

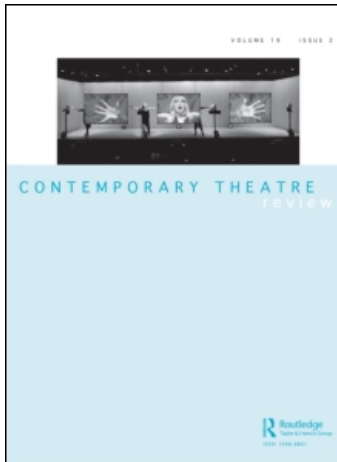
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# Surveillance Spectacles: The Big Art Group's *Flicker* and the Screened Body in Performance

Jason Farman

Caden Manson, the founder of the Big Art Group, terms their trilogy of performances as 'Real Time Film', pieces that stage split-second choreography with a technological *mise en scène* of digital cameras and screens. Manson and the Big Art Group brought their production of *Flicker* – the second installment in the Real Time Film trilogy – to Disney's REDCAT Theatre in Los Angeles in January 2005. The piece, which premiered in the United States at Performance Space 122 in January 2002, sets up a dialogic relationship between fragmented bodies and cohesive bodies staged through a performance that takes place simultaneously on a material stage and on digital-screen projections at stage front. The relationship between these two modes of stage production posits an embodied and situated performer (and audience member) in relationship to the voyeuristic tools of visual media and surveillance technologies. The technologies of Manson's Real Time Film capture bodies of differing genders and races – which remain distinct on the material stage – and suture them together as a singular, cohesive body on the digital screen. *Flicker* thus blends bodies and technologies through a performance that fluctuates between two narratives and two genres on two opposing stages.

Digital performances such as *Flicker* bring up an important question with regard to the embodied relationship between the actor/audience and the technology utilized: in the digital age of ubiquitous surveillance, what role does technology play in interpellating us as embodied subjects? The surveillance technologies of video cameras, which are utilized throughout *Flicker*, create a technological space that allows for bodies to cohere, yet

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simultaneously flattens and erases any embodied difference. Whole bodies exist only through the technology, while bodies that are viewed outside of the technology become fragmented. Since a significant mode of the performance is technological, the audience of the performance is in the precarious position of disembodied voyeurs who potentially engage the prioritization of this technological space. Rather than privileging the screen performance that erases corporeal difference, the Big Art Group's production foregrounds a continual oscillation between the material and the digital that situates the audience and interactively engages them in the phenomenological and semiotic interpretations of this mixed-media space. Ultimately, I analyze the central tensions surrounding embodied subjectivity as it is both created through and alternatively resists the technological gaze. These contrasting readings of the screened body in performances that utilize surveillance technologies are central to the stage design and the narrative of *Flicker*.

The narrative structure of *Flicker* begins with Jon (played by Jon Norman Schneider) returning from the hospital after a failed overdose. He attempts to reposition himself in the day-to-day life of his roommate Rebecca (played by Rebecca Sumner Burgos) while engaging in same-sex erotics with her on-again off-again boyfriend, Jeff. Jeff, who plays the voyeur, is never separate from his digital video camera (to which the audience is often privy). The erotics in which Jeff and Jon engage all center around the voyeuristic fetishization of the camera and the recording of Jon's self-annihilation (and often the word-play that surrounds this self-mutilation). Jeff records Jon's attempts to describe his failed suicide as well as his compulsion to cut himself. *Flicker* shifts into a second narrative that is a mock-horror movie in which a group of college-age friends are lost in the woods. As they try to cope with being lost, they soon realize that they are being pursued by a man in a ski mask with a knife. This staging of a frequently screened genre, which typically includes the mutilation of bodies, mirrors the voyeuristic impulses toward bodies in pain in the first narrative. In the end, the two narratives literally collide as the two groups are involved in a head-on car crash with each other.

*Flicker's* choreography between the various actors' bodies and the cameras that reproduce these movements on three stage-front screens creates a disjunction between the material stage that the actors inhabit and the digital screens that bracket the front of the stage. The three stage-front, contiguous screens continue from wing to wing and are as high as the actors' shoulders. Atop each of the screens is a live-feed digital camera facing the actors, though only capturing a portion of the stage. Since the camera only captures part of the stage, there is a gap on the material stage that the camera does not record. Though this gap exists only on the material stage, the screens appear to display a cohesive *mise-en-scène* through a seamless screen presentation. Throughout the performance, this 'blank space' of the stage is occupied by several actors in order to 'hide' their bodies from the camera and screen while still being able to affect the on-screen performance. The effect, successful through split-second choreography by the actors, is an alteration of the proximity of characters and of movements of bodies, and a dispersion of a single character onto several actors' bodies.

For example, one character, who slowly moves a knife toward another character, stands stage-left and moves the knife across the stage-left camera. As the image of the knife begins to disappear from the frame of the stage-left camera, another actor (standing in the stage's 'blank space', and thus off screen) brandishes a similar knife and continues the image of the knife in the stage-center camera. Likewise, when the knife finally reaches the third actor on the stage-right camera, it begins to cut the other on-stage (and on-screen) character who stands on the complete opposite side of the material stage yet is in proximity to the stage-left character in the digital projection of their performance. The action of the material performance behind the screens (as opposed to the digital performance projected *on* the screens) allows for 'Real Time Film' in which a character who is fifty feet away from his attacker on the material stage is actually cut by the movement of the attacker's knife on the digital projection. The visual technologies coupled with the precise movements of the actors make it appear on-screen as if the characters are only a few feet apart. Often, the second and third actors who complete the action initiated by the first actor are different in either race or gender, or both, from the actor who initiated the reach. The end result often creates an arm that is fragmented racially and not gender specific, yet is a seamless arm enacting a reach from stage-left to stage-right.

The utilization of this technique prompts the question, 'What happens when the "off-stage" is constantly visible?' As has been argued by the likes of Roland Barthes,<sup>1</sup> the stage has nearly always implied an 'off-stage'. This is a space where the actors make their exit and are no longer 'in character', but also a place that the audience is able to locate as the space of narrative continuation. The actions that are not staged but implied must be lived out off stage. Also, any actions that were unable to be staged were carried out off-stage and later discussed by characters on-stage. Thus, the term 'obscene' was created, derived from the Greek *ob* (off) and *skene* (stage), for the actions that were to be carried out off-stage. Such off-stage actions were often attributed to 'immoral' behavior or acts of violence that were not appropriate for the stage (because the actions either were meant to be experienced in the audience's imagination or were deemed inappropriate to be acted out in front of an audience). Yet, in the performance of *Flicker*, what happens when you bring the 'obscene' onto the stage? The off-stage world (of both breaking character and extending the narrative) is highlighted on-stage by making a 'hidden' place for actors away from the gaze of the cameras and by staging the major forms of 'obscenity' such as brutal violence and sexuality. In this performance, the realms of experience (the lived, the imagined, and so on) begin to converge. These realms (or what I term 'the interfaces of everyday life') begin to blend, calling attention to the experiences of users of digital media. Interfaces, both material and digital, are constantly informing each other to the point that the space between these realms becomes indistinguishable. Throughout *Flicker*, the interplay between the digital and the material and the ways the two stages inform one another are constantly performed and emphasized. The performance also stages this tension between 'interfaces' by bringing in two different narratives, one that is meant to represent 'real life', and one

1. Roland Barthes, *On Racine*, trans. by Richard Howard (New York: Hill & Wang, 1964), pp. 5–8.

that is meant to be a play on the fictional media form of the horror film. These two realms, which in my analysis are continually informing and dissolving into each other, literally collide in a deadly way in the final car-crash scene.

## The Actor's Cohesive Digital Body

In the performance of *Flicker*, a cohesive body (singular) does not exist on the material stage but only on the virtual-stage space of the screen. The actor/character is fragmented on the material stage. The actors encounter various modes of the body – or what Don Ihde calls the zones of bodily significance<sup>2</sup> – that are constructed in relationship to the camera, the screen, and the bodies of the other actors on the live stage. An example of this is seen as Amy (Amy Miley) runs through the woods to escape her pursuer and runs in place with her back turned to the stage-right camera (see Image 1). As she runs in place, she looks back at the camera (and apparently at her pursuer, as an off-stage actor playing the slasher figurer brandishes a knife on-camera) and continues her run on to the center-stage camera. However, it is not Amy Miley who continues the run of the character ‘Amy’, but another actor in a red wig and outfit similar to Amy Miley. As this actor moves to the stage-left camera, yet another actor in a red wig takes over the flight of ‘Amy’. On the live stage, the character of Amy is fragmented among three actors, and the cohesion of the action of Amy (however seamless or obvious the transitions may be) only takes place on the mediated stage. The second and third actors who carry the action over to the other cameras are

2. Don Ihde, *Bodies in Technology* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), p. xi.



Image 1 *Flicker* by The Big Art Group (2002). Photo: Linsey Bostwick, courtesy of Caden Manson and the Big Art Group.

different in race *and* gender from Amy Miley – a difference that is notably marked on the material stage.

A cohesive body on the digital stage must be obtained through a proprioceptive convening of body with digital media as that which not only alters but also completes the body. Thus this performance moves past the ideas of ‘technology as prosthetic device’ to a performance in which the body is totally incomplete without the technology. It is not simply an extension – it is a completion. Proprioception is a term that I find particularly applicable to this study, especially in the way it locates the body in a specific space. The proprioceptive body is informed of its particular locale and relational spatiality, thus avoiding any gestures toward the subject as a purely interior being. The proprioceptive body is in the world, as Maurice Merleau-Ponty argued for, and can navigate this world as a body in space and a body that is space.

Theories of embodiment that look to proprioception as an organizing concept far precede the digital age, yet, as seen in *Flicker*, those who interact with others across media forms in the digital age have continually pondered where and how to locate themselves in these new spaces. How does one proprioceptively locate him or herself in the space of cyberspace? Thus, while proprioception experienced in the material world is not very different from the ways it is experienced in the digital world, the spaces in which people locate themselves have drastically changed. The correspondence between material space and virtual space often requires a person to proprioceptively locate him or herself simultaneously in two seemingly distinct realms. This interplay between material and digital space and the modes of proprioception involved in being situated in these spaces are constantly at play in the actors’ relationships to the stage technology in *Flicker*. Caden Manson emphasizes the importance of the actors’ role in the digital/material relationships of the performance: ‘The real technology of the piece are the live performers. They are the ones in control. The cameras are stationary and are turned on before the show and turned off after the show. The performers are the ones making the digital illusion. They make it look like the piece is edited with zoom, dolly shots, and quick cuts – not the cameras’.<sup>3</sup> Though analyses of ‘the body’ in the digital age have primarily looked at two modes of embodiment – that of the body being altered by the code and that of the body *being* code – *Flicker* stages both of these modes while simultaneously desiring to invert them through privileging the choreography of the actors on the material stage.

The staging of *Flicker* presents the actor (and the audience) with a body that coheres through becoming a system of information (reduced to code through its production through the digital media of the camera, the projector, and the sound design emanating from the Macintosh computer of sound designer Jemma Nelson). The bodies on the material stage are fragmented and constantly referencing the screen (since the split-second choreography requires the material bodies to be constantly aware of their own proprioception in relationship to the virtual objects on the stage). The actor thus proprioceptively locates the material body in reference to the virtual stage as a site of completion (of both body and action). Manson, however, privileges the material bodies and their

3. Caden Manson, email to author, 12 June 2005.



fragmentation over the digital body produced by the bodies in the material space. The production of the digital body on the screen can be read as simply an illusion created through mere two-dimensional tricks of the material bodies on the digital screen. The creation of the digital body is perhaps accomplished by pulling the focus of the audience from the material bodies to the screen where these bodies cohere. Thus, the perception of a ‘whole body’ on the screen, though actually produced by several fragmented bodies, is gained through a specific focus on the screen which sets it as the figure in this figure/ground relationship between the material stage and bodies and the digital/virtual screened performance. Ihde argues that our ‘ability to perceptually focus’ does not eliminate other sensory data, but pushes it to the background: ‘In this case the very ability to focus helps to enhance the quasi-illusion of a pure visual phenomenon by subduing the other sensory dimensions’.<sup>4</sup>

4. Ihde, *Bodies in Technology*, p. 38.

Manson’s privileging of the material assumes a certain passivity on the part of the digital media, especially the cameras atop the screens. These ‘stationary’ cameras, which are ‘turned on before the show and turned off after the show’ by the stage crew, are far more active in creating the *mise-en-scène* of the performance, rather than simply being passive receivers of visual information. First, both Jeff’s camera and the screen cameras are continually autofocusing on the actors and objects in their field of vision. Thus, the camera is actively involved in the figure/ground creation of the performance by creating focal objects on the screen through its ability to autofocus.

Since the cameras and the projectors are digital, they play another importantly active role in the creation of the performance: they transform images into information and translate that information for display on the stage-front screens. The result is a body comprised of code and of information – a body that is proprioceptively read by the actors as they interact with the cameras and with the other actors on the stage. Though this performance could legitimately be done with analogue cameras (as Manson says, ‘When we first started, we used hi-8 ... which I prefer because they have better color and better light sensibility’),<sup>5</sup> the digital cameras are more effective through their ability to highlight the tension between the analogue (as it parallels the material performance) and the digital, and thus the tension between bodily signification and digital information. Here, in the space between the material and the digital, the physicality of the body confronts the virtuality of the computer code.

5. Caden Manson, email to author, 12 June 2005.

## The Situated Audience and the Staged Body

The staging of *Flicker* presents a dialogic relationship between the digital and the material. Though these two modes of performance can be read separately, analyzing their relationship offers a path to a nuanced reading of bodies on the stage. The field of performance studies has experienced a much-needed influx of scholarly debate in the last decade around the relationship between live performance spaces and the use of documentary technologies (such as video cameras) to record or stage a live event. These debates have laid the foundation for this study of the competing

stage spaces in *Flicker* by highlighting the tension between the ephemerality of the live performance and the attempts to utilize technology to capture the event. As we have seen, *Flicker* stages the tension between the material space and the digital space in several ways, including the ways the actor proprioceptively engages both the material body and its virtual representation on the digital screen. The audience also engages this phenomenology. To the audience of this performance (many of whom are very familiar with an embodied engagement with various digital technologies), seeing the three stage-front screens upon entering the theatre presents them with the expectations of engaging the interplay between material space and digital screen space. For many in the audience, this is not unfamiliar territory. As Philip Auslander notes, ‘In the theatre, as at the stadium, you are often watching television even when attending the live event, and audiences now expect live performances to resemble mediated ones’.<sup>6</sup> Echoing the theorists who have utilized Auslander’s seminal study and built upon it in nuanced and sophisticated ways,<sup>7</sup> *Flicker* needs to be approached with the understanding that neither the digital space nor the material space is phenomenologically privileged by the audience. Rather, the constant interplay between the mediated space of the digital screen and the material space behind the screens is demanded by the production.

One of the best examples of the type of proprioceptive interaction demanded of the audience is a scene in which the character of Jon is seduced by Willie (Willie Mullins), a sadist who cuts Jon across his chest (with intention to do more as the entire room is covered in plastic) (see Image 2). Jeff is seen outside of the window recording the entire event. Here, the important trope of voyeurism in the performance is seen not only in Jeff’s ubiquitous video camera but also in the stage design in which the only ‘whole-body’ view of a character is seen through the

6. Philip Auslander, *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 25.

7. See Matthew Causey, ‘The Screen Test of the Double: The Uncanny Performer in the Space of Technology’, *Theatre Journal*, 51.4 (1999), 383–94, as well as Steve Dixon, *Digital Performance* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007).



Image 2 *Flicker* by The Big Art Group (2002). Photo: Linsey Bostwick, courtesy of Caden Manson and the Big Art Group.



video projections on the screen. As the eyes of the audience are drawn to the on-screen projections, where and how the audience situates its gaze is emblemized in Jeff's voyeurism and is also highlighted in the distance between the audience and the actors on the stage. The screens (and the voyeuristic images projected onto them) function as a boundary between the embodied audience and the material actors. The audience has become Jeff who sits outside looking in on the actions taking place. The screens operate as a singular window into the actions on stage – actions that the audience cannot view as whole, coherent actions except through the employment of voyeuristic tools. The actions themselves are the product of voyeurism, produced by the effects of the camera and the digital projection.

The audience's sense of 'the body' is thus gained through this visual perception of the contiguous nature of the three screens as a singular window onto the performance. This phenomenology is constantly troubled by the fragmented action of the actors behind the screens on the material stage. The link between what takes place on the material stage and what takes place on the virtual stage of the screens requires not simply a phenomenological experience of the body but a simultaneous semiotic reading of various signs and multiple referents. Though the audience is initially confronted with three huge contiguous screens that present one performance, it is simultaneously invited to look *past* the screens at another performance.<sup>8</sup> The tension comes when an audience member is faced with the decision to engage in a type of figure/ground perception and make one of the performances (either the digital or the material) the dominant 'figure' in relationship to the distant and unfocused 'ground'. The performance solicits this tension and even makes it the fulcrum of the entire piece by constantly displaying its techniques: the illusion of the knife moving across all three screens is exposed by the actors and the stage design. Nothing is hidden. Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt* plays a key role in the direction of *Flicker* and the Big Art Group's work as a whole.

An analysis of this performance could easily fall into the trap of privileging the visual as the dominant mode of experience and analysis. However, other key modes of production contribute in large part to the split-second choreography of the actors and the subsequent experience by the audience: Jemma Nelson's sound design on the Macintosh computer and the play with notions of narrative structure. Throughout the performance, the actors' bodies are in sync with the sound emanating from the Mac. Ambient screeches and noises accompany the split-second choreography of the actors and mark scene shifts and narrative changes. The action of the bodies is realized in the sound design and thus the action is not a purely visual experience by the actors or the audience. Ihde, whose analysis of perception is 'derived from a phenomenology that holds to the primacy of an actional body/environmental relativity',<sup>9</sup> astutely notes: 'Phenomenology holds that I never have a simple or isolated visual experience. My experience of some object that is seen is simultaneously and constantly also an experience that is structured by all the senses. It takes some deliberate constructive manipulation or device to produce the illusory

8. Theatre in general expects this level of semiotic engagement. As Josette Féral notes, 'You enter a theater. The play has not yet begun. In front of you is a stage; the curtain is open; the actors are absent. The set, in plain view, seems to await the beginning of the play. Is theatricality at work here? If one answers in the affirmative, one recognizes that the set alone can convey a certain theatricality. Although the theatrical process has not yet been set in motion, certain constraints are already imposed, certain signs are already in place. The spectator knows what to expect from the place in which he finds himself; he knows what to expect from the scenic design – a play. Because a semiotization of space has already occurred, the spectator perceives the theatricality of the stage, and of the space surrounding him'

(‘Theatricality: The Specificity of Theatrical Language’, *SubStance*, 31.2/3 (2002), pp. 94–108 [pp. 94–5]).

9. Ihde, *Bodies in Technology*, p. 44.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 38.
11. *Ibid.*
12. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception* (New York: New York Humanities Press, 1962), pp. x–xi.

abstraction that could be called vision by itself.<sup>10</sup> The trouble with privileging the visual is that such analyses often *begin* with the visual and *assume* the spectator. We begin with a subject in many phenomenological theories. The incorporation of the aural elements brings the spectator out of the ‘pure point-of-view’ into a whole-body perception or a plenary gestalt.<sup>11</sup> There is no omniscient spectator in the performance, but merely situated perspectives. As Merleau-Ponty says, ‘I am conscious of my body *via* the world [... ] through the medium of my body. I am already outside myself, in the world’. He goes on to say, ‘Truth does not “inhabit the inner man”, or more accurately, there is no inner man, man is in the world, and only in the world does he know himself’.<sup>12</sup>

The aural elements of the performance, which position the audience member as a situated spectator *in* the ‘world’ of the theatre, proprioceptively link the audience to the actors in that each must negotiate with the screen that acts as a window – or, more precisely, a hinge – between them. The audience, through whole-body perception, recognizes the ways it is situated, as does the actor who must constantly be aware of his or her own proprioception in relationship to the camera and the screen. Through being proprioceptively situated, the audience must experience *and* read the relationship between performer and audience as a whole-body experience and as a semiotically read text of systems of information being scripted through information technologies. This simultaneity of phenomenology and a post-structuralist reading of the body’s inscriptions is what I term a proprioceptive-semiotic body.

### Proprioceptive-Semiotic Bodies on the Digital Stage

Though I have focused predominantly on the proprioceptive modes of corporeality, it is vital to insert the body-as-surface into this analysis of ‘embodiment’ and the subject: the body-as-surface is a body which is able to be simultaneously created with the space it inhabits as well as a body on which inscriptions can be written and read. This is the body of phenomenology converging with the inscribed body-as-text in a world of stimuli and signs.

Proprioceptive-semiotic bodies are inherent in performances that highlight the contested and constructed nature of embodied identity (or in which the status of bodies is the central concern). Such an approach is also inherent in most analyses of the posthuman age.<sup>13</sup> In theories of the posthuman, the body is read as a system of genetic information and as a system of sensorial information interpreted through the body’s organs. In *Flicker*, the body is seen not only as existing within these categories, but also as extending into the digital age in which the body is expressed through binary code on the screen through its digital projection. Here, the text of the computer code collides with the code of the sensorial and genetically founded body: body as text, code, and sensual-social information. These categories culminate in the way the body is screened in the performance and thus

13. For more information about the ‘posthuman’, see N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature and Informatics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

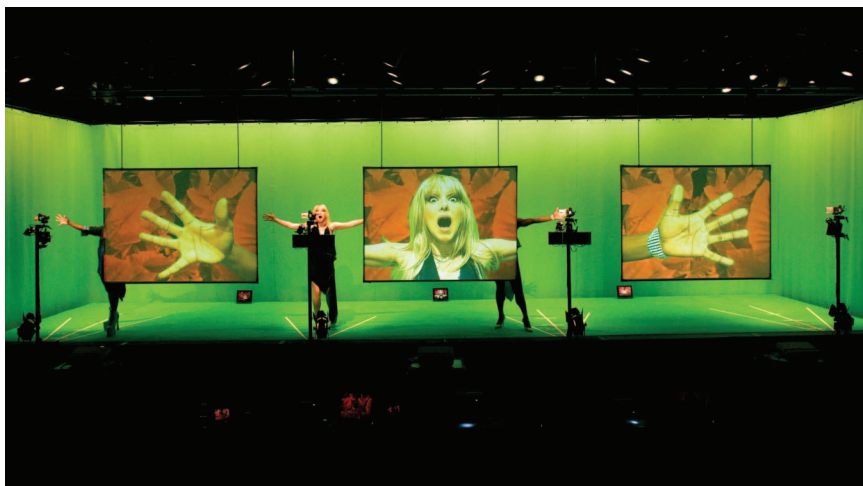


Image 3 *House of No More* (2004), the final installment of the 'Real-Time Film' trilogy of performances by the Big Art Group. Photo: Caden Manson, courtesy of Caden Manson and the Big Art Group.

the camera/screen relationship delineates the space in which the proprioceptive-semiotic body emerges (see Image 3).

*Flicker* offers many moments in which this convergence can be clearly seen. Let us return to the moment of the three actors' *singular* arm reaching across all three screens. As the first actor's arm begins to cross over the field of vision of the first camera, a second actor must be accurately located in relation to both the camera and the first actor: he or she must be 'off-screen' yet poised in the same manner as the first actor. This is proprioception at work on the material stage. As the second actor's arm begins to continue the reach of the first actor – and even before this action is in motion – there is *difference* at play. The stage itself, besides being a space in which the actors are proprioceptively located, is a locale of signs and signifiers. It is a tightly scripted play on difference (and *différance*). The space between the cameras, the screens, and the material stage creates several moments of difference – namely, in the gaps created between each camera. These cavities operate as an aporia on the material stage (or impassable space for the digital) and simultaneously exist and disappear. These spaces are the space between visibility and invisibility, between the whole and the part, between embodiment and the floating signifier of the synecdochical hand. These are the spaces of pure difference. What takes place on the material stage, post-structurally speaking, is, as Jacques Derrida writes, the 'abandonment of all reference to a *center*, to a *subject*, to a privileged *reference*, to an origin, or to an absolute *archia*'.<sup>14</sup> There is no privileged body on the material stage – each body is incomplete and fragmented.

This difference is translated onto the screens as embodied difference – both literally and theoretically. The play of signs and signifiers is seen in the reach that is carried on and completed by actors of different gender and race than that of the first actor. This digital embodiment of difference is read on the screen – as a reading and interpretation of

14. Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. by Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), p. 286.

‘a body’ that is deferred across the space of the screen – and simultaneously read on the material bodies of the actors, which are literally *different* from each other in race and gender. These bodies are not merely in a spatially performed relationship to one another but are also in a semiotic relationship of *différance*. The cohesion of the arm is read as a process of deferred interpretation (until all actors have created a singular arm across all three screens) in conjunction with the process of recognizing the situated actor’s difference to the actor who continues the reach across the next screen. Derrida’s notion of the ‘supplement’ is appropriate here: that which replaces the center, yet always remains ‘floating’ as it ‘perform[s] a vicarious function, to supplement a lack on the part of the signified’.<sup>15</sup> However, in making such an argument, I am also keenly aware that this supplementation and play on difference might disappear as the arm completes its reach as *one* arm (and thus the deferral of embodied meaning finds its ultimate syntax in the ways the body ‘concludes’ in the final arm). It is a whole and in some senses returns to its initiator: the arms of the second and third screens are read as synecdoche of the ‘transcendental signifier’ of the first actor.

In other words, if there is a cohesive body created on the digital stage, does that body become a *particular* body? This arm, through its completion in the realm of the technological, can be read as returning to the assumed initiator and thus appropriated by the masculine.<sup>16</sup> This appropriation thus erases any true difference the performance seems to offer. Many feminist media theorists have read the realm of the technological as a realm dominated by patriarchal and masculinist discourses. This particularly applies to *Flicker*’s use of the technology of the camera. In her book *The Domain-Matrix*, Sue-Ellen Case discusses ‘the power relations of the Gaze in narrative cinema’ and the ways they are ‘homologous to operations of spectatorship in the theater’. The Gaze set forth by the technology of the camera and the screen began to be critically read through the ways the ‘power relations in the visual were necessarily conjoined with a mechanical apparatus for seeing’.<sup>17</sup> Does the arm of the female actor, which becomes the synecdochical middle-camera arm, simply dissolve into its ‘referent’ of the male actor’s arm that initiated the reach? Or, in other terms, does the arm of the character often associated with being disempowered dissolve into the technological Gaze of the camera and screen? Perhaps it does not matter who initiated the reach. Perhaps the cohesion of the digital arm is merely a gesture of the technology that displays it. If such is the case, the claims of masculine appropriation have been clearly staged in this piece. The camera operates as the disembodied voyeur, always altering but never being altered. As Donna Haraway notes, the technological gaze establishes a ‘disembodied master subject’ that is ‘seeing everything from nowhere’.<sup>18</sup> Such a reading depends significantly on the privileging of the digital performance as the *primary* performance (merely supported by the material) and the dominance of the media over the bodies. Perhaps the visual dominance of the screen(s) at stage front clearly marks such control. However, I strongly argue that a reading of the screen as a hinge of the performance rather than being the dominant purveyor of the performance is a much more nuanced analysis of the performance that

15. *Ibid.*, p. 289.

16. Mark Poster, in his chapter ‘The Digital Subject and Cultural Theory’, discusses how several theorists have used Foucault’s theories to signal the ‘end of the subject’ and how such a requiem has come at a critical moment for the traditionally disempowered: ‘Foucault does not wish somehow to erase the subject but to make the construction of the subject the center of a historical problematic [...]’. [Nancy] Hartsock’s complaint that theories of the death of the author disempower dominated groups was echoed again and again as a defense against the perception of depoliticization in the works like Foucault’s “What is an Author?” Here, for instance, is Nancy Miller, who adds to the motif a particular gender allusion: “Only those who have it can play with not having it”. [...] Some

critics countered this defense of the subject by arguing that subordinated subject positions ought not to strive to occupy the place and take on the subject position of the ruling group. Pointing to the danger of such a move, Luce Irigaray and other feminists contend that “any theory of the subject will always have been appropriated by the masculine” (in *What's the Matter with the Internet?* [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001], pp. 70–2).

17. Sue-Ellen Case, *The Domain-Matrix: Performing Lesbian at the End of Print Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), p. 69.
18. Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 189.
19. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. by Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), pp. 200–2.
20. Lili Berko, ‘Surveying the Surveilled: Video, Space and Subjectivity’, in *American Television: New Directions in History and Theory*, ed. by Nick Browne (Chur, Switzerland: Harwood Academic

incorporates my theoretical notion of proprioceptive-semiotic bodies. While such an approach offers a deeper analysis of the performance, I cannot ignore the possible implications of the Gaze of the machine. The Big Art Group provokes these implications through the tensions created between the material and the digital spaces of performance and the situated position of the audience in relationship to the screen and the actor as co-spectator with the visual technology of the digital cameras.

## Surveillance, Staged

The emergence of proprioceptive-semiotic bodies can be compared to the ways surveillance is used to delineate the space of the embodied subject in this performance. The three stationary cameras above the screens as well as Jeff’s camera all highlight the ways surveillance technologies frame bodies. These technologies, by privileging the screen representation of the body as opposed to the material body on the stage, seek to interpellate the actor as a subject only in relationship to the space of surveillance. Outside of the frame of surveillance, the actor only exists as a fragment and can never obtain cohesion. Thus *Flicker* stages a spectacle of the surveilled body.

The terms ‘surveillance’ and ‘spectacle’ – which I seek to position in a reciprocal relationship – are often read in a contradictory relationship with each other. As Foucault defines the panoptic, there is a sense of invisibility that is essential to the subject’s understanding of the gaze – the observer must never be seen, yet the subject of the gaze must be aware of the possibility of being observed at all times. Thus seeing and the being seen are dislocated and unassociated – visibility itself becomes both central to the process and yet always elusive. It is defined only on the side of the one who gazes and cannot be gazed upon.<sup>19</sup> Thus ‘spectacle’ – if applied to the process of surveillance – is never of surveillance itself, but of the object of surveillance. Foucault’s analysis of surveillance, when extended into the era of screen surveillance technologies, must be altered to allow for surveillance to be read in conjunction with spectacle. *Flicker* functions as a performance of the spectacle of surveillance by performing the excessive visibility of those under the gaze of surveillance technologies. Such spectacles of surveillance call on the ways the excessively visible body on the screen serve, as Lili Berko writes, as a ‘means of marking boundaries, of articulating identity and difference’. Unlike the prisoner of the Panopticon, the performed surveillance of *Flicker* employs ‘a performative aesthetic which demands an audience to witness and in a sense to certify the performance (presence)’.<sup>20</sup>

The key question to this analysis of surveillance is: ‘How is the surveilled body being read?’ Also, we must ask: ‘Who is reading and who has the right to read the surveilled body?’ The proliferation of various surveillance technologies, as exemplified by the stationary cameras and Jeff’s home-movie camera, interpellates the individual under the gaze of the panoptic as an ‘included body’, implicated (or privileged) by the gaze of the panoptic as one who is also a potential viewer. Thus, these



Publishers, 1994), pp. 223–55 (p. 249).

surveillance technologies screen the bodies of what is termed by theorists such as Etienne Balibar as the body of the ‘citizen subject’. Jon can – and does – turn the camera against Jeff. At the same time, Jeff (the performance’s panoptic viewer) is also being surveilled by the stationary cameras throughout his surveillance of Jon. The included bodies of the ‘citizens’ operate within the frame of surveillance and are defined by it while simultaneously creating that frame within the hegemonic power structures. The reproduction of hegemonic power structures through the act of surveillance is done by understanding exactly *who* is allowed to be a subject of surveillance. This subject, who is defined by multiplicity (both viewed and viewer simultaneously), is constantly implicated in the process of surveillance. He or she is ‘included’ in this process – surveillance is for these subjects a mode of embodiment in the postmodern late-capitalist landscape.

This mode of embodiment as established through surveillance technologies is, once again, dependent on the technology. If the gaze is removed, the body becomes dangerously incomplete and resides in the realm of the on-stage aporia (visible, yet fragmented). The danger of being removed from the gaze of surveillance in the digital age is the potential loss of subjectivity and inclusion as a ‘citizen-subject’ (the one who can be gazed upon while also being one who can potentially gaze). The citizen-subject, conversely, must always submit to the gaze of surveillance in order to be included as a potential gazer. Those who are removed from the gaze are able to elude this excessive visibility and the threats to personal privacy that are commonly attributed to being the object of the surveillance gaze. Here, *Flicker* stages the power struggle between these two poles: inclusion and subversion. The threat of the technological gaze is that one must submit to it, though being potentially included in the very subjectivity that created it. On the other hand, the threat of subverting the gaze is the fragmentation of subjectivity as seen in the lack of embodied completion on the material stage in the Big Art Group’s performance.

### Ethics of Spectatorship

Ultimately, what is at stake in this performance is the status of bodies in digital performance and the digital age as a whole. Are these bodies erased through digital technology or instead re-inscribed with a clearer understanding of the modes of bodily significance in *all* performances? As Lisa Nakamura argues, the significance inscribed on bodies in the material world typically carries over into the digital world.<sup>21</sup> Thus the racist and sexist inscriptions do not disappear with the advent of digital technologies that may tout a certain level of freedom from such inscriptions. What performances like *Flicker* stage are the ways these bodies get inscribed and the audience’s participation in such inscriptions. In *Flicker*, it is Jeff who sits outside filming Jon being cut, thus bringing up the issue of the ethics of spectatorship. We, like Jeff, are looking in on the actions as voyeurs, yet can we interrupt the actions and intervene? To answer this question, the issue of liveness is once again foregrounded

21. Lisa Nakamura, ‘Race in/for Cyberspace’, in *The Cybercultures Reader*, ed. by David Bell and Barbara M. Kennedy (New York: Routledge, 2000), pp. 712–20.

22. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. by Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969).

since, as Emmanuel Levinas argued, ethics depends on face-to-face interactivity.<sup>22</sup> Can an audience interact in a face-to-face manner with performers whose cohesive embodiment is only displayed through a screen? Do we need to remove the screen in order to get face to face so that our gestures, expressions, and voices can be realized in those moments of ethical interruption? Interestingly, all the performers in *Flicker* have nylon masks over their faces and, since it is the face that is essential to Levinas' approach to human ethics, the covered face seems to point to the difficulty of face-to-face ethics in the digital age. It must be noted that the faces of the actors are obscured by the nylon masks on both the digital and the material stages; thus, I argue that the performance alludes to the difficulty of all face-to-face interactions, not simply those that take place through mediated means. For Levinas, once the ability to ethically interrupt in a face-to-face manner is removed, humans return to a world of animalistic survival of the fittest, a world reflected in the violent narrative turns in *Flicker*.

Through the way the digital stage highlights the spatial relationships between performer and spectator – either through the emphasis on its mediated nature or through attempts to bridge the gap between audience and performer by making the technologies inconspicuous – the audience is proprioceptively situated as a witness to the modes of bodily significance being inscribed in these performances. Though intervening in this performance as an interactive participant may appear to be difficult either because of the apparent distance between actor and audience member (separated by the screen) or because of the inability to perceive the face of the actors (thus limiting the face-to-face ethics of Levinas), such an ethical intervention comes through the proprioceptive-semiotics of interpretation. And thus the ethics of digital spectatorship is to occupy the position of 'spectator-user' – a term that deliberately invokes interactivity – in a mediated environment, distinguishing the ways the media and performances signify the modes of embodiment and the status of multiple bodies in this era of convergence.