

International Journal for Crime, Justice and Social Democracy



Life through a Lens: Risk, Surveillance and Subjectivity

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Abstract

Drawing on findings from a two-year empirical study examining the culture of closed-circuit television (CCTV) operation in the UK, this paper analyses how CCTV camera operators subjectively experience the visual media that they work to produce. It seeks to excavate some of the social meanings that these vicarious risk flâneurs ascribe to the telemediated events that they indirectly encounter, and how these 'narratives of the street' come to inscribe themselves on the subjectivities of the camera operators in a disciplinary manner. In so doing, the paper reveals the work of watching to be an ambiguous social practice, an activity that far exceeds its formal framing as a dispassionate and standardised procedure. As such, I contend that CCTV camera operators engage in two distinct modes of work – 'surface' and 'deep' – as they watch the screens and codify the spectacles that are mediated through the camera lens. The 'surface' work they enact is officially acknowledged and concerns their focusing attention on the screens to identify harmful behaviours, to capture evidence and to share information with other collaborators in the security network. This mode of work is principally performed for professional imperatives and economic returns. In contrast, the 'deep' work rituals they execute are informal in scope and therapeutic in purpose. Such individualised practices are an unseen and unrecognised work relation that mitigates the negative effects of CCTV viewing. They are operationalised through diverse behavioural repertoires which function to insulate the self from its exposure to mediated traumas, and from the contradiction of mobilising '(in)action at a distance'. Overall, the paper accentuates the messy realities that hinge on the *practice* of urban surveillance, showing these realities to be mediated by the vagaries of subjective experience and social relations.

Keywords

Surveillance; the gaze; urban disorder; risk flâneurs; emotions; surface and deep work.

Please cite this article as:

Smith GJD (2016) Life through a lens: Risk, surveillance and subjectivity. *International Journal for Crime, Justice and Social Democracy* 5(1): 82-97. DOI: 10.5204/ijcjsd.v5i1.281.



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Introduction: The 'black boxing' of watching repertoires

[S]cientific and technical work is made invisible by its own success. When a machine runs efficiently, when a matter of fact is settled, one need focus only on its inputs and outputs and not on its internal complexity. Thus, paradoxically, the more science and technology succeed, the more opaque and obscure they become. (Latour 1999: 304)

Closed circuit television (CCTV) cameras are now a familiar urban architecture in contexts organised around cultures of consumption and risk. Notwithstanding the complex historical and cultural factors that explicate their rise to prominence – and their subsequent banality (see Goold, Loader and Thumala 2013; Norris and Armstrong 1999; Smith 2014) – the cameras principally act to symbolise a watching authority and to cast a gaze upon the streets in a bid to deter and detect disorderly behaviour. Vast amounts of revenue were committed by state and industry actors in the 1980s and 1990s to subsidise the mass rolling out of these technologies without a clear sense of *whether* they worked – or more to the point, *how* they worked. Although much has been written about the broader politics of CCTV – in terms of how the cameras are connected to the commercial imperatives and spatial renaissance projects of neoliberal ideologies (Coleman 2004); how they reflect the state's technocratic will to outsource risk-work and to govern at a distance; how they are used to disproportionately target ethnic minorities (Norris and Armstrong 1999); and how effective (or otherwise) they are in reducing acts of criminal and anti-social behaviour (Gill and Spriggs 2005) – little is known about the socio-psychological impacts of CCTV monitoring on those responsible for manoeuvring the cameras and pointing them toward suspicious targets. That is to say, while scholars have explored the effects of CCTV on the spaces and bodies that are being exposed by these media technologies, few have considered from an empirical perspective how camera systems function as prisms, paradoxically broadening *and* narrowing a viewer's outlook on the social world. In particular, little is known about how camera monitoring transforms the lives of those remote observers (conceptualised here as contemporary risk *flâneurs*) dictating who and what is seen and unseen in the context of managing risky behaviours. This oversight raises some important substantive questions. Namely, how does exposure to telemediated activity affect the interior lives of the camera operators, and how does this visual knowledge come to reorient their everyday behaviours? Put slightly differently, how is what they see processed and internalised, and what subjective effects result from the work of watching?

While CCTV cameras may appear to those occupying the streets as insentient objects, this paper, conversely, shows them to be active mediums in the organisational indexing of the city. The cameras act as informational conduits, harvesting a continuous sequence of mediated spectacles that reveal in fine-grained detail the playful, the mundane and the disruptive dimensions of social life. How these media are '*prosumed*' – that is, produced and consumed – by camera operators is the main concern of this paper; specifically it seeks to explicate how the projection of an inquisitive gaze can elicit an unsettling reflection, a pedagogical outlook that mediates perceptions of reality and constructions of identity. Although the role of the CCTV camera operator epitomises the paradigmatic shift in neoliberalised risk societies toward outsourced, anticipatory and distanced forms of policing, we know little about how these models operate in practice, how they relate to context, and what forms of contestation they ignite. It is these empirical issues that are the primary focus of this paper.

I contend that CCTV camera operators engage in two distinct but interrelated modes of work (that is, 'surface' and 'deep') as they watch the screens and codify the spectacles that are mediated through the camera lens. The 'surface' work they enact is officially acknowledged and concerns their focusing attention on the screens to identify harmful behaviours, to capture evidence and to share information with other collaborators in the security network. This mode of work is principally performed for professional imperatives and economic returns. In contrast,

the 'deep' work rituals they execute are informal in scope and therapeutic in purpose. These individualised practices relate to the profound sense of impotence that some camera operators experience as a result of their separation from the unfolding action that is being passively witnessed. Deep work involves camera operators having to manage – that is, suppress and process – internal feelings that correlate with their being subjected to external displays of suffering. As such, it is an unseen and unrecognised work relation that mitigates the negative effects of CCTV viewing. It is operationalised through diverse behavioural repertoires which function to insulate the self from its exposure to mediated traumas, and from the contradiction of mobilising '(in)action at a distance'. The contradiction is that these street observers do not possess the powers required to intervene in the disorderly incidents they confront. Deep work necessitates that camera operators utilise diverse technical, cultural and psychological resources in a bid to satisfactorily extinguish adverse and debilitating emotional states.

Drawing on findings from a two-year ethnography of CCTV operating cultures in the UK, this paper selectively introduces the types of episode that prompted many of the camera operators to develop a profound sense of disenchantment and disillusionment with the seemingly disorderly dynamics of social relations. These symbolic 'order keepers' have, in the course of their duties, to confront a broad spectrum of extreme behaviours, ranging from violent confrontations to acts of suicide. In spite of the fact that the cameras were introduced by their proponents as 'technologies of security' for the governance of spatial fears and threats, they ironically operate to instil 'subjectivities of insecurity' in many of those tasked with their oversight (Smith 2009: 145). Contra to the formative conceptualisation of visibility by Michel Foucault (1977) that presents the condition as asymmetrically empowering the watcher over the watched, this paper shows that making things visible from afar can have *unintended* and *unseen* consequences. It illuminates that there is an altogether messier social reality overlaying processes of telemediated supervision (i.e. overlooking) and subjection (i.e. being overseen); that there are unrecognised work relations – and experiences of vulnerability – contingent on the presumption of visibility. It highlights the limitations of analyses that inadvertently separate the technical from the cultural, and non-empirical studies that deterministically 'read off' rationalist outcomes from what might appear to be decisive authoritative interventions.

Seeing beyond the state: Activating and animating security at a distance

I think if you look at CCTV, it is so ubiquitous in this country [England], and especially where you are at the moment. I suspect you know, you will have been surveilled by 200, 300 cameras during the course of the day in London, almost without doubt. I don't think people worry about those at all, to be fair. They don't even notice. (Security manager, cited in Goold, Loader and Thumala 2013: 977)

The term 'government at a distance' describes a key trend in the structure of the contemporary crime control landscape, especially in ecologies that are undergoing processes of neoliberalisation. The concept accentuates the fact that bodies and mentalities progressively come under the jurisdiction of discursive and material technologies that exercise control in subtle and cost-effective ways, through rhetoric, through measurement, through incentive, through discipline and through desire (Foucault 1991; Garland 1996; Miller and Rose 1990). It points to the *networked* and *indirect* nature of 'technologies of power' that are increasingly diffuse in their distribution and directive in their operation. It accentuates the fact that forms of sovereign authority have been outsourced to extra-state actors via discourses of 'de-regulation', 'efficiency', 'freedom' and 'responsibility' (Rose 1999), and via the disciplinary character of self-monitoring programs which act to modulate the activities of subjects in prescribed and normative ways (Foucault 1988; Miller and Rose 1990; Latour 1994). Conformist values and desires relating to work, consumption and risk-management are systematically inscribed upon subjectivity in a manner reducing the requirement for physical constraints and coercion. The architects of modernism envisaged the economy and progressiveness of producing self-

governing and self-enterprising agents, who accrue greater personal freedoms in terms of determining their identities and trajectories in return for their bearing greater personal burdens. These burdens demand that the individual assumes personal responsibility for mitigating the risks associated with greater social complexity and precarity, and for constructing a coherent – and socially acceptable – identity (Beck, Bonns and Lau 2003; Beck, Giddens and Lash 1994; Rose 1999).

A defining characteristic of neoliberalism has been the continuing transformation of the state from being the primary provider and regulator of public amenities to its becoming the facilitator and underwriter of a service-based consumer economy. The state's historical monopoly on the provision of security, welfare and civic services has been eroded by an increasingly de-regulated market which now vends as private commodities a set of formerly state-owned and administered goods to citizen-consumers. The rise of the insurance industry and the emergence of corporatised energy, telecommunications, health, education and transport providers are testament to these changes. According to David Garland, the state has strategically lowered public expectations apropos its influence (and ergo its accountability) and has assumed the role of 'knowledge broker', animating public-private sector partnerships and devolving many of its traditional functions to civil and market agents:

[This process] marks what may be the beginning of an important reconfiguration of the 'criminal justice state' and its relation to the citizen ... Where the state once targeted the deviant for intensive transformative action, it now aims to bring about marginal but effective changes in the norms, the routines, and the consciousness of everyone. As a recent government document puts it, crime prevention should become 'part of the routine day to day practice and culture of all agencies and individuals'. (Garland 1996: 454)

This circumstance has been particularly salient in the field of criminal justice, with the sharp growth of the private security industry (and its contracting for regular policing duties like border protection, night-time leisure economy coordination and residential safeguarding), the escalation of the fine (O'Malley 2009), and the privatisation of correctional services and facilities (Kempa et al. 1999; Shearing and Berg 2007). The outsourcing of functions to corporate and civic enterprises, and the attendant selling of publically owned and resourced assets, has (a) taken pressure off the fiscal budget; (b) reduced bureaucracy; (c) lowered civil entitlements; and (d) mitigated perceptions of failure, so that a more streamlined state can focus attention on core concerns and matters that transcend specified risk thresholds or that offer substantial recompense. It can, in other words, concentrate its energies on 'governing up', an important assignment in a context where processes of globality – namely, the transnational flow of bodies, commodities, markets, ideas and diseases – threaten to contaminate and weaken the integrity of national borders and sovereignties. Mobilising citizens into discourses and practices of self-responsibilisation where they often unknowingly perform the state's work in their enactment of civic obligations has been crucial to the economy of this political project.

And yet, the state has implemented a set of material infrastructures and immaterial sentiments which act as discreet but emblematic reminders of its ultimate dominion over population and territory and its ubiquitous presence in each domain. The CCTV camera is one of the technologies best exemplifying these transitions. As a spatialised totem, it acts to modulate behaviour in a non-physical way by means of its symbolic properties and technical abilities, via its capacity *to see, to track and to remember*. Huge amounts of expenditure have been allocated to the provision of these visual technologies across the topographies of public and private space in the belief that camera circuitries foster obedience and capable guardianship, reduce opportunities for criminality, and reflect state investment in – and commitment to – managing urban poverty and recalcitrance. The figure of the camera represents a conduit of decentralised power that operates – and garners its legitimacy – through precautionary principles and the

condition of spatial visibility (of both the immediate and the retrospective variety) that CCTV surveillance is in the business of mass-producing (Smith 2014).

Although much has been written about the political economic factors that underpin the decision by authorities to increasingly govern through ‘indirect mechanisms that link the conduct of individuals and organisations to political objectives through “action at a distance”’ (Miller and Rose 1990: 1) – and the capillaries of power that are expressed via these discourses and technologies – there is limited understanding of how the operating cultures and practices of those responsible for monitoring behavioural compliance, and for codifying urban (un)belonging, are structured. Specifically, little is known about how this work is ritualistically performed and experienced on a daily basis. While critical criminological accounts have vividly described the commercial imperatives accounting for CCTV’s dramatic proliferation – particularly its connection with a declining welfarist approach and with an ascendant risk discourse and penal ethos – and have questioned whether the cameras actually function as intended (Coleman 2004; Coleman and Sim 2000; McCahill 2002; Norris 2012; Norris and McCahill 2006), there remains a much thinner understanding of how ‘government at a distance’ operates in (and *as*) practice, and how it is actioned by those tasked with its execution. Likewise, research in the burgeoning field of surveillance studies has typically pivoted on how the projected surveillant gaze is wielded (and by whom), what interests it tends to serve, and who it adversely affects. It has focused less on the altogether messier dynamics of surveillance as it pertains to everyday life: as a means of labour and a mediator of subjectivity (Smith 2012).

Notwithstanding the fact that these theoretical narratives provide valuable insights into the wider fields of power that overlay the production of government, they often omit in their depictions the very people whose embodied practices effectively operationalise the flow of surveillance and the experiential effects felt on the street. Indeed, a key limitation of this body of research is that power asymmetries are commonly assumed by scholars, rather than empirically verified. This situation has, I contend, predominantly arisen for methodological reasons: it is far from easy accessing – let alone researching in ethnographic detail – surveillance sites, precisely because they are milieus where flows of power circulate in constricted ways along what are ordinarily ‘closed circuits’ of knowledge production. Although scholarship has been especially proficient at theorising the values, logics and motivations influencing surveillance system design and operativity, and empirically probing how these machineries govern populations according to disparate criteria (Lyon 2003), lesser attention has focused on the subjective and interpersonal experiences of visibility: how *seeing* and *being seen* makes individuals think, feel and act (Ball 2009). As John Gilliom (2006: 126) notes, surveillance studies analyses have not been so good at ‘the absolutely crucial job of studying the real people and real bodies who are the subjects of these systems’. By subjects of these systems, Gilliom is referring to both the *makers* and *targets* of visibility, to those engaged in the production of visibility and to those whose bodies and behaviours are rendered as points of scrutiny. While they might initially appear as distinct entities, it is often the case that the two parties are interactively engaged in complex relational exchanges that pivot around the act of (un)seeing and being (un)seen (see Smith 2007, 2014). This paper, however, concerns itself with the former actor, the *makers* and *curators* of visibility and, specifically, how generating street vistas impacts on the real people and real bodies who oversee a system of urban surveillance.

This focus on the experiential lifeworlds – and embodied labour – of those actors who monitor social space for an income provides scope for problematising standard post-structural accounts of surveillance that tend to attribute a rationality and coherency to what are often arbitrary or socially mediated operational repertoires. It helps contextualise surveillance systems as elaborate socio-material enterprises, and surveillance operativity as a *relational* process that is contingent on manifold social factors. A key aim of this paper is to supplement the conventional perspective of CCTV that is derived from living beneath its glassy gaze (that which is captured in the epigraph above), with a nuanced outlook that materialises from studying CCTV operators as

they encounter telemediated events from behind a bank of monitor screens. This involves transcending political and industry rhetoric that depicts CCTV one-dimensionally as a crime-fighting panacea and as a guardian angel of the law-abiding – and property owning – classes. It also involves situating CCTV cameras in a wider set of social relations that transcend mere crime control imperatives and flows of urban governance. It entails locating the daily operation of CCTV within a framework of affect and cultural sociology, and establishing how monitory activities are subjectively experienced and perceived. This approach will help further our criminological understanding of how new policing technologies transform and are transformed by social relations, and how they get informally deployed as participatory mediums in expanding networks of para-sociality (Horton and Wohl 1956; Smith 2014).

Life behind the lens: Researching CCTV observatories

The findings presented below are derived from an Economic and Social Research Council-funded multi-sited ethnography that I conducted in the UK between 2005 and 2007 on the nature and structure of CCTV operating cultures. Approximately 320 hours of fieldwork was carried out over the duration of the project and various CCTV monitoring facilities – with diverse jurisdictional responsibilities – were researched. The sample included several systems overlooking public space, several systems overlooking commercial premises and transportation facilities, and a system overlooking a football stadium. Due to legal and organisational difficulties in accessing CCTV monitoring suites as environs imbued in informational sensitivities and procedural mystique, the comparative sites were predominantly selected via a snowball or convenience sample. This entailed a CCTV manager from one of the primary research locales acting as a sponsor to facilitate my entrée into other settings so that substantive contrasts could be made. Contacts he had made in the course of his work were invited to engage in the study. Those expressing willingness to participate were visited to increase the diversity – both geospatial and organisational – of the sample.

Camera operators were voluntarily ‘shadowed’ in situ – that is, observed and conversationally engaged – as they went about performing their duties and as they corresponded with security and police personnel on the ground. Key events and narratives were registered and diarised as field notes in a jotter before being transcribed in more detail at the first available opportunity. The research instrument utilised implies, of course, that the observations and accounts logged were contingent on the researcher’s ability to memorise and recollect activities, a factor that restricts the reliability and validity of the data presented. Moreover, because of the comparatively small number of sites sampled for observation and the fact that the research was administered some time ago, the claims made in this paper should not be read as being representational of all CCTV systems. They should be read, instead, as insights that reveal prevailing tendencies influencing the structure and culture of camera work. A number of formal and informal interviews – some of which were tape recorded – with CCTV camera operators and managers were initiated to address some of the qualifications cited above, and a small attitudinal survey was also employed to gauge the accuracy of the emergent findings: specifically, the camera operators’ perceptions of work-related stress. Substantive content from these additional measures also informs the excerpts and arguments that follow. Data were interpreted and coded by applying a grounded theory analytical approach, where salient and prevalent themes were identified in a process of preliminary analysis before being further explored in secondary analysis in a bid to bring enhanced meaning to the practices observed and narratives expressed.

It is important to note that each of the research examples documented below – and some of the broad ideas used in their analysis – derive from a recent book that I have published on the study (see Smith 2014). These will be referenced accordingly. Although the monograph comprises a much thicker and more nuanced analysis of the camera operators’ subjective experiences and

social practices as they relate to monitoring heterogeneous spaces, it follows a contrasting thesis to the one that is developed for the purpose of this paper.

Risk flâneurship as surface work

A key outcome of neoliberal policy has been the gradual outsourcing to the market and to the citizenry of policing functions and responsibilities that the state formerly executed, specifically acts of surveillance and monitory attention. As urban space has been purposefully reconstituted as an aestheticised site for the production of excessive consumption behaviours, there has been a corollary demand to subject it – and the bodies that inhabit it – to stricter regimes of ordering, pacification and control. CCTV cameras serve an important accomplice role within such transformations in that they are deployed strategically to manage *in* desirable assets – and to manage *out* undesirable nuisances. Urban risk profiling duties that pivot on categories of belonging and unbelonging have progressively become the specialism of CCTV camera operators, those tasked with systematically regarding urban stimuli and identifying flows that have harmful – or ‘out of place’ – attributes (McCahill 2002). It is the remit of these behaviour technicians to execute remote and impersonal supervision and to (literally and metaphorically) ‘capture’ disorderly sequences in an evidential format.

As risk flâneurs of urban dynamics, camera operators are employed to perform several varieties of ‘surface work’ as they project an inquisitive gaze via the camera lens and subjectively assess the reflected spectacles mediated through the monitor displays. The ‘surface’ work they routinely enact in the course of their executing monitory duties is officially acknowledged and remunerated by their institutional employers. As professional observers, they are paid to manoeuvre cameras, to focus attention on the screens, to identify risky behaviours, to gather evidence and to share information with other collaborators in the security network. Camera operators are expected to exercise optic attentiveness and sustain the continuity of the gaze regardless of what traumatic scene confronts (or awaits) them. They need to intuitively profile on-screen movement via a tacitly acquired knowledge and expertise pertaining to gait and comportment analysis. They must exert cinematographic proficiencies to record evidentiary sequences from key events in a linear format ensuring that the central protagonists – be they victims or offenders – are identifiable and their actions are filmed from an optimum viewpoint that will settle ensuing criminal trials and court disputes. They need to deploy communicative competencies so that capable guardians – those agents of control such as security guards, police officers, nightspot bouncers, and so on, who have a physical presence in the space observed – can be informed in real time about imminent and ensuing incidents. As a result of the surface work they conduct, camera operators develop a set of contrasting perspectives on the texture of social relations within urban ecologies. Sometimes the scanning – or ‘assessment’ – of scenarios is influenced by wider institutional categories and prejudices, specifically an overzealous emphasis on monitoring the poor and the marginalised. Other times it is orientated by a personal morality and a duty of care (see Smith 2014).

As street overseers, camera operators occupy a privileged symbolic position, wielding discretionary powers of judgement and casting an asymmetrical gaze from the anonymity of the monitoring suite. Research has illustrated the degree to which such labourers impose their own subjective criteria upon that which is observed, and the adverse consequences for those who are often involuntarily exposed. Norris and Armstrong’s (1999) ethnographic study of several CCTV control rooms in the UK is an illustrative example. The two scholars sought to establish the interpretive frameworks or ‘working rules’ – effectively, subjective schemata – camera operators drew upon to determine camera positioning and thus who or what was scrutinised. The researchers show that suspiciousness is neither an innate nor discernible behavioural quality but is rather the outcome of intricate processes of social construction. It was racist, sexist, fascist and classist values and assumptions that largely determined where cameras were pointed. The camera operators predominantly associated criminality with young males,

minority groups and underprivileged populations, specifically those not explicitly engaging in legitimised forms of consumption:

The gaze of the cameras does not fall equally on all users of the street but on those who are stereotypically predefined as potentially deviant, or through appearance and demeanour are singled out by operators as unrespectable. In this way youth, particularly those already socially and economically marginal, may be subject to even greater levels of authoritative intervention and official stigmatisation, and rather than contributing to social justice through the reduction of victimisation, CCTV will merely become a tool of injustice through the amplification of differential and discriminatory policing. (Norris and Armstrong 1999: 201)

These findings emphasise the categorical and labelling powers that camera operators exert in manipulating the arrangement of social reality and in concomitant decision-making protocol. Similarly, I have shown in previous research (Smith 2007, 2014) how CCTV camera operators personalise what is being viewed by applying creative narratives to those mediated bodies and situations deemed to be salient and/or memorable. Telling stories about noteworthy personalities or remarkable episodes enables camera operators to de-anonymise what they witness. It permits them to impose order on what are otherwise random events through the prism of their imaginaries. It facilitates a discursive space for the sharing of anecdotes and myths. It allows the camera operators to make meaningful – and establish a degree of authority over – what are in effect para-social sequences devoid of context and familiarity:

I just treat the screens in here like I'm watching television. Helps you cope with what you see. It's funny 'cos a lot of the people we watch are like characters from TV, so it does become a bit like that. And gradually you begin to learn who they are and which places they hang out. (Camera Operator 5, cited in Smith 2014: 116)

It is understandable that in the greyness of visualised street routines, a genus of 'colourful' personas materialise: a set of urban celebrities whose disadvantaged position, unorthodox habits, behavioural eccentricities and regular contact with the criminal justice system make them prominent virtualised targets for supervisory oversight and deliberative commentary. A couple of examples from the fieldwork further illuminate this process of virtual familiarisation:

What I do [when bored] is make up stories for people I watch on the cameras and call them names. (Camera Operator 1, cited in Smith 2014: 114)

I am told about the recent death of a known prostitute from a drugs overdose. Camera Operator 7 proceeds to tell me the circumstances surrounding her death and the type of person that she was, as all the camera operators 'knew' her well: 'She was pretty well known round the town. A nice girl ... just fell into the wrong crowd which is a typical story really ... I mean, I know it sounds strange, but you form a kind of relationship with some of the people you watch, some of them are alright. And it's sad to think that you won't see them going about anymore. (Author's field note, cited in Smith 2014: 120)

As an active and attentive media audience, the camera operators' musings comprised a selective mix of memory and fantasy, and this inventive interchange between the historical and the fictional helped foster a set of ritualised occupational customs that made the surface work of watching a more pedagogically meaningful and pleasurable pursuit.

Risk flâneurship as deep work

It is easy to perceive 'the gaze' projected by camera operators as necessarily embodying disciplinary properties, and to assume that watching repertoires invariably foster experiences of empowerment. Yet performing camera work is an ambiguous pursuit. It is an activity that far exceeds its formal framing as a dispassionate assignment and systematic procedure. Indeed, contacting a spectrum of life through a lens comprises important affective and exploitative dimensions. Camera operators, for example, are required to proactively identify risky bodies, behaviours and rhythms that compromise the prescribed normative order and, by virtue of a self-fulfilling prophecy, recurrently encounter vistas that represent instances of social disorder and human suffering:

Some of the things we see and have to deal with are horrendous. Really quite traumatic. I've seen guys committing suicide right in front of my eyes, and people being stabbed and beaten unconscious. It's just one of those jobs where you're always looking at the nastier sides of life. You just never know quite what you are going to face next. (Camera Operator 2, cited in Smith 2014: 130)

Everything you can imagine I've seen, from traffic accidents to murder. I don't think anything prepares you for seeing someone die in front of your very eyes, you've just gotta find your own way of dealing with it. (Camera Operator 7, cited in Smith 2014: 131)

These spatially absented risk flâneurs must attempt to dispassionately track and film people engaged in acts of suicide, injecting drugs, enduring accidents, committing robbery and being viciously assaulted. They indirectly witness behavioural extremities and traumatic events and, notwithstanding their cinematographic contributions and interventions, the mercilessness of public space – and the social harms to which it plays host – never seems to abate. The outcome of such subjection is the instillation of a perception that societal norms and ideals relating to orderliness and passivity are misplaced in a world that appears plagued – overrun even – by addictive, excessive and violent behaviours. Over time and as a result of the surface work they are compelled to operationalise, it appears that many camera operators develop a perception of social relations that is characterised by profound feelings of distrust, suspicion, cynicism and distress. This mentality – and sense of anomie as regards urban ecology – is a by-product of frontline work in milieus of conflict and emergency, and is thus a familiar disposition in policing cultures, in health delivery contexts, and in theatres of war (Chan 1997; Healy and McKay 2000). The camera overseers come to bear a set of experientially derived values and cultural assumptions that impact on their sense of identity, on who they think they are and how they come to interpret the world around them. These prisms mediate how they engage their personal lives and they contaminate their orientation toward space more broadly. Camera operators, in other words, progressively assimilate the external spectacles they confront as internalised perspectives, as filters that encode apprehension into their generalised outlook:

This is just such a negative job; I mean you never pick up good things on the cameras. It's always fights, drugs, prostitution or shoplifting, it can really get you down sometimes. Okay that wasn't a bad fight, but it's still a fight and it really becomes like, 'is this all that happens out there?'. (Camera Operator 3, cited in Smith 2014: 134)

I'm just more conscious of people now when I'm out and about in the streets. I don't know, just more wary, more alert. I know what people are like now and what they're capable of. I have just become much more suspicious and cynical since I started working here and am not as relaxed being out and about as I used to be. (Camera Operator 14, cited in Smith 2014: 132)

I worry that my family might fall victim to crime, as I am more aware of the extent of crime and its effects now. I also worry if my husband is on a night out, as I know how easily trouble can break out. (Camera Operator 3, cited in Smith 2014: 133)

The vicarious intimacy that each of the camera operators experience as they project their disembodied gaze upon urban targets reveals in lucid detail the parlous scaffolding upon which social order precariously perches. Continuously searching for and confronting harmful on-screen activity reifies a perspective that such impropriety is a core feature of modern life. As a result, camera operators gradually come to perceive the world around them as being intrinsically fluid and susceptible, always subject to uncertainty and the possibility of rupture. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the effects of disembodied presence in the adversities of urbanism can induce a significant embodied scar, a subjective blemish that is brought to bear on how the camera overseers experience their personal lives and conduct their private affairs:

I remember when I was working on a big murder investigation ... Spent several weeks helping the CID [Criminal Investigation Department] piece together CCTV footage ... I couldn't sleep for weeks after that, kept on having nightmares and just seeing the victim's face in my mind over and over ... It was fucking horrible. (Camera Operator 2, cited in Smith 2014: 141)

Nowadays I don't go out at night in case I bump into the wrong person in a bar or taxi queue, 'cos I've seen what happens to some unlucky people. You can get a beating from just being in the wrong place at the wrong time. (Camera Operator 5, cited in Smith 2014: 133)

The job has definitely affected my social life. Observing the city centre in all its bingeing glory every weekend has put me off socialising there. (Camera Operator 4, cited in Smith 2014: 133)

Camera operators act as social order keepers: this is their primary function and purpose. They use their powers of sight and cinematographic expertise to detect recalcitrant bodies that jeopardise urban security, but they must do this vicariously as an 'absent presence' in the telemediated action that they are obliged to scrutinise. This is the crux of their dual role as anonymous risk flâneurs and as order custodians, but it is also the foremost origin of their felt estrangement and sense of impotence. Camera operators scan the monitor screens in search of behaviours that endanger or breach legitimate flows of sociality, and they capture these in fine-grained detail for use in subsequent police investigations. Yet, the social order does not belong to them, and nor does the machinery used for its preservation: the technologies of vision/visibility and the embodied agents of control stationed on the ground. As such, and when combined with the other structural constraints they endure (for example, long work hours, low pay, limited autonomy, uncomfortable ergonomics, and so on), camera operators find themselves experiencing alienation from the means and ends of their labour. This estrangement stems from the simple fact that they have neither unique ownership rights nor direct authority over the principal commodity that they are contracted to remotely manufacture. Social order is neither a restrainable product nor a stable materiality that they, or anyone for that matter, can exclusively possess and manipulate. In contrast, it is a fluid, contingent and susceptible entity, co-produced as a consequence of multiplex chains of interactivity. Its integrity and harmony is entirely dependent on the motivations and actions of those actors and actants congregating in its midst and constituting its transformative essence. The social order, in other words, is determined by the behavioural compulsions of external others, those over whom the camera operators have no authoritative powers to control via camera lens and monitor screen. It is the actions of these remote bodies – those appearing as two dimensional figures on the camera monitor screens – that either conserve or contravene the social order, not the actions of those

positioned within order-manufacturing observatories like the CCTV monitoring suite. This circumstance necessarily makes the work of watching a fraught undertaking. Camera operators, for instance, are often the first security officials 'present' (in a vicarious sense) at an incident. They can visualise its constituents in vivid detail but commonly have to endure the temporal delay preceding an embodied – order reassembling – response. This can mean passively witnessing and filming any number of terrifying acts without being able to either influence their indeterminate unfolding or convert their unruly dynamics. Far from being a mode of empowerment, this enforced separation from the visualised action comes to be experienced by many of the camera operators as a disempowering handicap and as a source of anguish:

You feel helpless and guilty when someone gets a kicking and you can't get a [police] unit there quickly enough. I remember once watching helplessly as this guy was kicking his girlfriend in the head full force before leaving her lying in the middle of the road. (Camera Operator 14, cited in Smith 2014: 135)

You know, it's not nice watching a guy getting his head stamped on while you're waiting for the [police] unit to arrive. You can't do anything and it can be pretty frustrating and distressing at times. At least when you're reviewing tapes you kinda know what to expect, you've got pre-warning; but when you're watching the incident unfolding in real time, it's a different story. I mean, I've sat here before and watched a guy jumping [that is, committing suicide] in front of my very eyes on the camera. That was pretty hard to take. It's really difficult because you know you can't do anything, but yet you have to watch. It's a horrible feeling. (Camera Operator 9, cited in Smith 2014: 135-136)

The type of sentiment and predicament encapsulated in these excerpts is a quantum leap from Foucaultian inspired characterisations of how disciplinary power is leveraged through the medium of an objectivating gaze. It illustrates the trauma associated with producing fields of visibility with technologies of vision – with devices that operate only to magnify and exaggerate the lived effects of marginality, victimisation and immiseration rather than provide a tangible opportunity for the camera operators to redress their elemental cause. The camera, therefore, offers a means of proximate spectatorship but not a means of participatory rectification. That is to say, while the camera operators meticulously track peoples' movements, the actions of the latter cannot be meaningfully controlled or substantively transformed.

In order to cope with the pressures and strains of camera work and street visualisations that habitually depict scenes of mundanity, impersonality or disarray, the camera operators informally partake in a second variant of labour that I shall term, 'deep work'. Deep work involves camera operators having to individually and collectively manage – that is, suppress and process – internal feelings that correlate with their being subjected to telemediated spectacles of suffering that they are unable to remedy. As such, it is an unseen and unrecognised work relation that mitigates the negative effects of CCTV viewing, in terms of how camera operators confront incidents that they are unable to control. Deep work is operationalised through diverse behavioural repertoires which function to insulate the self from its exposure to mediated traumas, and from the contradiction of mobilising '(in)action at a distance': wherein these risk flâneurs are, in effect, structurally set-up to fail. Deep work necessitates that camera operators utilise diverse technical, cultural and psychological resources in a bid to therapeutically extinguish adverse and debilitating emotional states and feelings. These resources provide an ephemeral avenue of escape and relief from the alienation arising from watching urban life unfold in ways that are not of the camera operators' choosing: specifically, spectacles of suffering to which they develop and experience a relation of impotence. There are two deep work practices that I wish to briefly illustrate: the ritual of denial and the ritual of adaptation.

Deep work: The ritual of denial

The key thing about doing this job is trying to stay calm, even if you don't maybe always feel it. You've just got to stay in control, as people out there rely on it, the people we watch and the people we work with. (Camera Operator 17, cited in Smith 2014: 138)

The ritual of denial pertains to the diverse techniques of coping that camera operators informally adopt and apply to their ecological circumstances so as to lessen the significance (and burdensome effects) of what it is they are paid to observe. As was previously mentioned, CCTV camera operators have limited agency to avert their gaze from the immorality and repugnance of urban violence and hardship. Indeed, they are under organisational pressure as professionalised voyeurs to record unlawful and risky behaviours in vivid resolution and to remain emotionally composed. It is in this context that camera operators must generate a cathartic outlet through which negative feelings that arise from being absently exposed to virtually intimate spectacles of suffering – many of which involve the gratuitous victimisation of vulnerable and law-abiding subjects – can be safely conducted. Most of these strategies revolve around attempts by the camera operators to create a sense of distance – or 'indirectedness' – between themselves and the incidents that they intimately oversee:

I have a technique to switch myself off from what is happening on the screens, otherwise I'd get ill. I pretend it's a film I'm watching, that it isn't real. Sure you maybe identify with some of the people, but you don't actually know them which helps. The camera, you know, makes it all seem slightly less personal. (Camera Operator 6, cited in Smith 2014: 140)

I never come home and sit and think, 'Oh my God that guy I saw getting beaten up has got a fractured cheek.' It's their life, it's not mine. (Camera Operator 3, cited in Smith 2014: 140)

Camera operators ritualistically perform repertoires of de-personalisation and emotional suppression in order to insulate the self from being breached and pathologically affected by the toxicity of witnessing the indeterminacy of on-screen disharmonies in real time and in graphic detail:

The first time I saw something violent happen I was in shock, though now it's just second nature, and I don't even think about it. It's a part of the job that you just have to get used to. You just do your best to capture events comprehensively so that the evidence is clear. I mean, that's our job, to not get emotionally involved. (Camera Operator 2, cited in Smith 2014: 138)

Technologies of humour and ridicule that might appear callous to the uninitiated cultural outsider are also applied to what is being viewed to downplay and displace its moral severity and to establish a relation of normative authority – or disassociated aloofness – *vis-à-vis* the action unfolding on the streets below:

I think we all tend to use a fair bit of humour in here, which outside the room may be seen as insensitive and quite possibly offensive. I think being able to laugh about many of the things we see is a healthy way of dealing with them. (Camera Operator 4, cited in Smith 2014: 141)

The camera operators are scanning an area for a woman who has threatened suicide. Two paramedics have arrived on the scene and make their way onto the bridge where she was claiming to be, peering over the side to the road far below.

On seeing this, Camera Operator 7 crassly states: 'Just look for the black hole in the road'. (Author's field note, cited in Smith 2014: 143)

I argue that these behaviours, along with exposure to violent media in other popular cultural contexts, come to de-sensitise some of the camera operators to the extremities of beholding interpersonal violence and suffering from a position of relative anonymity and safety: 'When I started the job, things used to get to me a bit. But over time, you just get used to it and nothing seems to shock me anymore (Camera Operator 8, cited in Smith 2014: 138). It is apparent that some of the camera operators are culturally socialised by their field of work into a habitus where violence is actively courted and glorified:

The first thing I do when I come into work is check the incident sheet from the night before to see if there are any good fights to watch. I didn't used to appreciate all the violence but it's actually quite amusing now. You just get used to it and it becomes a source of entertainment. (Camera Operator 28, cited in Smith 2014: 138-9)

Deep work: The ritual of adaptation

Closely related with the ritual of denial, the ritual of adaptation involves the camera operators repurposing the camera mediums for their own subjectively defined ends. Using the cameras artfully to locate harmonic patterns of the 'natural order' – for example, visualising dew-covered spiders webs, cumulus clouds, still rivers, dawn sunrises and twilight sunsets – affords these workers the opportunity to capture, albeit transiently, spectacles of stillness and fixivity, and to re-establish a sense of trust in the orderliness of natural phenomena existing in the frontiers of the outside world (Smith 2014: 146). Such therapeutic practices enable camera operators to experience a temporary state of ontological security via the stability and solidity of certain external objects, a sensation that seems so elusive when being perpetually exposed to the seeming fragility and fragmentation of contemporary social relations, behaviours that appear to pivot on the irresolvable harms that are a by-product of an economy of excess. Resting cameras on objects of relaxation serves to reassure the camera operators that there are extrinsic materialities that remain free from social decay. Paradoxically, the same camera mediums inflaming the camera operators' despair with the precarity of social life also help them detect harmonious aesthetics, referents for all that is solid, beautiful and dependable in the world that lies beyond the purview of the monitoring facility:

Camera Operator 12 is looking at the beach cameras, and zooms one out to sea: 'What a gorgeous sky. That is one of the small consolations of this job; you get to see all the sunrises over the sea. I do like watching the sun come up'. (Author's field note, cited in Smith 2014: 146).

You just kinda need a break now and again from all the fighting and watching of druggies, so it's nice just to have a few minutes by yourself looking at a field of cows outside the town. I think you need it just to remind you that it's not all doom and gloom out there! (Camera Operator 10, cited in Smith 2014: 146)

Other forms of technological repurposing that transcend the aesthetic or meditational imperative described previously are also prevalent in the monitory lifeworld. The following fieldwork excerpts provide germane instances of camera operators exploiting the technical capacities of their work tools to objectify other structures of interest in what might be understood as innovative acts of system repurposing:

As Camera Operator 9 takes control of one of the newer cameras overlooking the retail park, I say to him that they should perhaps have been installed there much

earlier when a now derelict nightclub was in operation. He agrees but adds, 'Ah, they still have their uses, especially when my wife is going to the cinema with the kids and is looking for a space in the car park. I can use this camera to direct her to an empty space. I can keep an eye on the car, too. (Author's field note, cited in Smith 2014: 148-149)

A short time into the shift, Camera Operator 14 tells me that: 'We've got all sorts of games we play in here. Our current favourite is "identify the building roof". Basically, what we do is zoom the camera onto a landmark church or prominent building roof, and then you've got to guess which one it is'. The camera operator then tells me to look away and moves a camera to focus on a distinctive architectural feature, before asking me, 'What do you reckon this one is, then?'. (Author's field note, cited in Smith 2014: 148)

Camera Operator 6 is watching on his monitor screen live coverage of a soccer match. He has skilfully focused a camera on a large plasma screen showing the match inside a public house. He continues to watch, and commentate on, the game for the next 25 minutes until it reaches a conclusion. (Author's field note, cited in Smith 2014: 149)

These examples reveal the degree of creativity that is elicited by the camera operators to make their labour more subjectively tolerable and meaningful, and to compensate for the negative aspects of the reflected spectacle, especially those situations where these risk flâneurs experience little or no agency in terms of either voluntarily directing or averting the gaze cast. They show how camera operator-derived tactics are deployed as a vehicle to struggle with, and contest, the forms of domination they endure as a result of their subjection to structural constraints. The technologies of vision and fields of visibility over which the camera operators preside are thereby deliberately directed to ends that provide the watchers with at least some form of autonomy and satisfaction. They get used for informal activities that help fracture and pass the time, and they get used to service the desires of those who all too often feel constrained by the desires of others populating the streets.

Conclusion: Debunking the myths of technocratic oversight

This paper has started to trace how camera operators relate to the visual texts that they are in the business of making, inspecting and interpreting. It has begun to excavate some of the social meanings that these risk flâneurs ascribe to the telemediated events that they vicariously follow, and how these 'narratives of the street' come, as reference points, to inscribe themselves on their subjectivities in a disciplinary manner. It has accentuated how seeing through CCTV affects social experience in *unseen* ways. CCTV systems produce harrowing representations of the social fabric: individuals being violently assaulted or choosing to end their lives in tragic acts of suicide. When aggregated, these sequences can inflict an enduring disfiguration on the camera operators' perceptions of urban space as an ecology of suffering. This impression can then orientate their conduct in contexts that extend beyond the monitoring facility. I have sought to illustrate the dualities of work – both 'surface' and 'deep', formal and informal – that camera operators ritualistically perform in response to these conditions, as they futilely attempt to manufacture a semblance of social order on the streets over which they gaze as absent witnesses, and as they attempt to preserve a stable sense of self.

I have shown the work of watching to be an ambiguous practice, a dynamic and contingent activity that far outstrips simplistic ascriptions of it being merely about the unidirectional or hierarchical dispersal of visual power. I have argued that the distinctive positioning of camera operators as physically-impotent and reactive overseers (that is, as relatively passive prosumers of de-contextualised urban flows) spawns an interesting and important workplace

culture, one that is infused in affective atmospherics and (in)formalised labour practices. Such conditions and repertoires reveal that surveillant supervision is a far from straightforward mechanical or technical exercise performed by a bundle of rule-following, dispassionate and detached technocrats. On the contrary, camera operators become emotionally invested in, and acutely transformed through, the 'surface' and 'deep' labour rituals that they perform. These risk flâneurs become as much the *subjects* of surveillance as the *agents*, with telemediated visibility functioning as a medium that intimately exposes urban overseers to the violence and suffering of others. In effect, the subjectivities of the camera operators both define and are defined by the spatial realities they vicariously confront and virtually inhabit, constructing and being constructed by the projection of the gaze and by its often merciless reflection.

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