

The Pleasures of Surveillance

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Editorial | The Pleasures of Surveillance

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Introduction

This special issue of *Surveillance & Society*, “The Pleasures of Surveillance,” includes both scholarly and artistic contributions that examine the fraught relationship between surveillance and pleasure. While the idea of pleasure may immediately bring to mind questions of games and play—questions already explored in a previous issue of this journal (see Whitson and Simon 2014)—pleasure is not only about these things. As this issue will show, pleasure may also encompass friendship, intimacy, resistance, sexual pleasures, affective embodied experiences, and artistic exploration.

The contributions in this issue highlight and consider the critical and complex ways that surveillance and pleasure may entangle along surveillance’s continuum of care and control (Lyon 2001: 3). Care through pleasure may take the form, for example, of networks of support and resistance in Black and 2SLBGTQIA+ activism, such as the “pleasure activism” that “reclaim[s] our whole, happy, and satisfiable selves from the impacts, delusions, and limitations of oppression and/or supremacy” (brown 2019: 13). In this issue, the intersection of surveillance and pleasure as a locus of care is explored in Fareed Ben-Youssef’s reflection on Hong Sangsoo’s film *The Woman Who Ran* and in our interview with artist Dani Lessnau on her artistic process with her photographic performance series *extimité*. Pleasure’s intersection with surveillance may also result in relationships of control, ranging from sexual/intimate playfulness—as explored in Jean Ketterling’s essay on sexual videogames, and the smartphone-based artworks “Stalk me to the end of love” and “ToDo LoVe Club” by Victoria Ascaso (Yauri-Miranda and Ascaso 2024)—all the way to violence and oppression—as Constantin Gidaris’s essay on the potential misuses of teledildonics and Miles Kenyon’s essay on cruising apps and police surveillance show.

Although some work in surveillance studies has explored the concept of pleasure, there is still a marked lack. To date, some of the most prominent scholarship that touches on questions of pleasure and/or adjacent concepts includes work on “empowering exhibitionism” (Koskela 2004); sexual pleasure and the public/private division (McGrath 2004); the pleasure of participatory surveillance (Albrechtslund 2008); sexual surveillance and resistance (Bell 2009); and Whitson and Simon’s aforementioned 2014 issue of *Surveillance & Society* themed “Surveillance, Games & Play.” Some have also posited that pleasure—via the deployment of cultural forms of voyeurism and exhibitionism—has been used as a cultural tool for softening the public’s resistance to surveillance and the experience of being surveilled (Weibel 2002; Lyon 2006).

Living in the nation-state currently called Canada, our perspective on pleasure is rooted in and informed by a dominant culture still deeply influenced by a white European philosophical, religious, and moral tradition that valorizes hard work, self-denial, and the mind and spirit over the body. In this context, the word “pleasure” suggests something potentially subversive, something perhaps too enmeshed with physical

indulgences: one's senses, one's own body, and the bodies of others. It is positioned as suspect, akin to an unhealthy, uncontrollable appetite (sexual or otherwise). In the Freudian sense, pleasure is linked to the libidinal drive of the id, or to attempts to redress/address some primal wound or lack. There is something distinctly bodily, distinctly of the flesh, about "pleasure" as opposed to the potentially sublime or spiritual register of "joy," or the innocence of "fun."

While pleasure may be embodied, it is also relational. Indeed, Angela Jones (2020: 25) defines it as a socially mediated phenomenon: "I define pleasure as infinitely different sets of gratifying social experiences. Pleasure is always subjective and contextual. Scholars must recognize that pleasure is a social experience, in which the body is caught up in what anthropologist Clifford Geertz calls 'webs of significance.'" Importantly, Jones (2020) points out that if pleasure can be a result of social encounters, it must therefore be considered in terms of its historical specificity.

To explore this complexity, we've brought together a collection of work by scholars and artists that puts the social and affective experience of pleasure in conversation with the tools, practices, and cultures of surveillance. In this issue, we ask: what is pleasure's relationship to surveillance? As an answer, the pieces in this issue take pleasure and surveillance up in two broad ways: pleasure as a social experience inflected by questions of power and pleasure as a subversive force requiring surveillance and regulation.

Pleasure, the Social, and Power

Jones's (2020) definition of pleasure as embedded within the social is particularly important for this issue, as surveillance is always a relationship of (social) power. Also salient is Jones's (2020) observation that this social relationship is attached to a "body," suggesting the sensory, embodied aspects of pleasure and pleasurable experience. Bodies are a key object of interest for surveillance, whether they are being marked; separated into data flows, tracked, and observed; or contained through surveillance practices and technologies. The emphasis on the body also gestures toward the ways in which surveillance is geared toward specific bodies—bodies that are, for example, racialized or gendered or classed. In this issue, Constantin Gidaris's (2024) essay "The Problem of Consent with Teledildonic Sex on Adult Webcam Platforms" problematizes the potential misuse of teledildonics, invoking the question of legal sexual consent with regard to sex work. With reference to a recent case against sex-toy company We-Vibe and its manufacturer Standard Innovation—in which We-Vibe's app collected users' device information and usage statistics without explicit permission—Gidaris illustrates the potential for digitally connected toys to be used not only in surveillant but also nonconsensual and potentially assaultive ways. In this context, sexual pleasure is complicated by questions of the uneven relationship in (consumer) surveillance and what sexual consent means both legally and in practice within the realm of teledildonics and sex tech.

The entangling of surveillance and pleasure, however, may also be found within relations of intimacy, friendship, and kinship. Albrechtslund (2008: 5)'s discussion of participatory surveillance suggests we consider "the social and playful aspects of surveillance," particularly in relation to phenomena like social media. Via this concept, Albrechtslund (2008) points toward the idea that surveillance studies might do well to consider the ways in which surveillance is not just potentially oppressive but also light, fun, and pleasurable. Albrechtslund (2008: 5) suggests that participatory surveillance's pleasures stem from "user empowerment and the building of subjectivity," "sharing," and "mutuality." Rather than always working to isolate people in an Orwellian sense, he argues, surveillance can also create pleasurable social relations. In this issue, Victoria Ascaso's artworks "Stalk me to the end of love" and "ToDo LoVe Club" both use the surveillant properties of smartphones to explore relationships of mediated affect(ion) (Yauri-Miranda and Ascaso 2024). Using interfaces modeled after dating apps and speed dating, these two artistic projects probe the line between a pleasurable intimacy that smartphone-mediated connections may offer, and the potential danger via exposure and privacy invasion they also make possible in the digital realm.

The idea of mutual surveillance as care is explored in Fareed Ben-Youssef's (2024) opinion piece on the film *The Woman Who Ran* (2020), which illustrates a unique take on surveillance within the narrative,

framing it not as a method of control but rather a metaphor for social and pleasurable relationships of care and support between women within patriarchal culture. Directed by Hong Sangsoo, *The Woman Who Ran* follows the two friends' compassionate and caring relationship mediated by the lens of Closed-Circuit Television (CCTV). While CCTV camera use is predominantly critiqued as a tool of control, the film subverts and uses it "as a surprising vehicle to establish new bonds of kinship." Ben-Youssef reads the CCTV as a "machine eye" that queers the viewer's understanding of what a CCTV camera should *look* for, making its eye instead a witness to care, reciprocity, and feminine solidarity. Ben-Youssef interprets the film's machine eye as a softer, more caring way of looking at the women. It uses the CCTV gaze as a tool for unsettling heteronormativity, "offer[ing] a nuanced model for scholars in the field to see how such systems of control can be queered—redeployed by those they seek to marginalize and subordinate."

In surveillance's playful vein, Jean Ketterling's (2024) essay, "Look Behind You! Playing with Sexual Surveillance in *You Must Be 18 or Older to Enter* and *how do you Do It?*" specifically examines how two sexual videogames employ the concept of surveillance as their loci of pleasure. These two games position the player as a sexually curious minor. In *You Must Be 18 or Older to Enter*, the player furtively explores online pornography before their parents get home (signalled by a sudden door opening behind them). Similarly, the player in *how do you Do It?* must avoid being caught experimenting with their Barbie dolls. In both, the spectre of disciplinary parental surveillance works "to amplify sexual affect, repurposing the embodied experience of being subject to surveillance for new, pleasurable ends." These games rely upon the user's memories of youthful sexual curiosity and exploration, heightened by the thrill of potentially being caught. Ketterling's essay highlights how the social power dynamic of surveillance—here, parent-child surveillance—is used to produce a gamified sexual pleasure. Importantly, for Ketterling, this use of surveillance has subversive possibilities, particularly within the format of sexual videogames that "are potent iterations of queer futurity" and "queer time," which leads into our second broad theme.

Pleasure and the Subversive

Pleasure can also take on a dimension of resistance, where pleasure is used and experienced by marginalized folx¹ as a way to push back against, refuse, or heal from the emotional effects of structural oppression (brown 2019). And when pleasure creates a challenge to the dominant order, it may therefore need to be tightly regulated and/or controlled (Foucault 1990). In this issue, Miles Kenyon's (2024) piece, "Capital Cruising: Surveillance, Pleasure and Discursive Practices of Queer Communities in Ottawa" revisits cruising as a queer form of pleasure that exists in tumultuous spaces of risk, policing, and intimacy. For Kenyon, queerness occupies spaces of visibility and camouflage; it "presents the opportunity to camouflage the body and circumvent powerful surveillance." Kenyon posits that cruising is both a pleasurable and political act by "bypassing heteronormative notions of appropriate sexual conduct and seeking out queer companionship [that] offers an individual mechanism for jamming deeply entrenched societal systems." Kenyon's argument is informed by data collected from the Canadian application Squirt, created by Pink Triangle Press in 1999 as a forum for men to cruise and speak about their experiences cruising. His data analysis finds that Squirt users in Ottawa are surveilled by police both in public and digital spaces. More specifically, he reveals how police may create fake profiles and "cruising sites" on Squirt as a method to deceive and catch users. Kenyon puts forward the ways that queer Squirt users create their own anti-surveillance resistance strategies using the app to avoid the surveillant gaze.

The subversive quality of pleasure might also be found in deliberate (public) performance. Those who consciously use surveillance tools to present or share themselves and their lives may be enacting a kind of resistance (Koskela 2004) that can be pleasurable, such as young Muslim women who choose to use "confessional" spaces to express shared experiences and "[perform] for the 'gaze' on their own terms" (Khoja-Moolji and Niccolini 2016: 98). Similarly, our interview with artist Dani Lessnau demonstrates the use of surveillance in a Koskelian way (McKnight, Chan, and Lessnau 2024). Lessnau's *extimité* (2017)

¹ We use the spelling folx here to mean a diversity of people (including but not limited to 2SLGBTQIA+, equity deserving, racialized peoples, Indigenous, disabled, classed, etc.)

photographic performance series, in which Lessnau inserted a camera into her vagina to photograph lovers, deliberately flips heteronormative surveillant looking relationships on its head. Lessnau's work creates an "uncanny space between surveillance and intimacy." For Lessnau, care and compassion is carried throughout her performances: the work she creates alongside her lovers is consensual, pleasurable for all participants in the performance, and a form of healing itself, even as the chronic pain Lessnau experiences makes sex uncomfortable. Through the looking at and documentation of intimacy, her work demonstrates that surveillance does not only abuse, divide, and collect information for coercive purposes. Rather, for Lessnau, her "body functions as a prosthetic of the camera and magnifies the presence of surveilling apparatus in the space." Here, surveillance and pleasure are not read as binaristic, but rather as allies.

Conclusion

Bringing surveillance and pleasure together may risk being misunderstood as a disregard for the ways in which many types of surveillance have perpetrated and continue to perpetrate violence and oppression. As such, we have aimed to select works that explore surveillance and pleasure with care, and in ways that recognize the harm of coercive forms of surveillance while also underlining the subversive potential of pleasure.

To resist the intense pressures of racism, colonialism, ableism, queerphobia, and white supremacy, marginalized folx have been re-examining pleasure as a way to reclaim agency and resist oppression (Swell 2020; Arthurs 2019; brown 2019; Grose 2014; Jolly 2010). Following them, we see the potentiality that different kinds of pleasure have to offer in resisting and disrupting contemporary surveillance systems. We hope that this special issue suggests new ways of thinking through our relationships to surveillance—including the good, the bad, and even the risqué.

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