Book Review

Hier, Sean (2010) *Panoptic Dreams: Streetscape Video Surveillance in Canada*. Vancouver: UBC Press
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Hier's *Panoptic Dreams* is without a doubt currently the most complete work on video surveillance in Canada. The fact that Canadian public camera surveillance systems are both rare and extremely limited in scope, often involving fewer than a handful of unmonitored cameras, make the book all the more interesting. First, it makes it possible for Hier to review a very large sample of projects, successful or not, anywhere in the country, and in great detail. These accounts of local political struggles are often quite amusing, of course, but also provide great insights on the construction of social problems and their solution. Second, because video surveillance is not yet the axiomatic panacea it has become elsewhere, it still generates a good deal of actual debate between groups of comparable social and political power.

The book is divided into three chronologically organized parts, detailing the basics of the Canadian context, the first few projects in Quebec, Ontario and British Columbia, and finally the subsequent multiplication of camera systems in likely and far, far less likely places. Part 1 discusses some of the factors that encourage, enable or justify the spread of video surveillance from one municipality to the other. Chief among these is the growing mythology of its infinite power of transformation: cameras reduce crime; they make citizens feel safer at home and tourists safer in the shops and legitimate entertainment venues they had previously abandoned; they revitalize the hearts of cities and keep the rest of their urban bodies clean (note: this cleanliness metaphor should be explored in further research). This wealth of expected benefits, the anecdotal evidence of effectiveness and the unshakable faith reminds one of homeopathy advocates. Hier's theory of camera surveillance adoption is that it is driven by a combination of three engines: the ideational factor, or faith in cameras just described, the diffusion of administrative structures following organisational changes made to accommodate camera surveillance and, ironically, the diffusion of policy frameworks meant to *limit* camera use in order to protect privacy—whose argument that cameras are to be a *last resort* against crime means that they are *effective* against crime.

The opening of Part 2, Chapter 3 describes video surveillance projects in Quebec, beginning in 1980. A few years later, the Commission d'accès à l'information produced a set of rules meant to determine if cameras were an acceptable solution to a perceived crime problem. As almost anywhere else, their adoption followed one or a combination of three factors: a serious crime being committed in an identifiable, limited public area, complaints of loitering, or repeated vandalism. Chapter 4 details the birth of Sudbury's camera system in 1992. It is a riveting story of commercial interests, political manoeuvring, good intentions and high expectations. The intense work of raising the needed funds for the system, in part through community events, is particularly telling of how desirable surveillance had become there. The project eventually culminated in a hasty and botched evaluation of the system, which claimed that cameras had dramatically reduced crime, and in turn served as a justification for many programmes elsewhere.

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Chapter 5 describes one of the more spectacular clashes between camera supporters and a privacy watchdog. In Kelowna, the Privacy Commissioner of Canada and the RCMP battled over video surveillance before the Supreme Court of British Columbia, who eventually ruled that the Commissioner had no authority to challenge the legality of the police cameras under the Charter of Rights. The second punch against the Commissioner was a series of accusations (later found to be baseless) of mishandling public funds. Following that episode, camera surveillance supporters saw little opposition from privacy watchdogs, who mostly retreated to an advisory position.

In London, Ontario, as described in the following chapter, the shaky evidence of anti-crime effectiveness from Sudbury was presented as 'irrefutable'. After a year of operation, the city produced its own review of its camera system, an equally triumphant, and incompetent, effort at stretching statistics to fit the agenda. Unfazed by increases in crime, London's camera enthusiasts declared that cameras were really meant to investigate, rather than prevent, crime. Interestingly enough, technical performance was equally dismal: the network registered almost 1,000 failures in its first two years of operation.

Part 3 of the book starts with a look at camera systems in Hamilton and Windsor and provides the reader with a comparison between a project piloted by a police service and one delivered to police by city council. Even more interesting are the projects described in Chapter 8, which failed, not because of the usual lack of long-term funding, but because of a combination of citizen opposition, lukewarm or disorganized support from their proponents and media criticism. This includes the case of Brockville (population: 21,000), where even \$70,000 in provincial money failed to convince citizens that cameras were a needed solution to a claimed crime problem. Paradoxically, in Thunder Bay the story was the opposite: as shown in Chapter 9, the city set up a project, in 2005, that would cost over a million dollars in its first 5 years of operation—a lot of money for a town of 100,000.

The book's final chapter provides a stimulating explanation of the successes, failures and paradoxes presented. The author alludes to the desire, dream, or what Nietzsche might have called the 'will to' panopticism: projects rest on the unquestioned feeling that hidden, centralised, constant (or at least constant in appearance) watching itself will provide instantaneous, direct power. Projects are tellingly named 'eye in the sky', 'lions' eye', 'eye on the street', etc.

Within the Canadian context, it is as important, perhaps more important, to explain the failures, the slow uptake, the limited scope of camera surveillance, as it is to explain its diffusion to a relatively small set of municipalities. If we live in a surveillance society, and if camera surveillance is widespread in the world and cheaper everyday, why is it that most towns in Canada have yet to implement camera surveillance systems? Hier shows that the adoption of camera surveillance systems is better understood in terms of 'anti-policy' than pro-surveillance. 'Anti-policy' refers to politics centred on, and articulated around, the need to counter phenomena identified as undesirable. Yet with camera surveillance, the target is in constant motion: crime, order, fear of crime, antisocial behaviour, etc.

The book sets out to map out developments of public, 'streetscape' cameras in Canada and does this in exemplary manner. In the end, though, the forewarned reader is not disappointed, of course, but a bit puzzled: it remains unclear how significant general conclusions about surveillance, privacy protection, and indeed 'panoptic dreams' can be, when 99.999 per cent (an off-the-cuff estimate, of course) of installed cameras in Canada are left outside of the analysis. Indeed, many others have had panoptic dreams before, and will continue to have them in private, mass private and quite 'public' (but non-police) settings such as transportation, infrastructures, etc. One is left to wonder how often police cameras are simply seen as redundant.