



Selected Papers of AoIR 2016:
The 17th Annual Conference of the
Association of Internet Researchers
Berlin, Germany / 5-8 October 2016

RULES AS THEATRICAL METHOD IN INTERNET SURVEILLANCE RESEARCH

David J. Phillips
University of Toronto, Faculty of Information

Introduction

Surveillance coerces us to act such that our everyday actions can be translated to data. That data is then circulated, collated, and analyzed. That analysis is then used to typify us and to organize our everyday lives and actions. Thus, we are made legible to surveillant organizations, and we become accessible to their self-interested interventions. My research continues to ask the question "What is it to live our lives mediated by infrastructures and practices of surveillance?"

Lately I've been using theatrical methods to explore that question. My co-researchers and I have used surveillance theory to inform the construction of theatrical games and improvisations, allowing those embodied activities to inform, illuminate, or question the theory. This iterative transgression between theory and embodiment somehow mirrors the surveillance process itself. In this paper I discuss this process as a methodological resource.

In an earlier paper, I discussed a previous attempt to use theatre as surveillance research (Phillips 2015). Briefly, I felt that that effort failed as surveillance research, in that it took existing theory and theatricalized it, rather than extending theory itself. This was, in part, due to a perceived urgency in that project to create a show. This time around, there was no intent to produce theatre or drama or entertainment. Rather, the project was structured as a more focused exploration of the dynamics of surveillance, using theatre games to elicit embodied structural knowledge and interrogate action and interaction within those structures. (Boal 1979, 1992)

What we did we do?

We first gathered a team of collaborators, comprised of Lucy Winner, a dramaturg, and five undergraduate researchers from the University of Toronto - Victoria McKenzie, Gabrielle Simmons, Elliot McMurchy, Laura Sanchez, and Alisha Stranges.

We then alternated between theoretical and embodied explorations of surveillance. Through readings, lectures, and other textual media, we became familiar with a particular framework for understanding surveillance infrastructure. This theoretical lens

This is a very rough outline of the work in which I am currently engaged. It is not nearly ready for publication yet, so please do not cite. However, I'd love to hear from you if you find any of this interesting.

Thanks to Jackman Humanities Institute Scholars in Residence Program at the University of Toronto for their invaluable support.

of “actuarial surveillance” understands surveillance as a set of interlinked processes of *identification*, in which durable links are made and maintained between bodies and databases; *monitoring and recording*, in which data models are developed, activities monitored and translated to data, and data is accumulated, stored, and exchanged; *analysis*, in which sense is made, patterns, categories, and entities generated and evaluated; and *response*, in which social processes are altered in light of the surveillance practice, action occurs toward the bodies the data purports to represent, and life is structured in the interests of the surveilling institutions. We discussed *infrastructure* as more or less stable configurations of legal, economic, cultural, and technical systems that are both the product of and the mediator of social relations (Giddens 1984).

We considered some possible organizing ideas to direct our research, including

- The differential usefulness of surveillance and scientific rationalism to individuals and organizations, and types of organizations
- The generative possibilities of surveillance – surveillance not as representative but as creative
- The meshing of surveillance with existing categorical inequalities of race, gender, sexuality, etc.
- The pleasures of surveillance and of being watched, seen, and known; the dialectic of fear and desire

We alternately used embodied research methods to engage these theoretical explorations, fashioning a research process in which we would identify a compelling issue and articulate our embodied consciousness of that issue through gaming exercises. These games would be designed to recreate and disrupt rules and theories organizing our practice and understanding of surveillance. By playing with and within these rules, we hoped to incite creativity and alternate possibilities.

Specifically, we relied on a small set of theatre games. These included machines, scene building, and dynamized tableaux. In *machines*, an actor establishes a repetitive and mechanical sound and action, informed or inspired by intriguing idea. One-by-one, the rest of the group builds an inter-connected machine using different mechanical sounds and actions as well as different levels in space. In *scene building*, the group is required to build a scene around an intriguing idea. The scene must contain certain elements (for example songs, rhythms, phrases, or machines) or conform to a certain structure. In *dynamized tableaux*, one actor wordlessly places other actors and herself in a tableau embodying an intriguing real, current problem or situation. Another actor rearranges the group into a tableau embodying an imagined ideal. Each actor then finds a position between their original and ideal positions, creating a transitional tableau. Finally, in three beats, the group moves from real to transition to ideal.

In general, these activities need an interlocutor – a participant who sits apart and watches. Discussion focuses on what each participant (including interlocutor and audience members) saw, rather than on what participants intended to convey.

Through these shimmerings between theatre and theory, we honed our familiarity with each to find a symbiotic relation between question and method. For what kinds of questions might these be evocative methods? Where, in surveillance, is the non-verbal important? Where, in surveillance, are performance and theatricality theoretically important? Where, in surveillance, are embodiment, identity, desire, and fear

theoretically important? Where, in surveillance, are conflict and relationality theoretically important?

We played games of identification, games of monitoring, and games of analysis, creating structured embodied explorations of our intellectual and personal uncertainty and discomfort. We tried continually to bring affect into productive engagement with theory, both in our reflections and in the design of further games. We circled around the problem of establishing a research question, looking for an engaging set of interesting ideas and investigative techniques.

In a breakthrough moment, we decided to tackle the surveillance of desire. This was not yet a formal research question, but it committed us to a more bounded field of inquiry that was likely to produce something novel, surprising, and interesting, engaging as it does fear and desire, rationality and affect, and consumer capitalism.

Through machines, dynamized tableaux, and reflection we began to ask evolving questions. Is the desired object always a talisman for something else? Is the desire for the hot activist artist (manifested in tableau) actually a manifestation of a desire for unfettered sexuality and keen intellectual anarchy? Do we want a Coke, or perfect harmony and snow white turtle doves?

What might be a grammar of desire? Along what axes might instantiations of desire differ? Perhaps our familiarity with the desire, our attitude toward it (joy, terror, hope, ambivalence, humor, shame, sadness...), its urgency, its perceived attainability, its mediating and sublime objects, its physiological manifestations...

We refined the project further to explore Desire for Acceptance in Social Groups, and set out to define that grammar.

At this point, however, the group began to manifest antsiness, incoherence, and a sense of impending failure. We were at the end of the third of four weeks. There was a sense that the project should be further along that it was and that no one knew what they were doing.

As the director, I had two responses to this. The first was to assure everyone that project had already been a success, in that I had convinced myself that this type of method had legs, and that I knew how to use them – that everything was gravy from now on.

We also had each actor create a dynamizing tableau embodying where we were in the project, and transforming into where we wanted to be.

Left to itself, however, the group veered to talking rather than doing, surveying each other and talking about what that grammar of “desire for acceptance” might be, instead of using machines, tableaux, play. There also appeared gender-informed divisions over the dichotomy between affect and empiricism, with one member in particular claiming that “affect cannot be measured,” to which I responded “... OF COURSE affect is measurable. We weep, we laugh, we smirk. How much pain are you in, right now, on a scale of 1 to 10?...What happens when your actions are used to infer an affective state of desire? What are the common and alternative ways for doing that? ... One thing that seems to be happening right now is a deep-seated resistance to pursuing the question.”

I believe that this could have been a tremendously productive conflict. However, I ended up in the hospital for what was to have been the fourth and last week of the project. We were palpably at a very emotional and conflicted part of the process, and the process needed supervision that I could not provide. So I ended the project.

But I was being perfectly honest when I said that the project had already been successful as a proof of concept for this research method in this area of inquiry. There were worlds of games beyond tableaux and machines to explore and articulate the powers and violences attendant to the infrastructuring of grammars, vocabularies, and standards of desire.

I leave with a few problems or warning or things to remember about these methods. As a director, it was important for me to keep iterating that this was not a project about interaction or theatre; it was a project about surveillance that used interaction and theatre. Nor was its goal to elicit our individual experiences of surveillance, but instead to embark on embodied and affective exploration of lived infrastructures. We were using emotive and affective states, not living them.

Also, the group must be willing to engage with pernicious inequalities. In this case, the conflict was pretty clearly gendered, but race, class, age, and other differences of position and experience and outlook among the group will rise, not as obstacles, but as dangerous and productive tensions.

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