Book Review

Review of Harding, James M. 2018. *Performance, Transparency, and the Cultures of Surveillance*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press. 326 pp. Paperback \$34.95. ISBN: 978-0472037094.

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James Harding's *Performance, Transparency, and the Cultures of Surveillance* is a powerful and potentially field-changing book. In it, he argues that in the postdemocratic, neoliberal moment, surveillance fortifies regimes of terror, intimidation, racialized violence, and corporate control. Surveillance *performs* and *directs*. It scripts social and political orders, insulates institutions and their actors from oversight and accountability, and delimits modes of response. Filled with detailed examples of artistic and activist performances, one might imagine that this is a book about artists and performers, but it is much more than that. It is a critical call to arms, thoroughly steeped in the surveillance studies literature and replete with insights and epiphanies. Harding is less interested in how individuals draw upon surveillance as a foil for artistic performances and more invested in uncovering how surveillance complicates and produces performances, including those that might actually destabilize postdemocratic orders. He gravitates to artistic interventions that take to the streets and are not afraid to do a "bit of damage" (259).

Some of those interventions include things like the performances of Russian artist Pyotr Pavlensky, described in the concluding chapter, who nailed his scrotum to the stones of Moscow's Red Square to protest government corruption and police repression. In a different performance, Pavlensky burned down the doors of the Russian Federal Security Service (the building of the former KGB) and staged his own arrest so that he could begin to uncover and critique contradictions in the legal system from the inside. In a different register, a project by Christoph Faulhaber and Lukasz Chrobok had the artists simulate private security personnel stationed in JFK Airport in New York and outside US embassies and consulates in Germany and Poland, among other places. By generating confusion among existing security groups and recording the interactions, the artists unveiled jurisdictional slippage among authorities and the propensity of policing apparatuses to mask their actions and intimidate others, including by arresting or detaining artists. These are the types of projects that Harding sees as imperative in our current conjuncture. He situates them within a general rubric he terms *performance postdemocracy*, characterized as

an emergent strategy of cultural warfare that combines creative activism and direct confrontation and that sees this combination as one of the few remaining options for drawing nebulous security forces and surveillance regimes out into the open where their extraordinary legal status might be subjected to scrutiny and where the discrepancies between the rhetoric of democracy and the realities of postdemocracy might be challenged. (238)

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Artistic representation and symbolism alone, as intellectually and visually captivating as they might be, are insufficient to the task of effecting change in a postdemocratic world fortified by surveillance. New forms of resistance are required and perhaps, Harding suggests, even engendered by this moment of crisis.

In other chapters, Harding carefully extends and sometimes directly corrects what he sees as shortcomings in previous surveillance studies treatments of things like prisons, undercover police operations, or countersurveillance activism. For instance, in Chapter 3 (“Blind Eyes”), Harding draws on the US government’s *Torture Papers* and Victoria Brittain and Gillian Slovo’s play *Guantanamo: ‘Honor Bound to Defend Freedom’* to unearth the logics of private prisons and black sites—test beds for the most advanced, intrusive surveillance—that are intentionally removed from public scrutiny and legal oversight. These sites afford dehumanizing, racialized violence by design. Contrary to the prison structure envisioned by Jeremy Bentham, today’s hidden prisons evade the forms of publicity and oversight that were understood as being essential to the social function of the Panopticon. Perhaps in this alone, they are not panoptic enough. In Chapter 2 (“Private Eyes”), Harding analyzes the theatrical (but hardly trivial) dimensions of the infiltration and covert surveillance tactics of law enforcement. The examples he covers range from the FBI’s COINTELPRO program used to undermine political dissidents to the UK police’s recent infiltration of environmental justice groups, which included police officers developing sustained intimate relationships with group members. Whereas in his classic text *Undercover*, Gary Marx (1988) viewed human and technical forms of hidden surveillance as categorically different, with in-person surveillance being much more invasive and problematic, Harding takes issue with that conclusion; he instead finds similarities and continuities, with both in-person and technologically mediated surveillance possessing “performative foundations” that strive to organize and direct human interactions. Harding writes, “the very term ‘surveillance’ itself is a bit of a misnomer that distracts from the performative realities of surveillance as a sociopolitical phenomenon. . . Surveillance is primarily a mode of directing. Its objectives are focused less on observation and intelligence gathering than on influence, persuasion, control, containment, and coercion” (90). Likewise, in Chapter 4 (“Electronic Eyes”), Harding revisits the Surveillance Camera Players (SCP), the troupe that staged silent performances for CCTV camera operators in the late 1990s and early 2000s. He locates the demise of SCP in its members’ misrecognition of the performative capacities of surveillance systems themselves, including, especially, automated and relatively invisible ones.

To the extent that Harding articulates a current, pressing need for disruptive art that is willing to “burn down the doors that regulate the [current] political order” (259), he adopts that critical posture with his own work as well. In particular, Harding devotes most of Chapter 1 (“God’s Eyes”) to critiquing David Lyon’s influential scholarship, especially for its strong Christian overtones, which Harding views as dangerously reifying dominant surveillance rationalities. Because David Lyon has been one of the key figures in the formation of surveillance studies as a field, it is also worth questioning, as Harding does, the extent to which the field has been shaped—and restricted—by concepts and metaphors that build upon Lyon’s self-proclaimed Christian beliefs and the Judeo-Christian tradition. For instance, the notion of surveillance as operating either as a form of “care” or “control” (or along a spectrum between these poles), tacitly positions caring surveillance in the sacred arena, which is something toward which one should aspire, effectively justifying the continuance of surveillance:

This conceptualization suggests that there is a godly omniscience of care against which a secular omniscience of control can be measured and against which it always comes up short. But the problem is that . . . the binary slips into the conceptual foundations of surveillance itself, providing it with its own variation of an inviolate ideal that justifies surveillance’s continued development and use. (39)

State surveillance and Christianity share additional similarities, at least conceptually, in their construction of submissive subjects who are hailed (or interpellated) as inherently guilty or sinful and in need of oversight. Instead of seeking forms of caring surveillance or shepherding people toward righteous living, Harding encourages readers to see surveillance—and Christianity—as necessarily punitive, authoritarian, and prone to abuse. Harding avers: “The critique of religion is requisite for the critique of surveillance

because without it the temptation will always be to assume that the latter is some cheap counterfeit of the former” (49).

I find it difficult to identify significant limitations with *Performance, Transparency, and the Cultures of Surveillance*. One could say that Harding's treatment of David Lyon and his scholarship is indelicate, bordering on ad hominem criticisms because of Lyon's religious beliefs. However, Lyon is quite candid about how his Christianity informs his scholarship: he has published extensively on sociology and Christianity and his influential work on surveillance explicitly acknowledges the guiding influence of “Christian social thought” (Lyon 2007: viii) and the quest for “an ontology of peace, deriving . . . from the power-refusing ethics of Jesus” (Lyon 2001: xi). So, interrogations of religious-informed conceptual frameworks seem both fair game and vital if the field is to embrace critical reflexivity. In sum, this is an engaging and important book that does not eschew confrontation but nonetheless strikes an honest and compassionate tone. The field would certainly grow if it wrestled with Harding's critiques and sought to actualize its own versions of the artistically inspired political activism his book describes.

References

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