

**Translating Guy Debord**

A city tour

**Research paper**

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## Introduction

Surveillance has been an issue affecting us as individuals for as long as we can all remember, however in the past decade, due to developments in technology and the fast diffusion of the internet, new forms of surveillance have emerged. Activists and computer professionals have taken the responsibility of unfolding these tactics, to name a few; Julian Assange, founder of Wiki Leaks, Edward Snowden, CIA employee and computer professional and Aaron Swartz, computer programmer. Considering the polemics these cases caused, surveillance in the digital age has been an issue we have been concerned with for a while.

Nevertheless, listening to an interview between Slavoj Žižek and Paul Holdengraber at the International Author's Stage in Copenhagen <sup>1</sup> that took place back in 2014, our anger towards surveillance widened up. Žižek commented on the issue by pointing out that surveillance doesn't only occur in our private lives, and so we should also reconsider how our public spaces have been taken away from us.

Public spaces, according to Hannah Ardent <sup>2</sup> are spaces where individuals learn to coexist with each other through action and speech, this is, through their own freedom. Having in mind this concept, it didn't take long for us to realize how little freedom we can experience in public space. We look around and all we see are camouflaged surveillance tools, dressed up with posters, and advertisement banners telling us how to dress, what to eat, where to go, how to walk, how to pose, how to smile etc. It's like we are part of a show, we are the puppets, mere actors, "they" write the script and decide on the plot. This reflection on the current situation of public space, immediately lead us to a classic of capitalism and ideology, Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* <sup>3</sup>. In this aggressive reflection towards post-industrial societies, Debord applies Marxist theories to explain how societies have become a spectacle, prisoners of labour, prisoners of their own spectacle, which is their 'guardian of sleep' as Debord notes on his book (21). We produce, we buy therefore we are.

We believe it's important for others to understand surveillance beyond its traditional form of cctv cameras. Surveillance is not only hidden behind our backs, or somewhere we can't see it, surveillance is everywhere around us, we even produce it. Mass media is consumerism's major surveillance tool. Artist Jenny Holzer <sup>4</sup> emphasizes this idea in some of her public space installations, known as truisms. One particularly relevant for us is *Protect me from what I want*, which when placed in public space can be confused with advertisement, but is essentially questioning consumerism and advertisements themselves.

To communicate the issue of surveillance in public space we have created a city tour, through New York City, starting at the Columbus Circle, moving forward through Broadway and ending in Time Square. We have used Google Street View <sup>5</sup> as an interface, to emphasise the surveillance aspect, and we used Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* text as narrator, to make reference to the mass media found in public space, which also serves as a surveillance tool.

## Semiotic Analysis / Why a city tour?

As mentioned above, we have chosen an audio-visual guided city tour to comment on our issue of surveillance in public space. Firstly, a guided city tour seems the most natural tool to use when wanting to show something that stands through different areas of a concrete public space. Secondly, we thought it might be interesting to play with the notion of entertainment that is embedded in a city tour. People go on city tours to discover public space, but it's a type of entertainment. This idea of entertainment found in city tours also clashes in an interesting way when the guide of the city tour is Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle*, where the terms spectacle and entertainment refer to the sleep of society, a numb society, a controlling method, surveillance.

Concerning the visual material we have used, we wanted to maintain the original medium that is used in mass media through public space, images and videos. The guided tour we have created is composed of still images, accompanied by a camera movement that gives them a dynamic flow, such as it's intended with a city tour, it takes you from point A to point B. A strong inspiration for the visual outcome of our project came from Broersen & Lukacs<sup>6</sup>, an artist duo based in Amsterdam. Their work *Prime Time Paradise* (2004) uses the same technique of scattered stills that are animated by a camera effect.

The stills used were taken from Google Street View. The choice of this interface intends to reiterate the act of surveillance within public space. Google Street View is a service that gives us geographical information of almost any corner on Earth. It is an amazing technology that we have all benefited from at some point, but nevertheless there is some black transparency to it. It's GPS capabilities have been used by security forces to survey individuals leading to mistaken targets many times. With this we aim to add some richness to our message, emphasizing the undemocratized transformation of public space.

The selected audio for the tour, Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* creates an interesting contrast with the images. As the mass media placed on public space showcases infinite images referencing emotions and states of happiness, utopian bodies, unreal colours, photoshopped places etcetera, the narrator describes everything that is portrayed in those advertisements as a spectacle, as a dimension that is separated from our real existence. But as a spectacle in the most negative way possible. A spectacle that keeps people busy or concerned with trivial issues, a form of control over the masses. Mass media advertisements portray paradisiacal situations in order to keep us wishing for the unattainable, they decide what we wish for. By wishing this we will feel obliged to stay in track with the system, and keep working in order to buy the unreachable.

## **Semiotic Analysis / Relation between signifier and signified**

A guided tour gives us the option to re-contextualize the surveillance tools found in public space that we are aiming for: mass media advertisements. By making them the protagonists of the tour we create a change in the direction of the gaze. Now, it's the viewer, who is normally being surveilled by advertisements, the one who is gazing at them. Advertisements are on the spotlight, being observed by Google Street view as well as by the viewer. This shift of gaze intends to create a double meaning on the spectator; on the one hand, he/she understands the effect of the advertisements on him/herself, an effect of control and behaviour definer. On the other hand, this guided tour through this perspective of the city is supposed to create an understanding of the shift of roles. The viewer is surveilling mass media as a symbolic gesture towards the unbalanced hierarchy of powers observed in public space. According to Slavoj Žižek's work in *The plague of fantasies*<sup>7</sup> one should recognise the fact that these forms of ideology are deeply rooted in everyday-life's visual spectacle.

In terms of generating meaning our project unfolds on multiple levels. Its collage-like aspect allows us to compile the content we are working with in layers. Through these multiple layers we sought to create the complete audio-visual experience of a tour. The deliberate choice of using images from New York City comes from a very natural reflection when thinking about invasion in public spaces. New York City, or Time Square specifically, is one of the most overloaded areas with billboards, T.V commercials, posters etcetera. This choice was made intending to exaggerate the effect of image and text combination. French philosopher and sociologist Jean Baudrillard<sup>8</sup> brings attention to the fact that the environment we chose to cover is already in a stage of simulacrum. Our aim was to further intensify our simulation of a tour using the same signs as in the "real" original setting.

The audio containing fragments of Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* is probably not what one would hear during a regular guided tour. Its confronting content was purposely chosen to create a more narrative flow through the images, as the artists Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller<sup>9</sup> did in their work *Alter Bahnhof Video Walk* (2012). It contains no references to locations or attractions which lie on the trajectory but it's meant to provide the listener with insight into the spectacle that he or she is about to enter.

With this combination of audio and video our aim was to communicate a statement about the current usage of mass-media as a surveillance tool applied on public space. The overload of Street View snapshots containing imposing capitalist language is meant to culminate with Times Square as a hotbed of its own representation. Our collaborative work does not intend to establish any form of truth, but it merely acts as a proposal to an alternative truth through an exacerbated buildup of the spectacle within public space.

## **Semiotic Analysis / Achieving credibility**

Our choice of using Google Street View as the source of our visual input has allowed us to work with the unaltered visual language of the actual advertisements within our designated area. This also creates a convincing layer of space and time factuality to encompass the series of changing images through which the tourist of the spectacle navigates. Through the use of continuity editing we wanted to create a story-line which would fit with the representative route we chose as a set for our video. The images we used to construct the video are ordered so as to track the route and timing of an actual walk through Broadway, starting at point A and ending at point B.

The end result of our project is aiming towards showing an abstract mapping of our guided tour. We purposely chose not to highlight any specific point of the tour, but to let the images flow naturally into their final concentrated landscape of Times Square. We feel that our simulated tour still has readability and recognisability through the addition of the location-specific route.

## **Project Description**

The beginning of our process has brought out our shared interest in the concept of surveillance and how one's behaviour depends on whether or not he or she is being monitored. Our initial subject was the idea of the external gaze and from this point we began to research on means of somehow reversing this regulatory gaze.

Our chosen subversive strategy is a combination of *detournement* and *sousveillance*. *Detournement* is a technique popularised by artists belonging to the Situationist Movement<sup>10</sup>. It can be defined as the decontextualisation of a previous work, a translation of it into a different set of circumstances which change its original meaning. In this sense we were interested in exploring how we would be able to use surveillance data against the surveilling agent. On the other hand we were also very interested in the concept of *sousveillance*, which denotes the act of inverse surveillance. In the context of civil *sousveillance* of authorities, we've also been looking into ways of reclaiming public space through these means of participation.

Our decision making abilities were put to a test when we were faced with clarifying and defining our concept. We noticed that our research was split in two directions: on one hand we wanted to continue with the idea of surveillance and the effects it has on society, but on the other hand we also strived to incorporate and apply our research in a public space setting. After expanding our research we decided to bring all these elements together under the concept of the spectacle, where social regulation through surveillance manifests itself in public space. We chose to document specific parts of New York City as a very relevant and representative example of how the spectacle unfolds in a public setting.

The results of our collaboration comprises our literary documentation as well as an applied example of our chosen strategy, through means of intensified surveillance by using Google Streetview. We chose to conceptualise our ideas in the form of a tour because we wanted to raise awareness towards mass-media as surveillance tool

## **Project Description**

and also simulate a mapped version of this type of visual semiotics.

## **Evaluation**

Our collaboration developed into quite fruitful results, even though we faced a few obstacles within our process. On a professional level we have been able to combine the graphic skills we had on one side and the functionally applied skills we had on the other. We feel that the result of our work together effectively communicates our research questions and our conclusive statement, combining both of our knowledge in terms of graphic and product design respectively. Our common interests also made collaborating into a more smooth and readable process.

In terms of rethinking the steps we've made, we would both like to bring more interaction and intensify the feeling of simulation within our project. Initially we wanted to materialise our research within a project comprising both 3D renderings and virtual reality, as a way to simulate a mapped tour. Unfortunately the factor of time didn't allow us to experiment with these digital means. Instead we chose to materialise our concept in video form. In the context of having more time to expand our work methods, we would both like to add a continuation to our project and bring it to a more interactive level within a 3D platform.

## **Future Plans**

Our topic of interest, in this case surveillance through media and public space gives us a wide range of possibilities when wishing to expand. Currently, we are concentrating on how these advertisement manifest themselves on a public level, affecting individual's perception of reality. However, mass media embodies itself in many private contexts as well. Besides, the surveillance effects it has on oneself can be explored in more detail. We would be interested to find new ways or new mediums to culture jam, concerning mass media as surveillance as well as extending the project presented in this paper. Due to a lack of time we have had to select several extracts of the book, being unable to create a guided tour that embarks the entire narration.

## References

- <sup>1</sup> Surveillance and Whistleblowers. Perf. Slavoj Žižek and Paul Holdenräber. Det Kongelige Bibliotek, 19 May 2014. Web. 20 Oct. 2015.
- <sup>2</sup> Seyla Benhabib. "Feminist theory and Hannah Arendt's concept of public space". *History of the Human Sciences* 1993 6: 97. Print.
- <sup>3</sup> Debord, Guy. *Society of the Spectacle*. Black & Red, 1983. Print.
- <sup>4</sup> For further information visit [www.google.com/maps/streetview](http://www.google.com/maps/streetview)
- <sup>5</sup> "Jenny Holzer". *Art History Archive: Biography & Art*. Web. 1 Nov. 2015.
- <sup>6</sup> For further information visit [www.pmpmpm.com](http://www.pmpmpm.com)
- <sup>7</sup> Žižek, Slavoj. *The Plague of Fantasies*. London: Verso, 1997. Print.
- <sup>8</sup> Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulacra and Simulation*. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan, 1994. Print.
- <sup>9</sup> For further information visit [www.cardiffmiller.com](http://www.cardiffmiller.com)
- <sup>10</sup> Guy Debord, and Gil J. Wolman. "A User's Guide to Détournement." *Les Lèvres Nues* 8 (1956): n. pag. *Situationist International Online*. Web. 27 Oct. 2015.