Book Review

Review of Lyon, David. 2018. *The Culture of Surveillance: Watching as a Way of Life*. London: Polity.

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Early in the introduction to *The Culture of Surveillance*, David Lyon tells readers that it is time to put *Nineteen Eighty-Four* to one side. Although Orwell's iconic novel still resonates with contemporary fears about the dangers of state surveillance, Lyon suggests that the idea of Big Brother—a single entity watching and controlling us—is no longer an appropriate metaphor for surveillance in the twenty-first century. Instead, he argues that surveillance is not something that is simply done to us, but also something that we actively—and often enthusiastically—participate in. Where in the past the idea of the “surveillance state” or the “surveillance society” might have served as good descriptions of how surveillance functions in modern society, in his new book Lyon argues convincingly that surveillance is now best understood as form of culture: a collection of interconnecting norms, practices, and habits that inform our everyday lives and are continuously shifting as society—and the institutions and technologies of surveillance—change and transform around us.

Of course, our understanding of concepts such as the “surveillance state” and the “surveillance society” owes much to David Lyon's own work. Books such as *The Electronic Eye* (1994), *Surveillance Society* (2001), and *Surveillance as Social Sorting* (2003) have been enormously influential and have helped shape—if not define—the emergent field of surveillance studies. What is impressive about *The Culture of Surveillance*, however, is Lyon's willingness to move beyond his earlier work and to acknowledge that many of the concepts we have relied on to explain contemporary processes of surveillance—concepts he himself was instrumental in developing—are no longer entirely adequate or fit for purpose. Indeed, a recurrent theme in the book is the need to let go of past assumptions and embrace a more holistic, reflexive understanding of surveillance. As Lyon notes throughout *The Culture of Surveillance*, people experience and respond to different forms of surveillance in a multitude of ways, a fact that gives rise to what he refers to throughout the book as the “imaginaries and practices of surveillance culture” (5). Surveillance, Lyon stresses, is not simply a fact of life but also constantly in flux, with the result that our relationship to surveillance is both fluid and constantly evolving.

Over the course of the book, Lyon explores the key features of surveillance culture, weaving together examples drawn from everyday life, media reports, and academic research. Although *The Culture of Surveillance* is clearly a substantial piece of scholarship, Lyon is careful not to overburden readers with long excursions into surveillance theory. Indeed, in his introduction he suggests that some may wish to skip parts of the first chapter, easily the most conceptual and theory-heavy part of the book. Although I

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think this would be a mistake—Lyon is often at his best when summarising complex ideas and concepts—it speaks to his desire to ensure that the book is accessible to a wide audience. In the six chapters that follow, Lyon then examines how our attitudes to surveillance have changed as we spend more time online and increasingly interact with “smart” technologies, such as wearables (e.g., Fitbit) and connected appliances (e.g., Roomba). Going further, he also shows how companies like Apple and Google, by popularising facial recognition technology through Picasa and iPhoto, have contributed to the steady normalization of surveillance. At the same time, social media platforms like Facebook have made it easier to watch each other and participate in our own surveillance. While state-sponsored surveillance remains an ever-present part of life in many countries, as Lyon rightly notes in Chapter One, not all surveillance is “intrusive, undemocratic, disempowering”: it can also be “participatory, playful, possibly empowering” (50).

In the middle three chapters of the book, Lyon then provides the reader with a framework for understanding the various forces and trends behind the emergence and spread of surveillance culture. By charting the move from “convenience to compliance,” “novelty to normalization,” and “online to onlife”—and devoting a chapter to each—Lyon effectively maps the landscape of surveillance culture, a map he populates with a mixture of observations, critical reflections, and references to media reports and academic literature. It is in these chapters that the book truly shines. In part, their success can be attributed to Lyon’s considerable skill as a writer. As intellectually vibrant as surveillance studies has become in recent years, opaque writing and excessive reliance on terms of art have meant that some of the best work is accessible only to those already well-versed in the field. In contrast, Lyon writes in a style that is exceptionally clear and almost devoid of technical language, with the result that *The Culture of Surveillance* is immediately accessible and extremely readable. However, these chapters are not only well-written; they are underpinned by the experience and perspective Lyon brings to his analysis. While careful to avoid generalisations when discussing the importance of particular social, political, and technological trends, Lyon has the confidence to draw significant conclusions at the end of each chapter. In the final pages of Chapter Four, for example, Lyon acknowledges that the language of surveillance and privacy may have lost some of its value in recent years—due, in part, to the growing popularity of social media and changing attitudes to personal information—but he nonetheless makes clear that such terms remain useful. Both draw attention to the continuing importance of the power relations that lie behind our interactions with government, private companies, and each other, and, as such, they need to remain in the frame as we discuss the various complexities and contradictions of surveillance culture.

In the final section of *The Culture of Surveillance*, Lyon looks to the future and asks readers to imagine what a culture of “good gazing” might look like. In one of the most engaging and insightful chapters in the book, entitled “Total Transparency,” Lyon steps away from his usual sources and draws together many of his key observations about surveillance through an examination of Dave Eggers’ novel *The Circle*. While Lyon is unsure as to whether the world presented by Eggers can properly be described as a dystopia (as opposed to a “sarcastic utopia” as Margaret Atwood has suggested), he argues persuasively that *The Circle* deserves to be taken seriously by anyone interested in the future of surveillance. Going further, Lyon suggests that *The Circle* provides important insights into how ideas of transparency and visibility are being transformed by contemporary surveillance processes. Transparency is no longer simply something we demand of government or corporations. Instead, it is also something that many of us actively embrace as we engage with the world through social media and technologies that collect and share information about even the most intimate aspects of our lives. Lyon’s analysis of *The Circle* is a major highlight of *The Culture of Surveillance*, in part because he does a wonderful job of drawing out Eggers’ central insights and relating them back to the carefully constructed picture of surveillance culture laid out in the preceding chapters. In doing this, Lyon grounds his overarching thesis in a vision of the near future that is both disturbing and perfectly plausible. As a final point, I should perhaps add that I very much enjoyed Lyon’s one-line review of the 2017 film version of *The Circle*. Although tucked away in a footnote, his summary of the film’s limitations, Tom Hanks’ excellent performance aside, serves as a good reminder of why it is almost always better to read the book than watch the movie.

Overall, it is no exaggeration to say that *The Culture of Surveillance* is essential reading for anyone interested in how surveillance now touches and shapes almost every aspect of our daily lives. Aside from being an excellent book in its own right, when read in conjunction with David Lyon's earlier work it provides fascinating insight into the evolution of his thinking as the imaginaries and practices of surveillance have changed around him. Moreover, the book also challenges us to embrace—as Lyon has done—a more reflexive understanding of surveillance that explicitly recognises its increasingly participatory nature as well as the many different ways in which people experience and relate to it. In the final chapter, provocatively titled “Hidden Hope,” Lyon warns against the temptation to examine surveillance culture solely in terms of binaries and antagonistic dynamics of “us” and “them.” Instead, he suggests, we need to “ask about hearts and minds, everyday attitudes and actions, as well as to analyse technologies, profits or policies” (173). In *The Culture of Surveillance*, David Lyon has provided a potential roadmap for the future of surveillance scholarship, and as such, the book may prove to be his most important and influential yet.