Who is Big Brother? or The Politics of Looking

Anthony Auerbach

Dérive Zeitschrift für Stadtforschung (Vienna) no. 42, January 2011.
Intersections: Practices of Curating, Education and Theory, ed. by Angela Harutyunyan,
Yerevan: AICA-Armenia/Institute of Contemporary Art, 2012.

Amidst the multitude of distractions offered by contemporary cities, billboard-sized video screens are perhaps the most conspicuous intersections between urban environments and electronic media.[1] The spectacular intent of such screens might recommend them as metonymic images of the 'media-city', but they disclose neither the nature, nor the meaning of this supposed hybrid. Urban screens, video screens, like all screens, are equivocal: as much as they display, they conceal. From this double functioning, the repertoire of urban screening engenders what could legitimately be called its personae, whereby a screen appears variously as if it were the receiver or the transmitter of images. An urban screen can, furthermore, appear as the reflector or the projector of images, while also performing the functions traditionally ascribed to architecture: shield, filter, divider, separator. The means of urban screening thus extend from pixels to police, concentrating the desires, aspirations and powers of planners, developers, architects, broadcasters and advertisers, among other urban and media 'players'.

As long as the effectiveness of large-scale video screens in urban settings is unproven — as long, that is, as it remains difficult to devise measures which would reconcile the interests of the various parties involved — the hopes and expectations invested in 'urban screens', hedged by every precaution that can be mustered by commercial, political and ideological alliances, tend to be framed by vague and utopian fantasies. These fantasies recruit the presumptive universal mission of art, along with a correspondingly undifferentiated notion of the public, in support of potentially conflicting projects. Imagining urban screens as blank canvasses endowed with almost limitless potential and believing that, by placing moving images before a hypothetical public, giant video screens could, as if by some kind of cinematic suture, repair the notion of 'public space' (whose demise is lamented as often as electronic encroachments on the realm of privacy) clearly moves beyond the calculations, for instance, of advertisers who recognise only what can be measured by the ratio of footfall to eyeballs,[2] but would not like to miss out on the promise of urban screens.

The introduction to the 2007 Urban Screens Conference hailed the 'discovery' of urban screens by the advertising industry, citing the appearance of outdoor screens in advertisements aired on television in the role of backdrops designed to enhance the appeal of soft drinks and mobile phones.[3] However, it should not be forgotten that the outdoor video

1 The television towers, which stand out on many a city's skyline, remain as monuments to broadcasting while TV transmission has gone underground, extraterrestrial and over IP.

2 In the industry jargon, 'eyeballs' means individual viewers of an advertisement, 'footfall' means pedestrian traffic in retail environments.

3 *A Media World in Flux*, Manchester Urban Screens Conference, 2007. The first Urban Screens Conference took

screens that actually exist are most often used by the hardware manufacturers who install them to advertise their own range of consumer products — mainly domestic television sets and mobile phones — and by media corporations to remind the viewer what to watch at home.[4]

While the evacuation of traditional communal places has been blamed on the effects of television, which disbanded and reassembled the public in their homes,[5] the private sphere — traditionally the patriarchal domain of the bourgeois family — now tends to be associated with the space of electronic media. The proliferation of television receivers and channels within affluent homes, as well as the use of video rental, home video and video games, atomised the 'audience at home' that formed television's public even before the widespread use of the Internet for information and entertainment. As the consumption of mass media becomes the mass consumption of ever more personalised media, channelled increasingly via mobile and personal devices, the private realm (as the space of media consumption) is no longer confined to the home, but transits the urban spaces traditionally assumed to be public.[6] As a result, the claim that outdoor advertising is the 'last remaining truly broadcast medium' is less convincing than it used to be.[7] The incursions, mediated by video and

---

place in Amsterdam in 2005. Subtitled 'Discovering the potential of outdoor screens for urban society', the first edition welcomed a wide range of speakers to discuss the uses of large-scale LED screens in urban settings. In the words of the organisers, the conference would 'investigate how the currently dominating commercial use of these screens can be broadened and culturally curated. Can these screens become a tool to contribute to a lively urban society, involving its audience interactively?' Contributions from academics, curators and artists were complemented by talks by architects, technology providers, advertising agencies and broadcasters. See, Anthony Auerbach, 'Interpreting Urban Screens', *First Monday*, Special Issue 4, 2006.

4 Digital billboards, run by the major outdoor advertising agencies, displaying a succession of static advertisements are becoming a more common sight. These installations allow the agencies to sell the same location to multiple advertisers while avoiding the costs of printing and putting up traditional posters. Furthermore, by segmenting 'airtime' outdoors, the system allows advertisers to target different 'audiences' with different messages at different times of the day. As the ability of the agencies to 'deliver audiences' (see note 7, below) depends on site-specific analysis of urban traffic, so ever more discriminating surveillance of 'public' space is incorporated by market research.

5 The disuse of traditional communal places such as town squares, suburban high streets, churches and cinemas has often been followed by their occupation by non-traditional communities such as teenagers, immigrants and, in some places, Protestants: nearly all the grand city-centre cinemas in São Paolo, Brazil, the world's largest Catholic nation, are now occupied by evangelical churches (if they do not survive as pornographic cinemas).

6 The notion of privacy as a 'right' is invoked, in particular, in connection with the trade in data gleaned from individuals' online and urban trajectories, their networking, consuming and viewing habits. While concern is expressed about the technologies that would strip individuals in public places of the anonymity that used to be afforded by the modern city — that camouflage which preserved the 'private' individual immersed in a crowd — the owners of cars, credit cards, smart phones and access privileges still demand protection from criminals, and worse, terrorists. This 'right', then, is the right of some people, but not others, to be private in public.

7 The statement is from ClearChannel's 'Glossary', 2005. The same agency's 2009 marketing material claims: '...

information technology, of the public by the private and vice versa tend to complicate any spatial definition of the two terms to the point where only a site-specific analysis of the relations of economic and social power and privilege could determine precisely how public and private are intertwined.

Because the phenomena of this entwining — from video surveillance to reality TV, from iPhone to YouTube — all stem from the same set of technologies, focusing on the 'forces of production' is unlikely to reveal much more than an image of the technological 'Great Leap Forward' already projected by the suppliers of cameras, displays and network infrastructures to the consumer market, public (government) authorities and commercial property owners alike. More to the point for an assessment of the traffic in images would be an analysis of the relations of representation.

Such an analysis would tend to highlight the distribution of technological means, and the interpretation of their use, but would not claim that personal gadgets, CCTV, video spectaculars or architectural metaphors[8] on their own could make a place public or private, or determine how visibility or agency are assigned and maintained in particular urban locations.

In the light of current urban trends, giant billboard screens might seem anachronistic: like clumsy replicas of outmoded visions of the future.[9] They might look like attempts at restoring television to the public places where it was first demonstrated in the 1920s and 30s, or perhaps like attempts at reclaiming 'neglected' public places on the model of the post-war living room, that is to say, making them places where the modern consumer feels at home. In any case, urban screens and their paraphernalia cannot be detached from their historical determinants any more than they can be isolated from the regimes of the places where they are installed, the regimes they are intended both to advertise (that is, to assert, if not enforce) and to dissimulate. Such installations remind us that thinking through video in all its forms in an urban context — thinking through video as an urban condition — amounts to a politics of looking.

*

instead of delivering panels, we deliver audiences. Outdoor is often described as the last broadcast medium and while this is still true, developments in campaign planning have meant that we are now able to deliver different consumer groups with more accuracy than ever before — including different socio-demographic groups, ethnic audiences and "tribes".' ClearChannel Outdoor, *Audience Solutions*, 2009.

8 A 'spectacular' (noun) is the term coined for high-profile electrified advertisements such as are associated with Times Square, New York, and Piccadilly Circus, London. The Times Square Alliance, formed in 1992 to promote 'economic development and public improvements' in the area, uses the metaphor 'The Crossroads of the World' as its slogan. 'Forum' and 'Agora' are popular names for shopping centres.

9 The cityscape of Los Angeles, 2019, in Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982) is one of the most often cited. However, outdoor video screens were imagined even a century earlier, when television was little more than a hypothetical possibility. In Albert Robida's *Le vingtième siècle* (1882) the streets of Paris, 1952, are equipped with giant public 'téléphonoscopes' run by the global media corporation L'Époque.

Yerevan is the capital of Armenia, a small country with a big past, located in the southern Caucasus, bordering Turkey, Georgia, Azerbaijan and Iran.[10] Formerly a land of ancient kings whose territory reached beyond its present borders, and proud to be the first nation to adopt Christianity (at the beginning of the fourth century), in recent centuries Armenia was under Turkish or Russian hegemony. In 1922 Armenia was incorporated into the Soviet Union, and became independent again in 1991. Nonetheless, the presence of 'Big Brother Russia' is still felt, as it is in many former Soviet and satellite states.

From 2003 until 2007, a large LED video screen stood on Republic Square in Yerevan, overlooking the government buildings and national museums. The square was planned in the 1920s as part of the principal political and cultural axis of the Soviet Republic's capital city. The spot occupied recently by the video screen was reserved for a statue of Lenin.[11] The Lenin monument was erected in 1940 and for a time was overshadowed by a really colossal statue of Stalin which stood on a hillside above the city (Figs. 1–4).[12] Immediately following the break-up of the Soviet Union, Lenin was removed from the square that used to bear his name, and later the pedestal was also demolished. Angela Harutyunyan suggests that the symbolic site, left empty, reflected a state of indecision in Armenian post-independence politics and identity.[13] This indecision was inaugurated by the brief gesture of ousting the symbol of the former ruling power and was interrupted temporarily by the erection of a giant cross: occasioned by the 1700th anniversary of the founding of the Armenian Apostolic Church (2001), but actually supported by a surge in nationalist, militarist sentiment. The video screen that took the place of the religious symbol would appear to reiterate the indecision, and indeed it performed a variety of functions without establishing a coherent programme. On anniversary days it presided over military parades reminiscent of Soviet times, except that the big screen now displayed the face of the present leader (Robert Kocharian, champion of Nagorno-Karabakh Armenians) in place of the bronze hero of the Russian revolution (Fig, 5). At other times, it displayed advertisements for real estate developments and a national

10 The present essay stems from a talk I gave in Yerevan in 2006, hosted by the Armenian Center for Contemporary Experimental Art as part of the project Video as Urban Condition. The content received additional grafts in the course of the seminar I devised for the International Summer School for Art Curators, Post Socialism and Media Transformations: Strategies of Representation, Yerevan, 2008.

11 According to a Soviet-era tourist guide, 'This is the centre of Yerevan, where ceremonies and meetings are held and through which processions pass on highdays and holidays. The statue of Lenin, the work of Sergei Merkurov (1881–1952), a prominent Soviet sculptor, rises high over the southern part of the oval square. This skilfully executed image of the leader, philosopher and revolutionary spokesman is extremely impressive. The restrained movement of the hand, the slight inclination forward, as if taking a step into the future, give the sculpture a sense of purpose and movement.' (Transcribed by Raffi Kojian)

12 The Stalin statue was part of a war memorial erected after 1945. It was removed after 1953 and later replaced by an equally colossal statue of Mother Armenia, which remains in situ. The army museum housed in the pedestal of the monument is now mainly dedicated to the post-independence conflict with Azerbaijan over the Nagorno-Karabakh region.

13 Angela Harutyunyan, 'State Icons and Narratives in the Symbolic Cityscape of Yerevan', Angela Harutyunyan, Kathrin Hörschelmann and Malcolm Miles (editors), *Public Spheres after Socialism*, Bristol: Intellect Books, 21–30.

promotional video featuring shots of historic Armenian architecture (including the buildings of Republic Square itself) and landscape scenes. Screen time was also rented out for family celebrations, being used to relay live video of wedding parades held on the square in front of the screen.

With that form of display, a private, commercial transaction on the screen authorised the occupation of the square in front of it and underlined the family's claim on public space, with the approval of church and state. While the wedding guests watching themselves formed the principal audience of the show, the screening advertised the public celebration — marriage — which affirms the regulation of sexual relations and the institution of the private realm of domestic patriarchy.

*

In George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* all the functions of command and conscience usually associated with secular and religious authorities, as well as all their powers of inducement and enforcement, converge in the all-seeing Big Brother, the personification and 'embodiment' of the ruling Party. Written in 1948, Orwell's novel projected a contemporary political parable into the near future. Clearly, Big Brother is Uncle Joe, and the book is a bitter reflection on the transformation of Revolutionary Socialism by Stalinism. Picking up where Animal Farm left off, Orwell explored the effects of totalitarian politics. The book is best remembered for the phrase, 'Big Brother is watching you,' and for the way Orwell imagined the future ubiquity of television.

In the society Orwell describes, there is one Party and one TV channel which is the Party's principal instrument of propaganda, projecting the paternalistic gaze of Big Brother and in his name, continually announcing the progress of production and of imperial wars. Except, supposedly, for the space of the proletarian underclass, and outside the city limits, the television apparatus is everywhere and always on.[14] The telescreen, as it is called, is present at home, at work (where it also forms part of the office machinery) and in the street. Moreover, it is a two-way device, albeit one-sided. 'The telescreen received and transmitted simultaneously.'[15] Thus it also projects the faceless and menacing gaze of total surveillance. At any moment, the telescreen might interrupt its stream of military music and Party announcements to admonish or instruct an individual. The device hears everything, even a heartbeat, but no one speaks to the screen.

As it turned out, this kind of technical apparatus of surveillance and control was not installed under the actually existing regimes Orwell indicted as travesties of Socialism, and against whose threats to individual liberty he intended to warn. Instead, television entered every home as the favourite propaganda instrument of the consumer society and the installation of video surveillance propagated the fear (and the love) of Big Brother in affluent, capitalist democracies.

14 For the protagonist of the story, the supposition, fatefully, turns out to be wrong.

15 George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, London: Secker & Warburg, 1949, 4.

Noam Chomsky famously drew attention to the totalitarian aspects of capitalism under the rubric *Manufacturing Consent*.[16] The title of Chomsky and Herman's critique of mass media is an ironic homage to the political commentator Walter Lippmann, whose *Public Opinion* identified propaganda — 'the manufacture of consent' — as an essential component of democratic government[17]. For Lippmann, modernity promised the demystification of 'public opinion' along with great technical improvements in the art of persuasion, and indeed good government, provided the instruments were entrusted to the right people. 'The Engineering of Consent' proposed by Edward Bernays[18] extended Lippmann's industrial metaphor and defined the role of the propagandist — the 'publicity man'[19] or 'public relations counsel' (as Bernays styled himself) — in the division of labour. The specialist knowledge and technical authority of the engineer is thus interposed between the ruling class and the public as between the directors and the management of an industrial concern. According to the theory of engineering consent, the mass production of opinion in a democracy is mediated by an educated class of bureaucrats, managers, teachers, journalists and the like who form public opinion. It is they whose thoughts are to be shaped, just as in Orwell's novel it is the class of Party functionaries, bureaucrats and the like — the 'Outer Party' to which the book's hero belongs[20] — who are haunted by telescreens, not the mass of 'Proles' who are considered by the Party incapable of thought and so of little concern to the 'Thought Police'.

As the publicist switches from political to commercial concerns, the qualification of the public is extended only to those capable of responding economically to the profit of the publicist's client. For commercial media such as advertising-funded television channels, political and commercial concerns are identical. The population that fails to qualify economically as the public is thus excluded from representation by the media whose business it is to reflect its public's interests (which is not the same as 'the public interest' — as has often been pointed out when the latter has been invoked to justify intrusions on privacy by journalists).

In Chomsky's analysis of the mass media, in particular the press and network television in the United States, the 'propaganda model' reappeared as a scandal. The defenders of the media institutions Chomsky accused of complicity in America's foreign policy atrocities, however, could easily counter his allegations by citing Orwell's dystopia as the fate Americans

16 Noam Chomsky and Edward S. Herman, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1988.

17 Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion*, London: Allen & Unwin, 1922.

18 Edward L. Bernays, 'The Engineering of Consent', *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 250, 1947, 113–20.

19 'The development of the publicity man is a clear sign that the facts of modern life do not spontaneously take a shape in which they can be known. They must be given a shape by somebody, and since in the daily routine reporters cannot give a shape to facts, and since there is little disinterested organization of intelligence, the need for some formulation is being met by the interested parties'. *Public Opinion*, 345.

20 Winston Smith is, after all, a kind of journalist. His job is 'correcting' the historical record in accordance with the Party's directives, removing 'unpersons' from back issues of *The Times*, for example, rewriting the articles, altering the photographs.

were spared thanks to the free press. Moreover, Chomsky's interventions were ridiculed as conspiracy theories as fantastic as any fabricated by the Party in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.[21]

The system of production Chomsky described was certainly paternalistic and exerted powerful influence over the flow of information, the mobilisation of desire and the conformity of behaviour. But it was not quite Big Brother.

To be fair to Orwell, the regime of the telescreen is a fable, an allegory of a political condition more than a technological prediction. Nonetheless the undisguised parallels with the Soviet Union under Stalin and the persistence of the language Orwell invented for the imagined Ingsoc (English Socialism) — the code of its regime — invite historical comparisons. So it would be worth considering for a moment how television and surveillance were implemented under Communism.

Although the isolated, passive and unsupervised character of home viewing was at first regarded with some suspicion by the Soviet establishment, television was not neglected as a means of popular instruction and entertainment. Its value was perceived at least as a counter-measure to Western radio propaganda and as a sign that Socialism could provide everything that modern technology promised. Thus provision was made in the economic plan (though it could have been dictated otherwise) for the development of domestic television on a model in some respects similar to that adopted in the West. Television was enthusiastically welcomed by Soviet viewers in their homes despite the notoriously unreliable equipment and often dismal programmes.[22]

Surveillance, on the other hand, was instituted before the television era and did not rely on technology, but mainly on human resources mobilised by ordinary incentives such as material rewards and credible threats. The effectiveness of surveillance, as a means of projecting power and exercising control over the Soviet public, stemmed from its boundlessness. Since the defence of the revolution and the security of the state were perceived as identical, the security apparatus instituted by Lenin recognised neither national borders nor any legal constraint on its activities. The same organisation was charged with suppressing dissent within the Party and revolt within the populace; it was responsible for domestic surveillance, foreign espionage and counter-espionage; for internal security and the pacification of an empire. The vigilance of the state was not delimited by any boundary that would mark the external, or the private. Neither was there any boundary between police procedure and political terror. Orwell showed vividly what happens to the character of information in circumstances like these.

In the Soviet Union, the recruitment of informers and the flow of information were facilitated by the state's involvement in nearly every aspect of daily life, from social organisations and structures to employment, housing and supply. Big Brother might be the metaphor

21 In Orwell's book, a shadowy Brotherhood of conspirators is rumoured to be behind every plot foiled by the loyal organs of the Party. The captured plotters confess their secret association with the arch Enemy of the People, Emmanuel Goldstein, and duly submit to the Party's retribution.

22 Kristin Roth-Ey, 'Finding a Home for Television in the USSR, 1950–1970', *Slavic Review*, 66, 2, 2007, 278–306.

for a remote, watchful authority, but was actually present in the eyes and ears of intimates, colleagues, friends and family.

*

Video and electronic surveillance networks are an increasingly pervasive feature of contemporary urban life, although without the centralised system of propaganda and monitoring which characterised the regime of Big Brother. The proliferation of the technical apparatus — cameras, monitors, recording, transmitting and receiving devices — combined with a weak regulatory apparatus has raised a multitude of possibilities and fears.[23]

Popular fiction suggests how the allure of the possibilities is as much part of the fantasy of surveillance as is the fear of it. In the movies, any camera installed openly for supposedly innocuous reasons could be being monitored and directly controlled by ultra-secret government agencies.[24] The secret agents, moreover, possess technology that can unveil a wealth of detail normally masked by the low-resolution pictures which signify surveillance — that is, the image quality that distinguishes surveillance from other video genres. The facilities for intercepting communications that the fictional agents are supposed to have in the same movies might in fact be closer to real surveillance fantasies, such as the United States' TIA (Total Information Awareness) and related programmes,[25] than Hollywood's secret CCTV networks and astonishing image enhancements are to the current state of the art in video surveillance technology.

However, even if the technical possibilities are assumed to be expanding, and becoming ever more widely distributed, the fantasy of surveillance — if it is not to run into its own contradictions — continues to run ahead of the fulfilment promised by each technological development. Video surveillance installations configure the fears and desires to which they owe their rise. Those fears and desires are in turn propagated, and multiplied as surveillance gives rise to other fears and more desires. Unifying this multiplicity, reconciling its contradictions, is not a matter of technology — notwithstanding the seductiveness of the idea of a big screen capable of binding a crowd the way the small screen bound the audience at home.

23 An overview was sought by the UK House of Lords Select Committee on the Constitution, published as *Surveillance: Citizens and the State*, London: The Stationery Office, 2009.

24 For instance: the popular thriller *The Bourne Ultimatum*, directed by Paul Greengrass (2007), which is noted for its 'realism'; or *Enemy of the State*, directed by Tony Scott (1998), where the heroes defend their individual morality and privacy with the same surveillance technologies used against them by the corrupt agents of the state. *The End of Violence*, directed by Wim Wenders (1997) inserts the fantasy of surveillance into the heart of the 'dream factory', with the secret control room of a sinister surveillance system concealed in Los Angeles' Griffith Observatory, overlooking Hollywood itself.

25 For example ADVISE (Analysis, Dissemination, Visualization, Insight, and Semantic Enhancement), or PSP (Presidential Surveillance Program). Such programmes have been mocked as fantasies: the 'Big Database in the Sky, the database that knows everything about everyone and can tell who's been naughty and who's been nice'. Jon Stokes, 'Revenge of the Return of the Son of TIA, Part LXVII', *Ars Technica*, 2006, *https://arstechnica.com/uncategorized/2006/02/6157-2/*

While technology may seem universal or indifferent, the meaning and potential of video/surveillance depends on who and where you are, and will change as you move from one urban situation to another. Furthermore, video/surveillance determines who you are in a given place, that is to say: the configuration of video/surveillance determines who watches and who is watched, what is seen and what is shown. The configuration therefore amounts not only to an instrument of looking but also articulates relations of representation which must be understood not only in the technical sense (how and when what or who is visible to whom), but also in the political sense. Compare, for example, what the possibilities of video/surveillance might suggest to a democratic government anxious both to highlight the threat of terrorism and to reassure the public, or to an authoritarian government concerned about the subversion of media controls; to an advertising agency or retail enterprise eager to identify and target customers more precisely, or to the people employed to watch for the customers who don't pay; to a social housing tenant worried about anti-social behaviour in the neighbourhood or to someone more interested in online social networking; to a privileged citizen, confident of his/her rights, concerned with privacy,[26] or to a homeless person.

*

Since 1999, when the popular TV series was first aired in the Netherlands, the name Big Brother has been associated with what is known as reality TV. In the *Big Brother* game show, members of the public voluntarily submit to total surveillance, which is transmitted in regular TV digests, as well as live streams on cable and online, for the audience to observe and judge the contestants' behaviour. The contestants trade their temporary isolation and subjection to the regime of the observer (more or less mediated by the producers of the show) for the promise of fame (even if only for fifteen minutes) and the possibility of a cash prize. The producers discovered a means of attracting large audiences without having to hire expensive professional talent and a way of observing their audience directly via the 'interactive' tie-ins associated with the series.[27]

The viewer's motivation is not so obvious. Why should *Big Brother*'s promise of reality be more compelling than fictional drama? How does watching the 'housemates' confined to the *Big Brother* set conform with the escapist model of popular entertainment? How does the audience identify with the housemates? If the *Big Brother* contestant is already 'one of us', what aspirations does the show mobilise? What wishes can it fulfil?

The appeal of *Big Brother* is probably the same as the fascination of television — that is to say,

26 Privileged citizens such as the Surveillance Camera Players who performed an adaptation of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* in the New York Subway for the cameras, for passers-by and ultimately for YouTube (Surveillance Camera Players, *Surveillance Camera Players Do George Orwell's 1984*, 1998); or the author of a movie — and by law the protagonist — who exploited a provision of the UK Data Protection Act which requires corporations to supply copies of personal data including surveillance video to an individual who requests it. The masking of faces required by the same law to protect the privacy of other individuals visible in the video prompted a science fiction-inspired story of redemption through narcissism (Manu Luksch, *Faceless*, 2007).

27 See Mark Andrejevic, *Reality TV: The Work of Being Watched*, Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003.

seeing at a distance: the binding of the viewer to a distant object. The pleasure this fascination offers, in the context of broadcast TV and closed circuits, is voyeuristic. *Video* (Latin: I see), literally, identifies the subject as the one who looks.

In the early days of television, before videotape, stations used to broadcast live pictures from distant cities to fill the gaps between programmes. Apparently, these shows were quite popular, although they had no content and no message other than demonstrating the ability of television at the same time to assert the remoteness of the object and insert it in the domain of the viewer. There, in television's unrecorded stream, the object is only to be watched, but doesn't coalesce into an image that will yield to desire: an image that could be had. For the voyeuristic subject, the object is always remote. Video recording plays back only the succession of incomplete images, each fraction only anticipating the next, but never adding up.[28] Slow motion replay seems only to dilate the anxiety of the moment, while it steals simultaneity. Under inspection, the video image vanishes in lines and pixels.[29] No image stands for the object-out-of-reach unless it is an image-out-of-reach. Thus desire is focused not on an object or on an image, but on the act of looking, and is fetishised in the apparatus of looking.

The notion of fetish doesn't quite explain, but hints at a way of understanding some of the seemingly irrational behaviours associated with video: behaviours displayed, for example, by people who point their camcorders but don't shoot, who record TV shows but never watch them, who attend live events only to watch them on video screens, and who appear in various ways to revere the TV set.

But to return to the question of Big Brother, I would like to consider some seemingly irrational aspects of video surveillance. Although the commonplace rationale of video surveillance — its 'ideology' as John McGrath calls it[30] — is crime prevention, the effect of video surveillance on crime rates has been shown to be mostly insignificant.[31] The CCTV images provided regularly to the broadcast media, with the aim of helping to solve crimes

28 Sean Cubitt, *Timeshift: On Video Culture*, London: Routledge, 1991.

29 The title sequence of *Zidane: A 21st Century Portrait*, directed by Douglas Gordon and Philippe Parreno (2006), stages that frustration as the prelude to a film that is nothing other than voyeuristic.

30 Like most commentators, McGrath speaks mainly of surveillance systems installed by public authorities democratically accountable for their actions and policies and hence required to formulate an ideology. Early and widespread implementation of CCTV by local authorities in the UK has also provided a base for the assessment of its effects. Privately installed surveillance systems mainly escape regulation and analysis. John McGrath, *Loving Big Brother: Performance, Privacy and Surveillance Space*, London: Routledge, 2003.

31 See Martin Gill and Angela Spriggs, *Assessing the impact of CCTV*, London: Home Office Research, Development and Statistics Directorate, 2005. Gill and Spriggs' Home Office Research Study points out that the effect of video surveillance on specific crimes in specific areas such as 'vehicle crime' in car parks was noticeable, but difficult to separate from 'confounding factors' such as improved lighting introduced at the same time as video surveillance for the same purpose. In these cases the displacement of crimes to neighbouring areas not under surveillance was also more noticeable. In most other cases, statistically significant changes in crime rates resulting from the installation of CCTV could not be demonstrated.

that they clearly did not prevent, nonetheless support the ideology of surveillance and, moreover, legitimise the pleasures of viewing. The videos broadcast by programmes such as *Crimewatch UK* or on the news are to some extent selected and qualified by the standards of television entertainment. Thus the videos of people being victimised are accompanied by warnings of 'scenes of a graphic nature' or 'scenes of violence' and solemn appeals for information. However, they are not really different from surveillance videos, which circulate only for their gossip and amusement value, if not for the explicitly voyeuristic enjoyment of sex and violence.

While video surveillance appears to have little influence on criminal behaviour (despite offering criminals a chance of appearing on television), it is said to have an influence on behaviour that may be a nuisance, but would not ordinarily appear in the public record as a crime statistic (dropping litter, or urinating in the street, for instance). This claim, which is harder to substantiate or to disprove,[32] along with the assertion that CCTV makes people 'feel safe', comes to replace the primary ideological justification, but may still mask other objectives. As if in anticipation of any critical assessment of the effectiveness of video surveillance, it is simply asserted that CCTV is a 'good thing'[33] whose potential would be unlocked, if not by the technical improvements promised by the next generation of equipment, then by consciousness raising. A local authority select committee report on the effectiveness of CCTV came to the confident conclusion: 'Increase public awareness of the existence and effectiveness of CCTV in the borough. This will lead to an added sense of security to the public and act as a deterrent to the criminal fraternity.'[34] This statement suggests how surveillance and propaganda might be bound together in a manner worthy of Big Brother. It suggests how, given an ingenious combination of technology and information, consciousness will divide the public from the 'criminal fraternity'.

The attempts by privacy campaigners, activists, artists and pranksters to raise awareness of surveillance tend to be frustrated by the already high levels of public awareness of CCTV (since

32 On this score, the effects of video surveillance installations are not compared with the effects, for example, of providing waste bins or public toilets, which, if installed, would doubtless have to be under video surveillance to prevent misuse. In many places, public toilets were closed because they were being misused by homosexuals or drug users. In the UK, waste bins were removed from public places because they might have been used by terrorists to hide bombs.

33 'First, CCTV was credited with the well-reported arrests of the murderers of James Bulger in 1993, and later of the Brixton nail-bomber in 1999, leading to a universal assumption that CCTV was "a good thing". This lessened the need for project planners to demand evidence to support the claims made for CCTV. There was also little need to think about whether CCTV was the best measure to address the particular problems in the area where it was to be applied. One project manager stated: I'm all for [more cameras]; it builds the system up doesn't it? If I had my way I'd have cameras everywhere, 'cause they're good. The Home Office endorsement of CCTV further diminished the need for planners to be seen to assess CCTV critically, as one of many possible crime reduction initiatives.' *Assessing the impact of CCTV*, 63–64.

34 Mark Aldred, Select Committee no. 3, *The Effectiveness of CCTV within the Wigan Borough*, Wigan: Wigan Borough, 2005, 37.

the systems are designed to be conspicuous)[35] and widespread acceptance, even enthusiasm for it, which is reflected in the wider commercial and cultural exploitation of the same technologies. This delight in surveillance seems to persist despite growing popular scepticism of the primary public justifications of mass-surveillance infrastructures. Consumer-electronic fetish objects, popular shows such as Big Brother, spy thrillers, as well as the exploits of campaigners, activists, artists and pranksters, tend to highlight the ludic and voyeuristic pleasures of surveillance, while providing a different ideological screen for the viewer — not the supervising authority, but the player, the connoisseur of cultural appropriations of technology, the autonomous subject, author, if not of its own destiny, at least of its spare time. Culture too is widely assumed to be a 'good thing' and accordingly claims a leading role on the urban scene, assisting in the formation of consciousness and hence in the identification of the 'public' and the exclusion of others.

*

When, in the mid-1970s, Rosalind Krauss said, 'The medium of video is narcissism,' she aimed to bring an emergent genre of art into critical focus by isolating it from its technological base, and comparing it to established modes of art production.[36] At the time, video art was even more remote from the mass media than other forms of contemporary art and owed its recent rise to the commercial availability (since the late 1960s) of portable video equipment, which had originally been developed for surveillance. The machines were still much better adapted to this purpose than they were to anything resembling broadcast television and lent themselves to closed circuits and feedback loops, to the staging of the author/looker as simultaneously desiring subject and desired object. Krauss' commentary suggests narcissism is a dead end for art and video is somehow destined to engulf artists in their own vanity.[37] This might not be borne out by the subsequent history of video art, but it is clear from contemporary cities that narcissism flourishes in an environment of closed circuits, video loops, displacements and feedback. The proposition that narcissism (Narcissus' morbid fascination with his own reflection) is the stuff of which video is made (like clay is the medium of sculpture) suggests a libidinal charge to the compelling presence of video which might be more than metaphorical. The audience assembled by the Manchester Big Screen — a 25-square-metre outdoor screen in the city centre, run by the BBC as part of its Public Space Broadcasting project — was called narcissistic by the Chief Project Manager[38]

35 The soundtrack of Surveillance Camera Players' video documentation of their performance of Nineteen Eighty-Four is interrupted by a conversation between the Players' lookout, who was also recording a CCTV monitor, and a passer-by who was wondering what was going on. When it is explained that the aim of the show is to draw attention to 'surveillance cameras all around', he replies, 'Yeah, but who doesn't know that?'

36 Rosalind Krauss, 'Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism', *October*, 1, 1976, 50.

37 On Freud's authority, narcissism signifies an incurable perversion of the reflexiveness Krauss had learned to expect from art.

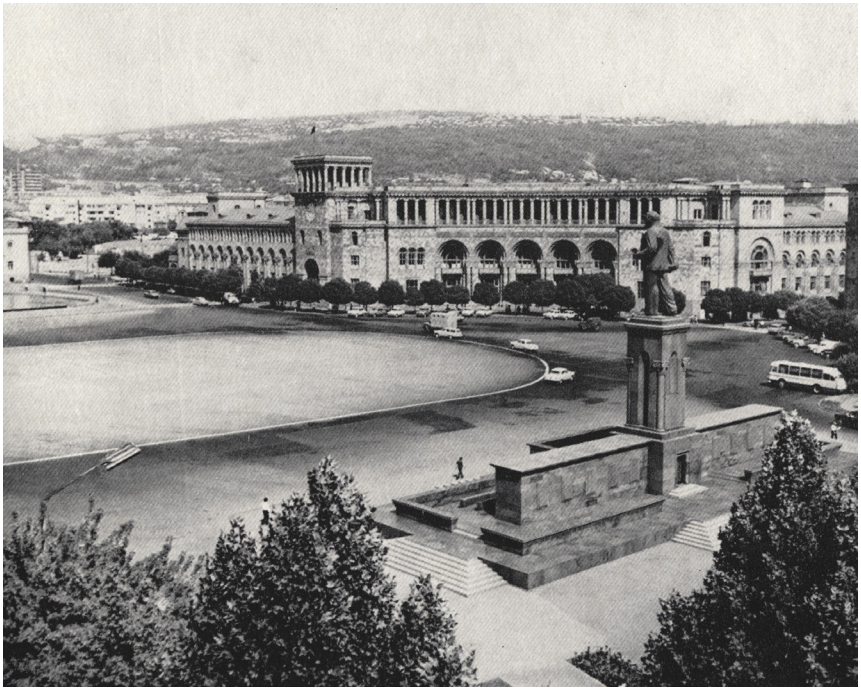
38 Mike Gibbons, Project Manager, BBC Live Events, during the Urban Screens Conference, 2005. Manchester was the pilot for a network of city-centre 'Big Screens' run by the BBC in collaboration with the technology providers Philips, commercial sponsors and local authorities. The BBC provides continuous programming

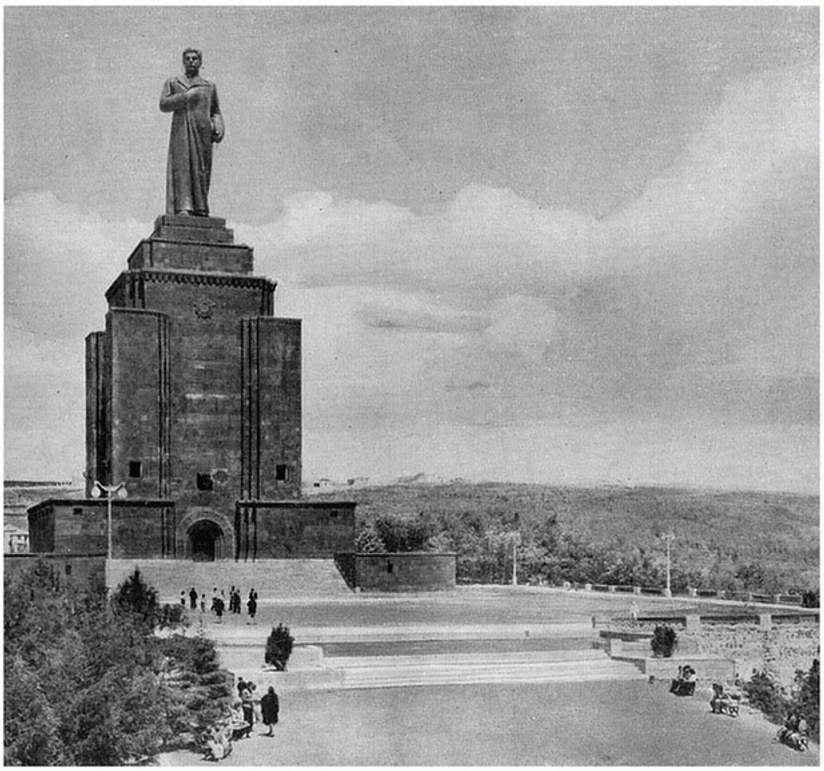
not only because of the popularity of local-interest programming. No bigger cheer went up from the crowd than when the cameras turned on the audience and the screen switched from projector to reflector. CCTV is not always as spectacular as this, but the narcissistic moment is no less enmeshed in the urban screens woven by surveillance. The monitor positioned at the entrance to a place, which announces 'You are being watched', unites the discriminatory and the propaganda functions of surveillance by staging the division between people who are welcome in the place and those who are not, as a moment of self-regard.

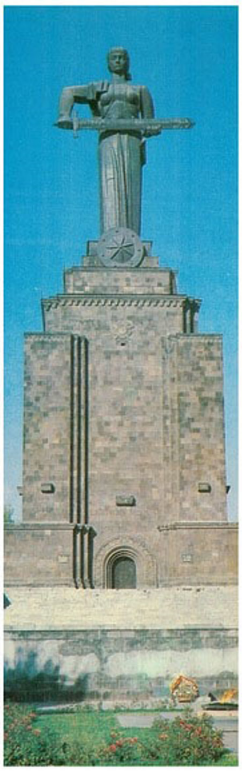
The location merges the video stream with the stream of people crossing the threshold of the place. The image crosses the voyeuristic pleasure of television with narcissistic desire, seducing you with the unattainable object of desire — yourself — captured where you stand — at a distance. The monitor entwines identification with the watcher and identification with the watched even more tightly than watching *Big Brother* on broadcast TV. Recognising one's own image on screen affirms both identifications, while dissimulating the actual regime of the place with the comforting reassurance of the sign on a map, which says 'You are here.'

with sound, day and night, without commercial interruptions. The screens provide, among other things, opportunities for communal viewing of live TV, lunchtime entertainment, local news, opportunities for screening selected art works or amateur videos, as well as backdrops for events and celebrations. Their value is measured in terms of the 'regeneration' of public space — normally as retail and leisure space.

1 Republic Square, Yerevan, Armenia (photo: Anthony Auerbach, 2006)







2 Lenin statue and tribune, sculpture by Sergei Merkurov, architecture by Natalia Paremuzova and Levon Vartanov, 1940–1991 (*Monuments of Armenian Architecture*, 1964)

3 Lenin Square, Yerevan, Armenia (*Architecture of the Soviet Armenia*, 1986)

4 Stalin statue, sculpture by Sergei Merkurov, 1950–1962, later *Mother Armenia*, sculpture by Ara Harutyunyan, from 1967, atop the military museum, architecture by Rafael Israelyan, Victory Park, Yerevan Armenia (unknown publication)

1 Republic Square, Yerevan, Armenia (photo: Adam Lederer, 2006)