

THE UBIQUITOUS VIEW: SURVEILLANCE, IMAGINATION,  
AND THE POWER OF BEING SEEN

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KEYWORDS

habituation, imagination, normalization, sociation, surveillance, the political

PUBLICATION DATE

Issue 6, December 11, 2018

HOW TO CITE

Jörn Ahrens. “The Ubiquitous View: Surveillance, Imagination, and the Power of Being Seen.” *On\_Culture: The Open Journal for the Study of Culture* 6 (2018).  
<<http://geb.uni-giessen.de/geb/volltexte/2018/13901/>>.

Permalink URL: <<http://geb.uni-giessen.de/geb/volltexte/2018/13901/>>

URN: <urn:nbn:de:hebis:26-opus-139017>



## The Ubiquitous View: Surveillance, Imagination, and the Power of Being Seen

### Abstract

The *Essay* discusses the relation between surveillance and imagination. It unfolds the argument that surveillance as a form of (political) oppression is necessarily centering on a decisionistic act of the individual who has to opt for deviant or conformist behavior under conditions of obvious social and political surveillance. Today, however, especially due to processes of an ongoing digitalization, surveillance is becoming a mode of self-expression, experiencing a shift towards its habituation and normalization within social reality. This development marks a clear difference from the classic habituation of surveillance as estranged, governmental practice. What seems to remain intact with regard to contemporary concepts of surveillance is the importance of the view and the meaning of surveillance as a politics of the image and the imaginary.

To see and be seen is the most explicit obsession in modernity. Our cultural imagination is loaded with images of visual encounters that remain one-sided as clandestine views on the other that deprive the other as individual of its very intimacy. The act of being seen, therefore, is a highly political act. Usually to be seen by the other should demand the act of recognition and, therefore, contribute to the establishment of the self as social subject. However, this is based on the precondition of mutual visibility and transparency of social actors. Seeing as acting is an expression of a particular political relation. To be heard and, even more, to be bugged is almost as much of an invasion, albeit of lower intensity with regard to the overall cultural interest that is taken in the production of visibility. It seems that the act of being seen (as well as that of being heard and, of course, of being followed) is perceived as the ultimate invasion, as the most extreme increase of a practice that allows others to know about somebody without this somebody being aware of the knowledge of others. This means that the very precondition of such practices is that they are kept secret. The politics of intrusion as much as the cultural imagination of such hidden observations are to be executed clandestinely.

Power here is established as a hidden agenda of knowledge-production based on systematical intrusion into individual integrity. It is this focus on secrecy that turns a particular politics of viewing into the distinct practice of surveillance and surveillance into a mode of absolute social and political power. That said, surveillance is the expression of the voyeuristic, sometimes inquisitive view turned political — the political as

process of socialization and ideology as an imaginary way merges in the act of creating visibility as practice for political performance.<sup>1</sup> Against this background, the difficulty with and the problem of surveillance is that, despite the fact that we know it is taking place, the reality of surveillance is nurtured by its concealment. With regard to surveillance, we are therefore aware of what we can't know. Surveillance, thus, is necessarily related to certain sets of cultural imagination which appear to form the basis of a reality of surveillance at large.

The following text will reflect upon the relation between surveillance and imagination. First, I will briefly focus on the history and background of surveillance, including its contemporary expansion from the political sphere into the public realm, thus promoting the intersection of both. I will then discuss a shift towards a habituation of surveillance and its normalization within social reality, which, in my view, is different from the so far obsolete habituation of surveillance as an estranged, governmental practice. What seemingly stays intact even with regard to contemporary concepts of surveillance is the importance of the view and therefore the importance of surveillance as a politics of the image. This then propels the notion of the imaginary as an important element of surveillance.

## **1\_History of Surveillance**

Like any cultural and/or political practice, surveillance, too, has a history that is constantly pointing in two directions — as a history of someone or some institution spying on others and as the imagination of individuals, or even of whole populations, of being spied upon. The former is not so difficult to describe since the individualization of the governmental view in modernity not only renders surveillance possible as a technique within the diverse set of social practices to govern society, but it becomes necessary as an explicit form of governance of the social expressed by the individuals. The latter, however, refers to a set of cultural imaginations that, on the one hand, produce revelations about the nature of surveillance as part of social reality, but, on the other hand, establish the notion of surveillance as a cultural fact that is, by nature, only accessible via techniques of imagination. When surveillance is used on a multitude of individuals as a technique of power and governance that expropriates these individuals from that

which is their very definition — integrity of privacy, autonomy of intimacy — surveillance as a practice of estrangement is turned into cultural imagology for producing a frame of what is expected as a reality of surveillance in the present.

In this regard, surveillance and its imagination certainly have a history, and from the perspective of cultural history, one could say, it functions as the exact expression of dystopian governmentality. In such dystopian scenarios, the sovereign is spying on the still reigned subjects. Nevertheless, nowadays individuals appear to be regaining the control that sovereignty seems to have lost with the shift from its classic to its modern form. The image of such, as it were, classic surveillance shows the sovereign spying by various, but in the end calculable, means on a plurality of individuals who are acting as individuals. These means include traditional practices of denunciation by others, obvious surveillance by people of formal position in the living environment like, e.g., the janitor, informal or clandestine surveillance by non-identifiable persona, visual and audible wire-tapping of telephones and places, or postal surveillance. The point is that, by definition, surveillance is only possible as a practice of absence, even if it is sometimes carried out in bold awareness of its subjects. This, however, in most cases serves the didactic purpose of power. The surveillance that is openly performed in public is a mere demonstration of the unlimited power of the surveilling subject over the surveilled one. Typically, the existence of surveillance might be known as a general phenomenon, but the question as to which specific individuals are kept under surveillance is, for the most part, left unanswered. And this is then the reason why surveillance always comes with vast practices of imagination. Imagination is not only the mere effect of a radically intrusive practice into the lives of others as subaltern subjects, but imagination as the mode of access towards an otherwise absent practice of sovereignty also produces a cultural concept of surveillance, and therefore its imagological reality, that might unveil surveillance as even more comprehensive than it is in the reality of daily routine.

In general, surveillance as normalized practice of the sovereign's intrusion into personal living environments can always be read as an expression of a suppressive society and political system. Without a doubt, still the most powerful and influential cultural expression of surveillance is George Orwell's 1948 novel *1984* in which he unfolds the imagination of a society under complete and totalitarian surveillance. *1984* still serves as the very metaphor for surveillance when it is acting out the idea of being constantly observed by depicting the expropriation of privacy and intimacy that still serves as the

most dystopian social scenario of our times. However, even here, the successful production of a reality of total surveillance is only possible via a recess of surveillance at one point. Surveillance thus profits from the very idea that escape is possible. Surveillance expects individuals to be deviant and, moreover, it wants them to be deviant to keep the existing system of social normality alive in which surveillance plays a major role of sociation. Without any existing deviance or, to be more precise, without any presumed deviance, surveillance would become its own dystopia and senseless as it is fueled by the constant suspicion against the (very) people to whose governance it contributes. Thus the regime of surveillance will by definition at any given time provide at least one possibility for deviance to supply individuals with a sense of rare individualization and thereby an opportunity to make a decision whether to act as obedient or deviant subjects. Consequently, Orwell's protagonist Winston Smith is trapped by the imagination that his, as far he knows, perfectly surveilled apartment has a tiny blind spot, a refuge of sorts at which he is able to cultivate the remnants of his autonomy.<sup>2</sup> But as it turns out, this opportunity for deviance, the little corner where Winston sits down each night to secretly produce his illegal diary, has been installed by the regime on purpose. Its function is to give people the opportunity to decide whether they might turn deviant or not. If they do, they quickly become, as Winston experiences, enemies of the state, merging with what Hannah Arendt calls the "objectified adversary" ("der objektive Gegner") — people turn into enemies of political sovereignty, not because they choose to, but because sovereignty wants them to be and to function as its opponents.<sup>3</sup> Thus, the supposed little blind spot in the room never was a refuge. On the contrary, it is an instrument to test the reliability of the mentally suppressed citizens. Under the social condition of surveillance it is the documented decision for deviance that makes someone an adversary. This decision is important when the act of monitoring oneself remains a solely rational practice of documentation of behavior. Monitoring and decision make a perfect match within the politics of surveillance. Decisionism, described by Carl Schmitt as the agency of the one who acts sovereign-like,<sup>4</sup> thus becomes a tool that the surveilling sovereign employs against the oppressed who is urged to opt for possible deviant behavior and its consequences. This is indeed not an illusion anymore. In fact, the Chinese Citizen Score System works exactly in line with such assumptions.

## **2\_Surveillance as Oppression**

Against the background of such classic concepts of surveillance stands the idea of surveillance as a distinct concept of the expression and agency of power and oppression. From this perspective, surveillance intrudes upon the individual through means of hegemonic otherness. Thus the repressive sense of governance always remains the other to a self that imagines itself as at least partially free. It is this freedom of the self as one of the decisive achievements of modernity that is dialectically making the self suspicious of any form of governmental power. In turn, the self has to be put under control as a prerequisite of the modern condition and the state that emerges from it.<sup>5</sup> Surveillance as a political practice of governance emerges from the fact that in modernity a governance of the people has become unthinkable beyond the acknowledgment of the individual as such. Therefore, surveillance plus eventually individualistic sanctions beyond mere surveillance are an integral part of the security measures of the state within modernity. Naturally, acknowledgment here takes the form of negation when the purpose of surveillance is to withhold the seemingly strong connection between the modern self and anomy.

The regime of surveillance cannot picture the modern self as being affirmative and therefore, as has been shown, consequently misunderstands this self as naturally striving to transgress the limits of sociation. As we know and have repeatedly been shown, this is not the case. However, the lasting mistrust of institutions of sovereignty against their people also demonstrates how strongly imagination is involved on the part of sovereignty, when it cannot stop producing fantasies about the deviancy and resistance of those who are governed. The imagination of a general sovereignty pictures the self as a constant threat to the order of things, because it is the individual self in which contingency materializes against the presumed stability of traditional framings. Therefore, the agency of governmentality, with surveillance as one practice amongst others, becomes the great other to the self. Governmentality then functions as the heterotopia of the modern self, which, by nature, has to be unaware of the fact that it is a result of such governance. In either case, intimacy as the very precondition of modern subjectivity is turned into a realm of hidden invasiveness by the agents of a governance of the people. However, by this divide and principle of sovereignty, surveillance as one practice of social governance is infiltrating society on the whole.

The message that can be inferred from the permanent subsurface practice of surveillance, which is only ever present in the joint imagination of people, is that literally no one will ever be safe from such ubiquity of power. Against this background society as a whole emerges as a heterotopia. Life in the society of surveillance is only possible by means of imagining a world without surveillance. Vice versa, being subject to constant surveillance measures contributes to imaginations of a constant presence of surveillance even in potentially un surveilled living environments. Much more than any traceable practice, surveillance in oppressive societies is felt as an atmosphere, as a contamination of the social. That said, surveillance does not need to be factually in place to be effective; the cultural imagination of being an object of surveillance is sufficient to produce similar effects.

### **3\_ The Recent Expansion of Surveillance**

This paradigm of surveillance, however, seems to be obsolete. Not because surveillance in the postmodern era has become superfluous, but because it has transformed and greatly expanded. Expansion of surveillance in the present time is happening due to two distinct phenomena, the first of which is the absolute ubiquity of CCTV measures in the public realm that serves two purposes: First, CCTV secures the governmental surveillance of the public realm. While this used to be a rather peripheral aspect for many years, it has recently shifted into the center of surveillance activities. With regard to the contemporary threat presented by international terrorism, the governance of the public realm is gaining increasing importance within current attempts of social security production. The second purpose of this significant expansion of CCTV is undoubtedly the privatization of the public realm, which leads to privately coordinated surveillance of large spaces within the social living environments, controlled either by individuals or, more often, by corporations for reasons of business security. This tendency is of interest because the ongoing privatization of the public realm is also interfering with the existing modes of governance of social living environments when it colonizes the public space as private property and commercial space.

Here too, security motivates the expansion of CCTV, but this imagination of security is driven by the idea of a security of commodification. Thus, when physically moving in the public realm, people are increasingly becoming the object of surveillance measures or, rather, feel as if they are when they are made aware of the existence of

CCTV cameras formerly only known from subway stations. People today are physically beleaguered by manifestations of surveillance that, at the same time, constitute the abstraction process of surveillance. The position of the deliberately spying individual is vastly supplemented by the machine that indiscriminately covers, and literally ‘documents,’ anything happening within its range. When surveillance turns into the ubiquitous normalcy of social life worlds, it also becomes radically contingent when, apart from the machine’s self-administered adjustment, no one is monitoring what exactly the camera is documenting. CCTV is not interested in what is happening to whom, but only in the coverage of a particular space. CCTV therefore is the true expression of a turn in material culture,<sup>6</sup> in surveillance, and security; its sole point of interest lies with observing clearly defined material spaces and completely excludes the potential considerations of a person who is tailing someone and therefore constantly has to decide how to proceed.

The second phenomenon in the expansion of contemporary surveillance is of course to be found in processes of data hacking and data tracking in the digital realm. Here, the technical artifacts have turned into a multifaceted actor that does not only store technical devices, but also technical, political and other agendas.<sup>7</sup> The digital sphere as well as the artifacts via which it becomes accessible is therefore undergoing an enormous process of abstraction. While the CCTV camera still exists in plain view and therefore still functions as the icon par excellence in the surveillance discourse; the abstract data spy does not materialize at all and remains the ultimate threat of material abstraction. Detection of digital surveillance is nearly impossible, which makes it even uncannier to those subjected to it or, on the other hand, might lead to comprehensive carelessness. Whether a computer’s camera is being hacked and whether someone is making use of pictures taken by these cameras or not, whether someone is making use of the personal data they hacked from someone’s digital artifact is ultimately rendered irrelevant. It also remains secondary how many trojans, cookies, and whatever other intruding programs our device is hosting and what will happen to the data they pilfered from our computer. We do not have to know whether someone or something is really tapping into our data. The possibility alone should keep people from sharing their documents not only with selected others, but literally with the public realm.

Surveillance in this scenario cannot be directly experienced any longer. It occurs as unseen, unfelt, and unnoticed surveillance at all times. This is the fallout of surveillance, a huge space beyond perception from which anybody with the adequate means will be able to look back on you and your digital activities. Surveillance has thus received a different notion when it transitioned from the classic, oppressing sovereign to the digital nomadic intruder who, in many cases, is not primarily concerned with the individual's privacy in terms of deviance or obedience, but as a bridgehead for further clandestine activities or as resources for exploitation. However, the most important and effective procedures of surveillance today happen openly and deliberately. It is common knowledge that almost any digital device we use is storing and communicating data concerning location, objects of interest and purchase, etc., thus constructing a detailed digital biography that opens the self up to public attention. This form of surveillance, one that mostly serves the economic governance of the (post)modern self, its oppression and manipulation, has largely replaced the old imagination of surveillance by the hands of a bold sovereign and his or her agents. And it has contributed to the production of a new normality based on the commodification of surveillance. Surveillance today serves the amenities of daily life and its routines. Nowadays "Big Brother" seems to emerge much more radically than he did back in 1948, seeing how, on the one hand, CCTV commands the public realm in many places and societies while, on the other hand, people are far from being anxious enough about being spied on by their own software. However, astoundingly, carelessness about being technically observed has also become one of the leading social attitudes of our time.

#### **4\_ The Habitualization of Surveillance**

The shaping of a social mentality has emerged that habitualizes surveillance not, as it used to be, as intruding exception and assault against the self in question, but as natural part of a society based on services. This constitutes a remarkable acceptance of surveillance. The commodification of surveillance that finally succeeds in its implementation as social totality emerges from a radical and unstoppable overflow of surveillance practices in the public realm. The sheer overflow of surveillance practices causes them to fade from public as well as personal perception. Due to the abundance of surveillance, its perception as social interference is declining. In this sense, in the words of Jean Baudrillard, one could speak of a sort of "hyper surveillance", i.e. surveillance that

vanishes into social normalization.<sup>8</sup> This is then a surveillance practice that transgresses itself. It seems that what was established as a constitutive device of daily routines is also beyond the integration of imagology, but seems to emerge as unnoticed fact, as media environment of contemporary technoscapes in which the imaginary partly turns into physically manifested entities and not the other way around.

The materialization of surveillance as commodification is expelling surveillance from political dystopia and the imaginary of terror and transforms into a new concept of a 'good life,' enabled by the manifold services based on a data pool that individuals provide by not shying away from newly invented means of surveillance and individual screening. What I mean by 'surveillance as commodification' is recent technologies and still ongoing technical trends as they emerge in the culture of digital social networks, like *Facebook*, in the permanent tracking of digital movement and behavior by search engines, like *Google*, or the upcoming technologies of an internet of things (as it is already being executed by *Apple* and other multinational corporations) that goes beyond connecting individuals with their technified environment. The commodification of surveillance is even more than that; it is an embedding of surveillance practices into the socio- and psycho-economic procedures of everyday-life. Surveillance (in most of its parts as self-surveillance) has become the core aspect of contemporary infrastructure and its logistics. What is emerging here is an infrastructure of surveillance, and this surveillance then turns out to become the life-world of any individual.<sup>9</sup>

Today, surveillance is by no means a subject that would trigger scandalization, like it used to be until the 1980s or even 1990s when questions of surveillance erupted and inspired important political movements and resistance against the governmentality of the political mainstream. The reason for this striking difference is that until recently surveillance was regarded as an external and hegemonic practice with which an alienated form of power targeted individuals. Whereas today, paradoxically, surveillance as a behavioral mode within digital society has become a core aspect of self-agency and has been successfully habitualized as a central part of the current concept of subjectification. It can be said that subjectification is thus the most effective form of governance of the individual and society. Only at rare occasions do surveillance practices still turn out to be relevant and therefore acknowledged as disturbances to the general public.

However, in each of these cases, surveillance as commodification itself is not questioned at all. Only its framing sometimes leads to adverse perceptions when it is unfolding too boldly upon the individuals as its almost always affirmative bearers.

This tendency results in a process that conventionalizes the reality of surveillance. Surveillance has thus become the very condition of everyday practices in the postmodern technoscapes. Today it appears as a logical consequence of the technification of culture and society, which marks a major difference with regard to classic governmental surveillance: Commodification surveillance is far from being intended as a means of oppression of the individual and only emerges as a consequence of the subtle complexity of technological devices that attach their technical capabilities to those humans who willingly function as their bearers. This makes surveillance an effect that follows the very capabilities of technology, but it is not its first premise. Of course, commodification surveillance also follows an intention, namely the ruthless exploitation of human data, the effort of tracking the self as customer, target group, and as always incomplete but ready for being made complete. When the postmodern self is, as many analyses have shown, a self that is occupied by permanent measures for optimization, the technological devices of a contemporary surveillance of commodification help this self to always have access to any means for optimization and completeness. Even if Wolfgang Iser is making a plea for the faint self as weakening of the imagination of an absolute and sovereign self,<sup>10</sup> this self is still under severe pressure to meet the demands of a society (that is) getting more and more complex, abstract, and, last but not least, individualized. Much more skeptically, Zygmunt Bauman outlines to what extent such freedom of postmodernity as a world of unlimited possibilities also means that none of these possibilities may turn into a lasting reality.<sup>11</sup> The burden of total opportunity is absolute uncertainty. Surveillance, then, turns into a way of life in postmodern times, in technoscapes that merge the human self and body and its social, technical, and natural environment into one communicating entity. In this situation, the data delivered by surveillance functions as the very instrument that holds together the individual self. The practices of surveillance are effectively producing individual cohesion as a precondition for social cohesion (today also massively achieved by surveillance measures). Such surveillance is acting as a surveillance of concern when it reacts exactly to the needs and desires of the body long before the body's self would realize that a physical issue is unfolding. This also means that technical surveillance today is turning the self

into an object of care, instead of one of mistrust and disbelief. However, mistrust against possible misuse of gained data remains active, otherwise the unstoppable technical device would not gain the enormous attention it factually earns. Consequently, this process normalizes life under constant technical scrutiny. Surveillance as a mode of scrutiny of the self is becoming the state of normality for the self within the digital society of postmodern times. Decisive social practices and cultural technologies of the contemporary do by rationale refer to modes of surveillance as the very basis of their performative phenomenology and aesthetic self-understanding. Any given online service company is following this strand, especially the biggest ones like *Google* and *Facebook* that are prime examples of detection companies and have made a cultural mission out of the conjunction of detection and commodification that is leading towards new and modernized practices of self-care.

## **5\_The Shift of Imagination**

With surveillance becoming a rather normalized ingredient of social reality, instead of remaining a politically abusive practice of intrusion, both the social and cultural approach towards surveillance and being surveilled are in a state of flux. Not only do individuals today accept measures of surveillance as constitutive parts of their self-approach or of their understanding as contemporary self, but the notion of surveillance clearly is the expression of a transformation of the human self towards a posthumanist perspective in which it merges with the directive power of technical devices functioning as exterior prosthesis to the self or as corporeally integrated artifacts for optimization incorporated in that very self. The remarkable phenomenon of an acceptance of more or less classical practices of surveillance as CCTV observation in the public realm is then to be understood as a sort of general adjustment to the ubiquity of such measures and the impossibility of escaping them. Surveillance as cultural technique of and within everyday life is becoming a strangely intimate practice, completely losing its notion of intrusion and threat to the self. Nevertheless, it remains a practice of abstraction, since it is usually not knowingly perceived, but just accepted as routines of a technified life in the modernized present.

This shift in the meaning of surveillance primarily follows the notion of an imagination of overall and constant surveillance that detaches itself from its classic practices, first and foremost from its former imagination as oppression at the hands of a despotic

sovereign. That way, the metaphor of “Big Brother” as active and inhumane oppressor — who makes use of the means of surveillance for the purpose of control and effective punishment of deviance — also transforms into its more recent variation of the “Big Other”. The Big Other in this regard is the manifestation of a surveilling power that has detached itself from its former appearance as the sovereign and now takes on the mantle of abstract floating discourse patterns. These patterns firstly emerge as digital service devices, technical, automatically connected opportunities. This new paradigm of surveillance, executed by the Big Other, therefore attaches itself to the imagination of an actor of surveillance who remains untraceable and also unidentifiable. However, it obviously has to exist due to the existing practices of surveillance that do serve the purpose of a commodification of surveillance as immanent part of the contemporary understanding of service society. Secondly, the shift mentioned above constitutes the mode of a permanently present observatory view that gradually loses its menacing effect, because due to its seemingly total coverage of social reality it also drains any precise communication of focused intention. As a consequence, the perceived totality of CCTV coverage is contributing to a seemingly senseless duplication of the world by the effort of a totality of screening activities. This interpretation is also supplemented by the lasting question whether constant CCTV surveillance is indeed a fact. Because, as is commonly known, regularly and on purpose, not all cameras present in the public realm are active. And the question remains what amount of the produced footage will ever be watched and by whom, since a totally excessive supply of surveillance footage would lead to an almost total devaluation of an overwhelming amount of data.

All in all, the concept of surveillance strictly draws on the capacity for imagination of individuals who are indeed under observation. However, the notion of imagination within this concept increases just as much as it consequently deflates. On the one hand, surveillance detaches itself from social and individual processes of imagination the more it becomes a normalized social and cultural routine. There is no imagination left in a state of ubiquitous surveillance that accompanies the postmodern self in all its activities, wherever it is, whatever it does. Surveillance then turns into a new category of the profane as a new order of things that relate to a travestied idea of knowledge production. Surveillance as anti-imagination, it seems, is creating the epistemological basis of our time. On the other hand, just as such surveillance is fueling the notion of the imaginary and imagology connected to it, possibilities seem to abound, which is

why the cultural production of imagination is currently developing with enormous intensity. Surveillance has transgressed any former limits that used to frame it and is therefore being experienced as an unbound practice of the social instead of remaining the representation of a subtle agency of sovereign power, it nowadays constitutes the very mold of a digitally interconnected and likewise individually estranged social reality. This renders the adaption of unlimited imagination to the normalized routine of surveillance possible. Only the quality of imagination is shifting from structural violence to an infrastructure of a genesis of the self. And this genesis is a genesis of the imagination of technical capabilities and unlimited expansion of man into the material and immaterial realms of the world. Thus, once implemented, the regime of surveillance shifts from an external technique of estrangement and control, to patterns of psychic and cultural negotiation of cultural technologies.

## **6\_Paradigms of Surveillance**

Especially in times of the overall and ubiquitous appearance of surveillance and its massive symbolical increase, the paradigmatic icon of surveillance is still, and somehow absurdly so, the camera as traditional technical device — and, preferably, it is located in the public realm. Beneath this surface of normalization, the regime of surveillance continues as a power regime and as a discourse that serves the purpose of dominating the multitude of individuals. Still, many interfaces, and important ones at that, continue to persist between surveillance and imagination. Obviously, surveillance practices do still remain a politics of the image and of imagination. As cultural and social regimes, they unfold as politics of the image as much as they migrate into abstract practices of data storage of images and information.

The image itself is pushing contemporary practices of imagination. Our contemporary understanding of surveillance is strongly related to practices of image production. However, in its modernized form of commodified surveillance, surveillance becomes a normalized cultural technique of the postmodern society; its suggested image production is anticipated by the individuals beyond any proof and is thus unfolding as a decisive means for a contemporary generation of the self. Surveillance, mostly as a form of cultural imagination, is becoming part of society as a realm of normalization and thereby loses its former notion as something unnatural, encroaching, or intruding. The Big Other's view aligns with the view of the self on itself. The power of being seen

turns into a power of being perceived by the Big Other as a technical device that, in fact, serves the integrity of the present commodified self. The newly emerging boom of the 'internet of things' illustrates this perfectly. The act of seeing, the discrete view of the sovereign on the subaltern self, is turning into a practice of constant perception; surveillance as normalized cultural technique is becoming a sort of service for individual correction, a new and permanent didactic of mundane life worlds. Likewise, the power of being seen takes the form of being perceived by the ubiquitous and constantly working technical devices of a seemingly low intensity surveillance that we ourselves do not perceive as hegemonic surveillance, but as a helpful device in everyday life. Seeing thus becomes a metaphor rather than a distinct practice as it comes to denote a sort of meta-acting of the surveilling subject as technical artifact turned upon the individual self.

In this vein, being seen nowadays does not unfold as a threat to the surveilled self, but as a challenge with regard to its capabilities of adjustment and mimetic adoption of the directives formulated on the basis of a knowledge produced by surveillance techniques. From this perspective, surveillance serves the individual as a meta-pedagogue from whose findings distinct consequences for the behavior, image, and performance of each targeted self are drawn. This said, Rousseau's *Émile* as concept for education is still most relevant. The guidance by the profound other has effectively been established as the most common understanding for social education, only having replaced the humane figure of Rousseau, or any classic educator, by the technical devices available to the digital society. The constant surveillance of the commodified self (of which the intimate act of surveillance is a core ingredient) has to be seen as distinctive part of contemporary techniques for self-production. Thus, surveillance is not just something estranged anymore, that individuals are put under, but it is accepted as a normalized tool within the course of postmodern individualized human resource development. As such, surveillance has definitely left its fortress of oppressive power, making the oppression of the self much more productive in the sense of an overall emergence of cultural practices of self-care. So one could say that the traditionally established politics of surveillance eventually turned Foucauldian when they adopted post-modernized practices of the self instead of an objectification of this self. The art of observation has nowadays become an art of self-perception, the logic of surveillance has become an intrinsic ingredient of the modes of contemporary self-perception and therefore has

completely lost its sense of oppression and intrusion. Instead, surveillance has successfully entered the realm of the service-oriented society when it established itself as an enabling tool for the benefit of self-emergence.

One decisive collateral effect of this development with regard to the political and to sociation is the general imagination of surveillance practices as a constant presence. That said, the self is obviously approached as surveilled self to its own benefit and as constantly present and aware at any location, at any time, and by any means or costs. Such ubiquity of the sovereign view turned minimal device, such constant intrusion in the private integrity of the individual is unfolding as radical abstraction. Such omnipresence of technically commodified surveillance that is altering the notion of the political as such can no longer be designated or concretely perceived, but can only be imagined. There is no option for a possible perception or experience of the radical abstraction of constantly being followed and being seen. Therefore, surveillance, even as absolute reality, is becoming an act of imagination when it comes to its social perception and negotiation.

Moreover, it often remains unclear whether surveillance in the specific situation is in fact happening or not. Maybe the device is off, maybe no one will ever watch the footage, maybe it's just contributing to an enormous pile of anonymous data, maybe it's immediately turning back on its subject via individualized advertisement, requests for ratings, demands for updates, etc. Conversely, surveillance too is acting through modes of imagination when it exerts its power on the multitude of the individuals. The techniques of surveillance are techniques of imagination, their collected data imagines a self in a state of coherence that (in reality) is unattainable. And the belief behind such an approach is of course that knowledge about rather limited data is synonymous with knowledge about a personality. Today, only practices and artifacts of cultural imagination are able to turn the abstract technique of surveillance into an imagology of reality. Other than in cultural imaginations of surveillance no image of a contemporary reality of surveillance will ever be possible. But most of all, the self seems to adapt to this imagination of surveillance when it quickly appreciates the value of surveillance devices as new little helpers to its quotidian life, as janitors of its digital life-worlds.

Surveillance today has evolved as ubiquitous practice of technical and (or: as) social imagination; there is no difference between both these categories anymore, simply be-

cause the contemporary self anticipates surveillance as a decisive part of its social acting, its self-image, and self-production. The act of being seen is not limited to objectification and control anymore. Instead, it is voluntarily adopted by the self when it serves the imagination of an opportunity to eventually perfect this self as a well-functioning device of society itself.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Claude Lefort, "Outline of the Genesis of Ideology on Modern Societies," in *The Political Forms of Modern Society. Bureaucracy, Democracy, Totalitarianism*, ed. David Thompson (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1986).
- <sup>2</sup> George Orwell, *1984* (New York: Berkeley, 2017).
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