Selections from the LiveJournal community
“exhibitionism_2,” March–September 2009
Show Me Yours: Cyber-Exhibitionism from Perversion to Politics

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My second ever mobile post from my camera phone to my LiveJournal blog (February 2005) featured a photo of me, offering my subscribed “friends” the opportunity to comment. Since then, I have regularly blogged images of myself and from my daily life, sharing them with this group of known readers who span my real and virtual communities (and with any unidentified Web surfers who happen to drop by). I am a cyber-exhibitionist. In her book Camgirls, Theresa Senft maintains that, when it comes to LiveJournal and other platforms for Internet exposure, the “many-to-many” nature of the Web fosters a modality she calls “micro-celebrity” that “depends on a connection to one’s audience, rather than an enforced separation from them.”¹ Why, then, is the term exhibitionism used to condemn such online self-display? Victor Burgin addresses widespread concerns about cyber-exhibitionism through an analysis of the popular early Webcam JenniCam. In defending the eponymous Jennifer Ringley against the media’s disapproving rhetoric, Burgin seems to adopt unquestioned the
assumption of popular and academic critics that exhibitionism is pathological (as does Ringley in her own defense) and claims that the term does not apply in this case. As the passive half of the scopophilic dyad in psychoanalysis, the counterpart of voyeurism, exhibitionism is a perversion by definition in Sigmund Freud’s seminal formulation of the practice. While colloquially this status may carry negative connotations—for example, the notion that perversity impoverishes intimate relationships—in psychoanalytic theory arguably everyone is perverse. I contest that within this framework, exhibitionism productively manifests the subject’s irreducible heteronomy (its formation by and in the outside), a dynamic that is the foundation of intersubjectivity. In addition to its pathologization, exhibitionism is rendered politically suspect as a contamination of privacy. It functions as the presumptive anchor of disciplinarity in the Foucauldian sense, wherein we supposedly internalize panoptic domination via the pleasure of self-display. Given some scrutiny, though, it is not clear how Michel Foucault’s architectural diagram of power maps onto present-day Internet diagrams: are network users like Ringley visual or textual, public or private, spectacular or social artifacts? Bringing theories of subjectivity and media technologies to bear on these questions, I argue that cyber-exhibitionism embodies a more complex engagement than typical condemnations of its perverseness suggest and in fact represents a meaningful axis of sociality not fully mastered by systems of control.

I begin this conversation by exploring how a body of work in media theory has mobilized the terms of the psychoanalytic model of scopophilia to critique today’s intensification of surveillance. In the intellectual tradition of pessimists like Theodor W. Adorno, Jean Baudrillard, and Guy Debord, present-day thinkers on digital media, film, and visual culture including Slavoj Žižek, Paul Virilio, Thomas Levin, and Mark Andrejevic emphasize the synergy between disciplinary regimes and the new technologies and relations of “cyberspace.” Such theorists tend to argue, in summary, that the developing dispositifs of surveillance in the digital age have led to the implantation of the paired constituents of scopophilia—exhibitionism and voyeurism—as the general prin-
ciples of subjectivity and intersubjectivity and, moreover, that this generalized perversion naturalizes the ever-growing domination of military-state-economic power. I find the ensuing thesis—that the allocation of the Other’s gaze to media technologies renders state and capitalist control enticing via scopophilia—to be a compelling analysis of contemporary conditions. Yet I have reservations about the inclination here to gloss over technical and social particularities, enabling the totalizing claim that generalized exhibitionism provides the libidinal architecture for an intensification of global surveillance. Exhibitionism iterated as online self-display includes aspects not unilaterally complicit with military-capitalist domination. In particular, I will challenge the conclusion, which seems tied to a dubious faith in the bygone sanctity of the private sphere as the insular and stable domain of healthy subjectivity, that the technological gaze is isolating and destroys the possibility of genuine intersubjectivity. Exhibitionism in fact constitutes a fundamentally relational engagement, both in its psychoanalytic characterization and in the particular case of Webcams.

From Surveillance to Control
To illustrate my assessment of this intellectual terrain, I will here take an essay by Paul Virilio from the anthology *CTRL* as a representative example (work by others in this volume falls within the same pessimistic orbit). This impressive collection from MIT Press was edited by Thomas Levin, Ursula Frohne, and Peter Weibel as the catalog for an exhibit at the ZKM Center for Art and Media in Germany, but it goes far beyond documenting the component artworks to assemble a definitive compendium of theoretical writings on surveillance, both recent work and classic texts from the likes of Jeremy Bentham, Foucault, and Gilles Deleuze. In “The Visual Crash,” a piece that typifies the tone of the volume, Virilio posits that “the proliferation of LIVE CAMERAS on the INTERNET” is at the heart of “the banalization or popularization of global surveillance, or to put it another way the DEMOCRATIZATION OF VOYEURISM on a planetary scale, has overexposed even our most private activities.” In contrast to television’s
broadcast model, which maintained a stable set of spatio-temporal distinctions, “the new market of vision is characterized by RENDERING TO SIGHT whatever is happening in the world in the present instant,” offering “permanent direct access” and thus collapsing spatial distance while reducing duration to instantaneous realtime (109). Although the video saturation of our culture is indeed a palpable phenomenon that demands analysis, Virilio grossly inflates technological capabilities and the uniformity of their adoption without engaging with existing technologies and their particular uses and discourses. Specifically, the popularity of Webcams has stagnated in the years since Virilio authored this article (with the notable exception of commercial pornographic Webcams), perhaps because they are typically configured with sluggish refresh rates that fall far short of the instantaneous and omnipresent vision that Virilio imagines.

Drawing out his totalizing vision, Virilio asserts that streaming Internet video as an extension of the computer “effectively transforms a personal, domestic device into an apparatus of behavior control, a post allowing us to see, in the very same moment, whatever is happening around the globe. But there is a price, which is to agree in return (in a counter-image) to be ourselves visually controlled . . . by anybody and everybody” (110). The fact that “direct LIVE COVERAGE does away with interpreter and commentator to bring the interlocutors together face-to-face” does nothing to assuage “the decline of immediate sensations” (111, 113). This modality is fully compliant with global capitalism, wherein “OVEREXPOSURE became indispensable to the market’s operation” (110). While there is certainly an intimacy between capitalist forces and the voluntary production of the self as a mediated commodity that constitutes this “overexposure,” Virilio seems to ignore an equally market-driven countertendency toward an intensified concern for privacy. This blind spot serves as another example of how, even if Virilio’s hyperbolic picture of the simulacral landscape can be defended as metaphorical, it clearly bypasses the quotidian battles being waged on this terrain. Nonetheless, Virilio activates complex and fundamental questions of periodization, though not always scrupulously. He identifies a transition from hierarchical to recip-
rocal or “democratic” models of surveillance that brings about what has been widely identified as a third or late or postindustrial stage of capitalism that corresponds to a transition from disciplinary society to what Deleuze calls “control society.” While this break is axiomatic, Virilio exhibits some confusion about whether the primacy of the visual characteristic of the earlier paradigm survives this shift, or whether, rather, the later computer “optic” merely simulates visual (and, by extension, scopophilic) relations through data transmission. There is confusion in evidence also about whether a perversion like “voyeurism” (or exhibitionism) is an independent (even universal) condition of subjectivity available to be mobilized by historically specific technologies of domination or whether, by contrast, particular perversions are actually generated by the changing technological architecture.

This indeterminacy is especially troublesome because Virilio’s model at its heart posits technology as the fulcrum articulating perversion with politics. It is because Internet webcams, for example, satisfy our scopophilic desire for “permanent direct access” to the whole visual field that late capitalism’s “deregulation of the icon” and the consequent “overexposure” are received as pleasurable. And thus the masses consent to the expropriation of privacy itself. Theoretically, this move relies on a perhaps uneasy marriage of Foucauldian and psychoanalytic theory. The “panoptic optic” is posed as simultaneously the dispositif of the social order as mapped in Discipline and Punish and the Lacanian principle of subjectivity. While there may indeed be some synchrony between these positions, it is presumed rather than carefully explained by Virilio and like-minded theorists. What is clear is that these technological and psychic conditions entail a reconfiguration of the boundaries of the public and the private, even if the precise coordinates of this shift are murky: it is “our most private activities” that are exposed; surveillance technologies become “domestic” as they enter the “public domain.” This contemporary scenario contrasts with an era retrospectively posited as a preserve of unmediated intimacy, impermeable privacy, and uncontaminated sexuality. On the basis of this historical fantasy, Virilio ultimately concludes that the virtualization of communication, its disengagement from
material encounters (“the decline of immediate sensations”) and its increasingly distributed proliferation, is synonymous with the loss of meaningful intersubjective connections (113).

This landscape of surveillance theory poses compelling and fruitful questions, which I have attempted to schematize. But the transformation of discipline into control is piecemeal and riven by unpredictable resistances. We need a more nuanced and productive portrait of this transition than doomsday scenarios offer. Moreover, if this architecture truly breaks with Foucauldian discipline, we could justly wonder whether it should still be characterized as panoptic. Virilio couples panopticism and subjectivity in broad strokes, activating this issue in terms of both the question of whether new media participate fully in a continuity of the optical and that of whether the parallel between the libidinal charge of power and the psychic mechanisms of desire can be drawn easily within a strictly Foucauldian framework. (Foucault was, of course, directly critical of psychoanalysis.) Another of the tensions in such attempts to model the interrelation of technology and subjectivity in the present-day context, flagged above as an ambivalence between universal and historically specific views of scopophilia, is captured vividly by Frohne: “Even though at all times and in all epochs the human relationship to ‘being mirrored’ in the attentiveness of someone else has determined an essential part of the subject’s constitution, the reference points of self-perception have shifted under the ever-present virtual gaze.”9 Her finesse formulates a compromise: “Esse est percipii (to be is to be perceived)” is a generalized psychic structure, but who we are perceived by is changing with technologies of the “virtual gaze” (261). While I find Frohne’s diplomatic resolution of the conflict between the universality of psychoanalysis and the historicity of politics convincing, it does not address how precisely the psychic apparatus is integrated with the technical apparatus at a given juncture. If surveillance theory widely adopts the terms of scopophilia, it is only fair that we turn to classic Freudian texts to evaluate the persuasiveness of their claims and to confront the questions that remain.
From Exhibitionism to Intersubjectivity

In *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, Freud gives the classic pathology of exhibitionists: those who “exhibit their own genitals in order to obtain a reciprocal view of the genitals of the other person.” In “Instincts and Their Vicissitudes,” however, he positions this as a broader and more basic formation. Scop(t)ophilia is conceived here as a four-part process, the first stage of which aligns with primary narcissism, when “the scopophilic instinct is auto-erotic: it has indeed an object, but that object is the subject’s own body.” At this point, voyeurism and exhibitionism overlap: the subject is simultaneously the looker and the looked-at. Lacan elaborates this paradox of primary narcissism with his theory of the mirror stage, the moment of misrecognition that inaugurates subjectivity as split. For Lacan, the scopophilic convergence, wherein the “I” who is doing the looking coincides with its image, is precisely the work of this phase: a work that is never seamless. Here the subject for the first time mediates between “two aspects of its appearance” through “the jubilant assumption of his specular image”; this “total form of his body, by which the subject anticipates the maturation of his power in a mirage, is given to him only as a gestalt, that is, in an exteriority.” It is the necessary splitting of one’s self-image from the self who sees it that lays the groundwork for a succession of further mediations, as the Other is introduced into the scopic relation from this exterior place.

Returning to Freud’s account, this initial configuration is succeeded by three more, through a chain of reversals:

(a) scopophilia as an activity directed towards an extraneous object [voyeurism, or “sexual gazing”]; (b) abandonment of the object and a turning of the scopophilic instinct towards a part of the subject’s own person; therewith a transformation to passivity and the setting up of a new aim—that of being looked at; (c) the institution of a new subject to whom one displays oneself in order to be looked at [exhibitionism].

The second step is the most obscure aspect of this trajectory, a sort of transitional, free-floating self-display, but Freud insists that the model cannot do without it—in the case of sadomasochism,
he calls it the “reflexive middle voice” (95). He charts (a) and (b) as the double-sided outcome of the disengagement of subject and object that coincide in primary narcissism: when the self remains the subject, (a) results; when the self remains the object, (b) results. The crucial point is that it is only with the secondary incorporation of the Other into the circuit, “the institution of a new subject” who occupies the active position vis-à-vis the aim “of being looked at,” that we can speak of (c), exhibitionism proper. The spiraling, branching movement of this relation points to a second crucial characteristic: though each juncture is a prerequisite of the one that succeeds it, we should not think of them as chronological stages. “The only correct description of the scopophile instinct,” Freud writes, “would be that all phases of its development, the auto-erotic, preliminary phase as well as its final active or passive form, co-exist alongside one another” (94–95). He states this succinctly in *Three Essays* as well: “Every active perversion is thus accompanied by its passive counterpart: anyone who is an exhibitionist in his unconscious is at the same time a voyeur.”¹⁴ This is a more radical way of formulating the “reciprocal view” of the pervert’s contract, “I’ll show you mine if you show me yours”: reciprocal not in the sense of an exchange between stable subjects, but rather in the sense of being simultaneously the shower and the shown.

So here we run up against at least two essential difficulties with portraying cyber-exhibitionism as a sort of internalized false consciousness whereby compliant subjects are accommodated to developing structures of domination. First, in perversion or fantasy, the subject does not occupy a fixed position but may identify with all available permutations of the scene, so the notion that the mediated gaze renders only passive self-display pleasurable comes across as rigidly one-sided. Even if the voyeur/exhibitionist distinction is not vital to the above argument—as scopophilia is generalized, the activities of watching and being watched become interchangeably gratifying—Virilio and other surveillance theorists seem to assume a symmetry and containment of this relation that is at odds with the psychoanalytic model that their terms invoke. Whether referring to panopticism, scopophilia, or both, they tend to portray
the two halves of the visual equation as counterpoised: voyeurism on the side of power, exhibitionism on the side of submission, with no excess or remainder. Psychically, in contrast, the subject is vitally split and duplicitous, unruly in its perversions, which tend to circumvent their confines. Second, above and beyond the multiplicity of the subject, exhibitionism turns on the Other “to whom one displays oneself”—it is defined by its address to this external gazer. So it seems erroneous to characterize a scopophilic orientation as antisocial and isolating, as Virilio does when he prophesizes that “the PANOPTIC optic will have come to appear more comfortable than common reality . . . the image coincides with its subject . . . [and] ‘coincidence takes the place of communication.’”¹⁵

We can also approach these features through Lacan’s theory of the gaze, which takes up where Freud’s analysis of scopophilia left off. The most critical difference between the two on this point is that while for Freud the subject’s position is fluid, it is nevertheless bounded enough to participate in coherent subject/object, inside/outside oppositions (even when both coincide in the initial moment of primary narcissism). For Lacan, the scopic relation is not inaugurated in such a self-contained interiority, but rather in a radical exteriority: “In the scopic field, the gaze is outside, I am looked at, that is to say, I am a picture. This is the function that is found at the heart of the institution of the subject in the visible. What determines me, at the most profound level, in the visible, is the gaze that is outside.”¹⁶ That is, if in Freud both the subject and the object of the gaze are originally autonomous, or located within, in Lacan the gaze is heteronomous: preceding and determining the subject from without. The exhibitionistic stance, “I am a picture,” is here the first principle of subjectivity. Assuming the active position of gazer—voyeurism (which, as in Freud, must be considered secondary to exhibitionism)—covers over this “pre-existence to the seen of a given-to-be-seen,” which then tends to erupt in the form of the “stain” (75). The irreducibility of the stain, the lack or void at the heart of subjectivity, ensures that “You never look at me from the place from which I see you. Conversely, what I look at is never what I wish to see” (103). Scopophilia is not a relation of potency and sovereignty but rather an essential misrecognition or missed encounter.
It is the lack of visibility of the object, the opacity of the revolutions of the gaze itself, that is the generative engine of scopophilia. We can now expand on the critiques raised via Freud above. On the first count, not only is the subject’s position in the gaze relation volatile in relation to the Other that determines it but in consequence the gaze itself also perpetually misses its object (or takes as its object this very unvisualizable gaze). With this theorization in place, warnings of an impending culture of total surveillance begin themselves to seem phantasmatic: they presume the potency and plentitude of a panoptic (all-seeing) visuality that shows everything and misses nothing. As for the second point raised above: not only does the centrality of the Other to scopophilia and to subjectivity itself throw into question the supposedly insulating effect of self-display but it also runs counter to the premise that some secure differentiation between private and public zones (a separation that grounds society and sociability) is being eroded or destroyed. In this pessimistic framework, privacy operates psychically as the foundation of a coherent subject who can then enter into intersubjective relations—in opposition to the Lacanian model, wherein subjectivity is heteronomous, indebted to the exterior gaze of the Other that precedes and circumscribes it. It is the outside, rather than a private interiority, that is constitutive.

From Homecams to Social Media
Before I turn to the affiliation of this psychic architecture to the technological it might be necessary to ask whether the conceptual problem here is not that cyber-exhibitionism is misinterpreted but rather that online self-display is not properly exhibitionism at all. This is the position Burgin takes in “Exhibitionism and Solitude,” an analysis of the groundbreaking webcam JenniCam. In defending Ringley against the media’s accusation that choosing to “expose . . . the interior of her room to the eyes of strangers” over the Internet constitutes an exhibitionistic position, Burgin raises questions similar to mine: “The writer of the Philadelphia Inquirer article does not explain how the Internet is supposed to have brought out Ringley’s otherwise ‘latent’ exhibitionistic ten-
dencies. . . . Nor do the journalists and psychology professors say how . . . they would distinguish her behavior from that of the man who compulsively exposes his penis in the street.” 17 Whereas I propose to take these difficulties seriously, exploring the correlation between scopophilia and the Internet and the lineage from the flasher in *Three Essays* to the more generalized Lacanian gaze, Burgin dismisses them (along with the more compelling of the theoretical perspectives on the culture of surveillance that I outlined above) as sensationalism. Burgin prefers to circumvent the visual by “listening to” instead of watching Jenni—a reference to texts such as her site’s FAQ page and outside interviews. This leads him to suggest that if “we judge Ringley to be an exhibitionist we have done no more than acknowledge our own voyeurism. From our side of the screen, the camera is a window. From Ringley’s position, her camera is a mirror” (80). This formulation is at variance with Freud’s elementary axiom that “all phases of [scopophilic] development . . . co-exist alongside one another” 18—it fixes “our” voyeurism (which Burgin takes as self-evident) as if it were a static node autonomous from the myriad other perverse positions available to Jenni and to her audience. Moreover, Burgin assumes here that mirroring is an alternative orientation to exhibitionism for Jenni, when in fact both Freud and Lacan variously claim that the autoeroticism of primary narcissism/the mirror phase is the inaugural moment of scopophilia.

Burgin’s impulse to recuperate Jenni’s online self-display as some sort of infantile regression other than exhibitionism appears motivated, at heart, by the same distaste for the term as the popular critics he sets out to counteract: where they condemn Ringley by calling her an exhibitionist, he defends her by arguing that she is not one. I see no reason not to assimilate webcams to an iteration of scopophilia for the digital age. Where I differ from the pessimistic strain of media critique that warns that scopophilia is the engine of ever more oppressive forms of control and surveillance is in my conception of exhibitionism’s psychic and political possibilities. Burgin calls attention to technical specificities of the Web that challenge any visual purity of the image inherited from earlier media, pointing out that we are misleadingly “encouraged by the
language used to describe the computer interface” to “think of her camera as if it were a window.”

It is especially disappointing, then, that despite his initial resolution to broach the issue of multimedia by “listening” to Jenni’s texts, Burgin ultimately concludes that “the commentaries she provides on her webpage are . . . after the fact. Jenni’s originary form of address was, and remains, essentially mute” (88). Combined with his premise that “Jenni has shown no interest in seeing those by whom she is seen,” Burgin, too, precludes the prospect that communication in either direction could be a goal or effect of online self-display (79). Let us explore whether this is indeed true of JenniCam; the site shut down at the end of 2003, but a mostly complete and functional version is available through the Wayback Machine at archive.org. This persistence demonstrates what Wendy Chun calls the “enduring ephemeral” of digital data, a characteristic not incidental to a multidimensional Webcam experience that reaches beyond the present tense. JenniCam.org included journal entries and other writings by Jenni, a gallery of member-submitted cam images, and Internet relay chat rooms. It also spawned fan sites, and Burgin reports that “each day [Jenni] receive[d] hundreds of new email messages.” The page is designed in frames: multiple windows in one to display various menus and content. That is, JenniCam.org surrounds the small floating cam with multiple forms of address and interactivity, both visual and textual. It incorporates both simultaneous (the real-time cam, but also real-time chat) and archival temporalities (past writings and images). And it provides multiple opportunities for viewers to participate—both on the official site and through satellite fan sites—and for Jenni to communicate with her viewers.

JenniCam is not exceptional in this respect. The subjects of Senft’s Camgirls—she formally interviewed ten self-identified camgirls and immersed herself in the camming community, maintaining her own webcam and LiveJournal blog—gave wide-ranging answers to the question “why webcam?” but for many of them, communication and community-building were key. She quotes Amanda of AmandaCam: “I spend between two and three hours a day in my chat room. . . . My viewers aren’t nameless and faceless to me, if they don’t want to be. We have a community. I know who my viewers are,
and they know I know.”

Virtually all amateur cam sites include or link to journaling and discussion components. And as homecamming has become less popular with the advent of more diverse options for sharing moving images online, including the incorporation of streaming video (as opposed to the succession of still captures that early webcams offered) into Web 2.0, its exhibitionistic dynamic has perhaps migrated more fully to platforms organized expressly around connection and social networking. LiveJournal, for example, combines personal blogs, profiles, and friends lists with “communities”: group blogs similar in function to forums or threaded bulletin boards. A search for “exhibitionism” on LiveJournal turns up more than three hundred such communities that post it as an interest—one of them, “exhibitionism_2,” boasts upward of four thousand members (who can make entries and read those that are restricted). Its content consists almost entirely of nude and/or sexually explicit photos of users or their partners, with comments on them by the community’s other readers (the rules state that feedback must be appreciative), though it is also open to related thoughts and queries. Participants in “exhibitionism_2” are evidently less reluctant than Ringley to identify with the perversion of exhibitionism, perhaps because the sexual dimension of their self-exposure is more prominent. Whereas Jenni’s homecam continually broadcast still images of her house, and it was up to fans to collect those that were nude or sexual (witness one foot fetishist’s site, “A Loving Tribute to the Size 11 Soles of an Internet Celeb”—note that he corresponded with Jenni and sent her a pair of stilettos as a gift), LiveJournal allows for the preselection and filtering of photos. The explicitly sexual exhibitionism of “exhibitionism_2” and many similar communities is, as Senft points out, one extreme of a continuum that sees the increasing incorporation of digital pictures of users and their daily lives into blogs and social networking services like LiveJournal. All these combine images with text and interactivity to produce a multimedia, communicative organization of the scopophilic relation.

This is not to say that cyber-exhibitionism, particularly toward its erotic pole, is unproblematic. Given the high storage and bandwidth load of video sharing, aggregating webcams or
recordings necessitates channeling them through a limited number of for-profit platforms. The most popular social media sites ban “obscene” content—YouTube’s “Community Guidelines,” for example, state that “YouTube is not for pornography or sexually explicit content. . . . Most nudity is not allowed, particularly if it is in a sexual context,” and users are called on to flag any video judged “inappropriate.” These terms result in the ghettoization of erotic video in a handful of designated XXX portals like YouPorn, PornoTube, XTube, RedTube, Submityourflicks, and indeed FreudBox. These streaming sites, as well as pay sites for live cams, are fully colonized by the commercial porn industry’s content and advertisements, making it difficult to find homemade amateur video and almost impossible to foster horizontal connections. In addition to the issue of corporate infiltration, it is no coincidence that Senft’s participants are camgirls: even in the golden age of homecams, gender was clearly a structuring axis of the practice. Freud does indicate the gendered inequalities that inflect scopophilia, and feminist psychoanalytic theory critiques his unmarked male subject and other sexist dimensions of the gaze relation. For Senft, “cam whores”—“underage camgirls who encourage their (mostly older, almost entirely male) fans to buy them gifts . . . in exchange for on-camera flirtations”—are “a limit case for those who advocate porn as counterpublic camp on the Web,” because their intertwined elements of sexism, commodification, and exploitation are so troubling. Still, her point and mine is that, to promote meaningful intersubjectivity online, we need to go beyond knee-jerk condemnations of exhibitionism in itself to analyze the complex relations between psychic and political domains that play out in phenomena from cam whoring to more diverse, egalitarian, and noncommercial spaces like “exhibitionism_2.”

From the Gaze to the Panopticon
This brings us to another crucial question regarding the opposition between private and public: how does this personal sphere of display and exchange interface with the political sphere? This is essentially the question raised above: How can Foucauldian and
psychoanalytic models be amalgamated? As I see it, there are two ways to approach this problem. The first begins by assimilating the Other of the gaze relation to the diffuse set of symbolic structures and power systems that make up the political topologies of critical theory. There is some precedent for this in Freud’s essay “On Narcissism,” wherein he proposes that a part of the psyche (later termed the super-ego) “constantly watches the real ego and measures it by that ideal [the ego-ideal]).”29 The genesis of this function, Freud goes on, “was parental criticism . . . reinforced, as time went on, by those who trained and taught the child and by all the other persons of his environment—an indefinite host . . . (fellow men, public opinion)” (75–76). So already we find a protopolitical association between a disciplinary sphere and a surveillant gaze. But it is Lacan who ties the specular image more broadly to a watchful public: he writes that the “moment at which the mirror stage comes to an end inaugurates . . . the dialectic that will henceforth link the I to socially elaborated situations. It is this moment that decisively tips the whole of human knowledge into being mediated by the other’s desire. . . . The very normalization of this maturation is henceforth dependent in man on cultural intervention.”30 Lacan offers some basis for extrapolating a political public from this constitutive social mediation in his reading of the Palace of the Doges in Four Fundamental Concepts: he asserts that “the people” are subjected by the murals to “the gaze of those persons . . . who deliberate in this hall. Behind the painting, it is their gaze that is there.”31 Thus while Lacan is not explicitly interested in politics, there is the implication here that particular institutions of domination could map onto psychic structures.

Slavoj Žižek, who is openly concerned with articulating the psychoanalytic and the political, takes this association of the heteronomous, exterior gaze with normative authority further. For him, the big Other is “the rules of the social game,” the “‘illusion’ [that] structures our (social) reality,” “the agency that decides instead of us, in our place,” and one who “sees all.”32 As with “power” in Foucault, the Other cannot be reduced to an actually existing instrument (the state, the law, the corporation), but rather is a structuration that makes the world intelligible and produces the
subject as such. In a short essay in *CTRL [SPACE]*, Žižek applies this perspective to what Frohne has termed “panoptic media culture”: noting that the “Internet has been recently flooded by the ‘-cam’ web-sites,” he wonders, “does this trend not display the same urgent need for the fantasmatic Other’s Gaze serving as the guarantee of the subject’s being[?] . . . what if Big Brother was already here, as the (imagined) Gaze?” Virilio (for example) merely takes the final step in this trajectory by explicitly linking this psychoanalytic gaze to the “visible and unverifiable” gaze of Foucault’s Panopticon, which is the privileged diagram of disciplinary power, “a figure of a political technology.” As with scopic relations under the big Other, in the Panopticon, “a real subjection is born mechanically from a fictitious relation. . . . He who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power . . . he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles” (202–3). The elements are analogous: an unlocatable and automatic surveilling gaze as the representative of a normative symbolic project; this gaze’s movement from outside to inside as it is implanted in the subject as that which determines him (or her); the resulting radical fluidity of the subject’s position vis-à-vis this generalized visual architecture.

But Foucault’s account in *Discipline and Punish* incorporates the same difficulty as Virilio’s and others’ later renditions of it: a tension between the fluid and flexible orientation of the subject who “plays both roles” and the totalizing implications of a “machine for disassociating the see/being seen dyad: in the peripheric ring, one is totally seen, without ever seeing; in the central tower, one sees everything without ever being seen” (202). This latter formulation is what grounds a pessimistic outlook on the escalating dissymmetry of power under late capitalism, wherein surveyor and surveyed are distinct and opposed across a great gulf of media-saturated disenfranchisement. From this rigid structure (literally, the walls of the Panopticon’s cells), it follows that the prisoner “is the object of information, never a subject in communication”: the disciplines “must neutralize the effects of counter-power that spring from [multiplicity] and which form a resistance . . . anything that may establish horizontal conjunctions. Hence the fact that the disci-
plines use procedures of partitioning and verticality . . . that they define compact hierarchical networks” (200, 219). It is important to recognize that for Foucault, this partitioning and hierarchization are never absolute (or are so only in fantasies of scopic mastery), that they respond (always only partially) to resistances inherent in the system. Moreover, the vertical diagram is increasingly inappropriate to a culture that organizes itself in distributed rather than centralized networks—as I have demonstrated by pointing out that the “inmates” of the purported Internet panopticon are very much able to communicate horizontally with each other (bringing them closer to the concept of control systems).

**From Images to Data**
There is a second route from panopticism to psychoanalysis, through their parallel concatenation of textual and visual relations. Disciplinary society is only partly determined by the optical architecture of the Panopticon; technologies of inscription and knowledge are equally decisive. Foucault writes: “[Police] power . . . had to be like a faceless gaze that transformed the whole social body into a field of perception . . . and this unceasing observation had to be accumulated in a series of reports and registers . . . an immense police text [that] increasingly covered society by means of a complex documentary organization” (214). The problem raised here, at the core of the disciplinary apparatus, is how to integrate optical perception with the archival exigencies of documentation and storage—and this is precisely where media technologies enter the scene, at the intersection of observed and recorded. The crux of modernity, in Foucault’s view, is that “the disciplines crossed the ‘technological’ threshold . . . that made possible . . . a multiplication of the effects of power through the formation and accumulation of new forms of knowledge” (224). The cam sites discussed above engage with a similar structural puzzle of how to combine the fleeting immediacy of a real-time view with the accretion of accessible images, texts, and conversations—all while working within a changing technological and political architecture.
In his article “Surveillance and Capture,” Philip Agre proposes that we are on the cusp of a transition between two alternative diagrams of “privacy” whose schematization I have adapted as follows.\textsuperscript{35}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Surveillance</th>
<th>Capture</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• visual metaphors . . .</td>
<td>• linguistic metaphors . . .</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• the assumption that this “watching” is nondisruptive and surreptitious . .</td>
<td>• the assumption that the linguistic “parsing” of human activities involves active intervention in and reorganization of those activities . .</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• territorial metaphors, as in the “invasion” of a “private” personal space, prototypically the family home, marked out by “rights” . .</td>
<td>• structural metaphors; the captured activity is figuratively assembled from a “catalog” of parts . .</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• centralized organization by means of a bureaucracy with a unified set of “files” . .</td>
<td>• decentralized and heterogeneous organization . .</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>identification with the state</td>
<td>the driving aims are not [openly] political [identification with the private sector]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While Agre emphasizes that these are cultural metaphor systems and not descriptions of reality, and that “these two models are not mutually exclusive,” it is clear that capture is intimately tied to computerization and digitization, intended as a more penetrating and productive assessment of contemporary conditions. “When applied as the sole framework of computing and privacy,” Agre appraises, “the surveillance model contributes to the near-inevitability of oversimplified analysis . . ., the idea being that distributed computer systems have the potential to establish a regime of total visibility”; actually, “the evidence is equivocal” on this point, and he calls for “a more complicated appreciation of the actual dynamics of such developments” (751). The first step is to recognize that visual metaphors derived from optical media (cameras) are waning in importance with the emergence of lin-
guistic metaphors derived from computer code. Moreover, capture (which aligns well with what Deleuze calls control) implies a transition in archival principles from the file to the database. Wolfgang Ernst makes a similar observation in his essay in *CTRL [SPACE]*: “Parallel to the collapse of the sociological distinction between private and public, supervision as a technique of control is being replaced by interception, as information is distributed by the Internet.”36 Again, then, the reconfiguration of the private-public boundary is associated with changing technologies of control, intersecting on both counts with the structure of the Web. And again this shift is allied with a declining reliance on the purely visual: “Algorithms, that is, already replace the panoptic regime. . . . Surveillance which has been frequently linked to the audiovisual regime, turns into dataveillance, that is, the reconnaissance of data patterns which can only metaphorically be called ‘visual’ any more” (462–63). But if the observation-documentation couple of disciplinary society is skewing increasingly toward the recorded digital text rather than the optical image, Ernst proposes that the archive itself is moving in the opposite direction. In “Dis/continuities,” Ernst writes that “the archival regime is being extended from text to audiovisual data . . . this extension changes and dissolves the very nature of the archival regime.”37 These developments perhaps draw mediated scopophilia, the context of the innumerable Webcam and personal images that litter the exhibitionistic Internet, ever closer to the domain of archival knowledge, in a sort of convergence of the datafication of surveillance and the imagification of the record. But at the same time, they unsettle the panoptic authority of power on both sides of this equation, as the articulation of a bounded regime of observation with a bounded regime of documentation characteristic of the disciplines disintegrates into a more fluid and homogeneous activity that saps the traditional authenticity of its objects.

The ambivalence of this transitional fluctuation between the visual and the textual comes out in a certain confusion in Ernst’s program. Should we approach the image as if it has lost its optical familiarity, having been converted into dynamic algorithmic data that is of one medium with the rest of computation,
as if “the term multi-media is a delusion” (108)? Or should we approach the archive as if it is being infiltrated by images proper, as if “moving towards the audio-visual. . . . It culminates in a plea for rethinking the options of retrieval under new media conditions—transcending the notion of the archive itself”(113)? In Ernst’s view, it is not only the question of multimedia that causes problems for the chimerical digital archive; the technology of the Internet is fundamentally at odds with the archival principle: “The address structure of communication and the address structure of archival holding merge into one. . . . Traditionally, ‘only what has been stored can be located’—and *vice versa*. . . . Is the World Wide Web simply a technique of retrieval from a global archive, or does it mark the beginning of . . . dissolving the hierarchy traditionally associated with the archive” (119)? In other words, the Internet, first of all, does away with the spatialization proper to archives—it indexes pure information, bypassing the intervention of a material substrate and privileging a temporality that is instantaneous and ephemeral. As a result, “the archival media memory is de-monumentalized”: memory on the Internet is dynamic, rhizomatic, interactive, and unfixed (110). Finally, Ernst sees in these developments certain liberatory possibilities: the virtualization of archival space does away with barriers to access, which depend on the literal sequestering of knowledge, and the fluidity of information thwarts methods of capturing it in static hierarchies. Ernst suggests that if we can extricate ourselves from the nostalgic “metaphor of archival spatial order” to which Internet discourse clings, we have the opportunity of “dealing with the virtual an-archive of multi-media in a way beyond the conservative desire of reducing it to classificatory order again” (109, 120).

A certain utopianism clings to this conclusion, and I am less willing than Ernst to see an overall loosening of the hold of power in the metamorphosis of the archive. In the work of Deleuze and Agre, among many others, the waning of the disciplinary regime simply supplants one diagram of domination with another—control/capture is an innovation, but not a liberation any more than we were liberated by the transition from sovereign to disciplinary societies. Even Ernst notes that “although the Internet still orders knowledge
apparently without providing it with irreversible hierarchies (on
the visible surface), the authoritative archive of protocols is more
rigid than any traditional archive has ever been” (120). Moreover,
and inextricably, I am less willing than Ernst to see the Internet as
the prospective death (rather than simply the reconfiguration) of
the archive. Witness the fact that three years after JenniCam went
off-line, inert copies and fragments are stored at archive.org, and
a Google image search for JenniCam turns up hundreds of items,
most legitimate captures from the cam. This is to say that cam
sites, and other organized forums for cyber-exhibitionism like Live-
Journal communities, materialize these archival conflicts between
visual and textual control, between the rigidity of physical space
and the ephemerality of real-time information processing. In their
integration of writing and images, self-display and participation,
present-tense transience and persistent traces, they demonstrate
that while technology, desire, and hegemony are in transforma-
tion, we are in the midst of a murky confusion of boundaries more
than of a radical break with their modern forms, Deleuze’s notion
of control included. The archive is immanent to the functioning
of power, and if it is becoming more modular, immaterial, and
horizontal, this is as much an accommodation to changing archi-
tectures of power as a flight from them—the archive remains, in
Foucault’s words, “first the law of what can be said.”38

From Archives to Publics
It is here that we finally arrive at what I have called an alterna-
tive route from psychoanalysis to politics, via media technologies.
Ernst quotes Sven Spieker’s observation that the “unconscious . . .
must (also) be understood as a media theory whose centerpiece,
the ‘psychical apparatus,’ belongs in the same content as other
storage media, such as the camera (to which Freud often com-
pared the psyche) or cybernetics (Lacan).”39 This is the theme of
Jacques Derrida’s book Archive Fever, wherein he follows the archive
as it appears in psychoanalysis, in “the representational models of
the psychic apparatus as an apparatus for perception, for print-
ing, for recording, for topic distribution of places of inscription, of
ciphering.” Just as, for Lacan, subjectivity is a radical exteriority, produced in a heteronomous relation with what is irreducibly outside and yet most intimate to the subject, the archive “is entrusted to the outside, to an external substrate. . . . there is no archive without consignation in an external place which assures the possibility of memorization, of repetition, of reproduction, or of reimpres- sion” (8, 11). Derrida binds the two together, asserting that the psychoanalytic “model [of memory as the ‘mystic writing pad’] also integrates the necessity, inside the psyche itself, of a certain outside . . . in sum, of a prosthesis of the inside. . . . The theory of psychoanalysis, then, becomes a theory of the archive” (19). Derrida offers a theoretical clarification of the ambiguous relationship between media and the psyche raised by Virilio as the coupling of generalized perversions and particular technologies, a reconciliation more elemental than Frohne’s compromise between universal structures and historical specificities. He writes that “the technical structure of the archiving archive also determines the structure of the archivable content even in its very coming into existence and in its relationship to the future. The archivization produces as much as it records the event” (17). In other words, and based on the very composition of the psyche and the archive (which are one and the same), technology and subjectivity are mutually constitutive: scopophilia, for example, could not exist in its modern form without the camera as a prosthesis of the eye, splitting one’s image from the self-present space and time of perception; but by the same token the camera could not exist without scopophilia, the drive to perpetually iterate, disseminate, and master the gaze through escalating technological developments. This circuit continues into the era of digitization and networks.

The archive is the joint figure that can serve as a hinge between psychic and political spheres through the question of what can be written rather than what can be seen. Derrida defines the archive, that is, precisely as the pivot or overlap between inside and outside, public and private: archives are located at the “intersection of the topological and the nomological, of the place and the law, of the substrate and the authority. . . . They all have to do with this topo-nomology, with this archontic dimension of domiciliation,
with this archic, in truth patriarchic, function” (2–3). Here, it is the archival function of inscription, authorization, and mediation both in the psychic and in the social apparatus, rather than the gaze of the big Other, that forms the intersection of subjective (inside, private, domestic) and political (outside, public, patriarchal) regimes. But, in keeping with both the psychoanalytic and Foucauldian theories of resistance, the archive as pivot, as boundary or passage, unhinges these oppositions even as it constitutes them. The archive, as precisely the possibility of repeating, recalling, and recording knowledge, “always works, and a priori, against itself” (12). And this is perhaps not distant from what we might also call a perverse movement, “a compulsive, repetitive, and nostalgic desire for the archive, an irrepressible desire to return to the origin, a homesickness” for the commencement that is the archive but also what the archive inescapably defers, by placing the inside always outside (91). This is why I am skeptical of Ernst’s view of the multimedia archive as dissolving a formerly stable hierarchization, since it seems to me that the modern archive was never as secure—nor is the Internet archive, by contrast, as fluid—as they appear in his account. Both, rather, are constitutively fissured in ways that resist totalizing diagrams of domination and open them to the irrepressible circulation of fantasy and communication.

I will not deny, however, that under the conditions of digitization these fissures are shifting and even widening. I can thus now return to the crux of my argument. If, as I hope I have demonstrated, the tendency to see cyber-exhibitionism as isolating and uncommunicative is supported neither by the psychoanalytic theory of scopophilia nor by the existing practices of this activity, then its persistence can be attributed to the aforementioned ideological assumptions about privacy. To posit that voluntarily relinquishing something called privacy entails the concurrent loss of intersubjective connections, one must define privacy as the preserve in which subjectivity (and hence intersubjectivity) is cultivated. I have already identified the problems with this hypothesis from a Lacanian perspective, which locates subjectivity in an exteriority that we can associate with the big Other (we might even call it the public). But a problem also arises here from the other
direction, from the archival direction whence the question “where
does the outside commence?” is absolutely central and simultane-
ously absolutely unanswerable — the institutional direction I have
also characterized as “political” (8). This is to say that Virilio’s pes-
simism is founded on the belief that privacy is a state that we once
had and are now losing. (Losing, not coincidentally, to the archive.
Much contemporary alarmism focuses on “personal information”:
What traces are we leaving as we use technology? Who is record-
ing, tracking, and capturing them? How can we see without being
seen or, more properly, read without being read or retrieve without
being stored?) Yet it would be more precise to conceive of privacy
as the strategic fabrication that furnishes the (bourgeois, capitalist)
disciplines with their ideological linchpin — ideology being, despite
Foucault’s rejection of the term, another formulation of
an interface between the psyche and political power.

For Jürgen Habermas, the author of the seminal work on
public and private spheres, democratic sovereignty relies on a
conception of the citizen as a free and independent participant
in the market. This fiction is stabilized by the carefully fabricated
intimacy and insulation of the domestic space. In other words,
“it was a private autonomy denying its economic origins . . . that
provided the bourgeois family with its consciousness of itself.”
The family was, in reality, imbricated in the economy materially
as well as ideologically: “It played its precisely defined role in the
process of the reproduction of capital” (47). Moreover, Habermas
argues that “the subjectivity of the privatized individual was related
from the very start to publicity” via eighteenth-century personal
and literary correspondence and later the “domestic novel,” which
constituted the initial “experiments” that enabled this new form of
subjectivity to coalesce by “communicating with itself” (49–51). In
other words, “subjectivity, as the innermost core of the private, was
always already oriented to an audience” — a point that essentially
converges with Lacan’s model (49). This theoretical heritage is not
meant to imply that privacy is not or should not be an important
aspect of both subjective experience and the rights of citizenship.
But I would like to suggest that when privacy is invoked nostalgi-
cally, as an endangered realm of uncontaminated and unmediated
intimacy, the ideological move wherein it naturalizes disciplinary power is repeated.

Networks and digitization, the technologies that enable cyber-exhibitionism, undeniably throw the archive into flux, in both its psychic and political dimensions. The contested boundary between public and private is necessarily reconfigured along with the mediated gaze relation, its articulation with language and textuality, and its possibilities for communication and horizontal connectivity. I would argue that, rather than mourn a formulation of privacy that was just as much the fulcrum of a diagram of power, we should critically examine the possibilities for resistance and for domination that are opened up by the increasing generality (the “democratization,” in Virilio’s words) of technologies and relations of scopophilia. Camgirls and exhibitionists emphatically contravene the decree that privacy is the ground of normal subjectivity, meaningful relationships, and a healthy social body. Users of communities like “exhibitionism_2” reclaim the positive value of the eponymous terms, making their home—the prosthesis that mediates their (inter)subjectivity, inscribes their gaze, and houses their archive—in a corner of the global network. We can say, at the very least, that this is a practice that has not yet been fully subsumed by the emergent hegemony of control. Online self-display lies at the heart of present-day negotiations of technological and political power, and I opt to join forces with perverts as the vanguard of new ways of thinking about and living within control society.

Notes


3. See, for example, Mark Andrejevic, iSpy: Surveillance and Power in the Interactive Era (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas,


23. Senft, Camgirls, 43.


26. Senft, Camgirls.


28. Senft, Camgirls, 89.


33. Slavoj Žižek, “Big Brother; or, The Triumph of the Gaze over the Eye,” in CTRL [SPACE], 226.

34. Michel Foucault, “Panopticism,” 205.


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