of the less obvious and perhaps more interesting implications of this relationship. Consider, for example, the spectacular character of the surveillance complex and its status as one of the most public "secrets" of the Information Age. If Edward Snowden did not exist, the NSA would have had to invent him. Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon papers anticipated this very logic. The functioning of the Panopticon was reliant as much upon its ability to facilitate viewing as on its status as spectacle (of the efficiency of viewing). In a somewhat different register, the recent development of automated forms of data collection and sorting relies upon the reflexive deployment of the surveillance apparatus to watch over ourselves. When the CIA's Chief Technology Officer blithely tells us that the agency's goal when it comes to data collection is "to collect everything and hold on to it forever," we cannot count ourselves out of this totality of the monitored world.⁴ After all, data-driven forms of pattern analysis rely as much upon the anomalous as upon the background against which anomaly can appear. In the database era, knowing whom to target means knowing as much as possible about whom not to target. One of the lessons of the Snowden revelations is that "foreign" and "domestic" surveillance (or "external" and "internal" monitoring) have become inseparable. This is not simply (or contingently) because of the entangled character of contemporary communication patterns and networks, but because data mining requires as comprehensive a database as possible.

The interactive and mutual character of social networks tends to dismantle the distinction between seeing and being seen, which facilitates both self-display and tracking (by “friends,” companies, and the state). Once again, the Snowden revelations have taught us the consequences of convergence: of self-display with surveillance, and commercial data collection with state monitoring (with Snowden himself inhabiting the intersection of surveillance, revelation, and publicity). These connections continue to spiral: the more we watch, the more we are watched. This dynamic is familiar to commercial media, which rely on “monitored eyeballs” (as well as ears and clickstreams). Freud’s formulation of a drive that reverses back upon itself anticipates this hyper-reflexivity: the more we want to know, the more we make ourselves known. The drive turns back on its originator as it passes through the realm of the other.⁵ Lacan pushes the indeterminacy of the two seemingly opposed drives of voyeurism and exhibitionism further, treating them not so much as successive stages (as in Freud’s formulation), but as a convergence of active and passive.⁶ In *Seminar XI*, he invokes the logic of an active form of reflexive submission: from seeing to making oneself seen, as the drive completes itself in its reversed form. Making oneself seen is the unique (and pleasurable) anxiety of the voyeur. It is no surprise then that a genre of pornography has emerged around the (spectacular) figure of the drone as window-peeping and backyard-surveying voyeur. This active form of self-submission is also the defining attribute of contemporary, demobilizing savviness and, not coincidentally, of the conspiracy theorist, who “gets off” on the impotence of ostensibly subversive knowledge. (Only the hopelessly naïve—the “duped”—imagine that their knowledge of how bad things are might help make the situation any better).

Lacan picks up on the tight link that Freud makes between scopophilia/exhibitionism and sadism/masochism, which suggests that the latter comes to serve as the defining model for the drives in general. That is to say, at issue in each case is a relation of domination and control. At first, Freud seeks to drive a wedge between the scopic drive and sadism. He notes that their primary forms are distinct, since the scopic drive is initially reflexive (focused on the self), whereas the primary form of sadism is other-directed (mastery over another). As he puts it, at the “beginning of its activity,” the “scopophilic instinct is autoerotic: it has indeed an object, but that object is part of the subject’s own body.”⁷ By contrast, “A preliminary stage of this kind is absent in sadism, which from the outset is directed upon

an extraneous object.”⁸ But, as Lacan observes, Freud wavers on this point and concedes that “it might not be altogether unreasonable to construct such a stage out of the child’s efforts to gain control over his own limbs.”⁹ In other words, the primary form of the “perversion” is already reflexive in both cases. Taken together, the reliance of the formulations of perversion upon the model of masochism/sadism and the fact that this complex originates in its reflexive form suggest a primary (and disavowed) role for masochism: an active form of submission. Or, to put it somewhat differently, the structuring logic of the drives is, in its primary form, masochistic. (The drive is only “completed” in its return form in Lacan’s formulation.) This observation has some implications for the other pair of drives that Freud links so closely to this dynamic: voyeurism and exhibitionism.¹⁰

What makes a drive perverse for Freud is the structure of the split between object and aim. In these cases, the aim misses its “proper” object by going too far—beyond the body—or not far enough, lingering on intermediate or preliminary objects.¹¹ Lacan makes much of this point, focusing on how the drive turns its object around and gets off on “missing” it. For Lacan, what becomes most significant in this regard is not the object but what he calls the “object cause,” or the “*objet petit a*,” that which is irreducible to the apparent object of desire. In the case of the scopic drive, or voyeurism, he identifies the “gaze” as the object cause of desire.¹² Gaze as object, for Lacan, appears in the form of that which cannot be seen, but that simultaneously invokes the position from which one can be seen: “The gaze I encounter . . . is, not a seen gaze, but a gaze imagined by me in the field of the Other.”¹³ The false fantasy of the gaze is one of perfect reflexivity: the attempt to capture the totality of one’s position by stepping outside of oneself to see oneself. However, this attempt backgrounds the role of the other and of the other’s desire in particular. As Lacan puts it, “That in which the consciousness may turn back upon itself—grasp itself . . . *as seeing oneself seeing oneself*—represents mere sleight of hand. An avoidance of the function of the gaze is at work there.”¹⁴ The reflexive relationship of the gaze to the seer—the way in which the monitoring gaze turns back upon itself—is reliant upon the introduction of an other. Reflexivity is not a solo affair. The gaze *qua* object is, for Lacan, precisely that which cannot be seen. That is, the position from which one would be able to see oneself being seen; the perspective of an Other that would make sense out of all that is seen, including the position and perspective of the watcher. If the fantasy of surveillance is one of objectivity

—the attainment of a gaze from “nowhere”—the gaze as object disrupts this fantasy and marks the structuring role of desire in the formation of the gaze. The blind spot of the gaze marks the point at which desire (and thus, lack) structure what passes for the objective, given reality.

Such logics are familiar in cultural representations of surveillance, which so frequently stage the reflexive turn of the monitoring gaze around a blind spot. The recurring trope is the monitor who suddenly finds the surveillance roles reversed. This is visible through the Senator behind the totalitarian surveillance network in *Enemy of the State* (dir. Tony Scott, 1998) who is blackmailed by the very technology he seeks to inflict upon the world (an act made possible by a failure to see all), or the reality TV producer in *EDtv* (dir. Ron Howard, 1999) who refuses to stop filming someone’s life until he is threatened with personal revelations about his own life. The reversal of the monitoring gaze in *The Lives of Others* (dir. Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck, 2007) similarly turns around missing gaze-objects, including an unlicensed typewriter and a smudge from its ribbon. In this film, set in East Germany in 1984, an attempt to incriminate a popular East German playwright stumbles when the typewriter he used to write a letter critical of the regime disappears. It turns out that the Stasi officer who spied on the playwright removed the typewriter to protect the playwright. The agent leaves a smudge from the typewriter’s telltale red ribbon on his own personnel file. When this document becomes public after the fall of East Germany, the playwright tracks down the individual who had spied on him and reverses the role of spy and target. In each of these examples, the surveillant apparatus is provided with the ostensible alibi of a pathological individual: a power-hungry bureaucrat, a money-hungry producer, and, in *The Lives of Others*, a high-ranking official who attempts to discredit the playwright in order to remove a perceived romantic rival. As Slavoj Žižek puts it in his critique of the movie, “In this way, the horror that was inscribed into the very structure of the East German system is relegated to a mere personal whim. What’s lost is that the system would be no less terrifying without the minister’s personal corruption, even if it were run by only dedicated and ‘honest’ bureaucrats.”¹⁵

The intriguing question for a study of surveillance then becomes how to approach the systemic horror of a totalizing monitoring apparatus. The structure of the argument so far suggests that such an apparatus might also

be understood through the relations of domination associated with the reversal of the scopic drive. In other words, to approach the question of surveillance in sociocultural terms requires going beyond the standard sociological approach that considers the role of surveillance in the disciplining and rendering productive of subjects. In addition, such an approach requires an engagement with the role of desire or, more accurately, drive—the form that desire takes when, in Lacanian terms, it misses its object and turns back upon itself. What is unique about contemporary surveillance strategies is their totalizing character. The technological capacity of digital monitoring now licenses the fantasy of total information capture. The digital recreation of reality envisioned by the goal of total surveillance encompasses the watcher as well as the watched. Remember Snowden's notorious claim that he had authorization to monitor anyone when he was working for the NSA: "I, sitting at my desk, certainly had the authorities to wiretap anyone, from you or your accountant, to a federal judge or even the President, if I had a personal e-mail."¹⁶ If, from a Foucauldian perspective, panoptic surveillance is about the process of subjectification, a psychoanalytic perspective proposes that the totalization of surveillance is about the obliteration of the subject altogether. In theoretical terms, this means the obliteration of the lack in the field of the other. Suggestively, the preemption of desire is one of the themes of contemporary monitoring practices in the realms of both commerce and consumption. Thus, for example, marketers are fond of telling us that they will discover what we want before we know it ourselves. In this sense, the ultimate consumption fantasy is the automatic fulfillment of any desire before it emerges: the Matrix as womb. (The fetal imagery in *The Matrix* (dir. Andy and Lana Wachowski, 1999), is suggestive in this regard). Similarly, the goal of security monitoring is not simply the detection of what the Department of Homeland Security terms "malintent," but, at the limit, its anticipation and obliteration. Hence, the increasingly apparent horizons of "total surveillance" are the perfection of a predictive power that seeks to obliterate action, history, and subjectivity, which Jean Baudrillard has called "the automatic writing of the world." He writes, "When the virtual operation of the world is finished, when all the names of God have been spelt out – which is the same basic fantasy as the declination of the human genome or the world-wide declination of all data and information – then we too shall see the stars fading away."¹⁷ The result is masochism taken to its limit: self-obliteration in the name of total control.

Notes

- 1 Zygmunt Bauman, "Is this the end of anonymity?," *The Guardian*, June 28, 2011, www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2011/jun/28/end-anonymity-technology-internet.
- 2 Zygmunt Bauman and David Lyon, *Liquid Surveillance: A Conversation* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2013), 25.
- 3 Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book IX*, ed. Jacques Alain-Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (1973; New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1977), 178.
- 4 Matt Sledge, "CIA's Gus Hunt On Big Data: We 'Try To Collect Everything And Hang On To It Forever,'" *Huffington Post*, Mar. 2, 2013, www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/03/20/cia-gus-hunt-big-data_n_2917842.html.
- 5 Sigmund Freud, "Instincts and their Vicissitudes," *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XIV (1914-1916): On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement, Papers on Metapsychology and Other Works*, trans. under the editorship of James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1957), 109–140.
- 6 Lacan, 178.
- 7 Freud, "Instincts and their Vicissitudes," 130.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Lacan, 183.
- 11 Sigmund Freud and James Strachey, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (New York: Basic Books, 1975), 16.
- 12 Lacan, 182.
- 13 Ibid., 84.
- 14 Ibid., 74. Emphasis in original.
- 15 Slavoj Žižek, "The Dreams of Others," *In These Times*, May 18, 2007, inthesetimes.com/article/3183/the_dreams_of_others.
- 16 Amy Davidson, "Edward Snowden, The N.S.A. Leaker, Comes Forward," *New Yorker*, June 9, 2013, www.newyorker.com/news/amy-davidson/edward-snowden-the-n-s-a-leaker-comes-forward.

- 17 Jean Baudrillard, "The Virtual Illusion: Or the Automatic Writing of the World," *Theory, Culture & Society* 12 (1995): 97-107, 106-107.

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