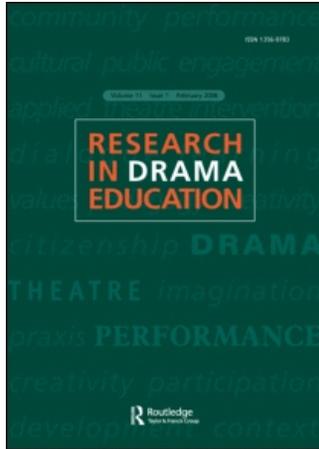


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Satire, surveillance, and the state: a classified primer

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Satire, surveillance, and the state: a classified primer

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This article explores the use of ironic performance in education, particularly around issues of human rights. I examine my own efforts to engage audiences with the history of domestic espionage and sabotage by the intelligence agencies of the United States. This is a history well known to some marginalized counterpublics (see Fraser, 1997), but little understood by the general populace.

The piece's relevance has increased since I first performed it in 1997. The images and declassified government documents in my slideshow are from the Sixties era, but the civil-rights ramifications of the PATRIOT Act suggest that it is time once again to ask: Who watches the watchmen? What are the advantages or drawbacks of irony and humor in taking on such a topic? Is there a point to performing such a piece to the 'converted'? How might such a piece serve as a provocation for active learning on the part of audience members, rather than a didactic and closed text?

[Settings: a classroom, union hall, theatre, activist gathering, a tent at the Burning Man Art Festival, a conference room, performance art space, a room in an art gallery. Old-school slide projector and screen]

Hi! I'm Special Agent Christian White.

Just call me Chris.

I'm with the Public Relations sub-division of the FBI, and Homeland Security. First of all, I want to say how happy I am to be appearing here, in *Research in Drama Education*. It's . . . heartwarming, really, to see so many talented and energetic people gathering to collectively create community. You are the future of this country, and it's vital that your voices are heard.

And recorded.

And analyzed.

But seriously, the Bureau has always devoted a lot of energy to observing and 'relating to' the performing arts, so today I'm just continuing in that vein.

It's great to meet you all face to face, I've gotten to know many of you by your very friendly emails and phone calls—in a third-person sort of way—and now, to be able to reach out and touch! To show you the human face of the Bureau. For you performers

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out there, we really feel a connection to your desire to observe human behavior, to get into character, and to go out there, perform convincingly, and hopefully, bring the house down. Knock 'em dead.

Which brings me, in a pretty smoothly-coordinated segue, to today's topic.

COINTELPRO. The Counterintelligence Programs. The Bureau's efforts to, as we put it, (can we get that slide please?)

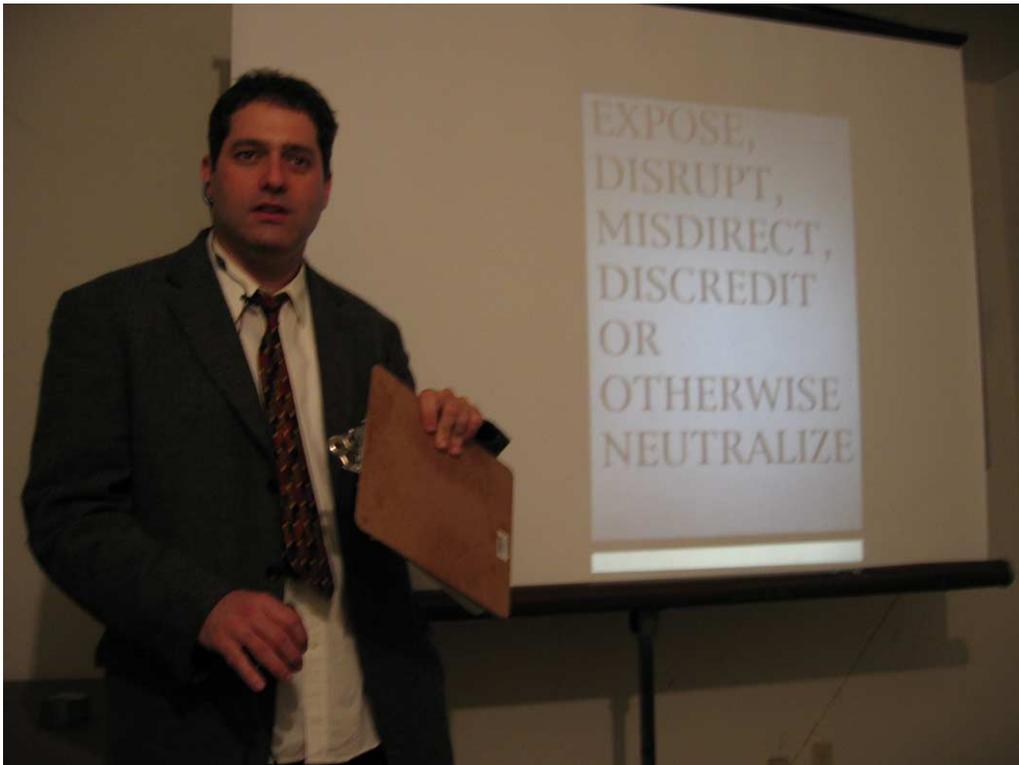
[Chris reads aloud the SLIDE, a quote of an actual FBI document, with the highlighted phrase:]

'Expose, Disrupt, Misdirect, Discredit, or otherwise Neutralize'

the activities of dissident political groups within our borders. And, in some cases, beyond.

Now, I can hear you all thinking—well, not literally, not yet, but we are working on it—let me rephrase that, I can imagine you're thinking, 'COINTELPRO? Oh God . . .', 'Don't condescend to us, Chris! We've heard all of this before . . .', 'Why dwell on this sordid little subchapter, this forensic footnote—toetag, even—on a bodybag full of dead social movements, this dubious marginalia in the tome of our nation's history?'

And of course, you're right.



COINTELPRO is history, just like the people it targeted. It's old news, especially in a fast-moving country like ours, so inventive that events are outdated before they even happen! We're all far too sophisticated for some kind of didactic presentation about outmoded social conflicts.

Still, since, over the years, several thousand documents on this subject have come to light, we at the Bureau feel that it's really time to come clean on COINTELPRO, to set the record straight, to lay our cards on the table for all of you to read your futures by, and to give you a sense of the kind of work we've done in the past and how maybe we can work together right now . . .

The Federal Bureau of Investigation was created in 1909.¹ In the Twenties, the FBI combated the organized crime fueled by the runaway bootlegging profits made possible by Prohibition. Their public image was that of super-competent, technologically advanced professionals, neutral and dispassionate in their relentless campaign to protect the public from criminals and subversive elements.

J. Edgar Hoover ruled the FBI from 1924 until his death in 1972. Hoover had been the right-hand man of Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer in what were known as the Palmer Raids, in which thousands of American leftists were rounded up after the Russian Revolution, some of whom were forcibly deported to Russia. Hoover considered himself the steward of American domestic security, and soon was keeping files on everyone he considered a domestic threat. This included social movement leaders and organizers like Martin Luther King, Jr., whom he wished to 'remove from the national scene', academics, artists, and many others.

However, in the Fifties and Sixties, Hoover's activities went far beyond surveillance. Active sabotage and destruction was planned against New Left presses. Manipulation and 'bad jacketing' (tricking activists into thinking one of their comrades was an FBI agent) were rife. Anonymous and forged letters were written by federal agents and mailed to activists to turn them against each other or to break up their marriages by spreading suspicion of adultery and betrayal. In 'Operation Hoodwink', members of organized crime were 'warned' that leftist labour organizers were trying to muscle in on their territory, and encouraged to eliminate the threat. Black Power organizations were violently turned against each other with FBI-spread rumors, cartoons, letters, and threats. Fake, inflammatory publications were disseminated with the Black Panther Party's name on them. Members of the Black Panther Party and the American Indian Movement were imprisoned, driven into exile, and killed.

All of these activities were coordinated under a secret program called COINTELPRO, short for Counter Intelligence Program. The presumption with the term 'counterintelligence', of course, was that dissidents in the US were the equivalent of foreign intelligence agents and to be treated accordingly. This underlying assumption resulted in violent, unacknowledged and irresponsible abuses of power by the watchmen trusted with ensuring domestic security. It led to a further marginalization and radicalization of dissent as well, and an understandable paranoia amongst many activists—a paranoia which Hoover welcomed as immobilizing. Most importantly, the constitutional rights of thousands of American citizens and residents to free

speech, free association, and freedom from unreasonable search and seizure were violated and suppressed without due process.

In the end, this secret program was only ‘declassified’ because of illegal activist direct action. An anonymous group of activists broke into an FBI office in the aptly named town of Media, Pennsylvania, stole COINTELPRO files, and disseminated them to the media. Those files, whose existence was hitherto unknown, revealed the existence of COINTELPRO. Scandal and a call for restrictions on the rights of the FBI and police to infiltrate and act as *agents provocateurs* resulted—restrictions which have recently been lifted.

The little-known (in the USA) case of COINTELPRO is sadly relevant in our post-9/11 era, when understandable concerns for domestic security from terrorism have led to the PATRIOT ACT and other civil-rights threatening legislation. Furthermore, basic human rights are threatened in the seemingly permanent ‘war on terror’, as exemplified by the spectacle of torture in Abu Ghraib, the suspension of *habeas corpus* at Guantanamo Bay, and the use of secret prisons and extradition of terror suspects to countries that torture. Protest groups in the USA are infiltrated, spied on, and preemptively arrested. Even a satirical street theatre group like Billionaires for Bush (www.billionairesforbush.com) was recently found to have been infiltrated and placed under surveillance by undercover agents of the New York Police Department (Dwyer, 2007). This is not to say that American fears of a terrorist attack are completely unjustified. However, as the pendulum has swung to the far right in American politics, and human and civil rights are in grave danger, it seems vital to ask the age-old question of ‘who watches the watchmen?’ with last generation’s experience with COINTELPRO as a necessary case study.

Educators and community organizers in the US who wish to engage classes and audiences around the question of the balance between civil rights and security are challenged by a sort of social amnesia and what I refer to as a ‘hegemonologue’,² a hegemonic monologue of authority—in this case one in which all resistance to secret searches, police infiltration of activist groups, and other forms of executive-branch domination over the legislature, judiciary, press, and citizenry are shouted down as unpatriotic or even ‘terrorist’. In the era of ‘No Child Left Behind’ education, which puts enormous economic pressure on government-funded schools to teach students to pass standardized tests, there is little time for dialogical education, critical thinking, and active learning, let alone a critical exploration of alternative narratives of American history ...

Now, I’d like to take a little straw poll here, how many people had heard of COINTELPRO before tonight? Anyone? Oh, it’s a pretty hip crowd! Okay, how about AIM—the American Indian Movement? Can I see some hands? Black Panther Party—there’ve been some movies about them, so I assume—Black Panther Party for Self-Defense? Anyone? Black Panthers, hands up, Black Panthers, hands up—I just like saying that! How about the MOVE organization?

[Chris says ‘oh good’ and takes a picture of anyone who puts their hands up]

CISPES? The Committee in Solidarity with the People of El S-where?³

Okay, the reason I ask is, these were problematic groups, people with ‘issues’, and, when the Freedom of Information Act was passed in that Watergate era, we at the Bureau were told we had to declassify some documents about how we dealt with these groups that, well, we never thought we were going to have to . . . declassify.

So we were faced with a pretty heavy PR challenge. I know many of you are performers and you like to be watched—but some people aren’t so comfortable with it. However, with 9/11 et cetera, everyday life is a spectator sport now, so I say you all might as well play ball!

A counter-narrative, or at least the opening of a public dialogue about the question of security versus civil liberties and human rights, is necessary. Progressive educators and theatre makers are in a unique position to take up this challenge, and to open that question up for audiences and classes.

There are many approaches to this task. Straightforward lectures and discussion sessions are obviously important. Earnest modes of public protest—demonstrations, rallies—can also serve to raise awareness of public issues. The approach I tried with my performance piece was to use irony and satire, to speak through a character, Special Agent Christian White, an alternatively friendly and menacing fellow who is filled with enthusiasm about the PATRIOT Act and the history of domestic surveillance. Chris shows slides of real government documents that have been censored and released under the Freedom of Information act as he worms his way into the hearts and under the skins of his audience. Chris ends his cheerfully creepy presentation with an upbeat recruiting pitch, enlisting the audience members to spy on each other or the other members of the institution where the performance takes place. There is no relieving, resolving catharsis, no *anagnorosis* in which Agent White realizes his wrongdoing or tragic flaw.

Irony can build the culture of a subaltern counter-public. The ironic speech act covers the intended meaning through inversion, exaggeration, or misdirection. In live performance, audience members who share a certain sensibility or understanding of the world may interpret the same joke in the same way, and *hear each other reacting similarly*. This shared reaction reflects shared meanings, and is part of the pleasant discovery of commonality that an ironic performance can provoke:⁴ *We all have anxiety about government surveillance? Enough to laugh about it when given the chance? This is good to know . . .*

So, what I’m about to show you is a document declassified by the Bureau, in compliance with the Freedom of Information Act. It contains information about COINTELPRO, and this particular document was declassified in 1988, over 30 years after that case’s conclusion. So again, the fact that I’m showing this to you at all is a really strong sign of the winds of change and openness blowing through the Bureau’s offices at this very moment.

[SLIDE: ERADI-REDACTED DOCUMENT. It is a file that has been completely blacked-out, or ‘redacted’, before release]

This is our version of Black Power.

That’s a little Bureau humor of course . . .



It is up to the audience to decide which submerged meaning is the intended one. The shared joke can build community, but it can also exclude or alienate. People left out of the joke may tune out or walk out. People who decide that they are the butt of the joke may get angry and shut down.

However, I am merely mocking the overreaching surveillance state through buffoonery, through cartoonish embodiment. My educational model is one of provoking without prescribing, to open up a dialogue on these issues without dictating a solution. *Here we are, in the Panopticon, baited and bought. Now what? This is the state. This is what it does. Here are the documents.* I am attempting to distance the audience from a set of given assumptions and mental ‘default settings’ about domestic security and the needs and qualities of the state.

The name of the character is a minor aspect of the mockery. My intention, besides the cheap ‘call me Chris’ joke, is to make a note of the demographic and politically dominant majority of the United States and its power structure. This is further meant to evoke, indirectly, the idea that a democracy should be judged by how well it protects its minorities against the agendas and interests of its demographic majority or its elites. Radical performance that attempts to open a dialogue on suppressed history (and histories of suppression) must take on the risk of offense. Indeed, offending one group can be an aspect of energizing other counter-publics; oppositionality unavoidably and necessarily offends the unmarked and unquestioned ‘common sense’ of the establishment.

No, seriously, you're probably wondering about the little dabs of black here and there on the text. That's called 'redaction'; a little sliver of shop talk, let me define with this slide:

[SLIDE: Redact (def.):

[Lat. *redigere*, to drive back]

1. To write in correct form or formulate (e.g., a proclamation)
2. To make ready (a document) for publication: [in short, to] EDIT]

Now, how would I *perform* Redaction?

[SLIDE: REDACTION AND YOU]

I'm asking this question in order to try to bridge that gap between us. That obsolete, outmoded, *fetid* binary that separates performance and enforcement.

Now, as a Public Relations man, I've had a lot of experience in performing texts of all kinds; fiction, non-fiction, you name it. So I can't help but reach out to all of you Lit-Crit types with the question:

[SLIDE: THE ERADI-REDACTED DOCUMENT]

How would I '*read*' this text?

The use of humor, however dark, on a topic of this seriousness has its merits. It can engage audiences who would tune out of a lecture on the same topic. When the audience is surprised, it can open a moment for critical thinking. When a presentation takes an earnest, familiar tone, mode, and rhythm, students may start to tune it out, in the same way that we tune out familiar songs on the radio or skip over clichéd phrases in hack novels. Clichéd writing and speaking can lead to boredom, or, perhaps worse, a sort of automatic, dogmatic non-thinking, as pointed out by George Orwell in *Politics and the English Language* (1968).

Comedian/novelist Alexei Sayles warned me in a conversation in 2003 that political stand-up comedy can lead to a sort of self-congratulatory groupthink. While Sayles' point is well taken, I feel that a dynamic comedy that is self-mocking as well, and which uses irony and sharp turns in tone, meaning, and staging techniques, can be unstable and open enough to short-circuit groupthink. When the audience is unsure what will happen next—when the lights go out and I light a candle and start searching 'under the redaction marks', then start singing, or, in a parody of traditional teaching methods, start handing out copies of redacted FBI documents and ask them to try to fill in the blanks—they may be more engaged. This engagement is a crucial component of active learning, which many theorists including Paolo Freire consider to be the key to dialogical, critical pedagogy.

This piece is hardly an act of Freirian-Boalian dialogue—the audience is not invited to come up and change the script or the ending, though perhaps that would be an improvement. However, there is often a time for group discussion afterwards. The humor, however dark and heavy-handed it may be, can help open up an otherwise closed and formidable subject, to create a community through shared laughter and playfulness. Chris White is a bizarre character, with sudden shifts in

delivery; he plays both good cop and bad cop in the same body (perhaps having him play both roles is a new cost-cutting method for the Bureau?). However, by playing Chris White, showing his theatrical power and making transparent his manipulative techniques, his baiting and switching, I attempt to empower through embodying and mocking the powerful.

There is a strong argument against performing only for ‘the choir’ or ‘the converted’. According to this line of reasoning, critical performance of this sort is best deployed in hostile territory, for example in conservative contexts where trust of the security agencies is held more deeply and groups like the American Civil Liberties Union are considered subversive. And, indeed, most of the places I have performed have been in academic, progressive, or even activist contexts. However, the argument does not stop there. I have found that even amongst friendly audiences in the United States, actual awareness of the details of COINTELPRO is rare. The ‘converted’ are not necessarily well-informed, energized, or activated around a specific issue, and performance can help to stimulate the kind of concerned conversation that leads to activist organization.

I have tried to use the program and slides together to encourage active learning as well. Active learning, in which people actually take initiative and responsibility towards their own learning process, leads to better retention and more profound engagement. It is for this reason, and to avoid over-didacticism with what is already a very loaded topic, that I do not explain every bit of text and imagery in the piece. For example, the slide projector shows a series of frightening images while I say ‘Shhhh . . .’ with my finger to my mouth. The first is of an old WW2-era poster of Uncle Sam also with his finger to his mouth in the ‘Shhh’ position, a cheap laugh indeed. The next slide is an unlabeled image of Fred Hampton’s bloody, bullet-riddled mattress.⁵ Silence. Next, another government poster: ‘SILENCE MEANS SECURITY’, with an offscreen hand covering the mouth of a soldier. Next, an image of Hampton’s body being wheeled out on a gurney by smiling white policemen. Next, an aerial image of several blocks of houses destroyed by the MOVE bombing.⁶ Then back to Uncle Sam’s ‘Shhh . . .’. I don’t explain or caption the images. My intention is that the images will lead to a desire for people to turn to the program for more information . . .

The program is darkly humorous. A great deal of it is redacted—including the names of the performance and the performer. Scrawled in the margins is Chris’s ‘to do’ list: ‘1. Milk. Eggs. Sugar. 2. Expose. 3. Misdirect. 4. Call Mom. 5. Discredit. 6. Neutralize’. However, between the dark humor and blacked-out sections, there is a substantial list of sources and references for audience members to check out for themselves, to fill in the gaps that my performance leaves open. It is my hope that this bizarre ‘study guide’ encourages them to take a more active role in learning about this history. Even if few folks do so, those who do may have taken the first step to activism: active learning. I’m still not sure if I should explain all of the slides—with subtitles, perhaps—but for now I prefer this more open and undefined staging. There is enough blatant material in the piece, and I think this method makes these moments more engaging because they are less closed, defined, didactic.

Performance itself is an act of advocacy—at the very least you are asserting that your performance is worth the precious, fleeting time of the mortals gathered to watch it. It is, hopefully, a demonstration—a demonstration of the performer's creative investment and commitment. For a piece like this to work, it must also provoke laughter, indignation, or both (and perhaps, afterwards, contemplation?). If the audience does not engage, then there can be little learning for either performer or audience. This type of work provides no Aristotelian catharsis, no satisfying emotional purgation or cleansing. It ends with a challenge, and a set of questions, rather than a conclusion. In this sense, I attempt to follow, at least in part, Freire's radically democratic model, his emphasis on 'problem-posing' education over mere 'transfers of information' (Freire, 1989). I hope that the audience will be provoked into finding a sort of cathartic satisfaction—both emotional and intellectual—after and beyond the performance, through active research and questioning in everyday life, to be followed up by practical, creative political action.

This little show, which I've done in small to medium sized venues around the USA and the UK, models one possible alternative form of engagement with these issues. It is deadly serious but also darkly playful. In the spirit of dialogue, I hope with this short essay to open up a discussion about other approaches to stimulating students and audiences to actively inform themselves about our threatened rights and liberties in this time of permanent war.

Notes

1. Named simply the Bureau of Investigation at the time, it was given its current name in 1935.
2. Bogad, as cited by Shepard (2005); interestingly, A. J. Beier seems to have coined the same phrase with a different but related emphasis at around the same time (see Beier, 2005).
3. With thanks to Peter Gould and Stephen Stearns and their play, *A Peasant of El Salvador* (Vermont, Whetstone Books, 1987).
4. For an example of an ironic political performance and character serving to help build the culture of an anti-racist counterpublic, see my article about Pauline Pantsdown (Bogad, 2001).
5. Fred Hampton was a founding member of the Illinois Chapter of the Black Panther Party, a charismatic speaker and organizer, and pioneer of the gang truce movement. On 4 December 1969, at the age of 21, he was killed in his sleep when Chicago police fired 99 shots into his apartment. The police had been provided a floorplan of the apartment by an informer/provocateur, who marked an 'X' on the map representing the location of Hampton's bed.
6. On Mother's Day, 1985, Philadelphia police dropped a bomb on a house fortified and occupied by members of the radical group MOVE. Eleven people, including five children, were killed. Several blocks of houses were burned down.

Notes on contributor

L. M. Bogad is Associate Professor of Performance Studies in the Department of Theatre and Dance at the University of California at Davis. His book, *Electoral Guerrilla Theatre: Radical Ridicule and Social Movements*, was published by

Routledge Press in 2005, and his essays have been published in *TDR: The Drama Review*, *Contemporary Theatre Review*, *Red Pepper*, *Fifth Estate*, *Radical Society*, *The Journal of Aesthetics and Protest*, *International Brecht Society's Communications*, and the collections *Place and Performance*, *A Boal Companion*, *The Art and Cultural Politics of Carnival*, and *Images of Mental Illness Through Text and Performance*.

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