

**THE PORTRAYAL OF POLICING IN NEW YORK CITY AS OBSERVED BY THE**  
**HISTORY AND FOCUS OF NYPD’S BUREAU OF SPECIAL SERVICES**

*Down the Barrel (of a Lens)*, is an archival film installation presented by Kameron Neal, made by reimagining the digitized and declassified historical NYPD surveillance films between 1960 and 1980. These films, shot by police officers, primarily focus on documenting the political demonstrations with footage of the Civil Rights Movement, Black Panthers, labor strikes, Vietnam War protests, and even some from inside the NYPD’s Photo Unit.<sup>1</sup> The installation, which was also displayed in the Lincoln Center, had two screens facing each other - one was representative of the NYPD officers, wherein they tested the cameras and interacted with one another, while the other screen had civilians going about their day without the knowledge that they were being surveilled. The clips cut when the civilians looked directly at the camera, choosing to stare back, when they realized that they were being recorded. The purpose of having the two screens face each other was to recreate the tensions between the police and the population they were recording, and to explore the power dynamics between the two. In 1985, the investigation of political organizations via surveillance was declared unconstitutional by federal courts under the Handschu Agreement.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> “Public Artist in Residence Kameron Neal’s ‘down the Barrel (of a Lens).’” n.d. Nyc.gov.

<sup>2</sup> “Handschu v. Special Services Division (Challenging NYPD Surveillance Practices Targeting Political Groups).”

The surveillance activities, as seen in the installation, were ordered by the NYPD's Bureau of Special Services, also known as the Bureau of Special Services and Investigation or BOSSI. The Bureau's job was "gathering and compiling intelligence on subversive activities and transmitting to the Police Department data on people and groups who, because of their plans, are likely to create problems requiring police attention."<sup>3</sup> Subversion was defined as an endeavor to overthrow or destroy the government through illegal methods. Due to the broad nature of what they could/wanted to surveil and since they weren't answerable to any other agency, except for the NYPD hierarchy, BOSSI "wiretapped, infiltrated, bugged, photographed, surveyed, investigated, spied, and unashamedly undertook any strategy that enabled it to do its job effectively." (Bouza, 4) Even though Bouza, who was a former captain of BOSSI, expresses that no laws were ever broken by agents, he also states that the Bureau was "at all times an instrument of possible abuse" (Bouza, 51) This paper will explore the history of the Bureau—what groups, parties, and people caused political anxiety among officials through its course? Who did BOSSI think could be a threat due to their subversive motives and activities? How early on, and how intensive and extensive, was its surveillance?

BOSSI has gone by different names since its inception in 1912, when it was called the Radical Bureau. In 1915, it was renamed the Neutrality Squad; in 1923, it was known as the Radical Squad; in 1931, it was called the Bureau of Criminal Alien Investigations after which it became the Public Relations Squad in 1945 and just a year later it finally came to be known as

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<sup>3</sup> Bouza, *Police Intelligence: The Operations of an Investigative Unit*. 51

the Bureau of Special Services and Investigations or the Bureau of Special Services.<sup>4</sup> The elements that the Bureau was investigating included what is considered threatening and subversive to the NYPD. The renaming and focus of this special services division throughout the years give insights into what it was that was being surveilled and policed by the NYPD. It often appears like a pattern was formed wherein the Bureau was nominally doing one thing, but doing something considerably more insidious in reality and practice. Moreover, it gives us an insight into what groups in society contributed to the social concerns of officials in New York at various periods in time.

In 1912, the Radical Bureau was established in response to Police Commissioner Theodore Bingham's proposal for a "secret service" primarily focusing on the activities of "Foreign Criminals in New York."<sup>5</sup> The bureau's principal mission was to investigate the status of alien residents in the city.<sup>3</sup> According to statistics, a significant majority of criminals, about eighty-five out of a hundred, were classified as aliens, meaning they were either foreign-born or had foreign parentage. This high proportion can be attributed to the fact that eighty-five percent of New York City's population was considered "alien" at that time, and about half of the population did not even speak English.<sup>6</sup> This raises questions about the correlation between the validity of policing of aliens and their 'criminal activity' in the city, considering it was only

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<sup>4</sup> Bouza, *Police Intelligence: The Operations of an Investigative Unit*. 24

<sup>5</sup> Bingham, "Foreign Criminals in New York."

<sup>6</sup> Nussbaum, "From Brescia to Bin Laden: The NYPD, International Policing, and 'National' Security."

logical that the proportion of the City's demographic would reflect the proportion of criminals and criminal activity.

With the onset of the First World War, the NYPD was on high alert, leading to the creation of the Bomb and Neutrality Squad, which was led by Thomas Tunney, an Irish officer who had “plenty of experience fighting violent anarchists and extortionists.” The Radical Bureau, which was turned into the Bomb and Neutrality Squad, was now “directed to ferret out ‘bomb throwers, German agents, and anarchists’”<sup>7</sup> in 1915. It is necessary to note that the Squad was specifically preying on existing xenophobia to maintain their unchecked power and confirm their biases. It was the first law enforcement organization to chalk up the bombing incidents in the city to a “coordinated sabotage campaign.”<sup>8</sup> While the Bomb and Neutrality Squad diligently investigated genuine threats, it is essential to note that their surveillance efforts extended beyond specific individuals and organizations. As mentioned by a newspaper article in 1917, thousands of people were suspected of being German agents, highlighting the paranoia prevalent during that time. The Squad also kept an eye on people suspected of being financed by German agents. Moreover, as mentioned in the article, there was a good number of suspects who were simply

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<sup>7</sup> Bouza, *Police Intelligence: The Operations of an Investigative Unit*. 42

<sup>8</sup> Office of the Director of National Intelligence. n.d. “INTEL - U.S. Law Enforcement Counterattacks.”

law-abiding citizens and were surveilled without any reason.<sup>9</sup> This raises concerns about the potential infringement on civil liberties and the misuse of surveillance powers during a time of heightened tensions.

The Neutrality Squad transformed into the Radical Squad in 1923, shifting its focus from combating bomb-throwing anarchists to addressing communist dissidents and looking into the activities of the Communist Party. This transformation reflected the changing social and political landscape of the time, as fears of communist ideology and its potential impact on society grew. By 1924, the Radical Squad had been divided into three sub-units: the Bomb Squad, the Industrial Squad, and the Gangster Squad.<sup>10</sup> The Bomb Squad actively investigated communist threats and dissidents, while the Industrial Squad was established to address the industrial strife of that period. The Gangster Squad, responsible for investigating criminal gangs, ceased to exist after the end of Prohibition. In 1925, the Bomb Squad made headlines when they raided ten communist meetings, confiscating May Day literature. Additionally, two youths distributing pamphlets to high school students about May Day were arrested on charges related to alleged communist activities in the city, although the official reason that was cited was littering the streets with circulars.<sup>11</sup> The extensive surveillance and arrests of individuals engaged in ‘communist activities’ highlight the heightened tensions and suspicions prevalent in that era. The

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<sup>9</sup> HOW NEW YORK GETS PLOTTERS: POLICE NEUTRALITY SQUAD IS ACTIVE IN THWARTING INTERESTS THAT ARE INIMICAL TO UNITED STATES GOVERNMENT. *The Christian Science Monitor* (1908-), Oct 05, 1917.

<sup>10</sup> Bouza, *Police Intelligence: The Operations of an Investigative Unit*. 24

<sup>11</sup> New York Police Raid Communists. May 1, 1925. *The Sun*.

activities of the Radical Squad during this time period raised questions about the balance between monitoring legitimate threats and potential infringements on civil liberties.

As the Bureau once again switched names and focus to being the Bureau of Criminal Alien Investigations in 1931, Bouza mentions, it reached a high order of effectiveness in the late 1930s and early 1940s as it responded to the then potential dangers of World War II and the foreign sabotage and spying occurring in America.<sup>12</sup> In that time period, it was a commonly known situation that aliens constituted a potentially subversive element in American society, and as a result, the arrest of aliens was brought to the attention of the Bureau of Criminal Alien Investigations. The number of aliens expelled from the country rose from 2,762 in 1920 to 9,495 in 1925 and to 38,795 in 1930.<sup>13</sup> Each and every alien that was arrested for any kind of crime, even jaywalking, was considered to be a potential threat to security, and thus each arrest was inspected and investigated by the Bureau in case they were related to other criminal activities.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, during WW2, intelligence was also focused on military enemies in addition to aliens, with infiltration operations against communists running through the 1930s and 1940s. The operations were focused on “potential criminal behavior, with the inherent knowledge by the police that no criminal behavior might be uncovered.” (Bouza, 4) It is important for us to rethink

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<sup>12</sup> Bouza, *Police Intelligence: The Operations of an Investigative Unit*. 3

<sup>13</sup> Volpp, Leti. Review of *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and Alien Citizens*, by Mae Ngai.

<sup>14</sup> Bouza, *Police Intelligence: The Operations of an Investigative Unit*. 142

the target selection, with people consistently and constantly being targeted for their political philosophies.

In the post-war period of 1945, when the Bureau's name switched to the Public Relations Squad, it lapsed into a period of ineffectiveness because of the absence of threats due to wartime. Bouza calls the Public Relations Squad a “deliberate misnomer [which] existed until April 15, 1946” (Bouza, 3) till it became the Bureau of Special Services and Investigations. Now, its mission is to secure information relating to the political or social activities of any person or group, that are considered to be subversive, at this point, the focus was activists conducting protests, strikes, sit-ins, and acts of civil disobedience in response to the Civil Rights Movement, Anti-Vietnam War and all groups, people and parties relating to them such as the Black Panther Party, Communist Party, The American Renaissance Party, and Youth Against War and Fascism. They kept a record of parades, religious festivals, celebrations for successful NASA missions, rallies for political parties, and even home movies. These were the clips that were shown by Kameron Neal. There were a number of cases of abuse of powers, civil liberty violations, and major surveillance operations of a questionable nature that took place during this time period. Neal was trying to bring us to question these practices and shed light on the police’s surveillance of people. These abuses ended up resulting in the Handschu Guidelines that dictated NYPD surveillance limitations.<sup>15</sup> The agreement prohibited investigating political and religious

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<sup>15</sup> Nussbaum, “From Brescia to Bin Laden: The NYPD, International Policing, and ‘National’ Security.”

organizations and groups unless there was "specific information" that the group was linked to a crime that had been committed or was about to be committed.<sup>16</sup>

In conclusion, BOSSI did contribute to investigating real threats and carefully crafted an image intending to investigate, infiltrate, and inspect criminals and crime in New York City. Historically, in contrast to their nominal purpose, they were more insidious in practice, by keeping records and non-consensually surveilling hundreds of thousands of people. The Bureau specifically preyed on existing xenophobia to maintain its unchecked power. From considering aliens as subversive in 1912 to documenting every single detail about people participating in Anti-War Protests and the Civil Rights Movement, they confirmed what often turned out to be their bigotry. Neal through *Down the Barrel (of a Lens)* wanted us to recognize that even the NYPD which is supposed to protect the citizens of the City has oftentimes crossed boundaries when it comes to their target selection and their extent of surveillance, he wants us to stare back and reclaim the power that was taken away by an unimaginable number of people for their beliefs and their backgrounds.

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<sup>16</sup> NYC Department of Records & Information Services

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