Abstract

Although George Orwell’s Nineteen Eighty-Four ([1949] 2003) and Aldous Huxley’s Brave New World ([1932] 2006) have long offered contrasting paradigms in surveillance theory, little attention has been paid to how race and cultural difference operate in their respective regimes. This oversight is surprising given race’s centrality in surveillance theory and practice, and it is increasingly anachronistic in light of contemporary geopolitics and the rising power of non-Western states. By contrast, the best-selling and critically acclaimed novels The Fat Years (Koonchung 2013), The Three-Body Problem (Liu 2004), and Death of a Red Heroine (Xiaolong 2000) are all set in modern China and portray issues of surveillance technology, policy, implementation, and resistance previously associated with Western powers. Yet while these later novels’ Chinese settings offer radically different scenarios than our previous touchstones of surveillance imagery, their global popularity also demonstrates their vast resonance and accessibility. Indeed, in strong reaffirmation of Orwell’s and Huxley’s ongoing value—and the value of literature to surveillance theory more generally—these recent China-set novels collapse the Orwell and Huxley dichotomy to offer surprising glimpses into the more culturally diversified twenty-first century global surveillance society.

Introduction

Literature, race, and cultural difference have a complicated place in surveillance studies. “Orwellian,” a universally recognized term for describing surveillance dystopia, references the author of Nineteen Eighty-Four ([1949] 2003).1 Together with Aldous Huxley’s ([1932] 2006)2 very different vision of modernity in Brave New World, these two British novels from the first half of the twentieth century have long provided theoretical touchstones by which we conceptualize surveillance and control.

Interestingly, however, although race and cultural difference are surely some of the most controversial and widely recognized issues of modern surveillance practice, little consideration is paid to how race functions in Orwell’s and Huxley’s respective surveillance imagery. While Huxley’s vision of genetically engineered mass complacency and Orwell’s forecast of constant war against East Asia and Eurasia each anticipate different aspects of modern surveillance society, their mutual origins at a time of British imperial decline also lead to the question of whether these two decades-old novels should even continue to occupy such importance. What other literary works from and about different parts of the world might also provide insight on surveillance in the world today?

---

1 All subsequent mentions of Orwell refer to these editions.
2 All subsequent mentions of Huxley refer to these editions.
**Nineteen Eighty-Four and Brave New World**

Early in 2017, for example, in the weeks between the US presidential election and Donald Trump’s inauguration, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* suddenly reappeared at the top of best seller lists (de Freytas-Tamura 2017). This contemporary resurgence of Orwellian paranoia highlighted the recent echoes of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*’s depiction of populist xenophobia and “alternative facts” propaganda, but it also overturned decades of critical thinking that held that Huxley’s projection of genetically engineered social stability and consumer compliance in *Brave New World* was more accurate (Postman 1985; Marx 1989; Fukuyama 1992).

For surveillance studies, this renewed attention to race and cultural difference reversed the fluid and purportedly post-racial globalization celebrated around the millennium and in the initial presidency of Barack Obama. Indeed, with the incessant alarming news revelations about Chinese corporate hacking and Russian meddling in US elections, the rising global influence of non-Western or non-UKUSA states also suggests that the Anglo-American surveillance hegemony posited by both Orwell and Huxley is no longer uncontested.

**The Three-Body Problem**

One recent novel that acknowledges this global remapping of surveillance geopolitics is Cixin Liu’s *The Three-Body Problem,* a blockbuster 2007 Chinese science fiction novel whose 2014 English translation won a leading award in the genre. *The Three-Body Problem* is about an alien threat to Earth, but with the twist that China leads the world’s response. This theme of international cooperation in the face of planetary threat is of course a well-tread plot, and *The Three-Body Problem* predictably uses that premise to authorize its country of origin as a global leader. The novel’s large cast of characters includes Chinese military leaders and Communist party officials alongside physicists, biologists, mathematicians, and software engineers, mostly born and trained in China, who all exist to assimilate the reader into China’s strategy and rationale. The narrative even includes a few representatives of American military and economic power, whose cooperation and occasional dissent with the Chinese program only reinforces overall global consent to Chinese state and military leadership. Indeed, if *The Three-Body Problem*’s commercial success is any indication, worldwide audiences are in consensus with the novel’s presupposition that Chinese supremacy and global leadership is inevitable.

To be sure, *The Three-Body Problem* is less about surveillance than ingenuity and survival in the face of coming catastrophe, but it reiterates the very different literary sources to which we may now look for compelling projections of surveillance modernity. One reason we read fiction for insight into contemporary surveillance trends is that it can move us more immediately and profoundly than any news headline or legal or technological development. (This is why *Surveillance & Society* has an Arts editor, and recently launched an art prize.) Mass culture and commercial products like movies and genre novels are especially visible instances of narrative fiction’s wide reach. Moreover, the changing sources and implications of such content are increasingly tangible as massive and newly affluent non-Western markets like China and India increasingly shape global taste. Thus, it is significant that, as one example of how we can expand or decolonize our canon of surveillance novels, *The Three-Body Problem* does not merely use its depiction of China’s current military and technological ascendency to suggest a massive remapping of global power. Equally important, by recasting as Chinese a premise typically associated with Western supremacy since H.G. Wells’ novels and Hollywood films like *Independence Day, The Three-Body Problem* also manifests Chinese ascendency through its blockbuster colonization of one of Western culture’s most time-honored popular narratives.

---

3 All subsequent mentions of *The Three-Body Problem* refer to Liu (2014).
Another, more explicit focus on China’s very different surveillance ecology and its relevance for the world at large is Qiu Xiaolong’s popular “Inspector Chen” series of murder mysteries, which follows a captain in the Shanghai police’s special cases bureau. “Special cases” are politically sensitive crimes, and each novel in the series centers on a murder whose investigation becomes increasingly mired in the conflicts, hypocrisies, and competing agendas within an increasingly prosperous and powerful China. “So, Chief Inspector Chen’s every step in Guangzhou had been watched,” states Death of a Red Heroine, the first novel in the series (Xiaolong 2000: 336). Set against the background of the rapidly transforming China of the early 1990s, Death of a Red Heroine shows how a citizen must maneuver in a society where surveillance is intense, pervasive, and unconstrained by rule of law, and even those most adept at its practice are vulnerable to its predations.

Interestingly, the specific rhetorical form at work in the previous quote from Death of a Red Heroine is free indirect discourse, a narrative device that literary critic D.A. Miller (1998) argues has a particularly strong relationship with Foucauldian discipline. A convention of the realist novel since Jane Austen, Gustave Flaubert, and Henry James, free indirect discourse presents subjective commentary embedded directly into the prose narrative, without punctuation, dialogue tags, italics, or any other orthographic or prose information that attributes that content to a specific character (Cohn 1984; Pascal 1977; Fludernik 1995). As Miller (1988: 25) notes, by “respeaking a character’s thoughts or speeches, the narration simultaneously subverts their authority and secures its own.”

Free indirect discourse—or stile indirect libre, the French term Miller (1998) uses—thus is both a mode of aesthetically representing internalized discipline and a mechanism by which novels habituate readers to discipline’s ubiquity in daily life. Qiu’s novels work similarly, corroborating and expanding Miller’s observations beyond the limited British, French, and American examples that Miller shares with Foucault’s oft-noted failure to address non-Western and postcolonial case studies. In his Inspector Chen series, Qiu uses mystery plots and especially the rhetoric of free indirect discourse to convey to global readers the logic and perspective of a society in which Chinese state power is ubiquitous and inescapable.

In fact, as an instance of the literary genre of detective fiction strongly identified with Western cultural icons like Sherlock Holmes, Philip Marlowe, and Hercules Poirot, Qiu’s Inspector Chen series also is notable in that its generic familiarity implies that Chinese surveillance does not require unique aesthetic models. Indeed, the series hints that this new Chinese surveillance figure is the heir to Holmes, Marlowe, and Poirot, potentially displacing them as contemporary global cultural touchstones. The series’ critical and cultural success corroborates this claim. Death of a Red Heroine won the Anthony award for best debut mystery, and resembles The Three-Body Problem in that its prizes and sales show that a Chinese setting is not an obstacle to wide readership. Transcultural aspirations are particularly notable in Qiu’s novels, which are written in English and whose primary publisher is American.

Perhaps most importantly, although Death of a Red Heroine is quite different from The Three-Body Problem in both genre and temporal setting, the mystery novel mirrors the sci-fi work by suggesting that despite the differences of race, culture, language, and political system, some non-Western surveillance societies today are not that different. Free indirect discourse corroborates this implication by rendering subjectivity transparent, such that both novels’ plots and affective experiences begin to seem a fait accompli. This kind of decolonizing is less a shouldering aside of one surveillance system by an entirely different culture, such as the threats from Eurasia and East Asia that Orwell conjectured: rather, these novels imagine a future in which non-Western nations long excluded from Western surveillance hegemony suddenly instill a radically different surveillance regime, precisely because their affluence and newfound global clout simulate the privileges and freedoms once promised by the Western democracies they displace.

---

4 All subsequent mentions of Death of a Red Heroine refer to Xiaolong (2000).
The Fat Years

Such a fusion of authoritarian repression with capitalist compliance is the premise of The Fat Years, a 2013 novel by Chan Koonchung, which most overtly engages with Orwell and Huxley. The novel, a work of speculative realism, is set in the immediate future and follows a group of mainland Chinese residents as they realize and investigate why none of their fellow citizens can account for one month of recent history. As in Brave New World, The Fat Years depicts a society of universal peace through the distractions of consumer abundance and endless recreation, as symbolized by the “great-tasting Lychee Black Dragon Latte” that the protagonist gets daily at a Beijing neighborhood Starbucks and the affordable and powerful domestic “K-Touch cell phone… [whose] functions combine all the elements of Apple’s iPhone and Amazon’s Kindle” (Chan 2013: 17, 98).

At the same time, however, The Fat Years also has obvious parallels with Nineteen Eighty-Four. Most prominently, just as Orwell’s novel imagines a government that ruthlessly rewrites history by suppressing counter-evidence and manufacturing propaganda, the characters in Chan’s novel are disturbed to find no print sources that corroborate their memories, and they begin to suspect that online publications which promote only positive aspects of national history are the products of a massive information distortion campaign by the government. Their discovery is a barely exaggerated allusion to the actual news control and suppression practiced in China today, where few young people now know much about the Cultural Revolution or the 1989 Tiananmen Square crackdown. As with the novel’s Huxleyian echoes—an analogy one of the novel’s protagonists specifically mentions (Chan 2013: 278)—these overt allusions in The Fat Years to Nineteen Eighty-Four underscore the Chinese novel’s local and global relevance.

The Fat Years is banned in China, and although this repression, both portrayed and experienced, might seem the opposite of The Three-Body Problem’s overt nationalism, it is consistent with that novel and Death of a Red Heroine in globally disseminating attributes of modern China’s surveillance state. All three novels do so by exploiting narrative devices that render accessible a surveillance environment or scenario that might otherwise be opaque to non-Chinese readers. Moreover, in the course of thus expanding surveillance literature from the limited Western models of Orwell and Huxley, these recent China-set novels also reveal the unexpected familiarities of these seemingly foreign spaces.

Part of Orwell’s and Huxley’s enduring legacy for surveillance studies has always been the idea that literature can be as powerful as theory and material action. Although rarely explored, the two novels’ treatment of racial–cultural difference is an important part of the disparate surveillance regimes they portray, and their ongoing insight for contemporary surveillance society is apparent in how the prescience of Huxley’s vision of social stability via genetically-controlled class stratification has been replaced by the current resurgence of Orwellian projections of xenophobia as state policy.

For too long, however, these two twentieth-century British novels’ canonical status within literature and surveillance theory has popularized a racially and geographically limited dichotomy that neither reflects the shifting geopolitics of the twenty-first century nor imagines how wealth, power, and freedom might be decoupled within this new world order. Meanwhile, more recent novels like The Three-Body Problem, Death of a Red Heroine, and The Fat Years build from current knowledge to explore a world where widespread consent to aggressive surveillance power exists because of economic growth and geopolitical clout.

All three of these novels are set in China, but their narratives might easily take place in India, Russia, or Brazil. These novels do not only expand the racial, cultural, geographic, and political range of surveillance societies from which we may project global futures; equally important, by combining the authoritarianism depicted by Orwell with Huxley’s insight into how prosperity induces compliance, prominent China-set novels like Death of a Red Heroine, The Three-Body Problem, and The Fat Years simultaneously direct

---

5 All subsequent mentions of The Fat Years refer to Koonchung (2013).
attention away from Orwell and Huxley and reiterate their ongoing importance through the references and ideas of new works from other spaces that notably feature elements of both.

References


