Shopping the Shopper: Predictable Performances and Retail Surveillance

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This essay seeks to understand how retail surveillance in general, and mystery shopping in particular, works to influence performances of consumerism. Using the work of ritual, performance and surveillance scholars, this essay argues that this surveillance works to create performances of predictability that ensure maximum consumption. This predictability works to discipline consumers and employees in the consumption process. Finally, this essay explores how this retail surveillance can be responded to in ways that work to allow for creative consumer performances within a space that works to stifle that complexity.

Starting this story with the phrase, "I watched her with great interest," seems as if I might be invoking a bit more than what I will ultimately provide for you as a reader, "I watched her with great interest" makes it seem as if we might be about to begin a love story, and this is no love story, at least not a conventional one. In the broadest of strokes you might be able to make the case that this is a love story about the fascination that comes from watching people who do not know they are being watched, but the principals do not "end up together" at the end of this story. The watcher and the watched are instead destined to be in a relationship that lacks intimacy, because secrets are not conducive to relationships. Meaningful connections require honesty and understanding. The central relationship in this story (between the watcher and the watched) is instead built on manipulation and a profound distrust. But the truth is that I did watch her with great interest. I took almost five minutes just trying to get her name as her long hair covered it. I watched her as she greeted the young man in front of me and asked him if "he found everything alright today." I noticed that she maintained eye contact and held a smile while she invited his stock response. I felt a little bad when she did not ask him if he had his loyalty card with him. I did not feel bad for him, but for her. She seemed nice enough, and now I had decide whether or not to report on her failure to ask him if he would provide his identification so that his purchases could be tracked and he could be fit into a profile for advertisers to target. I wish she hadn't put me in the position of having to make

                    <http://liminalities.net/7-2/mystery.pdf>

this decision. I looked at my watch to determine how long the transaction in front of me had taken; thirty seconds isn't bad. She handed him his receipt and wished him a "good day" before looking up at me and asking, "Did you find everything alright today?" The art of noticing the subtle details of her job performance is something that I had honed for almost a year. I had become skilled at evaluating how she might do her job better. Could she get customers through her line faster? Did she try to "upsell" any products? Could she have made another twenty-five cents on the transaction?

Mystery shopping is a growing trend within the service industry that allows managers to evaluate frontline customer service within corporate owned stores. Mystery shoppers pose as "regular" customers by navigating consumers through the consumption process. These retail spies are given scripts in advance that indicate how the employee should perform. These include evaluative categories such as how friendly the employee was, how fast s/he worked and whether or not s/he followed the mandated script (such as "would you like a large? It is only a quarter more").

After going through the consumption process, the mystery shopper reports on this experience to the company that employs him/her. This information is then relayed to managers who use it to judge employees' performances. This form of workplace surveillance became especially popular in the 1970's, and with the rise of technology that allows instant data transfer, it has become a multimillion dollar a year industry.

From 2004-2007 I worked as a mystery shopper monitoring various businesses, such as grocery stores, office supply stores, video rental companies and fast food restaurants. An example of my own experience as a mystery shopper makes clearer exactly what this job entails. As a mystery shopper, one of the jobs I have completed is mystery shopping an electronic store. I was instructed to inquire about getting a cell phone that connects to the internet. When I first entered the store, I had to browse and time how long it took for an employee to ask if I needed any help (target time was about one minute). When this happened I told the employee that I was interested in looking at a cell phone. After hearing the sales pitch and receiving a recommendation, I was instructed to listen to see if the employee tried to close the sale by saying something like, "Can I go ahead and ring you up then?" At this point I had to raise an objection. This objection could either be that the phone was too expensive, that I did not like the look of the phone, or that I wanted a phone with a faster connection speed. I chose to object to the sale based on price. How did the employee respond? There were a few "appropriate" reactions to the objection. The employee could let me play with it for a few minutes, hoping I would fall in love with it and forget the pricing problem. He could try to sell me a different phone that did not have the same "problem." Finally, he could try to convince me that the objection was unwarranted (i.e., "This is really the best phone out there for the money," or "You are going to get slow connection speed with about any phone"). At this point I say, "I will think about it" and I buy a small item from the store. Finally, I assess the sale of the smaller item. Was the transaction fast enough? Was the employee friendly?

Did the employee maintain eye contact? Etc? For this job I received $11 plus reimbursement of the small item I purchased.

The literature about mystery shopping is very limited and found primarily in marketing publications. These market based approaches are generally concerned with helping management effectively use mystery shopping. This literature argues that mystery shopping collects incredibly beneficial data while also expending minimum effort (Finn and Kayande) and also acts as a motivational tool for employees (Wilson, Leeds, Garber). Although the literature is sparse, it is valuable for understanding the rationale behind the practice. The goals of mystery shopping, diagnostic as well as motivational, give us a good indication of the intent behind this surveillance. It exists to preserve capital by monitoring the performances of employees who are expected to follow scripts that maximize consumption. This essay is mainly concerned with how this practice seeks to create and monitor predictable employee and consumer performances. In this essay I explore how surveillance within a capitalist framework creates predictable performances by explaining how the mystery shopper acts as a critic of performances of consumerism and ways that we might begin to respond to this surveillance gaze. I will now turn to a brief discussion of the goals and effects of retail surveillance as a backdrop for understanding specifically how the mystery shopper works to create predictable performances among employees and consumers.

Useful Bodies

> The story of our role as consumers in late capitalism is told in the story of how much energy goes into monitoring and tracking our buying habits, 'lifestyle' choices, and financial stature [. . .]there is an extraordinary amount of ritualized surveillance and monitoring taking place in our most mundane consumer activities—from our preferences in breakfast cereal, the type of pain relief we take, or the magazines we read. (Staples 85)

Staples explains that "useful" bodies are primarily consuming ones, and surveillance is one strategy used for creating and maintaining "useful" bodies. Some surveillance scholarship describes surveillance within capitalism as an attempt to maximize effect while minimizing the effort that goes into it (Reeve, Kling & Allen). Bodies are most useful when they consume at maximum levels while the effort put into creating those "useful bodies" is minimum. Surveillance within capitalism works toward this goal.

Foucault's well known description of Jeremy Bentham's 18th Century design for a panopticon provides the best-known example of how surveillance within capitalism works to achieve this goal. Bentham's panoptican was developed as a model prison with a large tower in the middle of the prison grounds that stands erect reminding prisoners that they may be under surveillance. The tower includes a blind and a lighting scheme that does not allow prisoners to look into the tower. The surveyor can see out of the tower, but the surveyed cannot look in. The panopticon is effective because the object of the surveillance is never sure if they are being watched at any given moment. The inability of any subject to discern if they are being watched at any

given moment disciplines the prisoners into subjects. Eventually the gaze becomes self-imposed.

Foucault describes a social body that is disciplined through the surveillance of the panopticon. "Discipline fixes; it arrests or regulates movements; it clears up confusion…it establishes calculated distributions. It must also master all the forces that are formed from the very constitution of an organized multiplicity" (219). Discipline turns bodies into subjects, which in turn become part of the operation of power. It organizes people in ways that makes them useful to the social order.

It is the threat of being watched rather than the surety of being watched that ensures this social control. The surveillance system need not always be watching everyone (which minimizes surveillance effort), but everyone must act as if they are always being watched (which maximizes the effect of surveillance). Foucault describes this apparatus as a social control mechanism that makes the object of surveillance internalize the surveillance gaze. Once the panopticon is in place, it is not even necessary to have anyone in the surveillance tower, just as long as someone might be.

The strategies of the panopticon can easily be used to monitor workers who are supposed to produce (such as on the assembly line). The gaze of the guard in the tower can survey factory workers using a Taylorism framework, but evaluating customer service is a bit harder to monitor through video cameras and towers. Getting to the point of sale is more difficult though. The mystery shopper provides this opportunity by spying on the customer service representatives. By posing as a consumer, the mystery shopper embodies the gaze of the panopticon because any shopper could be a mystery shopper. Every customer does not have to be a mystery shopper, as long as they might be. We could even imagine a situation where mystery shoppers would not be necessary. Employers could simply tell employees that they are there (and perhaps even drum up some "fake" mystery shopping reports to give to the employees).

One example of the ability of the mystery shopper to step into the role of the guard in the tower of the panopticon is illustrated in a memo that my partner received when she worked at a national department store. The memo read, "Remember– Anyone could be a secret shopper. Offer great customer service to all customers." The motivation for providing "great customer service" to everyone is because some of the people that the employee guides through the rituals of consumption are spies. This memo is a slightly veiled threat to the employee. "Great customer service" is a reference to facilitating the consumption process efficiently and making it enjoyable for the consumer and profitable for the company. The employee is motivated to facilitate the ritual this way with every consumer because there are people who are watching, but the employee never knows who those people are. One reason that employees provide adequate service is because anyone could be the mystery shopper. One out of every hundred or one out of every ten customers might be a mystery shopper. The employee has no way to know. It is the perfect example of the threat of being watched rather than the certainty of being watched that motivates the employee. This creates Foucault's description of "a state of consciousness and

permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power" (201). The mystery shopper is simultaneously invisible and permanently visible in the consumption process.

The panopticon does far more than simply monitor (or threaten to monitor) the employee. Poster argues that, "the panopticon is not simply the guard in the tower but the entire discourse/practice that bears down on the prisoner, one that constitutes him or her as a criminal [or an employee]" (182). The rationale for surveillance is often found in a promise to be able to catch "inappropriate" behavior whether it is shoplifting, stealing from the cash register or employee laziness. Bogard instead argues that surveillance is concerned primarily with the future. It works to make "reality" obsolete by creating a "surprise free body" (44) through simulated actions. Surveillance creates the very actions that it claims to monitor. Surveillance is often powerless to stop what it is monitoring (it cannot often do much with the past), but it can discipline future action.

Our surveilled actions become simulations because there is no originality. We are not autonomous people who find ourselves thrust on the scene while being monitored. We are instead subjects whose very subjectivity is constituted by the gaze. Our performance choices are citational of "appropriate" behavior with no authorship of those actions. "The gaze is no longer on the scene; it is the *total* scene [italics not mine]" (76). If surveillance is concerned with the future, it is successful in its ability to maximize effect. Instead of spending resources to punish "inappropriate" behavior, it stops the action before it endangers capital.

This maximization of effect and minimization of effort reaches new heights in what Poster calls "superpanopticonism." He explains, "in the superpanopticon, surveillance is assured when the act of the individual is communicated by telephone line to the computerized database, with only a minimum of data being entered" (184). The superpanopticon is concerned with databases of information on individuals. While using the minimum amount of energy and resources, these databases work to decenter and multiply the subject. In keeping with the goals of the panopticon to maximize surveillance while minimizing effort, a minimum amount of information needs to be entered into the database. For example, your credit card will yield a wealth of information about your buying habits. All of your information does not need to be entered every time you use your credit card number. Only your credit card number is needed to add to that database. Surveillance in this instance is assured rather than a possibility.

Bogard's explanation of the increasing presence of the cyborg worker demonstrates how employees have become integrated into the superpanopticon. The cyborg worker does not only refer to the routinized and seemingly robotic actions of worker, but also to the networking of employees. Cyborg work is characterized by a move to turn labor into information. Information is not only what workers produce, but also what produces efficient workers. Workers increasingly operate within a system that offers a perfect record of movement. Every transaction that the worker makes is recorded. An example of this networking is when a grocery store clerk signs

onto a register so his/her actions can be recorded. How much time lapsed between each transaction? How many items did the employee scan in a minute? How much money was taken throughout the course of the day?

The cyborg worker is monitored by the superpanopticon when this information is recorded and entered into a database. The mystery shopper contributes to this creation of cyborg workers through the inputting of data that inevitably goes to a database to record the employee's performance history. Mystery shopping becomes part of that employee's record. This record need not be manually updated, but it is automatically updated. The effect of the record is absolute; the effort put into maintaining it is minimum. This goal of maximizing and minimizing is a fundamental part of understanding how the mystery shopper acts in our consumer performances. I will now move toward an explanation of consumption as ritual to examine how it is that the mystery shopper works on our performances of consumerism.

Ritualistic Consumption

Consumption practices are rituals deeply ingrained in contemporary Western culture. Lowe argues that it is the instability of the consumption processes that makes contemporary consumption complicated. We certainly are no longer expected to buy what we need, because our needs have become destabilized. Loy argues, "[the market] makes no distinction between genuine needs and the most dubious manufactured desires. Both are treated as normative. It makes no difference why someone wants something" (287). It doesn't even make sense to talk about what we need in the contemporary capitalist culture, because our needs have become signifiers that are constantly shifting because of the ability of advertising to keep consumers "needing" more 1995). It is these shifting (and often manufactured) desires that motivate our ritual participation.

Although there is no academic consensus about what exactly ritual is there are some characteristics of ritual that most scholars agree exist in all rituals to some degree. Rituals are rule governed codes of behavior that we learn to enact (Bell, Rappaport); they are performed repetitiously and enacted through our bodies with the use of cultural scripts (Driver, Turner, Tambiah); and they are ideological because of their constant references to and enactments of power relationships that operate in our world (Hollywood, Butler, Bell). Consumption falls into each of these categories, and understanding consumption as ritual opens up the possibilities of understanding consumption as performance. Consumption as ritual is a vital component for understanding how the mystery shopper acts as a performance critic within the logic of consumerism.

Belk, Wallendorf and Sherry argue that consumption is ritualistic (and therefore ideological) by reference to Durkheim's explanation of the relationship between the sacred and the profane. The profane is the mundane part of our lives. The sacred offers transcendence of the profane and allows us to escape the monotony of our lives. Belk, Wallendorf and Sherry explain that shopping spaces are becoming

increasingly sacred because of their ability to provide transcendence from our everyday lives. Advertisers promise us that if we buy enough we can transcend our everyday lives and find happiness that cannot be found in the mundane. Rituals preserve the distinction between the sacred and the profane. Consumption rituals are not only concerned with making people buy, but also with the meanings that are attached to the products we consume. Advertising is often concerned with creating images of products that are "hip" or "cool." The products we purchase often give us a chance to define ourselves ideologically. We think very differently about someone who would buy a Humvee instead of a hybrid. A person who wears Gucci is positioned differently than someone wearing a *Nine Inch Nails* T-shirt. Certain products are "in" for any ideological message at any given moment, while others struggle to receive this status with consumers. Of course, these are always changing and we have to continually buy more to maintain our access to sacred space. Loy describes this drive as a type of religious salvation that, much like traditional religious salvation, is focused on the future. This consumptive salvation promises us that we will be happy in the future, but it arguable leads to greater dissatisfaction.

Durkheim's discussion of the sacred and the profane eighty years ago is still very important to ritual studies. Most ritual theorists acknowledge him as the founder of the systematic study of ritual. Durkheim argues that rituals are primarily rules about how we interact with sacred space. Rituals provide rules that make sure that profane space does not come into contact with sacred space, lest the sacred space becomes defiled. Rituals are ideological because they protect sacred space, which always has political implications. To determine the ideological value of ritual, we must ask ourselves what it protects.

Marketing firms have dumped billions of dollars into understanding and crafting consumption rituals because of their value. Understanding how the ritual is enacted helps increase the chances for success. The consumption rituals that we engage in are never arbitrary, but are instead carefully crafted. The goal is to find out which variations of the ritual yield the highest rates of consumption. Employees are provided scripts from market research firms that help them facilitate the ritual. "Do you want to biggie-size your meal?" "With your purchase today you qualify for a free trial subscription to any of these three magazines." "Would you like a large for a quarter more?" "Have you decided to sign up for the movie pass yet? "Are you sure you wouldn't like a drink with that?" "Do you want to put that on your company charge card?" and if you don't have one, "Can I sign you up? No payments for twelve months and you save twenty percent off of your purchase today." Every single word in these scripts is carefully tested and researched. Each part of the ritual is intended to influence the consumer to consume more. Even though we are often annoyed at these scripts, we know they increase consumption or they would not do it. These are all variations on the ritual that are intended to create "useful" bodies that are primarily concerned with consuming.

With this "usefulness" comes risk. Something is at stake in the ritual. Some consumers no doubt find this system satisfactory, but others might find it troubling.

Ritual is not benign. Because of the ideological implications, someone stands to benefit and someone stands to lose. These risks are important to understanding how the mystery shopper works and who benefits from the presence of the mystery shopper.

The most obvious risk involved in this ritual is that we will be duped into consuming more than we should. The benefits that these ritual scripts provide (such as expediency and pleasure) do not come without a price. One recipient of the impact of the consumption ritual is the employee who guides the consumer through the transaction. Employees sell their time to the company as a commodity (Sweezy), and every employee is expected to maximize profit from each transaction. This comes from a combination of encouraging the consumer to consume as much as possible by being efficient (but not at the expense of driving away consumption), and being paid as little as possible to provide as much surplus value for the company as possible (Sweezy). Although the consumption process might be enjoyable for the consumer, it is certainly not all that enjoyable to the employee who is constantly being disciplined to be concerned with maximizing profit for the company.

Corporations are faced with a fundamental problem in this ritual of consumption. The facilitators of consumption rituals simply do not stand to gain from the success of the ritual in the same way that the company does. This becomes a question of motivation. How can you expect employees who are often working for minimum wage to facilitate the consumption ritual to maximize consumption when they have nothing to gain from it? Why would the average employee care if you biggie-size your drink or not? Generally they don't.

Surveillance is necessary to make sure that the employee follows the script, and mystery shopping is one surveillance apparatus geared toward monitoring employee ritual facilitation. When this type of workplace surveillance is present, the worker has vested interest in their facilitation of the rituals. Their own access to capital is at stake (even though the capital they are seeking to protect is not even close to the same amount of the successful corporation, but the same intent guides them both). Lowe explains that it is the threat of unemployment that disciplines the workplace. Employees will be punished and not have access to a job which provides access to the financial resources which allow them to consume. It is this system of surveillance that the mystery shopper operates within.

The panopticon works to create this discipline. An example of a mystery shopping job I performed illustrates how the mystery shopper steps into the panopticon to ensure discipline in the consumption ritual. At an office supply store, I went in to look at office chairs. I looked for a few minutes and timed how long it took for an employee to ask if I needed help. After receiving help, I found a chair I liked and asked about it. After testing it out for a moment I was instructed to identify a feature that could be changed (such as color or upholstery), but was not available in the store. I told the employee that I would like the chair to be leather. I was to take note of how the employee handled the situation. The "right" course of action was to guide me to the company website where this feature might be available. This is a fairly

common script in mystery shopping jobs. The mystery shopper will offer a roadblock to completing the consumption ritual. When I mystery shopped a video store I had to wander around looking lost to see if an employee would help me find what I was looking for. At a grocery store I had to purchase a large item and put it under my cart. When checking out I had to "forget" that I had the item and see if the cashier would notice it and remind me to pay for it. When mystery shopping an electronic store I had to perform confusion over which printer cartridge I needed and see what kind of assistance the employee could offer.

These examples illustrate (i) how a mystery shopper is a guard in the tower of the panopticon, and (ii) how the purpose of mystery shopping is to monitor ritual facilitation that maximizes consumption. The mystery shopper is given in advance the ritual script for how to provide the greatest chance to maximize consumption. A block of this ritual script gives the employer a chance to determine how willing the employee is to preserve the consumption ritual. In the example of the office chair, because the sale could not be completed in store, the ritual script that yielded the highest potential for consumption was to point me to the website. The script ensures that the employee will adequately facilitate the ritual in a way that makes the shopper most likely to consume. The mystery shopper ensures that this script is followed. Part of the motivation for an employee to point you to the website is that you might be a mystery shopper who will alert managers that he/she did not properly facilitate the ritual. Every customer is guided through the ritual this way because he/she might be a mystery shopper.

These strategies work toward securing that the mystery shopper will be successful in surveilling the consumption ritual. These strategies are the basic premise of this practice, and without them the mystery shopper could not work toward the discipline that retail surveillance seeks to secure. I am not arguing that these troubling aspects of surveillance affect every consumer and employee the same way. There are no doubt those who have developed responses to this system. This analysis of mystery shopping surveillance speaks to the intentions of the system and does not necessarily reflect the ability of the system to discipline any single individual within it. Any person at any time might refuse to be swayed by the attempts of surveillance to increase consumption, but there is no doubt that when applied to masses of people, this type of surveillance will work to increase consumption, to create those performances of predictability.

Doubly "Useful Bodies"

The strategies of the mystery shopper that work to ensure discipline and predictability in the consumption process are important parts of the surveillance apparatus, but mystery shoppers and employees are not the only ones implicated in it. The body of the consumer is present as well and plays an important part in the ritual. Because surveillance is such an important part of the ritual, we (as consumers) are no doubt implicated in the surveillance apparatus as well. Our implication is vital to the success

of both the consumption ritual and the surveillance that is embedded in it. Because I have already discussed the strategies of the mystery shopper in the consumption ritual, I will now focus on our implication as consumers in this practice.

The genius of mystery shopping is its ability to make our bodies doubly "useful" as consumers and as part of the surveillance process. Not only are consumers valuable because of our ability to consume, but also because of our ability to surveil. We are facilitated through the rituals of consumption in ways that tend to maximize our consumption because we might be the mystery shopper. More often than not, an employee does not want to guide you through the consumption ritual in a way that makes you buy as much as possible, but he/she does so because you are being treated as if you are a mystery shopper. Our bodies not only consume, but also work to guarantee that we consume more. Because we are cast as spies in the consumption process, we do their work for them. We do double-duty in the consumption ritual. We are the referees as well as the players. It does not matter if you are "actually" a mystery shopper or not. The fact that you might be means that you are. In the moment of consumption, the only difference to an employee between the average consumer and the mystery shopper is compensation. Because of this double-duty, the gaze of the mystery shopper is not ultimately pointed at the employee, but at the consumer. This strategic move works to make us consume more because the ritual scripts are more likely to be followed. Each consumer works to maximize the effects of the mystery shopper while minimizing the effort put into it.

It is also important to remember that not only do we participate in this double-duty by buying and watching, but we also fund it. The surveillance apparatus is not free, and as consumers we support the mystery shopping gaze financially. We often understand the privacy we give up to surveillance as a price we pay for efficient and pleasurable shopping experiences. Privacy is not the only price we pay though. The financial price of the mystery shopper is built into the price tag of every item we buy. Products are more expensive because of surveillance. Not only do we watch employees, but also we fund the apparatus that forces us to watch employees.

The gaze of the panopticon is almost too simple of a way to describe this surveillance relationship, for the panopticon implies a one-way gaze. When we enter contested consumer space we instead encounter matrices of surveillance gazes. The consumer operates under the assumption that the employee is watching him/her to make sure he/she follows the appropriate consumption rituals. Because we are all mystery shoppers, the employee assumes that the consumer is watching her/him and gauging her/his ritual facilitation to maximize consumption. Each side of the transaction assumes that everyone else is a spy for the "other side." Because we are being watched, we are encouraged to perform appropriate consumer behavior. We ritually consume in ways that do not deviate from the pattern we know, all the while looking over our shoulder. We think we are the sole object of the gaze of the panopticon, while forgetting that we are also in the tower. Surveillance becomes complicated. There is not a unitary Big Brother watching. There are instead various gazes with different interests operating at any given moment.

The efficiency and pleasure that are provided by the mystery shopper are trade-offs in the consumption ritual. They come with a price (that of being watched, higher consumption rates and the price of mystery shopping that is built into the items we buy). Many consumers no doubt find this an acceptable price to pay. The bottom line is that employee and consumer alike are disciplined in the process. The chances for "successful" consumption (which rests on predictability) increase because of how our bodies are used in this process. The effect of retail surveillance in general (and mystery shopping more specifically) is ultimately intended to discipline us as consumers, to turn us into participants that will predictably buy and therefore further the ideology of consumption that benefits corporate interests. If we are cynical about the capitalist machine, the ultimate goal is to commodify our bodies and create our primary identity as consumers. In consumption, ritual predictability is paramount to success. Capital is at stake when consumers are creative. Surveillance as simulation (Bogard) works to stifle this creativity by attempting to create consumption rituals that are never original, but instead referential to the other billions of consumption acts that happen on a daily basis. Part of the beauty of rituals is their ability to reinterpret the world through our participation in them (Bell). Rituals offer the opportunity to be creative, the very thing that mystery shopping intends to curb.

Because of the contested nature of retail consumption, this domination of the consumer can never be fully realized. Fiske argues that:

> There is so much advertising only because it can never finally succeed in its tasks—those of containing social diversity within the needs of capitalism and of reducing the relative autonomy of the cultural economy from the financial, that is, of controlling not only what commodities people buy but the cultural uses they put them to. (30)

This analysis can be extended to surveillance as well. The reason that so much must be invested in it is because of its inability to succeed in ultimately disciplining the consumer for once and all. And while the goals of capitalism might seem deviant, ritual consumption is still always contested. The inability of the capitalist machine to ever fully create predictable consumption performances, however, opens up a realm of potential methods of subversion.

Responding to the Surveillance Gaze

The mystery shopper is always with us, especially because as consumers we are implicated in this aspect of the surveillance apparatus. We cannot opt out of the system. We are cast in it every time we perform consumption rituals. How do we adequately participate in the ritual of consumption when we are all cast in multiple roles that seek to discipline our shopping practices and the employees who guide us through the process? How do we perform this ritual? There are no easy answers (and we shouldn't seek them). It would be a mistake to simply try and opt out of

consumption. This response ignores the ways in which we benefit from the mystery shopper as it simultaneously binds us.

What I advocate for as a response is an active model of engagement with the surveillance apparatus. Part of the problem is that that consumer surveillance happens at a distance. It is difficult to engage with the surveillance apparatus that monitors us because we often are not aware of the ways we are watched in any given moment, and even if we are it is difficult to engage the surveillance apparatus that is shrouded in secrecy and operates at a distance. Active engagement that is aware of the citational nature of our performances in surveillance space is a productive place to start. An active engagement model calls for purposeful and aware performance choices in consumer space. This model resists the passivity and predictability that the surveillance gaze seeks to necessitate.

A performance by Steve Mann provides an example of active engagement with the surveillance gaze by infusing creativity into our consumer performances. In the piece "Maybe Camera," Mann gathers a group of six people who attach a small rectangular box on their bulky sweat-shirts with the words "for **your** protection a video record of you and your establishment *may* be **transmitted** and **recorded** at **remote** locations. All criminal acts prosecuted!!!" Out of the six people wearing the shirts, only one actually has a camera in it that is transmitting video to his website. None of the performers know who is wearing the camera. When an employee asks someone if they are wearing a camera, they truthfully answer that they don't know.

Although this is a pretty hilarious commentary on the black orbs above retail stores that might or might not be cameras, it also pretty closely mirrors mystery shopping. The assumption that employees never know who has the camera is very similar to the way that employees never know who is the mystery shopper. The acknowledgement of the performers that the employees cannot know if they are acting as surveillance highlights how the customer is implicated in the surveillance gaze. It is pretty easy to imagine a similar consumer performance that would involve "maybe mystery shopper" shirts. Mann explains that the problems with contemporary surveillance stem from our inability to interact with it the same way that it interacts with us. His attempts to take up a position that allow him to negotiate an interaction with surveillance are an example of ritual creativity that is available within the dominant ideology of surveillance, but not necessarily sanctioned.

This example is an interesting segue to reflecting on whether or not we consumers can apply these tactics. McGrath proposes that objects of surveillance use counter-surveillance that addresses surveillance representation. McGrath's proposal does not call for a simplified type of counter-surveillance that simply watches those who are watching us. "[Counter-surveillance is] not only about reversing the gaze but about opening a space for all sorts of reversals in relation to how the gaze and its imagery may be experienced" (201).

This is a call for us to instead work to gain some agency in our representation within surveillance, to gain a sense of "auto-representation" (202) that works against the forces of surveillance that work to create a homogenous whole. "Counter-

surveillance…is imagined as a gaze which restores the integrity of the body, disproves rumours of its misbehaviour, restores its coherence in the face of its systematic misinterpretation" (214).

This counter-surveillance comes out of awareness that our surveillance selves are negotiated. There is no such thing as a simple representation of who we are in surveillance images. Even if we do not like the "us" that is presented in surveillance images, these images are never false the same way they are never true about us. They are simply negotiations that are happening in this matrix of surveillance.

Counter-surveillance finds its power not in providing a "true" picture of ourselves to counter-act the person we are within surveillance. The images of counter-surveillance instead exist beside the surveillance selves that have been created by the machine of surveillance. It reminds us that neither is "true." They are simply translations of who we are that are part of the negotiation of our surveillance identity. This counter-surveillance provides a narrative of us within the surveillance system that works to limit complexity. This is the very thing that retail surveillance works against. It attempts to strip us of complexity and to make us into predictable consumers, and only consumers (and employees in the case of mystery shopping). There is no complexity to who we are in this space. Counter-surveillance reminds us that our identities are never this stagnant. "The goal can never be to close down surveillance, but rather to multiply its effects, to deconstruct its power structures" (McGrath 219).

We can work at providing this counter-surveillance by employing ritual creativity that relies on what Michel de Certeau's calls tactics. [1] For this response to be effective it must not be strategized. Tactical responses emerge out of the moment and seize small victories only to once again retreat into the shadows. Tactical negotiation is quick, responsive, and light. The surveillance images that we offer do not fully demonstrate the complex negotiation of our identities if they do not come from the moment, if they do not rely on tactical responses. We make decisions as situations present themselves, and counter-surveillance images should be presented in this way.

When we employ tactical ritual creativity in the consumer process, this complexity becomes the very thing that surveillance monitors and records. The databases of surveillance then become about our complex identities. The very complexity that allows for the possibility of resistance becomes the thing that surveillance monitors. We become free to engage the surveillance gaze instead of being appropriated by it. We can claim agency in the complexity that we choose to put on display (McGrath).

The scripts that intend to make us buy more completely ignore the potential complexity of the consumer and the employee that could be put into play. Mel Ash describes the spirit of the beat poets as one way to employ ethical communication and

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[1] De Certeau describes two versions of power in consumer culture; tactics and strategies. Strategies are concerned with space, isolation and power over. Tactics are instead reactionary and rather than a concern with space "a tactic depends on time-it is always on the watch for opportunities that must be seized 'on the wing.' Whatever it wins, it does not keep. It must constantly manipulate events in order to turn them into opportunities" (de Certeau xix).

to find spiritual connection. The beat poets, when writing, did not premeditate their words in advance (131); they instead followed the example of Mark 13:11. "Take no thought beforehand what ye shall speak, neither do ye premeditate; but whatsoever shall be given you in that hour, that speak ye: for it is not ye that speak, but the Holy Ghost." Applying the tactics of the beat poets to counter surveillance tactics highlights the aesthetic gesture of performance art that might be present in such responses. Counter surveillance tactics should be thought of as performances. A generative and often surprising performance aesthetic is a direct response to the cold predictability that the surveillance gaze attempts to fix.

The scripts that mystery shopping reports dictate work to eliminate any creativity in consumer-employee interaction. The words of both parties are carefully planned out, and the mystery shopper carefully listens to see if the script is followed. By getting off script and improvising the consumer performance, we can allow for complexity to emerge in the moment. This complexity then becomes the thing that surveillance monitors. This also acknowledges the social solidarity that must be present in resistant ritual. This improvisation cares for the complexity of the employee who is often reduced to only an employee.

One example of an attempt to claim agency through a display of complexity happened in the checkout lane of a grocery store where I was mystery shopping. As I waited in line, I could tell the cashier was tired and not especially present at this point of sale. He took longer with his transactions than he should have. He was not extending a "proper" greeting to customers. There was no bagger, so he was also responsible for bagging the groceries as well as ringing up customers. This task added to the time of his transactions. I had experience with this cashier before, and he was usually very friendly and attentive. I assumed that he must have been having a bad day, which was affecting his performance. As I approached the cash register with my $13 in groceries, I initiated a greeting before he had the chance to not greet me. I placed my groceries right next to the scanner so they would not need to travel down the conveyor belt (something that would no doubt take time and add to the length of the sale). Before he scanned my items, I started the process of bagging my own groceries so he would not have the chance to unenthusiastically and lethargically engage this task. The transaction came in at under thirty seconds, a perfectly acceptable length. I was able to truthfully report on his friendliness and avoid making negative marks about his bagging.

My influence in this ritual process was a small tactical response that came out of the moment. When I began this interaction, I had no intention of swaying the ritual in this way. The solidarity between the two of us in this moment worked to create a surveillance image that was neither true nor false, but instead complex. This is a response to the alienation inherent in the world ruled by the surveillance gaze. When I reported that he was friendly, it was not a lie, but neither was it the "true" image that this mystery shopping report intended to capture. The act of solidarity (even if unaware by one party in the ritual moment) is presented as a statistic that has no direct relationship to the truth of the moment that this mystery shopping report

captures. This exposes the inability of the surveillance system to capture who we "really" are in moments of consumption. I do not intend this example to be prescriptive. Like all tactics should, it happened in the moment. To prescribe it would turn it into a strategy. This strategy could then be usurped by the surveillance system. Much like consumerism, surveillance has at the core of its logic the ability to consume its own critique and transform it into part of itself. If those concerned with the surveillance gaze were to be able to find a tactic that worked at disrupting the surveillance apparatus, it would not take long for it to be detected. Scripts at countering this tactic would soon be employed and mystery shoppers would soon be asked to perform the disruption to ensure that employees handle it in a way that threatens the least amount of capital. We must instead understand general principles of how tactics that aim for social solidarity and ritual creativity in consumption can operate.

Tactical acts of creativity allow the surveillance gaze that we provide as mystery shoppers to become co-opted and provide a space for counter-surveillance images to be proliferated by us as consumers and employees. This is not a silver-bullet approach. It would be naïve to assume that these tactics will work to deliver a crippling blow to the surveillance apparatus. It instead offers us a limited amount of agency within the confines of the surveillance system. We can strive to create performances that foster creativity rather than predictability.

The lessons of the mystery shopper do not end with the retail community though. The logic of the mystery shopper has been extended beyond retail space. Some churches use mystery worshippers. Mystery patients have been present in the medical community for quite some time (Turner) and there has been recent discussion of using mystery students to evaluate university faculty (Douglas & Douglas). As the gaze of the mystery shopper expands to sites beyond traditional retail space, it is important to be aware of the ways that it seeks to make these spaces predictable as well. Our negotiation with surveillance must similarly expand beyond retail space. To say that no space is safe might be a bit of an overstatement, but it highlights the necessity of what Lewis describes as "critical surveillance literacy." This type of literacy requires us develop the skills to read surveillance environments as "against the grain," which highlights how power is negotiated in surveillance practices.

As we proceed in finding creative performances within this surveillance space, let us keep in mind the seemingly doomed relationship at the beginning of this story. If this were a cheesy romance novel, the inside flap of this book might read something like:

> *He watched her with great interest. She was unaware of his powerful gaze. But what would she think if she knew his secret intentions? Will she still want him when she finds out that he is not who he seems to be? Is their connection enough to overcome the secrets that are keeping them apart? Can the watcher and the watched find a meaningful relationship beyond secrecy and deceit? Is all doomed?*

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