

FURNISHING POSITIONS 05

PRIVACY | PUBLICITY

ISSUE 05

ERIC CAZDYN | CHARLES STANKIEVECH

10/11/2014

THE OPPOSITE OF PRIVATE IS NOT PUBLIC

ERIC CAZDYN

When we saw with our own eyes the video stills of the mayor smoking crack and heard with our own ears the mayor lying about smoking crack, we finally confirmed what we already knew. The mayor smoked crack. And the mayor lied. When we saw the leaked video of US military pilots murdering innocent journalists in Iraq (and heard the pilots' real-time commentary as they glibly rejoiced in their kills), we finally confirmed what we already knew—that war is hell. We tend to think that such confirmation is required in order to transform speculation into fact, and lingering doubt into unshakable confidence. Without the smoking gun we are stuck, always one clue short of closing the case. But what if it is the other way around? What if the confirmation of what we already know effectively undermines our confidence and keeps us further from the truth? What if it is the lack of assurance and the absence of any buried treasure that sharpens our critical qualities and brings us closer to understanding the logic of how things work? What if, finally, radical politics emerges not from a righteous and committed knowing, but from a hesitant not-knowing and a creative mobilization of our critical limits?

These creeping questions are meant to remind us that the assumptions that ground the current debate over information (concerning the extent to which the state should mobilize our private data) are not as stable as we might think. Or, to go even further, we can argue that the fundamental assumption of the debate, that the terms “private” and “public” are opposites, is unstable. The opposite of private is not public. *The opposite of private, rather, is another private in a qualitatively different historical situation. And the opposite of the public is not the private as we know it today under the condition of late capitalism, but another public—a post-capitalist public that is unimaginable from the enclosure of our present.* Unimaginable... but not impossible. At stake here is a rather simple critical manoeuvre—one by which we make sense of our current challenges not from within the very real constraints of the present situation, but from within a more expansive historiographical horizon; one in which, for instance, we incorporate into our present the possibilities of a radically different future. This is a post-capitalist public that is driven by a different logic than the present but is still connected to it, like a dream to waking life.

The incorporation of the future into the consideration of the private and the public provides a different perspective on how to examine the assumptions at the heart of the current whistleblowing debate. Centred around such iconic names such as Snowden, Manning, and Assange, this debate prioritizes transparency and exposure as a means to more free and democratic societies. Indeed, the lies should be

deconcealed and the liars held accountable (and these three dissidents should be celebrated for how they have effectively challenged the black-is-white logic of our leading geopolitical institutions). However, the celebration of transparency and exposure as a critical practice (not to mention the fetishistic and a-historical cliché-mongering of the term “democracy”) should be mistrusted, as it invariably leads to a debilitating and moralizing post-politics—making us feel better about ourselves when the bad guys are caught red-handed, only until the good guys (ourselves included) are revealed to have red hands as well. What goes missing in this melodrama are the critical thinking skills required to understand the logic of our current social system, as well as the radical acts required to change it.

Unlike Chelsea Manning, Edward Snow-



Chelsea Manning, 2010. Credit: Reuters/US Army Handout.



Still from *Prism*, dir. Laura Poitras, 2013

den outed and revealed himself—and did so by way of the image. So let's turn to Laura Poitras's remarkable video of June 6, 2013, shot in a Hong Kong hotel room and distributed via the Internet to be viewed countless times the world over. The video was shot only days before Snowden made his way to Russia and during which he revealed to journalist Glenn Greenwald the previously undisclosed details of the Prism project, which grants the NSA direct access to private user data held by Google, Facebook, Apple, and other major corporations.

The video begins with an establishing shot of the calm Hong Kong harbour, almost a still shot if not for the waves and boats moving in the distance. This is followed by the shot that remains for the entirety of the video's twelve and a half minutes, although occasionally cut and with slight variations of focal length (see still above). What is conspicuous from the beginning is not Snowden, but the back of Snowden's head reflected in the mirror behind him. The mirror: a key metaphor of the first wave of film theory, in which the film screen serves as a mirror whereby the spectator can falsely identify him or herself as an autonomous ego. In this model the spectator also identifies with the camera that purports to be all-seeing and thus establishes a regime of visibility from which nothing escapes—everything is experienced as transparent. But it is not, and the critical practice is then to remember that there is a camera and that

we are participating in our own misrecognition of how meaning and power works.

Unlike the “hypodermic needle” model of subject formation (in which the state injects the subject with dominant ideology), the Screen theorists of the 1970s wisely reminded us that the subject is his or her own dealer and injector. This argument relied on the work of Louis Althusser and Jacques Lacan's early essay on the mirror phase, during which the infant sees its mirrored reflection as full presence and identifies with the whole image rather than his or her own fragmented body, leading to an imaginary sense of mastery. For many film scholars this led to the practice of criticizing appearance and uncovering the symbolic structure of cinema itself. Unfortunately, this model often descended into another depth model, in which digging up the buried treasure of truth became the royal road to critical liberation. Just discovering how something works (film, government, ourselves), however, does not necessarily lead to progressive change; in fact, oftentimes such accurate knowledge functions to make us docile or smug, thus reinforcing the very system under critical study in the first place.

Likewise, whistleblowing is an important action, but one that risks keeping us in a certain managerial mode of the present, tied to actually existing systems of domination. What's at stake in this particular mode is the following assumption: that knowing and exposing the truth will necessarily lead to actions that will better manage the situation, and its inverse assumption: that better managing the situation will necessarily lead to knowledge and truth. True enough. They do—to a degree. But political reform, knowledge acquisition, and truth-seeking are not enough, and perhaps it's for this reason that I find Chelsea Manning as significant a figure as Snowden, because although Manning (like Snowden) was interested in the ethical and political stakes of the leaks, she was also driven by something that exceeded political instrumentality and analytic reason. She was driven by an “I-can't-help-myself” impulse that, by way of its benevolent destructiveness (or destructive benevolence), intimated a radically different order—a future that as of right now is unthinkable, but one that can

be shaken into existence depending on how we act in the meantime. The moral or political appropriateness of such a radical act can never be known in advance. Its singular function, rather, is to slap us with the unreasonable—but true—recognition that things *can* be fundamentally other, from the overarching logic of the world system to the most banal habits of our individual lives.

The problem with the radical act, however, is that it is almost always imagined as profound self-sacrifice, something like Antigone's grand act of burying her brother. Or, for that matter, of the immense sacrifice of Manning and Snowden—perhaps our era's own Antigones. And this can lead to either a pessimism of ever reaching such heroic heights or, sometimes, to a violent perversion of the act that borders on fascism or psychosis. Moreover, when the radical act is represented in the figure of an individual actor, the act itself is invariably de-historicized, making it hard to remember the material reality that called forth the act in the first place—and therefore making it difficult to recognize how the very same act might function radically in one context while counter-productively in another. First time as tragedy, second time as farce.

What I take from this is that at any given moment there is something that cannot be known, only sensed. And this something is a radically different present—one that exceeds transparency and instrumentality, not to mention (and for our purposes here) exceeds our current understanding of what constitutes the private and the public. By all means, let's blow the whistle on injustice, and let's blow the whistle on contradiction and hypocrisy (and from the other direction, let's creatively appropriate and hack and leak). But let's not confuse these critical actions with a genuinely radical act—an act that itself cannot be exposed or blueprinted or even performed in any reproducible way, but nevertheless exists to remind us that our present world is not the only world, and that even if we cannot capture a radical future by our intellectual, cultural, scientific, and political projects, this future can capture us. There is one thing that we can be confident about in this possible future: that what constitutes the private and the public will operate nothing like it does today.

PUBLISHER:
BLACKWOOD GALLERY,
UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO
MISSISSAUGA

3359 MISSISSAUGA ROAD
MISSISSAUGA, ON L5L 1G6
WWW.BLACKWOODGALLERY.CA

EDITORS:
ADRIAN BLACKWELL
CHRISTINE SHAW

DESIGNER:
MATTHEW HOFFMAN

COPY EDITOR:
JEFFREY MALECKI

PRINTER:
CAPTAIN PRINTWORKS

CONTRIBUTORS:
ABBAS AKHAVAN
ERIC CAZDYN
GREIG DE PEUTER
KANISHKA GOONEWARDENA
KAREN HOULE
MARY LOU LOBSINGER
DYLAN MINER
PAIGESARLIN
SCOTT SÖRLI
CHARLES STANKIEVECH
KIKA THORNE
CHEYANNE TURIONS

ISSUES:
01, AFFINITY | DISAGREEMENT,
15/09/2014
02, REPRESENTATION |
PRESENTATION, 29/09/2014
03, MATERIALITY | IMMATERIALITY,
13/10/2014
04, PEOPLE | THINGS, 27/10/2014
05, PRIVACY | PUBLICITY, 10/11/2014
06, CITY | URBANIZATION, 24/11/2014

ERIC CAZDYN is Distinguished Professor of Aesthetics and Politics at the University of Toronto (Centre for Comparative Literature and the Department of East Asian Studies), where he teaches courses on critical and cultural theory, psychoanalysis, Marx and Marxism, Deleuze, film and video, architecture, modern literature, and modern Japan. He is the author of the following books: *The Already Dead* (Duke, 2012), *After Globalization* (with Imre Szeman, Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), *The Flash of Capital: Film and Geopolitics in Japan* (Duke, 2002), and editor of *Trespaces: Selected Writings of Masao Miyoshi* (Duke, 2010) and *Disastrous Consequences* (South Atlantic Quarterly special issue, 2007). His most recent book, *Nothing: Three Inquiries into Buddhism and Critical Theory* (with Marcus Boon and Timothy Morton), will be published in 2015 by The University of Chicago Press. Cazdyn is also a filmmaker, and his films have been screened and performed in Japan, Canada, the U.S., Europe, and, most recently, in the U.K. as part of a two-week residency at The Cube Microcinema (Bristol) with Eric Chenuax.

CHARLES STANKIEVECH has lectured, performed and exhibited at such platforms as DOCUMENTA13 (Kassel), Louisiana Museum of Modern Art (Copenhagen), Haus der Kulturen der Welt and the Kunst-Werke ICA (Berlin), the Palais de Tokyo (Paris), and several art and architecture biennales (Venice, Berlin, Santa Fe, and Montreal). His writings range from academic journals for MIT Press to experimental texts for art publications. His images have been published in a range of forums, from NASA publications to *WIRED* magazine. He has participated in residencies with the Department of National Defence, the Banff Centre for the Arts, and Fieldwork in Marfa, Texas. He was a founding faculty member of the Yukon School of Visual Arts in Dawson City, Canada and is currently Assistant Professor in the John H. Daniels Faculty of Architecture, Landscape, and Design, at the University of Toronto. Since 2011, he has been co-director of the art and theory press K. located in Berlin.

ARTIST PROJECT (reverse):
CHARLES STANKIEVECH, *You Are Here*, 2014

