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WHY SHOULD WE TALK ABOUT CULTURE, WHEN WE WANT TO UNDERSTAND ‘SURVEILLANCE’?

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KEYWORDS

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_Abstract

Why should we talk about culture, when we want to understand ‘surveillance’? The following is a brief sketch towards an answer to this question. It has two parts: first, it presents and discusses how the term ‘culture’ is used within Surveillance Studies, an emerging transdisciplinary field combining research from social and political sciences as well as cultural studies and the humanities, and highlights the works of Torin Monahan and David Lyon in particular. Second, it puts forward a set of arguments why any reflection on surveillance must not ignore the cultural perspective.

1_Introduction

In public debate, surveillance is considered mainly at the level of institutional power. Consequently, the debate centers on regulatory and legal interventions aimed at specific institutions and actors, be they governmental or commercial. While I will not argue against such a perspective, I find it inadequate for a comprehensive assessment of surveillance as a dynamic set of technologies, techniques, and practices that impact our daily lives.

This article has two parts: first, I will present and discuss the way culture is used as a term within Surveillance Studies, an emerging transdisciplinary field combining research from social and political sciences as well as cultural studies and the humanities.¹ In particular, I will highlight the contributions of Torin Monahan and David Lyon. Second, I will bring forward a set of arguments that discuss why any reflection on surveillance must not ignore the cultural perspective.

2_Torin Monahan: Surveillance as Cultural Practice

For the sociologist Torin Monahan, regarding surveillance as cultural practice is a means to expand the notion of surveillance as well as to redefine the methodological approach towards this subject.² Traditionally, as Monahan points out, scholars in the social sciences have analyzed surveillance technologies “as exogenous tools that are mobilized by actors to deal with perceived problems or need” (Monahan 2011: 496) and have thus tended to favor the perspective of the actors or institutions employing such technologies. Instead, he continues, scholars should try to “comprehend people’s experiences of and engagement with surveillance on their own terms, stressing the production of emic over etic forms of knowledge” (ibid.). Such an inquiry must necessarily

include elements of popular culture, media, art, literature, or narrative. Monahan refines his argument: firstly, surveillance should not be viewed as external to social practices, but as “embedded within, brought about by, and generative of social practices” (ibid.). Secondly, surveillance technologies have their own agency and thus need to be analyzed accordingly. Thirdly, surveillance must be analyzed from an epistemological viewpoint: as something that is constitutive of knowledge, experience, and relationships. And, finally, the sites of surveillance should be understood critically as complex systems, i.e. as something that cannot be assessed as being ‘good’ or ‘harmful’ in itself but that can only be judged within specific cultural contexts or frames.

3_David Lyon: The Culture of Surveillance

The Canadian sociologist David Lyon sketches a triad of commonly used academic concepts. First, the *surveillance state*.³ This term designates the state and its institutions (e.g. the police, intelligence agencies, some branches of the military) as the central actor. Under the metaphor of ‘Big Brother’ this model of surveillance was most prominent from the postwar era until the late 1980s. When we talk about ‘state surveillance’, we think of surveillance as being centralized and monolithic, supported by propaganda, denunciation and (ultimately) by the state monopoly on violence (Lyon 2018: 12).

With the collapse of the Eastern Bloc and the demise of many socialist regimes at the end of the 1980s, this term lost a lot of its explanatory power. In the following decade, many commentators adopted an alternative term: the *surveillance society*:

Surveillance societies are societies which function, in part, because of the extensive collection, recording, storage, analysis and application of information on individuals and groups in those societies as they go about their lives. Retail loyalty programmes, website cookies, national identity schemes, routine health screening and no-fly lists all qualify as surveillance. Each features, in different measure, the routine collection of data about individuals with the specific purpose of governing, regulating, managing or influencing what they do in the future.⁴

As a concept, the ‘surveillance society’ expands the field of actors well beyond government and state to include the myriad of private actors and commercial companies who record and collect personal data, e.g. financial institutions, insurance and credit companies or large retailers. Here, surveillance is viewed as decentralized, focused on the individual as consumer and on mechanisms of data-driven “social sorting” in order to target specific groups.⁵ Importantly, the surveillance society does not rely on blatant coercion and brute force, but on enticement, exemplified in the (putative) financial benefits promised to, say, the users of loyalty cards. But, as Lyon notes, the ‘surveillance

society’ still regards surveillance as an external force, touching “the routines of daily social life from outside, as it were” (Lyon 2018: 13).

In a *surveillance culture*, in contrast, surveillance is ‘a way of life’: it has become part of the enculturation of subjects. This is not to be equated with total submission or acceptance. In a surveillance culture there are many possible attitudes towards surveillance: It can be complied with, engaged with, negotiated, resisted, initiated, or even desired. The important point is the everydayness of surveillance — it “informs everyday reflections on how things are, and the repertoire of everyday practices” (Lyon 2018: 9). People are also initiators of surveillance, whether they target others (e.g. in a search for someone on Facebook) or themselves (e.g. in so called ‘lifelogging’ practices).

If we want to analyze and understand surveillance culture, Lyon suggests we should distinguish between two different but interconnected regimes: *surveillant practices* and *surveillant imaginaries*. Roughly speaking: ‘practices’ are what we do and the way we do them; these are actions and interactions. ‘Imaginaries’ are ideas and emotions: images, metaphors, discourses, and rhetorics, as well as affects like desire, anxiety, or uncertainty. All of these contribute to the ways we make meaning of the world, of objects and events around us. The crucial points are not to conflate the two (as practices rarely match what people believe or say), and at the same time, to reflect how practices and imaginaries are interrelated.⁶ Our ideas inform and frame our practices, they give them direction, meaning, value. Works of popular culture — literature, movies, music, photographs, etc. — embody and express such imaginaries, albeit sometimes in intricate and indirect ways that have to be carefully analyzed and interpreted.

4_Why Study (Popular) Culture?

Again: why study ‘culture’, if we want to understand ‘surveillance’? Three interrelated perspectives on this question.

First of all, *there is so much material out there*. Culture abounds with works about surveillance, be it movies (*Enemy of the State*, *The Truman Show*, *The Conversation*), TV series (*Person of Interest*, *Homeland*), literature (George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Dave Eggers’ *The Circle*, Cory Doctorow’s *Little Brother*) or pop music (*Every Breath You Take* by The Police, *Stars of CCTV* by Hard-Fi).⁷ Surveillance is a recurrent motif in computer games (*Watch Dogs*) as well as in advertising and in fashion.⁸ On one hand, this abundance reflects a growing public concern with surveillance.

Filmmakers, authors and artists state their position on surveillance and the infringements of privacy. On the other hand, surveillance is also a theme or motif that lends itself to a spectacular aesthetic: surveillance is all about seeing and being seen, about transparency and clandestineness, and many movies exploit this fact. As a topic in narratives, surveillance provides a setting in which the heroine or hero must face not only unseen and seemingly omnipotent opponents, but in which heroic subversion or resistance is also made possible by the instruments of surveillance.

And these works can help decipher, describe, categorize, and analyze the public discourse on surveillance. The public discourse on surveillance (as I understand it) comprises *any* statement or document on this topic that is publicly available: the myriad of comments in the social web made by anonymous (or not so anonymous) users; news coverage and reporting by the press; public statements by government officials, police officers or other (private, commercial or state) agencies of surveillance; the output of academic research on this topic; the press releases and reports by civil rights groups and privacy advocates; the countless technical and legal documents that inevitably accompany the propagation of surveillance technology. While all of these documents (and this is not an exhaustive list) tend to focus on factual, empirical surveillance installations and practices, works of culture tend to give us fictional representations of surveillance. But the important point is: with surveillance, the fictional and the factual cannot be cleanly separated. Popular fiction is not only representative of the public discourse, it is also of great influence. There is a feedback loop at work: when people assume they are under surveillance, they will act according to what they believe or assume surveillance is capable of, regardless of whether these assumptions are valid or not. And what is more: factual surveillance technology and practices will adapt to these assumptions. A testimony to this is how the Spielberg movie *Minority Report* (more so than the original novel by Philip K. Dick) is repeatedly referenced or alluded to in reports about factual surveillance and how engineers and operators refer to the movie when talking about specific surveillance installations.⁹ To put it shortly: in the logic of prevention, images (representations) of surveillance are the flipside of ‘factual’ surveillance images and technologies, and vice versa.

Secondly, works of popular culture often the only way most people actually experience surveillance. Surveillance is notoriously hard to describe or observe. We may spot

the camera on the wall, but the CCTV operating room is closed to the public. The tapping of the undersea cables transmitting the signals of global communication occurs behind strictly guarded doors.¹⁰ We know our personal data is stored, mined and analyzed by countless (and mostly unknown) agencies, but we cannot see, hear, or feel dataveillance. And as experts must admit, even the algorithms behind such data mining are hard to understand. Since much of surveillance technology and infrastructure is hidden from sight (as well as from political oversight) and ‘security by obscurity’ is a principle followed by many surveillance actors, fictional works are often the only resources to publicly debate the experiences and emotions of living in a surveillance culture. Bereft of any reasonable assessment of the overall consequences of surveillance technology, it is no wonder that many either choose to ignore these altogether or to overreact with excessive suspicion. Popular culture can support academic debate by providing metaphors, images and references for discussing and theorizing surveillance in a way that does not ignore the effects and emotions that people under surveillance experience. And academics should closely analyze not only the works themselves, but also the public’s responses to these works: the adoption and diffusion of metaphors, the historically changing readings of classical works, the various ways in which George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty Four* has been adapted to the screen, the ways in which a game like *Watch Dogs* is played and is discussed in online gaming forums. Why are certain depictions of surveillance more popular than others? How does this change over time? Why has “Big Brother” become a term that designates a reality TV show?

My final argument for why we should study culture is this: *surveillance is itself structured like a fiction*. It is not only (in the case of video surveillance) based on the same technology as entertainment media, it also borrows strategies from works of fiction. This is contrary to Foucault’s dictum that our society “is not one of spectacle, but of surveillance.”¹¹ The logic of prevention, the rationale behind many surveillance installations, heavily relies on the fact that surveillance technology — e.g. CCTV cameras — must be seen, must be on public display in order to ‘function.’¹² Consider the case of CCTV signage: in the logic of prevention, as long as there is a warning sign, there must not be a real camera, since any potential criminal would be deterred by this sign alone. Such signs-without-cameras are only one example for what is labeled ‘*security theater*’: inefficient, but often costly measures meant to provide the public with

a false sense of safety.¹³ Similarly, Sun-ha Hong (2015) has proposed that the experience of being under surveillance is structured by the subjunctive, by the “as-if”: In a surveillance culture, we must act, think and feel “as if” we are under surveillance.¹⁴ Complementary to this ‘spectacular’ or ‘semiotic’ dimension of surveillance, there is also *a performative dimension* that cultural studies must analyze. People perform in surveillance situations in order to be able to go unnoticed and ‘pass’ (at airport security checks), as Lyon and others have pointed out (Lyon 34–36).¹⁵ No wonder activist groups like the *New York Surveillance Camera Players* use public performances and other artistic instruments in order to draw attention to the cameras in the street.

5 Recommendations for Further Reading

A growing number of publications on surveillance is of potential interest to scholars of humanities and cultural studies. Only a selection of them can be mentioned here. I recommend John McGrath’s *Loving Big Brother: Performance, Privacy, and Surveillance Space* as a groundbreaking work in the field of performance studies.¹⁶

As McGrath sets forth, no surveillance technology can determine people’s attitudes and actions towards it: it can provoke weary obedience as well as fierce resistance, indifference as well as playful reactions. In a historical perspective, David Rosen and Aaron Santesso have examined the ways that literature and surveillance have developed together as distinctly modern practices fostering notions of selfhood and the individual.¹⁷ In the field of film studies, Catherine Zimmer and J. Macgregor Wise have both published highly interesting insights into the relations (and indeed entanglements) between surveillance and cinema.¹⁸ Both contend that cinema and surveillance share affinities that cannot be explained by a model of representation alone. In the field of art, the catalogue for the 2002 exhibition at the ZKM Karlsruhe *CTRL [Space]: Rhetorics of surveillance from Bentham to Big Brother* is still among the best places to start.¹⁹

Endnotes

- ¹ For an introduction into the field, see David Lyon, Kevin D. Haggerty, and Kirstie Ball, eds., *Routledge Handbook of Surveillance Studies* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2012).
- ² Torin Monahan, “Surveillance as Cultural Practice,” in *The Sociological Quarterly* 52.4 (2011), 495–508, <<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1533-8525.2011.01216.x>>.
- ³ David Lyon, *The Culture of Surveillance. Watching as a Way of Life* (Cambridge: Wiley, 2018).

- 4 The Surveillance Studies Network: “An Introduction to the Surveillance Society.” <http://www.surveillance-studies.net/?page_id=119>.
- 5 David Lyon, “Surveillance, Security and Social Sorting,” in *International Criminal Justice Review* 17.3 (2007), 161–170. <<https://doi.org/10.1177/1057567707306643>>.
- 6 I am of course thinking here of the much discussed “privacy paradox”: While many people claim to be concerned about protecting their privacy online, they continue to behave as if they were not.
- 7 For more on music and surveillance, see Gary Marx, “Soul Train: The New Surveillance in Popular Music,” additional online material for Gary Marx, *Windows into the Soul. Surveillance and Society in an Age of High Technology* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2016), <<https://www.press.uchicago.edu/sites/marx/index.html>>.
- 8 Dietmar Kammerer, *Bilder der Überwachung* (Frankfurt, Main: Suhrkamp, 2008).
- 9 See the documentary *Pre-Crime*, dir. Monika Hielscher and Matthias Heeder (Berlin: Kloos&Co. Medien GmbH, 2017).
- 10 Nicole Starosielski, *The Undersea Network. Sign, Storage, Transmission* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015).
- 11 Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish. The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Random House, 1975), 217.
- 12 This argument is behind my *Bilder der Überwachung*, 2008. For a detailed discussion of Foucault and the panopticon see pp. 115–124.
- 13 See Wikipedia, “Security theatre,” <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Security_theater>.
- 14 Sun-ha Hong, “Subjunctive and Interpassive ‘Knowing’ in the Surveillance Society,” in *Media and Communication* 3.2 (2015): 63–76. <<https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v3i2.279>>.
- 15 For more on theatre, performance, and surveillance, see John Edward McGrath, *Loving Big Brother. Performance, Privacy, and Surveillance Space* (London et al.: Routledge, 2004), as well as Elise Morrison, *Discipline and Desire* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2016) and James M. Harding, *Performance, Transparency, and the Cultures of Surveillance*, (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2018).
- 16 McGrath, *Loving Big Brother*, 2004.
- 17 David Rosen and Aaron Santesso, *The Watchman in Pieces. Surveillance, Literature, and Liberal Personhood* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013).
- 18 Catherine Zimmer, *Surveillance Cinema. Postmillennial Pop* (New York: New York University Press, 2015); J. Macgregor Wise, *Surveillance and Film* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016). See also Paula Albuquerque: *Webcam as an Emerging Cinematic Medium* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018).
- 19 Thomas Y. Levin, Ursula Frohne, and Peter Weibel, eds., *CTRL [Space]: Rhetorics of Surveillance from Bentham to Big Brother* (Karlsruhe: ZKM et al., 2002).