# Surveillance and The Occult
- An attempt at identifying existing types of omniscience –

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We are progressively becoming more accustomed to being watched over; not by the gods or the moon and the stars, but by other supposedly omniscient and omnipresent entities. As much as the rest of society, the individual is faced with multiple unseen presences surveilling his or her every move, word and intention. Behind each unseen presence lies a different incentive, but they all undoubtedly converge into the same field of action: control through means of prediction and prevention. Whether the surveilling entity identifies with governments or corporations, the various forms which constant observation can take seem to increasingly become more specialized and globalized. There is no doubt that dystopian scenarios, such as Orwell's 1984, are becoming more and more integrated into reality and, as a result, surpassing the transition to a "normal" state of affairs under the pretext of global security and perpetuated capitalism. Examples of this phenomenon are constantly trying to document and depict various forms of reality, ranging from surveillance cam footage, to intercepted phone calls, to metadata being deployed into the online realm with each login or purchase. The dynamics of constant surveillance are becoming part of the status quo. One should ask: are people non-reactive as an effect of manufactured consent, or do they not even see it happening at all? The answer probably lies somewhere in between. In the post-Snowden era we become more conscious of the amount of personal data which is being intercepted for various uses. Perhaps we have always been aware of this phenomenon and our instinctive attitude towards it is generally passive, especially since we have no reluctance in providing online platforms such as Facebook and Google with detailed descriptions of our personal and public life. In the age of social media the notion of privacy becomes unstable and starts being employed selectively. For the sake of comparison when it comes to mobility, it seems that one's personal data can travel more freely than the individual as a citizen of any nation-state: it is easier for data to cross borders compared to the physically legislative limitations of border policies directed towards the individual.

In order to better grasp the unseen network in which this data ceaselessly travels, the whole process needs to become more visible or tangible. The experience of being intercepted has become a central part of everyday life. If we choose to take a closer look at the general purpose of massive data collection, the one oriented towards a seamless employment of control, we arrive at a conclusion which seems to depict a sort of Kafkaesque nightmare. One in which means of enacting authority become inherently absurd and the individual has no

choice but to be a passive witness to an increasingly illogical administrative process. The idea of centralized agency (in the form of online databases) when it comes to surveillance can sometimes have dramatic consequences, ultimately because the act of indiscriminately collecting such amounts of data is fundamentally stupid. The act of interpreting this information can be prone to considerable flaws, leading to scenarios such as data leaks, false accusations and other forms of socio-political entropy. No matter how much Google tries to predict your preferences from a consumerist point of view or how much the NSA tries to prevent international terrorism, the data which they collect can never paint a complete or even relevant picture of reality. In an essay published online, video artist Hito Steyerl explains this complex phenomenon in the following way:

> *Data, sounds, and images are now routinely transitioning beyond screens into a different state of matter. They surpass the boundaries of data channels and manifest materially. They incarnate as riots or products, as lens flares, high-rises, or pixelated tanks. Images become unplugged and unhinged and start crowding off-screen space. They invade cities, transforming spaces into sites, and reality into realty. They materialize as junkspace, military invasion, and botched plastic surgery. They spread through and beyond networks, they contract and expand, they stall and stumble, they vie, they vile, they wow and woo.*

Supposing that the concept of digital surveillance can function only as an invisible and underlying condition, the danger of it becoming normalized presents itself as more and more real. The aspect of individual consent doesn't seem to play an intentional role from both the side of authorities and that of citizens. Therefore the following question arises:
WHAT HAPPENS TO ONE'S PERSONAL INFORMATION IN THE AGE OF CONSTANT SURVEILLANCE?

In order to pursue the different answers which this question might hold, one should start from examining what happens to the notion of individual identity in the context of the ever-growing infosphere. The follow-up question could be: What forms can the self take from the perspective of the surveilling entity? It appears obvious that the translation is digitized into various forms of data with inputs such as sound, (moving-) image and text. In his book "*The interface effect*", Alexander Galloway argues that, from a ontological point of view, data could be inherently formless, much like metaphysical concepts of immateriality proposed by Aristotle, Spinoza, Badiou or Deleuze. If we take a look at the DIKW pyramid model (Data leads to Information, Information leads to Knowledge, Knowledge leads to Wisdom) we can see more clearly how data serves as the stepping stone towards further interpretation and contextualization. However, if Wisdom is the final destination of data in terms of attempting to decipher it, claiming that it takes the form of evaluated understanding" can be problematic in the context of digital surveillance because it almost proposes an absolute. The means through which data becomes

readable cannot be regarded as Truth, even if it is automatized by (objective) computational selection processes.

Unfortunately such a poetic approach does not suffice for figures of governmental or commercial authority. For the surveilling gaze this data must be translated into something it can grasp and analyze. Therefore these digital forms of representation are always condensed into various types of interfaces, which facilitate readability and analysis. For example, when it comes to the visual component of identity, the image of an individual will be deconstructed through technologies such as infrared sensors, facial recognition softwares as a part biometric-based techniques, intercepted images from one's personal webcam, etc. On the other hand, telecommunication technologies render identity as spoken or written word. On yet another hand, when it comes to space and mobility, one's identity boils down to a traveling dot on a map depicting a geographic area. Given these multiple outputs of processed data, whoever is concerned can begin to see how the surveilling entity tries to make sense of reality and decide which field of action it will adopt, though constantly from the incentive of manifesting authority and control.

It is also important to consider the different narratives which digital surveillance unfolds within society at large. Thus it is also relevant to ask: What are the dynamics of the surveilled society? Once again the notion of control surfaces as the principal imposed objective. Michel Foucault's "*Discipline and punish*" explains how the concept of panopticism "makes it possible to perfect the exercise of power" (206). Rather than using force to manifest authority, which proves itself to be inefficient as a maintenance effort in the long term, discipline can be instilled into the individual in a psychological manner, by deeply rooting the fear of being watched into one's mind. Therefore the regulation of behavior and morals follows as an effect originating from within one's self. In the past few centuries this concept has transcended the walls of specialized correctional institutions, such as the penitentiary, and has been employed as a defining characteristic of inhabited spaces, whether they are public or private. The surveilling gaze now takes the form of security cameras, satellites and drones, which impose a more specific set of dynamics between authority and the individual. In their book "*Practices of looking: An introduction to visual culture*", Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright emphasize the regulating omnipresence and omniscience of this digitized gaze as follows:

> *There are many ways in which camera surveillance is part of our everyday experience, in stores, on elevators, in parking garages, etc. We could easily say that the camera is used here as a form of intrusion and policing of our behavior. However, if we use Foucault's concept of the panopticon, we would also have to recognize that the camera is often simply a visible presence of the inspecting gaze that we imagine, whether it is there or not, visible to us or not. In other words, the camera does not need to be turned on or even in place for the inspecting gaze to exist, merely its potential to exist will have this effect. At the same time, the idea*

*of photographic identification, in the criminal justice system, the legal system, and the bureaucracy of everyday life, is prevalent.* (99)

Once again, it is imperative to stress the fact that, besides the example of camera surveillance as a strategy of control which is sufficiently visible, there are also other techniques being employed to capture one's identity and intent. All these different forms of surveillance amount to an interesting turn of power relations within the present century. As capitalism reaches its current form under the pretext of democracy, it is obvious that corporate authority prevails over the political correspondent. Taking the example of Facebook, one should become unsettled at the thought that Deepface, the corporate equivalent of the GCHQ's Optic Nerve, trumps its governmental competitors with 97,35% accuracy when it comes to facial recognition technologies. This should come as no surprise, since Facebook obviously holds the largest database of faces. The problem is the level of consent with which we share our information with these companies for the sake of a "better" social experience, both online and offline. In times of political decline, it is interesting to observe how more trust is oriented towards corporate giants rather than governmental forms of authority. It is also ironic that state powers begin to rely on data-collecting enterprises in order to enforce authority. A well known example is the NSA's dependence on platforms like Google and Yahoo! to provide them with information for strengthening the framework of their own surveillance tactics. Still, the issue of trust in one form of authority over another seems to function under the increasingly popular approach of choosing the lesser of two or more evils. The "nothing to hide" argument is being evoked more and more by morally conscious individuals, which ultimately enforces the passive nature of our approach towards intrusive forms of surveillance. Because the debate shouldn't revolve around the fact that we are all innocent until proven guilty, but rather that the act of overloading servers and databases with random data, because it might serve for a latter purpose, is prone to attacks or misuse in terms of leaks and hacks. The idea that one has nothing to hide from the surveilling gaze doesn't justify the process entirely.

In order to treat the urgency of surveillance becoming normalized, supposing that this is a scenario which should be actively avoided, it is crucial that it becomes uncomfortably visible. Just as the myth of Sisyphus stands for the futility of human endeavor and the search for meaning, so should the surveilling entity be perceived if we are to begin to overcome it. Linking surveillance to the absurd should be a first step in starting to subvert the means by which it functions. Here an appropriate analogy could be made towards the inherent absurdity of bureaucracy as a similar concept of classifying and processing data. If we consider how normalized bureaucracy has become despite it being fundamentally ridiculous, we can envision a similar fate for surveillance, only this time we might use it as an opportunity for change before it becomes the norm. In this case, the aforementioned Kafkaesque nightmare is what needs to

become more real in relation to surveillance, so that we can grasp what it is that we should avoid. Therefore the stepping stone towards subverting methods of surveillance is emphasizing how flawed, redundant, and ultimately absurd they are. Since this reality of constant monitoring is invisible, efforts must be made in the direction of providing a symbolic frame through which to perceive it, to paraphrase philosopher Slavoj Zizek in his book *"Event".* He argues that in order for an event to be considered as such, one first needs to create a frame which defines fantasy. The moment in which the concept perceived through that frame goes beyond it and violently breaks into reality is the moment in which an event is born. Here the use of fantasy is imagining surveillance as taking bureaucratic form. By participating in and interacting with the notion of normalized surveillance through bureaucracy, one has a chance to further react to it. The aim is to tinker with it before it erupts into reality, thus becoming an event.

If the purpose of mass-surveillance is established as directed towards further control, by means of prediction and prevention, the whole process seems to take on a distinctive connotation. Through the use of algorithms and neural networks reality is being portrayed in a limited form. The level of trust in machine learning as a way to document the present and foresee the future can sometimes go beyond rational thinking. Forms of authority cannot rely on artificial intelligence technologies to make sense of reality simply because these specialized machines are programmed on the fundament of human judgement, which is can still be prone to flaws and errors. If we can agree that our own logic doesn't always generate the truth then it is obvious that artificial logic will also fall short in that sense, perhaps even more so. Therefore the concept of algorithmic interaction and prediction becomes an inherently relative process, which cannot be considered as a consistent decision-making measure in relation to enacting authority. Because of its contingent nature one might be inclined to associate algorithmic prediction with ways of forecasting the future which pertain to the occult. In this sense artificial intelligence technologies become closely connected to methods of divination. Since the type of predictions made through employing surveillance techniques are based on psychological profiles of individuals constructed by collecting their data, mystical divination can also be regarded as a psychological tool of determining characteristic information and future course of action of individuals. While algorithms rely on a more or less empirical approach in order to construct one's identity, forms of augury revolve around a complex system of beliefs and superstitions which entail mythologically constructed components of good and evil. The fact that divination employs antithetic notions of morality together with mythological portrayals of life and death allows individuals to more closely relate to culturally universal notions of the self. Even though this mystical approach finds its roots in what is considered as fantasy, it is interesting to see how it depicts universal aspects of human psychology and daily life. In contrast to this, the administrative inner-workings of applied surveillance tactics focus on standardizing data to the point where it is completely stripped of all context

and nuance, thus facilitating the process of algorithmic prediction in which reality is filtered through a dry sequence of scripts and codes. David Graeber's *"Utopia of Rules"* offers a comparison between fantasy literature and bureaucracy, which shows how the two concepts are mutually exclusive:

> *[…] in fantasy, as in heroic societies, political life is largely about the creation of stories. Narratives are embedded inside narratives; the storyline of a typical fantasy is often itself about the process of telling stories, interpreting stories, and creating material for new ones. This is in dramatic contrast with the mechanical nature of bureaucratic operations. Administrative procedures are very much not about the creation of stories; in a bureaucratic setting, stories appear when something goes wrong. When things run smoothly, there's no narrative arc of any sort at all.* (185)

The element of mysticism found within tarot mythology for example is an appropriate analogy to the idea of prediction through surveillance, because they both represent different concepts which come together under the same goal: extracting individuals' personal information and contextualizing it for future reference. The psychological factor residing in both processes ultimately seeks to make sense of circumstantial aspects of one's identity; the difference between the two emerges from how this personal information is being used. While the surveilling entity strives for domination and discipline with its harvesting of personal data, one could say that the mystical entity adopts a more therapeutic reasoning towards the individual, with a strong incentive to clarify and mitigate. For the sake of speculation, these two seemingly distinct notions should be bridged in order to better understand their respective implications; hopefully with the aim of identifying an intrusive phenomenon in relation to one which is remedial. The artistic format of a performance is therefore meant to simulate the experiential characteristics of abusive control on one hand, and mystical confession on the other. With the aid contrasting tools, such as a deck of tarot cards along with digital methods of documentation, a potential scenario is being created in order to illustrate the contradiction between a more or less administrative process and one which is inherently intimate. Nevertheless both should be perceived as confronting in one way or another from the position of the individual undergoing the experience. The choice of space is intended towards a certain sense of neutrality, which can be perceived as a sort of structural limbo in which events unfold. The details of the performance related to ambiance, such as the change in lighting and discourse, have the role of designating the shift from surveillance to mysticism. The underlying conclusion to the entire experience creates an opportunity to reflect on the means through which one's personal data is either being intercepted or consensually provided, by way of a confronting opposition. Whether one's data is being interpreted by forms of authority or by esoteric counselors should not be an issue; the only suggestion is that one should be given the choice. And that doesn't seem to occur in the context of surveillance-states.

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