

CONTRIBUTIONS TO ENGLISH  
AND AMERICAN LITERARY STUDIES 3

Florian Zappe/Andrew S. Gross (eds.)

# Surveillance | Society | Culture



PETER LANG

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What only a few decades ago would have been considered a totalitarian nightmare seems to have become reality: Surveillance practices and technologies have infiltrated all aspects of our lives, forcing us to reconsider established notions of privacy, subjectivity, and the status of the individual in society. The United States is central to contemporary concerns about surveillance. American companies are at the forefront of developing surveillance technologies; and government agencies, in the name of security and law and order, are monitoring our words and actions more than ever before. This book brings together an interdisciplinary group of scholars to explore the implications of what many consider to be a far-reaching social, political, and cultural transformation.

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# CONTRIBUTIONS TO ENGLISH AND AMERICAN LITERARY STUDIES (CEALS)

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Florian Zappe and Andrew S. Gross

## Introduction

On October 11, 1986, the German daily *die tageszeitung* ran a short article entitled “No Such Agency,” written by the iconic media theorist Friedrich Kittler. Initially commissioned as a review of the German translation of James Bamford’s investigative bestseller *Puzzle Palace: Inside the National Security Agency, America’s Most Secret Intelligence Organization* (1982), Kittler’s text provided a concise yet striking reflection about the impact of the digital revolution—still in its infancy at that time—on the everyday practices of the intelligence business. With unabashed fascination, Kittler describes the National Security Agency, then largely obscure to the general public, as a highly efficient cloak-and-dagger force operating in the shadow of smaller but more glamorous agencies:

The National Security Agency—the USA’s surveillance institution—is the only one among all government agencies and intelligence service bureaucracies enjoying the right to deny its own existence. A secret squared prevents information squared, as president Truman decreed in 1952. ‘No Such Agency’ or ‘Never Say Anything’ are just two of the decryptions of the acronym NSA (not lacking intra-agency humor).

An organisation with 70,000 people surveilling—cautiously estimated—approximately every thousandth telecommunication message on the planet with spy satellites or radio relay systems, and using Platform, a network of 52 globally linked computer systems, to automatically decipher, store and evaluate them, leaves public relations to the CIA and its 4000 agents. (Kittler)

Now, thirty years later, in the post-Snowden era, the thought of the NSA monitoring merely a tiny fraction of the entirety of global communication seems like a lost Eden of privacy. The dizzying development of surveillance technologies has turned Kittler’s prediction that “one day, those 99.9% of the data flow that still run past the NSA might become graspable and evaluable” into an uncanny reality (Kittler).

What Kittler could not foresee was that surveillance would go far beyond the comprehensive interception of global communication by a governmental agency. Given the accumulation and commercialization of personal data by private companies—aided by advances in digital data

mining, biometrics, and social network exhibitionism—it is hard to dispute the claim that we have grown accustomed to living in what sociologist David Lyon calls a *surveillance society*. What the liberal-humanist consensus in Western democracies once considered a totalitarian nightmare has now become reality: surveillance practices and technologies have infiltrated all aspects of our lives and caused fundamental shifts in established notions of privacy and subjectivity, thus altering the status of the individual within the social realm.

Affecting issues of security, power, technology, economy, social control, and individuality, surveillance is a topic of extreme social, political, and ethical ambivalence. Shean P. Hier and Joshua Greenberg aptly note that today

[s]urveillance functions ambiguously in everyday life to enable efficiency, convenience and security while simultaneously constraining the opportunities and life chances of individuals and social groups with shared characteristics—be they economic, sexual, radical, geographic or cultural. The ambiguous nature of surveillance also facilitates the penetration of information and data gathering/storage systems into the deeper recesses of everyday life, and the pervasiveness of surveillance systems, although put in place to increase safety and provide security, tends to generate greater levels of insecurity, anxiety and fear. (5)

Defenders of surveillance justify it as a means of providing security. Detractors point out that it produces the opposite: insecurity and fear. For half a century, Orwell's Big Brother has symbolized this fear. Personifying the power beyond the gaze, Big Brother represented a clearly locatable, hierarchical and oppressive surveillance apparatus looking down on 'little brothers,' or citizens, from above. However, the ubiquitous dispersion of contemporary surveillance seems to have rendered Big Brother obsolete. Nowadays, as Garrett Stewart remarks,

the onetime etymon of the verb *survey* (the sighting of *sur-veiller*) has itself become, half a millennium after its introduction into English, a nearly dead metaphor. Monitoring is no longer necessarily rooted in things *over-seen*, *super-vised*. The new idea of surveillance taps a generalized source of anxiety about what can instead be intercepted in its coded digital form, mined, tabulated, aggregated. Privacy has found new ways to be violated, both by military-industrial and by corporate prying, all eyes aside. (xi)

Visual technology, such as the two-way telescreen that Orwell foresaw as an immanent invention, can seem almost quaint in the age of digital

data mining. In 1984, Orwell's protagonist learns that Big Brother isn't an actual person doing the watching, but merely an image concealing a group of governing elites. Now even images and watching seem outdated.

Surveillance, in other words, has gone beyond the limits of the visual—and for that matter beyond the audio and the graphic. Its impact and etiology also extend beyond the traditional realm of politics and the boundaries of the nation state. As a result, the critical discussion has had to move beyond the boundaries of established disciplines. Surveillance Studies—a broad interdisciplinary web of research perspectives and methodologies rather than a clear-cut academic discipline—tries to assess the complexities of surveillance from a variety of angles. However, the field is, as David Rosen and Aaron Santesso have argued,

at once burgeoning and strangely narrow in focus. [...] This narrowness is partly methodological, a result of the way the field has constituted itself: it is dominated by a small number of disciplines, pretty much the disciplines one would expect. Political science, communication theory, and sociology are all well represented, but the dominant player, with the deepest institutional support, is legal studies. (2–3)

The usual disciplinary suspects try to respond to a rapidly changing situation, but they bring with them a set of fairly stable methodological perspectives and concerns. One emphasis has been on questions of legality, with scholars exploring the impact of surveillance on political freedom. Other scholars focus on grassroots resistance movements, such as recent attempts to turn the technology of surveillance against the police—a technique known as “sousveillance” or watching from below. Still others look at corporate data mining and the widespread public enthusiasm for social media, noting that “the fear of disclosure has been stifled by the joy of being noticed” (Bauman and Lyon 23).

This volume, which consists of selected papers from the Surveillance|Society|Culture conference held at the University of Göttingen in 2016, attempts to widen the scope of surveillance studies by bringing philosophy and cultural studies into the discussion. This approach is not unprecedented. Zygmunt Bauman and David Lyon's *Liquid Surveillance*, for instance, draws on canonical works such as *Hamlet* to illustrate how the “watch” has moved from the walls of the city into the interior of society since early modern times (103). Culture, analyzed in this way, can

serve as a benchmark for historical change. Looking at contemporary art, Dietmar Kammerer's *Bilder der Überwachung* argues that effectiveness of surveillance depends on representations of surveillance: even images supposed to be critical, such as graffiti parodying CCTV cameras at work, add to the general impression of being watched (10). This type of approach measures the ideological significance of culture in terms of compliance and resistance. The essays that make up this volume build on these and other important predecessors, analyzing developments in surveillance society by reflecting on surveillance culture. They explore how cultural artifacts represent and help bring about historical change; how art shapes and reflects personal attitudes and political ideologies; how specific cultural practices are involved in forming group and individual identities. The essays also demonstrate how cultural forms interact with specific media, such as computers and cameras, in order to alter information flows, challenge dominant perspectives, and negotiate the space of the private within an increasingly monitored public sphere.

In analyzing the relation between culture and society, our contributors build on decades of work in surveillance studies. They also demonstrate how cultural and philosophical approaches can provide insight into the development of surveillance studies as a field. The staying power of specific narratives and metaphors, for instance, can reveal a lot about critical biases and ongoing concerns. If Big Brother has, in a sense, been exorcised from surveillance technology, his ghost continues to haunt the way surveillance is studied and imagined. With good reason. Government surveillance continues to have an enormous impact on, for instance, international mobility, especially since 9/11. The persistence of Big Brother in the literature registers this, but it also serves as a reminder that surveillance studies emerged from the Cold War critique of totalitarianism. There was a time when it seemed that the worst excesses of surveillance—spies and denunciation—were committed by the enemies of open society. Some midcentury commentators raised concerns, especially during the McCarthy trials, that liberal freedoms were being sacrificed in the fight to defend liberal democracy. However, there was nevertheless a broad Cold War consensus that open society had to be defended against its enemies, and that it was culture's job to reaffirm the importance of individual freedom (Gross 11).

Liberal concerns about individual freedoms are not outdated. Debates about ‘wiretapping,’ face recognition software, and the presence of CCTV cameras are still current in the United States, Germany, and elsewhere. However, the humanist-liberal paradigm tends to reduce surveillance to a political issue within the larger context of human rights, characterizing it as an undemocratic, oppressive technique used by totalitarian regimes to silence oppositional voices. After a few decades of the Cold War, some scholars began to question this ‘us vs. them’ characterization. Those aligning themselves with the New Left, often through their experiences in the Civil Rights Movement and in protests against the Vietnam War, began to see liberalism as a version of totalitarianism, or at least as existing on a continuum with it. Even the most outspoken defenders of open society began to note that surveillance was engrained in the everyday life of liberal democracy. Sometimes it was deployed by officials trying to stymie protests, but it also operated through practices that did not seem coercive, at least not on the surface. Surveillance, in other words, could no longer be exclusively characterized as a ‘top-down’ system of oppression benefiting the holders of political power. Rather, it was an implicit feature of the structures of liberal society, which maintained their hegemony by encouraging citizens to monitor themselves.

This shift in critical perspective involved a move away from Big Brother to the Panopticon—a new metaphor that was actually an old name for a prison that was never built. Michel Foucault saw Jeremy Bentham’s plan for a ‘better’ institution that would force inmates to behave by making them feel like they were always being watched, as a blueprint for modern society. All modern institutions, from penitentiaries to schools, train inmates to monitor themselves. The implication was that open society was actually a more effective, because more hidden, system of total control. This argument resonated with scholars who were already suspicious of the lengths liberalism was willing to go to in defense of nominally liberal freedoms. However, it is Foucault who deserves credit for showing that the polymorphic practice of surveillance is not necessarily a totalitarian aberration of but a characteristic feature implicit in *every* variation of modernity. It is not Big Brother who is watching us but a multiplicity of, as Foucault famously phrased it in *Discipline and Punish*, “centres of observation disseminated throughout society” (208).

This is a description of disciplinary society. It is important to note, however, that discipline not only controls people but in some sense manufactures them. Gilles Deleuze begins his famous “Postscript on the Societies of Control” with a summary of Foucault’s account of subject formation, or the social production of individuals, as a series of passages through various institutions that offers no outside:

The individual never ceases passing from one closed environment to another, each having its own laws: first, the family; then the school (‘you are no longer in your family’); then the barracks (‘you are no longer in school’); then the factory; from time to time the hospital; possibly the prison, the preeminent instance of the enclosed environment. (3)

Within these “closed environments,” surveillance practices are not merely *oppressive* but *productive*, molding the individual according to the dominant norms of hegemonic culture. Surveillance, by this account, is not only a matter of other people watching us; it shapes identity by training us to look at ourselves in certain ways.

Though the Panopticon still plays an important role in surveillance studies, it too is obsolete. As Deleuze points out in his postscript, the transition from modernity to postmodernity leads to a severe crisis of normative institutions. In the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, “everyone knows that these institutions are finished, whatever the length of their expiration periods. It is only a matter of administering their last rites and of keeping people employed until the installation of the new forces knocking on the door. These are the *societies of control*, which are in the process of replacing the disciplinary societies” (3). The society of control is different from what Foucault called disciplinary society, and similar to Lyon’s surveillance society, in that modern “closed environments” are replaced by what Deleuze calls the “ultrarapid forms of free-floating control” (4). In this context, surveillance practices become detached from the institutions and even further dispersed within the socio-cultural realm, infiltrating more areas of private, public and professional interaction, where they perform more functions, serve an increasing number of masters, and utilize a broader variety of strategies and technologies to exert a more total (but not exactly totalitarian) influence on how we conduct our lives.

It is difficult to come up with a single metaphor to describe the complexity of surveillance in control society. The historical shift from discipline



to control calls for new theoretical perspectives going beyond the analytical limits of Big Brother and the Panopticon, though both remain important points of reference for contemporary scholars. The most prominent of these post-Foucauldian analytical concepts are Thomas Mathiesen's "synopticon," Zygmunt Bauman's "post-panopticon" (cf. Bauman 11) or, more recently, Siva Vaidhyanathan's "cryptopticon," in which, as he argues in his book *Googlization of Everything*, "we don't know all the ways in which we are being watched or profiled—we simply know that we are. And we don't regulate our behavior under the gaze of surveillance. Instead, we don't seem to care" (112). The post-panoptic theoretical shift tries to capture the moment when disciplinary institutions are supplemented—and sometimes supplanted by—over-sharing, consumerism, and indifference.

How to even talk about *surveillance* when people *voluntarily* share information about themselves? Sociologists have proposed various models for making sense of this complicity. Indeed, surveillance studies, as we understand it today, has strong roots in sociology, which early on grasped the post-Orwellian necessity to, as Gary T. Marx put it,

go beyond the association of surveillance only with spies, police, political abuses and the state. To do that required a comprehensive set of content-neutral concepts to rein in the rich variation and social and moral complexity, paradoxes and contradictions of the topic. Explanation and evaluation required a common language for the identification and measurement of surveillance's fundamental properties and contexts. (xxii)

But sociology's concentration on social structure, sometimes using quantitative and empirical methods, does not seem fully adequate to the task of providing the "common language" Marx calls for. David Lyon suggests that one way of rendering the polymorphous and elusive socio-cultural phenomenon of surveillance tangible is by analyzing its representation(s) in popular culture and the arts:

While surveillance offers popular culture some of its dominant themes, our experience of surveillance is itself shaped in part by popular culture. Thus, on the one hand, we have to examine what sorts of surveillance are portrayed in novels, films, song lyrics and other media, and how these may interact with extraordinary or everyday kinds of surveillance, with what consequences; and, on the other, it is necessary to look at how popular culture influences surveillance. (141–42)

Cultural artifacts can serve as second order observations which, in the Luhmannian sense, observe “only *how* others observe” (Luhmann 62). Thus their analysis and interpretations can help us to understand the apparatuses, conditions, dynamics, ideologies, and above all the experiences characteristic of surveillance society.

But there is also a flip side. To the same extent that these works have the potential to serve as critical reflections on or even creative forms of resistance against surveillance systems, they can also trick us into complicity. According to Lyon,

[s]tudying popular culture may help us learn about surveillance in more than one sense. On the one hand, insights into the inner workings of surveillance may be gleaned from popular culture. [...] On the other, it is worth investigating how popular culture may facilitate further surveillance. It is clearly a mistake to assume that the imaginative world of film or TV exists in an entirely separate realm from everyday reality. They feed of and inform each other increasingly in a media-saturated environment. In the end, the efficacy of surveillance measures themselves may depend in part on how they are understood by their subjects, which by any measure must relate in some ways to popular culture. (157–58)

With this in mind, any comprehensive discussion of surveillance will have to account for the culture of surveillance, i.e. the way novels, films, and others forms of art comment on, subvert but also interact with or legitimize watching, divulging, and being watched.

This volume therefore aims at building a bridge between cultural studies and surveillance studies. The contributors have various backgrounds: some in philosophy, others in literary and cultural studies, in law and in media theory, but all of them build on work in surveillance studies to explore the cultural significance of watching and data mining. The common denominator is their concern with questions of signification, or what the ‘view’ in surveillance—from above, below, and all sides—means. The common assumption is that it means more than data. Surveillance tells a story, or a number of stories with their own narrative structures, images, points of view, and characters. The essays are grouped to explore how writers, artists, activists, and even disciplines interpret these stories in different but, we hope, complimentary ways.

The first three contributions explore some of the ethical implications of surveillance, or what being watched means in terms of how individuals see others and themselves. Bernhard H. F. Taureck’s contribution,

“Surveillance – A Complex Relationship,” defines surveillance as an asymmetrical relation between watcher and watched. Though privilege of perspective makes the watcher seem more powerful, there are always possibilities of resistance. This is because the power of watching is to some degree a myth. Taureck argues this point by turning to a pre-Socratic fragment that suggests the concept of an all-seeing deity was invented to make people behave. Actual watchers hide behind this god-like mask of mythic invulnerability, but there are always ways to use their methods against them and challenge their perspective. To illustrate this Taureck turns to the play-within-the-play in *Hamlet*, which in his reading demonstrates how art can be re-purposed to watch the watcher. The essay concludes with an analysis of Godard’s *Alphaville*, a film that demonstrates the vulnerability of a seemingly all-powerful supercomputer at the dawn of the digital age. Taureck sees Godard as the framer of a counter-myth to the all-seeing deity, one that helps direct our attention to the number of recent cases in which the information and tools monopolized by the surveillance apparatus have actually been leaked. Myth can counter myth, and computer technology can be used to subvert computer-based surveillance, but what are the ethical implications of, say, leaking private information or spreading dangerous software? After outlining criteria that might be used to address this question, the essay leaves the answer deliberately open.

Florian Zappe’s “Gazing Back at the Monster” offers a partial answer by exploring how individual citizens use tools of surveillance to counter the technological monopoly of governments and corporations and reestablish a kind of equilibrium between watching and being watched. His subject is a practice that goes by the name of “sousveillance,” or watching from below, which has intersected with the burgeoning lifelogging movement in an attempt to use self-monitoring technologies, such as smart phones and GPS devices, to take ownership of personal data. The gambit is that lifeloggers can challenge surveillance by offering a complete record of where they have been and what they have done, while at the same time documenting how governments and corporations treat their citizens and customers. Zappe is sympathetic with the cause but skeptical of its tactics, suggesting that sousveillance only increases the overall intensity of monitoring in the name of protecting a humanist individual that technology may have already rendered obsolete. He calls, instead, for a critical

posthumanism that thinks about subjectivity in networked terms, rather than assuming that data can be private as opposed to public.

Bärbel Harju's "Too Much Information: Self-Monitoring and Confessional Culture" takes as its starting point the much-discussed "privacy paradox" touched upon in Zappe's essay: while many people seem to fear that their private information is not secure, they nevertheless display a certain degree of negligence in sharing that information through social media. Contemporary thinkers—and Harju cites a number of them—tend to be critical of this new form of "confessional society." However, she cautions us against judging too quickly. Confession, she points out, has a long history in Western culture. The genealogy she provides begins with the invention of the confessional in the 13<sup>th</sup>-century, extends through Puritan practices of self-examination and social shaming, Enlightenment autobiography, 20<sup>th</sup>-century therapy, and culminates in the United States Supreme Court's 1965 landmark decision in *Griswold v. Connecticut*, which established a general right to privacy precisely when supermarkets were being flooded with gossip tabloids. There is a sense in which culture has always been confessional and confession has always been contested. Confession can be politically progressive, for instance when it offers members of groups typically excluded from public discussion, such as women and African Americans, the possibility to share their personal experiences and make them political. Confession is also not always as revelatory as it seems, for instance when talk show guests perform for the camera. Confession can even be used to carve out spaces of relative autonomy. In this connection, Harju points to media artist and lifelogger Hasan Elahi who, as part of his "Tracking Transience – The Orwell Project" uploads all of his movements onto a website in order to overwhelm surveillance agencies with too much information. With these various examples in mind, Harju urges us not to be too quick in our condemnation of confessional culture. The boundaries between public and private have always been shifting, and confession is one way to negotiate their relation without necessarily abandoning privacy altogether.

The ethical essays look to culture—and activism—for ideas about how to bolster the agency of those who feel like they are being watched. The next four essays approach *form*—the examples are novels and rap songs and videos—as an agent in its own right, challenging culturally

dominant patterns of perception and carving personal narratives out of the sheer quantity of impersonal information. Felix Haase's "Death by Data: Identification and Dataveillance in Gary Shteyngart's *Super Sad True Love Story*," turns to a recent dystopian fiction about rankings, dataveillance, and the numerical classification of identities. In Shteyngart's nightmare world of the near future, government oppression is only part of the story. Another threat comes from surveillance that is commercialized, social, and—in ways already touched upon in Harju's and Zappe's essays—voluntary. Shteyngart's protagonist Lenny sees data-management as a way to manage all contingency, up to and including mortality. However, a love affair teaches him the superiority of human emotions over numbers, even when it ends badly. Haase points out that it is hardly surprising that a novel would endorse narrative over data as a way to come to terms with existential problems. However, this literary endorsement of literature is coupled with a critique of a corporatized America, which has become the home of global capital but not of "low net-worth individuals." Monetized surveillance, in this assessment, eviscerates some of the foundational American myths. Lenny ends up moving to Italy, suggesting that there is no way out of the downward spiral of monetization and surveillance, except perhaps high art in the European tradition.

Birgit Däwes's "Flickers of Vision: Surveillance and the Uncertainty Paradigm in Dave Eggers's *The Circle*" analyzes another dystopian vision of the near future. Eggers's novel is perhaps the most well-known attempt to dramatize the dangers of a powerful, social media corporation modeled on Facebook or Google. Däwes shows how Eggers' naïve, do-gooder protagonist is a vehicle for his critique of our contemporary faith in technology. As Mae Holland embraces the progressive philosophy of a company that demands her complete loyalty, the readers learn how social media exploits our best impulses—say the desire to protect children and the environment—to colonize the private spheres of ordinary citizens, interfere in the democratic process, and absorb the competition. The novel is scathing in its criticism, but Däwes argues that it goes too far in its efforts to debunk big data. The narrative point-of-view uncannily mirrors the all-knowing ambition of algorithms, implying that literary representation can provide the link between observation and knowledge that surveillance only promises. The melodramatic moralism—narrative

omniscience is good, corporate control is bad—must be seen as a literary failure, but the failure itself is instructive. Däwes argues that the novel, in its smugness, demonstrates the pervasiveness of the surveillance ethos it seeks to criticize.

Andrew Gross is more sanguine in his analysis of another novel (or novella) of the near future. “The *Black Box* of Humanism: Surveillance, the Spy Narrative, and Literary Form” analyzes Jennifer Egan’s *Black Box*, which beginning in May 2012 was published as a series of 60 tweets by the *New Yorker*, which then published the story in print form. Gross argues that the novella deliberately makes use of the literary conventions provided by the spy narrative, to spy on the electronic medium of its transmission. It’s not that the story reveals something we didn’t know about Twitter. Rather, it re-characterizes data transmission as an adventure tale, stressing the romance plot and the physical aspects of adventure, in order to carve out a space within the flow of digital transmissions for another physical form: the book. The novella’s clandestine mission is actually the old one of literary humanism. Indeed, the history of the novel, when considered from the perspective of the spy story, can be described as attempt to carve out private spaces in the public sphere. Literature does not offer a platform from which to spy on power in the sense of gathering information. Rather, Gross argues that the novel offers a shelter for subjectivity in the midst of data transparency. Narratives distinguish themselves from information through their manipulation of perspective, and perspective—even in its published form—can remain remarkably clandestine.

Silke Järvenpää explores the way form can serve as a vehicle for protest in “Rap vs. Big Brother: The Conscious and the Comical.” She argues that rap artists have always been subject to police surveillance, which is why in the 1980s groups started taking names like Public Enemy and Niggaz with Attitude in order to expose the practice of police profiling. Contemporary rap artists can draw on this established idiom of resistance. Järvenpää’s subjects are Giordano Nanni and Hugo Farrant of the series *Juice Rap News*, a series of satires designed for YouTube, and specifically the episode “Big Brother is wwatching you”; and Shahid Buttari’s song “The NSA vs the USA,” which also features an accompanying video. Both songs reflect the efforts of critically informed performers (one has a PhD and a background in critical theory, another is both an MC and a constitutional lawyer), but their styles differ

radically. *Juice Rap News* is a satirical news program that features “guests,” i.e. the performers in costume, who rap their points of view. The example she points to is a pro-surveillance general who actually raps like a *gangsta*, thus suggesting that the true criminals are on the side of the state. Buttar sets a serious protest song to a meditative rap and house track. Järvenpää asks if these performers may be appropriating an African American tradition for their own purposes (Nanni and Farrant are Australian), concluding, on the contrary, that given the current state of surveillance, with the gradual erosion of civil rights, “the ghetto and the ivory tower are equally at risk.”

Järvenpää’s rap artists, who maintain strong digital presences on the web, serve as a transition to the three essays that make up the third group in the collection. These essays explore the shifting boundaries between public and private spheres through a variety of visual cultural practices and artifacts. Hugh Davies explores the evolution of what might be called a confessional aesthetic in “The Art of Surveillance: Surveying the Lives and Works of Andy Warhol and Ai Weiwei.” Davies pairs Warhol and Ai because their work actually embraces the surveillance technologies of their respective eras. Warhol was obsessed with celebrity culture, and his fear of not being watched (by the public) complimented the Cold War nightmare of being watched (by Big Brother). Public admiration and governmental scrutiny are, in a sense, two sides of the same coin. Both sides are invoked in Warhol’s 1966 film *Outer and Inner Space*, featuring Edie Sedgwick observing images of herself while she herself is observed. Warhol created such moments through a kind of art that anticipates the self-exposure of social media. Ai actually *is* the target of state surveillance, and he uses social media to transform that surveillance into conceptual art. Embracing the shallowness of “clicktivism,” Ai uses Instagram and Twitter to juxtapose selfies with celebrities and images of social activism. This, in some ways, preempts the Chinese government, which is busy tracking his activities all the time. Warhol fantasized about being watched, Ai cannot escape the official gaze. His art, according to Davies, marks a kind of “democratization of surveillance,” where Ai watches his watchers by watching himself, leaving it to history to sort out the implications.

As Marek Paryż points out, Hollywood has explored the implications of watching and being watched through one of its favorite genres. His contribution, “Paranoia and Surveillance in Andrew Dominik’s Film *The*

*Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford,*” analyzes a Western that represents the West at a moment of transition. In this version of the Jesse James myth, the protagonist is paranoid that he will be betrayed by former friends, and with good reason: the spies and informers are all around him. They do the bidding of the Pinkerton Detective Agency, which expanded with the railroads and actually did target James in the 1870s. The film dramatizes the Agency’s surveillance perspective through a voiceover narration that seems to know everything, and provides for narrative continuity, but also diverges in significant ways from what is pictured on the screen. This trouble at the formal level dramatizes how the Western positions itself as more than a historical study: it becomes a psychological testimony to the costs of living in a surveillance society. Paryż argues that Dominik’s film actually draws on the conventions of noir, which traditionally “emphasizes the hero’s exposure to a kind of disembodied controlling gaze.” It is this gaze that ultimately causes Jesse James to lose control of his own image—and his own identity—so that death becomes an anticlimax to surveillance.

Caren Myers Morrison’s “Mythologies of Violence in American Police Videos” discusses contemporary efforts to turn the gaze back on the police. Her subject is the circulation of videos of police brutality on the Internet. Morrison argues that while such videos are sometimes posted by activists as a form of protest, they are often filmed by the police themselves. The perspective serves to rationalize police violence, encouraging viewers to identify with the aggressor rather than the victim in the same way that viewers of the Western are encouraged to identify with the “good guy” wielding a gun. A recent example is provided by *Scott v. Harris*, a case tried before the Supreme Court, which involved police who rammed the vehicle of a suspect, crippling him for life. Justice Antonin Scalia compared the footage of the chase, captured by the police car’s dashboard camera, to “a Hollywood-style car chase of the most frightening sort.” Morrison cites other examples, pointing, for instance, to the parallels between body camera footage and first-person shooter games, but they all lead to one incontrovertible point: footage shot from the perspective of the police encourages the audience—in this case the judges—to identify with the police. Morrison argues that this traditional narrative needs to be corrected with the counter-narrative of people acting decently rather than violently—or maybe we simply shouldn’t be watching.



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# I. Agencies



Bernhard H. F. Taureck

## Surveillance – A Complex Relationship

*“Those who surrender freedom for security will not have, nor do they deserve, either one.” — Benjamin Franklin*

**Abstract:** This essay attempts to draw conclusions from different types of surveillance. It begins with ancient surveillance in one fragment of Critias the Sophist. Considerations on Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* and on the film *Alphaville* from Godard will follow. The conclusions may seem to be disastrous: The non-symmetrical power relations implicit in surveillance create structures that are vulnerable to blackmail. (1) Intelligence-based surveillance needs Internet insecurity to monitor populations in order to protect them from evil elements. (2) Knowledge of Internet insecurity can be and has been leaked. (3) Evil elements profit from Internet insecurity in order to attack the private economy and public infrastructure.

**Keywords:** Symmetric, asymmetric and non-symmetric surveillance; Sophism; Critias; Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*; Godard’s *Alphaville*; systemic consequences of surveillance; social security

Surveillance is generally practiced and regarded as an asymmetrical relationship. Asymmetrical controls are structures of strict order which cannot be altered. The parent-child relation, for instance, is a traditional type of that kind. Children are children of parents and parents are parents of children in all possible contexts. Children can wish not to be children of their parents and parents may wish not to be parents of their children. None of them, however, can avoid this relationship.

Love (or even hate or envy) constitutes a different kind of relationship which appears to be symmetrical: Romeo loves Juliet and Juliet loves Romeo. But is love necessarily a symmetrical relation? Of course, it often happens to be. But there are a lot of ‘amours malheureux’ where love is not reciprocated by the beloved. Love therefore is not necessarily symmetrical. It constitutes a relationship of its own. It is neither symmetrical nor asymmetrical, it is *non-symmetrical*. In non-symmetrical relationships,

the structure of relationship may be formative but it is not binding. Non-symmetrical relationships offer a chance for freedom. Acting according to the structure of symmetry constitutes an act of freedom and is not a blind consequence of the structure itself as in asymmetrical relationships.

What are the consequences of these insights for the understanding of surveillance? In the case of parents and children, nobody can escape the relationship. But is surveillance inescapably asymmetrical in the same way? The question is the answer: Surveillance is not inescapably asymmetrical. Humans, in other words, are free to defy surveillance. If this is the case, one can speak of two opposing forces, the force of surveillance and the force of resistance, the former tending towards asymmetry and the latter tending to demonstrate that surveillance is a non-symmetrical social relation.

The following essay attempts to *understand these opposing forces at work*. In doing so, I do not start with obvious reflections upon the consequences of Snowden's revelations about intelligence-based global surveillance. I choose a different approach. I start with an interpretation of different *representations* of surveillance in order to *compare them with real surveillance*. Any choice of representations of surveillance remains arbitrary. To reduce this unavoidable arbitrariness, I select examples from three distinct historical periods; antiquity, early modernity and modernity.

## 1 The Critias Fragment: Constructing and Deconstructing Control

The Critias fragment, sometimes attributed to Plato's uncle, relates this story about the invention of the concept of surveillance:

[A]s the laws held [mortals] from deeds  
 Of open violence, but still such deeds  
 Were done in secret, – then, I think,  
 Some shrewd man first, a man in judgement wise,  
 Found for mortals the *fear of gods*,  
 Thereby to *frighten* the wicked should they  
 Even act or speak or scheme in secret.  
 Hence it was that he introduced the divine  
 Telling how the divinity enjoys endless life,  
 Hears and sees, and takes thought  
 And attends to things, and his nature is divine.

So that everything which mortals say is heard  
And everything done is visible.  
Even you plan in silence some evil deed  
It will *not be hidden from the gods*: for discernment  
Lies in them. So, speaking words like these,  
The sweetest teaching did he introduce,  
Concealing truth under untrue speech. (*Critias Fragment*, 9–26,  
emphasis mine)

This eye-opening text suggests that absolute surveillance originated as a myth. The point of the story is critical enlightenment. People were encouraged to believe that gods were watching them so that they would behave. This, however, was a delusion invented for the purposes of control. The wise inventor of human fear of the gods was “Concealing truth under untrue speech [*pseudeî kalýpsas ten alétheian lógoi*],” the “truth” being the fact that divine surveillance does not exist. The story is as simple as it is convincing. Humans left the state of nature, which was a state of force, when they began to believe that laws would bring punishment to wrongdoers.

That the gods had to be invented, however, suggests that surveillance is never complete. Penal law, at least as it is imagined in this fragment, admits both the possibility of leaks and the impossibility of perceiving all secret deeds. The step from nature to society did not bring perfection. Crime was not fully overcome. How therefore to prevent humans from breaking the law in secret? Critias’ question remains our question. We answer it partly by devising ethical systems, though there is no agreement about which ethical standards to apply; we answer the question partly through religion, though there is no consensus here either. In a moment I will turn to the issue of electronic surveillance, which I will argue derives its power from the same kind of mythical agency debunked by the Critias fragment. Any super-human agency—religious, ethical, or technical—depends on human consciousness, with its intrinsic fallibilities and limitations. The Critias fragment is historically interesting because it demonstrates a shift from traditional belief in divine surveillance and punishment. The gods did not invent humanity; rather gods were invented to prevent human criminality. This early European document of political surveillance probably tells us with a wink that the fear of an all-seeing god, which does not exist, is predicated on the impossibility of absolute surveillance.

In other words, the asymmetrical relation between all-seeing god and tractable humanity reveals a deeper non-symmetry of the sort that obtains in unrequited love. Absolute surveillance is a lie necessitated by the problem that people disobey laws in secret. The human capacity for refusal and resistance always exceeds the myth of total control. The Critias fragment deconstructs the relation of asymmetrical power by demonstrating its necessity. There is no manifest contradiction between surveillance and resistance, but there is a contradiction between the theological attributes of an all-knowing being and their fictional origin.

## 2 *Hamlet* and Early Modernity: The Tragic Antagonism between Surveillance and Resistance

*Hamlet*, the play, starts with an atmosphere of eerie uncertainty in the context of monitoring. The beginning “Who’s there?” is interpreted as “the first of the many anxious questions that establish the tone of uncertainty that runs through the play” (Gibson 5). I propose reading the uncertainty in relation to the new kind of surveillance created in Shakespeare’s time. What I am referring to is the secret service of Francis Walsingham, who, for the first time in history, shaped an international net of spies to protect Protestant government from that kind of Catholic assassinations Walsingham witnessed in France in 1572 when Huguenots were killed in the St. Bartholomew’s Day massacre. *Hamlet*, however, is more than simply a historical document. It is a literary reflection on the way historical phenomena shape social reality.

That *Hamlet* is concerned with surveillance is suggested by the plot: Hamlet is monitored by his uncle Claudius, the King, in three ways. First, Claudius and Polonius try to find out the cause of Hamlet’s apparent madness. For this purpose, they deploy Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and also Ophelia as disguised spies. In both cases surveillance is defined as seeing unseen (3.1.31–32). Second, after Hamlet’s unintended killing of Polonius, the King strengthens his control over Hamlet in order to put him to death in England. In this context, Claudius refers to “the present death of Hamlet” (4.3.64). Hamlet is far from being dead when Claudius makes this remark, but the King is anticipating his death. This suggests not only impatience but part of the inner logic of surveillance: Getting power



over future events before they happen. Third, another plot to kill Hamlet is carefully prepared by Claudius and Laertes. Their preparation depends on surveillance.

Interpreting *Hamlet* as a drama of surveillance, one observes both the asymmetry of power and the non-symmetrical structures of resistance. In the figure of Hamlet, the non-symmetrical distance from surveillance becomes productive. The protagonist, a target of surveillance by the King, exercises his freedom in an act of invention. The ghost of his father has revealed to him the eerie message that his father has been secretly murdered by the present King. But is this message true? And how to find out? Hamlet's invention is his famous play: "The play's the thing/Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the King" (2.2.50–51). "The play" is the famous play-within-the-play, which tells a story of a political murder analogous to Claudius' murder of his father. It is performed before the whole court. Hamlet's strategy might be understood as an act of counter-surveillance. If the King as a spectator shows any unusual behavior, Hamlet will have the evidence that Claudius is the real murderer of his father. What happens in the play-within-the-play? Apart from the meta-dramatical structure, I want to explore what this episode reveals about the relation of theatre to truth and theatre to surveillance.

The play-within-the-play enlarges the verifying realm of theatre, and by extension of art or fiction. Art is an act of freedom or invention, but it also becomes the measure of what does and does not exist. Another way to put this is that the play-within-a-play is an arrangement of the surveillance of surveillance. If Hamlet is the King's target, now the King becomes the target of Hamlet. All this is known and needs a complement: As a theatre performance, the play-within-a-play is grounded on the asymmetrical structure between the spectator and the play. The spectator perceives the play, but the play does not perceive the spectators. Actors, of course, often witness their audience, but accidentally, for they are performing the play. With Hamlet's addition, the spectator does not only perceive the play, but the play is equally perceiving the spectator. Hamlet is part of the play-within-a-play insofar as he acts as its director, continuously commenting on the action. With the presence of Hamlet, the play achieves the force of watching the watchers, especially the King. This unusual addition of a reversed asymmetry to the usual asymmetry of the theatre is Hamlet's

work of inventive freedom; it gets rid of surveillance by discovering a hidden truth. To be sure, if Hamlet is superior to the King, Claudius becomes superior to Hamlet by transforming surveillance into liquidation. *Hamlet* can be read as the first document of early modernity showing a *tragic* dimension of the two forces of surveillance and cultural resistance. There are other structures of mutual surveillance in Shakespeare (*As You Like It*, *The Taming of the Shrew*); but they are not tragic.

### 3 The Modern Picture in Godard's *Alphaville*: Satirical Demystification of Surveillance

Jean-Luc Godard's film *Alphaville*, from 1965, is a brilliant mixture of dystopia and film noir, providing us with a completely different image of surveillance compared to that of, for instance, Orwell's *1984*, which has become a standard reference in surveillance studies. In Godard's film we are in the modern setting of a world of comprehensive malevolent surveillance doing harm to humans in order to do harm. It is a world governed by a supercomputer controlling the behavior and attitudes of the citizens, prohibiting all emotions, feelings, poetry and the use of all *Why*-sentences by replacing them with sentences beginning *Because*. Whoever speaks of feelings is shot and discarded into a pool; these murders are witnessed by the Nazi professor von Braun, who constructed the supercomputer after being evicted from New York in 1964. The fantastic plot has von Braun on the brink of starting a war against other galaxies. He offers the visitor to Alphaville, Lemmy Caution, control of one of these galaxies. However, Lemmy, who is a private detective, shoots and kills von Braun in his violent struggle against surveillance. He falls in love with von Braun's daughter, teaches her the meaning of the word "love," and rescues her from the center of dehumanized surveillance.

The plot of *Alphaville* depends on the ancient gnostic division between a terrestrial, imperfect and a transcendent, perfect world. However, the film reverses the attributes of the two worlds, suggesting that the perfect order is not the world of light, but that of malevolent control. The imperfect world is the human world of feeling, poetry and resistance. We are told that in Alphaville "people have become slaves of probability." They are punished for statistical deviation; one citizen, for instance, is shot for

shouting, “Go straight towards what you love!” Another dies saying, “Listen to me, normal ones! We see a truth that you no longer see. A truth that says that the essence of man is love and faith, courage and tenderness, generosity and sacrifice. Everything else is an obstacle put on by your blind progress and ignorance!” The supercomputer 060 asks Lemmy Caution, “Do you know what turns darkness into light?” “Poetry,” Caution replies.

I want to argue that *Alphaville*, like *Hamlet*, uses art to expose the malevolence behind surveillance; it does so, like the *Critias* fragment, by showing that the asymmetrical power relationship built into the structure of surveillance is actually a myth. In this connection it is worth noting that the film does not make use of a science fiction setting but takes place in the Paris of 1965. This helps Godard make clear that the evil presented in *Alphaville* is happening in everyday life, including the loss of questions, poetry, and conscience. Nevertheless, the rowdy behavior of one detective with a pistol is sufficient to destroy the iron cage of seemingly complete social control. There is no powerful system behind totalitarian surveillance. Complete control is a myth. Godard’s message, however, is not simplistic. He shows that surveillance is not as asymmetrical as it appears to be. Surveillance can be demystified by replacing the myth of asymmetry with an equally powerful myth of symmetry, here embodied in the love affair between Lemmy and von Braun’s daughter. This standard plot device suggests a romance of equality, and it goes a step farther than *Hamlet*, which reveals the fact behind the fiction, by redressing that system in terms of symmetrical participation.

#### **4 The Three Representations of Surveillance Compared with Real, Intelligence-Based Surveillance**

It is instructive to contrast these three historical representations of complete surveillance with the reality of contemporary surveillance, which aspires to the total intelligence-based observation of the global population (cf. Taureck).

What does the contrast reveal? First, one observes the opposite of the situation described in *Critias*: While *Critias* suggests there is no divine control but only the fear of it, today many people are monitored without seeming to notice or care.

Second, if the possibility of a superhuman observer was fictional in *Critias* and remains fictional in religious beliefs, actually existing surveillance technology does seem to constitute a superhuman knowledge that functions as a substitute for divine government (cf. Taureck *Überwachungsdemokratie*).

Third, contemporary intelligence-based surveillance transforms two features of *Hamlet* and *Alphaville* into social reality: the anticipation of the future before it will happen and the killing of humans selected as targets.

Fourth, while surveillance interferes with the communicative behavior of the individuals in *Alphaville* and also in *Hamlet*, for instance when Polonius publicly censures the language of Hamlet's love letter to Ophelia (2.2.), real surveillance does not interfere with the citizen's private use of language. The citizens remain free in their intentions, behavior and in the choice of their linguistic expressions, though these expressions are increasingly vulnerable to being picked up by electronic filters.

Fifth, contemporary institutions of surveillance are not personalized as in *Hamlet* or *Alphaville*. They are therefore invisibly protected against attacks. *Alphaville* and *Hamlet* provide concrete representations of surveillance, while real surveillance appears to be more abstract.

It follows that contemporary surveillance differs from earlier representations. If intelligence-based surveillance anticipates behavior and allows for the targeting and violent elimination of suspects, it nevertheless diverges in significant ways from earlier literary representations of total control. I want to argue that these representations are still useful for demystifying the impression of total control, but at the same time it is important to pinpoint the source of the difference. One possibility is the historical emergence of classical liberalism and the way surveillance has changed in response to liberal ideals.

According to John Stuart Mill, liberalism is basically concerned with the question of "how to make the fitting adjustment between individual independence and social control" (20). Liberalism was deeply concerned with strengthening individual rights against governments. Liberalism sought the liberty of the citizens for the sake of liberty. The liberal view of Mill included the sentiment "power itself is illegitimate" (52). Concerning the United States of America, Mill was even convinced of the following:

let them be left without a government, every body of Americans is able to improvise one, and to carry on that or any public business with a sufficient amount of intelligence, order and decision. This is what every free people ought to be: and a people capable of this is certain to be free. (316)

This was published in 1859. The contemporary preoccupation with security obviously contradicts Mill's view of more than one-and-a-half centuries ago. Classical liberalism has given way to what I call a democracy of surveillance. A democracy of surveillance attempts to reconcile liberty and security. It is basically interested in making liberty depend upon government. A democracy of surveillance pays lip service to liberty in order to achieve governmental control and power. The question of the 'fitting' relationship has therefore to be replaced by a fitting dependence of individual liberty on intelligence-based (and therefore military) surveillance. If this is the case, there is a *dissonance* between liberalism and surveillance. How could it be possible to simultaneously have both: the violence of targeting citizens and the liberalism of not interfering in their free behavior? In my opinion, neither this dissonance between liberalism and surveillance nor the methods of contemporary surveillance have been adequately reflected upon.

Two arguments can be made to reconcile the dissonance between liberalism and surveillance. The weak argument runs as follows: If there is a dissonance between surveillance and liberalism, this does not vitally affect the political system. The political system protects its citizens by removing the dangerous elements from liberal society. I call this argument weak because the contradiction between the liberal treatment of citizens and the killing of 'bad guys' is obvious. One cannot kill in the name of liberalism without violating fundamental liberal ideals.

The stronger argument invokes the asymmetrical structure of intelligence-based surveillance as a necessary condition of freedom. To those who object that surveillance denies liberal freedom and leaves individuals vulnerable to arbitrary acts of state violence, defenders of surveillance may respond: "Absolutely not. The system controls free people. Surveillance of automatons would be senseless, for they will behave by following their programs. If one chooses to prevent an open society from harm and evil one needs to preserve its openness." Citizens are the objects of surveillance, and there is no surveillance of the system by the citizens.

The more surveillance is unfailingly executed and the more it happens in an abstract way, the more it can be judged as being unavoidable. This strong hypothesis emphasizes an inescapability of surveillance.

I want to finish by reflecting on a strong structural danger of the surveillance system. Surveillance presupposes access to the citizens. If the citizens were metaphysically closed as the monads in the metaphysics of Gottfried Leibniz, no intelligence service would ever be able to monitor them. But it is generally known that surveillance happens via a medium the citizens widely use, the Internet. The intelligence services' interest is that the citizens remain completely unprotected against surveillance. The insecurity of the medium is a fundamental condition of asymmetrical surveillance. All this may appear tautological. It is not. The insecurity of the net is the inconspicuous fact which sooner or later may turn out to be the Achilles heel of asymmetrical surveillance. The intelligence community profits from the insecurity of the Internet but they do not hold a monopoly on it. There could be others who use the insecurity in order to blackmail private individuals and the public.

In May 2017, criminals began to block computers used by hospitals in Great Britain, industry in France, political institutions in China and Russia, railways in Germany, and telecommunication in Spain. Victims were forced to pay the blackmailers to unlock their own computers. The criminals used an Internet insecurity created by the NSA. We are told by experts that this was only the beginning. Surveillance is supposed to be a means of protecting citizens, but it also increases the vulnerability of the whole social system.

How could this be possible? The non-symmetrical power relations implicit in surveillance create structures that are vulnerable to blackmail. (1) Intelligence-based surveillance needs Internet insecurity to monitor populations in order to protect them from evil elements. (2) Knowledge of Internet insecurity can be and has been leaked. (3) Evil elements profit from Internet insecurity in order to attack the private economy and public infrastructure. Therefore, the more (1) happens, the more difficult it becomes to prevent (3) from happening. But is not (2) the guilty party? For without leaking information about computer vulnerability, (3) would not happen. The three elements constitute a circle of destruction: Intelligence-based surveillance appears to be unable to prevent either (2) or (3) from

happening. Therefore, the NSA and other centers of surveillance are part of an vicious circle, which could lead to a catastrophic collapse of the electronic infrastructure.

There is, in fact, one core of the whole problem, number (2). To leak information about Internet insecurity from intelligence-based surveillance is an act of non-symmetrical freedom from surveillance. The motivation of leaking can be morally justified as an act of freedom against manipulation: non-symmetry, as I outlined above, is a valid response to asymmetry. At the same time, the non-symmetrical leaking of information can be used to do harm to masses of humans. (2) is therefore ambiguous, in moral terms, and constitutes the following dilemma: If one does not leak the intelligence-owned knowledge about Internet insecurity, one abets illegitimate, by which I mean illiberal, surveillance. If one does leak this knowledge, one opens the doors to evil elements who may wish to destroy civilization.

The Critias fragment deconstructs the myth of total surveillance, and *Alphaville* demystifies surveillance by showing its malevolent intent. However, the true ethical challenge is how to justify antagonism to surveillance and resistance. In *Hamlet*, the solution is tragic and involves the struggles of an individual. In our electronically shaped togetherness, the antagonism at issue could be disastrous, preventing our individual and collective possibilities to act.

But if all is an illusion? I like to answer with Woody Allen: “What if everything is an illusion and nothing exists? In that case, I definitely overpaid for my carpet” (10).

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Florian Zappe

# Gazing Back at the Monster – A Critical Posthumanist Intervention on Surveillance Culture, Sousveillance and the Lifelogged Self

*“‘Control’ is the name Burroughs proposes as a term for the new monster, one that Foucault recognizes as our immediate future.”  
—Gilles Deleuze, “Postscript on the Societies of Control”*

*“Anyone who fights with monsters should take care that he does not in the process become a monster. And if you gaze for long into an abyss, the abyss gazes back into you.”  
—Friedrich Nietzsche, Beyond Good and Evil*

Abstract: With the rapid development and increased proliferation of wearable computers and cameras during the past decade, the practice of lifelogging—the voluntary and comprehensive first-person recording and archiving of all data of everyday life by means of digital technology—has emerged as a phenomenon that poses significant challenges for a contemporary philosophy of the subject in the *conditio posthumana*. This chapter will reflect on a specific application of lifelogging practices and technologies and its effects on the position(s) of the subject in the context of our contemporary surveillance societies. Advocates of lifelogging—e.g. scientist and pioneering lifelogger Steve Mann—have argued that the active use of these technologies as tools for “sousveillance” might have the potential to shift the subject’s position within the network of ubiquitous surveillant gazes in the realm of the social. In their alleged ability to subvert the “hierarchy of the gazes” these strategies seem to hold a promise for empowerment, agency and resistance. This chapter scrutinizes this optimistic claim from the perspective of a *critical posthumanism* as defined by Stefan Herbrechter.

**Keywords:** Critical posthumanism; sousveillance; lifelogging; surveillance society

With the rapid development and increased proliferation of wearable computers, smart phones and watches, body cameras, GPS tracking devices and other network interfaces during the past two decades, the practice of lifelogging—the voluntary and comprehensive first-person recording and archiving of all data of everyday life by means of digital technology—has emerged as an increasingly widespread cultural technique. The technique is informed by and a reaction to a tension that is characteristic for our contemporary surveillance culture—the tension between techno-euphoric utopianism and techno-skeptical dystopianism.

Consequently, lifelogging has triggered a wide variety of assessments among cultural critics, scholars, journalists, artists and activists. Those leaning towards a skeptical position see these practices either—e.g. in the form of the Quantified Self Movement—as the latest fashion of neoliberalism’s paradigm of optimizing the self or, when tied to social media activities, as the ultimate triumph of a culture of surveillance in which the monitored voluntarily surrender the last remnants of the private sphere. Zygmunt Bauman, for example, warns that

teenagers equipped with portable electronic confessionals are but apprentices training and trained in the art of living in a confessional society—a society notorious for effacing the boundary that once separated the private from the public, for making public exposure of the private a public virtue and obligation, and for wiping out from public communication anything that resists being reduced to private confidences, together with those who refuse to confide them. (Bauman and Lyon 30)

A cautionary tale such as Dave Eggers’s programmatic yet highly successful dystopian novel *The Circle* (2013) expresses the same uneasiness regarding an ideal of transparency turned towards the totalitarian with pseudo-Orwellian innuendo: “SECRETS ARE LIES – SHARING IS CARING – PRIVACY IS THEFT” (Eggers 303).

Others have approached the phenomenon with a less apocalyptic and more nuanced outlook. In 2015, the *Science Gallery* in Dublin organized an exhibition entitled LIFELOGGING and invited a group of international media artists to explore the practice creatively. In their installations, artworks and performances of the participating artists<sup>1</sup>—many of them

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1 For a full list see: <https://dublin.sciencegallery.com/lifelogging/lifeloggers/>

longtime practitioners of lifelogging themselves—critically scrutinized the effects of recording ‘oneself’ on oneself. The exhibition’s curatorial statement makes clear that the cultural ramifications involved in such practices go way beyond of what one might term ‘data narcissism’:

From critical to creative, LIFELOGGING asks ‘where do we go from here’ and questions whether we can record and analyse happiness, beauty and aesthetics the same way we record footsteps and heartbeats. This exhibition will explore novel methods for capturing data, for visualising, and for analysing the insights that new data affords us about ourselves and society. (Science Gallery)

The question “where do we go from here” is indeed a fundamental one. Its emergence clearly indicates the significant challenges the practice of lifelogging poses for a contemporary philosophy of the self in the context of the *conditio posthumana*—that particular ontological state of our time in which the boundaries of man and machine, mind and computer, knowledge and algorithm, empirical objectivity and personal subjectivity, and—in the end—data and ‘self’ become increasingly blurred. Against the backdrop of this open question, “the term ‘posthuman’ persists in eliciting conjectures on what remains or arises after the dissolution of the liberal humanist subject”; the posthuman subject, by contrast, is seen as “lacking the features of autonomy and agency central to the Enlightenment notion of the humanist subject, in other words, mastery over the self and mastery over the environment” (Bolton 14).<sup>2</sup> In the following essay, I will offer some critical reflections on a very particular application of lifelogging practices and technologies which aims at restoring this “mastery of the self and [...] the environment,” to borrow Michael S. Bolton’s words. Recently, a number of activists and scholars have argued that the *active* use of lifelogging technologies as tools for *sousveillance*—the practice of watching from below—might have the potential to at least partly reclaim that power of defining the ‘self’ by renegotiating the subject’s position within the network of ubiquitous surveillant gazes in the socio-cultural

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2 Michel Foucault has famously observed that “[t]here are two meanings of the word ‘subject’: subject to someone else by control and dependence; and tied to his own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge” (781). When I use the term in the context of this essay, I ask the reader to always keep both connotations in mind.

sphere. In their alleged ability to challenge and maybe even subvert the hierarchy of the gazes, lifelogging practices seem, according to their advocates, to hold a promise for empowerment, agency and, at times, even for resistance.

Recent developments in the theoretical field of critical posthumanism—especially Stefan Herbrechter’s highly insightful work—will provide a point of departure for my discussion of this claim. I call lifelogging and sousveillance *posthuman* practices because they use technology to interact with the world and to renegotiate established notions of individuality and subjectivity. Herbrechter cautions that terms such as “‘posthuman,’ ‘posthumanity’ and ‘posthumanization’ [are] politically, radically open” and he therefore calls for “a critical posthumanism that both takes the issue of the posthuman seriously and problematizes, contextualizes and historicizes it, at the same time” (*Posthumanism* 69). For him, *critical* posthumanism is primarily a *methodological* lens to analyze cultural phenomena typical of the posthuman condition. This use of the term differs from Pramod K. Nayar’s understanding of critical posthumanism as a “strand of posthumanism” that “rejects both human exceptionalism (the idea that humans are unique creatures) and human instrumentalism (that humans have a right to control the natural world)” (8). I will follow Herbrechter in this essay.

Herbrechter has noted the benefits of a critical posthumanist approach (primarily defined in methodological terms) for a reflection of the manifold roles surveillance plays in our contemporary situation:

The modern fight between surveillance and repression, on the one hand, and free use and empowerment, on the other hand, [...] continues in the new digital and virtualizing media. From gaming to information war, from new media art to electronic and digital media theory there is thus no question that the technological change provoked by virtualization, digitalization and intensified mediation is transforming, undermining and replacing the notion of the humanist subject. [...] A critical posthumanism thus acts as a ‘translator’ between two epistemes and critically illuminates both the humanist tradition, out of which these changes arise [...] as well as the processes and new forms of repression at work within the posthumanist regime. (*Posthumanism* 191)

Confronting contemporary surveillance culture, the question if the idea of using lifelogging as a form of sousveillance can indeed contribute to the empowerment of the subject has to be negotiated within this theoretical

framework. In other words, I will not invoke a form of posthumanism that rejects the centrality of the human subject but instead attempt to assess the impact of technologies on a subject, and a notion of subjectivity, that still bears some relation to the humanist tradition.

## 1 Towards an Equilibrium: The Cultural Logic of Sousveillance

The emergence of sousveillance as a theoretical concept as well as a technological practice is usually attributed to Steve Mann, a pioneering practitioner of wearable computing, who crafted a media image as “the world’s first cyborg” (Bilton) when he started to permanently wear data recording technology in the late 1970s. He developed his idea of mirroring surveillance from below over more than two decades of activism, research and publication activity, extending it from an initial engagement with visual panoptical monitoring to new forms of tracking in contemporary network culture. Mann is a particularly interesting starting point for a discussion of the individual’s potentials to exercise agency in contemporary surveillance culture because he himself seems to be the paradigmatic embodiment of Bolton’s understanding of the “posthuman subject” for which “agency entails various interfaces and exchanges with technologies that increasingly comprise the social environment” (Bolton 15). Mann considers science, activism and theory as his fields of action. Holding various engineering degrees including a PhD from MIT, he is a professor for Computer Engineering at the University of Toronto; his institutional web page states, “together with Marvin Minsky, ‘the father of AI (Artificial Intelligence),’ and Ray Kurzweil, [...] [Mann] created the new discipline of HI (Humanistic Intelligence)” (“Mann S”). But beside his career as a renowned scientist and inventor, Mann regards his habit of recording data about his everyday life via wearable technology as a form of performance (cf. Mann, “Existential Technology” 19; Mann, Nolan and Wellman 338–48), aligning himself with the tradition of the Situationist practice of the *détournement* (Mann, Nolan, and Wellman 333). As a lay philosopher, he frequently elaborates on the ethical, political and cultural implications of his use of technology.

Operating in the elusive twilight zone between techno-activism, political protest and media art performance, Mann targets the power dynamics of large, often transnational bureaucracies (one of his terms for governmental as well as corporate agents of surveillance) and their “increased use of surveillance and monitoring technologies [that] makes the individual more vulnerable to, and accountable to, these very organizations that are themselves becoming less accountable to the surveilled populace” (“Existential Technology” 19).

In this context, it is important to note that Mann continuously stresses that he does not identify as an anti-surveillance activist. On the contrary, he deplores popular culture’s role in focusing public discourse on “the dystopian aspects of the power politics of surveillance [which] often tend to overshadow the use of surveillance to achieve many necessary or useful infrastructural aspects in the ordering of modern citizens [...] and societies” and emphasizes that “wearing a camera” is not automatically to be equated with “‘shooting back’ against surveillance” (Mann and Ferenbok 19, 24). His nemesis is therefore neither surveillance nor our culture’s oversaturation with monitoring and tracking technologies per se, but rather “the asymmetrical nature of surveillance [that] is characteristic of an unbalanced power relationship” (Mann, Nolan, and Wellman 334). His formulaic understanding of surveillance is “organizations observing people” (332), a clear-cut top-down process in which “power favours the institutionalized agent, or agency, be it government or corporate or hybrid entities—‘coverments’ and ‘gorporations’” (Mann and Ferenbok 23).

Sousveillance is Mann’s name for the slingshot that the modern David can use to confront this corporate and governmental Goliath. The etymology of the term already explains its basic political assumptions: Whereas ‘surveillance’ literally translates as ‘to view from above,’ ‘sousveillance’ means ‘to view from below.’ Mann considers this bottom-up approach a feasible strategy to break what he calls a “monopoly” of surveillance, held by political power and corporate capital alike (“McVeillance”; see Mann, Nolan, and Wellman 332): “Sousveillance is a form of ‘reflectionism,’ a term [...] for a philosophy and procedures of using technology to mirror and confront bureaucratic organizations. Reflectionism holds up the mirror and asks the question: ‘Do you like what you see?’” (Mann, Nolan

and Wellman 333). The goal of this inversion of the gaze is to “restore balance to an otherwise one-sided surveillance society” (345).

To establish the equilibrium he calls “*equiveillance*” (Mann and Ferenbok 26), Mann invokes the emancipatory potential of technology in what he calls an ‘existential’ manner “as the technology of self-determination and mastery over our own destiny” (“*Existential Technology*” 19). For him—presenting himself here once more as an exemplary representative of posthuman subjectivity—technological know-how is the elementary precondition of viable agency. In real-life experiments—he refers to them as performances—with wearable *sousveillance* technology, he confronts representatives of surveillance organizations, giving them a taste of their own medicine. Mann describes his agenda as follows:

My performances and in(ter)ventions attempt to reflect the technological hypocrisies of large bureaucratic organizations on a moralistic (or humanistic) level by way of firsthand encounters with low-level ‘clerks,’ rather than the more traditional approach of writing letters to management, politicians or the like. By mirroring the structures of bureaucracy and complexity, I engage in a Reflectionist approach that I have found is, in many situations, surprisingly far more successful than writing letters to high-level officials. (“*Existential Technology*” 19)

In several case studies, Mann describes how his—mostly visible—use of cameras and other monitoring devices (to record geodata, bodily functions, etc.) in everyday situations has caused disruptions within the established hierarchy of the gaze and evoked surprising, somewhat unpredictable reactions from his environment, up to the point where he was physically attacked by employees of an ordinary fast food restaurant for wearing camera glasses (cf. “*McVeillance*,” Mann and Ferenbok 22). He offers such exemplary incidents as support for his argument about the paradoxical imbalance he sees at the heart of contemporary surveillance: It is taken for granted and generally accepted that individuals are the objects of surveillance technologies, both in the public (streets, train stations, airports, etc.) as well as the semi-public sphere (restaurants, malls, shops, gas stations, etc.). But the fact that an individual might employ the same technologies as the surveillers do to invert their gaze seems to be perceived as scandalous disturbance of the hierarchical structure of control. The harsh reactions triggered by this inversion can therefore, according

to Mann's understanding, be regarded as proof of sousveillance's potentiality to reclaim a certain level of subject(ive) sovereignty. It is exactly this empowering application of technology that Mann links to what he understands as existentialism:

Ironically, Existential Technology serves to empower the individual by disempowering the individual of responsibility for his or her own actions. Empowerment is achieved through self-demotion [...]. In the same way that large 'governments' (convergence of multiple governments corrupted by interests of global corporations) are empowered by being less accountable for their actions, existential technologies allow individuals to self-bureaucratize in order to achieve a balance of bureaucracy when dealing with government organizations. Existentialist theory holds that individuals are entirely free, thus entirely responsible. ("Existential Technology" 19)

This passage exemplifies one key problem in Mann's conceptualization of sousveillance: it is based on a sloganized use of philosophical terms. From the vantage point of a humanities scholar, one cannot avoid remarking that, for example, his understanding of existentialism is—like many of his other philosophical references—rather cursory.<sup>3</sup>

Mann's understanding of subjectivity, agency, sovereignty and individual freedom clearly echoes Sartre's notion that "there is no determinism man is free, man *is* freedom" (Sartre 34, emphasis in the original). He sees himself as a quasi-cyborgian individual, equipped with the technological possibility to invert the gaze from above and reassert this freedom: "Reflectionism becomes sousveillance when it is applied to individuals using tools to observe the organizational observer. Sousveillance focuses on enhancing the ability of people to access and collect data about their surveillance and to neutralize surveillance" (Mann, Nolan, and Wellman 333). This strategy is one example of how traditional humanism may respond to surveillance

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3 Loosely drawing on Walter Kaufmann's classic anthology *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre*, Mann defines existentialism "not a [as] philosophy but a label for several widely different revolts against traditional philosophy. The refusal to belong to any school of thought and a marked dissatisfaction with traditional philosophy as superficial form the heart of existentialism. Thus, in formulating the concept of Existential Technology, I deliberately try to avoid making it too clear upon exactly whose shoulders I am standing, yet in so doing, I follow the (existentialist) tradition of not following a tradition" (Mann, "Existential Technology" 19–20).



through the methodological emphasis mentioned by Herbrechter. Mann is one kind of posthumanist. Critical posthumanism offers a vantage point from which to assess the logic of ‘watching the watchers.’ Mann, it must be pointed out, neither states how *sousveillance* “neutralize[s]” surveillance nor how the first-person accumulation of personal data would win freedom back from the multiplicity of ‘governmental’ surveillance bureaucracies or how so-called self-bureaucracy would actually have a liberating effect (or even be compatible with the existentialist notion of responsibility).

If we accept Deleuze’s claim that “[t]here is no need to fear or hope, but only to look for new weapons” (4) in the societies of control, we must inevitably ask if the reflectionist approach can indeed be considered a viable weapon against this “monster” called control (Deleuze 4). According to Bauman and Lyon, in a control society “surveillance grows less like a tree—relatively rigid, in a vertical plane like the panopticon—and more like creeping weeds” (3). *Sousveillance* aims at growing in another direction, but it ultimately may knit the tangled web of gazes tighter rather than providing a line of flight from it.

Another concern involves the efficacy of *sousveillance* as a form of *détournement*. As we have seen, Mann repeatedly refers to this vanguard “tactic of appropriating tools of social controllers and resituating these tools in a disorienting manner” (Mann, Nolan, and Wellman 333) as a model, and he links his own performative socio-technological experiments directly to the Situationist movement (333). He is certainly not wrong in claiming this kinship, but he does not take into account that the originators of that subversive mode of appropriation already cautioned that “[d]étournements by simple reversal is always the most direct and the least effective.” They lack efficiency because they react “against the construction of an ambience based on a given metaphysics by constructing an ambience within the same framework that merely reverses—and thus simultaneously conserves—the values of that metaphysics” (Debord and Wolman 17). The dynamics that Debord and Wolman describe fully apply to Mann’s “reflectionist” approach. By turning the vector of “veillance” (Mann and Ferenbok 26) upwards against the hierarchical gazes<sup>4</sup> coming

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4 Mann is of course aware that, in the context of post-panoptical rhizomatic surveillance, this language of verticality can only be used in a “metaphorical context, such as hierarchically being ‘in high places’ (e.g. police keeping watch over citizens, shopkeepers keeping watch over their shoppers, etc.), regardless

from the “governments” and “bureaucracies,” the practitioner of *sousveillance* might enable individual moments of perturbation, but he or she will certainly not topple the ideological and economical metaphysics on which contemporary surveillance culture rests. In the same way that an individual weapon carried for the purpose of self-defense does not subvert the complex grammar of America’s gun culture, *sousveillance* technology does not fundamentally undermine the paradigms or structures of contemporary surveillance societies—the equilibrium remains primarily a symbolic one.

## 2 The Lifelogged Self as Empowered Self?

In spite of their philosophical weaknesses, Mann’s theories have proved highly influential in the lifelogging<sup>5</sup> community, especially since he himself has labeled the practice a potential “Case Study in *Sousveillance*” based on the authority of his claim to be the “first person to do lifecasting, i.e. stream continuous live first-person video from a wearable camera” (Mann and Ferenbok 27). What is remarkable is that the proponents of *lifelogging as sousveillance* have all followed Mann into the interdisciplinary borderlands of IT, philosophy and political involvement and share his euphoric stance towards technology. Ethan Zuckerman, director of the Center for Civic Media at the MIT, explicitly refers to Mann’s pioneering deliberations when he advocates the use of logging police activities via body cams to “help reform a police system that is broken in a deadly way” (“Why We Must Continue to Turn the Camera on Police”) in the aftermath of the killing of Eric Garner and the *Black Lives Matter* movement. In a similar manner, the science-fiction author and transparency activist David Brin argues for “exercis[ing] *sousveillance* at the level of the street, where power can most-directly affect us” as tool in civil rights struggles (“Transparency and Privacy”).

Besides these popular resonances, Mann’s ideas echo also in the academic realm. One insightful example is the essay “Lifelogging: Privacy

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of whether or not the police, shopkeepers, etc., are literally at a high vantage point” (Mann and Ferenbok 23).

5 It is important to note that the terms ‘lifelogging’ and ‘*sousveillance*’ are not synonymous. Lifelogging refers to all practices of first-person recording of personal data, whereas *sousveillance* refers to practices of ‘undersight’ in Mann’s model.

and Empowerment with Memories for Life” by Kieron O’Hara, Mischa M. Tuffield, and Nigel Shadbolt, three researchers who, like Mann, have a background in computer science and a penchant for philosophy. With regard to the potentially complex implications of surveillance on personal identity, they argue that “lifelogging has the potential to reaffirm the individual’s control of his or her own identity. The lifelog can facilitate a constructed identity that outweighs the others simply by weight of evidence, complexity and comprehensiveness” (157). This argument follows a paradigm very popular among the tech community, according to which personal identity is not primarily defined by—as a poststructuralist would argue—narrative or performance but by quantifiable data.

From this quantitative perspective, the comprehensiveness of the lifelogs does not constitute a problem, as its gathering happens in a “relatively non-discriminating manner” (161). And since corporate or governmental surveillance bureaucracies rate and sort individuals according to certain discriminating parameters (such as behavior, age, class, ethnicity, etc.), self-tracking would create an individualized counter-bureaucracy—a symbolic Mannian equeveillance—based on a body of data that is attributed a potentially higher level of accuracy. Recorded from the first-person perspective of the lifelogger, this comprehensive and therefore allegedly factual record of the self would empower the individual to correct or counteract abuses of his or her data by other parties.

O’Hara, Tuffield, and Shadbolt are aware of some far-reaching ethical difficulties of lifelogging, especially when the activity ceases to be solipsistic in the sense of “hoarding information about oneself for one’s own purposes” (160), and expands to include invading other persons’ privacy or sharing lifelogs via social or other networked media. Especially the privacy issue is a crucial one here as self-monitoring technologies do not only record data about the person using them but also about individuals in their environment—a moment, in which sousveillance (empowering from one’s own perspective) becomes surveillance (for others whose data is recorded without their consent)<sup>6</sup>.

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6 O’Hara et al. identify “three routes by which lifelogging might become surveillance. First, lifelog data may feature the actions of others in photographs,

From the position of liberal humanism, privacy is a necessary condition for the individual to act self-determinedly and independently as it is “the realm that is meant to be one’s own domain, the territory of one’s own undivided sovereignty, inside which one has the comprehensive and indivisible power to decide ‘what and who I am,’ and from which one can launch and relaunch the campaign to have one’s decisions recognized and respected” (Bauman and Lyon 28). As human personhood has its roots in the realm of the private, liberal humanism considers it to be one of the most important territories to be defended against surveillance bureaucracies of all kinds, including those supposedly looking from below. The posthuman position advocated by Mann and those who follow his example, on the other hand, see the information archive of the lifelog as the locus to define the self and from which to act in relation to normative social forces trying to stifle individual sovereignty. While acknowledging that “[t]he privacy argument is clearly real,” they argue that

it must be offset against the empowerment of the individual that lifelogging can provide. Perhaps the most important way in which this can happen is to give the lifelogger sufficient control over his or her information to act as a counterpoint to initiatives by formal authorities—and informal ones, such as families, too—to impose artificial identities. There are many sources of unwanted identities, whether or not it is the creation of a formal system of ID cards, a financial identity or an informal family insistence that one conform to social norm with respect to dress or sexual behaviour. The lifelog, for the lifelogger, might constitute *the ‘real’ person*. (165, emphasis mine)

This notion of identifying the lifelog with the authentic self is largely based on technological empiricism’s belief in the ontological objectivity of data and is an attempt to settle the “complex dialectical struggle between surveillance and selfhood” (Rosen and Santesso 4) for good—you are what your archive of individual recorded information on yourself shows you to be. This represents a transhumanist understanding subjectivity in which, as Herbrechter aptly notes, “the liberal humanist self [...] survives [...] but

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telephone calls, email exchanges and so on. Second, the tools for gathering data about oneself might also become tools for gathering data about others. Third, governments have a lot of power to insist that information that exists is made available to them” (164).

merely in a technologized form” (*Posthumanism* 52). There is a sense in which Mann’s dual devotion to technology and existentialism produces a model of selfhood that Sartre would have seen as anathema.

Also, there is a fundamental aporia in this understanding of selfhood. O’Hara, Tuffield, and Shadbolt accuse the various surveillance bureaucracies of constructing ‘false’ identities by a selective and discriminatory combination of data. As a remedy, they propose the lifelog that “provides a wide range of materials for the lifelogger to deploy and edit” (166), but through this process of editing, the sousveillant lifelogger has to be equally selective (albeit for different reasons). The edited self, no matter its editor, cannot necessarily claim a higher degree of authenticity than those constructed by the ‘governments’ and ‘corporations.’ The blind spot here is that the alleged objectivity of data is always defined by an epistemic framework that is likewise defined by cultural, social, economical, material, and ideological factors.

### 3 Curbing the Enthusiasm: A Critical Posthumanist Intervention

What the various approaches advocating *lifelogging as sousveillance* outlined above have in common, is an unbroken belief in what Mann and Ferenbok once called “the utopian promise of wearable personal broadcasting” (Mann and Ferenbok 21) and other lifelogging technologies. If we follow Herbrechter’s method, critical posthumanism has to be “a critical engagement with science fictional utopian visions, but at the same time [...] also an ongoing critique of our humanist tradition and self-understanding” (“Interview”). Of course, that does not mean that looking at sousveillance in general and lifelogging in particular through the lens of critical posthumanism rejects the assumption that these practices might entail a broad range of benefits. But looking at the complex interdependencies between technology, culture, and the social realm that shape and construct any notion of subjectivity, one cannot avoid noticing a set of debatable premises and impasses implicit in the concept of *lifelogging as sousveillance*.

The first would be that “like most technologies, many of the surveillant technologies are value neutral until applied towards specific uses”

(Mann and Ferenbok 19). From the perspective of critical posthumanism, this myth—which enjoys an enduring popularity in the scientific and engineering communities—has to be rejected as it underestimates the fact that

a concrete technology is always already embedded within a socio-cultural context, which means that it has a previous cultural history, so that it cannot just emerge in some kind of value-free environment. On the contrary, the specific technological solution selected for a perceived problem usually depends on premises, which are usually not just systemic or intrinsic to science and technological development but also depend on social, cultural and even personal factors. Technologies are always connected to their social uses whether these are by the military, the economy or even if they ‘merely’ serve some kind of idealist-humanist purpose like ‘saving the planet.’ (Herbrechter, *Posthumanism* 18)

As surveillance technologies are always designed for surveillance purpose, they always have, regardless of their actual application, power hierarchies inscribed in them: they are made to monitor objects which have not agreed to be monitored.

Can a literal *incorporation* of surveillance technology—Mann continuously speaks of his own metaphorical cyborgization, and the possibility to implant self-tracking technology into the body is already on the horizon—therefore really serve as a form emancipation in a surveillance society? Or does it, on the contrary, tie in with its modes of control and contribute to a new, even more totalitarian way of monitoring the individual by multiplying the gazes? O’Hara, Tuffield, and Shadbolt address these questions in their essay, admitting that “[l]ifelogging may increase the probability that one actually did appear on a record” (164), but they evaluate this danger as minimal compared to the ubiquitous surveillance bureaucracies of the corporate and political sphere (165).

Nayar claims that at the heart of the posthuman condition is a “radical decentering of the traditional sovereign, coherent and autonomous human in order to demonstrate how the human is always already evolving with, constituted by and constitutive of multiple forms of life and machines” (2). Regarding the *lifelogging as surveillance* idea, I want to argue for the opposite and claim that its apologists actually work on a re-centering of the “traditional, coherent and autonomous human” Nayar mentions. While its proponents certainly can be labeled as posthumanist in their ontological understanding of technology and their rejection of technological determinism, they also—in their conviction that lifelogged data is a viable

source for identity and sovereign agency—adhere to the idea of liberal personhood. What can be sensed in their arguments is an implicit rejection of the philosophical tradition of poststructuralism. While this tradition advocates deconstruction and disinterpellation of the so-called ‘authentic’ self and the ‘death of the subject,’ the advocates of *sousveillance* and *lifelogging* implicitly reintroduce an essentialist, albeit data-based anthropocentrism that resonates in the existential terminology of Mann. In their belief that the archived data can be mastered by the individual and become a resource for mastery itself, and in the conviction that their practices can be a viable source for reclaiming sovereignty in a totalitarian web of surveillance and control, their (alleged) posthumanism reveals a clandestine, curiously nostalgic humanism that is much closer, for example, to Sartre than to Foucault.

As a strategy to reclaim sovereignty in the light of contemporary surveillance, however, the potentials of *lifelogging* are limited as surveillance bureaucracies have become too polymorphic and multitudinous to be reflected by a (re-)centered individual, even one whose perception has been augmented by technology. Deleuze suggested “piracy and the introduction of viruses” as potentially viable tactics against the (digital) machines that enable societies of control to operate (6). This could happen, for example, by a playful confusion of the expectations of surveillance bureaucracies via disinformation. But *lifelogging as sousveillance* does not represent this kind of potentially subversive viral corrosion as it is intrinsically imitative. The mere act of gazing back at the abyss of surveillance and control will not stop this abyss from swallowing you.

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Bärbel Harju

## Too Much Information: Self-Monitoring and Confessional Culture

**Abstract:** Driven by a desire to be seen, the contemporary knack for self-exposure and self-surveillance raises interesting questions regarding the changing notions of privacy, the economics of confessional culture, and their ramifications for constructions of the self in both the public and private sphere. In the wake of the NSA scandal, the proliferation of surveillance technologies, and the accumulation of ‘big data,’ Americans’ privacy is deemed under attack. Cultural critics, however, did not fail to notice peoples’ inclination to forgo reticence in favor of voluntary self-monitoring and public self-exposure, divulging intimate details on talk shows, reality television, and social media. Taking into account both Zygmunt Bauman’s concept of “confessional culture” – a culture that values and demands self-surveillance and public confession – and Foucault’s notion of confession as a disciplinary technique, this essay explores contemporary practices of self-surveillance and ‘the obligation to confess’ in American culture and society. Arguing that the proliferation of confessional culture is not a symptom of a society that disregards privacy, I will probe historical (dis)continuities of confessional culture, and discuss the implications of several of its manifestations against the background of ever-present proclamations of the “death of privacy.” Rejecting to read public performances of intimacy as a devaluation of the private sphere, I will question whether people acting as their own PR agents on television and social media may indeed exercise control over their personal lives, possibly even enhancing and consolidating privacy in the act of confession.

**Keywords:** Privacy, confessional culture, publicity, self-surveillance, visibility, media

In the summer of 2016, an Off-Broadway play titled “Privacy” draws sizeable crowds to New York City’s Public Theater. Its online advertising alludes to privacy concerns in the digital age: “Who are you? Are you the websites you visit, the music you download, the photos you post? Do you measure your value by your followers and your likes? Who’s listening to you? And whom are you watching back?” (“Privacy”). Audience members are asked to bring their cell phones—charged—and leave them on during the show. The play requires audience participation: during the interactive

show individual audience member's private data will be exposed—in an effort to demonstrate the public nature of much of our personal information and the degree of visibility we subject ourselves to in the digital panopticon. The plot throws into sharp relief how complicit we are in our own surveillance and raises interesting questions regarding self-monitoring, voluntary self-exposure, and notions of privacy in contemporary US society.

The play reflects the perception that American society is in the midst of an unprecedented privacy crisis: in the wake of the NSA scandal, the proliferation of surveillance technologies, the accumulation of 'big data,' and spurred by novel techniques of invasion used by both governments and corporations, many Americans fear that their privacy is under attack. According to a 2014 survey conducted by the Pew Research Center, most Americans worry about the state and inviolability of their personal privacy, feeling that it "is being challenged along such core dimensions as the security of their personal information and their ability to retain confidentiality" (Madden). Simultaneously and somewhat paradoxically, Americans exhibit a fair amount of negligence towards their own privacy, especially if publicity is to be gained: The tendency to voluntarily waive the right to privacy by exposing private information is pervasive in a culture that pivots on the display of emotions and an emphasis on therapeutic sensibilities. Talk shows, reality television, and social media add to Americans' inclination to privilege self-exposure and "oversharing" over privacy. They create ample opportunity and enticement to speak—surrendering to "the obligation to confess," as Foucault put it in *History of Sexuality* (60), and declaring "aloud and intelligibly the truth of oneself" ("Subjectivity and Truth" 20). Indeed, the so-called "privacy paradox"—peoples' lip service to care deeply about their privacy and the simultaneous disregard of their privacy in practice—has become a staple in debates over personal privacy (Miller).

Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg put a positive spin on peoples' lack of concern, advocating for transparency and asserting in 2010 that privacy no longer appeared to be a "social norm" (qtd. in Johnson). Others, like former NSA employee and activist Edward Snowden, predict a bleak future, an Orwellian dystopia, ushered in by a complete loss of privacy. "A child born today," Snowden warns in 2013, "will grow up with no conception of privacy at all. They'll never know what it means to have

a private moment to themselves, an unrecorded, unanalyzed thought” (“Edward Snowden”). Snowden adds to a narrative that has become all too familiar: the powerful modern myth about the publicity-seeking masses, who join forces with an all-encompassing surveillance apparatus in the consentient destruction of their privacy.

A cartoon published in the *New Yorker* in 2010 comments on the notion of a “transparent society” that normalizes and demands ever-increasing levels of self-monitoring and exposure. A mother bashfully smiles as she reads in her diary that she just found in the attic, while her daughter, puzzled, can’t seem to grasp the concept of a private journal: “What was the point of writing a blog that nobody else could read?” The daughter, clearly a digital native, transfers her mother’s technique of self-writing—a private diary—into what is framed as the modern-day equivalent, distinctly different due to its very public nature: a blog, written online for others to read. The inconceivability of self-writing and self-observation for the sole purpose of introspection, testifies to a society in which “we chronicle our lives on Facebook while demanding the latest and best form of privacy protection—ciphers of numbers and letters—so that no one can violate the selves we have so entirely contrived to expose” (Lepore). The Janus-faced nature of today’s privacy crisis manifests itself in these twofold, yet complementary anxieties: one regarding the surveillance by government and corporations, the other pivoting on individuals’ desire for self-surveillance and confession.

This essay explores contemporary practices of self-surveillance and ‘the obligation to confess’ in American culture and society. Arguing that the proliferation of confessional culture is not a symptom of a society that disregards privacy, I will probe historical (dis)continuities of confessional culture, and discuss the implications of various of its manifestations against the background of ever-present proclamations of the “death of privacy.”<sup>1</sup> To what extent is confessional culture and the public staging of privacy an inversion of a surveillance society that chips away at citizens’ privacy? Vigilance turned inward demands not only self-monitoring

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1 Warnings of the death of privacy resurface throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century (cf. Harju 95). Literary scholar Deborah Nelson quips: “Privacy, it seems, is not simply dead. It’s dying over and over and over again” (xi).

and close self-examination for the sake of self-improvement, but also the constant exposure and public proclamation of private details. Driven by a desire to be seen, the contemporary knack for self-exposure and self-surveillance raises interesting questions regarding the changing notions of privacy, the economics of confessional culture, and their ramifications for constructions of the self in both the public and private sphere. I will draw both from Foucault's understanding of confession as a disciplinary technique and Zygmunt Bauman's concept of a "confessional society" in order to investigate how these developments have become driving forces in the transformation of privacy in contemporary American culture (Bauman and Donskis 57). I explore the powerful mechanisms of self-monitoring and individuals' voluntary participation in their own surveillance that are—according to both Foucault and Bauman—inscribed in the confessional paradigm. Following their insightful analysis, I will argue for privacy as a permeable, fluid concept of self and society capable of continuous reinvention and renegotiation. Declining to read public performances of intimacy as a devaluation of the private sphere, I will question whether people acting as their own PR agents on television and social media may indeed exercise control over their personal lives, possibly even enhancing and consolidating privacy in the act of confession. This reconceptualization offers a counter-narrative to conventional readings of privacy and publicity as mutually exclusive. An analysis of contemporary confessional culture might benefit from the notion that privacy and publicity are co-dependent and mutually reinforcing, and that privacy may actually "[thrive] in an age of hyper-publicity" (Jurgenson and Rey 61).

## **1 Self-Revelation and the Obligation to Speak: Foucault's Confessing Animal**

Any examination of self-surveillance and confession requires the debunking of two widespread presumptions. Confessional practices are neither a direct result of the Internet's and modern mass media's endless possibilities to monitor and broadcast the self; nor is self-revelation a deep-seated, ahistorical, transcultural human need or psychological compulsion, "the oldest human longing," as Zora Neale Hurston put it in *Their Eyes Were*

*Watching God* (10). Today's media landscape boasts with self-monitoring and confessional practices: voyeuristic reality television programs and talk shows nudge contestants into admitting humiliatingly private details just as much as personal blogs, social media sites (Facebook, Twitter), and confessional platforms (*simplyconfess.com*). Yet, confession has been an important cultural technique for centuries, shifting and changing with broader cultural currents, and gaining particular currency in US society. The second misconception stems from the observation that the act of confession, painful and excruciating as it may be, promises a sense of relief, considerable compensation, catharsis even.<sup>2</sup> The conclusion that the act of confession, thus, satisfies "an *innate* psychological need" requires careful analysis (Taylor 2, emphasis added).

Michel Foucault makes a series of observations regarding confessional practices in *History of Sexuality* that help debunk these popular notions of confession. Foucault takes a genealogical approach, famously noting that "Western man has *become* a confessing animal" (59, emphasis added).<sup>3</sup> According to Foucault, the practice of confession has deeply impacted Western society since 1215, when the Fourth Council of the Lateran introduced confession and, from then on, demanded Christians to confess their sins once a year to a priest. Meticulous self-examination became the rule and, thus, "confession became one of the West's most highly valued techniques for producing truth" (*History of Sexuality* 78). While confession has long left the strictly religious realm, its enticement for self-monitoring and exposure has remained intact, as Foucault observes, and indeed permeates secular life:

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- 2 Common wisdom tends to attribute a beneficial effect to confession—historical, social, and cultural factors notwithstanding. Psychologist Erik Berggren suggests: "[T]alking about painful or disturbing memories or experiences which have lain on our minds unburdens us of them and affords a sense of relief. [...] The pressure, as by its own force, impels a release; the process may take the form of a powerful need to make disclosures, to speak openly about oppressive secrets. [...] The cathartic element involved is of importance in explaining the genesis of all literary confessions since Saint Augustine's *Confessions*" (Berggren 3).
- 3 Cf. Taylor.

The confession has spread its effects far and wide. It plays a part in justice, medicine, education, family relationships, and love relations, in the most ordinary affairs of everyday life, and in the most solemn rites; one confesses one's crime, one's sins, one's thoughts and desire, one's illnesses and troubles; one goes about telling, with the greatest precision, whatever is most difficult to tell. (78)

Pointing out the deceptive inversion inherent in the ritual of confession, Foucault claims that individuals no longer notice its disciplinary effects, since “the obligation to confess is now relayed through so many different points, is so deeply ingrained in us, that we no longer perceive it as the effect of a power that constrains us” (60). Characteristically, but mostly unnoticed, the confession represents a ritual of discourse that “unfolds in a relationship of power,” Foucault argues, “since one doesn't confess without the presence, at least the virtual presence, of a partner who is not simply an interlocutor but the agency that requires the confession, imposes it, weighs it, and intervenes to judge, punish, pardon, console, reconcile” (82–83). The analysis of confessional practices, thus, requires close examination of the historical and social circumstances and power relationships in which it occurs. The institutionalization of confession was not a reaction toward that “human longing” of self-revelation, but was implemented to exert disciplinary power and “designed to instill anxiety as much as to cure it, to control and to discipline as much as to comfort” (Taylor 2). In his genealogy of confession, Foucault stresses “diversity rather than continuity, contingency rather than transhistoricity, and the possibility of resistance as well as the production of docility” (Taylor 2–3).

The intricacies of the dialogical relationship between the confessing subject and the listening authority will be further explored when I discuss US confessional television, and, in particular, Oprah Winfrey. The fact that the influential TV host has been named America's “confessor-in-chief” (Renzetti) begs the question: Why does public confession figure so prominently in US culture? Why is it that self-writing—autobiographies and memoirs are thriving in the US book market—forms such a significant part of Americans' literary output? What is the genesis of this quintessentially American confessional culture, unequalled by confessional practices in other Western societies?



## 2 The Puritan Origins of Public Confession

Self-monitoring and public confession loom large in American cultural history. They can be found throughout its religious history—the public acts of conversion and dedication of one’s life to Jesus at religious camp meetings during the Great Awakenings are practices still common in today’s evangelical communities of faith—and, indeed, can be traced back to Puritan practices. While not the sole tradition defining US culture, Puritan ideals of self-optimization, vigilance directed both at the self and others, and written forms of self-observation figure prominently in the contemporary United States’ cultural tapestry.<sup>4</sup> Puritan communities demanded self-observation, self-criticism, self-control, introspection, private bible study, and monitored “the presence of faith in their members by a screening process,” according to Edmund S. Morgan, “that included narratives of religious experiences” (104). The conversion narrative became a mandatory prerequisite for church membership, performed and narrated in front of a vigilant community. In his seminal study *The Puritan Origins of the American Self*, Sacvan Bercovitch asserts that the proto-modern shift of religious authority to the individual was accompanied by the constant fear that the fallible self could betray one’s faith and fall victim to sin. The potentially weak self is regarded with deep suspicion and, thus, has to be vigilantly monitored at all times, as Puritan church leader Richard Baxter purports: “the great means to conquer this Uncertainty is Self-Examination” (qtd. in Bercovitch, *Puritan Origins* 28). The moral surveillance of each other and the self, known as “holy watching” and facilitated by houses lacking curtains and built in close proximity to each other, served to enforce discipline and obedience (Farmer 105). The Puritans’ religious practice required introspection, individual self-control, and meticulous observation of even the slightest details of everyday life with regard to their religious meaning. It also demanded public confession: repentance and atonement, relegated to the privacy of a confessional by the Catholic Church, became a performative act to be carried out in front of the community, a public confessional, paralleled by practices of public shaming.<sup>5</sup>

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4 See Cox; Spengemann; Sayre; Bercovitch “Modernity.”

5 See Demos.

Puritan society foreshadows Americans' ambivalent attitudes towards privacy and publicity, the continuous negotiation and reciprocity between hyper-individualism and hyper-collectivism, oscillating between a valuation of privacy and simultaneous suspicion, surveillance, and public self-exposure.

During the 18th century the American colonies witnessed the systematic implementation of techniques of self-monitoring. The emergence of journals, diaries, and virtue catalogues—William Byrd and Benjamin Franklin serve as examples—can be described as a secularized version of the Puritan ideology of control. At its heart a technique for self-optimization, the meticulous observation of the self was fueled by a new, enlightened understanding of destiny and history as open categories of human self-fulfillment. The attention of the individual shifts from the exegesis of the bible—the Puritan *sola scriptura*—to the systematic ascertainment of collective and individual actions, especially in the form of self-writing. Introspection and autobiographical soliloquy form the pillars of continuous self-control, the beginnings of which can be found in Socrates' "know thyself," popularized due to the early republic's idolization of antiquity. Systematic self-observation and constant vigilance became keystones in the young republic that not only ensured individual autonomy, but also guaranteed the success of the nation itself. Self-monitoring and collective nation-building converge in autobiographies, memoirs, journals, and letters, and have been framed as important forms of expression of the autonomous, rational subject.<sup>6</sup> The need for a re-conceptualization of the self—in virtue catalogues, correspondence, and self-writing—pivots on its differentiation from the 'Old World' and necessitated private and public introspection and (self-)surveillance, contributing to a quintessentially American culture of confession and self-ascertainment. While the cultural legacy of Puritanism should not be overestimated, the proliferation of these early Americans' practices of private self-observation and public confession certainly impacted on and resonate with those of today's cultural landscape.

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6 See Olney, *Metaphors*; Hunsaker; Arch.

### 3 Privacy and the Proliferation of Confessional Culture

Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, confessional culture thrives in American culture. Practices of (self-)surveillance increasingly become related to issues of privacy, due in part also to the consolidation of privacy as a unequivocal positive value during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>7</sup> This process was accelerated by “the rise of a more reflexive form of individualism, a culture of self-thematization [...], a refinement of techniques of confession, which gradually became released from religious and juridical contexts” (Burkart 23). Several developments factor into the proliferation of confessional culture in postwar America. Ushering in the confessional mode on a broad scale was the invention of psychoanalysis and the ensuing “romance of American psychology,” as historian Ellen Herman describes “psychology’s rapid spread through post-World War II American society” (2).<sup>8</sup> Impacted by Freud, Americans embraced psychoanalysis and the “transfer of the therapeutic mode into everyday life” (Burkart 23).<sup>9</sup> “Therapy culture,” a term sociologist Frank Furedi used in his eponymous study to describe Western societies in which therapeutic discourse reigns, is predicated on processes of individualization and the valuation of individualism prevalent in 19<sup>th</sup> century US culture.<sup>10</sup> Technologies, media and

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- 7 Hannah Arendt explains the former negative connotation of the term privacy: “to be deprived of the reality that comes from being seen and heard by others, [...] to be deprived of the possibility of achieving something more permanent than life itself. The privation of privacy lies in the absence of others” (58). Only in the course of modern individualism did the term gain a predominantly positive meaning, “partly due to the enormous enrichment of the private sphere through modern individualism” (38).
  - 8 Herman states that “[m]embership in the American Psychological Association (APA) grew by more than 1,100 percent, from 2,739 in 1940 to 30,839 in 1970” (2–3).
  - 9 Therapeutic discourse, as sociologist Eva Illouz states, “represents a qualitatively new language of the self” that “has exerted [...] a decisive influence on twentieth-century models of selfhood” and “has mustered a rare level of cultural legitimacy across a wide variety of social groups, organizations, institutions, and cultural settings [...] and has come to constitute one of the major codes with which to express, shape, and guide selfhood” (5–6).
  - 10 Furedi further locates the origins of therapy culture in the decline of traditional authorities, the weakening of religion, hyper-individualism, and the rise of the atomized family (1–23). Cf. Herman.

institutions for self-reflection testify to the individual's search for his or her 'true self.' The "talking cure" normalizes the public exposure of intimate thoughts. A more general privileging of sentiment and feeling testifies to a "therapeutic ethos," a therapeutic imperative, even, that demands both self-monitoring and self-revelation, introspection and the public display of emotions (Furedi 22). Therapeutic discourse soon seeped into all areas of life, and especially permeated political discourse, leading to a "convergence between private and public domains, cultural and political concerns" (Herman 12). Privacy holds a precarious position here, since "[i]mplicit in the value system of this therapeutic culture is a disapproval of the right to privacy" (Furedi 66). The enticement to speak is so pervasive as to be almost mandatory; failure to comply with standards of self-exposure might raise suspicion, as Robin Anderson notes: "Almost no boundaries exist between what can and cannot be said in public, no revelation, confession or disclosure is so personal that it cannot be exposed. In this atmosphere of total exposure, no secrets are allowed" (qtd. in Calvert 82). Echoing Foucault, Illouz notes that "modern power takes on the benevolent face of our psychoanalyst, who turns out to be nothing but a node in a vast network of power, a network that is pervasive, diffuse, and total in its anonymity and immanence," while the "discourse of psychoanalysis is [...] a 'political technology of the self,' an instrument used and developed in the general framework of the political rationality of the state; its very aim of emancipating the self is what makes the individual manageable and disciplined" (3).

This shift towards emotion and the revelation of feelings fueled warnings about privacy's demise. Fear of intrusion upon the private life of citizens by the government, new technologies, and corporations were also present, but began to be rivaled by anxieties about this new inclination for self-disclosure. Nelson identifies the "shift from intrusion to confession" as "one of the signal events in the transformation of privacy in the late twentieth century" and establishes a link between new social norms of self-revelation and fear of surveillance, because "citizens would become indifferent to their own privacy, which was measured by their willingness to offer information about themselves to strangers" (19). A privacy crisis unfolded in postwar America, well

publicized in sociological studies, journalistic essays, as well as novels and autobiographies, in legal and political texts.<sup>11</sup> A decade after privacy had forcefully entered the public consciousness as an endangered social value, the United States Supreme Court's 1965 landmark decision *Griswold v. Connecticut* established for the first time that the Constitution protected a general right to privacy. At the same time that a right to privacy was publicly acknowledged and protected, "the nation was beginning to binge on the revelation of private life in popular, and slightly later, literary culture," as Deborah Nelson points out (18). Americans reveled in juicy details of celebrities' lives in gossip magazines, they engaged in mediated voyeurism on TV programs and talk shows, they revealed their innermost secret on the couches of psychoanalysts and marriage counselors, participated in a culture that valued a "therapeutic ethos," and embraced the new language of the self.

The language of self-disclosure was the *lingua franca* of second wave feminism and other social movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Following the credo that "[t]he personal is political," feminists connected personal experience with social and political structures, shedding light on the downsides of an excess of privacy and the wrongs protected under the banner of privacy. Feminists used public confessions as a powerful tool to raise consciousness and exert political influence, a method that has been adapted by social activists with the intention of giving a voice to marginalized individuals. The perceived boundary between "private" and "public" was challenged and subverted by stories of personal grief in order to stimulate female empowerment. Nelson observes: "There is no more potent or longer-lasting critique of public and private in American culture than that which began with the feminist movement" (22). The loosening of cultural prohibitions against public self-disclosure in postwar America extended to the realm of politics, where charisma, personality, and identity categories began to replace the actual issues of policy.<sup>12</sup>

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11 Cf. Nelson 9–11.

12 See Sennett; Lasch.

#### 4 “Tyranny of Intimacy”? Confessional Culture and the Public Realm

While the narrative of the ‘death of privacy’ looms large in American imagination, it has been rivaled by a second interpretation that pivots on the invasion and obliteration of the public sphere. The magazine the *American Scholar* provided a platform for this debate as early as 1958, when it launched a series entitled “The Invasion of Privacy.” Author August Heckscher states: “[W]hat is disturbing today is not merely the decline of privacy; it is equally the decline of a public sphere” (14). Heckscher does not lament the invasion of the private sphere by spying technologies and an over-reaching government, but observes a decline of public *and* private life, a corruption of both spheres. The boundaries between the two blurred, especially in suburbia. The cult of the private home, consumerism, conformity, and confessional culture led to the rise of a so-called “social sphere,” compromising the private and public spheres (20). Heckscher’s analysis is influenced by Hannah Arendt’s thoughts on the public and the private realm in *Human Condition*, published earlier in 1958, which reverberates in scholarly literature throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>13</sup> The “rise of the social,” according to Arendt, signifies the “emergence of society [...] from the shadowy interior of the household into the light of the public sphere” (38). Arendt is concerned that social concerns eclipse the political and laments how political culture in modern societies is encroached upon by “society,” the economic market, and family concerns—a sphere of social interaction situated between the private and the public realm and negatively impacting both. This infiltration of the public sphere by matters of consumption and production “has not only blurred the old borderline between private and political, it has also changed almost beyond recognition the meaning of the two terms and their significance for the life of the individual and the citizen” (38). The result, according to Heckscher, is not a decrease but an expansion of the private, characterized by a certain ambivalence:

Actually there seems today to be a retreat into privacy, and at the same time a disposition to flaunt areas of life hitherto hidden in the public light. The privacy

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13 See Sennett; Lasch; Bauman.

lacks substance and depth, while the publicly performed portions of our life lack the edge of excellence, risk, and high responsibility. (19–20)

The infusion of society with “psychological enlightenment” (Herman 2) not only led to the cultivation of the self’s vulnerability, but also to a common lament regarding the confessional mode, which Illouz summarizes as follows:

In calling on us to withdraw into ourselves, [...] made us abandon the great realms of citizenship and politics and cannot provide us with an intelligible way of linking the private self to the public sphere because it has emptied the self of its communal and political content, replacing this content with a narcissistic self-concern. (2)

What is really at stake, according to these critics, is not the invasion of Americans’ privacy, but the permeation of the public sphere by private matters. The “tyrannies of intimacy,” as Sennett has famously called the practice of mutual self-disclosure in an effort to create community, undermine public life (337). Lauren Berlant challenges some of these critics’ neglect of individual agency and the potential for political engagement via public disclosure of private trauma. While being wary of negative aspects of acts of self-disclosure—“the public rhetoric of citizen trauma,” according to Berlant, “obscures basic differences among modes of identity, hierarchy, and violence,” threatening to render “[m]ass national pain [...] into a banality, a crumbling archive of dead signs and tired plots” (2)—Berlant emphasizes that confessional texts, like slave narratives, can inform the public about and document the experiences of those who do not have a voice in public discourse. The dissemination of marginalized discourses via confession and the power of shared knowledge may activate political agency, create a sense of community or belonging, and lead to a democratization of collective memory (1–25).

## 5 The Truth Will Set You Free: Televised Confessions

Television has long been associated with the creation of an “intimate public sphere,” a term Berlant employs in order to describe contemporary US society’s rendering of “citizenship as a condition of social membership produced by personal acts and values” (5). Televised talk shows such as the *Oprah Winfrey Show* are emblematic for the rise of a therapeutic ethos that

calls for both introspection and the public display of emotions. Blurring the boundary between public and private, the staging of intimacy on television raises interesting questions regarding the performativity, authenticity, and coercive power of public confessions. Mediated voyeurism and confession intensified during the 1950s and 1960s when programs like *Candid Camera* and later Phil Donahue's talk show on PBS gained popularity, turning America into a "voyeur nation" (Calvert). Today, mediated self-surveillance, confessions, and the public display of private matters are a large and firmly established component of TV programming with reality television programs like MTV's *Real World*, talk shows like *Dr. Phil*, or dating shows like the *Bachelor* with its confessional interviews.

Oprah Winfrey ranks as the "high priestess of confession, offering redemption" to those who are willing to open up on national television (Renzetti). On the televised confessional market, she sells the "experience of confession—of hearing somebody's darkest story, and offering to them the possibility of relief from its articulation," as Kathryn Lofton explicates (qtd. in Renzetti). Winfrey's confessional mantra—"the truth will set you free"—derives from John's gospel and refers to the truth of Christ's word. Winfrey, instead, proposes a confessional imperative, asking in one of her Internet life classes: "What secret are you sick of keeping? When are you going to free yourself by telling it?" (qtd. in Capp). The lure of the traditional confessional's absolution has not lost its appeal, but, according to Capp, "is more commonly expressed in terms of 'self-knowledge' and the need for transparency in human affairs." Oprah's catch phrase, obviously, obscures the role of the listening authority—the truth and subsequent freedom appears to be the product of the speaking subject only—and thus underlines Foucault's assertion of the "functional presence of a power 'so deeply ingrained' that the speaking subject does not perceive its personal disclosures as an effect of a listening power; the subject speaks simply to be 'set free'" (Jones 95).

Celebrities and regular people alike flock to Winfrey in order to publicly repent and benefit from the "curative potential of TV talk" (Jones 95). The underlying coercive practices that nudge people into performing a public confession and the subdued aggression the host employs when "extracting" a public confession testify to Winfrey's "paradoxical power as both victim and victor, confessing subject and listening authority" (106).



Oprah, as the confessor, “wields the power of the interpretive, listening authority [...], ‘forgives, consoles, directs,’ in order for the confession to ‘constitute a discourse of truth,’” while her own confessions provide the show’s overarching narrative, rendering the viewers at home “authoritative and implicitly interpretative listeners” (96–97). Oprah thus embodies both the role of Foucault’s “confessing animal” and of the confessional authority, moving back and forth between the two; the “dialogical power relationship between the speaker and the listener [...] grants the confession its healing potential, and its redemptive character” (95).

Thus, on the one hand, televised confessions can be read as deeply embedded in well-concealed power mechanisms that entice the docile subject to engage in self-monitoring and self-disclosure on the public stages of daytime television; they add to an “intimization” of the public sphere by flooding it with private revelations, thereby leading to its ultimate decline, since the “once relatively impermeable barrier between public and private has now been turned into a porous sieve” (Meyrowitz 154). Analyzing the public performance of identity, Mark Deuze argues with Illouz that self-surveillance serves economic and political interests in driving the individual into the quest for self-improvement:

Importantly, this kind of mediated panopticism does not just rely on self-disciplining in order to fulfill real or perceived expectations, but in fact can offer quite significant rewards [...]. Apparently it is in our best interest to cooperate, making the panoptic surveillance system seem benevolent and participatory in nature—even though it punishes for opting out. (Deuze 113)

While the seductive, yet disciplinary aspects of self-surveillance demand to be taken into account, the performative nature of any television appearance complicates the narrative of a complete victimization of those who participate in their own surveillance. Participants of reality shows seemingly disclose their private lives. They may be victimized by profit-driven media corporations that exploit their willingness to expose themselves and cast them in rigid identity categories. At the same time, however, they might experience empowerment by the sheer act of sharing their private story, especially, as Milette Shamir notes, “since these participants are often members of disenfranchised social groups, subjects who lack other venues for self-construction” (231). Furthermore, discussing marital problems or sexual deviances on national television allows the confessing

subject to tap into well-established narrative structures that may be disciplinary,<sup>14</sup> but confessing also harbors the potential to transform a story by way of performing it, altering it, and, ultimately, creating distance to a vulnerable private self. Rössler assumes that talk show protagonists—despite appearances to the contrary—are “perfectly capable” of making the distinction between public and private realms, and “not only continue to have an interest in their own ‘backstage’ after the event, but would not consider themselves entitled [...] to spy on what goes on in their neighbor’s bedroom” (176).<sup>15</sup> Mediatized televised confessions have the effect that the confessing subject becomes aware of the performative nature of the confession, as Shamir further notes:

They are bound to feel and register [...] the sense of misrecognition that social interpellation always entails, the sense that ‘I am not *really* the person I performed for the camera.’ Ironically, the more conventionalized, caricaturized, and clichéd their performed identity is [...], the more lively the sense of an inassimilable remainder, of that negative space of interiority, becomes. In that sense, today’s media ‘victims’ may not be all that different from the domestic woman or the former slave who used writing to construct and make visible a private self, only to deepen their sense of self through silence and *disappearance*. (231)

Talk show confessions then can be understood as examples of a loss of privacy, but also as affirmations of privacy by way of its public enactment.

## 6 “I Am Seen, Therefore I Am” – Confessions as Do-It-Yourself Surveillance?

Zygmunt Bauman is a vocal critic of the commodification of privacy and has addressed excessive self-monitoring, the regime of self-disclosure, and the consumption of private narratives in the marketplace of culture. In Bauman’s “confessional society,” identity is constructed by publicity, by

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14 Shamir acknowledges that talk show guests “often are victims of a cynical and profit-hungry enterprise that cares little [...] for their well-being. But at the same time [...] it also endows them with a sense of autonomy and coherence that results precisely from the articulation/exposure of their private story” (231).

15 Rössler expands on her view: “The individual’s sense of privacy and intimacy seems to be more resistant and culturally much more deeply rooted than would be suggested by this sort of chat show or the accompanying cultural critique” (177).

sharing information in public, an inversion of Descartes's "I think therefore I am" into "I am seen, therefore I am" (Bauman and Donskis 28). Bauman criticizes that talk shows have ushered in a confessional society "in which microphones have been installed in confessionals, heretofore receptories of the most private and secret of secrets, [...] and where loudspeakers have been installed on public squares previously reserved solely for brandishing and thrashing out issues of common, shared interest and public urgency" (Bauman, "Privacy" 8). Bauman not only joins those critics who lament the invasion of the public sphere by means of its intimization, noting that "it is now the public sphere that find itself flooded and overwhelmed, having been invaded by the troops of privacy" (11); he also observes an inversion of the meaning of privacy itself. The fear of a lack of privacy is trumped by the fear of *too much* privacy: "the area of privacy turning into a site of incarceration, the owner of private space being condemned and doomed to stew in his/her own juice" (11). The real nightmare today, Bauman claims, is the absence of a confessor, an audience apathetic towards one's private details, privacy as unwanted invisibility, loneliness, and deprivation of publicity: "We seem to experience no joy in having secrets, unless these are the secrets meant to enhance our egos through being displayed on the Internet, on TV, on the first pages of tabloids and inside glossy magazines" (11).

Bauman extends his critique to peoples' online confessions and links them to mechanisms of (self-)surveillance. He laments the decline of both the private and public sphere in *Moral Blindness*:

We live in a confessional society, promoting public self-exposure to the rank of the prime and easiest available, as well as arguably most potent and the sole truly proficient, proof of social existence. Millions of Facebook users vie with each other to disclose and put on public record the most intimate and otherwise inaccessible aspects of their identity, social connections, thoughts, feelings and activities. Social websites are fields of a voluntary, do-it-yourself form of surveillance, beating hands-down [...] the specialist agencies manned by professionals of spying and detection. (57–58)

Bauman observes that the privileging of emotion and private narratives makes it increasingly difficult to interest people in politics, while the constant obligation (and virtue) to monitor the self while curating and maintaining an online profile leads to an evacuation of agency. Does

confessional society diminish both privacy and the public sphere? Does it create a sentimental culture, where stories of personal suffering figure so prominently in public discourse that they obstruct the actual politics of society's structural inequalities and discourage citizens' political agency? And does it only depoliticize those who participate in self-monitoring and public disclosures, or, more importantly, also pave the way for an all-encompassing culture of surveillance?

A case in point is media artist Hasan Elahi, who somewhat counter-intuitively claims: "In an era in which everything is archived and tracked, the best way to maintain privacy may be to give it up." Elahi, a Bangladeshi-American citizen and professor at the University of Maryland, created the project "Tracking Transience—The Orwell Project" in 2009. The artist's website—*trackingtransience.net*—has been recording his movements on a daily basis since Elahi had been arbitrarily detained and interrogated several times by the FBI after 9/11. In response to repeated questions regarding his whereabouts, Elahi created a site which seemingly makes his life transparent – a perfect alibi for suspicious FBI agents, an effort to be cleared off the FBI's terrorist watch list, or an artistic intervention in and a subversive comment on surveillance practices and self-monitoring.

Elahi wears a GPS device to track his movements—a red arrow indicates his exact location at any given moment in time—, he publishes his debit card transactions, he takes photographs of the hotels he stays in, of airports he visits, beds he sleeps in, his meals in restaurants and even the toilets he uses. In a 2011 *New York Times Magazine* essay he wrote, addressing the FBI: "You want to watch me? Fine. But I can watch myself better than you can, and I can get a level of detail that you will never have." Elahi's photographs, which he routinely posts on his website, let us see the places he visits, but never show himself. Elahi criticizes the commodification of private data, claiming that only "[r]estricted access to information is what makes it valuable" ("You Want to Track Me?"). By flooding the public with his information—in an intentionally user-unfriendly manner, since the website is hard to navigate—, he "devalues the currency of the information the intelligence gatherers have collected" (Elahi). The artist is literally giving authorities too much information: deciphering the data and contextualizing the random pieces of information is almost impossible. Even as his server logs record visits from the Department of Homeland

Security and the CIA, Elahi considers himself shielded by the “barrage of information [...] publicly available” and claims: “I live a surprisingly private and anonymous life.”

Elahi’s inversion of the logic of surveillance poses an interesting intervention with regard to big data and the narrative of the alleged loss of privacy. The artist not only criticizes, ridicules, and subverts the authorities’ surveillance practices and their excessive accumulation of data, his project can also be understood as a comment on the highly fabricated, performative, and artificial nature of online confessional culture. The act of voluntary self-surveillance and over-exposure of private details “points to the misapplication and uncritical use of identity management technologies and their aesthetic and political implications for privacy” (Smith and Watson 269). Elahi controls which data and images he shares and describes his practice of self-surveillance as empowering and affirmative of his subjective privacy. Creating and performing one’s private self, Elahi claims, is something that people engage in on Facebook already and is not necessarily the equivalent of giving up one’s privacy. Claims to privacy and a valuation of privacy are as salient as ever, but have shifted with changing social norms and processes. Chasing social visibility online, individuals negotiate and navigate confessional society’s rules of engagement, constructing “authentic” online selves.

## 7 “The Right Be Let Alone” in the Age of Hyper-Publicity

Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the narrative of the death of privacy has been tied to fears of surveillance as much as to warnings of peoples’ inclination to forego privacy in favor of publicity. Is American privacy actually dead, as critics often insist, diminished by a pervasive confessional culture, eschewed by publicity-seeking bloggers and talk show guests who broadcast the most intimate details of their lives? Has society become complicit in its own surveillance, distracted by selfie-mania and self-tracking supported by movements like the Quantified Self,<sup>16</sup> utterly oblivious towards notions

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16 Smith and Watson describe the Quantified Self as an “international organization that encourages users to self-monitor their bodily processes, intake, outgo, and activities” (268).

of privacy? Many, like communication scholar Joshua Meyrowitz, support this negative reading of the status quo, bleakly proclaiming “Post-Privacy America,” an era in which the boundaries between private and public are blurred beyond recognition (153–206). However, Americans’ stances toward privacy are both more complicated and more ambivalent than this assessment may suggest, and beg a closer examination. The Puritan heritage looms large in American cultural history, and its impact on confessional society and discourses of self-monitoring are certainly no exception. Americans’ ambivalence towards notions of privacy and publicity might be indebted to both the Puritan vision of transparency and community and the conflicting promise of the frontier: of a life lived anonymously, hidden from nosy neighbors’ prying eyes. Today’s privacy paradox, similarly, reveals contradictory notions and expectations of privacy and points to the United States’ multi-faceted cultural heritage, which comfortably accommodates seemingly opposing stances towards privacy and publicity.

Privacy, it seems, might have to not only be considered as “the right to be let alone,”<sup>17</sup> but also as the right to be seen, as historian Jill Lepore notes in an article for the *New Yorker*: The increasing desirability of publicity and visibility during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Lepore argues, has led to “the paradox of an American culture obsessed, at once, with being seen and with being hidden, a world in which the only thing more cherished than privacy is publicity.” This might be as true for online confessions as it is for participants on talk shows or reality television. Keeping in mind that “all self-presentation is performative, and that authenticity is a rhetorical effect, not an essence” (Smith and Watson 266), peoples’ practices of self-surveillance and confession might be better described as a careful staging and curating of public versions of themselves, a kind of brand-management of the self, while the “real” self remains hidden—maybe even from ourselves, as Joshua Rothman argues: A sense of privacy is always preserved, “a kind of inner privacy, by means of which you shield yourself not just from others’ prying eyes, but from your own.” This unshareable “inner privacy” points to the limits of confessional culture. The sharing

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17 Samuel Warren and Louis Brandeis famously framed the right to privacy as “the right to be let alone” in a seminal article in the *Harvard Law Review* in 1890 (193).

mania in reality television and on the Internet, then, “ends up emphasizing what can’t be shared” and, thus, affirms individual privacy:

Talking so freely about your life helps you to know the weight of those feelings which are too vague, or too spiritual, to express—left unspoken and unexplored, they throw your own private existence into relief. “Sharing” is, in fact, the opposite of what we do: [...] we rehearse a limited openness so that we can feel the solidity of our own private selves. (Rothman)

In a society that values visibility and makes available vast amounts of information, traditional notions of “privacy” may no longer apply. Highly public processes of self-definition make “continuous visibility on one’s own terms [...] look like a strategy—if not an unproblematic one—of autonomy, a public way of maintaining control over one’s private identity” (Igo 28).

Publicity doesn’t necessarily come at the expense of privacy, and privacy is not automatically established once we forego publicity. The relationship between these two fluid categories is dialectical, they are intertwined and may even be mutually reinforcing. The interplay between revealing and concealing, the process of carefully choosing what to expose and what to keep secret, is reminiscent of Roland Barthes’s observation of the striptease. The ritualized, professionalized act of undressing with the help of feathers, fans, and furs renders “the unveiled body more remote” and “to shed objects as ritualistic as these is no longer a part of a further, genuine undressing” (Barthes 85). The striptease’s mechanics, Barthes points out, stress the artificiality of a routine performance and expose only a nakedness that is “unreal,” “smooth,” “withdrawn,” an empty series of studied gestures that do not expose a real private self (85).<sup>18</sup>

It seems that the idea of separate spheres—public and private—is no longer valid in modern confessional society; and maybe the perceived boundaries between public and private have always been “mobile,

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18 Cf. Jurgenson and Rey: The authors employ sociologist Erving Goffman’s concept of a “dramaturgical framework of self-presentation that describes human interaction as an endless series of performances” (64), describing a structure of “front stage” and “back stage” not as a dichotomy, but as co-dependent spheres of online and offline existence, that constitute a “creative, seductive, and mutually-reinforcing interplay of reveal and conceal” (74).

situational, flickering and fragmented” and are now subject to increased hybridization: public citizenship and political agency “depend on the capacity to navigate these new [...] mobile worlds, that are neither public nor private” (Sheller and Urry 330). The shifting boundaries between public and private ushered in by confessional culture do not testify to the disappearance of the private; on the contrary, privacy’s increasing significance illuminates the mutability of privacy as a public concept and testifies to its capacity of continuous reinvention and renegotiation in the face of new patterns of visibility and confession, rather than to its demise.

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## II. Stories and songs



Felix Haase

# Death by Data: Identification and Dataveillance in Gary Shteyngart's *Super Sad True Love Story*

Abstract: Discourses about surveillance in Western societies often end up in the realm of algorithms, clouds, and databases. Piled and sorted here are not just masses of data, but actual identities. Removed from their embodied owners, these identities become classifiable and quantifiable. The image of individuals as grids of digital categories conveys and perpetuates a specific notion of the self. The protagonist of Gary Shteyngart's *Super Sad True Love Story*, Lenny Abramov, is repeatedly confronted with this categorical reproduction of his identity. In my paper, I argue that Shteyngart's novel portrays the interaction of two different sorts of identification, namely categorical identification and narrative identification. Both simultaneously converge and compete in Shteyngart's dystopian America, raising questions about individual agency and the distribution of life chances. I further suggest that the notion of quantifiable and classifiable identities does not intrude into the characters' world through brute oppression. Rather, it seeps into their society through the seductive forces of corporate capitalism, which eventually replaces the nation state in the novel and eradicates foundational American myths. Surveillance becomes pervasive because it caters to desires of love and control (of the Other or the body). Hence, *Super Sad True Love Story* underlines the importance of fictional dystopias for re-describing what it means to be under surveillance today. In order to support my argument, I refer to sociological and philosophical theorizations of surveillance, from Mark Poster's work on databases to Benjamin Goold's analysis of categorical identification.

**Keywords:** Gary Shteyngart; data mining, digital identity, dystopian literature

## 1 Introduction and Theoretical Background

Why is the titular love story between the protagonists and narrators of Gary Shteyngart's 2010 novel *Super Sad True Love Story* so super sad? Much of the tragedy flows from their unbridgeable difference. Lenny is an out-of-shape bookworm with anxiety issues and signs of manic depression. Eunice is portrayed as young and beautiful and shares the opinion of her

contemporaries that books simply smell bad. The novel's split discourse of Lenny's verbose diary entries and Eunice's acronym-infested social network messages immediately signals their communicative divide. Their love affair is doomed from the start. Surveillance issues also play into the sadness, however. Had Lenny and Eunice met in America instead of Italy in the beginning of the novel, their love affair would never have happened. Shteyngart's satirical tour de force portrays a society built on dataveillance, i.e. surveillance targeted at digital pieces of personal information. His vision of a near-future United States is pervaded by lists, rankings and statistical matches. In such a flawlessly sorted world, the decision about romantic couplings is made by algorithms, not people. An accident, such as Lenny and Eunice, would be impossible.

It is therefore justifiable to read *Super Sad True Love Story* alongside other classics of the dystopian genre, such as George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We*. The novel is true to their tradition in focusing on the potentially unjust aspects of surveillance. At the same time, it is much more nuanced and complex in assessing the social and individual changes tied to surveillance technologies. In the novel, smartphone-like "apparäts" become the locus of social life and govern everything from professional success to interpersonal relationships—a fact that certainly sounds familiar to a generation of digital natives. Dissatisfied with merely making up new labels, *Super Sad True Love Story* instead defamiliarizes the current landscape of social networks and databases. What if passers-by on the street could see our credit ranking flashing on a post? What if our vitals and daily moods were to be posted on a digital grid at work? What if an algorithm created several scores from our data portfolio in order to show which possible mates were desirable and vice versa? At stake for Lenny and Eunice are not merely issues we usually associate with dystopian portrayals of surveillance, such as the invasion of privacy and direct control. What the novel brings into focus is the change in self-conception and public image brought about by numbers, grids, databases, and rankings. In short, *Super Sad True Love Story* is a novel about dataveillance and identification.

The influence of the new surveillance on identity conceptions has been a critical focus of surveillance studies for decades. One of the first scholars to draw a connection between a panoptic model of surveillance and



digital databases was Mark Poster. He defines databases as “performative machines” that predetermine cookie-cutter identities such as the “bohemian mix”: “Buy wine by the case, common stock; Drive, Alfa Romeos, Peugeots; Read, *GQ*, *Harper’s*; Eat, whole-wheat bread, frozen waffles; TV, *Nightline*” (187). Modern bureaucratic states have long relied on such “categorical identities” to keep track of citizens in the sprawling anonymity of the metropolis (Goold 17). After computerized databases replaced the paper file, however, it became possible to match and cross-reference the growing amounts of information contained in these identities. The result was the emergence of an identity conception which functioned according to the logics of the computer:

[C]ategorical identities stress the importance of particular personal characteristics with a view to determining whether an individual belongs to some pre-defined group. Personal information is viewed as static and capable of being distilled into data, which can in turn be combined and used as the basis for making statements about an individual’s character and [...] predictions about his or her future behavior. [...] [T]he notion of categorical identity is based on the belief that human beings are capable of being summarized and understood in terms of lists. (Goold 16)

The resulting “dividual” can be perpetually assembled and reassembled (Deleuze 319). Since the data residing in the database is never deleted, however, the past becomes fossilized. This means that the data sets comprising categorical identities are to a large extent permanent.

The building blocks of information—data—are weighed and combined by algorithms. Even though these algorithms are coded by human beings and can never be fully objective, they suggest a comforting absence of bias. All the same, they always remain inscrutable to the individuals whose lives they influence. In contrast to other notions of identification (such as Ricoeur’s theory of narrative identity), categorical identities leave individuals with little to no agency in the construction of their own life stories (cf. Goold 17). This problem is inherent to external identification of any kind, and neither Benjamin Goold, whose work on data and identity I will be referring to here, nor I wish to argue that categorical identification can or should be abolished. Problematic about the confluence of categorization and dataveillance is the sheer extent and power of databased identification. If identities are increasingly understood as bodies of digital data, it is only natural that

the inherent assumptions of dataveillance extend themselves into the daily lives of citizens. The sophistication of the impersonal practice infiltrates personal processes of sorting, classification, and quantification (cf. Lyon).

The first part of this article is devoted to a study of the novel's dystopian rendition of dataveillance. There are eerie similarities between the observations of Goold and the fictional society of Lenny and Eunice. I suggest that *Super Sad True Love Story* should first and foremost be read as a satirical defamiliarization of categorical identification. While Goold explicitly traces how databased categorization impacts power relations between the state and the individual, he also claims that dataveillance influences how individuals come to know themselves (22). He refers back to the loss of agency, yet the implications for the very concept of identity remain rather vague. How does self-identification change when dataveillance penetrates every layer of social existence? The question is admittedly a difficult one because it addresses a subjective experience of social change.

In the second part, I argue that *Super Sad True Love Story* delivers precisely such an experience in the form of a fictional narrative. Lenny's diary follows his attempt to appropriate a new, databased kind of identity. In order to cheat death, Lenny tracks himself and others, only to eventually realize the futility of his efforts. This identity crisis is, in a very real sense, a data crisis; it is also paralleled by a crisis of foundational American myths. I will explore the mythical dimensions of the dataveillance of identity in the final part of my essay.

## 2 (No) Laughing Matter - Satire, Society, and Dataveillance

Throughout *Super Sad True Love Story*, Lenny experiences the uncanny sensation of living with an identity that speaks for him. His conversations and actions rarely seem to count as much as do numbers manipulated by hidden algorithms. Shteyngart shows satirical gusto in coming up with increasingly jarring confrontations between the characters and their categorical or statistical identities. There is, for example, the train schedule at the company where Lenny is employed (aptly named "Post-Human Services"). It lists not only the hormone levels of the employees, but also their "mood + stress indicators" and classifies them according to being "a

moody bitch today” or “not a team playa this month” (56). When Lenny returns from his sojourn in Rome, he is not even listed on the schedule, which plunges him instantly into fits of existential dread. The mock Internet lingo climbs to even more garish heights when the characters “FAC,” or “Form a Community,” and rank each other according to “SUSTAINABILITY” or “FUCKABILITY” (88)—Lenny, of course, does not fare well and becomes a nervous wreck. Behind the bitter sneer of these allusions to social networks lies a serious concern about the normalization of dataveillance.

The novel familiarizes the reader with its unique blend of absurdism and sincere dread from the very beginning. Consider Lenny’s interrogation by “Jeffrey Otter” (6), a digital cartoon animal that serves as the face for American immigration services. Not only is the nightmarish visage of Orwell’s Big Brother rendered as a cute, furry mammal—the otter also speaks with a country accent and is accompanied by corny disco hits. Another source of ridicule is the otter’s impaired hearing ability. When Lenny mentions his job in “Indefinite Life Extension,” the otter understands “Effeminate Life Invention” (7). Despite his absurd interrogator, Lenny is genuinely terrified that the mistakes of the otter or his own failure to give the right answer might land him in a mysterious “secure screening facility” (7). He represents the helplessness of individuals confronted with an authority that does not understand them (in this case, literally) but makes fundamental decisions about their identities anyway. Lenny’s misgivings turn out to be understandable when the name “Fabrizia DeSalva” causes his *apparat* to freeze and permanently flags him (8). He never learns what prompted this fateful error code, just as he never learns how his data is used and what identity the otter digitally fabricates for him. The scene has both bizarrely comic and Kafkaesque undertones. Lenny feels the presence of a vast and nebulous machine assessing him with unknown parameters and for unknown reasons.

The otter’s digital mark on Lenny also marks the novel’s whole plot. Nettie Fine, who comes in contact with Lenny directly after he is flagged, texts him at several points throughout the story. As Lenny and the reader learn at the end of the novel, she dies at the same time her profile disappears from GlobalTeens, a social network that just about everyone in the novel seems to belong to (324). The mystery of her death is never resolved.

Fabrizia and Noah suffer the same fate. She dies in a car accident (324) and he is killed by forces which are mysteriously connected to Staatling-Wapachung and Joshie, Lenny's boss and the company they both work for (256). In *Super Sad True Love Story*, categorical identities are not just a matter of importance for their referents. Through cross-referencing and matching, they also influence the lives of others. The novel thus interprets privacy as a communal good, not just a private property right. In an age of dataveillance, privacy extends through a vast network of social relations.

Maybe the most incisive satirization of categorical identities is the already mentioned "Form A Community" or FAC application (86). Shteyngart's dystopian version of apps like *Peep* and *Lulu* makes interpersonal relationships quantifiable, calculable and therefore controllable. Every speck of data fed by people into their *app* is turned into a profile. An algorithm converts the data into categorical scores such as "FUCKABILITY," "PERSONALITY," and "SUSTAINABILITY" (88). These ratings are ranked and matched, and the ranking is constantly visible to everybody close by. Sorted here are not large and anonymous segments of populations, but individual relationships and life stories. Verbal communication (what Lenny and his contemporaries know as "verballing") is largely eliminated:

The masculine data scrolled on my screen. Our average income hovered at a respectable but not especially uplifting 190,000 yuan-pegged dollars. We were looking for girls who appreciated us for who we were. We had absent fathers, who sometimes were not absent enough. A man ranked uglier than me walked in and, ascertaining his chances, turned right around. (90)

The first-person plural right away signals the elision of individuality, or the domination of "sameness over difference" inherent in categorical identification (Goold 21). Since every personal detail is already accessible online, and suitability is predetermined by an algorithm, there is no need to get to know each other. Socializing becomes fast, effective and, due to the allure of numerical values, seemingly objective. Nobody has to listen to the winding, fragmented and unreliable accounts of narrative identity such as the one developing in Lenny's diary.

The satirical dystopia of *Super Sad True Love Story* assumes a readership that can readily recognize the dire implications of such invasive sorting. But if it all leads to social and cultural decline, why are these

mechanisms so successful among the novel's characters? One aspect is the ideology which anchors the novel's version of capitalism. Lenny's boss Joshie gives a first clue: "Remember, I started out just like you. Acting. The Humanities. It's the fallacy of merely existing. FME. There'll be plenty of time to ponder and write and act out later. Right now you've got to *sell to live*. [...] You're going to have to learn to surf the data streams better. Learn to rank people quicker" (65, emphasis in original). On its face, Joshie's message is that Lenny has to sell their product, i.e. immortality, to become himself immortal and transcend the life which consists of slowly contemplating death. But there is another message buried in Joshie's lecture. In order to take part in society, Lenny also has to *sell himself*. The only way to exist in his society is to quantify, classify and sort himself and others. All else is just a fallacy.

Lenny implements this wisdom in his quest to get back into the good graces of his co-workers. He devours digital media and displays his intimate emotions so that he can "show these open-source young'uns just how much data an old 'intro' geezer is willing to share" (76). If social relationships are based on competition and comparison, then it is only prudent to buy the right commodities, feel the right feelings, and broadcast them all so that one becomes a desirable product. This equation of product, consumer, and identity is already taken to heart by Eunice and her friends: "They seem like decent girls, effervescent but unsure of themselves, lusting after big-ticket items and some measure of identity, confusing one for the other" (203). Commodification is a driving force for surveillance among the characters. The novel's special kind of lateral surveillance may appear almost bizarre in its vulgarity, but it exploits the urges and desires of the characters in a way that is all too familiar to contemporary readers.

### 3 Post-Humanity versus the Power of Narrative

So far, I have applied Goold's insights about categorical identification to a reading of *Super Sad True Love Story* as satirical defamiliarization. As mentioned above, Goold remains rather vague when it comes to the question of self-identification. In this regard, *Super Sad True Love Story* unfolds its strength as a piece of literature. By lacing intertextual allusions

to poetry, science, and social movements, the novel manages to provide a more nuanced picture of dataveillance. Rather than *just* representing a mechanism of control, dataveillance is also a means to an end for Lenny and many other characters. In quantification and categorization, they see nothing short of the promise of immortality. This struggle is announced as a major conflict in the beginning of the novel. The headline of Lenny's first diary entry alludes to the villanelle "Do Not Go Gentle into that Good Night" by Dylan Thomas. Just as Thomas' persona obsessively repeats the poem's central theme of confronting age, sickness, meaninglessness, and death, Lenny is obsessed with the slow decay of his body. Rather than transcending death through technology and self-surveillance, however, Lenny gradually comes to accept the inevitable "dying of the light" (Thomas 116) by working through his fear in his diary. It is not very surprising that a *novel* would champion the power of narrative over the benefits of technology. Lenny's diary is nonetheless a complicated account of the relation between identification and dataveillance.

When Lenny speaks of death as a "nullification" (*SSTLS* 16) of personality, he appears to think of existence as binary, a matter of ones and zeroes. Beyond death, there is nothing. Since Lenny loves his life (most of it, that is), it is fitting that he works at "Post-Human Services," a company which engages in "Indefinite Life Extension." Until human beings can be converted into machines, Lenny's employer promises its clients eternal health through "dechronification treatments," nano-bots, surgeries, and most importantly, a rigid system of self-surveillance. With the help of their *äppärät* and its sensors, Lenny and his co-workers constantly monitor their vital signs and attempt to adjust their lifestyles accordingly. These passages display obvious parallels to the "Quantified Self" movement, which has been gaining traction over the last couple of years. Commercially available technology like Apple watches, fitbits and pebbles make it increasingly easy to track and quantify bodily functions in the service of health. According to Deborah Lupton, the underlying motivation of the movement largely coincides with the one espoused by Lenny:

The self-knowledge that is viewed as emerging from the minutiae of data recording a myriad of aspects of the body is a psychological salve to the fear of bodily degeneration. As one self-tracker has noted, his tracking efforts have "made me believe I had more power over my health than I thought." (Lupton n.p.)

In *Super Sad True Love Story*, this quantification of human life supplants religion. In fact, it *becomes* religion, which is metaphorically expressed through the train schedule at “Post-Human Services.” Since the corporation is housed in a former synagogue, the schedule is located in the storage place for the Torah scrolls. It literally and figuratively replaces the scripture of Judaism (55). What is more, Joshie occupies the top of the synagogue, and the commandment “You shall have no other gods before me” is written on the window outside (62). Through Lenny’s diary, the reader also learns that his quest for eternal life is fueled by a healthy dose of distrust in monotheistic religion. At several points throughout the story, Lenny mocks the concept of faith, and is portrayed as a staunch believer in scientific positivism (cf. for example 78, 188). As such, the only way to avoid the unspeakable and unthinkable fate of non-existence, to not go gentle into that good night, is to convert his body and mind into pieces of malleable information.

As names like “Post-Human Services” strongly suggest, *Super Sad True Love Story* includes post-humanism into its satirical rendition of dataveillance. Post-humanism is a broad nexus of theoretical currents concerned with discussing and expanding the limits of the concept of humanity (cf. Miah). In Joshie, the novel features a character who propagates a very specific aspect of this movement, namely that of transhumanism. Joshie can be seen as a fictional mouthpiece for Ray Kurzweil (credited by Shteyngart in the acknowledgments), a scientist who is well known for his championing of transhumanism. According to this line of thought, the constrictions of our organic bodies can be transcended through technology, and a fusion of machine and human life will sooner or later be possible (cf. Birnbacher). It would be an understatement to say that the novel offers a skeptical assessment of this idea. Initially, the “dechronification” treatments seem to work on Joshie’s body and his urge for eternal youth is fulfilled (*SSTLS* 61). In his framing notes on the fictional publication of his diary, however, Lenny paints a different picture of his former boss. By the end of the story he is riddled with illness, twitching and drooling, and warns: “Our genocidal war on free radicals proved more damaging than helpful, hurting cellular metabolism, robbing the body of control. In the end, nature simply would not yield” (327).

Where do the themes of transhumanism and dataveillance intersect? First of all, the promise of immortality peddled by Joshie rests on a strict dualism of body and mind. The body may change or eventually disappear, but Joshie emphasizes that *personality* must survive (124). Accordingly, the personality of an individual can be converted into digital algorithms and preserved for a long time. Lenny often expresses this belief through metaphors which mix software terminology with character, for example his wish to “download” Kelly Nardle’s goodness and “install it in our children” (178) or the eye contact he establishes with Eunice, which “was enough time to download a million bits of sympathy” (192). This belief is only possible if personality has an essence, is static and expressible in numbers. Incidentally, that is why Lenny writes diary entries in the first place. Joshie encourages his staff to keep a diary because it helps them “to remember who we were, because every moment our brains and synapses are being rebuilt and rewired with maddening disregard for our personalities, so that each year, each month, each day we transform into a different person, an utterly unfaithful iteration of our original selves” (63). The “original self” seems to precede a personality which, tied to a protean body, undergoes countless reconfigurations. The motto which the “Quantified Self” movement posts on its website is “self-knowledge through numbers” (*Quantified Self*). Joshie makes the same revelatory promise to his followers.

As Lenny adopts this view in order to become truly immortal, he is doomed to pursue an ideal essence that perpetually evades him. Neither he nor the reader fails to notice how fundamentally Lenny changes over the course of the novel. He ceases to view Joshie as fatherly authority figure and is forced to emancipate himself. His naïve (and at times sexist) feelings towards Eunice turn into a more sober appreciation of her as an equal. Most importantly, he gradually begins to accept the inevitability of death. Contrary to Joshie’s designs, the diary does not grant Lenny access to his original self. It depicts an identity that, like any narrative, is continually subject to reinterpretation and thus always in flux. Rather than gaining objective and permanent self-knowledge through numbers, Lenny makes the experience that “self-knowledge is an interpretation” (Ricoeur 188).

Not only does Lenny’s diary negate the belief in an antecedent original self, it also questions the duality of body and personality. In the beginning



of the novel, he is still somewhat convinced that feelings and urges are data: “And all these emotions, all these yearnings, all these *data*, if that helps to clinch the enormity of what I’m talking about, would be gone” (*SSTLS* 68). If emotions actually were data, then a personality could be conserved eternally without the need for a body. However, during the process of writing the diary, Lenny seems to notice that many of his bodily urges are not graspable rationally. He expresses this by likening them to animalistic impulses: “How to contain the natural reflex to stand up on one’s hind legs and sniff poignantly for the warmth of the sun? How to keep one’s mouth from finding Eunice’s and burrowing inside?” (103). A little later, the feeling of nature under his feet and the smell of Eunice suggest something like transcendence to Lenny. He even contemplates the existence of a God he so despises elsewhere (107). Although his worldview is grounded in post-humanity, Lenny slowly grasps the impossibility of thinking his identity and his body separate. He is not a floating personality, but an embodied subject.

The gradual change of Lenny’s attitude towards dataveillance and eternal life is also embedded into the imagery of his narrative. His friend Noah tells Lenny about a certain kind of “melancholy twentieth century light” flooding the city, and how this light makes one “want to both cry for something lost and run out there and welcome the decline of day” (202). The parallels to Dylan Thomas’ poem are unmistakable: “Do not go gentle into that good night/ Old age should burn and rave at *close of day*;/ Rage, rage against the *dying of the light*” (Thomas 116, emphasis mine). In contrast to fierce battle cry of Thomas’ persona, Noah’s observation betrays a diffuse sense of nostalgia and resignation. If everything dear is gone, what is there to fight for? Lenny spins this light into a metaphor of his own: “The fading light is us, and we are, for a moment so brief it can’t even register on our *äppärät* screens, beautiful” (*SSTLS* 203). Characterizing himself and Noah as “fading light” suggests not only that their existence in general is limited, but that their whole culture has an expiration date. Lenny, a relic of a past full of books and narratives, has no justification for still being alive in an age of images and acronyms. In this metafictional moment, the novel pities itself and the demise of its medium. At the same time, *Super Sad True Love Story* questions the domination of categorical identities. The beauty of the fading light is only noticeable for

a brief flicker, too subtle to be captured on a display. This signals Lenny's growing awareness that his identity is contingent. It is influenced by historical, political, and social stories that are only meaningful in the present moment. As such, it is anything but static. Its beauty flows from its perpetual change.

*Super Sad True Love Story* is a skeptical answer to the promise of post-humanity and justifications for categorical identification. Lenny's self-characterization suggests that humanity is defined by change, inconsistency and contingency. According to this "soft" humanism, human flourishing is impossible if each physical and social aspect of existence is quantified. The only solutions to Lenny's existential qualms are therefore narrative and interpretive. Over the course of the novel, it slowly dawns on Lenny that narratives must have closure to be meaningful. This is why, at the end of the novel, he has no problems with the notion of finitude, and actually welcomes the moment when all sounds and all stories cease: "For a while at least, no one said anything, and I was blessed with what I needed the most. Their silence, black and complete" (329).

#### 4 Why America is Gone: The End of American Exceptionalism

Lenny's observations in the US embassy in Rome at the beginning of the novel foreshadow the political and economic decline of America in the second half of the novel. As he arrives in the building, movers dismantle the interior to make way for its newest owners, the Norwegian state oil company. Documents are shredded, shrubbery is reshaped, and "the man-sized golden statue of our nation's E Pluribus Unum eagle" (*SSTLS* 8) is on its way out the door. As it turns out, these events repeat themselves on a larger scale later on. Lenny's employer, corporate giant Staatling-Wapachung, seizes power after a chaotic military struggle. They oversee the replacement of America's debt-ridden federal government by Chinese Investors, international corporations and monetary funds. By the end of the novel, the nation state formerly known as America is "gone," as Lenny summarizes in his exile (329). The reasons for its collapse are not just limited to a shaky economy and an inept government. Lenny's account shows that dataveillance has compromised the foundational myth

of American Exceptionalism. The ideals that underwrite this myth, such as democracy, free speech, and social mobility, are incommensurable with the society depicted in the novel. As the shared narratives of national identity fall away, America ceases to exist—in more ways than one. In the following paragraphs, I spell out how exactly the novel alludes to the myth of American Exceptionalism.

Lenny's narrative is characterized by fear. He is afraid to be shunned by his co-workers, afraid to be nullified, afraid to be imprisoned by the militaristic police of the "American Restoration Authority." When they force him to yield his personal data at a checkpoint, the fear is accompanied by resignation:

All you could hear were the whirs and clicks of our *äppäräti* being downloaded [...]. And the looks on the faces of my countrymen—passive heads bent, arms at their trousers, everyone guilty of not being their best, of not earning their daily bread, the kind of docility I had never expected from Americans, even after so many years of our decline. Here was the *tiredness* of failure imposed on a country that only believed in its opposite. Here was the end product of our deep moral exhaustion. (128)

This passage alludes to a myth that possibly spurred all others: the notion of American Exceptionalism. Since its inception, the American nation had to carry an immense ideological burden. The Puritan settlers of New England did not just set out to build a new society, but to create a role model for every other nation on the globe. In his sermon "A Model of Christian Charity," John Winthrop proclaimed that their colony was "as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us" (158). His lofty rhetoric became one of the roots for American Exceptionalism: "In these terms the exceptional destiny of America is to transform itself into a model nation; the correspondingly exceptional destiny of Americans is also self-transformation" (Madsen 2). Lenny's quote suggests that this obsessive belief in the opposite of failure resulted in resignation once failure was no longer to be denied. But who or what "imposed" failure on America, and how does Lenny define "failure" anyway? In the novel, the core values of American Exceptionalism—civil liberties, equality of opportunity, and democracy—have been compromised by a society that values the immediate and unambiguous appeal of databased categorical identification. The underlying assumption of related dataveillance practices is that

identification can be externalized to a grid of data, and that subjects have no more agency about the interpretation of this data. Because his society is pervaded by these practices, Lenny's narrative oozes with fear—fear of the government, fear of other Americans, fear of past mistakes that cannot be expunged. In an age that values the statistical recording of “original selves,” there can be no self-transformation.

Lenny's narrative focuses not only on identification, but also on economic self-transformation. Before his flight back to America at the beginning of the novel, Lenny meets a man who truly horrifies him. Not only is the man obese and shoddily dressed, he also has no *äppärät*. Lenny is scared because he cannot identify the man: “there was this one guy who registered nothing. I mean he wasn't there” (32). What shocks Lenny even more is the presence of the man in the first-class lounge. Since he cannot be ranked, categorized, and quantified, Lenny surmises, the man has no business mingling with High-Net-Worth-Individuals. Then, Lenny makes a telling remark: “Now, in hindsight, I want to imbue him with some heroism; I want to place a thick book in his hands and perch even thicker bifocals on his nose. I want him to look like Benjamin Franklin” (33, emphasis mine).

Read in the context of American decline, the passage does not appear to invoke Benjamin Franklin by accident. After all, Franklin wrote *Poor Richard's Almanack* and popularized the narrative of the modest man, successful through hard work and ingenuity. Foregoing the Puritan quest for religious revelation in favor of self-improvement, his text “represents an optimistic version of the American Dream of upward social mobility” (Paul 371). According to this myth of the self-made man, anyone can rise to the top if only he or she tries hard enough. Naturally, this vision of individual agency and upward social mobility is antithetical to the confluence of dataveillance and categorical identification as described by Poster and Goold. *Super Sad True Love Story* depicts a perfectly sortable and stratified America in which the government and private corporations distribute life chances. Because the novel is a satire, Post-Human Services literally distributes the chance for eternal life. Yet it is much more interesting to note, again, the fear Lenny feels when confronted with the “fat man”. Lenny yearns for the immediacy and predictability of categorical identities. The “fat man” introduces uncertainty into a perfectly stratified

and congealed society of “High Net-Worth Individuals” (14) and “Low Net-Worth Individuals” (245). To safeguard this society, Lenny and his fellow citizens jettison the dream of social mobility implied by the myth of American Exceptionalism.

The scene in the embassy recounted in the beginning of this section can be understood as a final metaphor for this end of American Exceptionalism. Just as the seal is replaced by the logo of the Norwegian State Oil Company, the American government is eventually replaced by private organizations. The age of dataveillance and categorical identification imagined by Shteyngart offers an influential role for corporations in the interpellation and identification of citizens. Since there is no government that guarantees civil liberties, democratic elections, or social equality, the foundational myth of the “city upon a hill” cannot serve as an ideological fabric for America anymore. Whether readers understand this as a dystopian vision of the future or a pointed commentary on the present after the Snowden revelations is left up to them.

## 5 Conclusion

*Super Sad True Love Story* displays its dystopian heritage in focusing on the unjust aspects of dataveillance. This becomes especially apparent when it tackles issues like agency, transparency, and commodification. Every time Lenny confronts the lists and rankings, he is in a state of nervous dread. The novel never clarifies who makes which decisions on what grounds and therefore robs its characters of any semblance of influence in the matter of identification. The social injustice brought about by the various sorting mechanisms erupts in civil unrest and catastrophe. Interestingly enough, *Super Sad True Love Story* can be read to make much grander claims on the basis of Lenny’s identity crisis. His discomfort in facing his categorical identity is paralleled by the satirical deconstruction of foundational American myths. In an age of static selves and databased identification, the myth of American Exceptionalism does not possess the ideological power to hold the country together any longer.

It is therefore easy to read *Super Sad True Love Story* as the expression of a mind grown weary with the state of contemporary culture and the promise of technological progress. Behind Shteyngart’s hyperactive

humor lies a bitterness that betrays the disillusioned satirist. Yet Lenny and Eunice are by no means flat characters merely in the service of a dystopian message. Rather than being powerless dupes of a totalitarian surveillance state, they participate willingly in the quantification and categorization of their physical and social selves. The promise of immortality may be a sham, but it is perfectly congruent with the ideal of an original self that manifests itself in lists and databases. Thus, dataveillance in the novel works not only on the characters, but also through them. The novel denies a naïve technological determinism. While we may be to a certain extent predetermined by ideology, our motivation to participate in surveillance/dataveillance always plays a role. By defamiliarizing an almost invisible practice that takes place every time we click an ad, every time we like a page, every time we swipe a credit card, *Super Sad True Love Story* makes us conscious that we do, indeed, participate.

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Birgit Däwes

# Flickers of Vision: Surveillance and the Uncertainty Paradigm in Dave Eggers's *The Circle*

Abstract: In modern industrial societies, uncertainty and insecurity have emerged as favored metaphorical antagonists to wealth, order, stability, and meaning. Over the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and especially in the wake of the terrorist attacks between 2001 in the United States and 2015 in France, they have also become the major discourses in legitimizing systematic surveillance: the promise of public safety has sustainably overshadowed, if not substituted, concerns of privacy in a larger semantic shift of risk and security. Dave Eggers's novel *The Circle* (2013) addresses this shift through the lens of contemporary Internet technology. In his dystopian *roman-à-clef*, the protagonist Mae is transformed from the new, insecure employee of the world's leading social media corporation into one of its most fervent agents in the battle for a gaplessly transparent society. This chapter investigates the interfaces between uncertainty and control around which the novel revolves as well as its specific representations of what William Staples has termed the "security-industrial complex." In a reading based on Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle, by which the process of observing particular systems inevitably impacts those systems and distorts the observation's results, I am interested in the ways in which Eggers's text engages with (and falls victim to) the traditional alliance between seeing and power. Ultimately, the aesthetics of the novel reproduce rather than undermine the nexus of "surveillance security," as I term it with a nod to Garrett Stewart's influential work.

**Keywords:** Surveillance, uncertainty, security, Dave Eggers, *The Circle*, Werner Heisenberg, Diego Velázquez, Michel Foucault

## 1 Of Mirrors and Mimesis

In Diego Velázquez's 1656 painting *Las Meninas*, eleven figures and one dog are looking into different directions, and seven of the gazes seem to target the same subject—us. A painter (Velázquez himself), surrounded by members of the Spanish court (among them most prominently the five-year-old Infanta Margarita and her eponymous maids of honor), is apparently at work on an oversized canvas. In the background, among several

overshadowed paintings, and next to the Spanish Queen's chamberlain, Don José Nieto Velázquez, who guards the back door, the shiny square of a mirror indicates the presence of Philip IV and Mariana, the King and Queen themselves. Presented in perfect mimetic realism, the scene is indeed, as Michel Foucault has famously argued, "the representation [...] of Classical representation," but with "an essential void: the necessary disappearance of that which is its foundation—of the person it resembles and the person in whose eyes it is only a resemblance" (*Order* 20). "We are observing ourselves being observed by the painter, and made visible to his eyes by the same light that enables us to see him" (6).

It is an admittedly playful gesture to start an argument on surveillance with Foucault's *Order of Things* rather than with the more customary *Discipline and Punish*, but *Las Meninas* is used here neither for a provocative anachronism nor for an eclectic spotting of surveillance culture *avant le mot*. If we take the practice of surveillance, as David Lyon does in his most recent study, to be "any systematic and routine attention to personal details, whether specific or aggregate, for a defined purpose," which may be "to protect, understand, care for, ensure entitlement, control, manage or influence individuals or groups" (*Surveillance* 3), Velázquez's painting does not seem to be a natural match. Even if the King and Queen are physically present and thus represent a form of institutionalized oversight within the diegetic space of the painting, the only *dispositif* of data collection there is the canvas. At the same time, in terms of its visual structure and form, the painting provides a paradigmatic space of uncertainty—or insecurity, to stretch semantics just slightly—not only of its object of representation, but of epistemological processes at large. Therefore, as I argue here, the painting is linked to current political issues by its visualization of the nexus between seeing and knowledge; but I am also using it as a preface to my argument because of its intriguing engagement of visibility and invisibility as simultaneous entities—and thus as a useful approach to one of the central problems within the contemporary culture of surveillance.

*Las Meninas* is among the most widely discussed works of art in Europe, and thus deeply embedded in Western culture: "The scholarship surrounding it," Amy Ione writes, "is so vast that no single thinker or volume can present it fully" (51). From John Searle's famous approach in

1980, in which he identifies the central paradox of the painting as a basic representational one—"The painter [...] is painting the scene we see, but he can't be because he is in it. From where he is in the picture, he can see and paint a different scene but not the scene represented in *Las Meninas*" (486)—to Kevin Bongiorno's argument that *Las Meninas* presents us with "a sort of 'meta' literary text that [...] reveals its codes of (classical pictorial) representation, codes that are clearly those of literature" (95), many readings have stressed the painting's emphasis on visibility and representation, but its implications of seeing and power have not been exhaustively addressed, especially for a contemporary context.

At first glance, the relationships established by seeing in Velázquez's painting seem symmetrical: gazes meet in "a condition of pure reciprocity" (Foucault, *Order* 17). However, given the rules of perspective and proportion, the mirror image dismantles any mimetic claim at second glance: if we see, exactly in front of us, the reflection of King Philip and his wife (who we know we are not), the position of the viewer becomes impossible. This is the moment when the visual setup of the painting invites and necessitates contextual narrative to soften or solve the contradiction, restore order, and establish meaning. In attempts to do precisely that, critics such as Martin Kemp and others have argued that the mirror thus has to reflect not the viewer, but the canvas to the left: in this interpretation, Velázquez is painting a double portrait (Kemp 106–08). Simon Altmann has convincingly disproven this theory on the basis of historical evidence, since no such portrait could be found in the court's inventory, and the mirror itself is unlikely to have been on the wall of the painter's studio. If a mirror of that size—at the time nearly impossible to make and thus of enormous value—had really been part of the palace's decor, it would certainly not have been framed in simple wood (6). Altmann thus concludes that the mirror is but a device of poetic license: a stylistic device that enables Velázquez to enhance his own status as a painter. The royal couple "had to appear to just have popped in" (7). Furthermore, a vast section of the foreground is taken up by what Foucault calls "the ironic canvas": "Of all the representations represented in the picture this is the only one visible; but no one is looking at it" (*Order* 6). Most crucially, our own attempts at scrutiny remain futile: we can determine but the signifier of a concealed visual code. It is this uncertainty of signification that

I am interested in, which William Bogard much later describes as central to a “new semiotic of control” [...], one founded not on truth relations between a sign and the reality it purports to represent, but on the radical indeterminacy of those relations” (34).

*Las Meninas* thus disrupts one of the central paradigms of contemporary surveillance culture: the one that equates visual or digital observation with an increase in security. While suggesting to provide us with an exact and mimetic depiction of reality, the painting fundamentally—and most productively—questions the relationship between signifier and signified and thus invites a reading practice that is also useful within 21<sup>st</sup> century contexts of surveillance—and not only within the realm of the visual.

## 2 SurveillanSecurity

In modern industrial societies, uncertainty and insecurity have emerged as favored metaphorical antagonists to wealth, order, stability, and meaning. Over the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and especially in the wake of the terrorist attacks of 2001, the discourse of risk has become the driving force in legitimizing systematic surveillance. As Kelly A. Gates notes, “[t]he new levels of global insecurity inspired by the 9/11 terrorist attacks were seen as an unprecedented opportunity for growth in an already expanding global security industry” (“Globalization” 292). Visibility and security have been crucially tied together since Jeremy Bentham’s model of the panopticon, in which the central observation tower signifies—through its very visibility—the behavioral safe-keeping of the inmates. In today’s “security-industrial complex” (Staples 6), this visibility effect has clearly intensified, but to a different effect. According to Lyon, Haggerty, and Ball, “surveillance has become simultaneously more visible and invisible” (3):

On the one hand, as we go about our daily lives it is hard to miss the proliferating cameras, demands for official documents and public discussions about internet dataveillance. At the same time, there is a curious invisibility surrounding these practices. The actual operation of surveillance, the precise nature and depth of its penetration, along with the protocols for how one is singled out for suspicion or reward are opaque to all but a select few insiders. (3)

This is not only true for politics and the public space, but particularly so for the field of popular culture and film. There has been a notable increase

in dystopian narratives of watching, including, for instance, *The Truman Show* (1998), *Minority Report* (2002), *The Wire* (2002–2008), or more recently, Paul Greengrass's *Jason Bourne* (2016). This proliferation, on various screens, of cameras, monitors, and other visual technology is clearly linked to what Thomas Levin calls the “surveillant recasting of traditional narrative omniscience” (590), in which the camera becomes the safeguard of audience control. Through this conflation of the representational lens with narrative meaning, watching is no longer merely a theme but a formal and structural condition to restore and maintain the illusion of security. At the same time, however, this double effect paradoxically draws attention away from the actual sites of power: The projection of government spies and military technology, seen from a heterodiegetically omniscient angle, merely assures us of our outside position, while our cell phones, Internet searches, and social media posts continuously contribute to a surveillant economic matrix. This case has been well argued for Peter Weir's *The Truman Show*, for instance, a film that “simultaneously invokes a world of total panopticism but also insists that it is *not* our world, but only that of the (hubristic) televisual simulacrum” (Levin 591). Thus, if Julian Sanchez is right in assuming that “[o]ur ability to understand the realities and dangers of surveillance [...] depends crucially on the stories we tell,” then the profusion of dystopian cultural imaginaries of state control is merely putting the fox in charge of the henhouse, and different narratives are needed to approach the contemporary culture of surveillance from a more critical angle (“On Fiction”).

### 3 Glass Tanks and Circles of (Mis)Trust

In contrast to narratives of governmental dominance, in which “clandestine interception and its medial channels are caught in just such a closed circuit of cause and effect, perpetration and resistance” (Stewart xiii), Dave Eggers's *The Circle* has been celebrated by critics as a refreshing take on the “callow info-utopianism espoused by Julian Assange [...] or the dreams of social connectivity realized by Mark Zuckerberg”—and thus as a timely example of participatory dataveillance (Linklater, see also Stevenson as well as Atwood). In this 2013 *roman-à-clef*, the protagonist is transformed from the new, timid employee of the world's leading social

media corporation into one of its most fervent agents in the battle for a gaplessly transparent society. Mae Holland, age 24, whose first name already indicates her status as an allegory of insecurity, represents a generation of young, educated believers in digital progress: together with 10,000 others, she works at the headquarters of The Circle, the novel's eponymous company. While set in a fictitious Northern Californian town called San Vincenzo, the similarities of this company to Google, Facebook, Apple, and PayPal are too obvious not to be noticed (Clark 50): The Circle is described as a technology syndicate "on the forefront of social media" (Eggers 185), which has "been devouring all competitors for years" (482), bought the Facebook archives (123), provides a search engine for 90% of the world's online searches (482), and receives billions of dollars in grants from the Department of Education (337). Its headquarters, built in finest architecture of "brushed steel and glass" (1), are called a "campus" (2); its three founders are not without resemblance to Larry Page, Sergej Brin, or Steve Jobs; and with its free cafeterias and health center, its shuttle buses and dorms, and its elaborate sports and entertainment program, it is also "the world's most admired company" (2). Security is writ large here, and it is closely connected to transparency: all of the products developed by The Circle follow the founders' belief that "everyone should have a right to *know* everything and should have the *tools* to know anything" (286).

Since the first impediment to this goal is the anonymity of the Internet, The Circle has introduced "TruYou,"<sup>1</sup> an authentic user account connected to each individual's identity and payment system (21). In addition, the company works with a free health plan at its own "prevention-emphasis clinic" (151), in which all employees make their medical data accessible online through an ingested sensor and a wrist monitor. "The bracelet was beautiful," Mae notices (156), but in addition to its aesthetic appeal, it also ensures the elimination of any "incomplete information" (155). As a complement to this medical surveillance, the company introduces "SeeChange," the widespread deployment of inconspicuous, lollipop-sized cameras to prevent crime (67). Every new product is advertised by

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1 Like Google's "PageRank," all Circle innovations are compound words.

its contribution to physical, medical, or social security: the automatic warning system “NeighborWatch” ensures an instant digital alert to any intruder, “SoulSearch” encourages everyone to share information on potential criminals, and “ChildTrack” works by embedding a digital chip in an infant’s wrist bone so that parents always know where their offspring is located: “The second a kid’s not where he’s supposed to be, a massive alert goes off, and the kid can be tracked down immediately. [...] So immediately you take all child abduction, rape, murder, and you reduce it by 99 percent” (89). In the complementary “TruYouth” program, this chip remains to ensure identity verification of each individual as he or she grows up; these verified identities are then called upon to vote about all sorts of topics in “Demoxie,” which turns political decisions into continuous referenda. Since representational democracy is considered a flawed system in which mostly “wealthy white men” are empowered, The Circle develops a software for public polls: authenticated through their digital chip and retinal interfaces, all citizens participate in politics by voting on given questions, deciding, for instance, whether a terrorist suspect should be killed by a drone strike (404).

In addition to the promise of ensuring global security—or a “multi-national” version of “homeland security,” in Kelly Gates’s words—the incentives to participate in this ubiquitous dataveillance system are economic or social, and thus hardly different from those operating today (“Globalization” 296). All conveniences—including meals and housing—are free, competition among colleagues rewards the best participation rank in social media activities, and the cult-like community of employees follows the company’s promise of “peace” (Eggers 491), “unity” (491), and safety with “a duty that felt holy” (490). For Mae personally, this dedication is most profoundly motivated by her pathological fear of insecurity:

what had always caused her anxiety, or stress, or worry [...] was internal: it was subjective: it was *not knowing*. It wasn’t that she [...] was called on the carpet by Josiah and Denise: it was not knowing what it meant, not knowing their plans, not knowing the consequences, the future. If she knew these, there would be calm. [...] If she could eliminate this kind of uncertainty—when and by whom would you be touched a certain way again—you could eliminate most of the stressors of the world, and maybe, too, the wave of despair that was gathering in Mae’s chest. (194)

In contrast to the “chaos of an orderless world” off-campus (370), The Circle eliminates risk and gives her stability: “The elegance of it all, the ideological purity of the Circle, of real transparency, gave her peace, a warming feeling of logic and order” (415). Since she is also prone to what David Lyon calls “scopophilia”—the love of watching that has “become commonplace within a ‘viewer society’” and thus safeguards a broad acceptance of surveillance practices (“9/11” 36)—she willingly casts aside any “selfish hoarding of life” (Eggers 491) and decides to “go transparent”: wearing a camera around her neck 24 hours a day, she shares every move with a steadily growing online audience of ultimately 100 million people. Having perfectly internalized The Circle’s dogma that “Secrets are lies,” “Sharing is caring,” and “Privacy is theft” (303), Mae Holland ends up as the perfect caricature of a personified digital company, not too different from the phenomenon that Leander Kahney has termed “the cult of Mac” (4).

Among the merits of this novel, critics mostly emphasize its rare combination of “entertainment and ideological debate” (Stevenson). Indeed, in terms of prognostic accuracy, Eggers’s diagnosis is particularly sharp: Whereas the fictitious Danish company allegedly testing “ChildTrack” does not exist just yet, other features of The Circle’s transparency venture are uncannily realistic. In January 2016, Eva Wolfangel wrote in *Die ZEIT* about two computer scientists continuously wearing cameras in order to record their lives: although not connected to the Internet, these cameras promise a perfect form of memory that scientists call “life-logging.” A heavily EU-funded research group accordingly calls its venture “Project Recall.” “This is more imminent than most people think,” she quotes one of the researchers, who believes we will all soon be wearing automatic cameras (29 [translation mine]).

From this point of view, Eggers’s novel is a useful tool to raise awareness for our rapidly changing social codes, especially in educational contexts of media literacy. At the same time, however, I believe that the novel ultimately fails in this project by narratively reproducing the very structures it purports to criticize. Since its criticism of Mae Holland’s insecurity entirely lacks ambivalence, even the dystopian ending—in which Mae betrays, endangers, or indirectly kills the few individuals who cared for her—eventually deconstructs its own ethical ambitions.



Throughout most of the novel, Mae is attracted to a mysterious figure who seems to work on The Circle campus, but whom she cannot identify or find through the company's tracking systems. His name is Kalden, and he turns out to be one of the "Three Wise Men" (19), the founders of the company. Kalden, who has doubts about the totalitarian system of transparency that has become the company's goal, tries to seduce Mae, and to convince her that she has to resist, but when she finds out about his actual identity, she sides with the other founders in their efforts to contain the threat. While the narrative principles of ambiguity and uncertainty are thus upheld for a large part of the novel, this particular outcome, the novel's overall resolution, its stereotypical characters, and its symbolism dissolve any potential of intervention in the contemporary paradigm of insecurity. If Kalden's abilities to navigate The Circle campus unseen first hold a promise of sabotaging or stopping the totalitarian system by superior technological knowledge, the construction of his character as Mae's lover—and his dependence on her trust—not only leads to his downfall diegetically, but it reduces him to a wooden puppet of authorial intent when he spells out the message in detail: "Most of what's happening must stop," he says to Mae. "I'm serious. The Circle is almost complete and Mae, you have to believe me that this will be bad for you, for me, for humanity" (321). "Like Kalden," as Ellen Ullman puts it in the *New York Times*, "Eggers tends to overexplain," and so Kalden is complemented by Mae Holland's ex-boyfriend Mercer Medeiros, who abundantly serves as the voice of reason from the outside. Pointing out The Circle's voracious capitalism, and its followers' blindness and "social[l] autis[m]" (Eggers 260), he shares insights such as "[s]urveillance shouldn't be the tradeoff for any goddamn service we get" (367) or "the tools you guys create actually *manufacture* unnaturally extreme social needs" (133). The fact that he is driven into a literal abyss by the outraged digital crowd may demonstrate Eggers's dystopian cynicism, but it does not contribute to aesthetic complexity. As Ijoma Mangold summarizes these literary missteps in *Die ZEIT*:

The Circle is, in a rather conspicuous way, a bad novel. Like a textbook example, it fulfills the classic criteria of bad novels: trivial language without any aesthetic surplus, a predictable plot, stereotypically dichotomous contrasts of good and evil, dialogues that have been didactically constructed like an opinion piece, and

characters who simply represent these opinions; mere cardboard dummies, who overarticulate any associations readers are supposed to have. [translation mine]

*Der Circle* ist sogar ein in besonders offensichtlicher Weise schlechter Roman. Er erfüllt bilderbuchmäßig die klassischen Kriterien für schlechte Romane: eine banale Sprache ohne ästhetischen Mehrwert, Vorhersehbarkeit der Handlung, klischeehafte Schwarz-Weiß-Kontraste von Gut und Böse, Dialoge, die didaktisch so aufgebaut sind wie ein Besinnungsaufsatz, und Figuren als Meinungsträger, reine Pappkameraden, die alles, was der Leser sich denken soll, für die Doofen noch mal extra sagen.

The erasure of semiotic diversity effectively works through the provision of stability for readers by narrative omniscience, formulaic characters, as well as a plot development driven by familiarity and closure, and it becomes even more obvious in the maritime imagery of *The Circle*: when kayaking alone on the bay early in the novel, Mae enjoys peaceful moments among the seals (139) and gladly accepts her limited control and knowledge: “She guessed at it all, what might live, moving purposefully or drifting aimlessly, under the deep water around her, but she didn’t think too much about any of it. It was enough to [...] take comfort in knowing she would not, and really could not, know much at all” (270). Later, when Stenton, one of her bosses, brings home a few “heretofore unknown” sea creatures (307) from the Mariana Trench to populate the company’s decorative aquarium, this image is elaborately expanded into a classic conceit. All of the animals, brought to light for the first time, are “near-translucent” (307), made visible through the transparent walls of the aquarium, and multiplied by Mae’s camera to be watched by millions of viewers online. In order to get “a realistic and holistic look [...] at how creatures like this cohabitate” (474), Stenton adds a shark to the spectacle: “a bizarre creature, ghost-like, vaguely menacing and never still” (307), with a “malevolent stare” but also “omnivorous and blind” (307). It is hardly difficult to guess what happens to the “happy creatures” populating the aquarium (473):

[L]ike a machine going about its work, the shark *circled* and stabbed until he had devoured the thousand babies, and the seaweed, and the coral, and the anemones. It ate everything, and deposited the remains quickly, carpeting the empty aquarium in a low film of white ash.” (477 [emphasis added])

This scene of Stenton’s “feed” (pun apparently intended) pointedly summarizes the novel’s failed poetics of transparency: any criticism of the fatal alliance between security and surveillance is ultimately contained

in the safe hermeneutic aquarium of analogy. This overall lack of subtlety can be read as an intentional feature of satire; a “Menippean satire,” as Margaret Atwood reminds us in her review, which targets ideas and institutions rather than individuals and uses “at least two different languages, genres, tones, or cultural or historical periods to combat a false and threatening orthodoxy” (Weinbrot 11). At the same time, however, these two realms—the one we recognize, in which Julian Assange, Alexander Kalder, and Stanford University are mentioned, and the dystopian one in the near future—are so close to each other that they become indistinguishable, a flicker of vision that makes us close the book at a safe distance. The air-tight security of narrative closure seems to work at cross-purposes to the uncertainty or ambiguity endorsed by the satire. Instead of disrupting patterns of seeing and knowledge or even sketching alternatives, Eggers’s dystopia ultimately performs the politics of contemporary surveillance culture, in which the agency of omniscience and the comfort of closure erase any potential of subverting larger patterns of knowledge; and the author seems compelled to mobilize the formal strictures he is at pains to criticize when they impact our social lives.

#### 4 Waves and Particles

In quantum physics, Werner Heisenberg has famously noted that it is impossible to exactly measure two complementary characteristics of an object at the same time, such as its position and its momentum. The more accurately the momentum (as the product of mass and velocity) of an object is determined, the more uncertain its position, and vice versa. In consequence, it is the very process of observing particular systems that inevitably changes their features and distorts the observation’s results. As Heisenberg puts it:

The uncertainty principle refers to the degree of indeterminateness in the possible present knowledge of the simultaneous values of various quantities with which the quantum theory deals [...]. Thus suppose that the velocity of a free electron is precisely known, while the position is completely unknown. Then the principle states that every subsequent observation of the position will alter the momentum by an unknown and undeterminable amount such that after carrying out the experiment our knowledge of the electronic motion is restricted by the uncertainty relation. (20)

In other words, applied to Dave Eggers's narrative strategy in *The Circle*, one cannot have the cake of the surveillant antagonist—as a safe, exterior projection in the diegetic space—and eat it (or safely observe it) too. This effect is linked to a defining feature of subatomic objects, which physicists call their wave-particle duality. Since elementary particles manifest both as particles and as waves, the dichotomy between these two properties is revoked, just as the mirror in Velázquez's *Las Meninas* projects us as simultaneously being a historically specific royal couple and a generic contemporary spectator. In Eggers's novel, this duality is reduced to the containment of unambiguous narrative codes of familiarity and recognition; a form of security that ultimately echoes the very politics his novel seems to criticize.

It is here that I see the merit of uncertainty not only as a scientific framework, but as an aesthetic potential in addressing the challenges of contemporary surveillance culture. A truly counter-surveillant aesthetic would, in contrast to *The Circle*, not only leave open the gaps but also highlight uncertainty as a structural, formal, and narrative principle. With few exceptions, such as Jennifer Egan's *Black Box* or Joshua Cohen's *Book of Numbers*, recent American surveillance fiction has not been particularly rich in explorations of such an aesthetic. At the same time, if David Lyon is correct that we need “alternative visions” (*Surveillance* 137) and “ethical tools for assessing surveillance, a broadened sense of why privacy matters and ways of translating these into political goals” (123), narratives of surveillance are vital in this remapping of our future. However, when these narratives conflate the representational lens with a surveillant one, in which the reader or viewer are enticed into the secure space of omniscience, their emancipatory politics run—if that trope may be excused here—in circles.

## 5 An Uncertain Conclusion

To return to Velázquez: The disturbance of the viewer's gaze is subtle in *Las Meninas*; almost imperceptible, and yet, as Foucault summarizes, “[i]t may be that [...] the profound invisibility of what one sees is inseparable from the invisibility of the person seeing—despite all mirrors, reflections, imitations, and portraits” (*Order* 19). This dual invisibility is also central to another work of art produced much later: When visitors enter James

Turrell's 2013 installation *St. Elmo's Light*, they also face what looks like a screen or canvas. Two spotlights illuminate the backside corners of the room, but their perceptual direction is misleading: as they point to empty walls, attention is instead directed toward the bright purple area at the center. The shape and format of the screen raise expectations, particularly in the context of surveillance culture: viewers are likely to look for content, but there is no image in the monochromatic color. While we scrutinize this monitor for meaning, we are soon subject to an uncanny effect: as the eyes gradually adjust to the dim light, the perception of the room changes. Without redirecting our gaze, we realize that the observed space is transformed: what seemed to be a self-illuminating screen is in fact a hole in the wall from which diffused light emanates. Thus, behind the apparent monitor, a second space opens up, in which concepts of presence and absence, the visible and the invisible, flow in and out of each other. The title, *St. Elmo's Light*, also plays with this boundary between the tangible and the perceptual: named after a rare weather phenomenon in which luminous plasma indicates an electric field around the tops of ship masts or the wings of airplanes, the installation indexes the unreliability of perception at large.

James Turrell calls this effect "See[ing] yourself seeing" (qtd. in Abrams): whereas mimetic art highlights a loyal relationship to reality, his perceptual art is about dismantling our reliance on our senses to register reality. This installation captures the modern shift of power more aptly than Bentham's panopticon or Eggers's aquarium: its transition from seeing something present to seeing absence effectively celebrates the paradigm of uncertainty rather than trying to eliminate it. Whereas Foucault argues—in *Discipline and Punish*—that through the panopticon, "an obscure art of light and the visible was secretly preparing a new knowledge of man" (171), Turrell reminds us that this "knowledge" is not inherent in the structures of seeing. On the contrary; we require techniques of decoding, analyzing, and contextualizing information in order to make meaning. In these processes of decoding, neither the spectacular self-advertisement of contemporary "surveillancinema" (Stewart 250), nor Eggers's restoration of narratological security will prove particularly useful in the development of new epistemological and ethical patterns. The contemporary security industry pursues an obvious agenda by conflating seeing and truthfulness,

particularly so with an ever-increasing perceived threat and rising levels of fear.<sup>2</sup> The War on Terror, for instance, (not to mention Donald Trump's glorification of a wall to visibly separate 'good' from 'evil') often uses simplified specters of Otherness in order to promote particular policies and particular technologies—to the benefit of specific IT corporations. With regard to facial recognition software, Kelly Gates sees a problematic tendency in both academia and popular culture to accept this logic, i.e., “to gloss over the amount of effort that goes into developing and integrating new technologies and systems,” and, in accordance, “the prevalent myth of inevitability surrounding this and other new forms of surveillance” (*Biometric Future* 5).

In contrast to this myth of inevitability, the unknown canvas in *Las Meninas* and the lack of materiality in Turrell's monitor encourage us to think about our invisible complicity in the transformation of social structures. Acknowledging uncertainty may cause us to turn to the blind spots, to admitting our uncertainty about what happens when we simply accept, without reading, the 49-page terms of agreement for yet another free service or device. This acknowledgment, as celebrated by these works of art, could be a first step—if only, as Foucault states his aim when writing about *Las Meninas*—“to keep the relation of language to vision open” and to “preserve the infinity of the task” (10).

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2 See Glassner

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## The *Black Box* of Humanism: Surveillance, the Spy Narrative, and Literary Form

Abstract: I argue that Jennifer Egan's *Black Box*, first published as a series of tweets by the *New Yorker* in 2012, is a covert action, in enemy territory, on the side of literary humanism. The novella responds to threats posed by digital communication—the threat to literature and the threat to privacy—by spying on the electronic medium of surveillance. That is to say it masquerades as a spy story in order to use familiar narrative conventions as a shield for its true subject, which is the pathos of the protagonist's partially observed destiny, or what I will call clandestinity: the secreting of something private in the midst of the public sphere. Clandestinity is not on the side of surveillance but a refuge from it. Under the guise of patriotism, embedded in data transfer, Egan's twitter thriller smuggles in the kind of literary character that has become one of the novel's trademark features in its public representation of the private sphere.

**Keywords:** Surveillance, literariness, spy novel, humanism, digital communication

From a humanist perspective, technology often seems to dominate those it was designed to help. Surveillance, aided by advances in computer and video technology, is one of the more recent examples of such domination. The search-engines and cameras designed to pander to our interests and keep criminals at bay, end up divulging our secrets, destroying our privacy, and subjecting personal preferences to the impersonal forces of government and the market.

This humanist perspective is captured by Zygmunt Bauman and David Lyon's phrase "liquid surveillance," which deliberately links recent developments in security technology to the transformations ushered in by modernity and postmodernity. "Liquid" points back to Marx and Engels's observation in the "The Communist Manifesto" that "everything solid melts into air" (Bauman and Lyon 2–3; Marx and Engels 476). By "everything" Marx and Engels meant the social relations and institutions transformed by capitalism, but also the workers who, stripped of their humanity, became replaceable cogs in industrial machines. If rationalized

production methods liquefy human relations in modernity, advertising and ideology pose the main threats in postmodernity. Consumers, duped into believing that the free market guarantees freedom, assembled their identities from commercial products, thus aligning consumption with the political objectives of the Cold War (Jameson 113). The digitization of consumer culture and the security concerns of the ‘War on Terror’ bring about the next stage in technological alienation. Citizen-consumers using digital platforms like the Internet and smart phones divulge personal information for the sake of compliance and convenience. As technology becomes so liquid that it seeps into everyday life, tracking our ‘likes’ as it reports our locations with our full (if not fully informed) consent, human beings become indistinguishable from the algorithms mapping their preferences. Thus the paramount ethical challenge of the digital age lies in recognizing the humanity behind the flow of information (Bauman and Lyon 7). It is from this humanist perspective—one that grasps at the *human* as a stable point in the liquid flow of data—that Bauman voices his critique of contemporary surveillance. Responding to Lyon’s partially rhetorical questions, “why? what for? and, have you any idea what the human consequences are of all this?” he argues that surveillance stems from “the human, all too-human and inherent urge for transcendence” that tries to create “a world with no contingency or accidents, ‘unanticipated consequences’ or reverses of fate” (116).

It is not my intention to challenge Lyon and Bauman’s humanist critique of surveillance. On the contrary, I find that their fear of the unintended consequences of technological innovation points to the ongoing relevance of cultural, or more narrowly literary, innovation. That relevance is connected, paradoxically, to literature’s own precarious status in the information age. From a humanist point of view, surveillance challenges the humanities in the same way it challenges humanity. Digital technology dissolves literature into data just as it dissolves personalities into profiles. Conversely, the humanities provide a refuge from the threat posed by surveillance, upholding the importance of literary form and point of view in ways that “give[s] the human artifice the stability without which it could never be a reliable home for men,” to borrow the words of Hannah Arendt (167). Literature is an artifice that like technology betrays an “urge for transcendence,” but it is a different kind of artifice offering a different kind

of transcendence in the face of technological change (Bauman and Lyon 116; see Arendt 173–74).

Can the humanities bolster humanity as a stable point in the liquid flow of information? Some scholars, like Bauman, are thankful for the critical perspective provided by literature but less sanguine about its possibility to provide refuge or imagine alternatives (Bauman and Lyon 108–14). Others, more extreme, argue that technology renders a particular form of literature, the novel, obsolete. This is a modernist version of the literary humanist argument that Mark Greif calls the “Crisis of Man to Death of the Novel”: “Various deaths of the novel had been proposed in literary culture since the early days of modernism, often to announce that some new literary rival had already arrived” (104).<sup>1</sup> The version of the argument that I find most useful is that articulated by the German literary and media scholar Jochen Hörisch in his *Ende der Vorstellung* (1999). Hörisch links the displacement of the book—he does not pick on the novel—to the transformation of the traditional public and private spheres brought about by the digital revolution:

Together with the classic public sphere (and its complement, the private sphere), both of which it helped form, the book has wandered to the periphery of the contemporary media age. It is becoming—in a double sense of the term—eccentric [...]. But doesn't the periphery provide a better vantage point to observe what is going on in the tumultuous center? (130, my translation)

Zusammen mit der klassischen Öffentlichkeit (und ihrem Komplement: der Privatsphäre), zu deren Strukturierung es entschieden beitrug, wandert das Buch an die Peripherie des entfalteten Medienzeitalters. Es wird—im doppelten Sinne des Wortes—exzentrisch [...]. Aber läßt sich von der Peripherie her nicht besser beobachten, was im tumultuösen Zentrum vor sich geht?

This rhetorical question is an attempt to preserve the importance of literature while acknowledging its contemporary precariousness. In moving the

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1 Greif provides an extensive list of modernist critics who thought that the traditional novel would have to be buried so that literature could begin to deal with social and technological change. Contemporary proponents of the argument include Robert Coover (“the novel [...] as we know it, has come to its end” [n.p.]) and Jonathan Arac (“since the early twentieth century, literature has become less important within culture as a whole” [57]).

book to the margin, Hörisch does not abandon the humanist project—he relocates it in a way I hope to follow here.

Hörisch also scripts that relocation, providing the move to the periphery with character and a plot. The book, no longer central, becomes a secret observer. Extrapolating for the purposes of my argument, I would say that under the conditions of digital culture, when surveillance becomes a fact of everyday life and the private and the public cease to exist in their traditional forms, the book defends the cause of literary humanism by turning to particular literary forms. The form I want to focus on here is the spy narrative.

My case study is a recent spy novel or novella that did not begin as a book: Jennifer Egan’s *Black Box*, which beginning on the evening of May 24<sup>th</sup>, 2012 was published as a series of 60 tweets released in ten nightly installments by the *New Yorker*, then in the print magazine on June 4<sup>th</sup> (my references are all to the print version). Later it was picked up as a print and electronic book internationally, including in Germany, where *Spiegel Online* described it as “Mata Hari mit [with] Smartphone” (Buß).

Such experiments in digital writing are not without precedence, but Egan’s short novel was particularly well received, probably because she had already won acclaim as an author. Her previous novel, *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2010), earned the National Book Critics Circle Award and a Pulitzer Prize in 2011. Set in the near future, in the midst of an ongoing ‘War on Terror’ and uninterrupted digital communication, it postulates a growing nostalgia for analog music, which must nevertheless be promoted through clandestine digital networking.<sup>2</sup>

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2 One example of the analog nostalgia: Benny, a music producer, mourns the “*aesthetic holocaust*” of digitally produced music and yearns for the “muddiness” of 1980s punk music (*Goon Squad* 26). By the end of the novel he gets back in touch with a former band member from his youth, a guitarist who has lived on the margins of society, without a cell phone and without leaving a digital foot print, and he decides to stage a concert (using cell phones as marketing devices), to a remarkable public acclaim: “two generations of war and surveillance had left people craving the embodiment of their own unease in the form of a lone, unsteady man on a slide guitar” (*Goon Squad* 373).

*Black Box* builds on *Goon Squad* in terms of both narrative and marketing strategy. The novella was widely promoted on the *New Yorker's* website<sup>3</sup>, which emphasizes Egan's analog writing style (hand-written drafts on special Japanese note-paper); and the plot follows one of the minor characters from *Goon Squad*, grown from a pre-teen to a woman in her thirties, who takes on a secret mission for the US government. It is clear that the War on Terror has never ended, but just who the enemy is remains vague. The protagonist is also nameless and trained to masquerade as one of the interchangeable "beauties" who seem to populate the harems of unidentified enemy agents (85). We know from clues linking this story to Egan's previous novel that the hero's name is Lulu. Her observations constitute the narrative of the story but with an innovative twist. The approximately 140-character tweets are supposed to represent Lulu's thoughts, recorded in real time on a device implanted at her hairline, and formulated in the second person to serve as a field manual for future beauties. This recorder is the black box contained in her body, and it is designed to function like the black box in planes in the event that Lulu is killed. Agents are vulnerable; and in this fictional world they can only be used once before they are compromised for clandestine operations anyway. They are not exactly disposable but on the verge of obsolescence, encouraged to protect the data they store even if they must sacrifice their lives to do so, in the same way they are encouraged to subordinate themselves to the greater patriotic good. The following instructions, repeated by Lulu as reminders to herself, suggest the kind of selflessness in which she has been schooled:

Remember that, should you die, your body will yield a crucial trove of information./ Remember that, should you die, your Field Instructions will provide a record of your mission and lessons for those who follow. (97)

In the new heroism, the goal is to merge with something larger than yourself. (89–91)

In the new heroism, the goal is to transcend individual life, with its petty pains and loves, in favor of the dazzling collective. (97)

The individual life should be transcended, we are told, but at the narrative level it is conspicuously present. For a story that claims to be about data

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3 See "Coming Soon" for an account of the special notepaper.

gathering in the near future, the most striking quality of *Black Box* is its corporeality. Lulu is not a programmer sitting at a computer or the pilot of a drone. She has to physically find the enemy agent's handheld device, connect it to a cable concealed in her foot, and then escape with information recorded in the hard drive of her own brain. The gadgets of the bionic heroine—the camera implanted in the eye, the recorder in the ear—recall the prosthetic enhancements of some earlier dream of the future. Lulu is not a cyborg in the sense announced by Donna Haraway in her famous manifesto. Her technological implants do not enable her to transcend the corporeal and ideological boundaries imposed on her, as a woman, by gender conventions or the humanistic ideals of humanity (2270, 2276–77). Rather, she acquiesces in the objectification of her body, exposing herself to abuse—including sexual abuse—for the patriotic goal of serving her country and the middle-class goal of returning home to found a family.

The body is central to *Black Box*, and the plot emphasizes it in anachronistic ways. Contemporary surveillance is increasingly a matter of automatic processes and algorithms, but *Black Box* represents data gathering as a physical struggle (Bauman and Lyon 15). It also transposes the topography of digital networking into habitable spaces—thus the ‘hot spot’ is not where Lulu goes to find a wireless connection, but the destination she must reach to be saved by a rescue helicopter. The corporeal elements of Egan's story personalize the flow of data, transforming the process of semiotic liquification that Baudrillard once called “the ecstasy of communication” into moments of pathos, intentionality, and physical encounter (128). Writing in the early 1980s, Baudrillard predicted a time when the subject-object binaries framing the phenomenological worldview—and along with them, the private sphere—would dissolve into the information flows of networks and screens. Egan, nostalgic for the body in the same way she is nostalgic for analog music and writing with pen on paper, invokes a stable image of embodied subjectivity as the center-point of her digital romance.

The old-fashioned corporeality is the first hint that this story is not as new as it seems. *Black Box* adapts the familiar James Bond formula, with its dualistic conflict between good and evil, its lavish scenery and technology, its burlesque of sex and violence, its *Playboy* aesthetic—with the important difference that the protagonist of Egan's story is a woman

(Cawelti and Rosenberg 126, 128). John Cawelti and Bruce Rosenberg's standard account of the spy narrative, *The Spy Story*, describes the basic plot structure as follows:

the basic pattern of Bond's adventures drew on the formula elaborated by [John] Buchan and [Sax] Rohmer: the hero is given a mission; he enters enemy territory; he is captured, but escapes and finally defeats the enemy, thereby accomplishing his mission at the same time. Clearly, one source of Fleming's popularity was his ability to infuse a new variety and excitement in a pattern of action as ritualistic as that of the Lone Ranger and other superheroes. (50)

Egan's invocation of the old rituals and patterns is doubtless one source of her popularity. Lulu is new, but it was time for someone like her to play the role R. W. B. Lewis called the "good bad boy"—the character who breaks the law in order to preserve it. Because spy fiction was such a popular serial form in the 20<sup>th</sup> century it is readily adaptable to electronic media, as a review of Egan's novel in *Wired.com* magazine pointed out (Kirtley). As Kirtley did not point out, the formula's consistency over time has also made it attractive to conservative writers such as E. Howard Hunt, a former CIA agent who was implicated in the Watergate scandal, and William F. Buckley, who helped mainstream the political right through his highly influential journal, the *National Review*. Cawelti and Rosenberg argue that the spy story serves as a popular projection fantasy of masculine prowess, sex appeal, and adventure for male office workers—among them the thousands of bureaucrats employed by the CIA. More recently, Ruth Mayer has shown how the serial recycling of Sax Rohmer's villain Fu Manchu was linked to the spread of the racist specter of the yellow peril (cf. Mayer). Egan's story is not as conservative as these precursors, but in spite of its strong female protagonist, it does not offer a progressive view of femininity.

Nevertheless, the pared down prose of *Black Box*, which anonymizes the enemy and schematizes the plot, limits its usefulness as an ideological projection screen for the usual conservative causes. There is hardly anyone to identify with in this novella and no one to hate. Race is presented as schematically as political conflict; with the exception of the protagonist's fleeting thoughts of her husband, an immigrant from Kenya, no significance is attached to skin color. At one point in the novella he is the topic of some brief and deliberately misleading small talk, but he is conveniently kept

off stage (88). The serial elements of Egan's story do not serve national or racial ideology but abstract them to the narrative equivalent of squares on a chessboard. They also threaten to reduce the protagonist to a disposable piece on this chessboard, which is the role traditionally reserved for female characters in spy novels anyway. Trained to be a "beauty," schooled in the selflessness of the new heroism, and redesigned as a data storage device, Lulu faces the extinction already implicit in the second-person form of her "memoirs," her "I" disappearing into the interpellation "you" (88).

However, the pathos of the story works in the opposite direction. Lulu's narrative is most compelling when she fails to follow the instructions "Always filter your observations and experience through the lens of their didactic value" (88). Her own advice to future agents, recorded in her head, quickly moves from didacticism towards a lyricism of the kind defined by John Stuart Mill: "eloquence is heard; poetry is overheard" (12). Thus the "overheard" memoranda devote a surprising amount of space to describing what Lulu feels when she sees the moon, the stars, and the "strange, dark, piercing blue" of the Mediterranean sky (88). An example: "Fatherless girls may invest the moon with a certain paternal promise" (88–89)—the same moon that at other times "may appear like a surveillance device" (94). Much of the lyricism emerges negatively, when the instructions fail to instruct because they are better suited to poetry than to a field manual: "You will reflect on the fact that these 'instructions' are becoming less and less instructive" (94). The imagistic quality of these passages suggests an aesthetic orientation that Jessica Pressman has called "digital modernism," "in which twenty-first century writers purchase cultural capital from the literary canon in order to validate new aesthetics, promote traditional reading practices, and demand that their work be taken seriously" (3). Admittedly, Egan's turn to this modernist aesthetic is more middlebrow than avant-garde insofar as it promotes an extremely traditional image of women as sexualized objects, but it nevertheless encourages close readings and calls attention to the literariness of this digital production.

The imagistic passages also draw attention to the pathos of subjectivity that constitutes the novella's middlebrow appeal. Just as Lulu's instructions diverge from the impersonal norm, so too does she abandon the "Dissociation Technique" she has been taught to protect herself from



unpleasant situations (*Black Box* 85). When she allows herself to be “seduced” by her “Designated Mate,” when she is violently raped by his even more powerful contact, when she lies wounded in the bottom of a boat, she detaches herself from her body in a way that “feel[s] like floating, suspended, and looking down.” This is more than psychological self-defense; dissociation is the first step towards the new heroism: “Some citizen agents have chosen not to return./ They have left their bodies behind, and now they shimmer sublimely in the heavens” (97). However, Lulu does return to herself for reasons that become clear through the failure of the field manual’s impersonal form. In aphoristic passages with very little instructional value, she divulges that she is an only child who has grown up with a single mother, that she recently learned the identity of her actor-father; that she met her husband when she attended a robotics course in her university by mistake, and that she has undertaken her mission because he is a respected member of the national security community (96). We learn nothing about the data she gathers, the identity of her enemy, or the nature of the ongoing war. What we do learn is that her desires to return to her husband psychologically undamaged, to have children with him, and to forgive her mother and prove her heroism to her father keep her fighting to preserve not only the black box of her body, but her life. When at the end of the story the rescuing helicopter descends, “appear[ing] to be the instrument of a purely mechanical realm,” it reveals its animating humanity in a way that is paradigmatic for the covert humanism of the story. “You won’t know for sure until you see them crouching above you, their faces taut with hope, ready to jump” (97). Her saviors are poised to jump in a gesture that strategically inverts the dissociation she experiences by hovering above her body. Their hopeful faces are the ghosts haunting all of these machines, mechanical and informational. Human feelings persist because the black box is not merely a hard drive but the clandestine space of Lulu’s interiority (92).

I want to argue that Egan’s novella responds to the linked threats of digital communication—the threat to literature and the threat to privacy—by spying on the electronic medium of surveillance. The information gathered by the novella is not as important as the position within digital culture that it assumes; this is the position that Hörisch calls eccentric but that could also be described as clandestine. *Black Box* is a covert action, in

enemy territory, on the side of literary humanism. Of course the novella could be read as a piece of digital propaganda: a display of chic paranoia that attempts to render surveillance seductive by making data-gathering sexy (see Kammerer 262). In this reading it would serve as a kind of cultural supplement to the surveillance system, convincing subjects that they want to be watched, equating salvation with confession, memory with RAM, interiority with archiving (268, 281). However, it seems to me that the novel exploits a blind spot in what is being called the “new transparency” by activating something that seems transparent without being so: literary myth or form (Bauman and Lyon 12). The form acts as the shield or container for the true subject of the story, which is the pathos of the protagonist’s partially observed destiny, or what I will call clandestinity: the secreting of something private in the midst of the public sphere. Clandestinity is not on the side of surveillance but a refuge from it. Under the guise of patriotism, embedded in data transfer, Egan’s twitter thriller smuggles in the kind of literary character that became one of the novel’s trademark features in its public representation of the private sphere. Put otherwise: in forging Lulu’s personality through her work for an impersonal agency and against an imaginary and empty enemy, the novella generates the fiction or alibi of selfhood through what Joel Fineman called “the subjectivity effect” (xvii, 158–59). As in *Goon Squad*, Egan presents us here with a version of analog nostalgia, but this time realized through convergent media platforms, and aiming at the preservation of subjectivity and, as I will argue in a moment, the preservation of literariness in the form of the book.

Is the spy formula suited to this smuggling operation? We don’t go to Fleming for complex plots or characterization. Nevertheless, in the hands of its more sophisticated practitioners the spy novel has often gone beyond melodrama to depict deep psychological conflicts. John le Carré, Graham Greene, W. Somerset Maugham, and Joseph Conrad are the most famous British practitioners of the complex spy formula, but Americans like Norman Mailer, Don De Lillo, Thomas Pynchon, Walter Abish, Ernest Hemingway, Katherine Anne Porter, Henry James, and to some extent Edgar Allen Poe must be added to the list. The list could go back very far indeed. Cawelti and Rosenberg point to James Fenimore Cooper’s *The Spy* (1821) as the first significant novel in the American spy tradition. Cooper’s

historical romance tells the improbable story of a peddler named Harvey Birch who saves George Washington, himself disguised behind enemy lines, as well as the parallel story of a loyalist officer who marries the daughter of a patriot. The eponymous character is excluded from the resolution: he dies long after the Revolutionary War, alone and unrecognized, but holding a signed commendation by Washington that is discovered by the son whose parents he saved. According to Cawelti and Rosenberg,

Cooper is the first real spy novelist—that is, the writer of the first spy novel—because he saw what recent writers have had to rediscover, that the spy dwells in liminality, in no-man’s-land; and he, Cooper, was able to imagine and to express what it was like to exist there and to describe the relation of liminal regions to [...] the mainstream. (36)

Because Cooper’s pioneering clandestine novel preceded the Leatherstocking tales, it is interesting to think of Natty Bumppo as a spy at the border between the contending forces of wilderness and civilization, outcast because he feels loyal to elements of both. In any event, eccentricity or clandestinity appear to be a constituent element of the American novel from its very beginnings.

Indeed, it would be possible to retell the history of American literature, or at least the history of the American novel, through the lens of the spy narrative. Cawelti and Rosenberg link the widespread feeling of clandestinity to the modern problem of alienation, which puts it in line with the humanist critique of technology (humans create the inhuman force responsible for dominating them) outlined at the beginning of my paper. But the fascination with spying, whatever its roots in the general experience of modernity, also has to do with a particular American historical trauma. The Revolutionary War often made it impossible to tell who was on whose side—that’s why Cooper feels compelled to keep healing the wounds of the Revolution through the dynastic marriages of patriots and loyalists. There were many spies, and many were killed—the most famous being Major André, executed by order of Washington for conspiring with Benedict Arnold. André was a popular figure who was widely considered too honorable to be hanged. His ghost haunts the literature of the Early Republic, for instance in “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow,” which is deliberately set near the tree where he was discovered. There is, perhaps, a lesson here about a longstanding revolutionary distrust of authority that, even when

exercised by the Founding Fathers, may be responsible for injustice that clamors to be addressed. Such speculations, however, are too general to be of much use, and they also distract from the early history of the spy narrative. That's because the history of American spy literature would not start with Cooper or Washington Irving, rather with a largely forgotten book by Peter Markoe, *The Algerine Spy in Pennsylvania* published in 1787.

Markoe's biographer, Sister Mary Chrysostom Diebels, claims that *The Algerine Spy* was the first American novel (William Hill Brown's *The Power of Sympathy* and Susanna Rowson's *Charlotte Temple* both appeared in 1791, the latter published in England). This may be true, although it should be pointed out that Markoe did not invent the premise of an oriental spy who decides to settle in the west. *The Algerine Spy* was clearly modeled on Montesquieu's *Persian Letters* (1721), which tells the story a Persian spy who never makes it back to his homeland. Montesquieu would later claim that this early book marked his accidental discovery of the epistolary novel as literary form.<sup>4</sup> The same might be said of Markoe. His novel barely distinguishes itself from the essayistic debates that were its premise: the Constitutional Convention was taking place in Philadelphia precisely when this Pennsylvania novel was written and published. Mehemet's most substantive letters defend the anti-Federalist position, but the premise is shaky. It is unclear why an Algerian spy would be interested in endorsing unicameral legislatures, strong state governments, open immigration policies, or an agricultural economy. Nevertheless, his letters home should be understood as counter-arguments to those presented in the *Federalist Papers*, written by Alexander Hamilton, John Jay, and James Madison—under the collective pseudonym “Publius”—and published in journals at the same time.

The difference between *Algerine Spy* and *Federalist Papers* is useful for locating the divergence of the (spy) novel from more republican

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4 Marshall Berman, in *Politics of Authenticity*, says of *Persian Letters*, “Montesquieu is original [...] in exposing and exploring the intimate relation between personal passion and political action” (7). “Montesquieu is one of the very first thinkers to see personal identity as a *problem*. In a repressive society it cannot be taken for granted, but must be *achieved*: men cannot *be* themselves *within* such a system, but must strive to *become* themselves, *against* the system” (31).

styles of literature like the essay. The “Publius” pseudonym is meant to honor one of the Roman senators who overthrew the monarchy, but etymologically it evokes both public and ruler, thus suggesting the selfless devotion of the Federalist representatives to the Federal cause. The spy novel works through the more complicated anonymity of characterization. That is to say its perspective is subjective and liminal rather than public and official. Making use of the convention of the secretly deposited manuscript, *Algerine Spy* purports to be written by a former spy (Markoe’s name did not appear on the title page) who has decided to abandon his despotic homeland, in which life and liberty depend on the whim of the despot, in order to immigrate to a land that allows for both public debate and private life. He becomes an American, with opinions about American politics, but he remains hidden and in doing so helps to maintain the anonymity of his author. The spy does not claim to speak for the public or its leaders; but he does speak for a basic democratic principle in speaking for himself. It is not that it was dangerous to be an anti-Federalist in 1787, although the passage of the Alien and Sedition Acts in 1798 would make it more so. Rather, characterization in this early novel carves out a personalized perspective within the public debate, coming deliberately short of the *res publica* personified by Publius.

The novel is not by or about representative men but about liminal individuals whose political relevance is dramatized at the level of form. The novel distinguishes itself from the essay at the moment the fictionalized *Algerian* plot gives Mehemet’s anti-Federalist letters their *narrative* plot. Another way to put this is that the frame narrative creates a tension between Mehemet’s observations and his life—a tension that has to be worked out through character development and resolved through a change of heart. As he learns about American freedom, he becomes more inclined to grant his slaves in Algeria their freedom. This is felicitous since he finds out in a letter that his favorite concubine has eloped with a Christian and escaped to Spain, right before learning that, thanks to the wiles of political will in a despotism, he faces execution in Algeria if he returns. The novel concludes with Mehemet’s letter to his former slaves, now his equals, inviting them to move to America and start their family in the farmhouse next door.

A more detailed study would have to explore the relation of the spy novel to the sentimental conventions implied by this ending (and in Cooper's dynastic marriage in *The Spy*). Sentimentalism can be saccharine and formulaic, but also strangely private since it can evoke genuine emotions through the unlikely vehicle of convention. For the purpose of my argument, I will merely point out that sentimentalism marks the division of the public and private spheres in ways similar to what I have been calling clandestinity. Both hide the private—in one case private feelings, in the other case private perspective—in the most public of forms. Markoe's publisher jokes about this public/private ambiguity in his preface when he predicts his customers will enjoy carrying a handsomely bound book with the word SPY emblazoned on its binding (xxxiv, 2). He thus invites Markoe's readers to publicly advertise their privacy, and thus position themselves like Markoe, who uses fiction to maintain his anonymity while participating in a public debate. Fiction employs formal means (such as characterization) to dramatize and create the private sphere. The book, as a material object, is a figure for how this works. Indeed, the book is merely an old-fashioned version of the black box in its alternate meaning. A black box, namely, is more than a flight recorder. The term also refers to a closed system in which inputs and outputs differ. The bound book and the black box both hide in plain sight, advertising their difference, and manifesting an interiority that is best known by its effects, such as the emotions evoked in the reader.<sup>5</sup>

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5 In a recent interview in the German weekly *Die Zeit*, Yuval Noah Harari invokes the metaphor of the black box to explain how digital technology has rendered the liberal individual obsolete: "Das Individuum war mächtig, solange es eine Blackbox war, solange kein äußerer Beobachter meine individuellen Präferenzen, Wünsche und Gedanken kennen konnte. Die gesamte liberale Ordnung gründet auf dieser Annahme: Keiner weiß es besser als der Wähler, keiner weiß es besser als der Kunde. Aber wenn wir ein System haben, das tatsächlich in die alte Blackbox Individuum reinschauen und entsprechend dessen tiefste Bedürfnisse vorhersagen und manipulieren kann, dann gibt es das klassische Individuum nicht mehr" (41). I could not disagree more. The individual can hide her needs and protect herself from manipulation by investing emotional energy in literary forms and characters (and other cultural artifacts), which serve as public vehicles for private concerns.

Neither the black box nor the book needs to be terribly original or complex to serve as a shelter for privacy. In some cases convention, even stripped-down to the most schematic contours, may be more effective than innovation. We can see this in the development of Lulu's character, which evokes pathos in ways I have already described, but also undergoes what might be described as a schematic reduction in the transition from *Goon Squad* to *Black Box*, where she no longer even bears a name. *Goon Squad* introduces her as the daughter of a PR agent who loses her clientele when a party goes wrong. The mother tries to get back in the PR game by arranging a meeting between a has-been star and a third-world dictator. Lulu, along for the ride, is brought in grave danger when the star balks and begins insulting the man she is supposed to flatter. Lulu escapes from this first foray into enemy territory, as she will in the later twitter novel. By the end of *Goon Squad*, she has gotten involved in PR, like her mother, but by using social media to promote analog music. She teams up with a collaborator whose wife—a rising star in academia—writes about how digital culture divests certain words of meaning, turning them into “word casings.” The novel concludes when burned-out punk guitarist, “a word casing in human form: a shell whose essence has vanished,” becomes a musical success (370). On the one hand, the musician's emptiness is what enables him to become a container for public emotions: “And it may be that a crowd at a particular moment of history creates the object to justify its gathering, as it did at the first Human Be-In and Monterey Pop and Woodstock. Or it may be that two generations of war and surveillance had left people craving the embodiment of their own unease in the form of a lone, unsteady man on a slide guitar” (373). On the other hand, he is not empty at all, just blank in terms of information flows since he has never owned a cell phone or a computer. Thus the casing can be filled with emotional content in the same way digital media can become the vehicle for analog music. The musician's physical embodiment of emotion is a blueprint for Egan's project in *Black Box*, where she fills the casing of a smartphone with the body and feelings of a human being. Even this embodiment is foreshadowed when “Lulu, who was now holding hands with a statuesque black man, both of them gazing at Scotty Hausmann [the punk guitarist] with the rhapsodic joy of a generation finally desecrating someone worthy of its veneration” (374–75). Lulu will succeed Scotty as

an empty casing, and like him, she will be filled with the anxiety and joy of the digital age.

It would be easy to criticize Egan's derivative, sentimental, and middle-brow narratives. They do not seem to innovate literary form in ways that reflect innovations in technology. They uphold rather conventional views of gender. However, I think their conventionalism is also what makes them significant in a digital context. Egan's narratives are so familiar that they are able to hide in plain sight. Egan confronts the challenges of digital culture by transforming information back into narrative and binding it with the title "spy," thereby inserting a useful clandestinity, a dark container of pathos, into the liquid flow of information. In other words, she uses narrative as a technology to transform information technology into the kind of black box known as a book. Indeed, Egan's strategy was so successful that, moving across convergent media platforms, what began as a series of tweets ended in a print publication in the *New Yorker* and in books in places like Germany. Literary form is bookish, whatever its medium, because it closes in on a private perspective, which it then circulates in a public way. This strategy goes back at least as far as Markoe, and it is still useful today. From a humanist perspective, literature does not have to innovate. It is the Trojan horse of the information age.

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Silke Järvenpää

## Rap vs. Big Brother: The Conscious and the Comical

Abstract: The intimate and abusive relationship between the surveillance state and rap has repeatedly been a focus in both popular and scholarly discussion. Rap is the genre with the largest number of songs dealing with a sense of being watched, being followed and with visions of an Orwellian future. This is not surprising given that the hip hop scene has been monitored closely by the authorities from the start. The “hip hop police” proved to be very real: a law enforcement unit operating under the premise that the black body always is a potential threat to the body politic, and that holds true particularly for (black) masculinity in rap. The result of this has been an internalization of the Panoptic gaze by the actors in the hip hop scene, which in turn has helped shape the identity of its preferred musical genre.

In recent years, it has been a trend among intellectuals to employ the genre for—broadly speaking—educational purposes, not least for education about surveillance. “Rap vs Big Brother” will concentrate on contributions by two rappers cum academics: Shahid Buttar, MC, human rights lawyer, executive director of the Bill of Rights Defense Committee (USA) and Giordano Nanni, creative head of Juice Rap News and historian at the University of Melbourne (AUS).

The article explores the ways in which the two above-mentioned artists offer their critique of the surveillance state, and the tensions that arise when rap is relocated and seemingly reduced to its ‘usability by association’ for pop-scholarly counter-discourse.

**Keywords:** Rap, hip hop, Shahid Buttar, Giordano Nanni, Hugo Farrant

“Big Brother Is WWWatching You” was the 15<sup>th</sup> episode of the series *Juice Rap News*, a satirical program specially designed for YouTube by Giordano Nanni and Hugo Farrant. It appears to be the episode which made the two artists famous. Starting in September 2012, “Big Brother Is WWWatching You” went viral on the net and counter-culture bloggers and security experts such as Bruce Schneier gave it numerous links and likes and debated it on their blogs. Clearly, *Juice Rap News* had hit a nerve by ‘dropping the beat’ for a critique of the surveillance state.

Without being part of the ‘authentic’ hip-hop community, in their act Nanni and Farrant pose as political rappers, even if only one of them, viz. Farrant is a musician. But although it is Farrant who appears in most of the roles in *Juice Rap News* and makes the lyrics rappable, the mastermind of the duo is Giordano Nanni, a historian with a PhD from the University of Melbourne whose thesis *Colonisation of Time* betrays intimate knowledge of critical theory. Thanks to him *Juice Rap News* is more than intelligent satire; at times it becomes a reflection of Nanni’s intellectualism. When he quotes or references theorists from Chomsky to Žižek, he also seeks to educate the masses, so to say. Were it not for what looks like a simple rap parody at first sight, the writer’s didactic zeal could come across as ostentatious.

*Juice Rap News* is one of the examples that this paper will focus on, notably their song “Big Brother is WWWatching you.” The other example is by a completely different artist and in completely different style, namely Shahid Buttar’s song “The NSA vs the USA.” In many respects it stands in stark contrast to Nanni’s and Farrant’s example of rhyming against Big Brother. Part rap, part House track, there is nothing satirical or humorous about it and its visuals are as suggestive as its messages are straightforward.

What these artists have in common is their intellectual and theoretically informed commitment to rapping against surveillance. They possess multiple professional identities. While Giordano Nanni has a background in the social sciences, Shahid Buttar is, as his website indicates, an MC, constitutional lawyer, political activist, and erstwhile director of the US Bill of Rights Defense Committee. In other words, he does not fulfill the stereotype of a hip-hopper either.

Although the use of rap for educational purposes is ubiquitous on the net these days—covering topics from “The History of Maths” to “Ancient Mesopotamia”—I will show that rapping about surveillance is different. The genre and the *sujet* have traditionally formed a dialectic relationship; in other words: in a certain sense the genre of rap and surveillance are mutually dependent. While the rapper defines himself as a victim of control, the proponents of surveillance justify it partly as a necessary answer to the type of black aggressiveness of which rapping appears to be the most visible expression. In the cases under scrutiny here, it will become clear that the strategic choice of rap to critique state surveillance implies

in itself a statement of empathy and identification with the most obvious victims of surveillance.

*Juice Rap News*' "Big Brother is WWWatching you" is a six-minute humorous walkthrough of the state-of-the-art in technology and the central arguments on both sides in the debate. Moderated by the fictional anchorman Robert Foster, two of the recurring characters of the show (who battle for position as well as for the "right" narrative) explain facial recognition, mention projects like Stellar Wind and Pine Gap, and point out the dangers of RFID chips and Siri to privacy. The surveillance state is praised by one as the "greatest invention since 9/11 to keep us safe," in which "[i]f you've got nothing to hide, you've got nothing to worry about." The other character replies that once a government becomes less benign "this surveillance will enforce laws you no longer consent to, but by then it will be too late to protest, too." On one level, the viewer gets a summary of the debate, which is in line with *Juice Rap News*' mission to "deliver a bulletin to restore your faith in the fourth estate" (Nanni and Farrant, *Juicemedia.com*).

But the artists take a definite position against the surveillance state and use a number of techniques to frame the debate accordingly. For one thing, the character in favor of the surveillance state is General Baxter, the caricatured representative of the "military-industrial complex" (Nanni and Farrant, *Juicemedia.com*). Another broad hint is the choice of intertexts. The General, after all, speaks "live from the Pentopticon"—a pun for the academically-minded segment among the audience. The most obvious intertext, however, is Orwell's *Nineteen-Eighty-Four*. The clip quotes décor and setting of Michael Radford's movie adaptation of the novel. General Baxter is interviewed before the cheering crowd of the daily Two-Minutes-Hate ritual with a modified INGSOC logo (Orwell's newspeak acronym for "English Socialism" becomes IPSOS here, the global data collector). His main counterpart in the debate, Terrence Moonseed, is dressed in Winston Smith's blue overalls; the telescreen with Bob Flag's face as Big Brother is copied into the background. Moonseed decries the Orwellian proportions of General Baxter's surveillance utopia. And, as a highlight, the clip 'features' George Orwell. In this case, it is Giordano Nanni, dressed up as the writer, who is contacted with the help of a logic-analyzer turned television with a window into the past. Orwell lectures the audience on the

Internet's potential to create an egalitarian information society that can actually prevent the rise of Big Brother. He also recommends the use of the TOR browser and renames himself George TORwell.

Leaving the levels of plot, story, and argument behind to turn to the level of genre yields more insight into the song as a contribution to the surveillance debate. To a certain extent *Juice Rap News* use rap's conventions in a self-referential way, which, of course, is characteristic in satire (Knight 22–24).

Firstly, “Big Brother Is WWWatching You” parodies staple features of the hip-hop scene. The inflationary use of four-letter words and other explicit language imitates the love of provocation among rappers. Nanni's Orwell, while explaining the benefits of an open Internet, mumbles that

If we'd had such tools when I wrote this, well  
It would've been so much simpler to tell Big Brother to go f\*\*k himself,  
The motherf\*\*king, c\*\*\*-sucking piece of sh[...]

His swear words are drowned out only by the static of the time-traveling communication device. Secondly, General Baxter and his slightly esoteric counterpart, the “resident guru” Terrence Moonseed, enter into the stereotypical rap battle in which two artists compete against each other for the title of the most acrobatic ad-libber, the most inventive braggart, the most creative verbal offender (Weinstein 270–75). The insults the two men trade play with another cliché of the hip-hop scene, i.e. that no rap is complete without homophobic slurs. General Baxter calls the liberal left “civil-liberty fagtivists” and mistakenly thinks Moonseed has called his mother “gay.”

So, *Juice Rap News* does exploit rap conventions for comedy's sake, to be more precise: for the sake of the comic effects of burlesque. In burlesque, in this case low burlesque, a high subject is treated in low (i.e. vulgar) style in order to ridicule its pomposity or self-importance by the display of obvious incongruities. Nicolas Boileau, the famous 17<sup>th</sup>-century poet had illustrated this principle by a depiction of “Dido and Aeneas speak[ing] like fishwives and porters” (qtd. in Paulson 21). In “Big Brother Is WWWatching You,” it is the General who raps like a *gangsta* and inhabits the life of one: with his status symbols, his machismo, and contempt of the law. But the character also has to be seen in the context of

the debate about hip-hop, much of which has revolved around the question of how much harm that culture brings to society in general and young listeners in particular: “Is Gangsta Rap Hurting America’s Children?” asked *Fox News* in 1992, and it was not alone (cf. Philips). In the light of this, Nanni’s statement is clear: The representatives of the military-industrial complex are the *baddest gangstas* of all. It is therefore fitting that the General should be represented as a *gangsta* rapper. The same goes for his opponent, Terrence Moonseed. He challenges the *gangsta* and personifies another type of the hip-hop scene—the conscious rap artist, paranoid of the police and other state authorities, but for nobler reasons. *Juice Rap News* does not side with him entirely, but ridicules his assertions that the Illuminati are about to take over the world. It seems like *Juice Rap News* uses Moonseed to warn the critics of surveillance against devaluing their own arguments. After all Moonseed undermines the legitimacy of his position by succumbing to esotericism and conspiracy theories.

The rap episode “Big Brother Is WWWatching You” seeks to educate through political satire with a mission to create awareness. At the end of the clip, anchorman Robert Foster explains, a bit schoolmasterly maybe, why “Big Brother gives chilling effects,” i.e. why the surveillance state is a real threat to change in society. All in all, *Juice Rap News* appeals to the cognitive level, with caricature, burlesque and parody, generating the emotional distance between its creators and the audience.

Shahid Buttar’s “The NSA vs the USA,” in contrast, is serious throughout. Although the title suggests a rap battle, Buttar is the only soloist. As in “Big Brother Is WWWatching You,” the artist informs his audience of various forms of surveillance technology and about the agencies using and abusing them. But he is a lot less literary than his colleagues of *Juice Rap News*—Orwell’s *Nineteen-Eighty-Four*, for instance, does not feature prominently despite the occasional idiomatic expression like “thought crime.” Buttar’s theme is “Learn History.” He locates the surveillance state of the 21<sup>st</sup> century in the topos of America’s downward spiral, the decline of American democracy since WW I, but especially since the Cold War:

Fast forward 40 years to the real red scare  
 McCarthy did a number but the FBI was there.  
 [...]  
 But whether you’re compliant or a threat instead

A head, like MLK, to be “neutralized.”  
 That’s the word the FBI used: decades of lies  
 exposed, revealed as institutionalized  
 Beyond trying to drive Reverend King to suicide,  
 no one even knows how brother Malcolm died.  
 Fred Hampton killed in his own house, inside!  
 The feds bombed earth activist Judi Bari and lied.

*Juice Rap News* ends the rap on a philosophical and thoughtful note:

We’re told we need safety; which is precious, yes,  
 but can a society that can enforce *all* its laws ever progress?  
 Hindsight shows that many figures guilty of “thought-crime”  
 turned out to be luminaries and heroes, before their time.  
 But if a surveillance state had reigned then in this form and design  
 Just think of all the progress we may’ve all been denied.

But for Buttar, Nanni’s calm reasoning as well as any attempt at a moderate tone are out of the question. The most dangerous aspect about state surveillance, to Buttar, is its direct link with state terrorism: oppression, torture, assassination. The panopticon’s potential to classify people and entire communities—here: into “compliant” and “threat[ening]”—is worse than Big Brother’s “chilling” effect. The fear of not being able to progress as a society (which was at the center of *Juice Rap News*’ clip) may be acute, but it certainly weighs less than the loss of freedom and lives. Shahid Buttar turns the fight against the surveillance state (“The NSA vs the USA”) into a battle between good and evil. The NSA literally becomes the enemy of the people; it (alongside the other agencies) is denounced as fundamentally un-American. The clip’s flash-ups are revealing; viewers will see inscriptions that leave no room for speculation: “NSA”/ “Liar”/ “They lie”/ “Neutralized”/ “Infiltrated”/ “Bombed”/ “They lie.”

Awareness is important, or in Buttar’s words: “The future’s at stake/ You can start by knowing”; but where a battle between good and evil rages, this is hardly sufficient. Accordingly, the rap is a call to arms:

We can force any agency to make a new choice  
 When we build a movement, each raising our voice.

There are variations on the refrain: “We can force each acronym to make a new choice” or “We can force each government to make a new choice.” Flash-up words underline the lyrics: “Dance/ Get loud/ Organize/



Mobilize/ Resist/ Rise Up,” etc. Fast cuts and politically subversive images visible for only fractions of a second are a staple of video clip production; the music videos by *Rage against the Machine*, using anti-government and anti-corporate messages, have become legend by now (TylerC). Buttar plays with the myths surrounding the power of subliminal messages in counter-cultural music. He will use this power to build the movement and coordinate the resistance. “The NSA vs the USA” thus exploits the potential of rap to target the subconscious as much as the intellect.

Two reactions immediately come to mind: First, artists tend to be fond of musical genres that enjoy a reputation of being ‘cool’—to assure that their message is heard. Second, rap as a musical genre associated with resistance to authority makes for a convenient choice when critiquing surveillance, particularly since one of its subgenres is “conscious rap”—political, liberal, anti-establishment (Ensley 56–58).

However, rap is not just one of several genres that lend themselves to debating the surveillance state; it is a surprisingly adequate genre with an effective cultural language to match. While this might sound hyperbolic, the evidence to support my argument is quantifiable: Looking at the sheer number of titles that deal with surveillance, rap’s exceeds that of any other popular genre with the exception of literary anti-utopias (Nielson, “Can’t C Me” 1259). This may be due to the reactions early rap triggered among mainstream—and predominantly white—Americans. As cultural historian Eric Nielson has convincingly shown, social consciousness and oppositional culture in the hip-hop scene of the 1980s kicked into action the entire machinery of state surveillance, “sparking the creation of hip-hop task forces in major police departments whose sole purpose was to monitor (and in some cases, disrupt) the activities of rap artists” (Nielson, “Here Come the Cops” 350). In other words: There were teams within the FBI and police departments which did nothing but spy on the hip-hop scene, with racial profiling reaching a new high. In the perception of mainstream America and its institutions, the predominantly black actors of the hip-hop scene and those African Americans who had nothing to do with it slowly merged. Being urban, young and African American often was sufficient to justify ever increasing levels of surveillance and intimidation. Being male was even worse. The United States has a long history of representing the black body as a threat to the body politic, as documented

in W. E. B. Du Bois's *Souls of Black Folk* as well as more recent works, such as Ronald L. Jackson's monograph *Scripting the Black Masculine Body*.

It goes without saying that all this informed a number of rappers, their lyrics, and their practices. Not least did it give rise to *gangsta* rap in which the marginalized black urban youth reinvents himself as the lawless and hypermasculine hero (Black 705; hooks 134–35). The *gangsta*, after all, has earned the high level of surveillance he is subjected to through his career in crime. He wears his visibility as a badge of honor and takes the potentially omnipresent gaze of the panopticon for his muse. This is the time when rappers begin to choose names like “Public Enemy” and “N. W. A.” (Niggaz wit Attitudes) names that lay bare the racism in law enforcement's systematic profiling. Dozens of songs deal with the *gangsta* dodging high-tech efforts by the authorities to catch him.

However, the *gangsta* ultimately is a defiant pose, a staged identity to drown out the panic about the rapper's increasing disenfranchisement as a member of the African American community. So *gangsta* and other political rap have a predilection for paranoia (which has led Dave Bry to providing readers with a collection of “16 Songs That Warned Us about the Surveillance State” on his website). The world becomes an Orwellian nightmare. In the year 2000, the group Dead Prez sang: “F.B.I. spyin' on us through the radio antennas/ And them hidden cameras in the street-light watchin' society/ With no respect for the peoples' right to privacy.” Prodigy's most paranoid lyrics in the 2007 title “Mac 10 Handle” are: “They got eyes in the sky/ We're under surveillance/ That On-Star in your car tracks everywhere you been/ Gotta watch what I say/ They're tappin' my cellphone/ They wanna sneak a peek inside of my home.” Often the watchers are never seen: “who is that peeking through my window,” asks Goodie Mob in “Cell Therapy.” And as early as 1984 Rockwell's “Somebody's Watching Me” features lines like: “Are the neighbors watching?/ Is the mail man watching me?/ And I don't feel safe anymore/ Oh what a mess/ I wonder who's watching me now (Who?)/ The I.R.S.?!” (cf. Bry). Phone taps, black unmarked helicopters, soldiers coming in the dark; the FBI, the CIA, the IRS—surveillance has become the number-one theme in rap music.

As regards *Juice Rap News* and Shahid Buttar: What is conspicuously absent from their songs is the link between rap and the experience of black

urban youth under attack by the state. Farrant and Nanni are as white as can be, and Buttar, though from an Asian background, does not identify as a member of the African American community. The mock battles in “Big Brother Is WWatching You” certainly play with stereotypes of the black rapper from the ghetto. In a later episode of *Juice Rap News*, produced after the Snowden revelations, Farrant appears as the whistleblower and embeds his speech in the rap and reggae genre, complete with Caribbean English (subtitled) and with stereotypical Rastafari body language (*Juice Rap News* no. 19). There is, however, a double twist to this, as *Juice Rap News* offers a parody on white rapper Snow and his song “Informer” of 1992.

The clip of “The NSA vs the USA” displays background dancers who supposedly are part of the “movement” in which “each raises his voice.” Strangely enough, white people dominate the images. So, the question remains if the pieces by *Juice Rap News* and Shahid Buttar ultimately are examples of cultural appropriation by privileged individuals for the sake of effect.

The topic of cultural appropriation is, at present, hotly debated, and the debate has reached levels that many Europeans may find difficult to understand. The question of whether it is permissible to wear culture-oriented costumes for Hallowe'en is a case in point. The question of whether so-called ‘black music’ may be created and played by members of non-black communities is another one. Azealia Banks, a female rapper and speaker of the “Hip Hop Congress,” finds it frivolous. She deplores that the subculture of hip-hop, including rap, is being systematically stripped of its “integrity” to be “replaced with images of Black Stereotypes and white mimicry that verges on if not outright displays blackface” (qtd. in Noble). But not everyone agrees; scholars outside the USA have denounced the so-called integrity or authenticity debate as parochial; rappers focusing on their ‘hood’ in a handful of US cities exclude even Blacks outside those cities, let alone in Europe or Australia (Mitchell 3–4). The question remains: What makes rap authentic or the use of this art form legitimate? Answers among contributors to the debate include place, community, or skin color. What is important to note, however, is the fact that no answer has been adopted unanimously.

I am arguing that “Big Brother Is WWatching You” and “The NSA vs the USA” cannot be dismissed as examples of exploitative cultural appropriation; neither do the artists offer their critique from a position of privilege. Instead, the fact that the cultural appropriation debate resonates in the two songs discussed here, gives additional answers by the artists to the question of identity under surveillance. As journalists and scholars note, evidence is mounting that the future of surveillance for the entire citizenry is what present-day surveillance is for marginalized citizens at this very moment. To quote Virginia Eubanks, who is both a professor for Science and Technology Studies in the United States and an activist for human rights in poor communities in the information age:

A decade ago, I sat talking to a young mother on welfare about her experiences with technology. When our conversation turned to Electronic Benefit Transfer cards (EBT), Dorothy said, “They’re great. Except [Social Services] uses them as a tracking device.” I must have looked shocked, because she explained that her caseworker routinely looked at her EBT purchase records. Poor women are the test subjects for surveillance technology, Dorothy told me ruefully, and you should pay attention to what happens to us. You’re next.

[...]

Software designed for authoritarian political aims spawns repressive political environments wherever it is used. Systems tested in low rights environments will, as Dorothy informed me a decade ago, eventually be used on everyone. (Eubanks)

By choosing rap as a cultural language, *Juice Rap News* and Shahid Buttari are at least implying that privilege must be understood in terms of intersectionality. It is true, Farrant and Nanni are white; Buttari and Nanni do hold doctorate degrees and enjoy middle-class lifestyles. However, as the surveillance state becomes ever more sophisticated, traditional ideas of privilege become meaningless. Buttari’s lyrics point to the fact that divisions run along the lines of “compliant” and “non-compliant” to the agencies in charge of spying. And Buttari’s chronology of the agencies’ “neutralizations” includes victims like Malcolm X as well as the white, middle-class environmentalist Judi Bari. With the gradual erosion of civil rights and the dismantling of democratic structures and processes as a consequence of surveillance, the intellectual and the *gangsta*, the ghetto and the ivory tower are equally at risk, one sooner, one later. Surveillance becomes the great leveler for the non-compliant. Nanni and Farrant adopt, adapt, and parody conventions of black rap not only out of solidarity but

also because they—being in the camp of the non-compliant—see themselves as future victims. To the artists discussed here, rap remains one of the last cultural languages with a cultural heritage that is strong enough to sell powerful dreams in today’s world of surveillance: Only by the united resistance of all non-compliant actors can dreams of political consciousness, privacy, and ultimately of liberation stay alive.

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### **III. Visualities**



Hugh Davies

## The Art of Surveillance: Surveying the Lives and Works of Andy Warhol and Ai Weiwei

**Abstract:** This chapter explores surveillance as conceptual and creative practice in the work of American pop-artist Andy Warhol and Chinese dissident artist Ai Weiwei. Examining their mutual celebration of popular culture, celebrity and social media, the aesthetics of surveillance emerge as defining features of their respective oeuvres. Beginning with a literature review of the changing modes and understandings of surveillance over recent decades, this paper goes on to explore how surveillance manifests in the personal lives and creative practices of both Andy Warhol and Ai Weiwei, albeit during different eras and through different cultural lenses. Warhol's Factory studio where the eccentric and famous paraded before cameras constituted a kind of reality TV set decades before the concept would become mainstream, while Ai's prolific social media existence that collapses together political activism with selfies-with-the-stars sees his entire life documented online. Both artists also attracted state surveillance. Warhol for his subversions of social conservatism through popular imagery, and Ai Weiwei for his antagonisms of the Chinese communist state. For both artists, surveillance develops to become a paramount and existential concern. In tandem with this survey of the two artists is a broader discussion exploring how public perceptions of surveillance have evolved overtime. Once regarded with terror and abject horror, today, this essay argues, surveillance is no longer a state or corporate imposition, but a popular trend and artistic aesthetic embraced at political, social and cultural levels.

**Keywords:** Ai Weiwei; Andy Warhol; conceptual art; surveillance; pop-art

In the final rooms of the touring 2016 Andy Warhol and Ai Weiwei retrospective, the sculptural objects, paintings, and installations give way entirely to screens. As with much of the exhibition that precedes it, the practices of the two seemingly unrelated artists are again connected, but here links are forged between their mutual celebration of celebrity, social media, and the aesthetics of surveillance these factors give rise to. It becomes apparent that American pop icon Andy Warhol and Chinese dissident artist Ai Weiwei share a keen awareness of surveillance. Indeed, the concern emerges as a defining feature of their respective practices, albeit through different eras

and cultural lenses. Ai's social media presence resonates profoundly with Warhol's celebrity screen imagery from the 1950s onwards. Warhol's infamous "Factory" studio was already a kind of living social media three decades before such applications would hit the digital mainstream. Today, Ai's Beijing studio, called "258 Fake," has become China's equivalent of Warhol's Factory: filled with creative individuals, experimental practices, and prying cameras. Both artists also attracted state surveillance: Warhol for his subversions of social conservatism through popular imagery and Ai Weiwei for his antagonisms of the Chinese communist state. Taking inspiration from the internationally touring retrospective of their works, this essay examines the lives and practices of Andy Warhol and Ai Weiwei, exploring how these artists reflect and celebrate the surveillance cultures pertinent to the very different eras in which each worked.

It should be noted from the outset that the subject of surveillance art has produced several high-profile exhibitions in recent years. Among them are *Exposed: Voyeurism, Surveillance and the Camera* at Tate Modern (2010), *Watching You, Watching Me* at the Open Society Foundation in New York (2014), and *Covert Operations: Investigating the Known Unknowns* at the Scottsdale Museum of Contemporary Arts in Arizona (2015). In addition, numerous arts practitioners have taken up surveillance tactics and concerns in their work. Noteworthy are French artist Sophie Calle who has mapped the strange intimacy between observer and the observed and Bruce Nauman who explored the recorded self through participatory video installations. Of equal importance are the diverse array of creative practitioners who have investigated the eruption of post-9/11 state and commercial surveillance from data tracking to drone warfare. But in stark contrast to the majority of works addressing the art of surveillance, the works of Ai and Warhol contain an acceptance, complicity, and even a celebration of surveillance. Both artists embraced the new surveillance technologies of their eras (Warhol—video and Ai—the Internet); however in the work of these artists, the technologies become secondary concerns to their impact on the human psyche. In comparing their practices, separated by almost 65 years and spanning East and West, what emerges is a captivating insight into how screen technologies and cultures of surveillance have evolved since the 1950s, and how spectacularly society has transformed with them.

## 1 Topologies of Surveillance

In order to orient the reader, it is necessary to undertake a brief overview of the topologies of surveillance explored in the following text before embarking on an analysis of the artists, their lives and work. The term surveillance derives from the French word *surveiller* whose etymology is located in the prefix *sur*: ‘over’ and the word *veiller* from the Latin *vigilare*: ‘to watch,’ as in ‘vigil.’ The word *surveillance*, Albrechtslund notes, “implies a spatial hierarchy” specifically that of monitoring from above (“Online Social”). This directional orientation is often reinforced by the prefix ‘under’ as in to be ‘under surveillance.’

In recent years, there has been broadening of the conceptualization of surveillance beyond the architecture of looking down upon someone, as for instance from a panopticon, to include not only senses beyond the visual, but also to recognize multiple vantage points of surveillance other than from above. Most relevant to the investigation that follows is the acknowledgment of social surveillance (Marwick, “Public Domain”; Tokunaga) to denote the mutual and lateral eavesdropping and gossip that constitutes information gathering by individuals about their peers, a practice also described as peer-to-peer monitoring (Andrejevic). Aspects of social surveillance can also include surveillance from below or upward surveillance encompassing the eavesdropping of servants on their masters during the Victorian era (McCuskey), to the fan practices toward celebrity figures that Cashmore suggests are significantly more pervasive and aggressive than state surveillance (262). Within such a framework, whole cultures of fandom and participatory culture as mapped by media scholar Henry Jenkins in his book *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers* might be reinterpreted as cultures of social and upwards surveillance. Other instances of upward social surveillance include that of citizens being watchful of their leaders, often through the repurposing of surveillance equipment to watch the watchers, also called ‘sousveillance’: *sous*: ‘below’ and *veiller*: ‘to watch’ (Mann, Nolan, and Wellman).

Albrechtslund and Nørgaard Glud have argued that these new constellations of surveillance should not simply be understood as “unfortunate side effects” of contemporary culture and technologies, but instead be recognized as an “integral and productive part of social life in the mixed

space of the web and the city” bearing the potential to be subjectivity-building and playful (239). Shilton goes further to claim that social surveillance can be an empowering force—assuming of course that information is evenly distributed through informal communities “rather than [controlled by] governments or corporations” (131).

Today, social surveillance has become normalized in the digital arena of social networking. Contemporary social surveillance technologies (Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter) are purposefully designed for users to continually leave digital traces and investigate the traces left by others, a practice conceptualized as participatory surveillance (Albrechtslund). Critical to the practice of participatory surveillance is the open sharing of personal information with full awareness that it will be surveyed by often unseen and unknown others.

These recent developments in surveillance do not replace but augment traditional monitoring technologies, such as the camera, which remains the central apparatus in the development of modern surveillance. Artists were among the first to adopt and react to the radical potentialities of the camera, with the uncanny image-making device representing both an annihilation of their domination over visual representation, as well as a tool rich with creative potential. Through the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, many artists experimented with the opportunities delivered by photographic processes and practices. But it was not until the innovation of the video camera, arriving simultaneously with development of conceptual art in the late 1960s, that artists began to fully identify the surveillance capabilities of this instantaneous and electronic image-making device.

## 2 The Birth of Surveillance Art

Andy Warhol is credited with inventing surveillance art with his 1966 film *Outer and Inner Space*. The multi-screen collage presents factory favorite, actress, and socialite Edie Sedgwick observing images of herself, while simultaneously being observed. The predicament of a woman under the male gaze is well rehearsed in the history of western art, but Warhol reinvents the scenario by layering film and video: the then-latest in surveillance technologies. Like so many of Warhol’s moving image works, *Outer and Inner Space* interrogates the impact of surveillance, but it

does so through the lens of celebrity. Sedgwick was Warhol's first screen starlet—and this breakthrough-work coincides with his invention of the term “superstar” (Taylor and Winquist 422).

In the history of visual art, *Outer and Inner Space* appears entirely unique—no painting or moving image work appears to precede it. Although Warhol's *Empire* (1964) and *Sleep* (1963) establish the artist's interest in surveillance aesthetics, *Outer and Inner Space* imbricates technologically enabled surveillance with celebrity voyeurism and introduces the trauma of a subject watching herself being watched. Yet its providence, as I will outline, can be traced to the Hollywood Star system of the 1930s. In the work, we see a video playback of Sedgwick speaking with an unseen bystander. On the same visual plane, a projected film of Sedgwick observes and responds to her video recorded self. This double screen image is then re-doubled resulting in four Sedgwicks conversing across time and media platforms. At once watching and being watched, Sedgwick's moving and fractured likeness is interrogated by unseen others while trapped in a hall of mirrors. Through this evocative montage, *Outer and Inner Space* captures the narcissistic trauma of being the center of televisual attention, the condition of both the celebrity and the surveilled.

Both celebrity and surveillance were deeply personal concerns for Warhol. Throughout his life, he loved to observe others, and from childhood on—despite his intense shyness—also wished to be watched himself. Suffering a nervous disease from a young age, the house-bound Warhol became intimately acquainted with the star-system of Classical Hollywood through collecting silver-screen gossip magazines and autographed photos of film stars taken by stalking paparazzi and studio photographers alike. Some of the images he kept in treasured photo albums retained to this day by the Andy Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Others, he cut-up and collaged together making new faces and images—practicing the manufacturing of stars he would later come to perfect. This activity would prove crucial in the development of Warhol's identity, practices, and creative practice.

He held a particular fascination for Shirley Temple who was the same age as Warhol and perhaps represented the star he wished to become (Korichi 52–54). He wrote to Temple asking for an autographed picture and she obliged. The two would never meet, but Warhol titled his 1965

film, also starring Edie Sedgwick, *Poor Little Rich Girl*, after the 1936 Shirley Temple film of the same name. Warhol's success as an artist would hinge on his emulation of the Hollywood star-system that he had internalized as a child, creating his own entourage of 'superstars' and layering their likenesses together in film and video montages. Curator Kynaston McShine suggests that Warhol's early identification with celebrities was twofold, "both as objects of desire and as role models" (17). Temple was not the last celebrity that a fan-struck Warhol would desire, contact, or emulate.

## 2.1 Stalking Truman Capote

In his 20s, Warhol became fixated with the celebrity writer Truman Capote. Capote's 1949 break-through novel *Other Voices Other Rooms* featured an erotically charged cover photograph of the author appearing to touch himself. The book's cover image perhaps more than its content captured Warhol's fascination and the young artist became besotted with the author and socialite. Scanning the society pages, Warhol tracked Capote's every move; he wrote fan letters to the writer and stalked him across Manhattan. Warhol titled his first New York solo exhibition at the Hugo Gallery *Fifteen Drawings based on the Writings of Truman Capote*.

Although Warhol's overtures went unanswered, like many captured in the vortex of celebrity fandom, his magnetism toward the subject of his affection slowly tipped from attraction into obsession. "[I]n addition to inundating the writer with letters, drawings and daily phone calls, Warhol would prowl outside his home" (Piechucka 114). When finally Capote capitulated and met with the celebrity-obsessed Warhol, the writer was struck with pathos for his young fan: "He seemed one of those hopeless people that you just know nothing's ever going to happen to. Just a hopeless, born loser, the loneliest, most friendless person I'd ever seen in my life" (qtd. in Bockris 91). Following the meeting, Capote's mother ended Warhol's advances, telling him in no uncertain terms that his presence in Capote's life was not welcome. For Warhol, the encounter reinforced what he had long understood; he needed to transcend from the sycophantic end of the celebrity system to become the admired; to evolve from watcher



to being watched. In a way, Warhol managed to achieve this, not by becoming the star of his work, but instead by making his own desire—and America's desire—the focal point of his practice. Throughout the 50s and 60s, Warhol gained attention for his screen prints that mirrored all that he and America loved, from Elvis Presley and Marilyn Monroe to his daily diet of cornflakes and Campbell's soup. The works represent a snap-shot of America's popular image diet, a kind of surveillance of the society in which he lived.

Some fifteen years later, in the mid-1960s, relations between Andy Warhol and Truman Capote resumed. By this time, Warhol had succeeded in becoming a major celebrity himself. Although a friendly and professional relationship developed between the two, Capote viewed Warhol with contempt, believing that the artist sought celebrity for its own sake rather than as a by-product of a successful career (Korichi 98). Yet Capote's own success was largely due to voyeuristic and gossipy accounts of celebrity life in which he revealed the intimate circumstances of close associates in thinly disguised literature. "All literature is gossip," the writer famously quipped (Capote 50).

Of course, Warhol would never have denied Capote's allegation. "I've always wanted people to notice me," the artist declared in the book *POPism* (47). For Warhol, the hallmark of fame was to be a figure surveyed within the gossip circles of society life, to be stalked by fans and photographers alike. In Warhol's figuration of celebrity, possessing talent was an additional, but not essential feature. In 1969, Warhol proposed several television shows revolving around surveillance of ordinary people. One titled "Nothing Special" simply involved people walking past a camera. Another, as described by Warhol, uncannily foreshadowed the Big Brother franchise. The artist suggested: "We'll get five or six people living together for a couple of weeks out in the country, and just shoot everything that happens between them as they get complicated with one another" (Carroll 278). This notion of fame and celebrity as conceptualized by Warhol would entirely predict the emergence of reality television culture; of the flippancy and immediacy of ordinary people turned into celebrities; of people being famous simply for being famous; and of the pervasive public desire to be watched. Indeed, more than being watched, but technologically recorded too.

In addition to his prolific film and photographic documentation, Warhol was also a fervent audio recordist. Many of his gossipy conversations with personalities including Truman Capote are immortalized on reel-to-reel tape. Art historian Branden W. Joseph mentions “Warhol’s attachment to his recorder and his desire to tape every minute of his life” (248). Likewise a 1970 *Vogue* magazine article on the artist reported: “Warhol records everything...He records hours of tape every day but just files the reels away and never listens to them” (Perrault). While the bulkiness of audio technology and storage was unable to accommodate the full extent of Warhol’s aspirations to “record everything,” his obsessive self-documentation amounts to 4000 hours of his life and conversations preserved on audio cassettes that remain untouched in the archive of the Andy Warhol Foundation. Looking back from the present, we can distinguish a unique examination of surveillance as well as a providence of contemporary social media habits in the oeuvre of Warhol; a celebration and critique of the culture of celebrity and the technologies that facilitate it.

Nowhere is this more evident than in Warhol’s final works: his magazine-format cable TV shows produced from the late 1970s until his death in 1987. In these compellingly vacuous interviews, Hollywood A-listers, art-superstars, and unknown drag queens are all held up and revealed to be as vain and one-dimensional as each other. Through the medium of television, just as with silk-screen, Warhol possessed the talent of flattening and mass producing even the most illustrious pop-icons into something completely bland, repetitive and banal—while also managing to reveal the fragile beauty in that. For Warhol, the camera exposed much more than film; there is something magical and powerful in the act of filming someone: the awareness of the subject that through the camera’s enduring lens, all eyes are potentially on them.

### 3 The Truman Show Delusion

Warhol’s democratization of celebrity both relies on and celebrates surveillance, but also gestures toward the psychological impact that perpetual monitoring gives rise to. The subject matter was close to Warhol’s own heart. Aside from actually being spied on by New York Police in their “surveillance of gay men” (Joseph 244), and the FBI for his “subversive

cinema” (Willett 88), in his autobiography the artist professes to a long-held suspicion of living within a television show—that nothing in his life was real. When in 1968, Valerie Solanas shot and almost killed him, Warhol felt his consciousness leave his body and he looked down at the scene from outside it. The episode led him to a profound epiphany. He had been right all along—*everything was just television* (Warhol and Colacello 91).

Perhaps Warhol’s delusion of being televised was a technological reimagining of God’s view over him. Warhol was raised a pious Byzantine-Ruthenian Catholic, and secretly maintained the faith until his death. Art historian Jane Daggett Dillenberger examines the impact of Warhol’s faith on his practice, noting the Byzantine-Ruthenian sect’s renown for creating and venerating dazzlingly religious iconography. Daggett Dillenberger also underscores Warhol’s personal devotion, revealing that several mornings a week, the artist and celebrity would appear at mass at New York’s St. Vincent Ferrer, and volunteered at soup kitchens even during the headiest of the “Factory” and Studio 54 days (29). Might Warhol’s perception of being televised have been a deep and literal interpretation of his faith? Perhaps Warhol actually imagined God surveying him in real time via television broadcast.

What is certain is that Warhol’s embrace of both superficiality and indifference to being watched placed him ahead of the curve in accepting the present ordinariness of contemporary surveillance culture. It is important to recall here that during Warhol’s lifetime, mainstream society regarded the idea of being spied on with profound anxiety. The terrifying notion of an Orwellian Big Brother state orchestrating grand deceptions while recording one’s most private thoughts shaped popular nightmares through the Cold War epoch spawning a series of dystopian surveillance fictions of which Peter Weir’s *Truman Show* is probably the last. One of the many features that mark out Warhol as extraordinary is that he did not share his era’s distaste of triviality or fear of being spied on. Yet at some point around the turn of the millennium, amidst the rise of social media and reality TV, neither did anybody else. The ubiquitous and paranoid nightmare of being watched inverted into a shallow and narcissistic anxiety of not being watched. Although Sigmund Freud had mapped the overlap of paranoia and narcissism almost a century earlier, by the turn of the millennium, Freud’s conflation of both psychoses had become more than a

cultural norm—it had become a global desire. As Slovenian social theorist Slavoj Žižek observed of post 9/11 conditions:

Is not the ultimate American paranoiac fantasy that of an individual [...] who suddenly starts to suspect that the world he lives in is a fake, a spectacle staged to convince him that he lives in a real world, while all people around him are effectively actors and extras in a gigantic show? (12–13)

Today such paranoiac fantasies are no longer considered unusual or delusional but are made real through the automated surveillance within digital networks. Being perpetually watched has become the prevailing condition of daily life. Our browsers automatically record our most intimate interests, concerns, fears, and fetishes, which are saved to databases for easy access by corporations and governments. What had once been of greatest concern now seems a small price to pay for the opportunity to craft and promote our celebrity selves upon social media. Yet for all its popular embrace, contemporary surveillance does not occur without the psychological fracturing that Warhol mapped in his film *Outer and Inner Space*.

The contemporary imbrications of technology, surveillance, and celebrity has given rise to symptoms of narcissistic paranoia that Joel and Ian Gold have fittingly diagnosed as “*The Truman Show Delusion*.” In a paper published in the May 2012 issue of *Cognitive Neuropsychiatry*, the psychiatrist and philosopher duo recount an astonishing sequence of cases with uncanny correspondence to both Žižek’s observation of post 9/11 conditions and Warhol’s understanding of reality—of individuals convinced they were being secretly filmed for a TV show. One sufferer reports:

I realised that I was and am the centre, the focus of attention by millions and millions of people [...] my [family] and everyone I knew were and are actors in a script, a charade whose entire purpose is to make me the focus of the world’s attention. (Gold and Gold 457)

Another long-term casualty believed that all the individuals in his life were part of the elaborate scheme. Convinced that even the attacks of 9/11 were outlandish fabrications of his personalized and fictional narrative, he traveled to New York hoping to expose the hoax, but discovered—in vain—the World Trade Center destroyed (457).

In a bizarre post-modern paradox, yet another victim was himself working on a reality TV series, but had come to sense that the television show was an elaborate conspiracy, and that his fellow crewmembers were

secretly filming him. He perpetually anticipated the *This-Is-Your-Life* moment when the cameras would flip around revealing that *he* had been the true star of the show all along (458).

While each of these afflicted individuals was diagnosed with schizophrenia or bipolar disorder and treated with antipsychotic medication, the recent and increasing emergence of such cases evidences a much wider societal pathology. Is this the result of pervasive celebrity obsession combined with an awareness of omnipresent surveillance technologies that track our every move, making each of us perceive ourselves as the secret star of our own world/television show? In an irony perfectly worthy of a dystopian science fiction from mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, those who discern their perpetual surveillance—albeit in delusional metaphor—are understood as mentally afflicted.

#### 4 The Rise of Participatory Surveillance

Herein lies the astounding success of contemporary surveillance culture: It is not simply the development of technologies and unlimited capacity for data storage, but the complete inversion of the public imagination to embrace the same state and corporate surveillance that mass society once regarded with horror. With practices of participatory surveillance and an ethos of digital exhibitionism inherent in contemporary social media, this inversion is complete. Today, Millennial users report being more perturbed about bosses or parents witnessing their Facebook and Twitter feeds than by governments or corporations tracking their online activities (Marwick, “Public Domain” 379), a fact evidencing what Humphreys describes as a “voluntary Panopticon in which people willingly participate in the surveillance of themselves by corporate entities” (3). Selfies, Instagram, and reality television have all ensured the great paranoia is no longer of being watched by unseen others, but the terrible fear that perhaps we are not being watched, that we are not worth watching. How, as a society, did we arrive here?

The tipping point appears to occur in around 1990 with a significant shift in image cultures and technologies. These include the explosion in reality TV, the birth of the World Wide Web, and the end of the Cold War symbolized by the fall of the Berlin Wall. A scene from the 2006 German

film *Lives of Others* cleverly captures the almost-overnight shift in the perception of surveillance from cold war horror story to narcissistic fantasy. Following the fall of the Berlin Wall, the film's protagonist is shocked to discover listening devices had long been hidden throughout his apartment. He visits the now-public Stasi archive to see first-hand the information that was secretly collected on him by the former regime. Sure enough, the archive janitor wheels out a trolley stacked high with documentation of his activities. Crucially, the other visitors, each possessing only a small file of their own, glance over at him, enviously impressed at his media presence. The janitor whispers—"hats off to you." We have caught up to Warhol. To be watched, we all understand in the post-cold war moment, is the condition of the activist hero, and the celebrity.

The archives featured in *Lives of Others* are an actual but ad-hoc solution to the very real conundrum suddenly faced by the newly united Germany in 1991: what to do with the masses of weaponized gossip collected through the Stasi networks? This potent lateral surveillance collection represents a powerful magic, Strathern and Stewart have argued. Its existence evidences "a kind of sorcery practiced by citizens against one another and by the Stasi against all of East German citizenry" (39). How should such dark magic be handled? The German state found a conscientious solution by reversing the gaze and opening the files to those they were compiled against.

Today's geopolitical surveillance gods of Google and Facebook share none of these scruples. The Stasi archives represent but a small grain of sand compared to the vast oceans of information gathered and retained by the Internet giants. Social media companies have completely normalized the collection of personal data provided by users, a process sometimes called "dataveillance" (Clarke). Likewise, marketing firms routinely monitor the digital traces left by web users as they move across websites and advertising networks (Grimmelmann). The CEO of search giant Google has expressed the situation in clear and unapologetic terms: "We know where you are. We know where you've been. We can more or less know what you're thinking about" (Eric Schmidt qtd. in Saint). Google has assured users repeatedly that their data is completely secure while simultaneously arguing in court that users of its email service have "no legitimate expectation of privacy" (Saint). Meanwhile Facebook CEO

Mark Zuckerberg has remarked that privacy is simply “no longer a social norm” (Zuckerberg qtd. in Johnson). Outdated fears of pervasive surveillance of citizens have been realized precisely because our fears toward them have all but disappeared. Today, we are all watched.

## 5 Bugging Ai Weiwei

In 2015, Chinese artist Ai Weiwei returned to Beijing to discover unusual electronic gadgets hidden throughout his studio and home, wire-tapping devices similar to those featured in *Lives of Others*. In an act of sousveillance, he took photos of himself exploding firecrackers next to the devices with the caption: “Can you hear this?” and published the images across Instagram and Twitter. The prank is symptomatic of Ai’s *enfant terrible* practice as an activist artist and netizen, but the incident also highlights the absurdity of spying on a man who already professes spending almost all his waking hours online. In defense of China’s Security Bureau, we might speculate these listening devices were not even wired up, but that their function served a different order of communication—to reinforce what was already obvious to the artist: “*We’re watching you.*”

Although Ai’s transformation of state surveillance equipment into conceptual art constitutes a dangerous play, the risks of creative expression in the face of state power are already well known to the artist. His father, a pioneer of Chinese modern poetry and once darling of the newly formed communist state, fell afoul of Chairman Mao’s campaign against counter-revolutionaries in the late 1950s. Ai Qing went from literary celebrity to enemy-of-the-state almost overnight. The poet and his young family were banished to the remote fringes of the country (Manchuria, Xinjiang, and the Gobi Desert) where Ai spent the first two decades of his life. Ai Weiwei’s entire childhood was informed by his father’s harsh political exile for artistic integrity. The artist describes the results of his childhood this way: “I wouldn’t say I’ve become more radical: I was born radical” (Ai and Warsh 49).

Following Mao’s death and the relaxing of political conditions, the Ai family returned to Beijing in 1978 where Ai Weiwei enrolled in the Beijing Film Academy. Here he began to paint and co-founded a radical artist group called *The Stars*, but by 1981 had relocated to the United States,

replaced his sketchbook with a camera, and spent the next twelve years taking thousands of photographs. Like Warhol before him, Ai had discovered a liberating form of creativity in the machine image. The first book Ai read in English was Warhol's *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol*, and the pop-artist's attitude and demeanor spoke clearly to Ai across their vast cultural divide. Although both living in the same city but never having met, Ai learnt a lot from Warhol during this period. Curator Max Delany suggests: "As much as anything, Ai connected with Warhol's transparency and openness, his means of communication and his interest in documenting everyday life" (Delany qtd. in Boon). For Ai, the inherent transparency of lateral surveillance underpinning Warhol's art resonated with his own practices as a photographer and his deep desires for a more open and egalitarian China.

In 1993 Ai returned to China after more than ten years in the United States to care for his ill father and to reconnect with his homeland. Over the next two decades, the artist built a national profile as a conceptual artist and architect, and his international significance rose along with that of China. In 2005, Ai was invited as a guest blogger by Chinese Internet giant Sina Weibo and for four years he posted autobiographical reflections on art, architecture, and social commentary. Increasingly, he blogged criticism of government policy. Ultimately, his outspoken views on events such as the Sichuan earthquake and the Beijing Olympics saw the blog shut down in 2009. Soon after the artist was beaten by police in Chengdu causing a cerebral hemorrhage. But censorship, intimidation, and violence have not produced the intended effect of quieting the artist; instead they appear to further ignite his aspirations for creative freedom and political transparency, aspirations he now ventilates on Western social media, having been all but completely banned from the Chinese Internet.

## 6 Ai Weiwei Bugs Back

Twitter and Instagram have become for Ai what the screen tests and screen prints were for Warhol: a means of rapidly disseminating contemporary image culture in popular and accessible formats. Yet for all Ai's political conviction, there is—as with Warhol's screen prints—a profound shallowness and narcissistic folly in his use of social media, a crass self-promotion



that ultimately overshadows any actual political impact. What results is a kind of ‘clicktivism,’ the shallow agency that emerges from the collision of social media and political activism. Nonetheless, Ai draws attention to this happy hypocrisy in which we all participate. His Instagram account perfectly illustrates this case in point as he posts pictures of refugees rescued in Lesbos alongside selfies with Paris Hilton. This collapsing together of tragedy and irreverence, a scene common to everyone’s Facebook feed, is suddenly exposed as tasteless once it is framed as art. Because of this decisively asinine use of social media, Ai has attracted criticism in the West similar to that which he is accustomed to receiving at home: of not behaving within appropriate boundaries of unspoken ideology, ergo of refusing to censor himself.

Ai’s profane celebration of the contradictory promises of both the Internet and the Chinese state knows no bounds. Expressing the fullness and emptiness of their respective political potentials, Ai impertinently compares the collection of short proverbs within Chairman Mao’s *Little Red Book* to Twitter’s 140-character limit statements (Ai and Warsh). Taking the comparison to its endpoint, Ai has produced his own book emulating Mao’s, filling its pages with short statements from the artist’s own Twitter account. The volume titled *Weiwei-isms* is an irreverent affront to the rhetoric of the China’s Cultural Revolution.

Likewise, Ai has hijacked the currency of Internet memes to further offend the Chinese bureaucracy. In 2009 Ai published a nude image of himself with only a llama concealing his genitals. The image was captioned with Mandarin text that literally translated as “Grass Mud Horse Covering the Center” but phonetically reads as “fuck your mother, Communist Party Central Committee.” Because of this, even today, llama remains one of the many words censored on the Chinese Internet. Ai reports, “Every month the so-called Bureau of Propaganda produces a list of words that cannot appear [...] sometimes weekly; sometimes daily. I remember once the forbidden word was ‘today’” (Ai qtd. in Bunbury). Ai’s antics do not represent serious menace to China’s ruling party, but his persistence ensures that Ai must be made an example of. The result is a petty to-and-fro in which the Chinese ruling party is dragged down to Ai’s level by simply acknowledging him. This is of course precisely what the artist wants.

It's unfortunate that these social media aspects of Ai's practice don't easily translate into the gallery context, as it's central to his artistic and aesthetic activity. Indeed many have argued Ai's controversial social media presence is the real reason for his arrest in 2011. His online comments and creative practice have often provoked the indignation of the Chinese Communist Party guaranteeing that, where Warhol fantasized about being watched by unseen others, Ai constantly is.

In fact the perpetual surveillance of Ai borders on the absurd. As well as installing security cameras outside his home, work and studio, police have approached two of the artist's assistants, offering them cash to spy on him. For Ai's part, he welcomes the idea. "I am seeking for openness and the exchange of ideas. I never want to hide anything" (Sebag-Montefiore). Ai even suggested to the police that they come and work as his assistants. In a monumental performative gesture Ai has elected to make his entire life a work of art, a kind of *Gesamtkunstwerk*, and like Warhol before him, surveillance becomes crucial to the documentation of his practice. So rather than challenging his perpetual observation, he reinforces to it. The 2012 work *Weiweicam* saw him set up multiple webcams providing a live feed from his compound where online users could watch him 24 hours-a-day, at least until authorities instructed him to shut the project down two days later. This redoubling of the camera to create a kind of sousveillance is highly symptomatic of the artist's methodology.



A video camera stand-off from the 2012 film, *Ai Weiwei: Never Sorry*

An illustrative example is provided in the film, *Ai Weiwei: Never Sorry*, in which the artist and his entourage dine at a Chendu restaurant before being set upon by government officials. One official fires intimidating questions at Ai: “What are you doing here? When will you be done?” while another stands rigid in uniform filming the affair. In the tightest of feedback loops, Ai’s videographer refracts the intimidation by filming the police as they film him. Meanwhile, we also look on at incident via the documentarian’s third camera. The tension is palpable. Although obviously annoyed, Ai also appears strangely relaxed. He is clearly accustomed to conflict with officials. Ai once confessed to the Chinese newspaper *Southern Weekend* that “being threatened is addictive. When those in power are infatuated with you, you feel valued” (Sebag-Montefiore). Reverberating in this admission is the key to both Warhol and Ai’s art and perhaps the entire culture of contemporary surveillance: that being watched evidences a variety of adoration, regardless of whether the watchers are advertisers, sycophants, or secret police.

## 7 Conclusion

From drones to nanny-cams and Facebook to security cameras, today surveillance is found hiding in plain sight. It has become the ubiquitous wallpaper of our lives affecting the way we look, think, and act. Surveillance is no longer simply the stare of the state, but our permanent and mutual gaze at each other. While both Warhol and Ai are famous for their democratization

of creativity and celebrity, what is demonstrated here is their equal celebration of the democratization of surveillance. Within this constellation of cameras and online tracking, everyone is a celebrity and a fan, an artist and a dissident, and by extension, everyone must be monitored. For Warhol this realization provoked him to reinvent his friends as celebrities, (and reinvent celebrities as friends), and to navigate through his life as though starring in a television show. For Ai it has meant closely watching the very institutions that watch him, and navigating through his life as though his every action, statement, and movement will be recorded and judged by history itself.

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Marek Paryż

## Paranoia and Surveillance in Andrew Dominik's Film *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford*

**Abstract:** The chapter examines the ways in which Andrew Dominik's film *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford* (2007) uses narration, plot construction, character development and cinematography to address the problem of surveillance. Although *Assassination*—through its consistent, meticulous stylization—appears to be concerned primarily with the construction of myth, it also poses questions about the nature of the historical process, with a particular focus on how a confluence of randomly correlated factors produces an effect of scale that may have breakthrough significance. The specificity of surveillance as a symbolic social practice, by definition involving clandestine operations, sheds light on the intersections of institutional apparatus and individual agency. A growing awareness that an all-encompassing structure of power does exist is symptomatic of the historical situation presented in Dominik's film. Moreover, it conditions certain psychological reactions or states, especially those that verge on paranoia. It could be argued that *Assassination* appeals to the modern sensibility precisely through its psychological themes, its insistence on tracing how outside factors, among others in the form of surveillance activities, influence the development of an individual psychological syndrome.

**Keywords:** *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford*, Jesse James, Andrew Dominik, surveillance, paranoia, agency

Andrew Dominik's 2007 film *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford* belongs to the category of Westerns that show the American West at the time of transition in the closing decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It could perhaps be most aptly compared to Sam Peckinpah's *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid* (1973), not only because it uses the final months in the life of a famous historical outlaw as an axis of the story-line, but also—and more importantly—because it traces the emergence and strengthening of the modern structures of power in the American West. While *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid* looks at the signs of the expansion

of the corporate state—let us mention that the killing of Billy the Kid as shown in Peckinpah's film is a culmination of a series of actions instigated by a bunch of entrepreneurs whose interests had been threatened by the continuing outlaw activity—*Assassination* draws our attention to the spread of the surveillance apparatus. This article examines the ways in which Dominik's film uses narration, plot construction, character development, and cinematography to address the problem of surveillance. This thematic aspect is crucial for how the film approaches the subject matter of history. Although *Assassination*—through its consistent, meticulous stylization—appears to be concerned primarily with the construction of myth, it also poses questions about the nature of the historical process, with a particular focus on how a confluence of randomly correlated factors produces an effect of scale that may have breakthrough significance.

The specificity of surveillance as a symbolic social practice, by definition involving clandestine operations, sheds light on the intersections of institutional apparatus and individual agency. A growing awareness that an all-encompassing structure of power does exist is symptomatic of the historical situation presented in Dominik's film. Moreover, it conditions certain psychological reactions or states, especially those that verge on paranoia. It could be argued that *Assassination* appeals to the modern sensibility precisely through its psychological themes, its insistence on tracing how outside factors, among others in the form of surveillance activities, influence the development of an individual psychological syndrome.

Jesse James is—after Billy the Kid—the second most often portrayed historical figure of the American West in film and, according to Johnny D. Boggs, “has shown up in forty-odd movies [...]. If you take into consideration foreign films, short subjects, and brief appearances in television movies [...] that number grows substantially” (3). Christopher Anderson writes: “His [Jesse James's] inscription in any form demands an ideological reevaluation of the historical circumstances associated with him [...]. [T]he James story is perpetually being remade and transformed because of its value in ongoing historical debates” (45). Dominik's Jesse James, albeit portrayed as “a blend of bourgeois paterfamilias and crazy, somewhat dandified killer” (Naremore 60), emerges as a tragic hero for the age of information and visibility. *Assassination* revolves around the motifs of visibility/invisibility, disguise/exposure and concealment/revelation.

The film is set during the historical time that marked the beginning of the process which James R. Beniger calls the *Control Revolution*: “Before this time, control of government and markets had depended on personal relationships and face-to-face interactions; now control came to be reestablished by means of bureaucratic organization, the new infrastructures of transportation and telecommunications, and system-wide communication via the new mass media” (7). Alan Trachtenberg describes the far-reaching societal changes in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century as *Incorporation of America* (1982). He writes that the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century witnessed “the creation of national markets” and, as a result, “the corporate scheme” began to be increasingly seen as the most efficient method of organizing and managing “expanding enterprises” (6–7). This gave rise to conditions that “facilitated extensions of control: horizontally, among many companies in the same industry, and vertically, by integrating industries from the extraction of raw materials to the sale of finished products within a single corporation” (7). Trachtenberg emphasizes the fundamental importance of the Westward expansion in the process of incorporation:

The logic of events in the 1870s and 1880s disclosed [...] not an agrarian, but an industrial capitalist scenario. Penetrating the West with government encouragement, the railroad and the telegraph opened the vast spaces for production. [...] [C]ommercial and industrial businesses conceived of themselves as having the entire national space at their disposal. (20)

Incorporation led to the emergence of new forms of interdependence—and accompanying tensions—between communal or professional environments. As another eminent historian, Jackson Lears, observes, “[a] village merchant could exercise power across the counter as ruthlessly as any corporate overlord ensconced in an executive suit. Face-to-face relations were no guarantee of community. [...] A complex web of money and power bound cities, towns, and villages with the people who worked the land” (135). The extensive economic development and the resulting profound social change entailed the implementation of policing strategies on an unprecedented scale. The establishment and subsequent growth of the Pinkerton World-Wide Detective Agency was a crucial symptom of this development. Richard Slotkin writes:

Pinkerton’s detective agency was not only the largest provider of investigative and protective services in the United States between 1858 and 1898; it was also

the only instrument of police power to function throughout the nation. Pinkerton built his agency's reputation by aiding antebellum railroad corporations in their efforts to deal with embezzlement and defalcation by employees and with robbers who preyed on trains or railroad facilities. [...] [During the Civil War] Pinkerton organized wartime equivalents of the FBI and CIA, infiltrating 'copperhead' organizations in the North and directing espionage and intelligence operations in the South [...]. After the War, Pinkerton was again engaged by the railroads in capturing robbers and embezzlers; it was a consequence of this work that his agency was engaged in the hunt for Jesse James. (139–40)

As a historical note, let us add that the James gang started to rob trains in 1873 and soon became a target of Pinkerton's detectives. In January 1875 the Pinkerton men raided Jesse's mother's farm where he was reported to have been hiding; they threw a bomb into the house, and the explosion wounded Jesse's mother and killed his half-brother (cf. Dyer 56–60).

*Assassination* contains a series of episodes that show the work of institutional authorities, but it does not affirm their overwhelming power. Through the theme of surveillance, it suggests that the execution of power involves a chain of agents whose actions are not always predictable, not to mention their motives. Therefore, the enforcement of the law is aimed at shaping general attitudes as much as at handling particular crimes. And for its proper functioning, incidental deals are no less important than strategic plans. The efficacy of a given authority structure depends, among others, on how easily it transforms people of different attitudes or backgrounds into its subjects and even guardians. Such a process is not a result of pre-planning; the environment in which a given authority structure develops is too expansive and too diverse to be fully controlled. As Michel Foucault writes in his seminal discussion of the panopticon in *Discipline and Punish*,

Power has its principle not so much in a person as in a certain concerted distribution of bodies, surfaces, lights, gazes; in an arrangement whose internal mechanisms produce the relation in which individuals are caught up. [...] There is a machinery that assures dissymmetry, disequilibrium, difference. Consequently, it does not matter who exercises power. Any individual, taken almost at random, can operate the machine [...]. Similarly, it does not matter what motive animates him: the curiosity of the indiscreet, the malice of a child, the thirst for knowledge of a philosopher [...] or the perversity of those who take pleasure in spying and punishing. (202)

*Assassination* employs voice-over narration (Hugh Ross), which is crucial for sustaining the story's continuity and for establishing the film's mood.

Because of the frequent use of the narrator's speech, his serene and contemplative tone becomes one of the memorable features of the film. However, there is something deceptive about it, as the serenity of the narrator's speech veils its more ominous implications. Namely, the narrator has been endowed with a form of agency that has to do with surveillance because it is driven by a will to knowledge. This is reflected, in an intriguing way, in how the narrator's speech has been combined with images at the beginning of the film. The narrator introduces Jesse James (Brad Pitt) with the following words: "He was growing into middle age and was living in a bungalow. He installed himself in a rocking chair and smoked a cigar in the evenings as his wife wiped her pink hands on an apron and reported happily on their two children." This corresponds more or less to what the images show: a longer view of the hero sitting in a rocking chair and smoking and a shorter glimpse of his wife Zee (Mary-Louise Parker) and their children. The mother's happy report on the children is not to be seen, though, and thus words and images begin to diverge.

A good illustration of this divergence is a shot of Jesse that accompanies the information that he suffered from a condition called "granulated eyes," which forced him to blink much more often than people normally do; for the whole duration of the shot, the hero does not blink even once. It could be argued that the incompatibility of a verbal message and a visual image corresponds to the flourishing of invention at the expense of truth—a crucial step in the mythologization of the hero. But a different explanation is also possible: the narrator is absolutely convinced as to his knowledge and does not need to wait for the images to confirm what he has said. His words have enough authority to do without additional visual evidence. From the very beginning, the narrator dispels the mystery surrounding the notorious outlaw: he tells us about two bullet wounds in Jesse's chest and about how he hides his missing finger by which he could be recognized. The narrator encroaches upon Jesse's intimate sphere: he looks into his kitchen and even under his shirt. There is a shot early on in the film that symbolically defines the narrator's position in relation to the hero, his object of observation: for a few seconds the camera follows Jesse in a street of Kansas City from close behind. The narrator's voice can be heard simultaneously, and for this brief moment he literally becomes 'the man with a camera.' The ways of psychologizing Jesse James in Dominik's film have a

lot to do with the narrator's observations regarding his mental and physical state. In fact, the indication that Jesse is developing a paranoia would be less obvious if it hadn't been for the form of the narrator's account, which is analytical and at times even sounds like a diagnosis. The first hint that Jesse has a paranoid tendency is a description of how his behavior changed in the aftermath of the train robbery at Blue Cut, Missouri, with which the film's action begins: "The month of October came and Jesse began seeing Pinkerton operatives in every floor walker, street sweeper, and common man poking about in a store. On the morning of the 11<sup>th</sup>, he would wake his wife with the Scripture pertaining to the Holy Family's flight into Egypt. Overnight, the Thomas Howard clan vanished from Kansas City." As it turns out, this was not a paranoid reaction, but a step dictated by some kind of extraordinary intuition: we learn from the voice-over narration that four members of the James gang were arrested during the following days. "How Jesse could have known remains a mystery," says the narrator, and this is the only mystery he has ascribed to the hero. If, at this point, the narrator still entertains doubts about Jesse's condition, the matter will become clear soon. The episode in which Jesse brutalizes a boy who, he suspects, should know the whereabouts of a man he has been after, is summed up with the following comment from the narrator: "Jesse was sick with rheums, and aches and lung congestion. Insomnia stained his eye sockets like soot. He read auguries in the snarled intestines of chickens or the blow of cat hair released to the wind. And the omens promised bad luck, which moated and dungeoned him." The narrator links psychological causes to physical symptoms and implicitly instructs the viewer as to how to 'read' Jesse James.

Toward the end of the film, the narrator thus describes Jesse's behavior in the company of the Ford brothers during the time preceding his death: "And so it went, Jesse was increasingly cavalier, merry, moody, fey, unpredictable. He camouflaged his depressions and derangements with masquerades of extreme cordiality, courtesy and good will to others." The most telling word in this passage is "camouflaged," as it suggests that the narrator sees what others do not. This final description of Jesse's paranoid doubleness brings to mind a diagnostic procedure and shows him, in a reductive way, as a 'case'—a final assertion of the narrator's role in the production of knowledge. Importantly, the film's narration combines

psychological insights with remarks about health issues, and it ultimately defines the protagonist's body "in terms of information," to use Irma van der Ploeg's phrase (177). As van der Ploeg points out, "[t]he analysis of surveillance [...] has always revealed the body as a focal point of surveillance practices, and the detailed monitoring and registration of its movements, states and behavior as one of the primary mechanisms of disciplinary power" (177).

In one of the most symbolic scenes in *Assassination*, Jesse is taking a bath with his back to the door. Bob (Casey Affleck) stands in the door frame and after a while says: "Used to be couldn't no one sneak upon Jesse James [...] I ain't never seen you without your guns, neither." In response to these words, Jesse slowly extends his left hand, lifts up a piece of clothing from a chair next to the bath, and uncovers his gun in a holster. Bob walks off and then he is told to leave the town and hole up on his sister's farm. The bath scene introduces the theme of nakedness into the film, and nakedness should be understood here metaphorically as an overwhelming weakness combined with a fear that somebody may notice it. Whenever the voice-over narrator talks about Jesse's deteriorating physical health and self-destructive psychological proclivity, he wants the protagonist to be perceived as 'naked.' Symbolic nakedness thus signifies extreme vulnerability. The theme of nakedness is also connected to Jesse's loss of control of himself—both of his body (whose illnesses have been identified) and of his temper—and in a way anticipates the final exposure of his dead (dressed) body in the famous posthumous photographs which are reconstructed in some of the images from the film's ending. The bath scene marks the first occurrence that allows Bob to believe that he could gain the upper hand with Jesse if the circumstances permitted—an impossible thought heretofore. Bob's empowerment begins with this accidental act of surveillance.

While the voice-over narrator functions, to an extent, as an invisible agent of surveillance, there is a counterpart for such a function on the level of plot, too. Apart from Jesse James and Bob Ford, the film portrays four other members of the James gang: Ed Miller (Garret Dillahunt), Wood Hite (Jeremy Renner), Dick Liddil (Paul Schneider) and Charley Ford (Sam Rockwell). Frank James (Sam Shepard) is briefly present at the beginning, but he disappears—from the town and from the film—soon

after the train robbery at Blue Cut. The scene of the train robbery clearly shows that the gang is bigger than the bunch of men involved in the film's intrigue, but no other gangster subsequently appears on the screen although one, admittedly, should. The man in question is Jim Cummins whose behind-the-scene activities significantly influence the course of the film's action. The frequency with which his name is mentioned, at least up to a point, makes one think of him as an arch-plotter who provokes others to take the steps that will irreversibly complicate their situation or even bring about their own fall. While hiding on the Ford farm, Bob and Dick have a conversation in which the latter admits that he is "in cahoots" with Jim Cummins and wants to find out whether the former knows about it. It is completely unclear, however, what kind of a deal Dick Liddil and Jim Cummins have made; it could possibly be a plan to capture Jesse and hand him over to the authorities, but nothing confirms that at this stage Dick has such an intention. It is as if the very connection to Cummins somehow empowered Dick. Interestingly, when Dick makes a deal with the authorities it is not as a result of Cummins's mediation, but of Bob Ford's. Too close an acquaintance with Cummins has tragic consequences for Ed Miller. When Jesse visits Ed in his secluded hut, Ed is paralyzed with fear to see him and, when asked about his strange behavior, he answers: "You know them boys that got caught in the Blue Cut deal? Well, Jim say he got a word that you're planning to kill them." And then he adds: "Well, I'm in the same situation, you see. I was terrified I saw you ride up [...]. Suppose you heard Jim Cummins come by, you might have thought that we were planning to capture you or get that reward, and that ain't true. But you might have suspected it." The harder he tries to explain the circumstances, the more he implicates himself in Jesse's eyes as a potential traitor. Jesse tells him to get on horseback, and as they ride on to the town—where Jesse said he would buy him dinner—he shoots him in the back. It could be said that by pronouncing Jim Cummins's name in front of Jesse, Ed Miller has passed a death sentence on himself. But the whole affair also costs Jesse a lot psychologically, even if he pretends to remain unmoved. Of course, Cummins is not an agent of surveillance in the strict sense of the word, but his very presence as absence, similarly to the narrator's, enhances the impression of the world closing in on Jesse James.



Jesse falls victim to a syndrome analogous to the psychological effects of a permanent exposure to another's vision, as described in Foucault's discussion of the panopticon. The French philosopher observes that the panopticon was meant "to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power" (201). Persons subjected to such a mode of control were supposed to develop a permanent consciousness that they could be seen at any time, even though they were not being watched all the time. This, in turn, created "a power situation of which they [were] themselves the bearers" (201). As a result, "the surveillance [was] permanent in its effect, even if it was discontinuous in its action" (201). Foucault writes: "He who is subjected to the field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself [...] he becomes the principle of his own subjection" (202–03). The point is that, presumably, a psychological tendency that develops quite 'naturally' in an inmate must arouse great anxiety in someone who stays at large, as it is then an anomalous experience (cf. Friedman and Friedman 91)—and this is Jesse's case. As Kenneth Paradis observes, "[p]ower, for the paranoid, is understood in terms of autonomy, and autonomy with the ability to know the forces of confinement or antagonism while minimizing one's own exposure to knowledge" (24). It is precisely such autonomy that Jesse gradually loses, and it begins to dawn on him that he is losing it.

Some of Jesse's excessive behaviors could be seen as manifestations of a split between the need to resist and his awareness of his waning capability to resist the apparatus of power. The unbearable internal tension that Jesse tries to cope with finds a truly dramatic reflection in the episode when he, in the company of Dick Liddil, visits the farm where Cummins may have been hiding. The only person present at the place is Albert Ford, a boy in his early teen years and a cousin to Bob and Charley. When asked about Cummins, he says he does not know his whereabouts, and this answer provokes a very fierce reaction from Jesse. He brings the boy to the ground, kneels astride him, punches him on the face a few times, then grabs him by the ear and squeezes it, holding the other hand on the boy's mouth. Dick pulls him off the boy who—as he walks off—repeats that he does not know where Cummins may have gone. When Jesse and Dick return to their horses, the latter man, who normally does not have

any scruples, says: "I'm worn out. I can't, no, see ... My mind's all tangled anyway. Little deals like this just make me feel dirty," and Jesse bursts out crying. The meeting with Albert Ford, which actually marks the end of Jesse's search for Cummins, is a turning point as far as the psychological presentation of the hero is concerned. Perhaps for the first time in his life, Jesse is terrified by the violence he is capable of, and this leads him to suspect that violence is an expression of his insanity. The realization of his own unimaginable ruthlessness toward a child has a depressing effect on Jesse: if he is not in control of himself, he cannot possibly control a larger situation.

The episode with Albert Ford explains a suicidal tendency that Jesse subsequently develops. On one occasion, he takes Charley Ford on a ride; we then see them having a talk while standing on the surface of a frozen lake against a snowy mountainous landscape. Jesse asks his companion whether he ever considered suicide and then says: "You won't mind dying once you've peeked over the other side. You'll no more wanna go back to your body than you'd wanna spoon up your own puke." He aims his gun at his own reflection in the ice and fires a few shots. In Dominik's film, the killing of Jesse James is, in fact, the culmination of his suicidal plan. On the day of his death, he learns from a newspaper that Dick entered an agreement with the authorities, and this is an indication that the Ford brothers may have been plotting against Jesse, too, but instead of pressing them about this, he starts acting in a way that encourages them to proceed with their scheme. To begin with, he takes off his belt with the gun. He speaks and moves around in a studied manner, as if he were performing the last minutes of his life for the excitement, or the embarrassment, of the killers. The death of Jesse James is a logical end of a whole sequence of events that began with the beating of Albert Ford, admittedly, the only moment in the film that Jesse "peeked over the other side."

One fundamental problem connected with surveillance that *Assassination* touches upon involves the mechanisms of generating and circulating information. The characters constantly 'read' one another for how much they know; this is a cause of tensions among them. Seeking information is often perceived as an act of encroachment and elicits attitudes of resistance. On the other hand, the people who share the knowledge which is concealed from others form alliances; this is best shown in the motif of Jesse's

search for his cousin Wood Hite. Wood was shot to death on the Ford farm when he came there after Dick Liddil, who had seduced his father's young wife. The killer was Bob, but his reason for helping Dick is not to be determined. When Jesse visits the farm to find out about Wood's whereabouts, he has supper with the Fords—Bob, Charley, their sister and her farmhand—all of whom know, of course, how Jesse's cousin disappeared, and pretend that they do not. The tension at the table is unbearable, but the Fords avoid revealing the truth. The film contains a series of scenes in which the characters talk in twos; such intimate circumstances are conducive to working out plans, extracting information or making threats. The connection between information and intimacy is a very interesting subject of the film: the characters learn that their lives depend on their ability to conceal or reveal information at the right moments; they learn to use information as a weapon. In a conversation with Bob, Dick admits he has made a deal with Jim Cummins and, upon seeing the expression of astonishment on Bob's face, adds: "Oh dear. I went on and said too much, have I..." In the whole film, these words, uttered by Dick in a half-joking tone, reverberate with utmost seriousness and express a fear shared by a number of characters: that they will be betrayed by their own speech.

Jesse's paranoid obsession seems to be justified, given that the shot that kills him will be fired by the man whom he decided, perhaps whimsically, to trust. *Assassination* is concerned with the creation of myth as much as with the impersonation of myth, the desire to live up to its demands. Since an early age, Bob has cherished a fantasy about how much he shares in common with Jesse James, and in one scene he is encouraged by his brother to enumerate the similarities for Jesse's amusement; he does, and while the others are having fun at his expense, he remains dead serious about his claims. On the day of the killing, while Jesse and his family are at church, Bob imitates a series of Jesse's gestures and even lies down in his bed for a short while—an anticipation of the several hundred theatrical performances of the assassination which would launch Bob and Charley into a temporary fame (both in the film and historically). Still, as much as the film focuses on the striving for celebrity, it is also concerned with the striving for agency. And Bob is capable of satisfying such a need by involving himself with the authorities, which he does of his own free will, not under threat. He becomes a tool of the system and develops the

conviction that a lot depends on him, and apparently this gives him a greater sense of empowerment than does the association with Jesse James.

From the beginning, Bob Ford is portrayed as a potential threat to Jesse. When he approaches the James gang and asks to be involved in the Blue Cut robbery, Frank gives him to understand that he does not like him at all and tells him to go away. "You give me the willies," he says to Bob scornfully. But Jesse allows the young one to stay. Soon after the train robbery, there is a scene that carries a strong suggestion that Bob, despite all his ingratiating remarks about Jesse, actually encroaches upon his space: in a barn, Jesse and Frank are discussing the steps to take next, and Bob unexpectedly appears next to Jesse. Frank stares at the two men for a while and walks off, perhaps in an act of resignation. Bob says to Jesse: "I'll wager that's the first and last time you'll ever be caught off-guard." Later on, during a longer conversation, Bob recites a description of Jesse he has memorized from a book or a paper, and Jesse interrupts him, as if the rather preposterous imaginings according to which his fantasy persona has been construed unsettled him: "Jesse James, the youngest, has a face as smooth and innocent as a schoolgirl. The blue eyes, very clear and penetrating are never at rest. His form is tall and graceful and capable of great endurance and great effort. Jesse is lighthearted, restless and devil-may-care." Presumably, Jesse has gotten used to being a wanted man, but this description strikes him because it suggests the possibility that someone may recognize the weaknesses in him that he himself is not fully aware of—the comparison of his face to a schoolgirl's is particularly meaningful in this respect. It is as if the language of the description were meant to affect Jesse personally and thus accelerate his exposure. As someone who unknowingly disseminates the discourse that showcases criminality, Bob's role is defined—early on in the film—in terms of an oscillation between the surveillance apparatus and the realm of gangster activity. Both his imitations and his treachery serve as reminders that Jesse is not in control of his own image. Therefore it is not surprising that, in the course of time, Bob seems to find more and more excitement in challenging Jesse, rather than obeying him.

Bob's betrayal of Jesse makes it possible for him to assert his agency because surveillance flattens out power structures. After making a deal with the police, leading to the arrest of Dick Liddil, Bob gets a notion that

he is in a position to negotiate the subsequent tasks with the governor himself. He goes to a ball at the governor's place and somehow manages to get in. The narrator thus describes the circumstances: "Snowstorms would move over Missouri that Sunday, February 19<sup>th</sup>, shutting commerce for more than two days. And yet this wouldn't prevent Robert Ford from presenting himself to Governor Crittenden." The use of Bob's full name implies how seriously he now takes himself. At the ball, Bob boldly walks to the host's table to greet him, and the guards ruthlessly bring him to the ground, causing a commotion, and yet Bob succeeds in drawing the governor's attention and then has a conversation with him in one of his private rooms. Bob immediately sees the governor's determination to solve the problem of Jesse James for good: "I'm saying his sins will soon find him out. I'm saying his cup of iniquity is full. I'm saying Jesse James is a desperate case and may require a desperate remedy." A witness of this meeting is the chief of police, Captain Henry Craig, who does not conceal his irritation that Bob has stepped in where he should not be. When asked about Bob's exact role, Craig, after a moment of hesitation, informs the governor that "[h]e is just acting in capacity as private detective." What the chief of police means ironically is actually a proper definition of his function.

Apart from narration, character presentation and plot development, there are noteworthy aesthetic choices, especially in the construction of *mise-en-scène*, that enhance the themes of paranoia and surveillance in Dominik's film. *Assassination* is a highly stylized cinematic achievement; for example, Stephen Gaunson writes about its "eerie gothic miasma" (64). However, Dominik's style is noir<sup>1</sup> rather than gothic, and it emphasizes the hero's exposure to a kind of disembodied controlling gaze. Wheeler Winston Dixon thus characterizes the aesthetics of noir:

Noir holds both promise and danger. If we view the domain of noir as a zone in which our inhibitions are loosened, we can also see it as a place without rules, where restrictions are relaxed, where people can pass us by unnoticed, until it's too late. Noir functions as a literal and figurative zone of darkness, a place that must be illuminated so that we can see. [...]

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1 I wish to thank Fared Ben-Youssef for drawing my attention to this aspect of Dominik's film.

The world of noir is one of perpetual threat and contestation. Social conventions are stripped away to reveal the hard scramble realities underneath; even the family unit no longer functions as a zone of refuge. [...] There is no safety zone in noir, no place to rest, or hide; no comfort or shelter, no friendship; no pleasure that isn't transitory, and usually purchased with one's money, or life. (3–4)

One symptomatic technique employed in Dominick's film is the use of light in nocturnal scenes. *Assassination* includes a number of episodes that take place at dusk or at night, and they use light in a way that yields a chiaroscuro effect. This is a frequent enough solution in film in general, but its repeated employment in *Assassination* begins to signify on its own, underlining the theme of exposure. This very theme is further emphasized by the recurrent images of the interiors of Jesse's successive houses. They are invariably poorly furnished—cold, empty and depressing, as far from homely as they only can be. There is no point in getting settled in new homes; they only serve as places of sojourn until they cease to be safe. Every hiding place is for a time only. No matter how many times Jesse has evaded the authorities, he can only delay the inevitable.

The film represents surveillance as both an emergent historical situation and as a psychological problem. It shows how Jesse James' debilitating paranoia, leading to his complicity in his own murder, correspond to the moment when he loses control of his own image—both as it is presented to the public in dramatic reenactments and as it is reported to authorities. In a sense Dominick's film shows how the outlaw is at the mercy of his own mythmaking in the same way he is at the mercy of detectives. Perhaps, in identifying viewers with the narrative voiceover, it also suggests a conspiracy between the viewing public and the official spies. Our looking is enabled by and complicit with their controlling gaze.

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Caren Myers Morrison

# Mythologies of Violence in American Police Videos

*“The essential American soul is hard, isolate, stoic, and a killer.”—D. H. Lawrence*

**Abstract:** The United States is the only liberal democracy in the world where over a thousand people are shot dead by police each year. The increased circulation of video recordings of fatal shootings of unarmed black men has made this issue more culturally and politically salient, raising hopes of reform. But the images themselves may tell a different story. This chapter explores the link between these images and the American cultural preoccupation with violence. It suggests that, as images from police video become commodified, they lose their protest value. Their aesthetics evoke the same mythology of violence, masculinity, and brotherhood that permeates classic Westerns or contemporary video games. As a result, images that should be motivating action may instead reify existing power structures. The images in police video can be situated within a framework of white American mythology that dates back to colonialism. Then, as now, the twin lodestars were the good guy with the gun, and violence as a means of dominating and controlling a threatening Other. However, these narratives often go unrecognized; instead, these videos are seen as ideologically neutral because they merely “document” violent encounters between police and civilians. In the end, the videos that are presented as a possible solution to the problem of police violence—because they expose it and bring it to light—may also be functioning as arguments on behalf of that same violence.

**Keywords:** Police Video; violence; masculinity; guns, American mythology, Westerns, police brutality

## 1 Introduction

Recent public discourse in the United States has been marked by an increased awareness of deadly police violence. The United States is the only liberal democracy in the world where over a thousand people are shot dead by police each year, outpacing European countries by an exponential margin. One journalist calculated that, “in the first 24 days of 2015, police in the

United States killed more people than police did in England and Wales combined over the past 24 years” (Lartey). If the issue is newly prominent, this is largely due to the dissemination of video recordings of fatal shootings of unarmed black men in Missouri, South Carolina, Chicago, and Cleveland, as well other, non-shooting deaths in New York and Baltimore, which have inspired widespread protests and calls for social change (Brucato 6).

One response that has garnered wide public support is the increased use of body-worn cameras by police officers—a measure supported by police commissioners, the federal government, and the American Civil Liberties Union (Morrison 1). The resulting videos have been widely circulated in newscasts and on the Internet, raising the question of whether their function is to be seen as a political call to action or simply as a kind of voyeuristic entertainment (Balthaser; Brucato 38). This paper explores the link between these images and the American cultural preoccupation with violence. In it, I will suggest that, as images from police video become commodified, they lose their protest value. At least in terms of the videos recorded by the police themselves (as distinct from videos recorded by witnesses or bystanders), these images evoke the same mythology of violence, masculinity, and brotherhood that permeates classic Westerns or contemporary video games. As a result, the images that should be motivating action—in the shape of police reform, or combating poverty—may instead reify existing power structures.

The images in police video can be situated within a framework of white American mythology that cultural historians such as Richard Slotkin date back to colonialism (Slotkin, *Regeneration* 5). Then, as now, the twin lodestars were the good guy with the gun, and violence as a means of dominating and controlling a threatening Other (558). However, these narratives often go unrecognized; instead, “[b]ecause of the camera’s ability to capture things as they happen, the photographic media are frequently considered to provide an authentic record of what was in front of the camera’s lens when the scene was recorded” (Spence and Navarro 11). In other words, these videos are seen as ideologically neutral because they merely “document” violent encounters between police and civilians. But as art critic John Berger points out, “to believe that what one sees, as one looks through a camera on to the experience of others, is the ‘utter truth’ risks confusing very different levels of truth. As soon as a photograph is used as a means of communication,

the nature of lived experience is involved, and then the truth becomes more complex” (Berger 54). So the videos that are presented as a possible solution to the problem of police violence—because they expose it and bring it to light—may also be functioning as arguments on behalf of that same violence.

## 2 The Issue of Identification

Video material taken by the police often seems to “naturally” direct the viewer’s sympathies towards the police. Take as an example the United States Supreme Court’s 2007 decision in *Scott v. Harris*. In that case, a motorist, Victor Harris, sued a police department in the state of Georgia after an officer rammed his car during a high-speed chase, forcing an accident and causing him serious and irreversible injury. The chase was captured on a dashboard-mounted camera in the police officer’s car. The Court rejected Harris’s claim, saying that, based on the videotape, no reasonable jury could have believed that the officer’s actions were unreasonable (*Scott v. Harris*). The late Justice Antonin Scalia, in writing the opinion, compared the chase seen on the video to “a Hollywood-style car chase of the most frightening sort,” adding during oral argument that he found it “the scariest chase” he had seen “since ‘The French Connection’ ” (*Scott v. Harris Oral Argument*).

What is interesting is that if you watch the six-minute car chase in *Scott v. Harris*, you might be struck by how little like a Hollywood chase scene it seems. There are no screeching tires, no collateral collisions, no visible pedestrians, no hairpin turns—just a lot of following of Harris’ tail-lights (Figs. 1.1 and 1.2). There is very little incident at all until the final impact, which is caused by the police.



Figs. 1.1, 1.2: “Scott v. Harris Pursuit Video”



Figs. 2.1, 2.2: *The French Connection* (1971)

But we think about movies even when we think we're not thinking about movies. They enter our minds unbidden. If Justice Scalia, watching this video, somehow associated it with the 1971 crime thriller *French Connection*, directed by William Friedkin, then we are dealing with something entirely more dramatic.

In the celebrated *French Connection* action sequence, a New York detective known as “Popeye” Doyle, played by Gene Hackman, tries to overtake a suspect who has fled by boarding an elevated subway train. Doyle hurtles after him, oblivious to passersby, other cars, and street obstacles (Fig. 2.2). According to crew members on the film, the scene was filmed in fairly hair-raising circumstances, with unsuspecting pedestrians and drivers in shot, even resulting in a real accident—the white car colliding with Doyle’s Pontiac (Fig. 2.1) was driven by a commuter heading to work who actually crashed into the Pontiac. The filmmakers paid him for the damage to his car and kept the footage in the movie because it looked so realistic (Sorokanich). In short, to watch the long, underlit, fairly drama-free (until the final impact) Scott pursuit video and think “*French Connection*” is to do a considerable amount of interpretive work.

What are we to make of this? Did Justice Scalia subconsciously make the “connection” between the fleeing Harris, who is black, and the pursuing Popeye Doyle, an unrepentant racist who roughs up black junkies for the fun of it? Did the Supreme Court, through the dashboard-mounted camera in the police car, simply identify with the officers? The chase video in *Harris*, after all, was taken from a particular perspective: “the perspective

of a police officer participating in the chase” (Benforado 1353). When we watch any filmed event, “[w]e literally share the experience of viewing the world from a particular angle or perspective” (Spence and Navarro 205). But while we generally understand that a story will look entirely different depending on the teller—Akira Kurosawa’s *Rashomon* (1950) being the quintessential example—that kind of intuition seems to evade us when faced with a “documentary” video.

This type of point-of-view shot, “a shot in which the camera assumes the position of a subject in order to show us what the subject sees,” is frequently employed in the cinema, precisely because it is so effective in encouraging identification between the viewer and the character (Branigan, *Point of View* 103). These shots give the viewer the feeling that they are experiencing what the character is experiencing. “In the cinema the camera carries the spectator into the film picture itself,” observed the early 20<sup>th</sup>-century film theorist Bela Balázs, positing that the experience of watching a film was the experience of being the protagonist. “[I]f one character looks into the other’s eyes, he looks into our eyes from the screen for our eyes are in the camera and become identical with the gaze of the characters. They see with our eyes. Herein lies the psychological act of ‘identification’ ” (qtd. in Branigan, *Projecting* 40). As Branigan puts it, when film theorists write of a viewer’s “identification” with a film, “[s]omething more than ‘understanding’ or ‘meaning’ is at stake; rather, identification deals with our emotional response, involvement, appreciation, empathy, catharsis (Aristotle), or feeling towards the film. Identification relates to our active participation with a text” (Branigan, *Point of View* 10).

If there is an issue of identification bias with dash camera footage, as in the *Scott* video, it is even more acute with body camera video. There the viewer is almost literally in the officer’s shoes. This is something that the cinema has from time to time experimented with, though most films that have attempted to use a subjective first-person perspective (as you would get on a body camera video) have been failed experiments. *Lady in the Lake* (Robert Montgomery, 1947), based on the novel by Raymond Chandler, was shot entirely from the perspective of the actor playing Philip Marlowe, but seemed gimmicky even at the time; Raymond Chandler dismissed it, perhaps apocryphally, as “a cheap Hollywood

trick” (Thomas 102). That same year, the Bogart-Bacall vehicle *Dark Passage* (Delmer Dawes, 1947) saw the camera adhere to the protagonist’s subjective first-person perspective for the opening scenes, while he is a fugitive. After he undergoes plastic surgery and emerges looking like Humphrey Bogart, the film shifts into a conventional point of view—a choice that some critics deemed confusing (Crowther). More recently, the action movie *Hardcore Henry* (Ilya Naishuller, 2016) attempted to revive the first-person perspective by using GoPro cameras mounted on the lead actor’s head, but with no more success. One reviewer concluded that the movie “mimics the experience of watching someone else play a very derivative first-person shooter” game (Vishnevetsky). Overall, most moviegoers say that sustained use of the perspective makes them queasy and uncomfortable (Adams 273). Ernest Adams notes that “[r]apid movements, especially turning or rhythmic rising and falling motions, can create motion sickness in viewers” (273).

Nonetheless, in small doses the effect can be arresting. The director Samuel Fuller described how he achieved a memorably subjective perspective in his film *Naked Kiss* (Samuel Fuller, 1964) by strapping a camera on the chest of his actors in a scene where a prostitute beats up her pimp: “For the first shot, the pimp has the camera strapped on his chest. I say to [Constance] Towers, ‘Hit the camera!’ She hits the camera, the lens. Then I reverse it. I put the camera on her, and she whacks the hell out of him” (Sherman and Rubin 189).



Figs. 3.1, 3.2: *Naked Kiss* (1964)

In effect, Fuller was using the equivalent of a body camera to put the viewer right in the middle of the action, first from the point of view of the

man being beaten (Fig. 3.1), then from the point of view of the woman striking him (Fig. 3.2).

Today the reference point is less likely to be the cinema than video games, particularly first-person shooter (FPS) games, in which the player is represented by an on-screen avatar. “Audiences identify with these games,” writes Ryan Lizardi, “because they have ‘enormous persuasive potential’ by creating ‘immersion, intense engagement, identification and interactivity’” (375). The first-person perspective in body camera video is therefore likely to foster the closest identification possible with the on-screen protagonist, the police officer. Once a body-cam-wearing officer points his or her gun, the video looks almost identical to the graphics in a FPS video game:



Fig. 4: “Police Shootouts Body Cam”



Fig. 5: “10 Best FPS Games”

Although Fig. 4 comes from a body camera video, and Fig. 5 from *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare*, the images are practically interchangeable.

### 3 Men with Guns

The controlling theme in all of these videos is violence. The police video images of mayhem and death fit into a peculiarly American narrative, which can be traced back to the settlers heading for the frontier and is currently flowering in the video game industry. American society's preoccupation with violence, argues Slotkin, is deeply entwined with its history, that of settlers wrenching a land away from earlier inhabitants through superior firepower. "The first colonists saw in America an opportunity to regenerate their fortunes, their spirits, and the power of their church and nation," he writes, "but the means to that regeneration became the means of violence, and the myth of regeneration through violence became the structuring metaphor of the American experience" (*Regeneration* 294). Slotkin contends that the true founding fathers "were not those eighteenth-century gentlemen who composed a nation at Philadelphia." Instead, they were the men who "tore violently a nation from the implacable and opulent wilderness—the rogues, adventurers and land-boomers; the Indian fighters, traders, missionaries, explorers and hunters who killed and were killed until they had mastered the wilderness" (4).

The country's inability to pass even the most minor of gun-control laws is a measure of its thrall to the firearm. Despite surveys indicating that a majority of Americans support modest gun safety laws (T. Smith 1–2), Congress has been unable to pass even a bill preventing people on the terrorist no-fly list from purchasing firearms. Indeed, every time there is any public discussion of increased background checks or curbs on the sale of assault rifles, gun sales go up (Aisch and Keller). Let us return to Fig. 4. Like all body camera images, it contains a number of embedded assumptions that tell us about the role of the police in 21<sup>st</sup> century America: that they can use lethal force, that they are often outfitted militarily, and that, increasingly, they will be recording their interactions with the public.

But that is not all the image does. It also enables the police officer to become our avatar in a fantasy of machismo and power. Like the characters in the wildly popular *Call of Duty* video game series (Eassa), the police



officer is presented as a soldier in a war against the forces of disorder and mayhem. The black gloves and dark jacket give the viewer a sense of paramilitary professionalism—this is no amateur. The appeal of the imagery also reflects reality, as over the past decades the federal government has given local police departments over \$4.3 billion worth of military equipment, including helicopters, armored trucks, grenade launchers, Kevlar helmets, and assault rifles (Rivera 234). Because this image is so familiar, so congruent with the games so many people play, it tends to legitimize the police capability for violence as sometimes necessary and appropriate, and normalize the militarization of the police.

This parallels the fact that the increasing militarization in FPS games has coincided with their greater cultural acceptability (Voorhees 89). Gerald Voorhees observes that “public perception of FPS games improved as their themes became more militaristic and their narratives more directly supportive of American imperialism” (89). While the games “depict[] violence and killing of a previously unheard of quantity and quality,” he writes, they do not provoke much controversy anymore because they are “intelligible statements within the discursive field of a nation embroiled in a War on Terror” (107).

Additionally, this is just one screenshot from a longer videoclip, itself part of a compilation of body camera recordings on police shootouts posted on YouTube that has been seen over a million times (“Police Shootouts Body Cam”). At the beginning of the sequence, the officer approaches two black men. He goes to handcuff one of the men. “Relax,” the officer tells the man, trying to cuff him. Suddenly, there’s a scuffle and the man breaks away, with the officer chasing him on foot. The officer shoots four times, then once more, and the man tumbles into a ditch. His form is just visible in Fig. 4 in the distance on the right. Since we do not know why the officer stopped the man, or why he felt the need to shoot him as he ran away, the sequence is weirdly acontextual: It’s cop as trained assassin. Because the killing is framed exactly as a game would be, the viewer can indulge his own homicidal fantasies, “the love of destruction, the thrill of killing” (Broyles 34). There are real victims, but no consequences.

Intertwined with these images of force in police videos is a certain cult of masculinity, a glorification of strength and brotherhood. As Hans Toch has observed, “[i]n cultures of masculinity, the demonstrated willingness

to fight and the capacity for combat are measures of worth and self-worth” (170). Accordingly, the violence that resonates as quintessentially “American” is not Lizzie Borden and her axe—which merely seems deviant—but a man with a gun.

Police officers are encouraged to think of themselves as soldiers in a war against lawlessness, a mindset that begins in basic training and is reinforced throughout an officer’s career (Skolnick and Bayley 49–52, Stoughton 232). Criminologists Jerome Skolnick and David Bayley, in their 1988 study of policing around the world, observed as common features across police cultures a perception of danger “which, although real, is typically magnified,” an ethos of “solidarity or brotherhood” and “machismo” (49–52). This enduring connection is made explicit in this screenshot of a California police recruitment video from 2016 (Fig. 6):



Fig. 6: “Bellevue Police Department Recruiting Video” (2016)

The officers are armed, ready to do battle, marching resolutely towards the camera. Because the image plays upon action movie imagery, it is “deliberately appealing to people who are likely to be lured by the thrill-seeking, adrenaline-producing, butt-kicking aspects of law enforcement” (Balko 306). The figure on the right might be a woman, but with her uniform on and her visor down, she does not read as feminine. If anything, the black padded uniform gives her an exaggeratedly virile silhouette, like an action figure, or a superhero. Certainly, it does nothing to detract from the maleness of the image.

In this image, the officers' capacity for violence is glorified in a peculiarly cinematic way that evokes the famous "Long Walk" shot of the four protagonists in *Wild Bunch* (Sam Peckinpah, 1969). In that film, a band of outlaws flee to Mexico, where they kill dozens of Mexican soldiers and die in a hail of bullets—described by Slotkin as "one of the richest and most effective action sequences ever filmed" (*Gunfighter Nation* 383). Their deaths are presented, somewhat ambiguously, as heroic because they are avenging one of their own, and their self-worth depends on an ideal of brotherhood, "one they will finally die to vindicate: the inarticulable code of honor, loyalty, and group identification" (Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation* 604).

This code is so inarticulable that their leader, played by William Holden, only has to say "Let's go" for his companions to understand what he means. "Why not?" answers the one played by Warren Oates, who has been trying to cheat a prostitute out of her payment. He and his brother simply collect their guns and follow him. They pass their last companion, portrayed by Ernest Borgnine, who takes one look at them, chuckles, and joins them. The image of the four men, all armed with rifles, striding not only towards their own deaths, but as much mayhem as they can perpetrate (Fig. 7), is closely paralleled by the police recruitment image.



Fig. 7: *The Wild Bunch* (1969)

Violence steeped in brotherhood has sold movies from *The Wild Bunch* to *The Fast and the Furious* franchise, and it continues to sell the idea of the police to potential recruits.

#### 4 Confronting the “Other”

The corollary of the heroic aggrandizement of the officer in police video is the demeaning of the civilian as antagonist. The recruitment strategy in many police departments has often been to “select for personalities attracted to aggressive, antagonistic policing; isolate police from the communities they serve; and condition police officers to see the people they serve—the people with whom they interact every day—as the enemy” (Balko 336). This message has remained unchanged for decades. “Police are asked to risk their lives to man the ‘thin blue line’ that separates civilized society from the predations of those who would rend the body social,” observed Robert Johnson in 1986 (186–87). “The violence this requires is transmuted to the more sanitized notion of force applied to citizens whose humanity is discounted—they are enemies, ‘assholes,’ or animals we must control” (187).

Echoing this, one of the most popular themes in recent video games is the “post-apocalyptic game that depicts an invasion and defense from an outside and most times alien force” (Lizardi 366). *Gears of War*, for example, is set on a planet colonized by humans who are then attacked by the indigenous aliens who had been living underground. Although as Lizardi points out, “these creatures are really just defending their own homes and resources” (381), the alien characters are coded as “cultural ‘Other’”; while the players identify with the American, militaristic protagonists of the game (373). But these aliens appear to be thinly veiled transpositions of “different” people in general: they “connote a race of humans that is strange and foreign to the protagonists” (373).

In these post-apocalyptic video games, the first-person perspective is “used to foster identification with the protagonists [...] thereby de-emphasizing any kind of identification possibilities with the ‘Other’ characters” (Lizardi 376). Body camera video creates the same distancing effect, giving rise to a set of images where the officer appears to be the protagonist and the suspects are treated like interchangeable “non-playable

characters” in a video game (Welsh 391). Timothy Welsh notes that, while critics may deplore the apparent disregard for human life in games like *Call of Duty*, “players understand that these are infinitely respawning digital objects and therefore dispensable” (391). Digital lives, apparently, do not matter, although in the rare case, a game may dabble in ideas of remorse and reckoning. *Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater* apparently “requires the player to move upstream as the spirits of all the NPCs [non-playable characters] he has killed impede his progress,” recoding the player’s experience of facing the damage he has done as yet another playable conflict (Welsh 393).

Since gaming is a multi-billion dollar industry, “[i]t signifies a great deal about a society when its cultural texts continually address the same subject matters and issues over a certain time frame,” observes Lizardi (384). So “what does it say about culture when players are identifying with a set of games that have an ethnocentric, Othering point of view?” (384), particularly when that view is expressed in the mode of violence? In such games, the Other is not just to be shunned, but destroyed.

The civilians we see in police videos—typically people of color, those engaged in petty crimes, or the mentally disturbed acting erratically—fit this pattern of otherness. In fact, a quarter of the people shot to death by police display signs of mental illness, and eleven percent of police shootings are believed to be the result of “suicide by cop” (Lowery et al.). Watching a compilation of police videos gives the impression that the only criminality that we need to be concerned with comes from the street. Conversely, there is an almost total lack of white collar criminals. This too reflects a general conception of the poor, the disenfranchised, or the simply non-white as the enemy (Harcourt 976).

In such an environment, an officer who can show restraint by shooting a suspect without killing him becomes automatically newsworthy (Nestel). In a video of such an incident (Fig. 8), a police officer manages to subdue a man who seems set on self-destruction, attacking the officer with a knife and screaming “Kill me!” repeatedly (“Knife-Wielding Man”). The police officer shoots him once, then refuses to fire again, keeping his distance and yelling at the man to get down until the man finally collapses. “Kill me!” screams the man, over and over. “No!” shouts the officer. “We don’t want to! Get down!”



Fig. 8: “Glendale Officer Shoots Knife-Wielding Man on I-75”

There is something iconic about this image—the snarling suspect, gripping a 12-inch knife, “inherently violent in ways that make no sense at all,” facing the lone arm of the law (Rapping 261). The suspect is classically ‘other,’ ethnically ambiguous, wearing dark, bulky clothes on what looks like a warm sunny day, seemingly mentally unstable. It’s an image right out of the tabloid television shows that follow American police “reality-style,” which posit criminals not as people “like us,” but as irredeemably “other,” part of an image of “crime and criminal violence in which more harsh and repressive methods [...] are necessary to maintain social order” (256).

This conception is deep-rooted. Compare “Knife-Wielding Man” with the imagery in Fred Zinnemann’s classic 1952 Western *High Noon* (Fig. 9). In that film, Gary Cooper, as the sole conscientious lawman left in a town that has cravenly abandoned him, waits for his nemesis to get off a train, reunite with his henchmen and kill him. One scholar argues that *High Noon* depicts a Hobbesian world in its “portrayal of a state of nature as essentially a state of war or uncontrolled banditry” (Ryan 28). In such a world, society must constantly struggle to sustain legal order and prevent a relapse into a state of uncontrolled lawlessness and brutality. But the ordinary townspeople are too oblivious to understand this. They would rather wait and see if the returning outlaw really is that bad, while Cooper’s character “forthrightly asserts the need for pre-emptive violence to prevent



Fig. 9: *High Noon* (1952)

atrocities which he (apparently alone) believes are certain to follow [the outlaw's] return" (Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation* 393).

Not only are the figures framed similarly, but in both images the underlying theme seems to be that the steady hand of the law is all that stands between us and chaos. But while Gary Cooper's lawman stands in front of us, interposing himself between the criminal and us, shielding us with his body, in "Knife-Wielding Man," we do not see the lawman's body shielding us but rather assume his subjective point of view. Instead of being shielded, we are the shield. The message in the police video seems practically the same as the one in *High Noon*: "that the only effective instrument for constructive historical action is a gun in the hands of the right man" (Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation* 396).

But there may be another interpretation. "Knife-Wielding Man" could also fit into a burgeoning genre of "heroic officer" videos currently being given wider airplay by police departments as a deliberate counterpoint to the murderous cop narrative (Bosman). In these videos, police officers are shown at their best—pulling mentally ill people back from the edge of high balconies, rescuing small children from drowning, and saving motorists trapped in burning cars.

If these videos catch on, they could reflect a different kind of narrative, a strain of American heroism that runs counter to *Wild Bunch* nihilism.

The Bunch, after all, were driven to Mexico not only because they were on the run, but also by the dwindling of the American West. The film is set in 1913, right before the age when the car and the highway would take over the American landscape, and the Bunch represent a way of life that has nearly passed. As the old geezer who gets the last word in the film puts it, “It ain’t like it used to be.”

The current political moment in the United States—which is the context in which these police videos are seen—appears to be similarly dominated by a nostalgia for a quasi-mythic “good old days” when men were men, and there were no problems so complex that they couldn’t be solved by a gun and a bit of tough talk. While the formal properties of some of the police videos appear to play into that narrative, emphasizing masculinity and violence, maybe there could be a new American narrative, one where it doesn’t take a gun to make a hero. Maybe our new heroes could be like the three men on a train in Portland, Oregon, strangers to each other but united in their desire to defend two teenage girls being harassed by a white supremacist (Kristof). These men, two of whom ended up fatally stabbed, were not defending a lost ideal, an America that needed to be restored to former greatness. They were defending the decency of the country, as it is, in all its confounding multiplicity.

## 5 Conclusion

Police videos often evoke images that reflect a dominant ideology of militaristic might, brotherhood, and a kind of residual white supremacy. This may be one of the reasons they are so easily subsumed into the news and entertainment cycle. Past a certain point, the informational value of these videos diminishes and we are left with a disconnect between the intentions of the activists who posted and publicized police videos in an attempt to expose violence on American streets, and the way these images are consumed. Nearly all of the high-profile videos circulating on the Internet feature African American men being shot by police, creating a kind of “spectacle of black death” (Williams). But spectacle doesn’t necessarily motivate action—“a certain type of fashionable photography,” noted Walter Benjamin, “makes misery into a consumer good” (91). So perhaps it is not surprising that “the increased visibility of trauma and death at the



hands of cops isn't doing as much as it should," writes one commentator. "The legacy of our increased exposure to black death has merely been the deadening of our collective senses" (J. Smith).

So what is the function of watching these deadly police encounters on YouTube? Are we learning about the world in a way that we can translate into political action, or merely "pull[ing] up a seat [to] watch the lynchings take place over and over" (Natiel). Back in the 1970s, these ethical questions were posed by the cinema, by the bloody shootouts in films like *The Wild Bunch*: "How much of this sort of thing are we willing to look at?" mused Slotkin. "Are we willing to take responsibility for 'what we see' and for the curiosity—a form of wish or desire to see the unspeakable—that has brought us to this scene?" (*Gunfighter Nation* 597).

Sam Peckinpah, in looking back on *The Wild Bunch*, expressed disappointment with the way his own violent images were able to break free from their didactic purpose and become just another sensational form of enjoyment. Violence "is the cancer of our world, our time, all our times," Peckinpah told British interviewer Barry Norman in 1976. "Why does violence have such a point of intoxication for people?" He had intended the violence of the shootouts to provoke catharsis, hoping "that by seeing this [violence] we would be purged and get it out of our system. I was wrong" ("Sam Peckinpah Interview").

The commodification of police video images—packaged on YouTube with such lurid titles as "The Most Intense Police Shooting Caught on BodyCam—EVER! ENHANCED!"—appears to pose the same problem. It is hard to imagine police shooting videos retaining much political meaning when they are reduced to clickbait. If it's just a "wish or desire to see the unspeakable," then maybe we shouldn't be watching.

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## Afterword

There are, of course, several entwined lines of thought to follow out—as for students and scholars to follow on from—in engaging with these compact essays. Given that the Introduction can be said, in an entirely tacit link, to take up where my “Postface: On Mediation as Interface” leaves off in 2015’s *Closed Circuits*—in its shift of focus, in regard to narrative cinema, from Foucault’s panopticon as disciplinary model to Deleuze’s more distributed loci of internalized oversight in the “control society” (cf. Stewart 240–55)—certain afterthoughts on my own part, and some added words, do seem in order. Indeed, the most integral response I can offer to the weight and force of the present collection, three years after the high-voltage conference that spurred it, is to help further confirm its finds—and findings—from evidence emerging since that film book of mine went to press, along with the simultaneous publication, unbeknownst to me at the time, of Catherine Zimmer’s *Surveillance Cinema*.

So, rather than rehearsing this collection’s separate arguments, already so well previewed and summarized in the Introduction, this is an Afterword in the mode of an estimated aftermath—catching up, if only briefly and spottily, with the continued manifestation of a surveillance thematic in international aesthetic production. The new exhibits I want to bring forward include not only recent film releases but also instances from such diverse yet convergent realms of cultural practice—honoring the broad-gauged scope of the preceding chapters—as prose fiction, Conceptual art, found photography, and experimental video, to say nothing (though I will) of commercial affordances operating lately at the technological near edge, and ever-receding boundary, of sci-fi fabrication.

### 1 From Videosphere to Infosphere

*Closed Circuits* is a book whose unpunctuated subtitle, *Screening Narrative Surveillance*, rather like the demarcated but not strictly compartmentalized Surveillance|Society|Culture, is meant to call out three

interpenetrating issues—technological, aesthetic, and political—in films concerned with what I might now term audiovisual *supravisoin*. By this I mean that widespread process whereby the tactical machinations of supervisory purview become, on the cinema screen, inevitably reflexive, involuted, metafilmic. This is what encouraged my broadening out from Foucault to identify an epoch of the *technopticon*, resulting ultimately in the one-word conflation of plot and apparatus in the manifold operations of *surveillancinema*. Such coinages continue, for me, to ring true, along with the “cryptopticon” mentioned by the editors early on. But in searching for terms to keep up with the times, it also behooves one to return to that sweeping epistemic history of visual and inscriptive culture proposed, late last century (in advance of recent developments in so-called convergence culture) by mediologist Régis Debray under the title “The Three Ages of Looking.” One harks back to Debray especially for the way in which the uneven development implicit in his triadic partitioning of Western representational genealogy, overlapping as his categories are, leaves conceptual room for the inherently misaligned transitions through which we’re now living and moving, where digital imaging is only one phase or facet of computerization *tout court*.

According to Debray’s threefold taxonomy, the medieval Logosphere, where images of the deity held sway as icons, was transformed by the breakthroughs in Renaissance art and bookmaking constituted alike by a logic of representation and a machinery of textual mass-circulation (the Graphosphere). And this epoch persisted well into the advent, and rapid proliferation, of cinema, where camera angle and shot length, for instance, offered a new form of graphic “inscription.” For Debray, the subsequent Videosphere extends, in turn, from the dawn of analog TV through CGI (computer generated images). So it is that the order of the Look, in its third “Age,” may indeed be exhausted by the ubiquity of its own mediation, where the substrate of the pixel (pic-element) is operated by the same algorithms as are all other informatic displays. What was at first an abstract iconicity, then a pictographic approximation of the real, then a montage grammar of its motions, gives way, in the evolution of analog to digital process, to what we might now want to call, subsuming picture and look altogether, the Infosphere, where data, retinal or otherwise, exist only in a computerized flux.



Says a character in John le Carré's 2008 *A Most Wanted Man* (filmed in 2014), "information is dead meat. Only God can turn information into knowledge" (266). God, or omniscient narrative—since this is the same writer who claims on his website that all novelists "are spies" ("About John le Carré"). So, too, all narrative filmmakers, in whose practice visual data, to which the pictured agents are not self-consciously privy from within the plot, is shaped into meaning. In the spirit of that second remark by spymaster le Carré, I had wanted in *Closed Circuits* to show the tight imbrication of montage and espionage on the cinema screen. Certainly, movies since have been relentless in italicizing the point, even as the subgenre of technoptic surveillance seems to be wearing thin its cinematographic edge, and edginess, in the wake of NSA scandals focused on the nonvisual reign of dataveillance. From the work of Friedrich Kittler in the mid-1980s, whose satire of the NSA under acronymic self-denial as "No Such Agency" opened this volume, it is a short step to the prescient NSA thriller at the end of the next decade, *Enemy of the State* (Tony Scott, 1998), complete with a recycled Gene Hackman from Frances Ford Coppola's landmark of audio surveillance in 1974's *The Conversation*. Hackman's character, truer now to the actor's own name than to that of his previous role as the punning Harry "Caul," has become a master of computer interception, remote satellite deflection, and electronic counterbugging under the radar (to mix metaphors) of the NSA's electronic monolith. And from *Enemy of the State*, where surveillance makes an enemy of just such deep state control, descend those scores of films in the next decade that take of up similar themes and techniques—with a comparable visual rhetoric of screens-within-screens—until, most of a decade later yet, the primacy of the "opticon" (with whatever prefix) seems mostly, as I write, to have played itself out as a flashpoint of cultural phobia. And hence as a signature "look" for the screen subgenre seeking at once, in the thriller mode, to hyperbolize and ameliorate the specter of such closed-circuit rescreening of event.

If the "opticon" has played itself out, this would mark a decided transition in what Thomas Y. Levin has identified—looking as far back as 1991's *Thelma and Louise* (in a Ridley rather than Tony Scott film, from the beginning of that transitional decade)—as the optical trope of "surveillant enunciation" (Levin): the delegation of narrative incident to such

secondary video feeds as overhead CCTV playback. Becoming an aesthetic of quite variable ethics, this proliferating mode of both scenography and point of view may by now have spent most of its visual capital, or at least exhausted its editorial razzle-dazzle. It seems to be receding almost as rapidly as did slow-motion and the freeze-frame, as metafilmic markers, in films after the 1970s. It's a little too soon to say for sure, but it would appear that the slow pans and zooms of remote controlled CCTV, along with drone and satellite transmits, together with their multiplication across a wall-wide mosaic of tracking monitors as mandatory set design, have become the depleted stock-in-trade of thriller films, more perfunctory now than emphatic (as we will see below, almost by symptomatic parable, from their phasing out across the plot of a single recent film, *Jason Bourne*: latest installment in a franchise very much associated with the 'look' of the subgenre it now outstrips, whose trappings it gradually strips away).

## 2 Technology on the Look-Out

Without addressing this tendency, Hugh Davies' chapter helps explain it. Writes Davies in his "Conclusion," though the story is hardly over yet: "From drones to nanny-cams and Facebook to security cameras, today's surveillance is found hiding in plain sight." Beyond an open secret, and beyond all securitization protocols, voluntary surveillance has become the new medium of the social, the "ubiquitous wallpaper of our lives." So that when Davies summarizes surveillance as "affecting the way we look, think and act," the very verb "look" stands out almost an intransitive as well as a transitive form: for the way we choose to appear, to pose, before the always implicit devices of inspection. "Surveillance is no longer simply the stare of the state, but our permanent and mutual gaze at each other." And no longer just a gaze either, one must add, but increasingly a blind "mining" in the non-optic depths of code. In this sense the double dead metaphor of "desktop wallpaper"—as background décor, say, for the deeper dredging of data files—was for almost two decades, in "action films" concerned with everything from wired war to covert government surveillance, the default *mise-en-scène* of secondary transmit, reframing said action on banks of embedded video. Yet what once, in its technological sophistication, could only be orchestrated by the deep pockets of

the deep state in the paranoid thriller is what each of us can manipulate these days, in miniature form, on our “home” or portable screens—and the former not just in domestic convenience, but as a new kind of mental habitation in itself (think “home page”). Then, too, a further residential visitation is possible even in live time. Once the exclusive gimmick of sci-fi telecommunications, there is now the interface of Skype’s almost punning derivation from “peer-to-peer” viewing—whose first cinematic avatar as open-circuit video-phoning, outside of generic sci-fi, appeared in the dystopian near future of John Frankenheimer’s *Seven Days in May* (1964), where it was deployed as under-cover military technology in an attempted coup against a liberal US president.

In narrative film, certainly, a body being pinioned by the secondary gaze of an inset camera is less the immediate threat than it once was—even with the brief uptick lately in drone thematics and the often-lethal problematics of face recognition. Such uber-sight now appears less vivid a social concern than having your so-called “identity” stolen, where that very metonymy for private information is as much a part of the problem as it is the pressure point of vulnerability. I am what I am, one might once have said with resignation. But we are not even what we look like anymore, just mostly what we input—and what can in turn be downloaded. The reach of the camera is less invasive than the breach of the algorithm. Indexed only in the non-somatic sense of electronic traces left, digital “footprints,” to say nothing of search “profiles,” join the list of dead metaphors in a screen culture where the screen is as much data filter, or sieve, as it is an image plane. And where, as an incidental result, a new kind of “life-size” portraiture emerges in the work of conceptual artist Evan Roth, who paints six-foot thumbprints in acrylic on canvas in an enlarged version of the “swipe-to-unlock” function of portable “digital” (pun no doubt intended) recognition.

It is in the spirit of such global transformations that one appreciates this volume’s recurrent hinge-point between surveillance now as a societal issue, now a cultural one: a scarcely rigid dividing line drawn suggestively in the Introduction. Located thereby, in other words, is the psychologically as well as politically negotiable space between overseen (thus policed) behavior and an acclimation to control already internalized, between disciplinary facilitation and zeitgeist—inextricable in the latter case from

narcissism and exhibitionism. In response to this new global condition(ing), the essays here train their diverse and compelling attention on the many ways in which the instruments of oversight and eavesdropping have been trained on the social agent and the acculturated subject alike, the isolated citizen and the aggregated rather than autonomous self. The result is also a kind of tutorial (training in this extra sense) in the naturalization of a nonprivate life. This is why other readers might well join me in sensing, in the volume's own title, the latent conflation, under lurking hyphenation, of surveillance(-)society culture.

Passive acquiescence in this regard—a warming to control as its own kind of freedom, to continuous imaging as the true human imaginary—is the rule thrown into relief only by its most overt and perverse exceptions. For the parameters of surveillance can be rerouted and thus exposed, at times, through the malign play of deceptive self-performance. Within the sociocultural “closed circuit” by which exhibitionism answers to unwitting exposure, with openness to the electronic gaze a kind of subliminal narcissism, David Fincher's film *Gone Girl* (2014) locates its metafilmic climax. This reflex action of the look arrives when the title figure, otherwise incognito, fakes a traumatic post-abuse convulsion in front of CCTV cameras in a borrowed mansion in order to justify her subsequent stabbing to death of its owner, her former lover and temporary host.

Alternately, the sheer “performance” of a crime, its re-enactment rather than its simulated fallout, can be used to read the reactions of a comparable perpetrator. So here cinema, and its frequent synecdoche in CCTV, enters upon a longer-span history arcing all the way back to early modern theater and its own participation in the show-and-tell of spectacle, including its discipline-and-punish undertones. In a resulting early touchstone for this volume's topic, Bernhard H. F. Taureck's contribution turns on the spectatorial pivot within *Hamlet's* play-within-the-play by which, famously, the watcher is watched: the inset drama staged strategically to “catch” or capture—in a pre-technological mode of face-recognition, so to speak—“the conscience of the king.” Is this a mere local ploy, or a theatrical metadrama? The second is a suspicion hard to shake. If all playwrights are not just spies but covert double agents in this way, exposing and punishing their characters in order, from behind the curtain, to read the reactions of their own audience in the inculcation of the play's ideological and moral

premises, then the paradigm is well established before the invention, even the dream, of cinema. And if so, then film's previously one-way aesthetic (unlike theater's) has achieved in the digital age an unsettling equivalent of Shakespearean irony in the actual face-recognition technology mobilized, via pinpoint cameras embedded in the tight mesh of certain film screens, that can now record and interpret—by so-called affective computing in the reading of responsive facial features (widening eyes, tightened jaws)—precisely the degree of investment or pleasure a given screen effect induces. What results is a surveillant and invasive twist on the test-marketer's "focus group," where invisible cameras can now do the covert work of such focusing—on us, rather than we on the screen. Where Hamlet and his players hoped to "catch the conscience" of the sovereign spectator, such new affective scanning is merely bent on netting the preferential indices of the mass audience.

### 3 Surveillance in Embryo

From *Hamlet's* monitoring of response to its new computerized monetization: that's one overarching difference within the reflex performativity of audience reaction. But there are also other, and underlying, issues of narrative function to factor in here, beyond the exhibition circuits of commercial cinema. If all novelists are spies upon their own characters, and if all "live theater" plots are capable of returning the gaze upon their audience, it's no surprise that our culture might so inure us to the idea of secret access, so naturalize and even somaticize it, that we might suspend our disbelief about its function even when reading of it imputed in utero as a kind of inbred urge. An early episode in le Carré's *A Perfect Spy* (1986) is indeed narrated from the paradoxical womb of retrospect by the unborn hero and eventual spymaster. In describing a dreary prenatal scene at which he was not consciously present, he asks us to "take my word for it" about the soggy weather, as if to flag the sheer wordwork of any such description. He was, we are to understand, still in his mother's womb on this particular day, oblivious, as the scene of his father's public disgrace unfolds: an unwanted pregnancy at that—or, in other words, through a kind of *Hamlet*-like inversion, with a further play on mercantile transactions, "an unborn ghost, unordered, undelivered and certainly unpaid for" (26).

Unperfected as yet (in terms of the book's title: not, that is, having etymologically "made it through" [*per-facere*]), the spy-to-be is merely the larval version of his eventual eavesdropping: at this point still a "deaf microphone, planted but inactive in any but the biological meaning"—and thus, though not in the horticultural sense, a latent "plant" in the language of espionage bugging.

Three decades later, Booker-prize winning author Ian McEwan takes this one step further, and with early modern theater in mind—and this with particular twist, as well, on Shakespeare's conscience-catching trope. With a title alluding to the cramped space of possibility in Hamlet's lament about being "bounded in a nutshell," the premature hero, as it were, of *Nutshell* (2017) is an unborn fetus eavesdropping through the membranes of his mother's body upon her plot to murder her estranged husband in cahoots with his brother, her recent new lover. Surveying the long tradition of the spy novel traced out as a function of "clandestinity," Andrew Gross's conclusion comes to mind here: "From a humanist perspective, literature does not have to innovate. It is the Trojan horse of the information age." Trojan horse—or in this case, with plenty of "innovation" to spare, a literary response to the so-called information economy that gets focalized in a surreptitious ploy rendered so completely out of sight as to be literally internal, not just internalized: the gestating of consciousness itself from zygote to mole. Horrified by the discovered complot of Trudy and Claude, our unnamed blind spy, no sleeper he, is tormented, in effect, with the unsaid intertextual matrix of the entire novel, drastically backdated from the question of suicide to that of parturition: to be or not to be. All plot descends, there in the unknown mother's body, from the pursued curiosity, chiasmatically (if not quite grammatically phrased), of "who [for "whom"] I'm in, and what I'm in for" (McEwan 1).

Couched as the inverse of any such fetal personification, it may be that the latent trope of the mother's "invaded privacy" operates not just in uneasy (even if unwitting) connection with American abortion rights rhetoric but taps as well an anxiety about the same kind of "full transparency" offered by the eyeball-like global transmitters in *The Circle*. For in Birgit Däwes's essay, the question of narrative omniscience is equivocally linked with the tagline attached, for instance, to the 2016 film version of the Eggers's novel: "Knowing is good. Knowing everything is better." So close

is this braiding together of screening (and) narrative (and) surveillance, if I may, that the “real-life” equivalent of this spherical mini-cam—no less explicitly monetized than is the cult of transparency in *The Circle*—is, not surprisingly, marketed for its specifically (if loosely) “narrative” function. Here we come again upon that proliferating cross between phobic sci-fi and venture-capitalized high-tech R&D. I refer, on the Web rather than the narrative screen, to the start-up marketing that boasts (quoting from the publicity) “a surreptitious narrative camera that gives you a searchable photographic memory” of “every 30 seconds of your life.” This mnemonic visual catalogue is cross-sectioned automatically, from lived duration, in a “life-flogging” camera (that’s actually “life-logging,” not flogging—my debunking pun on the potential masochism of it all): a life-logging camera originally called “Memento” (with perhaps too much *mori* invoked) and changed to its own punning sense of wearability and temporal excerpt in its rebranding as (quote) a “narrative clip.”

The syndrome is familiar. It is sousveillance (ordinarily associated with the forensic potential—and politics—of the body-cam) turned indulgent rather than vigilant. As if in the spirit of a countersurveillance that is actually complicit with an undifferentiated scopophilia, the desideratum is that the world, or my variable slice of it, can be made fully, if intermittently (economically), available to me for review. The device thus calls to mind such various sci-fi scenarios as *The Final Cut* and *Freeze Frame*, each from 2004, as discussed in *Closed Circuits*—not to mention the film *Closed Circuit* itself (2015) about British CCTV. In many such cases, as much as in *A Perfect Spy* or *Nutshell*, the apparatus of surveillance is naturalized as a nascent, an innate, impulse of epistemophilia—as if in a non-sci-fi version of anticipatory crime “arrest” (stoppage, prevention) in the *preveillance* (to coin a phrase) of a film like Spielberg’s 2002 *Minority Report*.

All told, the human sensorium in conversion to a “live” if unborn “wire” or to a latent microphone—before its transfer to narrative enunciation—operates as the anomalous flip side, long since *Hamlet*, of the paradigm by which a spectacle can be detected reading you, like *The Mousetrap* trapping the rat Claudius. This alternate and more prevalent cultural syndrome persists in many ramifications, especially in non-incriminating if co-optive forms: namely, in the watching of ourselves being watched, our data “interpreted.” It finds a unique update in a certain specialized

commercialization of drone technology recently on view in the “contemporary design” section of London’s Victoria and Albert Museum—installed, as it happens, next door to Edward Snowden’s smashed laptop, destroyed by British authorities at the *Guardian* offices and now on exhibit as a quasi-archaeological ruin of the present. The nearby publicity drone, small-scale but higher-tech equivalent of the American Goodyear blimp, flashes LED advertising in moving lights keyed, in variable but automatic fashion, to the demographics of the neighborhoods over which it passes, catching less the conscience of the crowd than wind of its preferences.

But what else is new in niche marketing? Feature films are geared to audience response and previous viewing patterns in their own related way, tracking our viewing of them out of the corner of their narrative eye—even without “affective” microcameras. And genre trends always reflect, by careful market calculation, the wax and wane of public fascination—and anxiety. Since the surveillance thrillers charted and explored in *Closed Circuits*, the more recent update of a Big Brotherish telescreen ubiquity for the slain computer genius in *Transcendence* (2015) is a cinematographic motif, staged in a multiple regress of two-way screens, that is demoted by plot to something of a second-level threat. Beyond any such simulated optical persona and its widespread visual penetration—more insidious, the film suggests—is the dead brain’s telekinetic powers of data access and electronic intervention. And more ominous yet, or at least more unnerving, is the very fact of neural immortality—and precisely as a marked extrapolation from present technology. This we realize when his scientist wife’s mission to “save him” operates not by sparing his life but in the Save-as mode of storage and retrieval in a cyber-securitized consciousness of perpetually suspended animation. One may read this plot (reading us) as one of the first signs of surveillance taking second seat in recent cinema, as monitory touchstone, to the post-human (here literally posthumous) innovations of AI robotics, cloning, and the disturbing middle ground of cerebral upload (as for instance, in the body-snatching mode 2015’s *Self/Less* as well).

#### 4 “See-Changes”

Borrowing, for this subsection, that hokey trademark hook from *The Circle* is one further way to categorize the shifts in phobic priority, as



narrative watershed, between the optic and the cryptic in recent thrillers, sometimes involving the difference in visual rhetoric between multi-monitor montage and mere reactive closeups in front of a single desktop screen. Moreover, it is not regularly the main thrust of such more or less dystopian plots that one finds most intriguing, but rather the telling minor details of design and technique that may tend to leak such new priorities. One film certainly, to which we come in a moment, attempts to address the new post-retinal trend in surveillance plotting, though with lackluster results, even as it comes into alignment with the kind of museum display mounted by Snowden videographer Laura Poitras in a show about surveillance at New York's Whitney Museum in 2015, called "Astro Noise." While, in one gallery, museum spectators recline looking up to a bland expanse of overhead drone footage in ceiling rear-projection, the true work of violated privacy is being transacted—as one discovers only when passing into the next gallery and seeing its results on a video monitor—when the registration numbers of the spectators' cell phones, scooped up by dataveillance, are scrolled out in serial appearance on a viewing screen given over entirely to this numerical roster. Overhead optical surveillance was thus an entirely false lead. The Hollywood equivalent had appeared the year before in the dialed-down action thriller *Jack Ryan: Shadow Recruit*. The eventual President hero in the Tom Clancy series is encountered there, by anachronistic backcast, as a young computer genius and CIA rookie, able to do with bulk data, at high enough speeds of manual-cortical dexterity—and in uninvolved shot/reverse-shot closeups alternating with numerical permutations on a scrolled laptop screen—what the NSA admits it cannot do with the mined files that Snowden exposed: intercept a threat, rather than just investigate a disaster afterwards.

Premised on a vast and ludicrous evolutionary leap beyond this fantasy of wiz-kid mastery, the revved-up action hero is computerized in her own person in Luc Besson's *Lucy* (2015). An overdose of pre-natal steroids implausibly triggers the title character's rapid (if plot-long) AI metamorphosis into an invisible but all-seeing global computer program of pervasive disembodied surveillance. On her accelerated pace toward this post-humanoid destiny, an early sign comes with the cinematographic fast-forward of her machine-speed ambidextrous calculations on twin

laptops simultaneously. In an age of lightning-fast data-mining, machinated alacrity is at a new premium, human embodiment on the way out.

Other recent films in the surveillance mode play thematic catch-up along different lines. Most whole-heartedly, in a film of explicit moral consternation, there are the sustained drone POVs of *Eye in the Sky* (2015), where the high-def but still slightly pixelated hub screen at British Command Central intercuts with the roar of full-screen explosion and panic on the Mideast ground. Yet, such a wholesale—and narratively tactical—montage plan is often not what is most revealing in the films since I wrote, especially in light of a certain falling off in the requisite décor of the backlit video bank. In line with this volume's own distinction between the socio-political and the cultural, the kind of typifying marginal detail I have in mind (because in remembered view) may operate to evoke—quite apart from the set designs of a military-industrial complex—exactly the way the surveillance apparatus (like the “*apparat*” in Gary Shteyngart's novel, as discussed by Felix Haase) pervades, as it were, the very air we breathe. A notion like this seems to motivate the one persistent visual idea in the film of *The Circle*, as first manifested when the corporate office space of the computer megalith is punctuated—or, more to the point, punctured—by fiberoptic signage. Through a CGI effect in its own right, of course, and becoming a kind of stylistic cliché all its own in recent films inflected in this way by the magnified intersections of palpable Internet connectivity, this happens when free-floating and obliquely-angled streams of computer lettering are enlarged—and thrust (for the most part briefly and illegibly) into the surrounding cubic volume—from the operational 2-D of desktop screens: the very immanence of total cyber-data made ambient, or vice versa. Frequent complaints about the movie on the score of its falling between the cracks of digital thriller and workplace melodrama, though justified in genre terms, seem at another level to be registering exactly the ontological difficulty of distinguishing, at this stage of technological prosthesis, between the tentacles of computerization and the trials of human labor.

Looking sideways to serial TV rather than big-budget Hollywood features, there is another small touch in a long-running surveillance thriller, marginal but telling, in the current 2018 season of Showtime's *Homeland*—as it cuts to the quick of our “interactive” culture. A recurrent

motif of the series began with the CIA heroine's erotic fixation on the illegal surveillance feeds installed through hidden cameras, in the bathroom ("privy") in particular, of an American war hero and suspected jihadi double agent. This recurrent transgression of warranted spycraft by private desire has continued, intermittently, down through the current 2018 season, where the sexual exploits on camera of the White House Chief of Staff, in his wired townhouse, sketch again, in broad strokes, the fine line between spying and voyeurism. But in a digressive episode in this latest season, so detached from plot that it can only seem meant to nail the optical reversal it performs, we discover, out of the blue, that the heroine has had her laptop frozen by a ransomware hacker (with no connections to the main conspiracy narrative)—whom she seduces into an in-the-flesh meeting, where she beats him within an inch of his life. She first entraps this predator, in his blank-screen audio coercion, by engaging her own Skype feature. Peeling off the tape over her computer's inbuilt minicam, and then her blouse and bra as well, she comes on to him behind (from our POV) the upright portable screen of her compromised device, like the sex worker in a porn chat room. Scopophilia and criminal detection remain two sides of the same coin in the threatened securities of *Homeland*, with the audience invited to be caught up, rapt, in both the sex and the criminal violence alike, alike and at times indistinguishable, as here, in their modes of violation and counter-attack.

On the big screen again, rather than the small, as if marking the worn-out (or at least frayed thin) genre esthetic of "surveillant enunciation" (Levin), we watch this very technique leached away from the cinematographic texture of one of its signature film franchises. This happens when writer-director Paul Greengrass returns to the series for the flatly eponymous *Jason Bourne* (2016)—almost as if to suggest Bourne eventually unplugged, unmediated, off the grid. Notably, after its exaggerated deployment in the early episodes, amounting almost to a deliberate excrescence and overkill, the film leaves much of its own optical spyware behind as its plot advances, sloughing off the metacinemaic surveillant motif altogether. In one iconic and much reproduced shot (below), it is as if Bourne is looking back over his shoulder (and through a subsidiary lens) at a stylistic tic of transferred image that the film will in fact put behind him after the first half hour or so:



“Isolate all the social media posts!”

Initially, the familiar secondary and manically reframed transmissions dominate the *mise-en-scène*—as digital *mise-en-abyme*. Every move, every action and gesture, is “monitored” (literally and figuratively) from the headquarters at Langley, so that the whiplash shifts from “omniscient” narrative to inset surveillant screens include the sometimes undecidable play, or ricochet, between POV and dash-cam imaging from the wheel of the CIA assassin’s car in pursuit of Bourne. From framed shot to shot, we’re often not sure at first which frame functions are relaying the action, narrative film’s or its synecdoches in staged surveillance intercepts.

After frenetically recessional screens-within-screen in the tech-savvy if already clichéd first phase of the narrative, the visuals to follow are entirely straightforward in the full-frame fissurings and elisions of Greengrass’s micro jump cuts, often swerving between vectors of action in continuous real space rather than just between remote planes of materialization in real time. The closed-circuit optical image banks by which the film has launched its remote action sequence (in effect weaponized by the rapid dispatch of armed “units” to Bourne’s locale) can of course harvest CCTV feeds to follow Bourne wherever he goes. No crowd cover can avoid facial recognition and its “enhance” or zoom functions for long—including the CIA’s wily recourse to social media (one new wrinkle in the surveillance arsenal) via randomly uploaded cell phone images that may have inadvertently caught a glimpse of Bourne (as in the frame grab above).

That's part one—the first hypertrophic phase in the eventual plotting-out of optical surveillance. By declension to full-screen fleshed presence from there out, even with Bourne pilfering some of the latest demo equipment at a Las Vegas surveillance display (shades of Gene Hackman eyeing the detective convention wares in Coppola's *The Conversation*), the espionage prosthetics take a turn into a predominantly *audio* cross-cutting. At which point it becomes enough that *we* are watching. In this same sustained vein as well, the surveillance punch line arrives in the entirely old-fashioned comeuppance of an audio bug, where Bourne—remotely, and long gone from the scene—reveals to the manipulative female agent, supposedly devoted to reintegrating him into the Agency, that he knows she has promised to “put him down” otherwise.

An everyday “wire” has thus asserted its eavesdropping finesse over against the electronic panoply of global imaging: a further chastening of the scopic privilege initially accorded to remediated action in the plot's early (and typical) barrage of metanarrative surveillance relays. Metanarrative—and, I stress again, metafilmic as well, since these all-too-common screen arrays (inset in walls and narrative contour alike) have, in effect, de-tricked the original trick of narrative cinema: parallel montage. By electronic intervention in such manipulated frames, we see separate streams of action transpiring at once and in real time, but only in a switch between planar scales that often embeds the one screen (the technocrat's) within the other (the narrative's) rather than just yielding serial ground from one narrative locale to another. In this sense, the bipolar aesthetic of the digital surveillance hub in contemporary thrillers can come across as an exacerbated new version of montage-within-frame. If film can so easily re-naturalize its own editorial basis as techno-facilitation in this way, then it may well be that the instrumentation of high-tech surveillance—as a maximized optical phenomenon—was bound to cede some of its reflex cinematographic leverage, or certainly its fascination, after too much over-exposure as such.

In a related example form the same year, the on-site videography that keeps the alien heptapods in *Arrival* (2016) under surveillance behind their elongated and translucent scrim-like barrier, and thus frames them wide-screen like the sci-fi special effect they are, must ultimately yield not to the linguist heroine's translation of their photographed inked syntax,

in squidlike calligraphy, but to the physicist hero's recognizing in the mere on/off spacing of these hieroglyphs a tacit mathematical ratio as coded sign of aggregation and solidarity. Cryptanalysis seems to take precedence over visual interpretation. And if so, then here, as in *Jason Bourne*, cinematic storytelling might well be tacitly acknowledging—within a broader turn from the Videosphere to the Infosphere—all those off-screen and invisible operations of dataveillance by which culture, in a no longer photogenic phobia, is beset. Whether or not, in this sense, and varying the biological principle, we may want to say that cinematic ontogeny does in fact recapitulate phylogeny at times, as in the incubation of a single plot rehearsing the entire structure of its genre, the delimited case of *Jason Bourne* need not be so speculatively cast. In the series' long-standing focus on a brain-washed hero as virtual CIA robot, the Bourne films have been centrally preoccupied with a coercive biopower more insidious than straight optical spyware. In sheerly dramatic terms, then, evading the remote clutches of the latter is only the hero's first hurdle in a reclamation of his freedom from a uniquely internalized—because psychologically programmed—oversight.

Such, at least, is the fullest footnote to *Closed Circuits* I have to offer in this Afterword, entertaining the thought that recent Hollywood thrillers, since my nearly century-long retrospect of the surveillance motif (from Fritz Lang forward), are no longer so routinely (or steadily) addicted to the multi-screen registers of covert security overreach. Hence this rapidly atrophied visual facet of the subgenre. Yet even as the premium on spy-cam remediation tapers off on the narrative screen, other visual art forms have come at the question from fresh perspectives. Across town from the Laura Poitras show at the Whitney appeared a film series called "Voyeurism, Surveillance, and Identity" in conjunction with a curated exhibit at the International Center for Photography, called "Public, Private, Secret." A classic film narrative of voyeurism-turned-surveillance from the film series actually entered the gallery in the form of Conceptual video art by John Houck, who ran Antonioni's famous 1966 allegory of camera-aided eye-spying, *Blow Up*, through a facial-recognition software program that picks out from among the shrubbery in the park not the face of the later-vanished corpse, or even of the shooter, but numerous misidentifications of human features configured by light and shadow in the bushes and trees.

Reversing the poles, in gallery art, from reprocessed images to the supposed moment of recording, another quintessential instance comes to mind. Renowned simulation sculptor/photographer Thomas Demand, featured at the Tate Modern in the first of the recent art exhibitions mentioned in Hugh Davies's paper, mounted there, high on a gallery wall, a one-channel video projection of a CCTV camera scanning the museum audience from above: yet again, the viewer viewed. Also unmentioned by Davies, though very much in line with his sense of turning the surveillance apparatus against its wielders in the work of Ai Weiwei, is the full-scale mock-up of the Chinese artist's onetime detention cell, complete with three surveillance cameras, as well as his marmorealizing, and thus pulling the plug on, a CCTV camera by sculpting it in marble like a classic bust with one blind eye. Suffice it to say that the prevalence of dubious optical technology in the surveillance mode continues to render the materiality of such image making a crucible, and crux, for the critical approach to "visual culture" at large by its conceptual practitioners—and not least in the era of analog eclipse under digital supremacy.

## 5 "Rogue Pixels"

On view as I write at the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington, DC, Berlin artist Hito Steyerl's *How Not to be Seen: A Fucking Didactic Educational. MOV File* (2013) focuses, in an organizing trope of her video, on a particularly trenchant conjunction of technology and socio-cultural anxiety when lingering over a giant earthwork eye chart, of sorts, vintage 1960s, installed by the U.S. Air Force for the calibrated resolution of aerial photography, all arbitrary hash marks in greyscale now faded further in neglect under the corroding sun of the American desert. This is a "resolution target," so we are told in a low-resolution male voiceover, so slow and gravelly it sounds robotic—with that designation already suggesting the weaponized utility of precision focus. It was, the voice further explains, "decommissioned" in 2006 "as analog photography lost its importance." As if confirmed by an immediate cosmic zoom to a satellite overview of the globe, its purpose was to "measure the visibility of the world as a picture." Visibility is everything. Only later do we see its digital update: no longer a descending scale of horizontal and vertical

lines but three adjacent squares, two black, one white, hinged at right angles, their footprint de-escalated over time, we later learn: steadily scaled back to keep up with exponentially enhanced technology. “In 1996,” in voiceover still, “the standard resolution per pixel was about 12 meters. Today it is 1 foot.” Thus: “To become invisible you must become the size of a pixel or less.” At which point the sat-cam view cuts to dancing human figures at ground level masked from the neck up with canvas cubes—in a kind of black-site choreo/graphic farce—their parodied interface with the apparatus supposedly slipping below the range of any overhead detection. Accompanied in this dance of incarnate pixel jitter by the 1970s pop song “When Will I See You Again?” is none other than a *ballet electronique* for our new epoch—as introduced by the following crisp quip about functional disappearance involving the removed mirage of picturing itself: “Rogue pixels hide in the cracks of old standards of resolution. They throw off the cloak of representation.” In a new caliber of espionage one level down from sp/eye-craft, and proverbial daggers aside, one must operate on the assumption of picture *cloaking* medium. Instead of the superficial cape of manifestation, a strategic escape to the substrate.

In her counter-surveillance lampoon of an instruction manual, and offered as one among several modes of becoming invisible (though not in any restoration of personal privacy or autonomy), Stereyl at one point pantomimes—with hands and their own digits, in a desktop charade—the scrolling, wiping, and delete button of computer-manipulation. As the rest of the video makes clear, however, what these “functionalities” serve to disappear (in the transitive sense) are only text or image, not the over-exposed human operator herself (off- as well as on-line): not, that is, the sighted, sightable, spatially sited, or mere merely data-citable subject of global tracking and mining. So “subject of,” there, in the double genitive sense: meaning both object of as well as occasional agent. For this personal version of “how not to be seen,” rather than just how to make invisible, one would indeed need to go underground, sub-pixel, even sub-binary, refusing the algorithmic flux of search history itself. That’s the only (and impossible) solution: to go rogue, by an effacing masquerade, well beneath even the level of optical resolution. Such is her allegory, wry and theoretically resonant at once. Its caustic wit reminds us how much the cutting



edge of the cautionary has elsewhere been blunted lately, and on how many fronts.

That optical “cloak of representation” is otherwise abandoned—or draped in further disguise—in another contemporary project turning, as well, on the ironies of resolution in aerial photography. Squelching the rogue pixel composites of Google Earth when bringing into resolution privileged covert sites, numerous national governments have various ways of blocking the unwanted “oversight” image. This is one further method, in short, beyond Steyerl’s “didactic” litany, of “how not to be seen.” In a suite of appropriated and retouched images, Conceptual photographer Mishka Henner—under the 2011 series title *Dutch Landscapes*—commandeers, in his own turn, the government’s interception of Google Earth photos worked over to camouflage sensitive political or economic sites in Holland. Unlike the usual opaque pixelation or blurring used by other governments, and as if in honor of its own fine art tradition (think Vermeer’s *View of Delft*), the Dutch have imposed not a roughly gridded scrim but a blanket of colorful pop polygons, making the invisible its own visual event. The drive toward image remains, even when its intended content is interdicted. One can only imagine what Rembrandt might do for unwanted portraiture on Facebook.

In Steyerl’s terms, the “cloak of representation” has here become the quilt of disguise. But only by the exercise of state power. To black-site your own visibility is not that easy. In all this, the high in-roads, so to speak, of critical theory have been leveled and paved over by pop tech. Critique has been swamped, in the main, by merchandizing, with every new iteration not just the apple of one’s eye but the I/eye of one’s Apple. The involuntarily spied-upon *cells* of the carceral panopticon have, long after Foucault, become the *self*-phones of today. Control, pace Deleuze, has seen its interventions lost sight of in the cult of convenience. Under the rubric of affordance rather than surveillance, the cantilevered photo-armatures of the sat-scan are fractalized at ground zero by the selfie-stick. And everywhere we find the portable conflation of arbitrary symbols and indexical imaging, alphabetic signage and digital image capture, lines and frames, coming and going at our fingertips. Whenever the mobile keypad is not messaging to the world, the artificial click of its inbuilt lens can reverse that vector of “information” to capture your body seen from beyond you,

as in a computerized (and thus, in turn, transmissible) mirror. Your line of sight becomes the gaze of the Other when, fusing Lacanian and Derridean models, you self-surveil in the instagratology of binary dissemination. In which process, tele-phone selfies emerge as *personae* in the etymological sense of “masked” algorithms.

Though all is digital through and through (or *numerique* in the French usage), the positioned subject of society and culture (alike)—again that Janus-faced intuition of this volume, sociopolitical on the one hand, affective and ideological on the other—is thus situated and inscribed within a double dialectic yielding no synthesized center of cognition: veering optically, on the one hand, between the eye’s scopic drive and its body’s ubiquitous objectification by video record, whether by CCTV or private design; suspended numerico-alphabetically, on the other hand, between encrypted IDs and their potential for hacking, between “personalization” and exposure. Our lives are thus emplaced, even as lived, at a wholly alienable interface determined by far more than mere facial recognition. We are scanned by the surface we skim: immersed, that is, in a reversible (thus “surfable”) data stream whose bottomless channels are those of mediation per se, with all its noise and static—and with all its openness not just to a service-fee’d “reception” but to a further acquisitive interception. Call its own variety of a closed and vicious circuit by name: *surveillance*. Critique, so widely muted by techno-boosterism lately, might certainly find a fresh occasion in this nexus of complicity. And has, in fact, frequently come to the fore in the ten position papers filed here. The very layout of the volume can be sensed to map the possibilities of such resistant encounters. Just rewrite “Philosophies / Narratives / Perspectives” as “theory / plots / contexts”—again a lexical triad articulable as a single transitive clause—and one would be reminded, in and beyond narrative cinema, how directly engaged in philosophizing such perspectives the artifacts and social practices taken up by the book’s contributors are meant to be.

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