Surveillance Aesthetics and Theatre against "Empire"

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The multitude not only uses machines to produce, but also becomes increasingly machinic itself, as the means of production are increasingly integrated into the minds and bodies of the multitude (Hardt and Negri, 2000: 406)

Relax: The cops are inside us (Relax magazine cover incorporating Mike Mills’ artwork. Relax, 2003)

I: Surveillance and Empire

Over the 1990s technologies and uses of surveillance developed at an expediential rate. We became accustomed to the presence of micro-cameras, sound recording devices, cross-referencing databases and software designed to recognise shapes and patterns, even human faces. Surveillance now performs an expanding array of regulatory, disciplinary, entertainment and protective functions. State and government organizations have adapted surveillance technologies to measure, predict, control and protect citizens. In the light of a sceptical public, politicians use surveillance images, transmitted by compliment media companies, as ‘evidence’ or ‘justification’ for their acts of rule, border protection and warfare. The corporate state freely monitors the activities of its workers and customers; both are now observed and measured in their everyday behaviours, their work and consumption patterns are monitored, their communications and habitual movements are ceaselessly recorded and reviewed. Such information is used to administer workplace regimes, ensure compliance to corporate ideology, censure thought and prevent collective organisation among workers. Detailed customer
information gleaned through surveillance is itself a commodity. Although sometimes regulated, the sale of such information without the knowledge or approval of the consumer is commonplace. In the private sphere, individuals responding to the marketing of a general ‘ambient uncertainty’ (Bauman, 1998) sustain a massive home surveillance industry of cameras, movement sensors, gated communities and the like that far exceeds either the value of home wealth that is being protected, or the actual level of the security threat. And all this is extracurricular to a military-surveillance complex that instructs us to obey through carefully selected *cinema verite* images of missiles that can reach every corner of the globe and enter every domain.

With such a visible, affective presence in society and culture, it is important that we debate the ongoing implications of surveillance mechanisms for society and for cultural production. Specifically this essay will consider how theatre might address the surveillance world. Surveillance will be discussed as a function of ‘Empire’ – a recently developing notion of power approximating and extending the logic of globalisation (Hardt and Negri, 2000). The essay will ultimately consider how theatre has offered insightful possibilities for challenging and resisting Empire in its most dystopian forms.

Conservative and even some progressive critics have pointed to the benefits that accrue in the surveillance society. For example, increased safety for women in streets that have surveillance cameras installed, the ability to track flows of resources and expedite their most efficient use, and the ability of tax authorities to cross-reference data bases and thereby target corporate tax avoiders or money launderers are all notionally progressive outcomes of surveillance activities. At the same time, arguments about the meta-constitution of surveillance draw attention to the ways that it has become a mode of symbolic violence and technological determinism, and how consequently it is now an agency for the shaping and control of society at large. In this regard, Michel Foucault's reading of Jeremy Bentham's radial prison design with a single guard at the centre was an influential, prescient thesis that has bearing on the present situation. As is well known, Foucault describes this disciplinary system as a "panoptic modality of power" that seeks to "obtain the exercise of power at the lowest possible cost" (Foucault, 1977: 218). The resulting invisibility of disciplinary functions embedded in state apparatuses and cultural formations are in Foucault’s terms: "intended to increase both the docility and the utility of all the elements of the system" (Foucault, 1977: 218). In short, this describes the foundation of Foucault’s notion of biopower, a conceptual model of power taking into account discourse and knowledge, technology and the institutions that regulate our lives and shape our world. "Biopower analyses, regulates, controls, explains and defines the human subject, its body and its behaviours" (Schirato and Webb, 2003: 214). Hardt and Negri offer the assessment that biopower is invasive and parasite-like, "a form of power that regulates social life from its interior" (2000: 23). Biopower is a form of symbolic violence, a kind of phantom pain that is enacted on, in, and through the body. The surveillance-like aspect of biopower, wherein the objective is to regulate behaviours from the interior place of self-censorship, is also stressed in this description.

In the present age of globalisation – or ‘Empire’ (Hardt and Negri, 2000) – biopower has intensified. Disciplinary systems have accordingly become completely decentred and totalising; the guard of the panopticon is no longer seen or locatable. As stated by Hardt and Negri, power now operates through intensities and flows rather than originating from monolithic blocks; there are no easily identifiable institutions or mechanisms of control. Consequently, Empire is omnipresent, "a decentred and deterritorializing
apparatus of rule that progressively incorporates the entire global realm within its open, expanding frontier” (Hardt and Negri, 2000: xiii). While Empire has visible agents who promote its systems and do its bidding – for example, the Bush republicans or, more generally, military and police forces – the authors argue that they are ‘inside’ larger systems of control. Nor are authoritarian institutions singularly identifiable as centres of power. Hardt and Negri argue that in their ideological opposition and response to crisis, neo-conservative groups, and liberal-humanist NGO’s, who might be seen as offering alternatives to Empire, in fact, feed each other (Hardt and Negri, 2000: 34-8).

Accordingly, while the signs of power are visible, it is important to think about the ways that they are constituted as flows, how even people and groups opposed to Empire might be inside its machinic structures. Australian, American and UK ruling politicians, for example, seemed unperturbed by the mass anti-war protests of February-March, 2003 and even took delight in taunting peace activists. It was as if the demonstrations were a media spectacle of nostalgia, providing token decency and the manufacture of a national conscience. Plans for war though, including plans for managing and controlling demonstrations, were well advanced; few expected our marching to stop anything.

Schirato and Webb have helpfully distilled (Schirato and Webb, 2003: 33-4) the complexities of Hardt and Negri’s thesis by noting that it is constituted by four interweaving practices:

1. It is a network that is both a ‘system’ and ‘hierarchy’, (that to say, a machine for organising the world)
2. It reproduces itself through the production of social and cultural activities
3. It is decentred and therefore everywhere
4. Through participation in cultural flows, everything is imbricated and inside it’s modus operandi

According to this analysis, power is so diffuse that it easily infiltrates our every act. It has become fictionalised and made performative. It is hidden in the dramas of media presentation and cultures of consumption that flow from this new conceptual order. This point is acknowledged in Hardt and Negri’s chillingly prescient observation of the contemporary political situation: Empire is ruled by a "permanent state of emergency and exception justified by the appeal to essential values" (Hardt and Negri, 2000: 18).

Empire has attracted wide attention not only for its critical tone, however, but also for its imaginative, utopian perspective. In the complexity of Empire, Hardt and Negri see revolutionary potential; they observe a decentred system that is vulnerable to intervention and attack. In their view, Empire’s need for mobility creates the conditions for a global mobilisation among people and their restless, endlessly creative crossing of borders. The rising avant-garde energy of ‘the multitude,’ experiences of “desertion, exodus, and nomadism,” leads Hardt and Negri to argue, "Mobility and mass worker nomadism always express a refusal and a search for liberation: the resistance against the horrible conditions of exploitation and the search for freedom and new conditions of life" (2000: 212). This statement speaks encouragingly about the situation for refugees and the rise of counterculture movements such as anti-globalisation networks (although the latter have more choice in the matter of nomadism). Hardt and Negri argue that the mediatised, virtualised, shifting landscape of global capitalism creates the conditions for its modification and intervention. Mobility is the Virilio-like condition of the Empire and simultaneously its alternative.

In his review of Empire, Gopal Balakrishnan acknowledges Hardt and Negri’s point that
Empire is "permanently vulnerable to the impact of destabilizing, marginal events that slip out of the control of those who manufacture consent" (Balakrishnan, 2000: 147), but brings a note of caution to Hardt and Negri's visionary thesis. Balakrishnan is surely right to conclude that Empire offers a sense of optimism "that can only be sustained by a millenarian erasure of the distinction between the armed and the unarmed, the powerful and the abjectly powerless" (Balakrishnan, 2000: 147). As a source of political cultural renewal radical or counter Empire depends on how, where, when and by whom it is experienced. We have seen how nomadism and resistance gives rise to counter protectionist forces that seek to impose authoritarianism and silence oppositional thinking and practices, not to mention heavy controls on the movement of oppressed peoples. One can begin to understand why seemingly small numbers of refugees arriving in Australia, for example, inspired such visceral hatred among conservative groups and leading politicians, so out of proportion to the actual magnitude of the events. It is not the numbers, nor the people and their story that counts; rather it is the threat of nomadism, the appearance of an alternative world-view that must be dammed. Consequently, we see a kind of rule by appeal to essentialist values in Australia and elsewhere, the recourse to race politics, fear mongering and outright lies, the attacks on culture, eduction and intellectual communities, and the war against difference.

If Hardt and Negri’s machine-like network of power "arranges hybrid identities, flexible hierarchies, and plural exchanges through modulatory networks of command" (2000: xiii), then one constituent feature of this network is the image and reality of surveillance. Although the authors do not directly discuss the specific dimensions of surveillance in Empire, they do acknowledge the importance of Foucault’s ideas to their own, giving particular support to the concept of biopower (2000: 22-27). As noted above, biopower constitutes a rule by surveillance and its internalisation is a process of self-instruction. In surveillance technologies, it is the "power to circulate" systems of command and control, or as Hardt and Negri put it: "the bomb, money and ether" (2000: 345), that constitute the new imperium. Moreover, Empire is characterised by the privatisation of public spaces and resources; these spaces are constructed, delineated, policed and normalised by surveillance systems. Their very habitus is defined by the presence of surveillance, so ubiquitous has it become. Where does the public or the collective space now reside, where does imagination bloom, if not in the collectivisation, categorisation, and privatisation of this surveillance data? We can say that surveillance is a spectre of Empire.

II. Surveillance Aesthetic

I have used the term ‘surveillance aesthetic’ in the title of this essay. The surveillance aesthetic comes into being when we begin to see and experience our world though the ever present chimera of surveillance. It is part of a new spatial and cultural formation; one that watches and listens, compares, and directs. It constructs systems and hierarchies as organising principals to determine the ways that we might see and relate to the world around us. The convergence of media and communications feeds from and helps to organise such surveillance aesthetics. We become wrapped in these atmospheres as we move through the surveillance-intensive spaces that permeate our world. Moreover, surveillance enters the body and is internalised. As suggested earlier, its purpose is to instil self-surveillance and self-regulation. Alphonso Lingis writes, "Surveillance registers the transgression as soon as it is initiated, indeed observes every possibility of transgression and every temptation to transgress, and neutralises
them in advance” (Lingis, 1994: 59). Hardt and Negri extend this view, drawing on a Benjamin-like image of the machinic and the cyborg wherein the means of production literally invade the body. The border between the body and economies and technologies of power has been broken down with the result that the mechanics of Empire have become integrated within the self (Hardt and Negri, 2000: 406).

Real world events can generate the aesthetic turn. For example, surveillance cameras recorded the 2001 attacks on the World Trade Centre that were timed so that they would be captured by these cameras and edited for global broadcast. By contrast, controlled surveillance and monitoring of US military activities in Afghanistan and Iraq celebrates American power. ‘Embedded’ (or are they machinic?) journalists using video-satellite phones send us grainy pictures of themselves playing soldiers. Surveillance data was fabricated or at best liberally interpreted to prove the existence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq and justify the second Gulf war. When the lies were exposed, the apparent lack of surveillance became a pretext for disbelief: of course the weapons were there, there just weren’t enough cameras around to see them! Surveillance has also becomes an organising principle for the identification of people, including for example at airports worldwide. Subsequent categorisation, or so-called ‘profiling,’ is based not only on how people look but how and where the camera sees them. In all of these examples, surveillance is the enveloping, atmospheric presence and authority function that helps give substance to the events.

There is opposition (among civil rights groups for example) to intrusive ‘anti-terrorist’ legislation in Australia, the UK and the US, amid concern that surveillance practices may lead to abuse and possible injustices. But the extent to which these arguments are well known and people are comfortable and relaxed about living with a kind of ambient surveillance enterprise highlights the aesthetic-anaesthetic sensibilities that surveillance promotes. We know that surveillance shapes the spaces around us and regulates human participation. We know that it is a manifestation of global capitalism and Empire. But, equally, this knowledge is experienced with a kind of pleasurable aesthetic apathy. In a world where surveillance is yet another kind of informational political economy, to be forewarned is to be apathetic, or so it seems. In this regard, the irony of the appropriation and reconstruction of Mike Mills’ Warholesque and vaguely dystopic artwork into the cover of the Tokyo-trendy fashion and art magazine Relax to produce the phrase “Relax: The cops are inside us” should not be lost.

Relax is a typical ‘avant-garde,’ high fashion street magazine that promotes trendy ‘lifestyle’ options imbricated with designer innovation and conspicuous consumption. One’s consumption patterns and nuanced coolness towards being ‘in fashion’ have knowledge value and consequently determine the shaping of class, gender, race, and identity formations. Everything is looking to shop and shopping to look; the conservative world-view of what Akira Asada calls ‘infantile capitalism’ is exposed by all those apolitical bodies on display. This ambient anthem of surveillance and self-disciplining nihilism suggests a kind of cool communion with the ideological aesthetics of Empire.

Surely cultural productions like this, as amusing as they often are, are also a powerful example of the aesthetic rendering and subsequent normalisation of surveillance dystopia. The myriad ways that counterculture movements and critical or socially antagonistic arts (especially the avant-garde) are brought ‘inside’ the system have been discussed since the time of Adorno and the Frankfurt School; as always the question remains how can we break out of this complacent smooth world? In the contemporary
moment we need to begin to find ways to ‘surveil’ Empire back on itself. After all, globalisation, Hardt and Negri argue, “must be met with counter-globalisation” (2000: 207).

III. Postmodern Theatre in/against Empire

Surprisingly, postmodern theatre might be a productive site for the investigation of this aesthetic-ideological crisis. As has been often stated: ‘in Empire there is no outside.’ In the same way, scholars note that postmodern theatre is ‘inside’ the system and offers no critical distance from which it might stand apart from and comment on the world (eg. Auslander, 1997: 59). But what can theatre do from here, and how can it avoid simply recirculating the kind of ambient surveillance enterprise noted above? One possibility might be to apply a kind of metacritique to the production of theatre itself; in Hardt and Negri’s terms, to "shift our focus from the question of form and order to the consideration of the regimes and practices of production" (2000: 217 emphasis mine). We can look to postmodern theatre’s exploration of production processes and its typically deconstructive commentaries on the contexts for theatre’s reception. We can develop the idea of meta-theatre wherein the interplay of dramaturgy is heightened to the extent that the ‘logic’ of theatre production greatly informs the theatrical event.

While we can relate this to Brecht’s notion of estrangement, the present situation presents new challenges. Moreover, such ideas for political theatre were also present in the new wave of the 1960s, where subjectivity, rather than estrangement, became the voice of political protest. Both theatres tried to show the mechanisms of production unfolding in real time and space and used the conditions and experiences of the times as primary dramaturgical material to make their point. But as the cover of the Relax magazine shows, subjectivity, alienation, and the avant-garde are complex problems and their meaning is difficult to determine at the present time. Cultural production lives with the fact that the radical project of 1960s theatre collapsed; its exploration of desire and free expression was transformed into the identity-commodity linkages of postmodern capitalism. By selling the dream of ‘free’ expression, the radical no more became a ruling formation. Furthermore, Empire makes the claim that we cannot be culturally or intellectually distanced in ways seen or imagined in the modern theatre. Because of this perennial closeness, the question of alienation is difficult to determine. In Brecht’s view, the audience was detached from the absorbing constraints of a predetermined narrative so that they could contemplate alternatives. Now, however, as in the Relax magazine image, people today are simply detached as an aesthetic stance – alienation is more an affectation than an effect. If we look around us, it’s not hard to see that people are truly alienated in the Marxist sense of the word; they/we just prefer it that way. One’s sense of expression has become a kind of empty rebellion – more a cool slogan, or something to exhaust us, than something with substance: the ‘multitude’ in postmodern societies no longer expects to change anything, especially through theatre.

(i) Kawamura Takeshi’s Nippon Wars

Such problems were depicted in Kawamura Takeshi’s 1984 play Nippon Wars (Kawamura 2002). In this popular work from the Japanese experimental theatre, cyborg-soldiers were shown to be rebelling against their leader and against their programming. They developed subconscious urges, subjectivity, and self-awareness.
By the play’s conclusion, however, we realise that the leader all along anticipated the cyborg uprising and the rebellion was nothing more than pre-programmed, fully containable dissent (see Eckersall, 2000). In a 2001-2 revival of Nippon Wars Kawamura staged two versions of the work. The first was a restaging of the 1984 production that replicated, as closely as possible, the staging of the original. In the second version – which the audience could view immediately following the first – Kawamura reworked the text as a kind of historical critique of the original and a contemplation of the changing situation for the play’s message and reception. Nippon Wars (2) began with an interrogation scene between an android-soldier survivor and his interrogator who seemed to be a control figure for the play’s re-enactment. As the soldier recalls the story of Nippon Wars, his thoughts blend details from the past era with the present. Sections of the play are performed as if in video replay mode; the actors are fast forwarded and reversed. They speed-up or play their scenes backwards and replicate the jerky motions of bodies on a television screen at double speed. In this way, the performance progresses in a fragmented way, some scenes are taken out of context and commented on, and others are simply fast-forwarded. Kawamura began to subversively question the status of his work, and undermine its theatricality and historical dimensions. Over the final moments of the performance, as the cyborgs play out their empty rebellion, Kawamura projected images of the world trade centre strikes, inter-cut with the words Eiga? (Film), Senso? (War), Engeki? (Theatre). The performance ended with the words “The film is finished.” Thus, in a very provocative way Kawamura conflated the rebellion of his play with real-world political violence.

While the use of these images presents us with difficult and socio-politically complex interpretive possibilities, Kawamura argues that he was making a specific point. Japan experienced these events and their aftermath through media outlets, and consequently they were experienced as mediatised and unreal events; simplified, spectatorial, lacking complexity, history, or a sense of reality. The spectre of political violence has certainly grown larger than the events of that day; the perverse political and military after-effects that have developed in the wake of those bombings have likewise extended the sense of mediatisation and cultural reduction. Kawamura is not saying that these acts never happened, rather he is pointing to the problem of and for resistance; no matter how extreme the attack, it is reified. This in turn reduces any form of protest or resistance (violent or otherwise) to having a filmic (unreal) sense of reality. As people often comment, seeing the world trade centre strikes was like watching a movie. While we are yet to fully understand how this mindset will shape the world, these cataclysmic events have become the standard for what now unfolds; politics in the guise of ‘war, film, theatre.’ In the process, we are in danger of losing the sense of history, context, and complexity that is essential to understanding the events and preventing a further escalation of violent behaviour. Kawamura’s point is insightful.

But as a space for exploring radical or alternative viewpoints in society, postmodern theatre is also slippery ground and shows enormous capacity to absorb and reify dissent. It endlessly reproduces those apolitical smooth bodies that we often see in contemporary dance, for example. It revives radical texts as nostalgic commodities. Contemporary left-wing plays have their messages buried by the publicity and fandom machines surrounding the practice of casting ‘celebrity’ film stars and members of pop groups. The challenge for artists is to politically engage with the postmodern, to draw on its capacities for creative hybrids and dramatically striking contrasts, yet also insisting on locating within the theatrical enterprise a sense of context and history of and for the images and events that unfold on the contemporary stage. A kind of self-critical process...
needs to be developed that corresponds to the intellectual critiques of globalisation in *Empire* and is alive to the wider means of production in contemporary theatre. Theatre that is less relaxed, less willing to serve the politics of Empire might in its awareness of the forces against it have a certain violence or pain (see Fensham, forthcoming). Such theatre might explore a kind of inter-subjectivity. As Heiner Müller writes on the task of rethinking subjectivity and revolution in theatre, "My place, if my drama would still happen, would be on both sides of the front, between the frontlines, over and above them" (Müller, 1984: 56). Like surveillance, political theatre, to be effective in our age, needs to try to be simultaneously everywhere. Kawamura makes this point with his postmodern meta-remake of *Nippon Wars*; political theatre needs to match the catastrophe of the world and counter its virtualisation by the fact of theatre’s liveness; its awareness of history and context and immediate presence in time and space. This task might seem difficult but must be insisted on.

**(ii) The Wooster Group & Dumbtype**

To gain an insight into the kinds of political theatre that might be possible, we can consider other examples of works that seem to have explored a Hardt and Negri-like approach. The Wooster Group’s production of Eugene O’Neill’s *The Hairy Ape* (1995), and Dumb Type’s *ph* (1989) are contrasting examples of works in which the determining modes of production were central dramaturgical operations in the production’s outcomes. Moreover, there are deliberate attempts to experience inter-subjectivity through the integration of human and mechanic forms in these productions. Thus, for example, continuously interfering machinery disciplined and regulated the actors’ performances throughout these works. Mediatisation effects such as video projections, amplification and music that strongly determined the spatial, kinesic, and auditory relationships that both the performers and audience experienced added to the intrusive surveillance like aesthetics of the machinery. In *ph*, the images of surveillance that over-coded the prototype ‘post-human’ bodies of the Dumb Type performers were designed as a commentary on the so-called ‘new world order,’ itself a precursor to Empire. In this late 1980s commentary on the body as the site of cultural inscription, light bars swung back and forward across a space that was designed to resemble a photocopier or digital scanner. As the bars passed over the performers, commodity symbols and maps were projected down onto their bodies. The work considered themes such as gender-sexuality and identity politics. ‘New World Order equals New World Border’ was the prescient catchphrase of the performance and so the stage was smooth and compliant to the aesthetic operational modes of Jamesonian late-capitalism.

By contrast, the mid 1990s production of *The Hairy Ape* was staged as a visceral entrapment of class-politics by the machinery of its own invention. Playing the main character Yank, actor Willem Dafoe was literally embedded and finally consumed by the mechanics of the production: by the rods and pistons of the set, and by his working class speech effects forcefully amplified via a microphone roughly grafted onto his wrist. These machines of an older industrial America, like this representative working class figure, are shown to be extinct.

It is not the representational force of these works that strikes me, but their multidimensional and self-reflexive staging of experience through the logic of production. Like the performers in the avant-garde group Gekidan Kaitaisha who articulate a method of being moved by the space around them *these actors are not*
acting but are acted upon.

(iii). NYID

Not Yet It's Difficult's (NYID), an experimental theatre group based in Melbourne (I work in the group as dramaturg) that has long incorporated images of surveillance into their work (see www.notyet.com.au), employs a model of theatre that bears comparison to the dramaturgical framework outlined here. One of the goals of NYID is to:

(T)ry and make process as performance...so that the way in which a performance was made generated the way in which it was presented, so that the material of the making of the work was transparent in some way, and readable in some way to an audience. (Pledger, 2002)

NYID’s production of K (2002) explored the linkages between systems of surveillance, technology and Empire. Surveillance, in its most Empire-like form, was the theme of this work as well as its mode of presentation. An idea of surveillance aesthetics was the key to developing the performance; the dialogical and critical functions of surveillance translated into theatrical form. As will become clear, surveillance was not so much debated in the performance through metaphor, social commentary, or some other representational gesture. Through its intrusive presence, surveillance was continually foreground as a reality. It was the determining feature or the logic for the performance as whole.

For David Pledger, NYID leader and writer-director of K, surveillance is unambiguously a form of symbolic violence and an operational mode of power. He argues that surveillance is a "kind of organisation of power and capital ... which determine the way that we organise ourselves in space, our emotional lives, our thinking" (cited in Murphet, 2001). In K, a work loosely based on Franz Kafka’s The Trial, the audience is taken through a maze of security checks into a 'waiting room' prior to the performance beginning. In the waiting room, itself a surveillance site and a typical 'in-between' zone of globalisation, large television monitors display the current alert status, switching from code blue to red. An anonymous female announcer ceaselessly delivers instructions and words of apology and comfort on behalf of the theatrical producers. Her words have the clipped mechanical rhythm and empty sensuality of machine generated speech – she has the familiar embrace of an omnipresent instructional force. The final "audience member" (Greg Ulfan) to enter is detained because he has a copy of The Trial in his bag. He is taken centre stage, surrounded by guards and interrogated by an official (Luciano Martucci) using a new and advanced "neuropsychosis implant program" that causes pain and distress in the subject under interrogation in expediential measure to his degree of resistance. The depiction of this is through the body; the guards inflict their treatments by quick flicks of their torsos, the subject is thrown to the floor by the invisible force that is directed his way. Throughout the interrogation – the purpose of which is only vaguely stated – the subject is incessantly watched and recorded. His faith in democracy and freedom is challenged and undermined by his interrogator’s torture and routines of instruction.

Overwhelmingly intrusive surveillance in K breaks down the autonomy of the individual resulting in a kind of schizophrenic inter-subjectivity. As multidirectional images of K’s body are shown across the monitors and writ large at the back of the space, K becomes a fragmentary, hopelessly divided character. Words and concepts mentioned by the officer and the subject are registered as trademarks and subsequently evacuated from
public discourse. They become privatised and, when used in conversation, the same
female-mother voice records their use, their acronym, and their trademark ownership.
In this way all emotions, concepts, familial relations and expressions, for and against
the system, are registered and protected. Speech is punctuated and colonised by the
intruding voice reminding the speaker of the ownership of the words they use and the
need for their continued loyalty and compliance in respecting the primacy of the private
over the public. Theatre critic Helen Thomson wrote:

This is theatre that takes risks in the extremes of its alienation techniques,
trapping the audience in the same horrors as K, subjecting us to a barrage
of threatening sounds, of language corrupted by political euphemism, and
the sight of one man’s struggle against inhuman odds (Thomson, 2002).

Finally, after three rounds of questioning and the rising pain of the psychosis system,
the subject breaks down. His capacity for resistance (developed through his
memorisation of Kafka’s text as a way of diverting his mind away from the images of
instruction that otherwise fill his world) reaches its limits and his mind is an ‘open book’
to his interrogators. His thoughts can now be recorded, owned and controlled; he is
subsequently reborn as a television celebrity, who in the second section of the
performance, plays out his former victimisation and incarceration as a glib promotional
movie called *Demokracy™*. The smoothly bureaucratic and male interrogator from the
first half of the performance is replaced in the second by a cyborg-TV hostess (Vivienne
Walsh) who embodies media’s informational domain. Permanently ‘live,’ and always
ecstatic, the hostess prefaces her program introductions with the phrase: "Today,
tonight, wherever you are globally speaking.” Her physicality exists solely as a montage
of media presentational gestures (noddies to camera, etc.) and hyperactive dramatic
speech rhythms, her spine is permanently curved to push her breasts into the camera’s
eye. Occasional glitches in her operating program see her manically repeat single
motions and sound bites as a kind of gesticular virus. K is likewise transformed from the
helpless wretch rooted to a single spot centre stage during his interrogation, into a slick,
smooth-bodied television star who traverses the space easily, using an overabundance
of clichéd ‘meet and greet’ and ‘good to know you’ gestural forms. As Jonathan
Marshall explains, "K was imprisoned, reprogrammed and let loose only to become
even more intensely unfree, pedalling a cynical, deflated version of political
disengagement and Demokracy™” (Marshall, 2002-3: 7). At first, *Demokracy’s*
popularity soars, but this cannot be sustained and gradually K’s identity is mediatised,
privatised and taken from him. He is set on the path of running from his world and finally
collapses once more. His interrogator returns for a final round of questions, but no part
of K that has not been sold remains to answer. K dies, "like a dog,” … "for the ratings.”

*K* literalised and internalised the logic of surveillance as dramaturgical material. All
aspects of the performance, the actors, design, media, sound, and audience were
regulated according to this logic. In this sense *K* is a performance of Empire. In *K*’s
world as in our own:

The liberal notion of the public, the place outside where we act in the
presence of others, has been universalised (because we are always now
under the gaze of others, monitored by safety cameras) and sublimated or
de-actualized in the virtual spaces of the spectacle. The end of the outside
is the end of liberal politics” (Hardt and Negri, 2000: 188-9).

*K* makes the point that we are within the kind of moral corruption and hyperactive
capitalism of Empire, and that Empire works to ensure the maintenance, and further extension of this reality. As Pledger notes: K is "this detention culture (we) now live in" (cited in Roberts, 2002).

**IV. Conclusion**

In this essay I have argued that surveillance is a formation of Empire, Hardt and Negri’s compelling thesis for the current globality of power. Surveillance behaves in ways that prompts me to further suggest that it has an aesthetic dimension. A formation that wraps around us and that we move through, surveillance constructs and instructs according to what and how it sees. We in turn modify our performances to conform to its dictates. While we should analyse the amnestic, anaesthetic subterfuge of surveillance aesthetics, we should also look to cultural productions that might resist this order. By ‘surveilling Empire back on itself’ we can begin to understand and address its coercive power. Theatre from the contemporary postmodern and experimental genres, when alive to context and its own means of production can offer an effective response. Works like NYID’s K that give consideration to the regimes and practices of production can be a theatre that rebels against Empire.

However much this extreme theatre explores the crisis of our age though, it does not offer an alternative outlook. This reflects that fact that Hardt and Negri’s theorisation of ‘the multitude’ is incomplete and lacking fuller political realisation. Yet, perhaps this is also a failure of imagination. We are unable to imagine the kind of politically conscious hybrid bodies that Hardt and Negri seem to require and demand for their radical project to be realised. "How can the body of the multitude configure itself as a telos?" they ask (2000: 404) and bring about a transformation in the world. Now that theatre has realised a kind performance dramaturgy built from "the regimes and practices of production" and shown the surveillance aesthetic in all its power, this is something to work for. We might think about theatre and inter-subjectivity not only as marking the breakdown of the self and the schizophrenic condition of living in Empire, but also as a site for new possibilities; not in terms of a surveillance aesthetic, but one that activates resistance to Empire’s soft totalitarian world. This is to imagine change through participation and through peaceful resistance. To do this, theatre as an institution, and not just a handful of artists and cultural producers, must get out of the passive world and return to the barricades.

**REFERENCES**


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