For Whom They Serve

Jeff Rian

Lewis Baltz's trilogy of works, *Ronde de Nuit*, *Docile Bodies*, and The *Politics of Bacteria* – multiple panels of still pictures, each the size of a very large billboard – examines the technology of watching, the video surveillance, the hidden cameras, the micro-cameras that enter human bodies for medical purposes, these and the technicians who operate them. *Ronde de Nuit* is cast in the blue-tint murkiness of surveillance videos; *Docile Bodies* features medical images of patients and machines; and The *Politics of Bacteria* focuses on cities as fortresses and the warrior stance of their bodyguards. In all three works Baltz indirectly reveals the point of surfeit the public has reached in relationship to the processes and technologies of surveillance designed to protect it. There's a feedback loop between the central powers of states, institutions, guardians, workmen and workwomen who run imaging processes and technologies, and the people they serve. Who are these people? That's the question Baltz's works most poignantly asks. Central authorities no longer have absolute control over technologies, because they are also used in the public domain. Thus the technologies, and the different places they're set up to "serve us" (like radar traps), have, in effect, instigated a distorting feedback loop in the hierarchical logic of those who watch and those who are being watched. This is the story Baltz recounts in his iconic images.

Everything is a story, a connection of events. The stories of amoebae, oceans, forests, creatures like us, the universe itself ravel and unravel in the relevant connections that engender them (and us). No creature or thing has to know how to build a universe or how to make a story. Repeated patterns of development initiate growth and adaptation, evolution and continuity, survival and death. A cell's nucleus is surrounded by protective organelles, like functionaries, that enable the connections for the cell's growth into a more complicated organism. Societies evolve and develop on the same principle.

Men, watching from the periphery, protect the cultural capital. Women, children, and iconoic artifacts compromise the cultural capital, and are protected to the death. In time of war, workmen are conscripted. In defeated, as Homer noted, women are raped and, along with children, conscripted into the enemy camp. Much

of this remains so today. So, naturally, in the course of human events, fear is a primary theme in stories and art forms.

Humans seek love, but all creatures flee potential catastrophe. Fear dictates the ways and means of survival, and is, therefore, bundled into the DNA of cellular creatures' patterns of survival. Fear is the most salient human emotion; fear has spawned the development of stories, which are based on survival behavior against animals with big teeth, snakes in the grass, thieves in the forest, barbarians at gates, unseen miasmas like Plague, the conquering of enemy tribes, the reactions to nuclear arsenals, and so on. The stress-points in our stories convey aspects of real fear, based on (1) actual experiences of violence; (2) anxiety about threat, which relates to an uncontrollable or inescapable perception of something that might not exist; and (3) caution – a subtext in any story – such as wary gaze across a savannah, into a forest or dark alley up ahead, or across the night sky.

Power and progress are primary themes in the stories of Oedipus, Christ, Little Red Riding Hood, The Three Little Pigs, Gibbon's history of the Roman Empire, the biographies of "great men," and Freud's psychology (caricatured from Greek theater). A specialized elite governs via an inherited mantel of power, which is represented by idealized iconic images like heroes and heroines, lions at gates, eagles on emblems and rooftops, crosses on necklaces, tattoos on chests, and by images of men bearing arms of women and children needing protection. An elite rules from a center (a crucially relevant word) in a top-down hierarchy (ditto), which is driven by an obsession with status (likewise).

Lewis Baltz makes aesthetic connections between information and control, invasive medicine and institutional authority, and invisible bacteria and paranoia. In his trilogy's panels Baltz shows the protective organelles of culture as instruments of technology and control. He also questions the arbitrary nature of the stochastic process of control, one that is aimed at any random possibility of attack or potential disorder. The purpose is specific but the aim is generalized, like protecting citizens from terrorists or disease.

Prediction is general, not specific. Artwork tends to follow this model, portraying the general as a model of the specific. The world has been divided into parts (north and south, organic and inorganic, cities and countries), as have been perceptions (good and bad, actual and abstract, big and small, them and us).

Divisions are based on established patterns that are continuously subjected to change, such as a small object's relationship to a big one, say, in countries, competitors, and sexual organs; insider to outsider status, as in political parties and the special friends one hugs or kisses; and categories of ethnic relationships, language differences, and inculcated habits.

Recognizing patterns is aesthetic. Different types of patterns, whether of eating habits, styles of dress, or systems of survival and control – the building of walls to the invention of electronic surveillance – evolve from patterns of experience. No one can predict the future of these patterns, including the global surveillance technologies, many of which are in the hands of individuals: the video recorders, computers, cell phones, etc. However, certain inculcated patterns can become toxic to the way the individual/group, insider/outsider, and center/margin relationships are defined. Such problems and their aesthetic implications are often artistic subjects.

Baltz's multi-panel triology is like a contemporary version of, say, Giotto's cycles about the life of Mary, her son Jesus, and her mother Anne seen in the Arena Chapel in Padua. In them Giotto told a story about one way to salvation (although his patron, Enrico Scrovegni, can be seen praying for his salvation over the tomb of Hell – Giotto's jokes about his employer: will he be admitted into Heaven or not?) Baltz's story is about technology, the extensions of Man, as Marshall McLuhan called it – the tools of war and protection, of fear, power, and control. These technologies are our gods. In looking at Baltz's works one must ask whom these technologies are for. Whom do they serve and how are they ordained? Baltz addresses the questions aesthetically, iconically, and without negative makers. Yet these works are visibly shrouded in an atmosphere of caution. They aren't happy pictures, like the advertisements whose scale they equal. They're more like documents that query certain facts of life.

The first in the series, *Ronde de Nuit* (also called *Night Watch*) is a spin-off from Baltz's *Sites of Technology* photographs. Many of the *Sites of Technology* works show the windowless, dust-free, inside-world architecture of electronic technology – rooms filled with massive mainframe computers, all colored in pastels, as if to soften their mechanistic authority. In such an interior world the only sounds produced are the low-decibel hum of electronic equipment and neon lighting. Technicians quietly serve and service their nuclear organs. These sterile interiors

recall the science fiction we make up about them, such as Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*. The technologies themselves play the roles of both Little Red Riding Hood and the Big Bad Wolf: innocent objects capable of instigating riots of paranoia in their users. There is no day or night, only continuity. Enormous power looms in them. All the while control remains an institutionally accepted give. But again: for whom are these technologies a gift?

Ronde de Nuit was designed for the Centre Georges Pompidou. It comprises 12 panels, 12 meters long, two meters high, in a corridor with a fairly low ceiling, exposed ducts, and a floor of reflective stainless steel. The basic tonality of the work is what the artist calls "video blue." The work is about a world of round-the-clock vigilance, powered by electronic surveillance technologies. Its panels are visually organized, left to right, using Dante's *Inferno* as a model. One story frames another. The first two panels represent the descent into the netherworld: a searcher bathed in swimming-pool blue, an up-going escalator, buildings at twilight, and a network of junction cables. In the central panel an android-looking feminine face, reminiscent of a mannequin in the film *Blade Runner*, plays a satanic role – a Boschian demon technologically processed into technical innocence. The panels of the final section give onto a city at night, a machine world of hard surfaces and glass, whose central nervous system is comprised of lights and silicon cables.

Several of the photographs for *Ronde de Nuit* were taken at a police surveillance station in Roubaix, a suburb of Lille, the economically depressed, crime-ridden town on the northern border of France, a town far away from the centrally based, income-generating tourist haven of Paris. The images are filmic in their familiarity – the cool, remote, cryptic colors of surveillance videos, icons of technology, with the cautionary artificial light used in the servicing of cities, not people.

The second work in the trilogy, *Docile Bodies*, borrows its title from Focault's long essay, *Discipline and Punish*, and refers to the benevolent mask of power and dominance. In it the photographer shows the godlike, invasive, life-protecting medical technologies – echograms, X-rays, the tools of microsurgery – which are controlled by a priest-like elite who works in specialized medical communities served by armies of caretakers. We're all their dependants.

But these kinds of corporeal surveillance technologies also increase awareness in a way that augments a personal sense of caution, paranoia, and self-protection. As a result these technologies have contributed to the questioning of their own invasive power. The knowledge these technologies generate, the real precaution about potential illness, sets in place an unprecedented expectation whose reality is machine-dependant. Yet, genetically, each of us is still a tribe-oriented hunter-gatherer. In effect, technological power outstrips human capacity. The positive side of a colonoscopy is that it can relieve anxiety.
The negative feedback comes when such power both generates hope and enhances a wary fear of cancer, which has become an individualized version of the Plague.

In the final work in the trilogy, *The Politics of Bacteria*, Baltz takes up a theme that has preoccupied the writer Thomas Pynchon for fifty-plus years: paranoia. Paranoia compresses fear, anxiety, and caution into a self-imposed, often psychotic, conspiracy theory – a feeling of being chased by demons, possibly by Progress. The wary, protective, "parade rest," stance as Baltz calls it, of bodyguard, policemen, and soldiers dominates this work. Contemporary buildings and whole sectors of towns and cities have a "panoptic" power – as if cities are the iconic extensions of Foucault's (via Jeremy Bentham) circular prison, the panopticon. Buildings are outfitted with surveillance equipment that is operated by hyperconscious gazers, who are trained to look out for lurking terrorists, troublemakers, or bodies conveying bacteria. This trained hyper-awareness becomes a virus of the cultural mind; a way of thinking that favors the dark side of stories. What can result is a problem of power and control growing more complex in the hierarchies of social status, with the protected coming to fear the protectors.

For nearly half a century (taking pictures at a young age) Lewis Baltz has been dividing the world into subjects – the subjective parts of his specialized interests. He looks through the lens of a camera, which he generally sets on a tripod and aims at some part of a larger aesthetic pattern he perceives. He has focused, among other things, on standard clichés, which he calls "prototypes," on tract houses, on industrial parks, and on technology and surveillance. These subjects are the cultural patterns that define the Western lifestyle. Perceiving patterns is an integral part of the developmental processed used by all cellular organisms. Pattern recognition in humans is combined with an ability to learn how to learn – which is

what makes us human. Baltz is conscious of status and hierarchies but he works independently from class distinctions. In series after series he has transformed cultural patterns into iconic images. A Chevy, a house, or an X-ray machine is an icon of cultural patterning; objects are made in an evolutionary committee process. Isolating such objects doesn't idealize them, in a Platonic sense; it treats them as models or prototypes – the products of cultural formation, adaptation, and invention. All of them are aesthetic.

Baltz almost never depicts people. Yet in the trilogy he shows people as iconic actors in the feedback loop we have gotten ourselves into, at this most interesting stage in our story, when watchfulness has turned inward, at this time of surfeit, when the questions about who's doing the watching, and why, are being asked.

In earlier times information, such as the ability to write and calculate quantities, was reserved for specialists. With industrialization, starting in the Renaissance, cash crops and natural resources became cultural capital and art began its move from churches into the public arena, framing the world in linear perspective – a picture. This is a story about our technical evolution, one that set in motion today's technology: the cameras, video recorders, computers, surveillance systems, microbiology tools, etc.

The term Homo sapiens sapiens, Man the Knower, has hit a new limit simply because the information has been released from the strictures of a central control. Increasing awareness gives flight to the human imagination.

Lewis Baltz's trilogy projects an awareness of the world today, in the same way that Giotto, Hieronymus Bosch, Pieter Bruegel, Franz Hals, Jean-Leon Gérome, Matthew Brady, and August Sander made iconic projections of their worlds. Art is iconically factual; images are generalized representations of real biology, real things, and mythical and real events. In Baltz's works the thinking of a moral philosopher is revealed in his factual presentation of objects and events. There's no specific judgment or moralizing but questions do arise. One of the primary functions of visual art is to enter into the minds of its viewers, using images mnemonic devices, so that they might think about the meaning. Meaning arises from the ability to learn to learn, because one questions why.

Baltz's trilogy images are historical (he is also an obsessive reader whose greatest interest is in facts and their influence on history). His photographs (which benefit from his particular noticing and his concomitant obsession with his craft) are factual representations of the technologies of our constantly evolving watchfulness. No one can predict how these technologies will evolve or how we will transform them or they us. Optimists say that because watchfulness has been democratized in portable technologies we may become more open-minded towards others. Maybe. Given the fact that we depersonalize the way just about everything is made and manufactured – to have a short life-span, to never be repaired, to be simply discarded – we might also treat ourselves as instruments, as toss-offs, as mere servants, or, as Samuel Butler put it, as the sexual organs of a machine-run world to which we are enslaved. These oppositions are conceptually released in Lewis Baltz's trilogy of colorful Cibachrome images, the size of billboards. Our time is captured. A message has been conveyed. The story is ours. We are what we project. There is no conclusion. And it's all aesthetics.

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