

Documentary *Sousveillance* and Apocalypse:

David Moore's *The Last Things* (2008)

Like Taryn Simon, in her *American Index* project (2007), David Moore has infiltrated spaces of secrecy and power, making the covert visible. At the same time we are living in a moment of history when public space is increasingly privatised, incorporated into global capitalism, and placed under surveillance. This is a process that renders the representation of public space a corporate monopoly serviced by a state politics of fear post 9/11.

Both in his 2004 project, *The Commons* and *The Last Things* (2008), Moore's approach to documenting 'state institutions and government apparatus' aligns him to a certain extent with the concept of *sousveillance*.¹ The term refers to actions that imply a process whereby surveillance is placed under reverse scrutiny. This is achieved by ironically mirroring its technologies and strategies of looking from the point of view of the citizen under surveillance. The aim of *sousveillance* interventions is to make visible the power relations inherent in contemporary surveillance society by temporarily turning them upside-down: surveillance, from above, is translated into *sousveillance*, from below. *Sousveillance* interventions, might counter surveillance's authoritarian corrosion of a sense of community in a climate of suspicion. *Sousveillance* would reconstruct the secretive

¹ David Moore and curator Angela Weight in conversation about *The Last Things* on 21 August 2008, as part of Belfast Exposed Photography. Available as podcast at: <http://www.davidmoore.uk.com/>

centralised authority of surveillance as a distributed power structure that aims to strike a state of *equiveillance* through its inherent accountability and egalitarianism. *Equiveillance* ideally implies a democracy where citizen and state have equal access to the means of watching in and watching over both public space. Moore's work extends the public gaze by interrogating the inaccessible spaces of representative government.²

Moore questions the power relations inherent in documentary photography itself. Moore's conversation with the curator Angela Weight, as part of Belfast Exposed Photography, is telling in this respect.³ For him, documentary was born in the 19th Century as a genre often in the employ of the state. Consequently, in *The Commons* and *The Last Things*, his stated aim was to adopt the viewpoint of the panopticon as a way of representing an 'internal institutional life for the benefit of a wider audience'. That Moore's approach is a *sousveillant* one is underlined when he asserts that he is concerned with 'turning the camera around 180° and pointing it in the other direction.' In a democratising turn, he has reversed the traditional gaze of documentary by 'looking at power rather than looking at the powerless'. Moreover, his *equiveillant* aims are clear in the statement, 'I think that thing about making things equal is a motivating force.'

The title Moore has chosen is a medieval term referring not only to apocalyptic events but also to apocalyptic places beyond our

² For a more general discussion of surveillance, sousveillance, and photography, see my Zonezero editorial for April 2008 at: <http://www.zonezero.com/editorial/abril08/april08.html>

³ See footnote 1.

everyday world, whether Heaven, Purgatory, or Hell.⁴ The ambiguous, tawdry banality, and occasionally deadpan humour of Moore's images would cast these spaces as abject and uncanny. Posthumous photographs of an apocalyptic world emptied of humans, the lighting is often dramatic ['Broadcast Studio'] (Moore 2008: 23). However, the synthetic surfaces and colours illuminated reveal our fate to be bathetic ['Briefing Room'] (ibid.: 26-27). An almost tone-perfect antechamber to the uncanniness of the post 9/11 world we inhabit. Responding to epic events, the leader of the Western world assumes the mantle of a clown, reliant on a series of comic turns to distract us, the viewers, from the tragedies unfolding.

The historical memory that pervades the series is equally apocalyptic and uncanny. If ours is a world of technologically enhanced flows and connections, then Moore portrays the frozen anachronism of enclosure and confinement. Though equipped with the computers, information screens, and surveillance cameras of the digital world, this is also an underground repository of Cold War memory. Moore's photograph of the 'Briefing Room' (26-27) recalls the War Room of Kubrick's *Dr Strangelove* (1964), while copies of Len Deighton's *The Ipcress File* (1962) and Ian Fleming's *Casino Royale* (1953) appear on the bookshelf of the 'Duty Officer's Quarters' (67).⁵

⁴ On Medieval eschatology and apocalypticism, see Walker & Freedman (2000). Also of interest in the context of surveillance and art history is Schmidt-Burkhardt (2002: esp. 20).

⁵ In his interview with Angela Weight, Moore himself draws attention to the parallel between his work and Kubrick's film. See footnote 1. Petit also mentions the film in his introduction (5).

Bookended between Cold War nuclear apocalypse and post-Cold War global terror, the fact that nothing happens in these photographs may accumulatively arouse a sense of apprehension in the viewer. The fear that defines our world in 2008 is precisely that of cataclysmic events bursting into and bursting apart daily routine. Silent phones waiting to ring sit under ticking clocks. [‘The Principal Office’] (Moore 2008: 49). Premonitory reminders of the ticking bombs continually invoked by Western governments to justify both the increasing restrictions on their citizens’ civil rights and the projection of military power abroad. In Moore’s ‘Annex [2] to Emergency Briefing Room’ (Moore 2008: 75), a clock and two telephones frame an aerial photograph of a classified location. It is virtually impossible to dissociate this photograph from the use of similar satellite images in a presentation before the UN Security Council in February 2003 by the then US Secretary of State, Colin Powell. Offered by him as definitive evidence of Iraq’s advanced development of weapons of mass destruction, Powell offered seemingly compelling justification – subsequently proving to be unfounded – for the invasion of Iraq.⁶ Here again, Moore questions the deployment of photography as documentary evidence in the context of its mediation by power structures. He does so through the typically *sousveillant* gesture of interrogating surveillance’s view from above.

⁶ David Campbell gives an account of Powell’s use of satellite images in a broader discussion on satellite imaging in his ‘Tele-Vision: Satellite Images and Security’, *Source*, 56 (Autumn 2008), pp. 16-23.

The uncanny in-between of *The Last Things* evokes a purgatorial space where things hang in the balance. Surprisingly, rather than fatalistically pointing to the hellish end of things, Moore's title and images clear a space full of suspense, inviting meaningful human intervention to fill the void of the underground rooms he depicts. It is as if his photographs would ask: 'Where and who are the actors who might fill this empty stage?'. In the pause afforded by such suspense there is at least a tacit interrogation of the viewer's will to break the stillness with some action. The only occupant of this series of rooms is the viewer who guiltily passes through them by virtue of Moore's reverse surveillance. His forensic attention to detail might give the viewer the disturbing sensation of scrutinising a crime scene. But, initial alienation quickly becomes overtaken by the active participation of the viewer, as they analyse the evidence at hand and consider what to do with it. It is thus that the images here are politically charged. Charged with a sense of consequence, they are poised between hope and despair, heaven and hell, dispossession or intervention.

Might not David Moore's introspective gaze into the bowels of the post-Cold War British State apparatus be occasioned by the Imperial West's crisis of identity? The spectacular catastrophes of 9/11, Abu Ghraib, and the collapse of Wall Street, compel me to view *The Commons* and *The Last Things* as sober explorations of uncharted territory in the shaky period of late Capitalism. *Terra incognita*, where such terms as democracy, freedom, and prosperity resonate as hollow echoes of a history we no longer inhabit, in a series of empty rooms.

At one point in his introduction, Chris Petit describes a `world beyond the niceties and reassurances of design and taste.’⁷ This is a space whose anonymity is panoptical, in a Foucauldian sense. The purgatory of Moore’s security state is congruent with the French philosopher’s `diabolical’ system of power. In an interview with Jean-Pierre Barou and Michelle Perrot, Michel Foucault describes the institutionalisation of power in the following terms:

One doesn’t have here a power which is wholly in the hands of one person who can exercise it alone and totally over the others. It’s a machine in which everyone is caught, those who exercise power just as much as those over whom it is exercised. [...] Power is no longer substantially identified with an individual who possesses or exercises it by right of birth; it becomes a machinery that no one owns.⁸

Machinery takes centre stage rather than those, absent here, who are employed to operate the apparatus of security on which Moore dwells. In photographs such as `Officers’ Quarters’ (p. 48) and `Corridor, Level One’ (p. 47), individuality is anonymised; though the instrumental hierarchy, and class, of power reveals its corporate identity.

⁷ Introduction to David Moore’s *The Last Things* (Stockport: Dewi Lewis, 2008), pp. 5-7, p. 5.

⁸ Michel Foucault, `The Eye of Power: A Conversation with Jean-Pierre Barou and Michelle Perrot, in *CTRL [SPACE]: Rhetorics of Surveillance from Bentham to Big Brother*, ed. by Thomas Y Levin, Ursula Frohne, & Peter Weibel (Karlsruhe: ZKM Center for Art and Media, 2002), pp. 94-101 (p. 99).

The world we enter, thanks to Moore's camera, is a deadened space of blank procedure. But, through its occupation by the photographer and viewer, a nerve-centre of command, control, and containment is partially domesticated. The instrumental becomes existential. Hierarchical power gives way to the playful distraction of the souvenirs informally decorating the Telecommunications Room (64). Impersonal space is haunted by the random traces of humanity the camera seeks out. By so doing, photography defies the amnesia of corporate functionality through a process of remembrance. At the same time each photograph, like a souvenir itself, serves as a memento, perhaps memento mori, as in the case of the blue shirt cast off like a mortal coil and hanging from the back of a chair in the Duty Officer's quarters (68). Memento, but also keepsake since, if to photograph is to appropriate, the photograph may also be a gift. And, if a gift, it is one that is made democratically, in a gesture that reclaims secret places for its viewers in the public space of the gallery, book, and website.

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