

Material Culture and Surveillance in British Society

Date : November 13, 2007

Carys Banks, MA Material and Visual Culture, UCL

My dissertation has investigated surveillance and security systems and what their implementation indicates about perceived risks and fears in British society. My analysis focuses on a commercial communications company: C3 who are suppliers of a security service 'LookOut Call'. This service is specifically designed to provide security for lone or mobile workers. I have also conducted fieldwork research within CCTV (close circuit television) control rooms run by Governmental bodies.

My research indicates that societal notions of risk and fear are pivotal to perceptions and usage of surveillance and security within modern society. Consumption of surveillance and security systems is also a consumption of societal conventions of perceived risk and risk management. This has had consequences for notions of personal and social responsibility in society.

The 'LookOut Call' security technology as a risk management device is indicative of how surveillance and security are constitutive of people's responsibility. Investing in and consuming security devices allow people to take their own precautionary measures. With the aid of technology, they are thus taking on the responsibility for their own safety in the face of perceived crime.

'LookOut Call' can be viewed as a "therapeutic" or 'life style' choice. Consuming the security is a means by which the individual partakes in "introspection" and "management" (Rose, 1996:162) of plans and goals in their life. Much like other forms of "therapeutics" the 'LookOut Call' service can be 'tailor made' to meet individual needs. It is "imbued with a 'personal' meaning" (1996:162) so as to highlight what kind of person is participating in the consumption of this technology device.

As regards security within governmental bodies and CCTV operating, it appears there is a real need for collaborative legislation. The huge amounts of funding that is being driven into CCTV equipment and employment do not automatically mean that the systems are going to be effective. Cameras are now an integral part of all citizens' daily activities in public spaces. Essentially they are perceived as a good thing by my informants, and they can be used very effectively in court proceedings. Nevertheless, organised strategies and research must be conducted in order for the control room environment to become as worth while as advocates of CCTV proclaim it is. At present this form of visual technology possesses too many flaws and areas whereby incorrect and unethical use can take place. The visual will, it seems, always be prominent in human understanding and objectification. We just have to make sure we do not lose sight of why people feel the need to be watched.