

Final Project for  
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*Surveillance As Therapy*  
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Maintaining an video archive of ones day-to-day life with body cameras allows for unparalleled accountability for themselves and those around them. It acts as a repository that can be used as a tool of reflection or for a variety of more practical means such as settling arguments, recounting events, and providing alibis. The sum total of interactions with the world being saved to hard disk ensures that a true representation of a person is preserved and maintained in public forum. Through this extreme practice of exhibitionism one can dispel the rumor, gossip, and anxiety that has taken hold of our increasingly online world.

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### Surveillance as Therapy- Ben Nunez

In a society where engagement with one another is increasingly taking place online we cease to be solely beings borne of flesh and blood, subject to the consequences of our tangible deeds. We are now hybridized; people who are the physical bodies of a society but with an augmentation, this augmentation is the connection and interaction with others online and our engagement with the internet as an object of its own agency. Our technological footprint becomes its own entity, worthy of judgment and subject to any matter of criticisms. Criticism that was bound to the physical realm disappeared the moment we had unlimited access to a universal global communication system. Futurist theory of the modern day argues that we are less subjected to Kardashev's scale in that the success of our species here on earth has transformed from one solely concerned with energy to one concerned with technology, precisely communication technology. Michio Kaku (2010) argues that "attention [has] turned to the information revolution, where the number of bits processed by a civilization [becomes] as relevant as its energy production" (179). In a world where success is so closely tied to technology the sink or swim of the individual hinges on their association and success with technology. This paper refers to an internet based on the Western ideal of a global communication system that is ostensibly free of major censorship. The politics of this must be put aside for the sake of this argument and we will therefore be assuming that those we discuss have free unlimited access to the internet. (When in reality we know many do not.) Barney provides statistics that state that over 23% of the total global population of internet users face the

most stringent internet censorship.

Profiles for social means, business profiles, online representation of one's life and works, their awards received, their portfolios maintained, their appearances in news media, their celebrity, the celebrity they subscribe to, their reviews of establishments or services, and in some professions even reviews of individual themselves: all of these are the constituents of people at the mercy of how others interpret this documentation. We have social media profiles—what we want society to view us as, and this is our attempt to foil what has historically been a social trial by fire, just or not. Previously, you met someone, or read about their actions, or judged their art and made your decisions of merit based on that. Innumerable representations of ourselves online now muddy those. We become that criticism of a comment we made, we are an insensitive repost, we are the echo of a virtue signal positively highlighted with a clapping hands emoji. What was once contained to the rough geographical area in which one operated has expanded to the global stage. We connect with our friends and enemies worldwide and have either a cheering section or prosecution committee anywhere and anytime.

In the past, representation of ourselves was somewhat confined to the physical world. How we dressed, how we socialized amongst one another, and what we published or made served as the pillars of what made us who we are. This is not to say that this no longer applies, only that we now have infinitely more ways in which to cultivate our image and the world's perception of us. We are fractures and reflections of our true selves, some true and some fabricated. We use the modern digital tools at our disposal not only as the means to some practical ends but as adornment. It is up to us whether this adornment is indeed true to ourselves

and the lives we live or some manufactured construct of what we hope to be or perceive ourselves to be . It is this proliferation of our online presence that leaves one open to reproach. This carries with it the tenets of Debord where the true meaning of life is supplanted by the fabricated meaning, (the spectacle), and commodity as it now relates to technology is replaced by that which one allows others to access about them online. It is this same spectacle but under a new guise. What for Debord were tangible objects of commodity that represented and replaced life are transformed into the binary code of our phones and computers and our place on and within them. In his work *The Society of The Spectacle* (1967) “The illusory paradise representing a total denial of earthly life is no longer projected into the heavens, it is embedded in earthly life itself. The spectacle is the technological version of the exiling of human powers into a "world beyond"; the culmination of humanity's internal separation” (7). The same comparison can be said in of those whose lives are more closely connected to the online world rather than the physical. This separation is someone’s liberation

This project that I will outline in the writing to come is drawn from Jeremy Bentham’s concept of the Panopticon. The panopticon is the hypothetical design of an institutional building (usually represented as a prison) in which a single guard or “observer” is situated at the center of the prison and is surrounded radially by the prisoners or “the observed” in their cells. The guard is hidden from the prisoners view and those in the institution will begin to police their own behavior because of the assumption that they are being watched. The likelihood of this being successful in a modern prison system (or one of recent antiquity) is absolutely able to be argued as impossible, but the poetics of the panopticon to modern surveillance is a popular comparison.

Foucault is perhaps one of the most classic wielders of the theories related to the panopticon. He wrote and lectured at length about The panopticon as a concept. He is also the most optimistic in its potential. What I have noticed from my research is that by and large Bentham's creation has been described almost exclusively as a tool of oppression. At its best it is a tool to be employed by ruthless corporations in which through their surveillance they are able to squeeze out every last minute and keystroke from their employees. Manokha (2018) says "It is important to note that those scholars who have used the metaphor of the Panopticon to study modern surveillance have largely employed it to analyze the increased capabilities of modern watchers, predominantly the state and, to a lesser extent, business firms to acquire more power over the watched" (2). Foucault differs from these writers by proposing the concept of "Technologies of the self" in *Sexuality and Solitude* (1985) which he defines as "another type of ... technique[e] which permit[s] individuals to effect, by their own means, a certain number of operations on their own bodies, their own souls, their own thoughts, their own conduct, and this in a manner so as to transform themselves, modify themselves" (365). This is arguably one of the first attempts to pose the panopticon as a system of positive growth and not just one of punishment.

After reading it I was able to find the words to describe what I was attempting as an art piece. I am proposing my own drastic answer to these flippant and often debilitating social byproducts of living in the digital age by implementing surveillance as therapy for one year. Maintaining a video archive of my day-to day life with a police body camera allows for unparalleled accountability for myself and those around me. The monotonous and equally mammoth volume of recording also acts as an insulation for myself, it allows me to dispel criticism with hard proof. It also acts as a repository that can be used as a tool of reflection or for

a variety of more practical means such as settling arguments, recounting events, and providing alibis. The sum total of my interactions with the world being saved to a hard disk ensures that a true representation of me as a person is preserved and maintained in public forum for as long as the camera stays rolling. Through this extreme practice of exhibitionism one can avoid the rumor, gossip, and anxiety that has taken hold of our increasingly online world. By subverting these classic tropes of limitless surveillance that are often distilled into metaphors of power and control I am claiming this system as a tool to be used by myself.

The panopticon's inception was formed at the junction of two brothers. Jeremy Bentham was visiting his brother Samuel in Russia who was at the time on assignment there attempting to build the high prince Grigory Potemkin an improved version of a factory that he called "Inspection-House." This new factory would produce the fruits that the panopticon would become known for; increased productivity brought about by unseen surveillance and inspection. Samuel himself drew inspiration from the organization of the Parisian Military School, whose design was to prevent masturbation and sexual relations among its inhabitants; quoting Jeremy's recollection: "[i]n the Royal Military School at Paris, the bed-chambers (if my brother's memory does not deceive him) form two ranges on the two sides of a long room; the inhabitants being separated from one another by *partitions*, but exposed alike to the view of a master at his walks, by a kind of a *grated window* in each door. This plan of construction struck him, he tells me, a good deal as he walked over that establishment ... and possibly in that walk the foundation was laid for his Inspection-House." Over the next couple years Jeremy developed his brother's idea into the panopticon using a three step system in which to define his creation.

The first step is the omnipresence of the inspector, ensured by their total invisibility. This is paralleled in my case with the observer taking the form of those who watch my published daily videos on YouTube. Their presence is known, but when and whom will be kept secret from me. The second step is universal visibility of the objects of surveillance. The third step in this system is the assumption of constant observation by the watched. The object of surveillance is of course, me. By being able to see the view counts on my videos I am able to satisfy the second two of these requirements, being assured that my videos are accessible to the public and are indeed being viewed. I have aimed to keep this project pertinent and agreeable to Bentham's standards of omnipresence by keeping the recording of my life as complete as possible with the following three exceptions.

- I. Sexual encounters will not be recorded in any capacity to protect the privacy of those involved.
- II. There will be no recording at airports due to the trouble that could arise and alter travel plans.
- III. Sleeping will not be recorded due to the limitations and storage of the body cameras.

These are the only limitations that I have implemented to protect myself from legal trouble as well as the necessitation to buy additional cameras. With them in place I am able to satisfy the core obligations of Bentham's creation while keeping this project feasible to continue for a year. This is meant to be as complete as possible with not a single day of recording missed.

While reading about this I came across a term that piqued my interest; Bentham referred to his development of the panopticon as a possible "Columbus's egg". The term is used to describe an idea that is lucrative and genius but seems simple or apparent after the fact. Jeremy believed the possibility of bolstering the productivity of a prison would be extremely profitable, this being brought about not by some new expensive implementation but by a simple change in



architecture and observation from one central figure as opposed to the usual staff of a similar operation. The term has its roots in a 16th century Italian story in which Christopher Columbus sits surrounded by his critics and challenges them to make an egg stand up on the table by itself. As they try in vain he takes up the egg and smashes its tip on the table flattening it and allowing it to sit upright without any support. I felt the same cleverness when this idea first came about. What if I was truly able to change my behavior with a device as simple as a camera? By using only my own behavior and social stigma will I be able to improve myself as a person?

The most important effect of this constant recording is the policing of my own language and actions. The camera becomes my judge, jury, and executioner. It is able to both vindicate and convict me. It is the younger sibling pulling on the end of my shirt, a constant fixture that I must learn to live with. I feel this sigil when I embrace a friend or lover, the hard metal square on my chest that both separates and connects me with other people. Borrowing again from Foucault on Panopticism: “He who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power and he becomes the principle of his own subjection.”

This object around my neck is a reminder. I have found myself holding back things that I would normally say without thinking wondering to myself “what if so-and-so is watching?” The times in which I have gotten into trouble or arguments can now be revisited, allowing the other parties to see subsequent and previous conversations that surround a remark or incident. Allowing for a more in-depth and accountable reconciliation. The words I say are now not bound to only memory, they are able to be easily found. It makes me think before I speak, knowing full well the possibility of an interested party going back and reviewing my footage. This mindfulness is not contained only to how I speak and conduct myself but in where I am and what

I do. No longer am I able to employ a light fib to get out of something or flake on plans. I am accounted for physically by the observer and held to my word of where I am and with whom.

In my research I came about another term in which I had defined internally but didn't quite have the words to describe: empowering exhibitionism. "In contrast of being targets of the ever-increasing surveillance, people seek to play an active role in the endless production of visual representations. Their shows include a "notion of self-ownership" (Mann, 2002: 533). They seek to be subjects rather than objects. In other words, it can be claimed that what they actually do is reclaim the copyright of their own lives. The logic is simple: if practically anyone else can circulate one's images, why not do it oneself." (Koskela 2004) (206). Many people when describing this project, or in the act of seeing me with a body camera on express their disapproval or concern for me or themselves being recorded. I always attempt to resolve this criticism by bringing up the constant surveillance that we are under at all times in most major cities, and often times to punctuate my point I can look around wherever I am and point out a camera to them. By recording myself constantly for a year I am engaging in this exhibitionism, reclaiming my representation as wholly mine online. Often times I am also able to get through to the people who initially take offense to me recording them. I initially dubbed this effect "The Boring Effect," in which the gravity and importance of recordings lower as the length of the recording increases. Those who make short appearances in my day to day life become a fraction of a moment in the overall length of recording. I am able to alleviate their stress when I tell them our interaction is a minute or so in a 16 hour recording cycle part of a whole year.

This project has been met with much criticism. I have been barred from wearing my camera in certain classes, the banning of which has left an indelible mark on the relationship

with me and those particular professors. I have lost some of my more meek and mild friends since the recording has begun, them not wanting to be captured on film for even a moment. It has also wrought havoc on my dating life, most people can wrap their head around the idea of being filmed but in the world of dating the camera takes on a far more sinister appearance. Many of the things we cherish in relationships are those special and intangible moments of intimacy that somehow lose their magic when they are put on YouTube. I constantly get second glances and looks of disgust in public, particularly on the subway. I can see the visceral reaction of when people are made aware that they are being filmed. It conjures up any number of assumptions; am I a police officer, am I a voyeur? There is something that is so offensive about being filmed without consent, and I am realizing that more and more. I don't know where this project is going to lead me, or even what I plan on doing with the bulk of the footage after the fact. I have had many people tell me any number of edits that could be arranged but the sheer time and volume make and edit seem impossible. These have been some very trying couple of months and I can't imagine it is going to change or get easier. I think there is something profound about what I am doing, what that is remains to be seen. I leave with one last quote from Koskela: "when people present their private lives in the Internet the point is exactly that anyone, literally, can be looking. It cannot be about whether or not one is looked at in the first place, because the idea of empowerment is not depending of the act of looking/seeing but the act of presenting." This presentation for me takes the form of a fainting couch and a box of tissues.

### Annotated Bibliography

Richards, Neil M. "The Dangers of Surveillance." *Harvard Law Review*, 24 Mar. 2023, [harvardlawreview.org/print/vol-126/the-dangers-of-surveillance/](https://www.harvardlawreview.org/print/vol-126/the-dangers-of-surveillance/).

This article provides a general overview of the effects of surveillance on an entire country such as the United States. I want to use this as a launching board for the rest of my research as I feel that the topic of surveillance is often touched on in its broadest terms.

Patrick Toomey, Ashley Gorski. "The Privacy Lesson of 9/11: Mass Surveillance Is Not the Way Forward: ACLU." *American Civil Liberties Union*, 6 July 2023, [www.aclu.org/news/national-security/the-privacy-lesson-of-9-11-mass-surveillance-is-not-the-way-forward](https://www.aclu.org/news/national-security/the-privacy-lesson-of-9-11-mass-surveillance-is-not-the-way-forward).

This article brings into focus the effect 9/11 had on this country in terms of surveillance for the "good of the public" and how at times it can infringe on our constitutional rights of privacy.

Disruptive Exhibitionism - a Performance Methodology for Surveillance [www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/25741136.2023.2209685](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/25741136.2023.2209685). Accessed 26 Sept. 2023.

This is a great piece of writing proposing how we can subvert surveillance and create an opportunity for inclusion and expression. I want to use some of these methods and resources for my research while making it more palatable for a less radical audience.

Koskela, Hille. "Webcams, TV shows and mobile phones: Empowering exhibitionism." *Surveillance & Society*, vol. 2, no. 2/3, 2002, <https://doi.org/10.24908/ss.v2i2/3.3374>.

This a great adjacent writing to the last cited resource. This is hosted on

Surveillance and Society, which is “the international, interdisciplinary, open access, peer-reviewed journal of surveillance studies.” Plenty of related articles here to look at.

Michio Kaku. *Physics of the Future : How Science Will Shape Human Destiny and Our Daily Lives by the Year 2100*. New York, Anchor Books, 2012.

Read this book a few years ago, great read about the future of technology and earth

Foucault, Michel . *Discipline and Punish*. Pantheon Books, 1977.

Supporting information for Panopticon (Bentham not mine)

Debord, Guy. *Society of the Spectacle*. Detroit, Black & Red, 1977.

Manokha, Ivan. “Surveillance, Panopticism, and Self-Discipline in the Digital Age.” *Surveillance & Society*, vol. 16, no. 2, 15 July 2018, pp. 219–237, <https://doi.org/10.24908/ss.v16i2.8346>.

Warf, Barney. “Geographies of Global Internet Censorship.” *GeoJournal* 76, no. 1 (2011): 1–23. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41148433>.

Internet censorship statistics