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**Swinging at the State:
Media, Surveillance and Subversion**

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[I]n a mediated world, the opposite of real isn't phony or illusional or fictional—its optional.

Thomas de Zengotita, Mediated

NOT LONG AGO, I SAT DOWN WITH A SECURITY CONSULTANT for a public housing provider, inside a crumbling late modernist high rise located in one of the postwar suburbs of what is now formally known as the City of Toronto. The consultant wanted to show me the Closed Circuit Television (CCTV) system the housing provider had recently installed in this catchment area. After several minutes spent scanning live images from each of the 29 cameras, I inquired as to whether these images were recorded. They certainly were, and our gaze promptly switched to some archived footage. Within seconds, we were observing two youth in a concerted quest to destroy one of the cameras. The youth began their mission with a quick survey of the architecture of the device. Next, they scanned the ground, selecting large stones within the immediate area which they then hurled at the casing surrounding the actual recording apparatus. With this casing dislodged, the youth alternated hoisting each other onto a door ledge to provide the necessary leverage they needed to swing a baseball bat—which had been resting idly against the wall—directly onto the camera itself. Finally, after several swings, the screen in front of us abruptly blackened. The movements of the youth were methodical and unhurried. They made no effort to conceal their identities—if I were to see them later on the street or in the park I would have easily been able to congratulate (or condemn) them on their undertaking.

CCTV systems, as we know, are a means of surveillance. But they are also agents of mediation. Rather than a neutral recording device designed to enhance 'community safety', they have the capacity to reify human relations so that they appear

as relationships between things. In doing so they produce representations of 'events' to be viewed, interpreted, and acted upon. The remarkable things about the footage I describe above was its ability to render visible the transformation of such relations by *inverting them*. Watching it, I became acutely aware that as the viewer, I, in fact, was what was 'represented' and they—the youth—the 'reality'. No longer was the CCTV device simply a means to record reality, but an object that actively *constituted* that reality. By destroying the instrument that marked my presence as a viewer, the youth effectively *made me present*, exposing the mediating agent as a determining factor of the event itself. Such exposés are unsustainable however, precisely because formally recognizing them as such would reveal that perceptions of events matter far more than the actuality of their production. CCTV, not unlike other forms of media, could never endure such an epistemological blow.

We can imagine this relation, for instance, when we ask what role the mediating agent—the CCTV system—might play when these youth are brought to court to face their pending charges. Will it figure centrally in the production of this footage, particularly as it is both the subject and object of the event in the first place? Or will the visual media itself—the footage from the CCTV system—be the focus? If it is the latter case what will most likely be distilled from this footage? An act of 'masculine' violence and aggression against private property? Or will the youth be deemed 'at risk,' their actions pathologized through their socio-economic class, citizenship status, 'race,' or literally 'place' as residents of a decaying public housing high-rise amidst an isolating suburban landscape? If however, the mediating agent does work its way centrally into the analysis—will the judge then cry out: 'What in the world was this camera doing there in the first place when the only thing it's managed to capture in its miserable existence is its own annihilation?'

My point is that visual media encourages the viewer to separate what is represented from the actuality of its production—the systemic interlocking of class, race, and gender; the historical and contemporary geographies of uneven development in the city and beyond. Paradoxically, while the youths' act of aggression is embedded in the contemporary social ordering of Toronto's inner suburbs, deriving such a representation from the footage gleaned off the CCTV would be remarkable precisely because CCTV was never intended to offer that. Rather, the system was designed primarily as a pre-emptive security mechanism, much like the one, for example, that recorded the London Bombers in the early morning of July 7th, 2006 (the footage of which was projected relentlessly around the globe). Indeed, rather than preventing crime and promoting safety these devices have become yet another instrument crafting our aestheticized global imaginary—producing 'authentic' visual media to bloat the ideological bowels of state security.

There are, however, emergent signs of subversion. While smashing the 700 plus cameras installed in Toronto's public housing properties may seem like a daunting

task, even with such stellar swings, Austrian filmmaker Manu Luksch's science fiction film *Faceless* is rooted in a similar desire to undermine the rise of visual media in the service of social order. Produced under the guidelines of the 'Manifesto for CCTV Filmmakers'¹, the film was entirely composed of CCTV images obtained through the UK's Data Protection Act. Under this Act, any individual has the right to access surveillance camera footage of his/herself (a right that those who produce such images were none to willing to oblige). While one of the film's reviewers suggests the beauty of *Faceless* lies in its ability to transform a visual medium into something for which it was not intended, I would argue that the film does precisely the opposite—it reveals just how CCTV is not simply an agent of law and order but also *an increasingly powerful aesthetic device*. Commenting for example, on how the film dwells on 'the everyday' rather than the sensational, this same reviewer goes on to note: 'We were half *expecting* some bland, grey scene of a truck passing or a person entering a tube station to suddenly erupt in the staggered crimson frames of a terrorist explosion...' (Frost 2006, emphasis added). Such expectations demonstrate how the production and circulation of visual media from CCTV sets structural limits to our urban public imaginary. *Faceless* on the other hand, gleans its CCTV footage from banal experiences and mundane spaces of the city, and in doing so, counters the tendency of this media to reify social relations. The film prompts us to ask why we now *expect* the sensational and in whose interests such expectations serve.

To be sure, when I asked the security consultant who'd shown me the video of the youth if what we'd seen was representative of the kind of footage held in the archive, the response was: 'No way, the most common violation we record is illegal dumping. But you don't want to see *that* do you?'

ENDNOTES

¹The Manifesto "declares a set of rules, establishes effective procedures, and identifies further issues for filmmakers using pre-existing CCTV (surveillance) systems as a medium in the UK. The manifesto is constructed with reference to the Data Protection Act 1998 and related privacy legislation that gives the subjects of data records (including CCTV footage) access to copies of the data. The filmmaker's standard equipment is thus redundant; indeed, its use is prohibited. The manifesto can easily be adapted for different jurisdictions"
<http://www.ambienttv.net/5/00a/about.html>

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http://artlife.blogspot.com/2006_06_01_artlife_archive.html
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