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Watch me sleep: Self-surveillance and aging queer performance anxiety

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Article abstract

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Watch me sleep: self-surveillance and middle-aging queer performance anxiety

Dayna McLeod

Creator's Commentary: *Watch me sleep*: self-surveillance and middle-aging queer performance anxiety

My video essay *Watch me sleep* compares *Restless* (2021),[1] a video installation comprised of night-vision surveillance footage of my girlfriend and I sleeping, with an excerpt of *Under Surveillance: 12hrs at the PHI* (2021),[2] a live-feed performance that featured me sleeping alone at the PHI Centre—an arts research and exhibition centre in Montreal—that was livestreamed as part of a fifteen-day broadcasting program in February 2021. This video essay puts in conversation different affective moments of sleeping taken from these projects: one from an installation where I had editing control over footage of my sleeping self and, therefore, what was eventually shown to an audience, and another in which I had little to no control over what was shown to the original livestreaming audience because I was asleep.

Night visions

This body of work started with my conceptual interest in collaborating with my subconscious self as sleeping subject. I was also keen to work with non-sexualized representations of queer coupling and middle-aging queerness.[3] Formally, I wanted

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to explore night-vision as a surveillance technology while considering its potential for empathy and intimacy as I turned this technology on myself. I was captivated by the quality and texture of these surveillance images and how this imaging technology contributes to, shapes, and informs the meaning and emotion of an image and its subject(s) through pixilation, blurriness, perspective distortion, grain, and lighting. We are so familiar with what surveillance imagery looks like and what it means on screen: that someone is being watched, whether from a supermarket, bank vault, drone, doorstep, or Nannycam.

In the summer of 2019, I started recording myself sleeping with a cheap spy camera I ordered off the internet. I've always had sleep disturbances such as nightmares, sleepwalking, and night terrors, but I didn't realize their extent and frequency until I started these recordings. *Restless* is a video installation that is comprised of night-vision surveillance footage of my girlfriend and I sleeping in our bedroom as part of a sixty-day residency at the PHI Arts Centre in Montreal that I participated in during the start of the COVID pandemic in April and May 2020. I recorded us sleeping every night, which produced six to eight hours of footage per night, depending on how long I slept. I edited together a "highlight reel" whenever I had a sleep disturbance, which happened two to seven times per night. I gasp, yell, talk, scream, do elaborate arm choreography, and get up to check my surroundings while asleep or in that space between sleeping and waking. My monsters aren't usually under the bed but press down on my chest, stand over me at my bedside, or are in the hallway. Over the past decade, these monsters have evolved from shadowy men at the end of the bed into machines and robots that appear out of my sleep surroundings, emerging from transformed lamps, hanging shirts, framed pictures, or the red light on the television. As the recordings for this installation progressed, these apparitions started to appear behind the surveillance camera. In these vivid dreams, I think I'm awake and am filled with anxiety because I don't know how to work these machines but have been tasked with mastering them, teaching someone else to use them, or I am charged with repairing them before the world ends and we all die. So *no pressure*.

Restless

Restless was made up of two components: a virtual exhibition of a sixteen-minute loop of the accumulated footage, and a physical exhibition that ran from October 2020 to June 2021, with audiences able to attend from January to June 2021

because of Quebec's COVID restrictions. The virtual exhibition presented a contextual challenge as the raw surveillance footage, although cut together, did not jump off the screen as I had hoped, and I worried about what the work would compete with on the desktops and mobile devices of potential viewers. Surely audiences would watch the entire sixteen-minute loop full screen on a large monitor if they didn't have a projector to hook up to, right? I ended up projecting the final cut onto a cement wall in the backyard of my girlfriend's house and showed this version online to make obvious a small step outside from my sleeping studio in COVID times. I wanted this formal encapsulation to connect our intimate, private sleeping realm—complete with my night terrors and disturbances—to the outside world with our neighbourhood as visual and aural surroundings (in addition to our sleeping sounds and snores, you can hear the neighbourhood grumble with voices and traffic).[4] Working with exhibition designers for the physical exhibition, I used seven monitors with seven different looped sleeping sequences from the original surveillance footage (without backyard context). Each loop ranged in length from thirty seconds to seven minutes and are the main ingredients of my video essay. The backyard projection was also supposed to be shown on the outside of the PHI Centre in a side alley for passers-by to happen upon, but because of Montreal's 8pm COVID curfew during the run of the show, this didn't happen.

Sleeping Under Surveillance

While the exhibition was up but inaccessible to the public, I was invited to be under surveillance for twelve hours from 7pm–7am on Friday, February 19, 2021 as part of the PHI Centre's *INFRARED: THE ARTISTS TAKE OVER PHI*,[5] a fifteen-night livestreaming event. Because of Quebec's COVID lockdown curfew restrictions regulating residents to not leave their homes from 8pm to 5am every night, this meant that I was literally locked in at the PHI Centre with my video installation.[6] For the first six hours of this piece, I staged elements of my performance-based practice while

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4. Thanks to Daniel Fiset, curator of the PHI residency for his insightful counsel, observations, and input.

5. « Nuit Infrarouge : Les artistes s'emparent de PHI », online exhibition, centre PHI, 19 February–5 March 2021.

6. Four surveillance cameras focused on the two different spaces I used throughout the night and were livestreamed as part of a grid of nine on the PHI's website. Artist Ianna Book occupied several of the other camera views in this grid. Viewers could choose between us, open several windows at the same time, or observe the grid together all at once.

taking advantage of the surveillance context by talking to the various cameras set up throughout the space as though someone was there with me. I also hosted a karaoke party in which I was the only guest.[7] My intention here was to reach across cameras and screens to any audiences watching at home in isolation and under lockdown. Throughout the twelve hours I was under surveillance, I had no idea if anyone was watching. I really liked thinking that maybe people were there or maybe they weren't. Either way was okay with me because I was there with myself and that seemed important, especially as we are/were all so exhausted from the pandemic, and a lot of people were isolated and just trying to get through its effects on their own. I found this uncertainty of someone watching or not comforting. I also used this first part of the performance to tire myself out for the second part, which featured me sleeping.[8] Somehow, the proximity of sleeping near my video installation gave me comfort because it reminded me of my bad sleeping experiences in the past and reassured me that everything would eventually be okay. I told myself that I've slept poorly before, been scared and confused, and after waking up everything was fine after a while. This cycle seems to be as much a metaphor for getting through the pandemic as it was practical advice I gave myself to get through the night.

Needless to say, I did not sleep very well that night under surveillance. I slept for a few hours with a few nightmare events, which although was not fantastic for

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7. I utilized Headphone Karaoke, a practice I've developed and engaged with in other performance-based works (*Intimate Karaoke, Live at Uterine Concert Hall* (2016); *Headphone Karaoke: Don't Stop Believin'* (2018)), which for *Under Surveillance* meant that I was the only one who could hear the musical track in headphones as I sang songs with a microphone fully equipped with reverb that was also wired into my headphones. I shared YouTube and Spotify playlists so that people could sing along with me at home if they chose. Dayna McLeod, *Intimate Karaoke, Live at Uterine Concert Hall*, live performance, 18 September 2021, https://daynarama.com/uterine-concert-hall/ (accessed 18 September 2021); Dayna McLeod, *Headphone Karaoke: Don't Stop Believin'*, *Vimeo*, 31 October 2018, https://vimeo.com/298288004 (accessed 31 October 2018).

8. Artists who have slept for live audiences or hired others to sleep in their work include but are not limited to: Chris Burden, *Bed Piece* (1972); Susan Hiller, *Dream Mapping* (1973); Bruce Gilchrist, *Divided By Resistance* (1996); Chu Yun, *This is XX* (2006); Marina Abramović, *The House with the Ocean View* (2002); Chajana denHarder, *Sleep* (2012); Taras Polataiko, *Sleeping Beauty* (2012); Xiao Ke and Zhou Zi Han, *We Apologize to Inform You* (2013); Cornelia Parker and Tilda Swinton, *The Maybe* (2013); and Zhou Jie, *36 Days* (2014). Artists who have invited audiences to sleep in their work include but are not limited to: Marina Abramović, *Dream Bed* (2002) and *Sleeping Exercise* (2014); Jasmeen Patheja, *Meet to Sleep* (2014); Anna Fafaliou, *Sleep* (2016); Ellen Sebastian Chang and Amara Tabor-Smith, *House/Full of Blackwomen Episode: "Black Womxn Dreaming"* (2017); Navild Acosta and Fannie Sosa, *Black Power Naps* (2019); Yiou Wang, *Morphai* (2023).

me, was probably good for the performance, should anyone have been watching.[9] While trying to fall asleep and when I woke up startled, I grabbed the microphone and described what was happening for viewers who might be watching. I engaged in pop-meditation practices, that is, I used a soothing voice to guide myself back to sleep, identifying the lights in the gallery that were not in-fact machines I didn't know how to use, or the window, that was not in-fact a portal to another dimension. I described these thoughts and feelings for anyone (if anyone) was listening.

Conclusion [sleep vs. sleep]

Both of these performance-based contexts (the installation and the live-feed performance) impacted and affected the quality of my sleep in different ways while allowing me to present a *performance of sleep* through *sleeping as performance*. In *Restless* (the physical and virtual installation of pre-recorded footage), I had editing control over the footage, its content, and the presentation and representation of my and my partner's queer middle-aging, my sleeping subconscious self, and what was eventually shown to an audience. I selected clips to be included in the cut *after* sleeping. In *Under Surveillance*, the live-feed performance, I had less-to-no control over what was shown to a livestreaming audience: no control over representing my subconscious self. I had a fear of what may or may not happen while I was asleep. I was also afraid of not performing sleep disturbances for the pleasure of my audience, a sort of performance anxiety in direct opposition to my sleeping mental, physical, and emotional health. After all, I was still putting on a show (of sorts). If I slept well, nothing would have happened. If I slept poorly and acted out, I delivered a performance of sleep disruption.

When I started this video essay, I thought putting these works onscreen together would illustrate these different registers of anxiety I felt as a sleeper performing for an audience. However, because the live feed is now documentation of a past moment

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9. Sleep livestreams on Twitch and Tiktok have gained popularity in the past few years as sleepfluencers stream themselves sleeping "to comfort people and to help users struggling with insomnia fall asleep more easily". Cecilia D'Anastasio, "Twitch Streamers Make Thousands Literally by Just Sleeping," 6 March 2020, https://www.wired.com/story/twitch-streamers-make-thousands-sleeping/ (accessed 2 April 2023); Mara Leighton, "TikTokers are livestreaming themselves sleeping to help viewers with insomnia—and some are making big money off the practice," 6 December 2022, https://www.insider.com/tiktok-sleepfluencers-help-people-with-insomnia-fall-asleep-2022-12 (accessed 2 April 2023).

and not 'live,' and because I now have control of what you are seeing and how you are seeing it, this anxiety isn't obvious or evident. These past live moments have been flattened into mediatized memories, transforming an anxiety *I feel* into an anxiety *I felt* that is firmly located in the past, although potentially foreshadowing how I may sleep tonight and in the future. This anxiety of sleeping for an audience has changed for me as the sleeper now that I am watching myself sleep and transfers to you (sorry!) as you watch me not/sleep through various lenses of surveillance. This project began with my sleep and exploration of embodied practices and evolved to tap into the sleep and embodied responses of potential audiences through the lens of the pandemic. Without intentionally formulating an approach to anxiety and fear at the start of this work, I realize that I've ended up making a project about fear, anxiety, and (night) terror because of the quality of my sleep, the performance skills and presence of my sleeping self, the universalizing experiences of sleep, and the conditions of a global pandemic.

Watch me sleep: self-surveillance and aging queer

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ABSTRACT

Watch me sleep is a video essay that compares *Restless*, a video installation comprised of night-vision surveillance footage of Dayna McLeod and her girlfriend sleeping, with an excerpt of *Under Surveillance: 12hrs at the PHI*, a live-feed performance that featured her sleeping alone at the PHI Centre—an arts research and exhibition centre in Montreal—that was livestreamed as part of a fifteen-day broadcasting program in February 2021. This video essay puts in conversation different affective moments of sleeping between these projects: one for an installation where the artist had editing control over footage of her sleeping self and what was eventually shown to an audience, and the other, where she had little to no control over what was shown to the original livestreaming audience because she was asleep.

RÉSUMÉ :

Watch me sleep est un essai vidéo qui compare *Restless*, une installation vidéo composée de séquences de surveillance nocturne de Dayna McLeod et de sa compagne en train de dormir, avec un extrait de *Under Surveillance: 12hrs at the PHI*, une performance dans laquelle elle dormait toute seule au Centre PHI — un centre de recherche et d'exposition sur les arts à Montréal — qui a été présentée en direct dans le cadre d'un programme de diffusion de quinze jours en février 2021. Cet essai vidéo met en conversation différents moments affectifs de sommeil entre ces projets : l'un pour une installation où elle avait le contrôle du montage sur les images de son moi endormi et ce qui a été montré à un public, et l'autre, où elle avait peu ou pas de contrôle sur ce qui était diffusé en direct car elle dormait.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE:

Dayna McLeod is a middle-aging queer performance-based media artist and Fonds de recherche du Québec—Société et culture research-creation postdoctoral fellow at McGill University (2021-2023). Her work often uses humour and capitalizes on exploiting the body's social and material conditions using performance-based practices for cabaret, installation, and video. Her scholarly work appears in *The Anthropology of Work Review* (2023), *The Journal of Autoethnography* (2022), *Theatre Research in Canada* (2021), *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media* (2021), *Journal of Aging Studies* (2022), *Canadian Theatre Review* (2020), and *Ciel Variable* (2023).