

Brunton

THE WORLD MADE AVAILABLE BY SHODAN—the idiosyncratic domain of the networked machines with which we are saturating our environment—is at once familiar and deeply strange. A search engine for devices, Shodan makes it possible to find and potentially access routers, webcams, traffic lights, refrigerators, VoIP phones, streetlights, supervisory control and data acquisition (SCADA) systems for factories and buildings, and more. You can, or could, find a crematory (where the interface features temperature readouts and pull-down menus for “Container” and “Size”), a cyclotron at a major US lab, and turbines in the Fumel dam on the Lot River in France. It’s not just the surface aesthetic of disembodied surveillance that makes Shodan feel like an invention of J. G. Ballard’s: It’s the quality of alien intimacy, of a distant proximity that’s all the more potent for being affectless, remote, and mediated through factory presets. “As for living,” says Bobby Crawford, tennis pro and master criminal in Ballard’s 1998 novel *Cocaine Nights*, “our surveillance cameras can do that for us.” He’s updating the only line anyone remembers from Auguste Villiers de l’Isle-Adam’s fin-de-siècle drama *Axël*, when the hero announces his rejection of the world with the ultimate nihilist-aristocratic kiss-off: “Living? Our servants will do that for us.” But let’s take Crawford at his coked-up paranoid word. What kind of living are these devices doing?

The practicalities of Shodan are straightforward and benign and we can sum them up quickly. Where Google follows links to build an index of the Web that we search for words and phrases, Shodan (created by programmer John Matherly) trawls Internet Protocol addresses and then tries to connect with any responsive device on various ports—a process akin to ringing every bell at an apartment building to see if anyone will open up. It assembles the device information it locates and makes it searchable.

Shodan is a salutary wake-up call for the importance of device security and of changing default passwords; a project in Internet cartography; and a collection of experiences that begin to cohere into the affect and the aesthetic so presciently explored by Bobby Crawford’s creator. In Ballard’s *Super-Cannes* (2000), in another one of the author’s gated communities for business-class psychopathology, security officer Halder conducts a tour following a massacre. “There’s no civic sense here,” a visitor complains. “There is,” Halder replies, gesturing to a nearby surveillance camera. “Think of it as a new kind of togetherness.” Ballard is expanding a point he made in a 1979 interview with *Penthouse*: Urging us to consider people in traffic jams and on escalators, he said, “It’s a new kind of togetherness which may seem totally alien, but it’s the togetherness of modern technology.” The technologies we fashion and adopt do not merely reinforce or disrupt economies or political sys-

tems: They make available new modes of experience, new ways of being and models of organization.

Forget Facebook’s laughably crude social skeuomorphism, which produces a shallow analogue of offline “friends” and “relationships” the way a background JPEG of low-res Corinthian leather makes your blog look like a classy desk blotter. Forms of togetherness are developing that are unique to our own “modern technology.” Early traces: political imbroglios where automated bot editors, human editors, and human vandals and trolls tangle up in Wikipedia’s software; Dora Moutot’s “Webcam Tears,” an archive of people crying at their computers (real? fake? does it matter?); Tumblrrs for initiates only, with text space do ut or made sūdāj8 əpooūn pəddij jo, rendering them almost impossible to find; twelve hundred people, all summoned to jury duty on the same morning by a civic computer glitch in Auburn, California, sitting together in an epic traffic jam. To date, Shodan provides the most direct path into the diversity of ways of being around, with, and in devices—it is the bluntest deployment of the new vocabulary of togetherness that we are assembling. This can be felt most clearly, and most numbly and coldly, in the surveillance feeds of the webcams.

The vast array of webcams that a Shodan search makes available feels deeply pornographic, though not in the sense of any disclosure of human privacy or nakedness. Rather, it’s the lossy texture of the video (the jagged compression artifacts, retinal-burn color calibration, digital light blooms that look like a migraine) and the combination of vacant affect with twenty-four-hour zoom-and-pan monitoring. Many of the cameras are recording other machines, other objects: parked cars in the rain, sensor panels, grids of LEDs in dark rooms, warehouse shelving, closed doors of shatterproof glass. In 1984, Ballard described the pictures in the *Warren Commission Report* as “reminiscent of very hardcore porn . . . where no bodies appear.” The webcams model a kind of accidental eroticism defined by the specific quality of the video feed and the dispassionate yet rapt gaze of the camera.

Night fills the unoccupied office space, with compression marks in the nylon carpet where the furniture had been, and slowly a slice of orange sodium-vapor streetlight comes into radiant real-time presence on the far wall. (This is what it feels like to be a ghost.) We have been building ways of watching and being in the world that are very different from our own; we are only beginning to explore this parallel Earth that coincides everywhere with ours. Log on, and zoom in. □

FINN BRUNTON IS AN ASSISTANT PROFESSOR IN MEDIA, CULTURE, AND COMMUNICATION AT NEW YORK UNIVERSITY AND THE AUTHOR OF *SPAM: A SHADOW HISTORY OF THE INTERNET* (MIT PRESS, 2013).