

The Culture of Surveillance

Vincent P. Pecora¹

Postmodern cultural theory after Foucault, Debord, and Baudrillard has tended to indict surveillance as a disciplinary apparatus, producing a society that is both "carceral" and increasingly virtual. At the same time, social critics like Lasch have decried the growth of narcissism amid the failure of liberalism. This essay aims to complicate both of these perspectives by examining the contradictory desire for surveillance in popular media like "reality TV" and in the social sciences themselves. It may be that the desire to watch and be watched is a more deeply rooted element of the liberal democratic impulse than we normally care to admit.

KEY WORDS: surveillance; reality-based television; narcissism; social psychology; liberal democracy.

At least since Michel Foucault's *Surveiller et Punir: Naissance de la Prison*, the way in which surveillance functions as a mechanism of social regulation and discipline has been central to the study of cultural representations (1975). Foucault's resurrection of Bentham's panopticon was in large part also a re-elaboration of Max Weber's "iron cage" thesis about bureaucratic, capitalist society, this time for an increasingly media-saturated age (1958, p. 181). To be sure, the power of surveillance was presented by Foucault as both coercive and productive where social relations were concerned—he famously claimed to refuse any normative approach to the topic—but it would be fair to say that it was surveillance as morally and even epistemologically regulative authority that became the dominant issue for the majority of Foucault's readers, who applied it equally to the unseen enforcement of good social order in the nineteenth-century novel (see, for example, D. A. Miller's *The Novel and the Police* [1988]) and the unacknowledged workings of political and economic control in the modern metropolis (as in Mike Davis's *City of Quartz* [1990]). In these and countless other examples, surveillance

¹Correspondence should be directed to Vincent P. Pecora, Department of English, Center for Modern and Contemporary Studies, University of California, Los Angeles, CA 90095-1530; e-mail: pecora@humnet.ucla.edu.

emerged as an instrument by which authoritative social institutions shaped reality, either for the benefit of such institutions and the classes they served or for some more general tyrannous purpose. Foucault's thesis resonated in profound ways with a Western intelligentsia that had been reminded constantly of the evils of surveillance in communist Eastern Europe, especially through novels like George Orwell's *1984*; that watched both the Zapruder home movie of John Kennedy's assassination and the live broadcast of Lee Harvey Oswald's subsequent murder; that had been educated in the ways of the media by films like *Medium Cool* and *Blow Up*; and that had witnessed full-scale televised war in Vietnam from their living rooms.

At the same time, with commentators like Guy Debord (1967), Jean Baudrillard (1972, 1973), and Jean-François Lyotard (1984), the truth of contemporary (or postmodern) culture began to take shape in the idea that reality itself was already a theatrical spectacle or hyper-real simulation—a thesis that would have seemed utterly inane were it not for the power of film and television technologies to make fictional worlds appear indistinguishable from real ones. In one of his famous dicta, Baudrillard (1983) insisted that Disneyland functioned not as a fantasy escape from the harsh reality of Los Angeles, but rather as a ruse to make us think that Los Angeles and the rest of an equally fantastic America were in fact real.² Such a wonderfully Parisian *bon mot* depended on the perception that Los Angeles is reducible to Hollywood, and that Hollywood itself is further reducible to studio lots (even if not all *in* Hollywood) filled with false building façades arranged in imitation neighborhoods. The *trompe-l'œil* of the studio lot was indeed the material basis of Walt Disney's quite profitable good idea, one that has been further elaborated by projects like Universal City Walk—for many visitors, a virtual urban scene preferable to the real thing just outside. Baudrillard saw correctly that the preference for Disney's simulated village square was related to similar simulations across America (and the rest of the world), from theme parks to nostalgic urban renewal projects—but he continued to link this “hyperreality” to the “carceral” nature of modern society, thus repeating Foucault's basic premise. Even so, neither Foucault nor Baudrillard explicitly clarified the link between surveillance and simulated reality, and it is in part the implicit connection between them that I will be talking about.

While some contemporary popular entertainment would seem to be following in Foucault's footsteps—the recent film *The Truman Show* is, precisely, about the tyranny of surveillance as a manipulative, god-like control of individual and society alike, all set in what could be called a carceral “small town” version of

²“Disneyland is there to conceal the fact that it is the ‘real’ country, all of ‘real’ America, which is Disneyland (just as prisons are there to conceal the fact that it is the social in its entirety, in its banal omnipresence, which is carceral). Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real, when in fact all of Los Angeles and the America surrounding it are no longer real, but of the order of the hyperreal and of simulation” (p. 25; Baudrillard's italics).

Universal City Walk—recent trends like “reality TV” have made it obvious that a very different, far more embracing, attitude toward surveillance has been evolving at the same time, especially in *fin-de-siècle* society. Some of the shift in attitude about surveillance is due simply to a shift in the primary object and purpose of surveillance. Most Americans, for example, saw a surveillance-obsessed East Germany where every sixth person was a political informant for the secret police, or Stasi, as a frightening threat to liberty and privacy, one worth the risk of a nuclear arms race. But Americans today react very differently when the television program *America’s Most Wanted*, increasingly celebrated as a tool of law enforcement, mobilizes its viewing public as bounty hunters’ apprentices. (A “real-life” police program like *Cops* is a related phenomenon: though not interactive, *Cops* in its own way also functions as a law-enforcement tool, making viewers virtually complicit with the police actions filmed.) In the same vein, high school students, after the Columbine shootings (and others similar to it), now seem far more willing than formerly to agree that “snitching” to authorities about the privately voiced violent fantasies of their friends is the right thing to do. Perhaps most striking of all, in becoming a common household appliance, the small video camera transformed surveillance into a practice in which average citizens could control, rather than be controlled by, a recording gaze. A bystander’s videotaping of the police beating of Rodney King in Los Angeles transformed the nature of surveillance, turning back the eye of authority upon itself. Some police forces have responded to the proliferation of video cameras by policing their officers with self-surveillance video recordings that might also provide evidence against subsequent charges of police brutality.

In what could be taken as a kind of practical, if perhaps terribly ironic, refutation of Foucault’s work on the modern prison as disciplinary panopticon, San Francisco’s newest prison facility has won rave reviews from its inmates (to the extent that such a thing is measurable), precisely because the prison’s explicitly panoptical architecture undermines the culture of rape that has plagued other facilities for years. In this prison, as in *America’s Most Wanted*, the suburban high school, the airport, the stadium, the government building, the queue at the ATM machine, the local convenience store, and especially cases like that of Rodney King, video surveillance is now often embraced as an undeniable good. One might also mention the more passively accepted (if often unwanted) sort of electronic surveillance that goes on unnoticed as we browse the Internet, or purchase products on-line: The “cookies” that merchandisers attach to our electronic identities track our consumer preferences in ways that are almost as revealing as a hidden camera in our homes. Undoubtedly, the destruction of the World Trade Center towers in New York on September 11, 2001 by terrorists in hijacked airliners will make surveillance, at least for the purposes of law enforcement, all the more acceptable. At Universal City, a voice on the public address system now repeatedly declares, “You are being watched,” and visitors report that they are comforted by the message. Still, I want to suggest that the new trend toward “reality TV,”

by which I mean largely unscripted, though heavily edited, programs peopled by ensembles of nonprofessional actors and focussed on group dynamics, as exemplified by programs like *Big Brother*, *Survivor*, *Boot Camp*, and many others, seems to be tapping into something quite apart from America's continuing fear of crime, terrorism, and senseless adolescent mayhem, and distinct from the ever deeper penetration of market research into our lives. A development that began almost a decade ago with MTV's *Real World* (1992) and has evolved considerably since then in Europe, the United States, and, most recently, Russia, "reality TV" elaborates surveillance as a sublime object of desire, and it is the nature of that desire that we should try to understand.

When we add to this the growth of self-surveillance in cyberspace—the 24-hour video feed of one's routine activities on a computer website that *Big Brother* incorporated into its format—the possibility arises that, for a growing number of people in contemporary Western society, surveillance has become less a regulative mechanism of authority (either feared as tyrannous or welcomed as protection) than a populist path to self-affirmation and a ready-made source of insight into the current norms of group behavior (even, as I hope to show, for the academic social psychologists among us). In 2000 Apple introduced a computer that would allow you to edit and provide musical accompaniment to digital home movies. *The Truman Show*, that is, only got it half right: We are now the subjects of media-shaped, even virtual, realities, but we are also being encouraged to become the producers—and the ethnographers—of these virtual lives, to edit them on our iMACs even as we live them.

Already, whole families document the trivialities of their existence on web pages designed to celebrate intimacy as a public performance. I am bombarded almost daily with news (and worse: vacation pictures!) from cousins a continent away, and I feel technologically slow because I do not (yet) display my personal life on a constantly updated website. While these forms of surveillance are surely less oppressive than the one that Orwell foretold, they embody to an astonishing degree the idea that modern culture has become dominated by the practice of testing reality. Advanced capitalist society at the dawn of the new millennium is less about truth versus fiction, or authenticity versus simulation. It is instead about a quest for real life that requires surveillance for its—for our—verification.

The relatively recent rise of reality television is in many ways the culmination of developments in modern culture since 1945 (to which I will return at the end of this article), some dependent on new media technology and some quite independent of it, in which fiction and truth are blurred in new, but also not so new, ways. There are obviously much older precedents: from the seventeenth century on, the bird's-eye (or God's-eye) view elaborated by the European novel's omniscient narrator turned a given segment of society into a believable reproduction through the fiction of anonymous surveillance. Nineteenth-century romancers like Nathaniel Hawthorne reveled in the role of unseen social observer, naturalists like

Emile Zola explicitly referred to their practice as a kind of sociological experiment in observation and recording, and Henry James finally codified the entire relationship of the novel to surveillance by embodying the recording consciousness of his narrative perspective in a nosy, spying character (consider Fanny Assingham in *The Golden Bowl*). Benedict Anderson's notion that the nation-state could have arisen only in the context of a "print-capitalism" that provided the medium for a collective sense of simultaneity among distant strangers must be mentioned as well. For what Anderson implies in the coming of mass-consumed print is the point of view of virtual, quasi-divine surveillance that any citizen could assume when imagining the "simultaneity" of the national community ([1983]1991, pp. 24–26). That point of view is for me the perspective of "the social" itself, the nascent idea of "society" that would be elevated by early twentieth-century sociologists into an all-encompassing super-subject watching over all. "The collective consciousness," wrote Emile Durkheim, "is the highest form of the psychic life, since it is the consciousness of the consciousnesses. Being placed outside of and above individual and local contingencies, it sees things only in their permanent and essential aspects, which it crystallizes into communicable ideas. As the same time that it sees from above, it sees farther; at every moment of time, it embraces all known reality; that is why it alone can furnish the mind with the moulds which are applicable to the totality of things and which make it possible to think of them" (1915, p. 492). Durkheim's hypostatization of the social, remarkable in its own time, is a prescient forecast of a social mind far more materially embedded in today's proliferation of collectively approved and encouraged surveillance and surveillance-oriented television.

Early photography suggested at times the more totalizing surveillance to come: It was said that Atget photographed the streets of Paris, Walter Benjamin remarked, as if they were the scene of a crime (1969, p. 226). The moving picture of cinema made it possible to reproduce human action, which for Aristotle had been the primary object of all poetic mimesis, with a previously unknown verisimilitude that even captured war in newsreel footage. And the hand-held camera eventually allowed cinema and television to achieve, or fabricate, a sometimes startling immediacy and intimacy. It is this new combination of surveillance and putative immediacy that marks the present moment in cultural representation, as we in Los Angeles routinely watch televised automobile police pursuits on our nightly newscasts, unfolding in real time and perhaps right outside our doors, led by individuals who know they are being observed constantly from hovering news helicopters but who choose to play out to its inevitable end a scenario that appears to have been scripted for them in advance.

These automobile chases are primarily the effect of two decisions: First, the LAPD abandoned reckless pursuits that produced unacceptable amounts of "collateral damage" whenever police attempted to run down and apprehend the fleeing suspect as quickly as possible; and second, O. J. Simpson embarked in the wake of his ex-wife's murder on what we might call a simulated "run for the border,"

which became the most widely observed police pursuit of the era. This television genre—for that is what it has become, a genre—has since taken on a life of its own, complete with bizarre “color commentary” provided by local newscasters who during the chase say things like, “Ok, now that’s something new,” or “Well, we’ve never seen that before.” There are websites devoted to the genre. Here is what can be read at the home page of one such site:

How do you find out when a chase is being broadcast live on TV? And how many have you missed because you didn’t know about it? Some people rely on their friends to tell them about a chase, but with PursuitAlert™ service, you’ll be alerted by pager, phone, or cell-phone of every live high speed chase broadcast in your region. When you get the page, you’ll know a chase can be seen on your TV as it happens. Sign up now for a FREE, no-obligation, 3 month trial. Nothing to cancel!³

These car chases are at heart reproductions of one of the oldest Hollywood film genres: The Keystone Cops helped lay the foundation for American cinema itself, and a long history of LAPD chiefs have unwittingly found themselves haunted by the bumbling Keystone legacy. If we could ever fully understand the meaning of the live, televised car chase, I am suggesting, we might also understand the complicated relationship between truth and fiction in contemporary culture.

The underlying strategy at work in shows like *Survivor* and *Big Brother* (a title conjuring up ironically what had been depicted with such horror in 1984) can be summed up in a phrase used by Jean Jamin to describe the sort of auto-ethnography practiced by the avant-garde intellectuals (Georges Bataille, Georges Caillois, Michel Leiris, among others) of the short-lived Collège de Sociologie in late 1930s Paris: to “make each of [the community’s] members participate so that . . . they would become the voyeurs of and actors in a sociological experiment” (1980, p. 12). Like the Collège, that is, contemporary reality-based television has awkwardly embraced an oft-repeated modern quest for the sacred and most primitive elements of human community, and (also like the Collège) has done so in an elective, participatory, and highly self-reflexive, ironic way. It is no accident that the first American edition of *Survivor* (a European import) was set on a “desert island,” thus reproducing the signature element of countless Victorian “Robinsonades” aimed primarily at adolescent boys, and that the second edition, dividing its teams into “tribes,” was set in the Australian outback, which is precisely where much groundbreaking ethnology on aboriginal peoples was performed in the late nineteenth century.⁴

If such programs explore the foundations of community, they do so in the more commercial context of a game show, in which the winner is actually the person who manages to survive the group’s predestined self-dissolution. (MTV’s original reality television series, *Real World*, has no game-show format, though the series

³<http://www.pursuitwatch.com>.

⁴See, for example, the works of Baldwin Spencer and F. J. Gillen, *Native Tribes of Central Australia* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1899) and *Northern Tribes of Central Australia* (London, Macmillan and Co., 1904), from which Durkheim and others borrowed.

may have inadvertently spawned the device of ritual expulsion marking all later versions of the genre when its participants spontaneously banished by majority vote one particularly disruptive member.) In *Survivor* and *Big Brother* (also a success in the Netherlands and Germany before coming to American television) the “tribe” or “household” periodically votes to expel a member from the community, and the programs focus on the shame involved in being expelled—a crucial element that suggests the degree to which all reality television is a nostalgic exercise in the production of shame for individuals, whether participants or audience members, who no longer feel any in everyday life. The various group members must thus manipulate one another, with varying degrees of subtlety, to insure their own social survival for as long as possible. Participants do not simply vote to expel those who are not “fit,” or do not “fit in”; in many cases, a participant votes to rid the group of another individual who may fit in too well and thus become a threatening rival at the end. On the surface, as many commentators have pointed out, loyalty is reduced to a commodity, valuable only as long as it is useful for individual success. But a better analogy may be the inner reality of ordinary democratic politics. In summarizing the driving ambition of F. Clinton White, the manager largely responsible for Barry Goldwater’s Republican nomination for U.S. president in 1964, Russell Baker perfectly describes the central plot device of both *Big Brother* and *Survivor*: “He became fascinated,” Baker writes of White, “by the mechanics of acquiring power through democratic process.”⁵ It would be naïve to think that the average person in Germany or America is any less fascinated by, or concerned about, the same thing, and reality TV is a suitably populist exploration of the theme.

Underlying this eccentric exercise in democratic voting strategy is an exploration of forms of communal belonging and intimacy, complete with the exhilaration of solidarity won through hardship and ordeal, and the embarrassment attending expulsion. The act of expulsion holds commercial possibilities also for those sacrificed, who often conduct staged interviews immediately after the experience and wind up (quite without any residue of shame) on talk shows in the days and weeks following. The expelled thus provide the program an afterlife through in-house gossip about those who betrayed them, laying at the same time what they hope will be the groundwork for further television exposure. One contestant expelled from last season’s *Survivor* resurfaced on the soap opera series *The Young and the Restless*, playing—who else?—herself, implying nothing less than that she is, as a real person, already a recognizably fictionalized character. (This idea—that people in real life are increasingly coming to see themselves, and play themselves, as fictional characters—is of course an idea as old as Cervantes’s great seventeenth-century novel, *Don Quixote*. But contemporary modes of surveillance provide a stage, and an audience, for such real-life fictions that is not merely quantitative in its difference.) In the newer *Chains of Love* television program, a surveillance-oriented version of the *Dating Game*—both part of a genre I would call “intimacy

⁵New York Review of Books, May 17, 2001, p. 5.

surveillance” that first appears in the earliest days of television—the “game” involves five people who have been chained together for several days, including a “picker” of one sex who periodically decides to release/renounce one of the four opposite-sex members of the chain gang until there is only one left to date. (So far, there have been no homosexual versions of reality-based television, though the winner of last season’s *Survivor* was indeed gay.) The structure of *Chains of Love* is thus an absurd, if suitably populist, fulfillment of Hegel’s famous account of master-slave relations in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, where the enchained bondsman’s desire for recognition (in today’s world, for the main 19- to 34-year-old demographic, this means a date) requires a labor that becomes the mechanism and sign of accession to culture and self-consciousness—albeit of a rather limited sort, if the post-show interviews are to be believed (1977, p. 115).

The communities formed within these television programs are in a sense cursed from the start: They must slowly dissolve through the continuous expulsion of one of their own, and the camera lingers time and again on the delicious mixture of sadness and guilty joy—*Schadenfreude* par excellence—on the faces of those who remain. The seemingly paradoxical community-destroying motif was made explicit in two additions to the genre: *The Mole*, in which a member of the group—not unlike a Stasi informant—is assigned the task of working “undercover” to thwart its collective efforts; and *Temptation Island*, in which single seducers are assigned the task of breaking up already troubled couples—a plot device that enables (for the first time, I think) legal, nonfiction prostitution in the guise of a television program, the seducers in effect being paid to provide sex to strangers. In these shows, both the victims of ritual expulsion and the sovereign saboteurs of the group function as what Bataille and his friends would have called “accursed shares,” which is to say they also appear as illustrations of the sacred forces embedded in the notion of the group (1967). The collective’s dissolution becomes the surest way of demonstrating the social magic that was holding it together in the first place.

The trend within the reality-based genre may well be toward a more obvious game show structure, one that dispenses altogether with the surveillance and “real-life” settings of *Survivor*, *Big Brother*, and *Temptation Island* while retaining the tension between group solidarity and individual triumph, as well as the emphasis on the humiliation and rancor of those voted out of the group. A recent import from Britain, *The Weakest Link*, is really just a quiz show moderated by a British host with the aura of a dominatrix, humiliating those who answer incorrectly and dismissing those voted off with a highly ritualized “You are the weakest link: good-bye.” (In the English version, the humiliation appears to be more intensely felt, less easily laughed off, than on the subsequent American one.) But the immediate popularity of *The Weakest Link*—its curious appeal—is that it has distilled to a formulaic essence what other “reality-based” programs only achieve in more circuitous ways. Even where the surveillance-driven “reality-based” genre has

been completely taken over by the game show, the basic elements that, to my mind, structure all the new surveillance programming remain: 1) simulation of a sociological experiment; 2) display of the normative conditions of collective solidarity; 3) exploration of (and nostalgia for) the ritual of social ostracization; and 4) evaluation of the lengths to which individuals will go in manipulating group loyalty to achieve success (though even here the “survivor” who gets to claim the prize at show’s or season’s end may also be the unwitting beneficiary of even more aggressive rivals doing themselves in).

It is impossible to ignore both the extent to which the “game show” may be the dominant genre determining the evolution of such programs and their “amateur-hour” character, as they provide previously unknown participants with a chance at prime time television exposure. But it is also significant that their merging of reality and fiction obeys the same logic as that proposed by Jamin: we are being invited, as in so many other arenas of contemporary culture (think of Oprah and Jerry Springer), to become participant-observers of our own lives. As Lord Henry Wotton, the cynical aesthete of Oscar Wilde’s *Picture of Dorian Gray*, observes: “Suddenly we find that we are no longer the actors, but the spectators of the play. Or rather we are both. We watch ourselves, and the mere wonder of the spectacle enthalls us.”⁶ Simultaneously ethnologists and ethnological subjects, actors and audience in a culture that is increasingly like a self-conscious sociological experiment, we test ourselves to see what we will do, how we will perform, and what we will look like in the process.

It is tempting in this context to invoke Christopher Lasch’s influential Freud-Marxian thesis in *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations*—a book whose pessimistic, end-of-liberalism premises, first outlined in essay form in 1976, laid the groundwork for Jimmy Carter’s ill-fated announcement of American “malaise” amid a culture of reduced expectations (1991). Lasch—whose book was itself part of a wave of post-counterculture social theory in the 1970s, from Tom Wolfe to Richard Sennett, lamenting a putative increase in narcissism (p. 25)—re-tools an older Frankfurt School thesis about the inexorable decline of daddy and family behind the rise of the authoritarian personality, and concludes that “bureaucratic dependence” and “therapeutic justice” have become the basis of a new culture of narcissism (pp. 228–229). He approvingly cites Debord on capitalist advertising’s production of “pseudo-needs” (p. 72) and indicts the media’s reliance on “credibility” as opposed to “truth” (p. 74). Contrary to earlier theorists like David Riesman or William Whyte, who emphasized Americans’ growing conformity and other-directed psychological orientation, Lasch insists that “Americans have not really become more sociable and cooperative . . . they

⁶Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891; London: Penguin, 1985), p. 130. For a discussion of this passage in relation to the later project of Bataille and the Collège, see my *Households of the Soul* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), pp. 141–142.

have merely become more adept at exploiting the conventions of inter-personal relations for their own benefit" (p. 66). Lasch's left critique can be readily applied to reality television, which is on the whole an orgy of capitalist self-promotion that tends to attract what might loosely be called "narcissistic" personalities. (A "Big Brother" sort of reality television program enjoying record ratings for the M6 channel in France has in fact drawn sharp criticism from the left there, though along lines closer to those associated with Foucault or *The Truman Show*. The cultural difference from America is obvious. French communists, who have for decades now apparently concluded that bad taste, rather than private property, is the true enemy of the people, stormed the M6 studios waving copies of 1984 to "liberate" the show's participants.⁷)

From the vantage of the present moment, however, in the wake of the Cold War's end, the apparent dominance of the marketplace, and the roaring economies of Ronald Reagan's and Bill Clinton's administrations, it now seems clear that narcissism thrives just as well when nourished by the optimism of boundless growth and rhetorical tides that lift all boats as it does when stimulated by "stagflation" and astronomical interest rates. To be sure, single-parent households are still on the rise, and daddy gets less respect every day (though he is more likely to be heading a single-parent household himself than before); and there is now good evidence that divorce takes a greater toll on young children than anyone, at least outside the hierarchy of the Catholic Church, previously believed. But the multitude of familial arrangements seems to pose less of a direct threat today to the survival of liberal democracy than it did when Senator Daniel Patrick Moynahan raised the issue two decades ago, and no one now worries, à la Dan Quayle, about Murphy Brown having a child out of wedlock on prime time television. Even Barney the dinosaur almost daily celebrates the diversity of family structures in children's song. Liberalism would seem to have consolidated its social hegemony in the last decade, even if it is clear that it will take considerably more than a "village" to sustain its promise in truly egalitarian ways.

Lasch's conflation of the categories of individual psychology and social history may have been profoundly misleading, that is, despite his best efforts to clarify the relation between them. His high-toned, nominally left but also deeply conservative anxiety over the intellectual, political, and historical bankruptcy of American liberalism, which was the driving force behind his "culture of narcissism," has for many been swept away along with the Soviet Union and the Cold War. Lasch poignantly lamented liberal culture's loss of, and disregard for, collective historical memory, but only ten years later Francis Fukuyama (1989) celebrated the end of history (a celebration oddly prefigured by academic ironists like Lyotard and Hayden White decades earlier) in the millennial triumph of a liberalism that Lasch thought was on its last legs. (Lasch's reconsideration in 1990 of his arguments do little to revise their meaning [1991, pp. 237–249].) In the end, Fukuyama's thesis

⁷Los Angeles Times, May 15, 2001, p. F2.

may be even less convincing than Lasch's, but it was a telling barometer of things to come: A doggedly centrist version of liberalism re-emerged in the 1990s that was successful enough to keep an otherwise quite impeachable president happily in power, both the doctrine and the man never more popular than when attacked by the radical right.

Narcissism is intrinsic to the culture of surveillance shaping reality TV, even if there is no simple Laschian way of linking this narcissism to our collective life, our political ideals, or our historical memories, of tracing its etiology either to the decay of liberalism or to its triumph. In large part, the difficulty in contriving these links is due to the complex relationship between reality TV and social psychology itself, including the sort that Lasch practices. As one of the principal psychological evaluators and consultants for *Big Brother* noted in conversation with me recently, those who applied to be participants on the program exhibited an unusually high quotient of narcissistic, extroverted personality traits, at times to a manic degree.⁸ The psychologist's task was to find individuals who also exhibited a reasonably strong tendency to join and be loyal to a team, though to improve ratings he occasionally advised producers to include a truly manic narcissist, who tended to be voted out of the group rather quickly. Contra Lasch, however, I would suggest that the audience's appetite for the new surveillance-oriented television programs—which in many cases hire academic psychologists as advisors—would seem to be primarily the heightened emotional fulfillment of a desire elaborated for some time, paradoxically enough, by enlightened social theory. While the spread of surveillance is surely on one level a response to fear and the disorienting pace of social change, the pleasure that, both as voyeurs and as exhibitionists, we take in the proliferation of closely observed social reality is an almost inevitable consequence of the liberal democratic demand to make the socially hidden visible, to expose the secret workings of individual choice and group authority, and to create the increasingly transparent life-world that philosophers from Jean-Jacques Rousseau to Jürgen Habermas have held up as an ideal. This is precisely why, for example, American social psychologists in the years after the all-too-successful Nazi experiment in collective consciousness became so interested in testing and recording with cameras the way group authority works on the individual's sense of identity and responsibility. Reality television is simply making exoteric (if also trivializing) the same sort of filmed inquiry into group dynamics that social psychologists have carried out esoterically for decades.

Some contemporary psychologists may even be envious of television's foray into the genre, since the ethical constraints on the use of human subjects at universities today would forbid the kind of experimental protocol brazenly deployed by programs like *Temptation Island* and *Boot Camp*. The consultant for *Big Brother* confirmed this: while his own ethics would not, he said, allow him to act as consultant for *Temptation Island*, he had already decided to use videotape footage from

⁸Telephone conversation with Professor Augusto Britton Del Rio, April 29, 2001.

his work on *Big Brother* as a teaching tool in his classes at his university—even though the university itself would not have sanctioned the sort of experiment that *Big Brother* represented. We should recall here that *Big Brother* was accessible on the Internet, like a number of personal websites devoted to self-surveillance, twenty-four hours a day and seven days a week, and professional psychologists were on hand observing the interactions on the set at all times. Reality TV is, for me, the expression of a powerful, and increasingly unbridled, tendency within democratic society, one also embedded in its academic institutions, to reveal the norms and limits of individual responsibility and group identity, however exaggerated (and commercialized) the settings that reveal such knowledge may be. In effect, television is now doing the kind of social psychological research our universities no longer permit.

The current wave of reality-based television programming can be traced back at least to the early-1970s film (and television series) *An American Family*, which inherited trends in earlier film documentaries and filmed academic social science, such as the famous experiment on individual responsibility and authority at Yale University in 1961 by Stanley Milgram. But it is obvious that what was a highly suspect and much criticized experiment three decades ago is now a phenomenon whose time has come. (The Louds of *An American Family* divorced on-air, and many wondered publicly whether the constant surveillance contributed to the family's dissolution.) In the past, such public surveillance techniques had to be done for laughs if they were to obtain wide approval as entertainment. Alan Funt's very successful *Candid Camera* was at heart a popularized version of an experiment in social psychology, in which the humor derived from confronting a naïve participant with what might then have been called "cognitively dissonant" situations in (apparently) real life. But Funt's short vignettes were very limited in scope and were completely devoted to a comic resolution. Likewise, the humiliations suffered by participants in the earlier TV game show *Beat the Clock* occurred solely within the context of slapstick comedy. The difference between Milgram's experiment in the early 1960s, in which the tested subjects had to be naïve in order for the results to be serious and meaningful, and *An American Family* a decade later, in which the participants were willing subjects of a televised documentary project intended to be equally serious and meaningful, perhaps represents a crucial shift in the American public's acceptance of, and response to, such surveillance. There were so many applications for the second edition of *Survivor*, in many ways the catalyst for the new wave of reality-based television programs, that Federal Express suspended deliveries to the show's producers. *Big Brother* too had an enormous applicant pool from which to choose.

Not only did this trend expand in this year's television season, but reality-based programming has itself become fodder for "ripped-from-the-headlines," though still nominally fictional, police dramas like *Law and Order*, an episode of which indicted reality-based television for being—what else?—too real, paradoxically because it manipulates putative reality for the camera: the network vice

president of the episode's "fictional" reality-based program had manipulated a teenage actor, in a big-city version of the actual reality-based program *Big Brother*, to kill one of his loft-mates. A more recent program, *Boot Camp*, which is largely what its title implies, found itself caught in what may be the ultimate irony for a reality-based show: Its producers were sued by the producers of *Survivor* for copyright infringement, which would seem to imply that something like "reality" itself—or at least the networks' understanding of that term—might soon be a legally copyright-able concept. *Survivor* has also been much discussed in newscasts and newspapers because some of the scenes televised during last year's season were re-shot with extras or stunt persons standing in for the named players, a technique that oddly seems to violate more the viewing audience's desire for the surveillance of unmediated "reality" than any overt claim made by the producers.

The new reality programming can also be linked to an experiment by psychologist Phil Zimbardo at Stanford in the summer of 1971, in which students, divided into prisoners and warders, wound up displaying alarming degrees of cruelty to one another. More recent experiments in England have involved the division of a group sequestered in a country house into two rival moieties or teams that, faced with simple game show-like tasks, exhibited ferocious amounts of hatred toward their opposition, enforced a rigid loyalty to the group, and harshly branded any sympathy for the "enemy" as betrayal. Professor Zimbardo declared in 1997 that the ethical guidelines applied by today's universities to research involving human subjects are too restrictive—in large part, of course, because of the sort of mess that Zimbardo created three decades earlier at Stanford.⁹ Zimbardo may be watching a lot of reality TV these days. (I have a recurring nightmare that one day soon I will see a game show version of the Milgram experiment, complete with a celebrity edition in which naïve, average Joe contestants are tested to see how far they will go in shocking Regis Philbin, whose fake screams will emanate from an off-stage, but also televised, sound booth.)

Andy Warhol's quip about everyone in the future having fifteen minutes of fame—which was actually a slightly altered quotation of Marcel Duchamp—has surely come significantly closer to realization since he uttered it, and the vehicle of that fame has been a narcissism-fueled culture of surveillance. Many of us want, desperately it seems, to be watched, and the rest are more than happy to play observers, even *if* we're not so sure about the benefits of being watched ourselves. But when we watch, we do so for the same reasons that rivet our gaze to the visual records of Milgram's and Zimbardo's "shocking" experiments. In advertising and justifying its surveillance-based mission, *The National Inquirer* articulates what must be the foundational tautology of the age: "Inquiring minds want to know." We have been for some time both the subjects and the victims of that tautology, and I imagine that only an increase in secrecy and privilege, for which I see little

⁹Stanford News, January 8, 1997.

demand from either enlightened theorists or common television viewers, would reverse the trend.

And it is here that we may find the clearest link between Foucault's panopticon and Baudrillard's hyperreality. While it is a safe bet that our collective passion for social transparency and the egalitarian distribution of knowledge will never find true fulfillment in the proliferation of surveillance, the desire for surveillance has had a paradoxical side effect, inexorably transforming the world not into the stage immortalized by Shakespeare but into a real-time social-psychology experiment in which we are increasingly both test subjects and detached clinical observers. Should anyone feel disconcerted by this possibility, or undecided about its significance, I will note in closing that the whole phenomenon may be rather more short-lived than I have so far implied. The events of September 11 and the subsequent clamor for increasingly vigilant police surveillance has, at least for the moment, come to overshadow the appeal of cultural voyeurism. But the arrival in the summer of 2001 of *Final Fantasy*, a movie populated only with photo-realistic synthespians—computer-generated images indistinguishable (almost) from filmed actors—may already signal the beginning of the end to our current delight in surveillance. Within a decade, we might all be entertained primarily by computerized, super-real cartoons. Whether we are on the way to becoming cartoon characters ourselves is no longer a merely facetious question.

REFERENCES

- Anderson, B. ([1983]1991). *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*. London: Verso.
- Bataille, G. (1967). *La part maudite*. Paris: Minuit.
- Baudrillard, J. (1972). *Pour une critique de l'économie politique du signe*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Baudrillard, J. (1973). *Le miroir de la production*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Baudrillard, J. (1983). *Simulations*. P. Foss, P. Patton, & P. Beitchman (Trans.). New York: Semiotext(e).
- Benjamin, W. (1969). The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction. In H. Zohn (Trans.), *Illuminations* (pp. 217–251). New York: Schocken.
- Davis, M. (1990). *City of quartz: Excavating the future in Los Angeles*. London: Verso.
- Debord, G. (1967). *La société du spectacle*. Paris: Editions Buchet-Chastel.
- Durkheim, E. (1915). *Elementary forms of the religious life*. J. W. Swain (Trans.). New York: Free Press.
- Foucault, M. (1975). *Surveiller et punir: Naissance de la prison*. Paris: Editions Gallimard.
- Fukuyama, F. (1989). The end of history? *The National Interest*, 16, 3–18.
- Hegel, G. W. F. (1977). *Phenomenology of spirit*. A. V. Miller (Trans.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Jamin, J. (1980). Un sacré collège ou les apprentis sorciers de la sociologie. *Cahiers internationaux de la sociologie*, 68, 5–30.
- Lasch, C. (1991). *The culture of narcissism: American life in an age of diminishing expectations*. New York: W. W. Norton.
- Lyotard, J.-F. (1984). *The postmodern condition: A report on knowledge*. G. Bennington & B. Massumi (Trans.). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Miller, D. A. (1988). *The novel and the police*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Weber, M. (1958). *The Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism*. T. Parsons (Trans.). New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.

Copyright of Qualitative Sociology is the property of Kluwer Academic Publishing and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.