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Blinding the Cyclops, Wrecking the Panopticon

Camera Hunting in the Metropolis

CrimethInc.

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2020

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outlier, I returned the next night. It was Friday and the cameras were right by a bar, so if no one walked by this time, I could be sure it wasn't a fluke. I arrived about an hour before the bars closed. Again, not one person passed. I watched for about twenty minutes, long enough to be sure the place was going to be an easy one. So easy. Fun as hell too.

**These actions and this text are dedicated to Jeremy Hammond: freejeremy.net*

I, Suspect

Since cameras became mobile enough to take pictures of people without their consent, punching photographers has become the great American pastime. From celebrities hounded by paparazzi to civilians who resent news teams invading their privacy and demonstrators who don't want to be profiled, everybody loves swinging on a person shoving a camera in their face.

But what about when the person shoving the camera in your face isn't there—it's just the camera and you? Every time I turn a corner and see a camera pointed at me, in my mind I can't help but hear the word "Gotcha!" Even at our most innocent, it's hard not to feel like a suspect. Indeed, to the security professional who sees the world through a surveillance camera, everyone is a suspect.

These thoughts had been running through my mind the day that I stumbled upon a Youtube video entitled "Camover 2013." I watched Germans running all over their city, tearing down security cameras, smashing security cameras, painting security cameras. They said it was a new game and challenged others to join in. "I'm glad somebody's doing that," I thought to myself, and went to bed.

Camera 1

Weeks later, I was out with a friend scouting spots for banner drops and generally exploring the less-traveled altitudes of Springfield. As we came to the edge of a roof overlooking the main strip of downtown, we saw that we were not alone. Also looking over the edge of the building was a security camera, wires leading into a hole in the wall to God-knows-where. My friend commented on the camera, but I shrugged it off and

changed the subject, deciding that if I was going to come back for it, I should probably not let on.

Every Sunday, my friends gather to watch Itchy and Scratchy. I really couldn't care less about the show, so when Sunday came, I said I had to clean my room, slipped out, and went back to my house. There I put on an old windbreaker that somebody had left there ages ago, black cotton gloves, a baseball cap, and some dark blue jeans. I grabbed a canvas shopping bag and put into it some wire cutters I'd taken from the supply closet at work earlier that week. I rode my bike to a spot a couple blocks from the target, parked it there, and approached on foot, hood up and hat pulled low to avoid other security cameras.

I climbed up the fire escape onto the air conditioner and finally to the roof. I crept up behind the camera, grabbed it with both hands, twisted it from its bracket, and snipped the wire with my clippers. Having never done this before, I wasn't sure if some silent alarm was going off or if somebody watching a screen somewhere had just had their creep-fest interrupted, so I hastily shoved the camera and clippers in my bag and retreated to my bike.

When I got home, I was wired on adrenaline. I knew I was going to do this again next weekend and I knew exactly which camera it would be.

Cameras 2 and 3

My job is right next door to a green yuppie cafe that has been cashing in on the local foods trend of the past few years. The owners are doing pretty well for themselves; the only thing holding them back from their Eco-topia is that they are located beside the Krusty Burger where a lot of black youth hang out, so they've plastered the outside with security cameras. One of those cameras points straight at the spot where I take smoke

We were jacked up on adrenaline again and not ready to settle in, so we approached a restaurant that had two cameras pointing toward the sidewalks that were the boundaries of their so-called prop-erty. We were beginning to act together more naturally. We approached almost without discussion, I looked both ways down the street—"Clear!"—and we both jumped up, grabbed a camera, and twisted. The cameras came away in our hands and we ran off the way we'd come, into a residential neighborhood where we unmasked, stripped down to our yuppie attire, and walked off into the night.

Reconnaissance

When Bart pointed out the two cameras outside of the mall, I couldn't stop thinking about them. Every time I passed them, I looked not just to figure out how to take them down, but to see how bodies moved around the space. During what times was the area active? During what time was it dead?

One night, I had some extra time and decided I could spend a little time sitting outside the mall. I sat on a bench far away for most of the time, but I expected to have to get close to the camera at some point, to check the alleyway not visible from the bench, so I wore inconspicuous clothing and a bright yellow jacket. The bright yellow jacket was a trick I picked up from learning about the psychology of recognition—people remember only the most noticeable characteristics about you, like your bright-colored shirt or your tacky shoes, and then make the rest up. Later, I extended this trick by walking differently than normal during recon for the cameras I was going to remove myself.

I sat outside the mall and watched. For thirty minutes, no one walked even near the cameras. I changed spots and checked out the alleyway. No one. Weird. I sat a little longer on the bench and went home. In case the night I'd done recon had been an

Unfinished Business: Cameras 19, 20, 21 and 22

Determined to keep working on the so-called vandal-proof cameras, I went to Lowe's and took a hammer and the biggest chisel I could find.

We crouched and masked up behind a closed business across the street, double-checked our tools, and put our gloves on. What had looked ordinary in winter looked criminally absurd in the hot and humid summer night. We waited for a break in the sparse traffic of stragglers still making their way home from the closed bars. The only people out at that hour were drunks, taxis, cops, and criminals.

We sprinted across the street to the target. I put the chisel's tip to the dome and struck the butt repeatedly with the hammer. Over and over I swung, at least a dozen times. The electrical box it was affixed to let out a loud low boom with every strike; deep pock-marks appeared in a cluster on the surface of the dome, but the chisel wouldn't pass through to the camera itself.

"Cars!" Bart stage-whispered, and we lazily jogged a safe distance into the lot.

"Not gonna happen, time for plan B," I said, pulling a can of flat black spray paint from the bag and jogging back toward the camera.

"All clear," Bart said, looking up and down the street. I covered the dome with a thick coat of paint and sprayed around it as well, letting the paint drip so that any passer-by could tell from a distance that this node of the panopticon was disabled. We went and painted another dome camera across town.

"We'll keep an eye on these, to see how long it takes to clean them and learn whether the process scrapes or fogs the dome. This may become a thing we just do for time-sensitive stuff like marches or whatever, but it can't be a permanent fix."

breaks out back. Every day, it stares at me as I smoke and try not to stare back at it.

The only glitch in my plan was that this camera was with others that all essentially watched each other. I had to get to the roof, but the only way I could see to get up there was directly below the camera I wanted. I spent all week playing out scenarios in my head; by the time Itchy and Scratchy came on, I almost felt like I'd done this many times before. I excused myself, got on my bike, parked a block away, and proceeded on foot.

Before I got to the site, I hid behind a fence and tied a bandanna over my face. Even with the hat and hood, I'd felt a little uneasy the last time—the twisting and breaking of the camera bracket had happened so quickly that, thinking back, I couldn't really be sure I hadn't accidentally pointed it at myself before clipping the wires. What if the last thing a person reviewing the tape had seen was my stupid face? Probably that hadn't happened, but the point was that any mistakes I made would be recorded.

Masked up, I approached quickly, moved a stack of chairs behind the café to the wall, and climbed past the camera. Once on the roof, I made a quick detour to another camera that pointed into the same alley, snipped the wire, and twisted it till the bracket broke, then repeated this process on the first camera. Then I climbed back down and, for some reason, put the chairs back where I'd found them.

I biked away, stowed the cameras off site, and changed clothes. Then I went to the bar across the street and waited to see if the cops came. I wanted to know if cameras were hooked up to alarms. None came.

Conspiracy of One

I was hooked. I spent each week plotting, mentally rehearsing, for Itchy and Scratchy time. Two notable mental shifts occurred at this point.

First, my interactions with security cameras changed. Before, if I rounded a corner to see the red circle of LEDs that features on the front of most modern cameras, I might have reflected on how it looked remarkably like Hal from 2001: A Space Odyssey and then walked on grumbling about industrial capitalism's increasing encroachments on my privacy, feeling generally violated. Now, when I saw that camera, I immediately began evaluating the best way to remove it.

The second shift was that this changed how I spent my mental free time. It put other parts of the week in perspective. Anytime I was on a mindless task at work, my thoughts would move to that week's target. This made the tasks that then required my full attention an annoyance. But on the other hand, things that I would previously have found irritating, like bad drivers, stupid customers, or breaking or losing possessions, could obtain no foot-hold in my thoughts. I had a mission.

Disaster Relief: Cameras 4, 5, and 6

Winter began, pushing me indoors. Like many parts of the country, we had an "extreme" winter. I looked out my window, listening to the radio imploring people to go home and not drive anywhere. I looked forward to the warmer weather returning so I could go out and play again. I watched videos of the Ukrainian uprising. People outside, fighting the police, using homemade catapults to hurl Molotov cocktails over the barricades. Barricades made of... snow. The video showed them packing burlap sacks full of snow and I realized the obvious. These people were fighting all day and night in the middle of

every time we leave our homes, does it matter who put each one there? Would any of those people resist if the footage were sub-poenaed by the police state? Would it even take a sub-poena, or would they just hand it over like good citizens? Does it even matter, since most CCTV is hooked up to the internet, and we know that the NSA and by extension every other government agency has access to nearly everything on the internet—so that these are, for all intents and purposes, NSA cameras? Each owner is just tending his little plot in a system of surveillance feudalism.

***Anonymity Loves Company: Cameras 14, 15, 16, 17 and 18

Any apprehensions I'd had about bringing in a second person were gone. Bart had hit the ground running, doing research, reconnaissance and making me a little nervous—dropping five cameras on his own the same week we had done the other four.

"I would never say you shouldn't do cameras on your own—but consider slowing down a bit, we want to be able to keep doing this. We've definitely got to go kind of hard if we want to make a dent at all, but leaving irregular periods of inactivity between jobs will greatly increase our chances of not getting caught. I don't want to hold anybody back from smashing every camera in the world, but pace yourself so we can be in it for the long run."

I also talked to him about my personal policy of not wandering around on a night I was going to attack cameras, so there would be no recordings of me in the area. "I know it seems a little overcautious for each individual act of misdemeanor vandalism, but if at some point they pick up the pattern and label it some sort of activism, federal investigation money will come pouring in and we won't be sorry we played it safe."

I was wrong. The camera came away easily when we pulled. Bart grabbed the camera and ripped it free of the wires that still attached it to the building.

“Want to do the other or call it a night?” I asked.

“Let’s get it!” Now getting the hang of the cord with steel link, I easily tossed it over the second camera, which came down as easily as the first. Normally, I would have gone home at this point. Go out, hit a spot, go home, that was my trend; it was conservative but safe. But this is where I learned the true value of working with others: it’s fun and you push each other. While some tasks may seem like a one-person job, two people’s worth of courage and audacity may make them more likely to happen quickly. Instead of going home we went and did two more rooftop cameras and I fell asleep feeling amazing.

Think Global, Smash Local

We heard later through the grapevine that the employees at the mall had been gossiping and speculating about what had happened to the cameras. It occurred to me that every business where we’d destroyed cameras probably had a boss who was angry, possibly even feeling threatened, but also had employees that surely noticed that the cameras were gone and either didn’t care or thought it was funny. No doubt when the bosses called the police, they replied, “Yeah, we’ve had a string of these lately,” and so the rumors spread...

Irrational as it was, I sometimes felt bad for the people whose cameras we destroyed. Some were small business owners who probably imagined that whoever broke their camera might come back later to rob them or whatever. It’s important to remember that individual people needn’t act in malice to help build a totalitarian system; in fact, that’s almost never how such systems are built. If each camera is part of a larger system of cameras that effectively monitors us

Russian Winter. How comfortable I suddenly felt—too comfortable! I needed to push myself. It occurred to me: as the populace watched Netflix with their heat blasting, and police tended to car accidents and other weather-related 911 calls, anyone who would brave the elements would have full run of the town. That evening, I put on all my sets of thermal underwear, my scarf, big gloves, and a large windbreaker over my winter jacket and headed out to test my hypothesis. The two cameras I wanted were not on a main street but in a heavily trafficked parking area behind some bars, normally populated and fairly exposed. They were on a window ledge—out of reach, but not terribly so. I parked my bike behind a restaurant, masked up, and took a milk crate I thought would allow me to reach the targets. Sure enough, the place was dead. I climbed on the milk crate and came up short. Fuck.

My meticulous planning each week had let me avoid the stress of improvisation in compromised positions. There was a third, much higher camera for a different business, for which I had other plans at a later date. If somebody had watched the tape from that camera on that night, here is what he would have seen: A black marshmallow with a bandanna over its face approaches the pair of cameras, places a milk crate on the ground beneath them, pulls out a pair of wire cutters and reaches for the cameras, fails to reach them, hops down, and looks around frantically. Said black marshmallow then proceeds to run around to every restaurant and bar in the alley and eventually drags a wooden pallet from behind one of them, leans it against the wall, and climbs up to the cameras, snips the wires, and attempts to twist the first camera from its bracket. The camera remains firmly affixed to the window sill; the marshmallow places both feet on the wall below the camera and wrenches back and forth with full upper torso until the camera finally comes loose, sending the marshmallow flying backwards, nearly landing on its ass. The marshmallow

gets up, frantically looks around, and proceeds to attempt the same maneuver on the other camera.

It's hard to gauge time in moments like this, but I am quite certain that at this point it had taken at a matter of minutes, in contrast to my previous actions which had certainly all been a matter of seconds. As I had both feet pressed against the wall and was pulling with both hands, my eyes fell on a small hand screw at the joint where the camera meets the bracket. Duh. Back to the view from the third camera: Marshmallow stops wrenching back and forth, puts feet back on wooden pallet, calmly unscrews camera, climbs down, returns wooden pallet, and walks away. A few days later, an ice storm hit, paralyzing the city, and I was back out, this time on a highly-visible roof during what should have been rush hour—instead, it was a ghost town covered in a sheet of ice as far as the eye could see. And there I was, holding onto a satellite dish for balance, kicking a camera from above. I couldn't wait till flood season.

Location, Location, Location

Beyond simply getting the easy ones first, figuring out which cameras to remove seemed to warrant a plan. I'd decided that I should avoid appearing on any camera during my little excursions, due to the nature of the crime. It was easy to determine the exact time it was committed by watching the video, and other camera owners might well be sympathetic and cooperate to help track who had been in the area around that time. Also, if at some point this behavior pattern was designated political—because a communiqué appeared, or as a result of astute police work—federal money would become available for an investigation. This greatly limited my range of motion and list of potential targets. I was immediately reminded of one of the rules of guerrilla warfare: every action should give you the ability to do something you could not do before. It was with this in mind

When I got home, I cut two twelve-foot sections from the para-cord and tied them to the loops on each end of the “Commando Saw,” adding a heavy steel link at one end. I pictured myself throwing the link over a camera, adjusting it so the wire saw was directly on top, and then pulling the strings back and forth to saw through the hard plastic bracket.

I explained the tool to Bart and he got excited. “Perfect! I've been watching a spot that you mentioned to me last week, and foot traffic dies there shortly after the mall closes. The cameras are out of reach, but this new tool would be great.”

Springfield Under Siege: Cameras 10, 11, 12 and 13

We approached the mall well after closing, but early enough that a show at the bar next door would drown out any suspicious noises we might make. We stood on either side of the first camera. I let out a little cord and threw the steel link over the camera. My angle was wrong; it bounced off the wall, but Bart caught it before it noisily hit the metal grate below us. “Good save! Can you be ready to do that again?”

We repeated that a couple times until I finally got the steel link over the camera. I let out a little more cord until the saw was on top of the metal bracket, then I changed the plan. “Let's see what happens if we just pull.”

“OK. 1, 2, 3!” We both gave a hard tug and the wire saw broke in half, re-angling the camera upward in the process.

“Fuck.” I'd broken my new toy by using it wrong and had no backup plan. I thought for a moment. “Let's see if the remaining cord is long enough to just throw over and pull it down, since the para-cord is stronger”. I had previously assumed that the brackets couldn't possibly be flimsy enough to pull down with some thin, non-static cord—that's why I'd developed the elaborate saw device.

with the hammer. It bounced back at me as if I'd struck rubber. We paused, shrugged, did the best we could to wipe off the scuffmarks advertising our failed attempt, and jogged away, unmasking behind a building.

Camover Lab

We discussed the possibilities as to how to deal with the dome. We ruled out fire because of the disproportionate penalties associated with arson in the United States. We also ruled out just painting the dome because that would only be temporary; we want the cameras fully destroyed. Contrary to some texts circulating on the issue that advocate paint, snipping wires, or even just gluing plastic bags over the lenses, I believe in maximum damage. If we damage a camera in a temporary way, it will be fixed quickly and we may have to return over and over. This is pattern behavior: it gives the enemy the chance to adapt, and that's how you get caught.

While we were out one night, Bart updated me about his inquiries. "I did some research on the domes, and they advertise as vandal proof. There's a promotional video where they run it over with a car and try to set it on fire. The screws all require proprietary bits to remove. But there is a tool for working with the material the dome is made out of. It's long, slim, and sharp and available online so we could buy it anonymously with a Visa gift card... but I still wouldn't know where to get it sent to." We decided to table the subject for the time being. Meanwhile, I'd been developing my own special tool and was excited to test it in the field. I'd been in Conglomo-Mart's camping section when I'd stumbled across a small device called the "Commando Saw." It was a few rough wires twisted together with cloth finger loops at either end. I shoved it down my pants, put fifty feet of para-cord in my pocket, and walked out.

that I decided I would create "privacy corridors" in my town: paths one could take without appearing on camera.

Future Primitive

I walked through a different world. My solitary secret made me feel like a superhero, or a villain.

When I see cameras staring at me today, I still feel that initial anxiety. Studies have shown that humans behave very differently when they know they are being watched; they try harder to conform to social norms, not to stand out. They become anxious and irritable, yet ultimately they adapt emotionally, accepting the surveillance and anxiety as normal. I too have always behaved this way: eyes forward, keep walking, unconsciously weighing how my every movement might be interpreted. But now it's different: after the initial moment of anxiety, I remember that I am undercover, plotting, watching back.

In an increasingly complex society, the space for individual deviation becomes smaller and smaller as more conformity is demanded of us. I don't mean superficial forms of expression like dress style, musical taste, recreational drug use, or even religion and sexual preference—those are tolerated, so long as they are practiced in ways that don't disrupt production, consumption, or social control. I mean rather that our freedom of movement, our freedom to express ourselves by acting upon the world, our very autonomy—these are greatly curtailed. Our minds adjust to these new limited sets of options: employment, charity, starvation; or buy, rent, be home-less; or be observed, hide away, comply and be ignored.

But sometimes our minds and bodies remember that there was once another set of options: self-defense, attack, destroy. And it was in these options that I found dignity. When I act for the cameras now, my smile is genuine, not forced. I know I will be back to destroy them.

Cameras 7 and 8

I loved working alone. It felt safe, but it also felt strong, figuring out how to do things and executing plans that required serious judgment calls with real consequences without running them by anybody else, just trusting myself.

So I'd be hard pressed to tell you why I decided to bring a second person on. Perhaps I thought I needed a lookout for some of the more audacious actions I hoped to accomplish; perhaps I just needed to get out of my own head with the whole thing and get a little perspective. Either way, I decided to approach Bart. I trusted him, and he'd made some comments about wanting to act in a similar way. I had originally feigned disinterest, the way I always did when the subject of cameras came up.

He was excited about my invitation. For practice, I took him to an abandoned strip mall that still had its cameras intact and questionably operational. I wanted him to learn the motions outside of a stressful situation so that he could focus on our surroundings during missions, avoiding awkward situations like my last couple outings.

We hid in the bushes and masked up and then quickly approached from behind the first camera. Bart stepped in my hands and I pushed upward. He put his hands on the wall to stabilize himself. "Now use the clippers to cut the cord, and then just pull on the camera and see if it'll break."

"It won't.

"OK, perhaps there's a hand screw at the joint which will just come undone?"

Silence. "Got it!" He hopped down. We did another and went home.

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Bart and Lisa Hit the Streets: Camera 9

A few nights later I brought Bart out on a simple mission I'd been planning but had to keep putting off because the bar kept later hours than I did. Once I finally found a night they were closed, the task was a breeze. We kept our hoods up and hats low as we approached the building, then climbed the chain link fence against the back and onto the roof. We circled behind the camera, masked up, did one more "Anatomy of a Camera," cut the wires, shoved it in my jacket pocket, climbed down, and exited the area before removing our gloves, and hoods.

We wandered through a back neighborhood route toward my house.

"Wanna try one more? An experiment?" I asked.

"Yeah, sounds great." The camera I wanted was at the entrance of a parking lot, face level, commanding a view of where cars came in but also of the sidewalk. It was covered by a glass dome to hide which direction it pointed.

I produced a hammer from my jacket pocket. "Let me run this plan by you: we circle around, mask up in the back corner of the lot, approach from behind, you keep your eyes peeled because traffic is pretty steady, I'll strike the bulb with the hammer, it'll break, I'll try to rip out the camera, and then if that doesn't work, I'll just bash it a few times with the hammer. We'll jog back across the street into the neighborhood. Any objections or modifications?"

"I'm in."

Communicating what I wanted to do and putting it up for debate felt strange, emotionally. I felt like this was my project—and with so much at stake, was I ready to take another person's input? I suppose if he'd said no or we couldn't agree on one plan, I could have returned another night to do it solo. We followed each step of the plan, but when I swung the hammer it glanced off the dome. I swung again and it glanced off again. I stepped around to get direct shot and hit the dome head-on