COVERING SURVEILLANCE: THE VISUALIZATION OF CONTEMPORARY
SURVEILLANCE ON SCHOLARLY BOOK COVERS

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# Covering Surveillance: The Visualization of Contemporary Surveillance on Scholarly Book Covers

## _Abstract

This _Perspective_ analyzes a selection of covers of scholarly books from the field of surveillance studies. Reading these book covers on their own as paratextual text-image combinations, we seek to illuminate a seemingly marginal field of the contemporary representation of surveillance. Foregrounding the motifs of cameras, eyes, and surveilled bodies, we point out some of the complex ways in which subjectivity and in/visibility interact on book covers in the age of dataveillance.
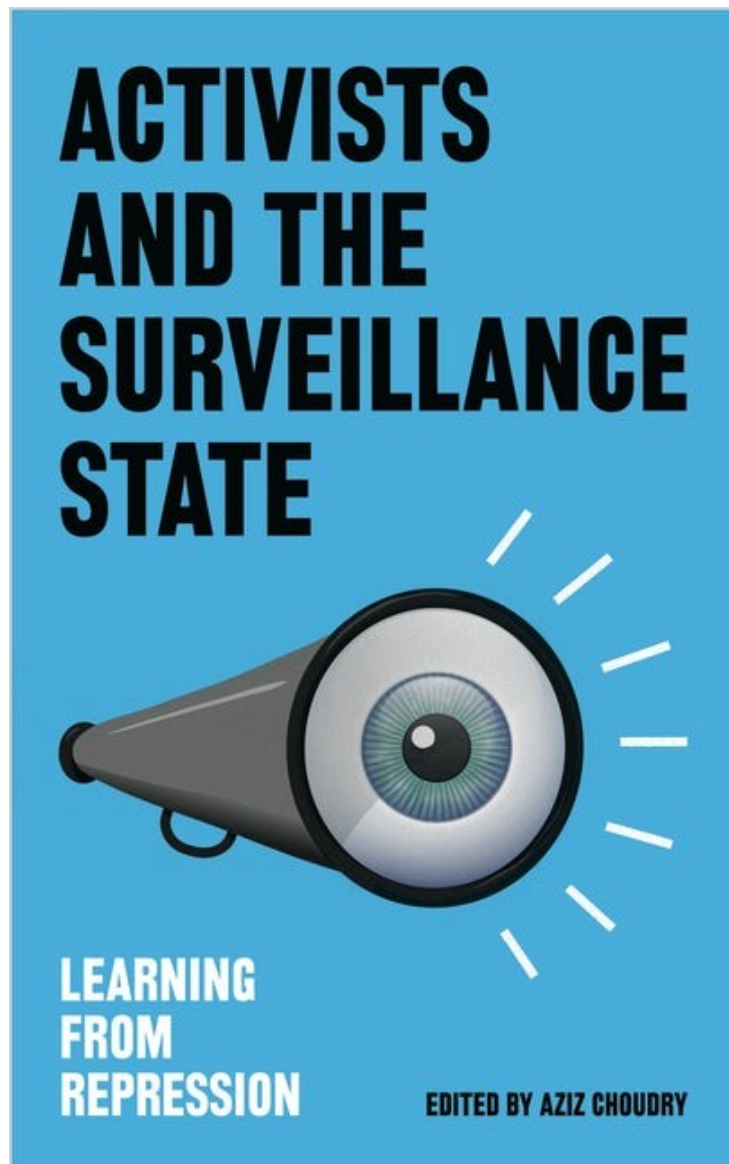
Fig. 1: The cover of Aziz Choudry's (ed.) *Activists and the Surveillance State* combines imagery of vision and sound.

**1_Introduction**

In their editorial to this issue of *On_Culture*, guest editors Wolfgang Hallet and Wibke Schniedermann foreground an essential question concerning the historical specificity of contemporary surveillance cultures: "How do films and other media visualize the invisible processes of surveillance?"[1] Our *_Perspective* deals with this question in a self-reflexive fashion in that we suggest examining the book covers of scholarly publications from the field of surveillance studies. We are interested in how these book covers illustrate the dilemma of visualizing the increasingly less visible phenomenon of surveillance. Our ideas are grounded in the emerging interdisciplinary field of invisibility studies, which is especially interested in the shifting contemporary configurations of what is regarded as visible and what is not.[2] Within surveillance studies, it follows up in particular on Jonathan Finn's 2012 study of the representation of surveillance in stock imagery.

If surveillance is "the dominant organizing practice of late modernity,"[3] surveillance is also "a fundamentally narrative act," as Betiel Wasihun has argued.[4] Its deep structure is defined not only by the transformation of one state of affairs to another but by metaphors of vision, visibility, and invisibility. At first glance, this does not seem to apply to the current importance of "dataveillance,"[5] the forms of which increasingly subsume more traditional modes of audiovisual surveillance. Yet attempts to grasp the specificity of contemporary regimes of surveillance such as the "global eye" cannot escape the visual dimension.[6] This thesis is strikingly illustrated by Jeff Coons's video contribution to this issue of *On_Culture*, "GlobalEyes," which assembles publicly available CCTV camera footage.[7] It is further supported by the contribution by Martin Hennig and Miriam Piegsa, who argue that contemporary media representations of dataveillance in films, documentaries, and video games employ certain recurring visual metaphors based on the "[p]ersonalization and spatialization" of dataveillance.[8] The general cultural relevance of concepts of visibility and invisibility has been highlighted in this issue of *On_Culture* by Wasihun, who links these abstract ideas to the social dimension of shame. Emphasizing that contemporary dataveillance makes "the question of how to define interiority […] even more urgent," she convincingly argues that the "concepts of visibility and invisibility […] are not outdated in the context of dataveillance."[9] The advent of post-panoptic surveillance thus certainly marks a shift in the social and technological configuration of in/visibility — yet by no

means does this shift mean the end of the cultural relevance of the dimension of in/visibility when it comes to transforming and understanding surveillance.

Foregrounding the issue of how to visualize invisible surveillance and emphasizing the relevance of in/visibility for contemporary subjectivity, we are looking at how representations of in/visibility and subjectivity interact in the covers of scholarly books that address the topic of surveillance. In other words, how do the book covers represent the contemporary relationship of subjectivity and surveillance? The selection is not representative but led by our theoretical interest in cultural images that define the contemporary perception of surveillance. We would also like to stress that we are not reading the covers as representative of the books' contents. Our approach is based on literary and cultural studies methodologies that foreground the textual dimension. We shall be discussing the book covers as paratextual text-image combinations that form part of "the outermost peritext" rather than as cover art.[10] In sketching three main groups of book covers, we shall move from the motif of cameras to human eyes to human bodies.

## 2_Subjectivity and Surveillance on Scholarly Book Covers

In his insightful commentary on the aesthetic representation of surveillance in commercial stock photography, Finn argues that images from archives such as Getty and Corbis trivialize surveillance as an element of everyday life. He points out that "[t]he images position surveillance as a banal, commercial concept: it exists as a generic category to be used in the construction of visual content."[11] Thus, Finn maintains that these images "are de-politicized, de-historicized, and convey nothing of the problems and tensions associated with the practice of surveillance."[12] Considering the prevalence of the concept of surveillance and its visual representation in, for instance, advertisement, entertainment, and popular culture, Finn is right to call for a critical examination of stock imagery as it shapes our perception of surveillance. Like Finn, visual culture studies scholars stress that despite their seeming banality, commercial stock images are neither arbitrary nor objective but instead are determined by the corporate interests of the companies that distribute them.[13] While there are some commercial interests involved in the publication of scholarly books, one would expect their covers to have a different aim than the banalization of surveillance Finn identifies in stock photography. Considering the audience for scholarly books, one could

assume that the covers foreground precisely the opposite: namely, a kind of re-politicization and re-historicization of surveillance.

Stock imagery and book covers certainly share a marginal position within surveillance studies. While cover art for novels or music records has garnered some attention (one needs only to think of the iconic first edition cover of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* by Francis Cugat), the covers and cover images of scholarly books are usually not a topic of research and are hardly ever mentioned in book reviews.[14] In this sense, the cover fulfills a prototypically paratextual function as identified by Gérard Genette, according to whom "the paratext is, rather, a threshold, or — a word [Jorge Luis] Borges used apropos of a preface — a 'vestibule' that offers the world at large the possibility of either stepping inside or turning back."[15] The cover artist is usually not named in the front matter of the books unless the book cover is an adaptation of an independent artwork (as in the case of Simone Browne's *Dark Matters*, 2015, which will be discussed below). In addition, the proverbial judging of a book by its cover hardly seems the goal of serious scholarship. However, it can be assumed that the combination of images and text on book covers signals certain prevalent ideas about surveillance, can contribute to our understanding of a particular subtopic, and may even play a role in the way we approach and read the scholarly book behind the cover.

Book covers, then, provide a rich source for cultural study. As paratextual elements of a book, they influence its perception by readers and can be understood as an important part of visual culture. We do not judge any book by its cover but rather investigate what the covers might reveal about the judgments involved in perceptions of surveillance. This endeavor connects to a set of intriguing questions about the visual representation of surveillance and the aesthetics of surveillance: What are the dominant images used to visualize and represent surveillance and how can they be systematized? What types or modes of surveillance are represented (corporate, state, or individual surveillance, dataveillance)? What is the relationship between the watchers and those being watched? How is the interrelationship between subjectivity and surveillance portrayed?

Taking a first glance at the covers of scholarly literature about surveillance, it becomes apparent that many share common themes and motifs such as hands, fingers, control rooms, and the panopticon. Images of hands and fingers are used to fore-

ground fingerprinting as a means of identification (e.g., Armand Mattelart's *The Globalization of Surveillance*,[16] Pramod K. Nayar's *Citizenship and Identity in the Age of Surveillance*[17]), as well as in their contemporary function to unlock digital devices (David Lyon's *Surveillance Studies: An Overview*[18]). Keith Laidler's *Surveillance Unlimited: How We've Become the Most Watched People on Earth*[19] features a more traditional image, namely a part of a surveillance control room, in which several CCTV screens are stacked on top of one another. The architectural structure of the panopticon is taken up, for instance, in the cover of David Lyon's *Theorizing Surveillance*,[20] directly linking to its subtitle *The Panopticon and Beyond*.

In cultural terms, the shifts from representations of audio and visual surveillance to dataveillance might be thought of as the transitioning from Francis Ford Coppola's *The Conversation* (1974) to Tony Scott's *Enemy of the State* (1998) to Jeff Orlowski's docudrama *The Social Dilemma* (2020). With regard to illustrations of surveillance, these shifts become particularly apparent when we think back to Gary T. Marx's observation in 1996 that "[t]he best-known visual symbol of surveillance is the eye, followed by the ear," which "reflects sight and hearing's centrality to surveillance relative to the other senses."[21] One of the strategies Marx identified as typical illustrations of surveillance is "the breaking of frames,"[22] a strategy succinctly illustrated by the cover of *Activists and the Surveillance State: Learning from Repression*,[23] edited by Aziz Choudry: It depicts an electric megaphone containing an unblinking eye. The rays emerging from the eye could represent either sound waves or the radiant gaze of the eye, thus foregrounding the relationship between the voices of protest and the observation of activists. In the following examples we shall foreground three groups of book covers that feature aspects of seeing and not seeing the body, understood as the site of subjectivity: 1) book covers that display cameras; 2) book covers that show human eyes and abstractions of eyes; and 3) book covers that figure people, bodies, and sketches of bodies.

## 3_Cameras and Eyes

Probably the most obvious choice in representing technologically mediated surveillance visually is the motif of the surveillance camera. For instance, J.K. Petersen's *Introduction to Surveillance Studies*,[24] Kevin D. Haggerty and Richard V. Ericson's *The New Politics of Surveillance and Visibility*,[25] and Lyon's *The Culture of Surveillance:*

*Watching as a Way of Life*[26] feature surveillance cameras on their covers. The cover of *The Culture of Surveillance* is particularly noteworthy. It shows two bullet-style cameras on opposite walls that point downwards to a book placed in the center. This book features a book cover that is identical to the original book cover of *The Culture of Surveillance* and as such represents a *mise-en-abyme*. The cover image thus gestures to surveillance as an ongoing process of cameras watching cameras. Seeing that "[t]he surveilling eye can no longer be located but is rather dispersed in complex structures and networks,"[27] the enduring prevalence of camera images, symbols, and themes in visual representations of surveillance suggests that the common perception of surveillance and surveillance technology is only partial. Especially when we consider the practice of dataveillance, the systematic monitoring of peoples' data trails, and the collection of personal information (e.g., from credit card uses to social media communication and online search patterns), it is clear that a simple image of a surveillance camera will no longer be fully adequate but rather needs to become aesthetically charged in order to represent contemporary surveillance methods.

The depiction of eyes — both actual human eyes and abstract forms — as visual symbols of surveillance is employed by the second cluster of books. These cover images emphasize the centrality of sight and vision in technologies and processes of surveillance. For instance, *Surveillance, Architecture and Control: Discourses on Spatial Culture,*[28] edited by Susan Flynn and Antonia Mackay, features on its cover a close-up of a human eye peering through torn white (wall)paper; its gaze is fixed and there is a reflection of a grid structure in the iris. Upon closer look, the reflection turns out to be that of a high building with a large glass front, giving the overall impression of a skyscraper with corporate offices. The cover image is thus reminiscent of a spy who secretly watches a corporate space from a hideout. At the same time, the torn paper above the title in red letters and the fact that the reader has to take a close look to make sense of the reflection in the iris also point to the discursive level of surveillance. Marx's *Windows into the Soul: Surveillance and Society in an Age of High Technology*[29] presents abstract eyes on its cover, i.e., several irises in different sizes and colors with black pupils and small white spots caused by the reflection of light. The abstract irises are reminiscent of camera lenses, thus conflating the human and the non-human. The cover of Zygmunt Bauman and David Lyon's *Liquid Surveillance: A Conversation*[30] explicitly visualizes the metaphor of the camera-eye: it de-

picts two round, free-standing webcams with the camera lenses resembling blue irises with dilated pupils. In human eyes, the dilation would suggest little light, but it also serves to underscore the non-human quality of the eyes and the 'magnitude' of their view. The title runs through the middle of the cover page in expiring lines. The cameras are visually separated by the lines and arranged in such a manner as to suggest a face, thus putting the phenomenon of pareidolia — the tendency to perceive known patterns such as faces in (arrangements of) objects — to artistic use. Surveillance-themed images like this often combine surveillance technology, particularly cameras, with human facial features, ascribing human characteristics to technological objects and thus reflecting ambivalence about surveillance and its technologies.

It is hardly a surprise that there is a prevalence of eye symbols and a continuity with the motif of the security camera in the visualization of surveillance. Eyes are traditionally connected to vigilance, knowledge, and observation. The common saying that eyes are the mirror of or window to the soul is taken up in the above-mentioned title of Marx's study *Windows into the Soul*. It points to the traditional idea that eyes have the potential to convey a person's invisible interior, their most intimate thoughts and feelings, just like surveillance aims to deconstruct a person's privacy. The existence of more than two eyes commonly suggests a kind of spiritual power, as in the concept of a third eye — a supernatural, mythical, or magical ability to perceive something that is invisible to ordinary eyes. As we move from cameras and eyes to surveilled bodies, another facet of the cover of *The Culture of Surveillance* emerges, namely its pareidolic effect: The symmetrically arranged cameras on the cover of Lyon's book are reminiscent of lowered eyebrows. It is as if an invisible face frowned on its own *mise-en-abyme* reflection on the book cover in the middle of the bottom of the page, illustrating yet again the uncanny conflation of the human and the non-human in the book covers that feature camera and eye imagery.

## 4_Surveilled Bodies

The third category of books we would like to discuss uses cover images that depict people or sketches and outlines of human bodies. Examples of this category include David Barnard-Wills's monograph *Surveillance and Identity: Discourse, Subjectivity and the State,*[31] Emily van der Meulen and Robert Heynen's edited collection *Expanding the Gaze: Gender and the Politics of Surveillance,*[32] and Peter Marks's *Imag-*

*ining Surveillance: Eutopian and Dystopian Literature and Film.*[33] The cover of *Surveillance and Identity* shows a black and white photographic image of people at a London Tube station with a video surveillance camera fixed to the wall above the station sign. People who linger in or move through such heavily monitored public spaces are usually aware of the fact that they are subject to surveillance and that they may be recorded by security cameras. However, on this cover, they do not take notice of the surveillance technologies and go about their usual business undisturbed, which is represented in the fact that none of the people look in the direction of either of the cameras. The image represents surveillance as a normal part of everyday life in the metropolis, yet it also hints at the invisibility of the process of surveillance, especially through the slightly tilted perspective that gives the image a certain dynamic quality like that of a snapshot. In contrast, the cover of Marks's *Imagining Surveillance* reflects a very different notion of surveillance: it shows several people standing in a dark monitoring room in front of a large screen that is composed of hundreds of individual frames and images of close-ups of people. This image instantly brings up the question of who watches whom and for what reason in the surveillance society. At the same time, there is no technical equipment and, in keeping with Marks's interest in literary and cinematic representations of surveillance, the image suggests an aesthetic situation as if in a museum. The watchers' role, then, oscillates between watching for control and viewing for pleasure.

Subjective experiences under surveillance are highly diverse, and twenty-first-century subjects need to constantly negotiate the paradoxical conditions generated by surveillance; for instance, paranoia, fear, suspicion, voyeuristic pleasure, the desire to be seen, and the wish to remain invisible online and keep personal information private. For people of color, surveillance practices and technologies are directly tied to a history of violent oppression, racism, and discrimination. The cover images of Simone Browne's *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness*[34] and Saher Selod's *Forever Suspect: Racialized Surveillance of Muslim Americans in the War on Terror*[35] criticize the disproportionate surveillance and criminalization of people of color. In the United States, for example, racialized subjects are the target of surveillance practices including the government surveillance of Black intellectuals and activists (from the FBI's surveillance of Martin Luther King, Jr. to the surveillance of Black Lives Matter activists); the targeting of people of color, in particular Arab and Muslim trav-

elers, by security personnel at airports; and racial profiling by law enforcement officials. The book cover of Selod's *Forever Suspect* integrates the illustration "Surveillance 2010" by graphic designer William Varner, in which the stars of the star-spangled banner have become security cameras and the stripes have become window blinds.[36] Behind these blinds, a man appears to peer out, as his body and glance are perched ambiguously between watching and hiding. The main book title "Forever Suspect" is printed in white, reflecting the color of the surveillance cameras. The cover of Simone Browne's *Dark Matters* features a combination of two photographic panels from a series called *Pan's Opticon* (2008) by the South African, Berlin-based artist Robin Rhode.[37] With his back to the spectator, a young Black man in a pinstriped suit jacket and a straw boater hat gazes at a wall, connected to it by measuring instruments that seem to emerge from his eyes. Browne herself interprets Rhode's complex artworks in systematic terms of the surveillance of Black people and in the historical context of South African apartheid, foregrounding especially the relationship of the "prosthetic look" of Rhode's subject and his "disruptive staring."[38] In adapting Rhode's artwork, the book cover thus leaves the eyes of the subject invisible, marking a departure from the use of cameras and eyes we discussed above. What is crucial is that this paratextual book cover comes to play a role in Browne's argument, thus marking an argumentative move from the paratext to the text, which stands out among the covers we surveyed for this _*Perspective*. It is perhaps no accident that these two book covers, which use already existing artworks, open up particularly relevant questions for the field of surveillance studies, as it continues to diversify.

## 5_Final Remarks

The book covers discussed here point to the complex interactions between subjectivity and in/visibility in the age of dataveillance. They constitute intriguing examples of the inevitability of visualizing the relationship between the visible and invisible aspects of surveillance, which becomes particularly clear in the frequent use of the pareidolic effect of seeing faces in specifically arranged technical equipment such as cameras. While seemingly marginal to the scholarly arguments within the books, the book covers illustrate the ongoing relevance of metaphors of vision to the understanding of contemporary surveillance. In contrast to the banalization of surveillance at the core of stock imagery as discussed by Jonathan Finn, they frequently attempt to prob-

lematize the very acts of seeing and observing, their technical and technological substitutes, and the uncanny merging of the human and the non-human. It remains to be seen how these paratextual elements of scholarly books will continue to adapt to the ever-changing conditions and perceptions of contemporary surveillance, but it is certain that they will be worth more than a cursory glance.

## _The List of Book Covers Discussed

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## _Authors' Note

## _Endnotes

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