

Defamiliarizing Surveillance
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In his essay "The Street Scene," Bertolt Brecht suggests that a model for his epic theatre can be derived from the demonstration one might give in public if one had to relate the details of an automobile accident. Brecht argues that in a situation such as this, the demonstrator performs the behavior of the driver or the victim in such a way that bystanders can formulate an opinion about what has happened. According to Brecht, the acting in this street performance is "alienated." The actor does not subsume her- or himself into the role, but instead maintains a certain distance from it, going so far sometimes as to pause during the portrayal to directly address the audience. In this way, the performance in the street attempts to not merely imitate but to explain the details of the accident; it marks a "changeover from representation to commentary" (Brecht, "The Street Scene: A Basic Model for an Epic Theatre" 126). For Brecht, this notion of "alienation" or "*Verfremdung*" is central to his epic theatre. He writes that the *Verfremdungseffekt* is "a technique of taking the human social incidents to be portrayed and labeling them as something striking, something that calls for explanation, is not to be taken for granted, not just natural. The object of this 'effect' is to allow the spectator to criticize constructively from a social point of view" (Brecht, "The Street Scene" 125). The *Verfremdungseffekt* defamiliarizes what is presented, "making strange" in order to historicize, to denaturalize, and to interrogate the institutions and events in the performance.

Brecht's examination of the "street scene" provides only a basic model for his epic theatre. He claims that the move back inside the auditorium requires a level of increased complication and skill, and this, we might infer, is the primary locus of performance for Brecht. This paper, however, will return to the streets, not for the sake of simplicity and not in a rejection of theatre, per se. Rather, this paper will examine the work of the Surveillance Camera Players, a

group of activists from New York City who perform skits in front of the ubiquitous surveillance cameras in the subway system and on the street corners. Like Brecht's formulations in "The Street Scene," the performances of the Surveillance Camera Players disrupt conventional notions of theatrical representation. And like Brecht, their work is not meant to merely entertain; rather, it is intended to provoke audience reaction. This paper will explore the defamiliarizations performed by the Surveillance Camera Players. Using the theories of Bertolt Brecht, alongside those the SCP claim to have influenced them—those of the Situationist International and of Antonin Artaud, I will examine how the performances of this group defamiliarize and denaturalize surveillance in the hopes of shocking the audience into thought and action.

The first performance of the Surveillance Camera Players occurred in New York City in December of 1996 when six members performed an adaptation of Alfred Jarry's *Ubu Roi* in front of the security cameras located in the Union Square subway station. Although this version contained only nine scenes, the players were unable to perform it in its entirety as they were interrupted at the end of Scene 7 and "were asked to stop and to move along by two utterly humorless New York City policemen, who just did not care that Scene Eight was the one in which the Bear fights with and is killed by Ubu's Man" (SCP, *Debut Performance*). Since then, the SCP have learned to streamline their performances, so that ideally they can be performed from start to finish before the police's attention is attracted. The group has performed in front of surveillance cameras throughout Manhattan (and their actions have spread to other cities in the United States and abroad). Their repertoire includes adaptations of George Orwell's *1984*, Edgar Allan Poe's "The Raven," and Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, along with original material the group has written expressly for their actions.

As they state in one of the group's first manifestoes, the SCP

are not a professional theatre troupe, nor are they producers of or actors in television shows; they are just a bunch of average Joes and Josephines who appreciate how boring it must be for law enforcement officers to watch the video images constantly being displayed on the closed-circuit television surveillance systems that perpetually monitor our behavior and appearance all over the city. The only time these officers have any fun watching these monitors is when some-

thing illegal is going on. But the crime rate is down and the subways (which are filled with surveillance cameras) are the safest they have been in 30 years. Thus, for untold numbers of police surveillants, there is less and less to watch—less and less to watch out for—every day (SCP, *The Surveillance Camera Players*).

Although the SCP initially “banded together to present a specially-designed series of famous dramatic works of the modern period for the entertainment, amusement and moral edification of the surveilling members of the law enforcement community,” they have since altered their conceptualization of audience (SCP, *The Surveillance Camera Players*). Less concerned with the “moral edification” of the police, they now recognize the impact their performances have on passersby, who witness not only the theatrical event staged in front of the surveillance cameras but often see the police response the SCP elicit. For these audiences in particular, the surveillance cameras, along with the rhetoric of public safety that accompanies them, are defamiliarized. The “naturalness” and neutrality of surveillance is challenged.

Although this paper posits there are similarities between Brecht’s *Verfremdungseffekt* and the SCP’s defamiliarizations, the group does not trace its theoretical and theatrical heritage through Brecht. Instead, the Surveillance Camera Players draw on the works of Antonin Artaud and the Situationist International. While some theorists place the theatre of Artaud in opposition to that of Brecht, and while the situationists sought to differentiate themselves from previous members of the avant-garde including Artaud and Brecht, this essay seeks to demonstrate that these various theorists are not entirely incongruent.

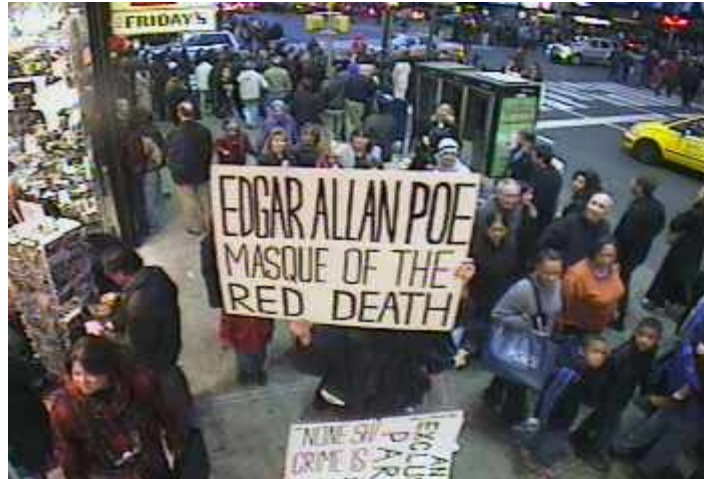
Surveillance Camera Players co-founder Bill Brown uses the alias “Art Toad” during his performances; although the reference to the French dramatist has been lost on many media pundits, the SCP website has a lengthy essay comparing the group’s work to Artaud and his “Theater of Cruelty.” Artaud sought to establish a new form of theatre that minimized the spoken word, relying instead on gestures and movement. Through a violation of the conventions of acting and of setting, Artaud sought to shock viewers, conjuring extreme emotional responses and demanding they confront the primitive aspects of their psyches. In *The*

Theater and Its Double, Artaud asserts that "In the true theater, a play disturbs the senses' repose, frees the repressed unconscious, [and] incites a kind of virtual revolt . . ." (Artaud 28).

This element of heightened emotion is likely the reason many critics place Brecht and Artaud in opposition, for Brecht is often seen as resistant to an emotional response to theatre. In one essay, for example, Brecht writes that "efforts were directed to playing in such a way that the audience was hindered from simply identifying itself with the characters in the play" (Brecht, "Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting" 91). However, Brecht's dislike of emotional identification does not mean his plays lacked emotion. As Antony Tatlow suggests in his book *Shakespeare, Brecht, and the Intercultural Sign*,

Brecht's plays are full of emotionally powerful moments because of the skill with which he takes the mind apart, uncovering, in a flash of unforgettable insight, the repressions lodged in the social unconscious. Artaud's theories called for a theater that would not merely frighten its audience but also explain, through a profane ritual and a systematic depersonalization of the individual into gestures, why such depersonalization has taken place. Although they do this with decidedly different emphasis, both theories . . . advocate a gestural language that shuns or discounts representational convention, that comes from within the body, is expressed through it, and uncovers the forces that have structured it, and that is intended to create viscerally disturbing effects (Tatlow 73).

Similarly, the Surveillance Camera Players' performances utilize a gestural style of acting, one very dependent on the body as a site of expression about and a site of resistance to surveillance technologies. However unlike Artaud, the SCP are motivated by neither theory nor madness to dispense with the spoken word; rather, the group performs in silence because surveillance cameras do not record sound (yet). The group therefore relies "exclusively upon props, objects, movements, gestures, mimicry, and pantomime to dramatize their themes and intentions" (SCP, *On Antonin Artaud and the Theater of Cruelty*).



Opening "Title" to Edgar Allan Poe's *Masque of the Red Death*, performed in front of the Times Square Web Cam, November 2001



"The End" of George Orwell's *1984*, performed in Washington Square Park, April 1999

It is, perhaps, the use of placards and signs that make the performances of the Surveillance Camera Players most visibly reminiscent of a Brechtian production. As in a Brecht play, dramatic moments are announced on titles. Brecht suggests that the use of projected titles is "a primitive attempt at literalizing the theatre" (Brecht, "The Literalization of the Theatre" 43). For Brecht, this "literalizing entails punctuating 'representation' with 'formulation' [and] gives the theatre the possibility of making contact with other institutions for intellectual activities" (Brecht, "The Literalization of the Theatre" 43-44). These activities might include book clubs (that

is, reading in a group, not in private), radio, and film, and according to Brecht, this “literalizing” would act to complicate the audience’s experience, to encourage new ways of “reading,” and to prevent them from being “carried away” by the performance. While again, the Surveillance Camera Players’ use of placards stems primarily from the lack of an audio track on surveillance equipment, they do give a theoretical justification for this move that echoes Brecht’s desire to historicize and materialize the theatre:

If the SCP want to convey meaning through written words, these words must be printed on boards large enough so that they can be read by the lens of the surveillance camera. In the form of captions, thought-bubbles, and speech-balloons—devices taken from comic strips and books—the SCP literally ‘materialize’ and ‘manipulate’ the spoken word as if it were an object. To the extent the SCP has made its printed boards visually striking, these ‘materializations’ of speech are both visual and plastic elements, to be appreciated as objects, as well as carriers of meaning (SCP, *On Antonin Artaud*).

Of course, the SCP’s statements echo Artaud’s own description of speech in his Theatre of Cruelty—a “solidified, materialized language,” language that can be “manipulate[d] like a solid object” (Artaud 38, 72). For Artaud, alteration and embodiment of words gave them “an incantational, truly magical sense” (Artaud 125); in this way, he sought to recreate a sort of ancient, mythological theatre. Interestingly, the Surveillance Camera Players have adapted a play from rituals in pagan priestess/political activist Starhawk’s book *The Spiral Dance*. While Artaud believed in the transformative powers of mythology, the SCP locate their notion of transformation elsewhere. They admit they have “had success without any interest whatsoever in ‘ancient magic’ and despite the group’s hostility both to mystical beliefs, in general, and to naïve beliefs in the curative powers of pure spectacle” (SCP, *On Antonin Artaud*). Whereas Artaud sees the problems in society as largely metaphysical, however, the Surveillance Camera Players like Brecht see them as social.

Indeed, one of the SCP’s criticisms of Artaud is his failure to see the importance of organized political activism or to link his radical plans for the theatre with other social causes. To the contrary, the Surveillance Camera Players seek to broaden the scope of their performances, encompassing not just the stage but the streets. They encourage anyone anywhere to take up

their name and their technique of surveillance camera “playing.” Here, the connections to the group’s other main influence—the Situationist International—are clear.

The Situationist International was a small and short-lived group of mostly male, mostly European artists and theorists. (Less than seventy individuals claimed to be situationists during the group’s brief existence from 1957 to 1972.) Although they may have since drifted into obscurity, the situationists played an important role in the French student uprisings of the late Sixties, particularly during the events of May 1968, and remain an important influence on contemporary anarchist groups. Like Brecht, the situationists formulated a technique of defamiliarization: *détournement*, or diversion. However, they were adamant their concept superseded all previous ones. “We must note,” they wrote in 1956, that Brecht’s defamiliarizations

are held within narrow limits by his unfortunate respect for culture as defined by the ruling class—that same respect, taught in the primary schools of the bourgeoisie and in the newspapers of the workers parties, which leads the reddest worker districts of Paris always to prefer *El Cid* over *Mother Courage* (Debord & Wolman 9).

And of Artaud, they say that

no sooner had he made his break than he completely lost himself in solipsistic ravings and magical thought. He abandoned all notion of realizing subjective will through the transformation of the world. Instead of externalizing what lies within, he sought to make it holy, to discover a permanent mythic reality in the rigid world of symbols. The only road to this kind of revelation is the road of impotence (Vaneigem 268).

The situationists therefore sought to redefine art, removing it from its elite, specialized legacy.

Although initially formed as an aesthetic movement, the Situationist International had expelled all its artists by 1962. Thus they sought to erase the distinction between art and politics and between politics and everyday life.

Situationist theory posits that we live in a world of “spectacles,” where all life is reduced to images and representations. According to Guy Debord, main theorist and self-styled leader of the Situationist International and author of *Society of the Spectacle*, “the spectacle, grasped in its totality, is both the result and the project of the existing mode of production. It is not a

supplement to the real world, an additional decoration. It is the heart of the unrealism of the real society" (Debord 6). The situationists argued that individuals in society have moved from "being" to "having" to "appearing." In other words, modern conditions have exceeded Marx's analysis of production and labor; moreover, alienation has grown beyond Marcuse and Lefebvre's emphasis on consumption and leisure. We are alienated from all aspects of our surroundings—work and leisure, knowledge and relationships, culture and consciousness. In the spectacle, objects become images; expression is diluted into information. People are mere spectators, passive observers of the spectacle surrounding them. Lives are reduced to lifestyles, commodified and circumscribed roles.

The spectacle, Debord argued, was everywhere. "The basically tautological character of the spectacle flows from the simple fact that its means are simultaneously its ends. It is the sun which never sets over the empire of modern passivity. It covers the entire surface of the world and bathes endlessly in its own glory" (Debord 13). Faced with the paradoxical task of resisting and subverting the totalizing and universal spectacle, the situationists merged theory with practice; they proposed the creation of "situations," performances that disrupted or defamiliarized the spectacle thereby transcending oppression and alienation.

One method for creating these subversive "situations" was the *dérive*, or drift. Modeled after the wanderings of surrealist "automatism," the situationists advocated rambling expeditions through the city, not guided by the designated routes of the spectacle, but instead led by the desires and direction of the unconscious. Debord and others created "maps" with cut-and-paste street-maps and arrows, depicting a re-envisioned urbanism based on "psychogeography," a mode that privileged happiness over efficiency, chaos over conformity. The Surveillance Camera Players too create maps, although they are more precise, perhaps, than the situationists' collages, as they carefully describe the location of security cameras; nevertheless, these maps encourage the same type of playful exploration and "recapture" of

public space. Like the situationists, the SCP draw heavily on the work of Henri Lefebvre and his analysis of space.

The other important method for the SI was the *détournement*, translated from French as diversion or subversion. Initially, *détournement* was described as a manipulation of texts and images—the “theft” of pre-existing artistic productions and their integration into a new construction, one meant to serve the Situationist International’s radical political agenda. In other words, images and texts are to be decontextualized, détourned, and then recontextualized; the displacement of cultural artifacts reverberates into both the old and the new contexts, destabilizing the primacy and stasis of image and meaning. Often quoting Lautréamont’s maxim that “plagiarism is necessary; progress demands it,” the Situationists took up texts, images, and theories and twisted them to suit their own program. The situationists are perhaps best known for their détourned cartoons—popular romance comics whose speech balloons were altered to espouse situationist theses. Guy Debord was also famous for his détourned films. *Hurllements en faveur de Sade* (1952), for example, contains no images; it is comprised of a black screen and silence with intermittent fragments of banal conversation, white lights, and lettrist poetry. By utilizing texts and images stolen from the spectacle, they hoped to foster an insurrection at the level of representation.

However *détournement* is not merely a textual or imagistic defamiliarization. As the situationists were interested in “the revolution of everyday life,” they were eager to disrupt conventions of art, literature, film, and theatre, as well as day-to-day “performances.” The influence of this situationist praxis was particularly evident during the occupations of May 1968, for détourned performances and artifacts were prevalent in the streets of Paris. Graffiti and posters decorated the walls, proclaiming situationist-inspired slogans like “Run! The Old World is behind you” and “Workers of all countries, enjoy!” The Odéon Theatre was raided and became the locus for the whole revolt: the insurrectionaries wore costumes; they were pirates, knights, and queens; they bore swords and shields and chainmail to defend the barricades. These

dramatic but playful violations of expectation threatened the more conventional modes of resistance, those perhaps more readily tolerated or accepted by the spectacle.

The jarring effects of these defamiliarizations were revolutionary, according to the situationists; but they also argued their techniques were radical for it required collective, rather than individual creation. Echoing Lautréamont, it was "*poésie faite par tous*." *Détournement* was a participatory technique, one that involved people in construction and performance, not just consumption and spectatorship. In this way, *détournement*, like *Verfremdungseffekt*, is intended to spark direct action and political critique. Unlike the V-effekt, however, *détournement* is meant to draw people into the streets, not into the auditorium.

The Surveillance Camera Players act then in the spirit of the Situationist International, demanding art and politics be merged and ensuring their performances remain in public space, directed expressly at the surveillance camera technology and not abstracted for presentation in the theatre (or on talk shows and so on). They assert,

The SCP only perform in the street, and have never performed in a theater or any other 'performance space,' precisely because it is in the streets that one finds both surveillance cameras and the people that will form the movement against their installation in public places. There is no better way of convincing people that they are being surveilled than by actually showing them the cameras; and there is no better way of convincing people that protests by individuals or small groups can be effective than by encouraging them to join the performance that caught their attention in the first place (SCP, *On Antonin Artaud*).

The SCP eliminate more than just the "fourth wall" that prevents actor and audience interaction; by performing in public space, they disrupt the notion of a separate stage altogether.

Furthermore, they seek to disrupt the split between actor and audience, between active and passive. The actions of the SCP demand participation from the audience—both those behind the video monitor and those who are just walking by. As SCP co-founder Bill Brown writes, "we want cops/security guards to COME OUT OF THEIR WATCHERS' BOOTHS and talk to us (doesn't matter what they say). Getting them to come out is a tactical victory for us: exposing the Man Behind the Curtain (a la the *Wizard of Oz*). We want passersby to stop and join us" (Brown). In this way, the Surveillance Camera Players facilitate a performance that draws attention to the

presence of surveillance cameras and security guards in public space, while reclaiming that very space from these disciplinary mechanisms.

In some ways then, the Surveillance Camera Players are, like Brecht, engaged in a type of pedagogy, a theatre that educates as well as entertains. As Christine Kiebuszinska points out, Brecht's theatrical techniques "aimed to assault his audience's passive and fatalistic inertia, its adjustment to the course of things in order to encourage an active intervention in the historical process" (Kiebuszinska 78). In other words, the disruption of formal theatrical elements was meant to alter the audience's perceptions of society. In *The Prison-House of Language*, Fredric Jameson insists

The purpose of the Brechtian estrangement-effect is therefore a political one in the most thoroughgoing sense of the word; it is, as Brecht insisted over and over, to make you aware that the objects and institutions you thought to be natural were really only historical: the result of change, they themselves henceforth become in their turn changeable (Jameson 58).

What was once viewed as static and eternal becomes flexible, and the audience itself becomes a dynamic force for change.

Similarly, the performances of the Surveillance Camera Players *détourne* public space and denaturalize the surveillance cameras installed throughout the city. By acting out in front of a camera, they make visible the techniques of surveillance, a technique that operates in part by its invisibility and its inevitability. Their actions make us aware of how surveillance cameras have transformed all public space into a stage of sorts, where we need to be aware of our public performances. Are we acting like "good citizens"? Or are we performing suspiciously? Who is the camera watching? And where? The Surveillance Camera Players, by calling attention to bodies under surveillance, defamiliarize conventional "performances" in public space.

Unlike the Situationist International who made many proclamations universalizing and totalizing spectacular relations and the power of situationist resistance to them, the SCP seem quite realistic about the potentials of their *détournements*. They are clear that their actions fail

either to achieve Artaud's vision of the theatre, to fulfill the SI's demands for total revolution, or to end the use of surveillance cameras in public places.

The 'theater' staged by the SCP is alive to the precise extent that it isn't independent or autonomous, that it isn't a pure 'art,' and that it can't accommodate all the demands made upon it. The very inadequacy of the SCP's theater of cruelty—the fact that it seems powerless to actually stop generalized video surveillance—is actually its strength: the inadequacy prevents anyone from believing that a 'revolution' in the theater is enough, and demonstrates that all of society and not just the theater is going to have to be changed (SCP, *On Antonin Artaud*).

Like Brecht, then, the Surveillance Camera Players are involved in a theatrical project that historicizes and materializes conditions of exploitation and oppression, and that simultaneously motivates audiences to consider—and even try to change—these very circumstances. As we enter an era of unprecedented surveillance—both by the government and by corporations—the tactics of the Surveillance Camera Players provide an interesting and amusing way of provoking people to consider this issue.

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