The Locus+ Archive

Pat Naldi & Wendy Kirkup
Search, 1993

Search
Helen Cadwallader

Search was developed by Pat Naldi and Wendy Kirkup from the knowledge that the Northumbria Police service, working with Newcastle City Council, had recently installed a surveillance system in the commercial centre of Newcastle in 1993, The result is an eight-minute video documenting a synchronised walk or 'enactment' undertaken by the artists throughout the city.

The surveillance system, implemented primarily in response to local business demands for greater security measures, consists of sixteen black and white cameras feeding four monitors in a centrally located control room operated by the police service. As such the system is designed to monitor and document criminal activity and 'civil disturbances' in the city centre.

This modern surveillance system, embedded in the architectural structure of the city, echoes the principles of Jeremy Bentham's eighteenth-century panopticon or Inspection House. Designed for use primarily as a penal institution, the panopticon was a circular building with cells at the periphery and a central viewing tower from which a superintendent could keep the establishment under surveillance. For the French theorist Michel Foucault, such a design marked a significant event in the history of the human mind by legitimising and institutionalising the dissemination of power and control through surveillance.[1] Whilst the principles underpinning the design are the same, the technologically mediated surveillance system goes beyond the physical constraints of architecture by dispersing power and control across the 'body' of the city, predicated as this is through the 'look' or 'gaze'. This is achieved through images being viewed or recorded using either real-time or time-lapse options and the siting of cameras at key vantage points throughout the city centre. As the artists themselves put it, this results in a continuity of knowledge being mapped out at any one time across a wide geographic space,

The activity of viewing and processing information, gathered through visual surveillance, can be characterised as a dichotomy between an active spectating subject and the object of this inquisitive gaze that (or who) is at once both passive and relegated to an inferior position through this unequal distribution and acquisition of 'knowledge' which' privileges the spectator.

Such a duality is played out in complex ways, not least through the formal syntax of the visual code but also through the process and moment of viewing. As spectators we participate in this contract of complicity and collusion staged through much of the *Search* video enactment. Indeed, the very title itself invites us, as spectators, to stake out a superior position of active knowledge acquisition. To search: to look through or overly carefully or thoroughly in order to discover something. Again this is worked out with heavy irony through the video scenario of the detective-based narrative. We see a 'character' (one of the artists) donning a trench coat, the archetypal detective uniform, in order to 'search' for clues. As viewers, our desire to 'know' is

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[1] Foucault, Michel, *Discipline and Punish,* Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1979.

literally played out through the 'detective' who is apparently in pursuit of an assailant or seeking a rendezvous with a shadowy accomplice. This 'chase' is observed and recorded through the surveillance system which is, in turn, one of the very real means by which the police themselves gather information.

But our desire for visual clues with which to complete the 'picture' - partly promised through the omniscient authority of the surveillance technology - is denied in a number of ways. Firstly the option, made by the artists, to use time-lapse imagery means that certain images are chosen and others excluded to produce an incomplete picture of both the city and the video enactment. As a result, there are glaring omissions in our visual knowledge. Temporal as opposed to spatial continuity is, therefore, privileged in linking together wide-angle shots of the city centre with its corporate architecture and bustling crowds alongside middle-distance shots focusing on the movements of the two artists. Furthermore, as spectators, certain expectations are established through the codes and conventions drawn from the classic detective thriller format. These centre on a narrative orientated around the investigations and activities of a male protagonist and which relegates female characters to a passive role either as victim or as an object of erotic contemplation. This former assumption, of the proactive and therefore male detective, echoes the reality of a police service which sees a disproportionate number of male officers promoted to the status of detective, Given this, our expectations, then, are radically reversed in the closing sequences of the video enactment when the 'true' identity of the two protagonists are very deliberately foregrounded - as women. This moment is marked when the two artists turn to gaze directly into the (two separate) camera(s) which also signals the 'closure' of the video enactment as the time codes are finally eradicated from the video frame. Our former status as spectators in privileged positions of knowledge-achieved through the 'look', and the spectatorial omniscience of the surveillance system coupled with the assumptions generated through the generic codes and conventions-are radically challenged and undermined. Through the evocation of a narrative scenario based on paranoia and voyeurism, which in turn are the main characteristics of any surveillance system (both real and conceptual), our gaze as a spectator is returned by the female gaze forcing us to ask the questions: Who is watching who? Who is the subject now?

The implications of this act of defiance are multi-fold. Not least in terms of challenging the ideological values written into the viewing experience, between the viewing subject and - in this instance - the video enactment along with the viewing apparatus (surveillance system). Classic feminist cultural theory has critiqued the institutions, specific fantasy scenarios and the viewing structures underpinning and written into much art history and popular cultural formats such as film which, it is argued, are designed to promote and privilege both the status and desires of (white, heterosexual) men.[2] For example, one such point of contention argues that many popular film products construct spectating positions and the narrative fantasy scenarios whereby women become the objects of sexually orientated male visual pleasures. Such observations raise very serious questions concerning not only mainstream culture, but the supporting visual apparatus (in this instance, surveillance systems), as a technology not only of control and discipline, but also of male power. But these early feminist critiques were flawed by implying both an essentialist sexual politic and advocating the determinist and therefore non-negotiable operation of any visual apparatus (the cinema, etc.). This effectively foreclosed the opportunity for women to work with processes emphasising the 'look' and thereby the possibility to devise different forms of visual pleasure, Naldi and Kirkup have chosen to directly engage with such issues by intervening with certain visual technologies: a closed-circuit television surveillance system as a means to construct a different space from which to articulate an alternative and previously unheard voice.

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[2] Mulvey. Laura, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema". *Screen*, 16, no. 3, Autumn 1975.

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In addition, the surveillance system can quite reasonably be dubbed a technology of 'male' power, not least because it is operated by a public service institution renowned for privileging male officers and for servicing the interests of corporate business. Furthermore, as part of the fabric of the city centre, this is a public space given over - not only to 'work' - but to a visible demonstration of corporate and civic power which further consolidates this inscription of patrician authority.

Given these characteristics governing the physical setting - the visual operation of the video enactment and the emphasis upon the inquisitional 'look' (all part of the visual apparatus of the surveillance system) - it is quite fitting that *Search* was 'sited' on television. Put simply, TV is not only a visual technology but, like the city, operates a 'public' space which is ideologically complicit, its ubiquitous nature, as a cultural format and as a physical unit, disguising its exclusivity in terms of real cultural access and again its dependency upon the market-place and private capital - both as a physical unit and in terms of the network's dependence on advertising. It was as part of this latter 'space' that *Search* was broadcast. As grainy black and white, short, silent sequences segued into the flow of glossy, full colour highly conventionalised, yet seductive, mini-dramas centring on lifestyles. The *Search* 'episodes' effectively disrupted the flow of these impossible dream-like spectacles. On one occasion, *Search* struck a freakish note of discord squeezed, as it was, between commercials for hair colorants and baby food during the advertising break of that off-peak, yet hugely popular, day-time viewing favourite *This Morning*. Less bizarre alliances were made when, as was the more common tendency, *Search* was scheduled at the end of the police-based drama series *The Bill* and alongside *Crimestoppers* (the Public Service Announcements detailing criminal incidents such as theft, and which often feature the same awkward, grainy, black and white video images culled from closed-circuit television surveillance systems). The *Search* episodes, then, functioned as an interventionist strategy akin to some pirate TV transmission in both appearance and enigmatic effect. Although, paradoxically, in order to be realised the project quite literally 'bought into' these advertising slots.

Through *Search*, Pat Naldi and Wendy Kirkup have demonstrated and articulated two features predominant in contemporary culture, namely paranoia and voyeurism, in which certain technologies of (male) power become part of the ideological social totality, which as Foucault has argued, we have created for ourselves.

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