

# Lights, Camera, Action!

Destroying Video Surveillance Cameras as an Act of Rewilding

The Grievous Amalgam

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Surveillance is developing in more and more domains and at an extremely rapid pace. Surveillance cameras are obviously involved, as are miniaturized cards, portable telephones, the growing number of recording devices of all kinds, the Internet and electronic “cookies.” This is the era of Big Brother! Today, when cameras equipped with face recognition software add their specters to the pantheon of the failed illusions of security, the government is trying to pass liberty-killing laws under the fallacious pretext of the “fight against terrorism.”

Here, we are made to live in the psychosis of continual control: filmed, surveilled and filed all day, as if we are all criminal suspects, and asked to accept the “fact” that — in the name of our security — men, women and children will have to be killed. We denounce those truly responsible for this masquerade, those thirsty for political power who do not hesitate to use demagoguery and opportunism to inflame the fears of “the Other” and who, even before September 11, were playing the “Total Security” card in an attempt to get votes. We demand the rejection, from now on, of politics in the service of the maintenance of the market — economy and social inequities, of politics that have as their guiding principle the enslavement of the general population and the restriction of human possibilities.

We hope to live in a different world, one in which we don’t have to submit ourselves to the government-subsidized industrial companies that pollute our air, land and water, that rapaciously enrich themselves by riding the backs of workers, those in precarious socio-economic situations, and that set up the market in the surveillance of human beings. The images of money-traffickers and fiscal paradises, political operatives who can act with total impunity, and deal-makers working in the rich soils of the powerful will not be captured by surveillance cameras, despite the facts that they are the ones who are responsible for the world in which we are forced to live, and who should be held accountable for it.

The supermarket is surveilled, as are the streets, offices and factories. What a plethora of images! And why are they captured? In the supermarket, each movement and gesture of the apathetic consumer is filmed and analyzed so as to discover the unknown factor that will facilitate the sale of mad-cow-infected meats, spoiled cheeses, and aseptic chickens. At the office and at the factory, we are surveilled in the name of profits; in the street, we are surveilled so that we never lose the sense of being watched! For what purpose? To force behavior to become normalized; all movements other than normal become suspicious.

When will we address ourselves to the real problems, the ones that erode our capacity for life? When will we have the intelligence — which is lacking in this society, which turns in the wrong direction — to refuse to accept these conditions, neither for us nor for the generations to come? The progress of digitalization and computerized information profits the type of social control that we fear will exist in the future. Aren’t people already enmeshed in the gears of the market, which without hesitation supports every political manipulation so as to have servile consumers? We say “no” to the liberty-killing laws that would legalize this fuckery.

We reclaim the right to possess “disguises.” We reclaim the right to a private life. We reclaim individual freedom, not simply the freedom to exist, but all freedoms.

### **We Are Being Surveilled - Camouflage Yourself!**

— Collective for Individual Freedom in the Age of Information Technologies

In recent years, the use of video surveillance cameras (also called Closed Circuit Television, or CCTV) to monitor public and private spaces throughout the world has branched out to unprecedented levels, dramatizing the rise of a global, centralized One World State that meticulously controls all aspects of political and social life through the use of state power and its perfected technological systems of suppression. The leader in this trend is the U.K., where it's estimated that between 150 and 300 million pounds per year are spent building a surveillance grid involving 200,000 cameras furnished with full pan, tilt, zoom and infrared capacity. The more colossal camera web covering Britain is appraised at 1,500,000 cameras and counting, radiating invisible lines of influence on the thoughts and actions of those living under its predatory, voyeuristic Eye. Enveloping all, a frightening electronic Retina is emerging as an absolute and uncontested regulatory mechanism, from which no concealment, let alone escape, is possible. The clarity of the pictures collected by these cameras is usually excellent (for the State!), with many systems being able to read a cigarette package at a hundred meters.

These cameras are intimations of the future, as Britain is in many ways being used as a “social laboratory” for the development of technologies that extend the pervasive homogeneity of the unilateral political order; methodologies of enslavement are being formulated and installed, with the aim of increasing obedient uniformity and snuffing out wildness on an international scale. The U.K. Home Office estimates that 95 percent (!) of towns and cities in Britain are moving to CCTV surveillance of public areas, housing estates, car parks and public facilities. The System, compulsively preoccupied with order, precision, utility, and rationality, can now zoom in on the lives of its “citizens” and effect the complete elimination of anonymity. Architects and urban planners in Britain are already factoring cameras into the core design of new towns and buildings, and our lives are all tarred with the same leveling brush of what “civil engineers” are now describing as the “fifth utility.” Cameras the size of a matchbox are commonplace and are being integrated into urban architecture in much the same way that electricity and telephones were in the early 20th century. Some of the “cameras” being installed are “scarecrows,” empty shells meant to look like cameras, but with their surface aesthetics reinforcing the same sense of estrangement and extracting the same obedience from their ghettoized human subordinates. Appearances are maintained — and monotony imposed — by the invasion of this reifying technical progress that governs the details of urban construction and social scheduling/ social dislocation.

The global system is striving to eclipse all contestable sites of physical space and shape all interpersonal relations through the establishment of a totalizing *spatial enclosure*. This is the process whereby the explicit duplication of a characteristically capitalist mode of production reprograms and utterly restructures the behaviors, life rhythms, cultural habits and temporal sense of its subjects. Nanotechnology, genetic engineering, and CCTV are all integral to the project of taming wildness and pounding it down into the coin of mercantile civilization.

The very presence of CCTV negotiates conflict between exploiters and exploited, engendering human relationships that are stilted, artificial and lacking in intensity. Public becomes pseudo-public and an “apartheid” of inner-city spatial relations the norm, in a liaison between architecture and the police state that inverts interior and exterior reality. These surveillance technologies

are converging with sophisticated software programs that are capable of automated recognition of faces, crowd behavior analysis, and in certain environments, intimate scanning of the area between skin surface and clothes. The U.S. government is now funding the development of “passive millimeter wave technology” that allows police to peer under clothing to see if a person is carrying contraband or weapons.

Through the implementation of CCTV, the political order accommodates into its own structures a safety valve for sedition. When disenfranchised factions within society rebel against the disempowerment of a super-organized, vise-like system, CCTV isolates, enlarges and creates permanent photographic evidence of the rebels’ transgressions, recuperating them into bounds where they will have no consequences for the authoritarian state apparatus. CCTV exists to create a sterile, whitewashed world in which spontaneity disappears, our behavior is fully law-abiding and humanity eventually sleeps itself to death.

## **In the Land of the Blind the One-Eyed Lens is King**

The proliferation of video surveillance cameras and other technologies of domination evokes all kinds of nightmarish, dystopian images and scenarios, the most clichéd of which is the over used (and thoroughly recuperated) term “Orwellian.” As important a book as Orwell’s *1984* is, we feel we would only be doing our readers a disservice by drawing such an obvious analogy, especially when far more potent and accurate political models exist to describe the cage-like conditions of techno-industrial civilization. Any serious attempt to analyze and break down the locked doors that enclose our lives in the modern world will inevitably lead to the observation that society itself has become a vast prison, a monumental gulag of the body, mind and senses. Thus it’s hardly surprising that many social theorists since Orwell have discussed the character of modern Western civilization using *prison imagery*.

Max Weber depicted it as an iron cage; Gary T. Marx defined it as a “maximum security society,” while others have represented it using terms like “disciplinary society.” But Michel Foucault offers a more sinister and arguably more precise concept to outline the facelessness of high-tech political repression: that of Jeremy Bentham’s blueprints for the Panopticon prison, where all prisoners were segregated into cells around a central tower which allowed guards to watch prisoners without being seen and where the prisoners sense that they’re under ceaseless observation. Bentham, an English Utilitarian philosopher, unveiled in 1791 his prototype for the “all-seeing place” or panopticon, the ultimate prison with the central goal of using the mental uncertainty and paranoia of implied and constant surveillance as an instrument of discipline, wherein prisoners constrain their own behavior. Bentham found this Utilitarian ideal of oppressive self-regulation to be appealing in many other social settings, including schools, hospitals, and poorhouses, although he achieved only limited success in realizing his twisted vision (at least in *his* lifetime).

Michel Foucault seized upon this metaphor of the Panopticon as the perfect governing design for any institution in which discipline is required. By encouraging self-surveillance on behalf of the prisoner, the Panopticon assures the automatic functioning of power. Control no longer requires physical domination over the body in modern society, Foucault noticed, where our spaces are organized “like so many cages, so many small theaters, in which each actor is alone, perfectly individualized and constantly visible.” In the Panopticon all power resides with the State

and government control becomes internalized. The gaze of someone in an authoritative position is a power/knowledge mechanism, which contains and imprisons those subjects who come under its scrutiny, its *guardianship*.

It follows that these examples of the “Panopticon Principle” equip anarchists with a beneficial critical tool to comprehend the ubiquitous spread of video surveillance cameras and the State’s scheme to control the “psychic selves” of the populace and turn the mind itself into a space of imprisonment. The “surveillance effect” of globally pervasive “image catchers” creates mental chains as crippling as literal chains. Believing ourselves to be under the microscope of the State at all times, we are conditioned to act in accordance with the will of the watchers. The urban and suburban zoos the System has herded us into become increasingly claustrophobic as the techniques of social control metastasize internally and externally, creating the impression of police omnipresence and omnipotence. If they “know what’s good for them,” people will conform to the whims of the electronic eye.

## Wide-Angle Enclosure: Overexposed to a Mirror With Memory

It would be a serious mistake to focus exclusively on the “self-policing” quality of video surveillance cameras and ignore the *physical dimensions* of this latest despotic encroachment of the State. The ruling class is endeavoring to construct a “Total Institution” of permanently entrenched fear, a digitally re-mastered menagerie, and their cameras *are* there to archive and track our movements as well. The state has a vested interest in establishing whether or not rules are obeyed, who obeys and who does not, and how those who deviate can be located and punished. CCTV cameras *do* freeze moments in time *and* provide a reservoir of information to the probing, investigating eye of law enforcement; in some of the larger urban labyrinths, these cameras are becoming more common than wildlife.

Class struggle has always been a component of civilization and the War on the Wild, and video cameras are the absolutist tool of a particular social class (civilization’s ruling elite), wielded to sequester another class. The exploited, the undesirables, the “bad consumers,” the natural world, *the wild*—we are all to be reduced to high-resolution captivity superimposed on us by video surveillance, and autonomy and feralness are to be faded out cinematically. In the workplace video cameras are proving to be a forceful new feature of the class war, as the roving overseer or foreman is being substituted by the silent and untiring electronic eye. The machine has (once again) replaced the presence of a human being; instead of “breathing down one’s neck”, management now fixes a seemingly continuous and unyielding gaze on one’s productivity from the colder and more uncertain distance of the hidden recorder. Scientific control techniques reach a new peak of intensity and the shadow of the Panopticon extends further over our lives, immobilizing revolt and endangering the traditional “weapons of the weak” (sabotage, theft, wildcat strikes).

In the past, the exploited always knew that monitoring was episodic — the supervisor could not be everywhere all of the time. In contrast, camera and recorder can be omnipresent and allow our masters to even analyze the *friendships* that form between fellow slaves. The CCTV network threatens to smother all *wildness*, that “dreaming ground... invoking ever new dreams,” as all conceivable sites of resistance are absorbed by the Spectacle of self-oppression. The cameras of the State seek to produce a new type of civilized slave, one that is satisfied in its restricted possibilities,

isolation and anomie, dreaming the circumscribed dreams of the powerless and unimaginative, never crossing the paltry bounds that the system provides. With no aspirations that go beyond what exists in their plastic tombs, the exploited become like wild animals whose teeth and claws have been removed.

But humans are not simply robots or “docile bodies” following the dictates of coercive micro-mechanisms of state power, but potentially feral, ungovernable agents capable of interpreting, rejecting and destroying these structures. In his book *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates*, Erving Goffman discusses how although “primary adjustments” or acts of conformity abound in tightly run “Total Institutions,” rebellious individuals also make “secondary adjustments” which defy the suffocating demands of the institutional order. These acts of recalcitrance are practices of “reserving something of oneself from the clutch of the institution... like weeds they spring up in any kind of social organization.” To use straightforward war terminology, for every *strategy* that is planned for a particular purpose there are always innumerable *tactics* which can spontaneously be deployed to counteract them.

Put simply, “strategy is the science of military movements beyond the field of vision of the enemy; tactics, that of movements within his field of vision.” For every new strategy of social control on the part of the State, there is a novel and surprising tactic of negation, and for every video surveillance camera installed, there is a complimentary form of resistance, of subversion. For Big Brother’s telescreen has blind spots just like the human eye that rests on the other side of the lens.

## Hitting Your Mark: From Digitized Subject to Insurgent Negative

In a Panoptic, conformist society of mediocrity and standardization — where vanquishment, collaboration and/or capitulation (all unacceptable) — seem to be the only responses an overwhelmingly technological, capitalist civilization permits, it’s uplifting to see rebels around the world roused to revolutionary action against the CCTV dragnet. In August 2002, a militant aggregation known as Motorists Against Detection (MAD) started a direct action anti-“speed camera” campaign in Britain, kicking it off with the UK’s most profitable speed camera located at the bottom of the infamous M11 motorway near Woodford, Essex. This particular camera was reputed to earn up to 840,000 pounds per week in traffic fines, as it tracks the movements of all motorists and communicates in real time via microwave links and the phone system to the newly upgraded Police National Computer. Within two weeks, MAD had sabotaged a further 29 speed cameras along the whole 27 mile length of the A406 North Circular Road between Chiswick and the east side of London.

A member of the resistance calling himself Captain Gatso (a tongue-in-cheek reference to the inventor of the speed camera, Maurice Gatsonides) released a communiqué soon after the CCTV Jihad started, stating that “we are fed up with lining the pockets of police forces and councils as a stealth tax revenue raising scheme. Everyday now it seems we read stories about camera technology and hear people talking to radio stations moaning about them. Up until now this has not made a lot of difference which is why it is time for all of us to act before it all gets out of hand.”

The balaclava-wearing highway liquidators of MAD vowed to burn, bomb, and dismember all speed cameras within the range of their wrath. They followed through on their threats with a

string of attacks in the county of Norfolk, where six cameras valued at more than 100,000 pounds were set alight and vandalized. The secretive mutineers are fast becoming the most popular outlaw folk heroes in Britain since Robin Hood and his Merry Men stalked the countryside: from the south coast of England to the Highlands of Scotland no camera is safe, as the “Gatsometers” are being playfully destroyed in a carnivalesque transformation of the State’s totalitarian topography. With each unit costing about \$38,000, a huge bill is being run up. But the rebels are unrepentant: “We are all guinea pigs in a huge experiment that will restrict our liberty, not just in London but the whole U.K.”

Communicating to the broader public through internet chat rooms, MAD rails against speed cameras (calling them “Weapons of Mass Persecution”) and warns of the menace of what they call the Talivan – mobile police speed detection units. Particularly destructive MAD cells are known to be operating in North London, Essex and Wales, while recent months have seen new operations in central Scotland. Most MAD actions have involved simple approaches like spray-painting camera lenses, burning them or cutting them down with power tools. But Northhamptonshire police are offering a reward for help in identifying the MAD members who used plastic explosives to bomb a camera in May 2003.

MAD’s “mad antics” are definitely catching on, as the destruction of these noxious devices has become a near-weekly occurrence in the British Isles. To date, MAD has taken credit for the destruction of more than 700 cameras, while other clandestine groupings around England have taken up the practice of placing tires over speed cameras and setting them alight (and often posting images of their charred remains on the web). Still other camera-haters are shooting them out with guns and one creative hooligan pulled down a speed camera by attaching a rope from the back of his car to the camera’s pole and driving away – a humorous reenactment of the staged toppling of Saddam Hussein’s statue?

In early February 2004, a group called the Mendip Mafia achieved a local publicity coup in its battle against speed cameras when it used dynamite instead of the usual flaming tractor tire to destroy a CCTV camera in the village of Emborough, on the A37 Road. This same camera had been destroyed once before – by other means – and twelve of the fifty surveillance cameras operated by the Avon, Somerset and Gloucestershire “Safety Camera Partnership” (who “oversee” this district) have been violently disabled since May 2003. And the camera rebellion is spreading, a heartening sign of chaos in revolt! In Brussels, Willem Laurens is accused of leading a gang that torched 26 cameras in the city of Flanders, while in France, the country’s first radar camera was vandalized just hours after its inauguration by someone who cracked its armored-glass plating with a sledgehammer (equally determined police had the \$90,000 unit repaired the next day, and its images were being examined for clues). In early October 2003, a pipe bomb took out a CCTV unit in North Belfast, and on October 23, in Milan, Italy (as reported in issue #15 of *Green Anarchy*) 101 security cameras were attacked throughout the city.

## That’s a Wrap

While some people conceive of “rewilding” as scattering marijuana seeds in the cracks around City Hall or learning the Latin names of “native” plant species, we recognize that any serious rewilding will also necessarily involve the destruction of the technological system. The total administration of life is underway and to fight it we need to move from arresting paralysis to the



deployment of regenerative chaos, by smashing the rational and institutional restraints placed on our lives and rekindling the Promethean fires of the imagination. The struggle to reclaim wildness is intrinsically a confrontation between chaos and organization: whether we accept it unquestioningly or rebel against it, technology has acquired not simply a life of its own, but a life that substantially infiltrates *our* lives, warping our characters as we gradually accept its mechanistic parameters.

If we succumb indifferently to the totalitarian reengineering of our world, we risk becoming androids ourselves, *animals made into machines*. To deny technology's pervasive role in our existence means, then, to deny reality — at a time when the prospects for life and liberty seem to be rapidly drying up, and we are advancingly imbricated in the Panopticon's presence. Only by demolishing the System's machinery itself can we hope to get out from under the thumb of the political order and achieve our vision of renewal. Technology and the State are two of the more obvious enemies of wildness. ***Destroy what destroys you!***

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