Book Review

Review of Flynn, Susan, and Antonia McKay (eds).
2017. *Spaces of Surveillance: States and Selves*.
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In recent years, the study of surveillance as an increasingly pervasive factor in society, which has developed into a dominant strand in the social sciences since the 1990s, has also increasingly become of interest in the domain of cultural studies. This is especially the case in film and arts studies, as special issues in this journal also document (see McGrath and Sweeny 2010). However, while there are a number of volumes considering surveillance as an important part of other central concerns, such as digital screen culture (Pisters 2013), the most solid collected volume on surveillance from a cultural historical perspective has for a long time remained *CTRL_SPACE: Rhetorics of Surveillance from Bentham to Big Brother* (edited by Levine, Frohne, and Weibel), which dates back to 2002. Therefore, *Spaces of Surveillance: States and Selves*, edited by Flynn and McKay, is a timely intervention into a quickly expanding field. This intervention brings together contributions from visual and performance art, film studies, literary studies, and the study of identity construction under terms of surveillance, focusing mostly on contemporary examples from the first two decades of the twenty-first century, such as Eggers' 2013 novel *The Circle* (Pignagnoli's contribution) or the work of surveillance media artists Jill Magid and Suzanne Collins. The contributions argue from a broad range of theoretical perspectives and concerns, including such long-standing film studies paradigms as Mulvey's *scopophilia*. The volume also includes interesting perspectives that emerge from a focus on surveillance in examinations of such classics as Bram Stoker's 1897 novel *Dracula* (Bacon's contribution) that are not often found in discussions of surveillance in cultural production and that strengthen the volume's historical reach. The introduction is very wide-ranging, starting from a discussion of Orwell's 1948 classic *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, it reflects developments throughout the later twentieth century and ends with outlining the effect of the Snowden leaks on the increasing self-awareness of contemporary mediated lifeworlds as embedded and pre-structured by surveillance. Accordingly, the stated aim of the volume is to investigate "identity and states of selfhood from within a cultural context where surveillance is not only around us, it is already part of who we are" (16). This is a timely and interesting perspective, as it forgoes off-handed criticism of all kinds of surveillance in favor of an approach focusing on the multiplicity of forms in which surveillance co-constitutes the experientiality of the present, also pointing to the possible emergence of new forms of subjectivation and selfhood under surveillance.

However, even allowing for the broad range of disciplinary backgrounds of the various contributors, the overall argument of the volume might have been more strongly foregrounded by a slightly stricter sense of categorizing the central notions and claims of the volume. It is hardly clarified what "identity and states of

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selfhood” actually mean in the context of the volume. Similarly, the titular notion of “space” is employed in a very idiosyncratic manner across the contributions, sometimes referring to actual, physical space (Milligan; Ryan) and other times to aesthetic space (Lutton; McBride). As it stands, the main notions employed in the volume are framed rather by chains of associations than by a strong basic argument. This associative approach is also used in some contributions that are stylistically very essayistic (McBride), while others are very thorough in outlining their complex and innovative theoretical approaches (Meloche; Flynn). As in many edited volumes in cultural studies, the variety of approaches and representational styles that the volume represents is therefore its greatest asset, but also slightly confusing for a reader looking for a more general outline of trends and issues in the analysis of surveillance, space, and selfhood in contemporary cultural phenomena. This does not, however, mean that, as a collection of individual texts, this volume is not a treasure hoard that revisits visibility and surveillance in contemporary culture from a multiplicity of approaches and, therefore, also represents an open-ended history of the present. A prime example of the productive insights that the volume offers into the framing of selves and bodies in societies of control is the contribution by one of the editors. Flynn’s “Medical Surveillance and Bodily Privacy” outlines the entanglements of vision, data, and selfhood in an innovative manner and with an original approach to data hoarding. Due to the diversity of the approaches already mentioned, the final chapter is a very helpful addition to the volume. It takes the form of an afterword by Vian Bakir, who sums up the main arguments of the contributions but also adds his own perspective on “veillance awareness” (245–246) in the light of the revelations about the activities of the “Five Eyes” intelligence alliance of the US, the UK, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. What is missing in the volume is a contribution that investigates non-Western art or popular culture responses from regions that are either deeply entrenched in surveillant regimes (such as China or Russia) or in which “veillance awareness” is only just developing, such as African countries. What is addressed, however, is the importance of surveillance cultures in the context of Canadian multiculturalism and the Black Lives Matter movement (Teclé et al.; Ryan).

In sum, the claim that the volume features “groundbreaking analysis” (10) might be slightly overstating the volume’s scope as long as it refers to the first two parts that focus on cultural products. Many of the examples investigated are already very much canonized among cultural studies scholars who work on surveillance, such as the work of Jill Magid or Egger’s *The Circle*. Egger’s novel has been part of teaching curricula for a couple of years now. However, it is nevertheless true that, as Bakir states, “Cumulatively, how these artistic and popular cultural forms address contemporary practices and possibilities of veillance contributes both to public literacy and collective imaginaries on such issues” (259). That most of the contributors are not, in the first instance, surveillance studies specialists also adds productively to the range of approaches and perspectives from which this ever-more-pervasive aspect of our mediatized lifeworlds can—and should—be assessed. Therefore, the volume is of interest to seasoned specialists in the field of surveillance studies, who might benefit from it as a summary of trends and developments in surveillance art and culture, as well as to scholars and graduate students from the fields of cultural studies, literary studies, film studies, and media studies who are approaching the study of surveillance for the first time.

References

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