

BLUE SKY VINEYARD: OPPORTUNITIES FOR SUBVERSION OF THE POWER STRUCTURE IN THE SURVEILLANCE ASSEMBLAGE

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My paper explores the potential of digital media arts technology to disrupt and resist apparatuses of control in surveilled commercial spaces. Although the consumer culture in these spaces appears complicit with the potential power in the surveillance assemblage, the leveraging of digital media arts technologies offers opportunities for the subversion of the power structure in the digitally networked surveillance assemblage.

Blue Sky Vineyard, a southern Illinois winery, is a surveilled commercial space. The multiple video cameras, credit card machines, and wireless network at this private location create an electronic surveillance system that can be used to monitor its patrons. Through my critical ethnographic study, I closely examined the culture and surveillance system at this location. Although the consumer culture at Blue Sky Vineyard appears complicit with the vineyard's potential power in the surveillance assemblage, the leveraging of digital media arts technologies offers opportunities for the subversion of the power structure in the digitally networked surveillance assemblage.

In its promotional materials, Blue Sky Vineyard says that it creates "a taste of Tuscany in the hills of Southern Illinois." [1] Indeed, patrons are encouraged to delight in Blue Sky's simulated Tuscan environment; visitors are asked to "enjoy the large indoor seating area" that overlooks the "vineyard and rolling countryside." [2] The "tranquil atmosphere" that Blue Sky advertises is supposed to create the "Comfort of Home" with the benefit of free wireless high speed internet. [3] The images of the rustic windmill and the Tuscan-inspired edifice surrounded by rolling hills foster the impression that Blue Sky is a relaxed environment where people can leisurely enjoy food and drink.

Upon entering the space, multiple laminated placards notify patrons in bold lettering that "This Property is Protected by Video Surveillance." These notifications did not appear to create any cause for unease among the patrons at Blue Sky. Patrons who sat directly in front of these signs for hours did not comment on the signs. The signs were relatively small, approximately 6 inches in width and length, but even those patrons who stood within inches of the signs did not discuss them.

Similarly, Blue Sky patrons did not appear to pay attention to the five video cameras that are located in the tasting room space. The three video cameras located in the wine bar area are well above eye-level and are skillfully integrated into the simulated Tuscan environment. The two video cameras that are located outside the Blue Sky wine bar area appear to be identical to the three wine bar area cameras, but they are not as well camouflaged in their environment as the wine bar area cameras. All of the cameras are small round structures, probably no more than six inches in circumference, which are painted in a neutral gray hue.

The cameras and credit card machines that are located at both the wine and food bars at Blue Sky can be seen as being part of a larger surveillant assemblage. This assemblage is made up of formerly distinct surveillant systems that have combined to become synthesized into a larger system. According to Haggerty and Ericson, this desire for integration across and among surveillance systems "allows us to

speak of surveillance as an assemblage, with such combinations providing for exponential increases in degree of surveillance capacity.” [4] Thus, visual surveillance can be combined with database surveillance to create an integrated system that is far more effective at surveillance than each of its component parts. Surveillance assemblages span the world with various surveillance devices working together to create data files on people in public and private spaces.

The combination of surveillance systems can be seen at Blue Sky Vineyard. Assuming Blue Sky gathers and records the information from its cameras, it could gain a wealth of information about its patrons and their habits. The cameras could enable the Blue Sky staff to gather practical information on which patrons drink which wines and how they use the tasting room space. They could allow the management to gain insight on who their patrons are, how long these patrons stay on the premises, and how Blue Sky can more effectively market their wares to sell additional products. When this visual information from the video cameras is combined with textual credit card information gathered when patrons make their purchases, Blue Sky can gain even more insight into their patrons’ identities and spending habits. Blue Sky could link patrons’ names on their credit cards with their images from the video cameras to identify these patrons and carry out targeted marketing initiatives. Through the surveillance of the free wireless network, Blue Sky could monitor the internet traffic within its walls. Once patrons consent to enter the free wireless network, Blue Sky has the ability to gain access to the data that patrons are obtaining on their laptops. Blue Sky can gather information from patrons’ internet searches on the wireless network such as their online shopping activities. Blue Sky could combine this information with the information from the video surveillance and credit card information to further expand the variety of consumer goods that it offers its patrons and carry out marketing initiatives that are even more targeted to particular patrons. The integrated combination of the video, credit card, and wireless network surveillance at Blue Sky is a far more effective surveillance mechanism than each of its component parts.

The integrated combination of the video, credit card, and wireless network surveillance allows Blue Sky to construct a digital double of its patrons composed of pure information. Haggerty and Ericson call this data “a decorporalized body, a ‘data double’ of pure virtuality.” [5] Indeed, Blue Sky may find that the digital doubles that it can create when it combines the data about Blue Sky patrons from the multiple video, credit card, and wireless network surveillance sources to be more useful to them in many ways than the actual living Blue Sky patrons. Haggerty and Ericson explain that digital doubles are “increasingly the objects toward which governmental and marketing practices are directed.” [6] The Blue Sky management may use the digital doubles of its patrons, virtual bodies composed of pure information, to make marketing and product placement decisions. This is an indication of a hyperreal existence where “simulation is characterized by a precession of the model.” [7] When and if Blue Sky uses the information from the surveillance assemblage to send its patrons publications on Blue Sky’s events, the digital double of the Blue Sky patrons becomes more real to Blue Sky than its patrons’ corporal bodies.

Blue Sky Vineyard may not use the information that it gathers from the multiple video cameras, credit card machines, and wireless network to monitor its customers. Perhaps the video cameras are not even operational. They may be simulations of surveillance that are displayed to discourage shoplifting and deter patrons from acting inappropriately. Blue Sky may not even monitor its wireless network. However, as shown by the examples above, the surveillance assemblage at Blue Sky is potentially very powerful because it can grant Blue Sky the ability to gain vast amounts of personal information about its patrons. Should it wish, Blue Sky can use the surveillant assemblage at the vineyards to create digital doubles of its patrons.

Indeed, if Blue Sky is using the surveillant assemblage, Blue Sky may not only be watching its patrons, collecting data from their credit card transactions, and monitoring their internet usage. The surveillant assemblage at Blue Sky is not a fixed entity with defined limits. Indeed, “to the extent that the surveillant assemblage exists, it does so at the potentiality, one that resides at the intersections of various media that can be connected for diverse purposes.” [8] The surveillant assemblage is an unstable, moving target because it can change at any time with advancing technology or changing demands on its infrastructure. For example, although microphones are not yet commonplace on closed circuit equipment, recent technological advances can allow Blue Sky to add microphones to its closed circuit television apparatus. In fact, Blue Sky may already have this technology. With audio surveillance, Blue Sky Vineyard can gain additional information about its patrons. It can listen to patrons’ comments about its wine and other consumer products. Blue Sky could potentially carry out even more targeted marketing by combining audio data from its patrons with their video, credit card, and internet data to create richer, more complex data doubles.

It is interesting to consider that Blue Sky management and employees may not be the only people monitoring Blue Sky patrons or potentially constructing digital doubles of these patrons. The dynamic nature of the surveillant assemblage allows the surveillant assemblage at Blue Sky Vineyards to connect to other parts of the larger surveillant assemblage that extends across southern Illinois and the world. This larger surveillant assemblage is composed of both private businesses and public governmental authorities. Although it is not likely that Blue Sky Vineyards links its closed circuit surveillance television network to the local police department’s database of criminals, there is the potential for this connection. Should there be a local man who is being pursued by law enforcement authorities, Blue Sky can provide its closed circuit surveillance television tapes to assist in the fugitive’s arrest. The data from the closed circuit television at Blue Sky, a private business, can be shared and distributed to the federal law enforcement authorities as well as international governmental authorities.

Just as the surveillant assemblage extends across private businesses and governmental authorities, it also extends to private citizens’ homes and personal digital devices. The surveillant assemblage is a rhizomatic system where widespread access to technology has given private citizens the opportunity to gain access to surveillance technology. [9] The so-called playing field has been leveled for the average man or woman. Private businesses like Blue Sky Vineyard and governmental agencies like the local southern Illinois police department and federal and international governmental authorities no longer have the exclusive ability to electronically surveil others. Private citizens have gained the access to technology that enables them “control, rather than be controlled by, a recording gaze.” [10] With the consumer electronics industry’s expansion into personal media devices in recent years, consumers have gained increased access to smaller video cameras, camera phones, and audio recording devices. Private citizens have set up web-cams to document their lives and broadcast this data live across the World Wide Web to others across the world. These citizens have taken control of the camera and used it to serve their private interests.

According to Haggerty and Ericson, while this increased access to technology has not resulted in “a complete democratic leveling of the hierarchy of surveillance, these developments cumulatively highlight a fractured rhizomatic criss-crossing of the gaze such that no major population groups stand irrefutably above or outside the surveillant assemblage.” [11] Private citizens, including young children, low-income, and traditionally disadvantaged populations, have gained access to inexpensive video cameras and audio-visual recording features on low-cost mobile phones. These recording devices allow these marginalized populations to access the surveillant assemblage and add their own media content to this vast, dynamic, and rhizomatic system. One of the most famous demonstrations of this increased

access was a private citizen's video recording of the police beating of Rodney King in Los Angeles. This recording resulted in a "turning back of the eye of authority upon itself." [12] The hierarchy of surveillance where law enforcement had the nearly exclusive power to electronically surveil the public was disrupted when a private citizen used media technology to challenge law enforcement's account of the events.

These disruptions and places of resistance are what give private citizens the opportunity to resist the hierarchical power structure in the surveillant assemblage. This hierarchical power structure favors institutional actors such as corporations and governments because these entities are far more organized and well funded than private citizens. According to Michel deCerteau, "*space is a practiced place*" and sites of resistance such as the recording of the police beating of Rodney King constitute deCerteau's places. [13] Like the surveillant assemblage itself, these actions and sites of resistance lack stability, but they are liminal places that offer the potential to challenge the current power structure in the surveillant assemblage. Should these isolated sites of resistance work together to expand the surveillant assemblage, they could threaten power structure of the surveillant assemblage and grant private citizens greater power in this assemblage. The more that private citizens work together to create places or sites of resistance, the closer society comes to an ideal democratic leveling of the hierarchy of surveillance. This democratic leveling of the hierarchy of surveillance would not allow Blue Sky to have greater and more powerful surveillance mechanisms than private citizens. Private citizens would have the same opportunities to surveil Blue Sky that Blue Sky has to surveil them.

Although it may seem unlikely that there will be the democratic leveling of the hierarchy of surveillance at Blue Sky now, there were multiple moments of disruption and sites of potential resistance at Blue Sky. On many occasions, I observed patrons using mobile media devices to record the grounds of Blue Sky. One man walked around with a handheld video camera to give his colleagues the opportunity to see "this cool place." A woman video recorded the bar because she thought that it was "so beautiful and unique." I witnessed other patrons using their mobile phones to take digital images of the tasting room space. These were moments when the surveillant assemblage at Blue Sky was expanding. There was a blurring between the observers and the observed and the subjects and the objects of observation. Indeed, these moments offered opportunities to resist the power of surveillance that Blue Sky potentially holds over its patrons. These moments are interruptions that can be viewed as challenges to the hierarchy of surveillance at Blue Sky Vineyard.

Such moments can eventually lead to other moments in which the surveillant assemblage grows to include more private citizens who are expanding the surveillant assemblage at Blue Sky. By leveraging digital media arts technologies, private citizens can offer opportunities to subvert the power structure in the digitally networked surveillance assemblage. Digital media artists can create media art pieces by placing webcams above their laptops and recording the activities at Blue Sky. They can digitally capture video and still images of the video cameras recording the Blue Sky patrons and the Blue Sky employees. These digital media artists can curate the images and broadcast their live and archived digital video and photographic data on websites that they can promote across the United States and the world. Digital media artists can also construct digital documentaries of the events at Blue Sky. They can take a sequence or series of still digital images of the video cameras themselves showing the video cameras in the context of the environment and how they are used to surveil the space. Digital media artists can document the participants and activities in the space and post their documentary data on websites that would expand the surveillant assemblage at Blue Sky.

Aside from using websites to expand the surveillant assemblage at Blue Sky, digital media artists can also expand the surveillant assemblage with art installations in public and private exhibition spaces. Digital media artists can use live digital feeds of the real-time surveillance activity and the digital still images they record at Blue Sky to construct visually and intellectually compelling art installations. Through these installations, participants at public and private exhibition spaces would have the opportunity to witness the live expansion of the surveillant assemblage at Blue Sky. More adventurous digital media artists may try to expand beyond the physical manifestations of the surveillant assemblage at Blue Sky and intercept the Blue Sky closed circuit television system, duplicate the data from this system, and create an art installation inspired by this system.

There may be legal implications to such activities, but such concerns may be inconsequential as the surveillance assemblage grows to include more data. [14] As the surveillance assemblage becomes larger and accessible to more people, these people can work together to represent their interests in the legal system. For example, the legal battles over Napster continue, but many users feel free to download music off the internet.

According to William Bogard, the “very logic of information networks that information must be free to flow between any part of the system, for surveillance means more ways to observe the observers, bypass their firewalls, access their databases and decode their communications.” [15] The master’s tools have the potential to eventually dismantle the master’s house. If the surveillant assemblage eventually expands to include more and more people and their networked technology, it becomes an increasingly open structure. Bogard explains that if “an information network is a rhizome, then information must be able to travel in all directions, directly or indirectly, from every node to every other node.” [16] The more virtual nodes that are included in the assemblage, the more difficult it becomes for both institutional actors and private citizens to monitor the surveillant assemblage.

This growth and expansion makes it increasingly difficult for governments and corporations to maintain control over the data in their information networks. Powerful and institutional members of the hierarchy need increasingly sophisticated technology to protect privileged information. However, these powerful and institutional members also supply private citizens with “the very information gathering, interception, sharing, blocking and editing tools they need to defy that control.” [17] Through purchasing and co-opting this technology, private citizens can gain access to this technology as it becomes available. [18] They can use this technology to subvert the power structure in the surveillant assemblage. When digital media artists capture video and still images of themselves in the Blue Sky space and post this information on the internet, they participate in and influence the creation of their digital doubles.

Blue Sky Vineyard is a commercial space that offers the critical ethnographer a wealth of information about surveillance and consumer culture. As a critical ethnographer, I chose an inductive qualitative approach to my study and I began “with an ethical responsibility to address processes of unfairness or injustice within a particular *liveddomain*.” [19] I locate my study within the tradition of critical ethnography because I am committed to challenging the status quo and revealing the concealed power relations in our complex society. [20] My study identified opportunities for changing the consumer culture at Blue Sky Vineyard so that digital media artists can challenge the vineyard’s potential power in the surveillance assemblage. I offered examples of activities that operated in liminal places, moments of disruption, and sites of potential resistance at Blue Sky. However, my study is not bounded by the confines of Blue Sky Vineyard. The strategies that I identified in my study can be extended to other

private and public locations across the United States and the world. It is my hope that people will embrace these strategies in these expanded contexts.

References and Notes:

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