Book Review

Review of Wise, J. Macgregor. 2016. *Surveillance and Film*. New York: Bloomsbury.

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The first page of the introductory chapter of J. Macgregor Wise's book *Surveillance and Film* contains a black and white image of two men conspiring in front of a bank of closed circuit television monitors. The monitors are slightly out of focus, but appear to contain live images of several rooms of a home. Between the grinning men and the CCTV screens is a futuristic-looking control panel outfitted with dials, buttons and lights, reminiscent of the retro computer panels in sci-fi movies of the 1960s and 1970s. The image is taken from the 1975 Walt Disney film *Escape to Witch Mountain*, and the reason for starting here, according to the author, is to emphasize that images of surveillance have been commonplace in popular film for decades. Thus, the subject matter of the book—surveillance in film—should not be assumed by readers to be a new phenomenon of the 21st century. Instead, Wise notes that “Surveillance is a common feature of popular films and has been for as long as there has been popular film” (3). With that, Wise turns to his main research question: how has surveillance been represented in film? Or, more precisely, “What is the *surveillant imaginary* that the films present” (4).

Wise contributes to an emerging literature on popular culture and surveillance. Recent work by Garret Stewart (2015) and Catherine Zimmer (2015), for instance, interrogate the same subject matter although from different vantage points. Moreover, unlike some other scholarly treatments of the subject matter, Wise presents a more accessible entry point to the academic study of both surveillance and film. Taking the time to flesh out basic theoretical concepts in surveillance studies such as Foucault's Panopticism, as well as in film theory, including Laura Mulvey's controversial psychoanalytic analysis of visual pleasure in narrative film, the book seems well positioned as a supplementary text in undergraduate courses in surveillance studies or possibly in film studies. To this end, each of the five main chapters is followed by two or three basic discussion questions that some instructors may find useful for stimulating class discussion. Because of its presumed introductory audience, other readers may find the discussion of both film theory and surveillance studies to be somewhat rudimentary. Nevertheless, the book's accessibility is a positive feature and one that will ensure a broad spectrum of readers from surveillance studies and beyond.

Given the realization that images of surveillance have been a part of film since the medium's very inception, the task of organizing a concise overview of surveillance in film seems a rather daunting project. To start, how many films should be included? According to the author's estimate from a basic search of the Internet Movie Database (IMDB.com) there are at least 601 films filed under the key term *surveillance*. How does one choose films to be potentially included? How much or how central to the plot must surveillance be in order to be included in the discussion? Should only mainstream Hollywood films

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with a wide release be included? Or should films from a range of cinematic cultures and languages be included, as well as independent and obscure films that have not necessarily reached a large audience? Should special care be taken to include films that have been particularly influential in film studies or popular culture? Methodologically, is it important or even necessary to employ some type of systematic sampling strategy when choosing films? Or should all films meeting a particular set of criteria be included? In the end, Wise chooses a “selective” rather than “encyclopedic” approach, opting to “engage with key exemplars that raise issues pertinent to the body of films at large” (6). Clearly there are advantages to this approach, particularly for a book aimed at an introductory readership. However, the disadvantage of taking a less comprehensive approach is that Wise leaves himself open to the criticism that his choices may be at times idiosyncratic. Certainly, film classics like Hitchcock’s masterpiece *Rear Window* (1954) and popular Hollywood fare like *Enemy of the State* (1998) merit discussion because they have no doubt contributed to popular conceptions about surveillance given their sizable audience or high regard among film critics. But what of obscure films, such as *Peeping Tom* (1960), that might be of interest to surveillance studies scholars, but were widely panned by critics and given only a limited release before virtually disappearing? Why are such films important to include? This question is part and parcel of a more general methodological critique of the study of film and popular culture. Clearly, there are some limits to studying film by focusing solely on the texts, rather than engaging with critical or audience reception. The selective analysis of films could end up exaggerating the importance of some films while overlooking other films that might have been justifiably included in their place.

Notwithstanding concerns about selection and sampling, Wise does exactly what he sets out to do. He interrogates a number of critical questions that animate surveillance studies in general, while homing in on a number of themes in his exemplar films. In the end, his discussion is positioned to “inspire additional analysis of other films and popular texts” (10), and this was certainly the case for me. While Wise has hit upon most of the films that I would have associated with surveillance, he also opens the door to many other possibilities by discussing less well known, international examples that would be largely unfamiliar to North American audiences saturated with Hollywood fare. Consequently, I found myself compiling a list of films to watch, while also thinking of other possible films (particularly those from Canada, which I am familiar with from my own work) and wondering what would happen if I were to subject these films to the kinds of analyses and questions in *Surveillance and Film*.

Rather than tracing the chronology or evolution of surveillance films and mapping their production historically along with wider industry shifts in film production, or the socio-political contexts of reception, Wise pursues a thematic analysis of his exemplar films. In turn, he explores the representation of “watchers” in surveillance films; those who are “watched” or subjected to surveillance in film; the representation of the “surveillance society” in film; what Wise terms the surveillance “procedural” film; and finally, the very idea of “the real” in surveillance films. Because of this cross-sectional approach, there is a certain amount of reiteration of theoretical concepts across the chapters, and films are discussed in more than one thematic context, making for some repetition—a key strength in an introductory text for undergraduates. A number of films are mentioned in passing or with only a brief comment and compiled at the end of each chapter for further viewing.

Overall, Wise provides an accessible and engaging introduction to surveillance in film, and each of the five main chapters considers a number of critical questions about surveillance more generally. An intriguing theme introduced at the outset and reiterated later in the main chapters concerns an important dynamic of surveillance: care and control. A number of the films disrupt cultural assumptions about surveillance as an instrument of control and suggest that the surveillant gaze may be at times characterized by motivations of care. Thus, Wise demonstrates that film can subvert or challenge popular ideologies while also helping to construct those very same cultural assumptions.

While there is much to like about *Surveillance and Film*, there are few missed connections and opportunities that might have broadened and deepened the discussion. The discussion might have been strengthened by addressing the question of genre in film more generally. How do the five thematic grouping of films map onto more conventional genres in film? Additionally, I found myself seeing connections between Wise's analysis and some of the recent cultural criminological work examining crime films and society (e.g., Rafter 2006; Rafter and Brown 2011). And of course, the question of audience always looms large in any work examining cultural products like films or TV. It would have been appropriate to think more broadly about the social effects of surveillance films given their putative connection to broader cultural structures of feeling. Are films simply capturing this cultural mood, or working to shape or contest ideas about the use and usefulness of surveillance? Notwithstanding these relatively minor criticisms, the book should find a broad readership and contribute to the growing literature on popular culture and surveillance, crime, and control.

References

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