

EDITORIAL: ON THE CULTURAL DIMENSIONS OF SURVEILLANCE

WIBKE SCHNIEDERMANN AND WOLFGANG HALLET

Wibke.Schniedermann@gcsc.uni-giessen.de

Wibke Schniedermann is a Postdoctoral Researcher and Teaching Centre Coordinator at the International Graduate Centre for the Study of Culture (GCSC) at Justus Liebig University Giessen. Her current research investigates the representation of homelessness in American literature and culture. She completed her PhD on symbolic violence in Henry James's novels with Frankfurt University. She is co-editor of *Class Divisions in Serial Television* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017) and has published on homelessness in literature, film, and television, on Henry James, the American Western, and the contemporary American novel.

Wolfgang.Hallet@anglistik.uni-giessen.de

Wolfgang Hallet is Professor of Teaching English as a Foreign Language, Literature and Culture at Justus Liebig University Giessen. He was a founding member of the Executive Board of the International Graduate Centre for the Study of Culture (GCSC) and Head of its Teaching Centre until 2017. He has published a number of monographs (including a book on Paul Auster) and co-edited a large number of handbooks and volumes and the book series *Concepts for the Study of Culture*. He has researched and published widely on the contemporary novel, the multimodal novel, on the cultural contextualization of literature, and on genre.

KEYWORDS

Surveillance Cultures, Surveillance

PUBLICATION DATE

Issue 6, December 11, 2018

HOW TO CITE

Wibke Schniedermann and Wolfgang Hallet. "Editorial: On the Cultural Dimensions of Surveillance." *On_Culture: The Open Journal for the Study of Culture* 6 (2018). <<http://geb.uni-giessen.de/geb/volltexte/2018/13894/>>.

Permalink URL: <<http://geb.uni-giessen.de/geb/volltexte/2018/13894/>>

URN: <urn:nbn:de:hebis:26-opus-138947>



Editorial: On the Cultural Dimensions of Surveillance

Digitalization and de-materialization of surveillance technologies have facilitated changes in cultural agency that are at once fundamental and yet seem easy to ignore. Surveillance pervades every-day experiences down to the most quotidian and subconscious practices as well as the very materiality of the affected bodies. As a growing performative force, these practices and the responses they elicit work towards an essential cultural restructuring that results in a plurality of surveillance cultures. This shift calls for a radical reconceptualization of surveillance and its motivations. It even challenges us to reformulate basic epistemological questions of knowability through the constant production of data and the ubiquitous availability of coded, immaterial yet deeply personal information.

In this issue, we address the growing concerns about the fundamental interventions into social and cultural lives made by current surveillance technologies. How do societies at large as well as individual subjects undergo, exert, and perform different forms of surveillance? How do subjects respond to the experience of actual or imagined surveillance in different environments, e.g. in the workplace, in city centers, in one's home, or online? How does the de-materialization and de-visualization of surveillance alter sociocultural as well as material realities, social and communicative practices and, in consequence, individual behaviors? Whose behavior is being normalized, and to what end? How can we grasp this culturally performative force, how can we analyze and conceptualize it, and to what extent does it affect our theorization of the social and of established notions of culture?

The issue also analyzes the discourses arising from this changing surveillance landscape and the resulting divergence in the cultural imaginary. Metaphors of surveillance are largely influenced by visual and optical components like security cameras, CCTV, drones and satellite photos. Yet, visual observation is being supplemented and often outdone in scope by the gathering of constantly increasing amounts of data. With technological advancement enabling extensive and almost gapless "dataveillance" of a person's activities, the algorithmization of the subject is altering our very notion of the individual as social agent. Dataveillance therefore gives rise to a new imagination of

surveillance in visual culture. How do films and other media visualize the invisible processes of surveillance?

David Lyon's *Essay* "Exploring the Culture of Surveillance" runs the gamut of the cultural dimensions in which surveillance operates and on which it impacts. Making the case for a cultural approach to surveillance, Lyon guides the reader through the most significant technological and experiential changes. The rise of social media platforms and their success in turning a profit from the attendant data exhaust went hand in hand with sociable online activities becoming a condition for individuals' participation in social life. The normalization of surveillance advances further as such use of online platforms and digital networking is experienced as enjoyable while the surveillance practices they promote offer more and more opportunities for users to participate actively as surveilling subjects. When the act of watching becomes a "way of life," as Lyon describes it, surveillance becomes, by definition, a formative part of culture(s). As Lyon states in his recently published book, *The Culture of Surveillance*: "These ubiquitous data are desired for both control and commodity and in many cases those categories are not entirely separate."¹

In this issue, David Lyon also points to the mutual influence between the imaginations and narratives of fiction, on the one hand, and the culture of surveillance on the other. While each culture produces its own distinct surveillance culture, Lyon reminds his readers of the equalizing effects of a globalized economy. The study of surveillance culture therefore needs a common theoretical framework, which he sketches here based on six concepts: The fluidity of surveillance, which originates from the concept of "liquid surveillance" proposed by Zygmunt Baumann and himself (in their sociological conversation of the same title)²; the inevitable immersion in surveillance as it has become virtually impossible to avoid; the performative activities encouraged by social media use as well as security measures aimed at shaping behaviors; the complex power relations informing surveillance culture, from the intimate and interpersonal to the corporate globalized level; the quasi-automated compliance with surveillance measures that security discourses and online media seem to elicit; and, lastly, the increasing normalization, if not naturalization of surveillance in which these developments result. The study of surveillance is therefore inherently cultural and must, if it wants to provide a productive critical perspective, investigate the consequences of these cultural shifts.

Mapping the field of Surveillance Studies in its current status, Dietmar Kammerer in his *Essay* asks — and answers — the question “Why Should We Talk About Culture When We Want to Understand ‘Surveillance’?” His focus here is on popular culture and the readiness with which it has integrated surveillance into its fictions as a social, cultural, and technological phenomenon. The abundance of pop-cultural material alone compels researchers in the study of culture to look to these productions when trying to decipher what surveillance means at the beginning of the twenty-first century. While it has become nearly impossible to avoid surveillance altogether while leading a social life, most acts of surveillance do not produce a conscious experience. Cultural texts, says Kammerer, provide an experientiality of surveillance that makes it palpable and discussable. The kinship he identifies between surveillance and entertainment extends even to the material and immaterial structures organizing both: many surveillance practices use technologies from the entertainment industries and, more importantly, surveillance imitates fiction by relying on similar strategies — imagination and performance determine surveillance’s effectiveness.

In their *Perspective* on “Dystopian Realities,” Jennifer Kiesewetter and Robin Schmieder offer empirical evidence for the reciprocity of fictions and of established surveillance practices. The boundaries between imagined and culturally practiced surveillance technologies, as they found in a survey they conducted among students, are becoming increasingly blurred to the indistinguishable — a somewhat disturbing finding since it leads to a general loss of epistemological reliability.

In the same vein, Jörn Ahrens takes a closer look at the imagination of surveillance and the social-political implications of unilateral observation. In his *Essay* “The Ubiquitous View: Surveillance, Imagination, and the Power of Being Seen,” Ahrens traces the “hidden agenda of knowledge production” in surveillance’s implied unknowability. Imagination, as Ahrens demonstrates, is both the technique with which individuals grasp the factuality and the ideological power of surveillance and the producer of surveillance as cultural reality. In his analysis of the habitualization of surveillance, he discusses the consequences of the recent expansion of surveillance technologies and practices vis-à-vis the placid compliance with which increased surveillance is being perceived and even welcomed as an organic process.

Cultural representations that comment on this wide acceptance and increasingly positive attitude towards ubiquitous surveillance also zoom in on the ways in which it

changes intimate and emotional responses to being surveilled. Drawing on the notion of surveillance as a producing factor in the elicitation of emotions, Betiel Wasihun's *Article* "Surveillance and Shame in Dave Eggers' *The Circle*" explores the affects of dataveillance in Eggers' novel. Her reading of *The Circle* is based on the "phenomenological analogy" between the affect of shame and philosophical concepts of surveillance. In her case study, Wasihun demonstrates how the literary imaginations of the immaterial and thus largely invisible forms of dataveillance represent the affects of exposure, such as shame, through a negotiation of concepts of visibility and invisibility. In Eggers' fictionalization of Google, as Wasihun shows, the voluntary submission to visual and data surveillance is motivated by a wish to avoid shame through radical exposure.

The prevalence of digitality in many surveillance technologies challenges traditional strategies of visualizing their procedures and their effects. Martin Hennig and Miriam Piegsa investigate how visual media have responded to the de-visualization of surveillance and discuss why optical metaphors still dominate these imaginations. In their *Article* "The Representation of Dataveillance in Visual Media: Subjectification and Spatialization of Digital Surveillance Practices," Hennig and Piegsa distinguish four representational modes, or "levels," of representing dataveillance on the screen and demonstrate their categories' analytical purchase in case studies of the Hollywood production *Enemy of the State* as well as the documentary film *Pre-Crime*.

To a certain extent and counter to the digital disappearance of surveillance, Peter Rogers in his *Article* "The Securopolis: (Re)Assembling Surveillance, Resilience and Affect" reminds us that, as imaginary, invisible and almost natural surveillance practices may be, security and data obsessions are increasingly penetrating urban design and planning, thus creating material realities which are able to establish 'affective governance' that produces socially acceptable human behavior at the level of atmosphere, instinct and cognition.

Ana Ivasiuc's case study of neighborhood militias and vigilantes in her *Article* "The Order of Things and People: Vertical Non-State Surveillance" confirms empirically that surveillance as 'a way of thinking' may indeed shift away from the invisible and the digital realm and produce social and personal practices that can be experienced directly by citizens and residents in urban areas. These practices may even be read as an attempt to re-materialize surveillance and to re-establish it as a social reality, as a

material ‘presence.’ In such civic, self-organized kinds of self-surveillance many of the questions of fear, desire, knowability and self-assurance culminate around which all surveillance discourses revolve.

The *Perspectives* complementing the articles and essays in this issue aim to open up the discussion to include artistic and experience-based involvements with surveillance. Anna Heitger’s take on auto-surveillance engages with the effects of technologies that promote self-optimization through a constant tracking of physical performance. Jeff Coons’ video “Global Eyes” combines live-camera feeds that are publicly accessible online with the commentary of people watching these videos for various purposes. Ann Lawless condenses experiences of surveillance into poetic form in “Work Under Surveillance,” and Franci Duran uses Google Street View images to produce a video installation, *8401*, that grapples with the oppressive state surveillance during Chile’s military dictatorship.

Endnotes

- ¹ David Lyon, *The Culture of Surveillance: Watching as a Way of Life* (Cambridge: Wiley, 2018), 20.
- ² Zygmunt Baumann and David Lyon, *Liquid Surveillance: A Conversation* (Cambridge: Wiley, 2013).