Book Review

Gilliom, John and Torin Monahan. 2013. *SuperVision: An Introduction to the Surveillance Society*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 188pp. Paperback \$22.50 (US), ISBN 978-0-226-92444-1

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The field of Surveillance Studies is fortunate to have had many dedicated scholars produce a number of excellent books geared towards the accomplished reader of surveillance literature. While quality texts exist that overview the field (see e.g., *Surveillance Studies: An Overview* by David Lyon, or the *Routledge Handbook of Surveillance Studies* edited by Kirstie Ball, Kevin Haggerty and David Lyon), an entry level introductory text to orient the inexperienced student or surveillance enthusiast to a variety of conceptual footholds has been sorely lacking. John Gilliom and Torin Monahan help address this gap in *SuperVision: An Introduction to the Surveillance Society*. In their concise crash course, Gilliom and Monahan engage the reader in an accessible and witty dialogue. The authors encourage the reader to not only recognize the ubiquitous nature of surveillance in everyday life by providing a variety of practical and highly relatable examples, but also prompt the reader to consider how omnipresent surveillance shapes their social reality. In no way forceful, Gilliom and Monahan maintain their focus of initiating a dialogue, not having the final word.

Eager to avoid the hindrance of conceptual baggage, the authors note that they define surveillance broadly as “monitoring people in order to regulate or govern their behaviour” (2). With this definition Gilliom and Monahan impress upon the reader that surveillance is not voyeurism—surveillance never simply involves the act of looking. The authors maintain that surveillance is, in fact, an act of power: it invokes purposeful watching with the intention of gaining information and/or controlling behaviour. Through this orientation, Gilliom and Monahan prime the reader to begin questioning their basic assumptions about surveillance.

Although Gilliom and Monahan make a series of assertions that run through the book as central themes, their primary goal is to foster a “reimagining” of surveillance. Their reimagining strategy can be described as three pronged. First, the reader is encouraged to purge themselves of antiquated surveillance vernacular (while *Big Brother* and the *panopticon* hold important historical positions, they are not particularly relevant to the contemporary practice of surveillance). Second, the reader is urged to consider how the increased visibility brought about by surveillance, muddled with inherent power dynamics, actively shapes their social reality. Third, building on the assertion that the complexity of the social world negates sweeping generalizations, the reader is compelled to contextually evaluate the positive and negative effects of surveillance.

To develop the reader's ability to reimagine surveillance, Gilliom and Monahan focus each chapter of *SuperVision* around a surveillant item, organization, or system with which the reader is likely to have had personal experience. The first three chapters are dedicated to items with surveillant functions. Chapter one is built around the cell phone. Discussing the cell phone as a polyvalent device, Gilliom and Monahan

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explore the ambiguous forms and functions of surveillance. The focus of chapter two is on cards (debit, credit and identification) that are likely to figure prominently in the reader's daily routines. The authors emphasize how the outcomes of financial surveillance can directly impact the extent to which an individual's life is made relatively easy or difficult. Chapter three presents the surveillant qualities of the internet. Gilliom and Monahan highlight "contextual spillover" as a fundamental issue in this situation (i.e., that information intended to be person or purpose specific is far less private than one might think).

In chapters four and five, the authors turn their attention to surveillance in two core organizational structures: schools and workplaces. Gilliom and Monahan contend that schools are a quintessential example of the surveillant organization. By gearing nearly every aspect of the school setting towards visibility and control, the organization successfully masks its surveillant qualities by making them difficult to recognize as abnormal or invasive. The organizational workplace is described in a similar vein, though emphasis is placed on the surveillant qualities of technologies in this setting. Gilliom and Monahan maintain that advancements in technology have simultaneously enhanced the worker's ability to perform as well as to be evaluated for that performance. Finally, in chapter six the authors confront the chimera of security systems, arguing that the contemporary western culture of insecurity fosters a perceived need to continually expand surveillance in the pursuit of safety.

These chapters provide a framework through which Gilliom and Monahan weave 10 central themes. Specifically, readers are encouraged to critically question the "usual suspects" vocabulary in surveillance, the convergence of surveillant systems with existing patterns of social power, and the preparedness of surveillance to address complex social phenomena. Readers are advised to recognize that joyful enthusiasm (not only coercion) compels acceptance of surveillance, and that voluntary disclosure is just as relevant to understanding engagement as begrudging compliance. Readers are asked to acknowledge the central role of private institutions in the modern assemblage, and the influence of scientific rationalism on the pro-surveillance stance adopted by most organizations. Finally, readers are implored to consider surveillance as a key mediator of social reality, in that it (re)produces our selves and our world, challenges spatial and temporal parameters, and fosters countercultures of resistance and negotiation.

Though the material presented in *SuperVision* is unlikely to be significantly novel to the experienced Surveillance Studies scholar, newcomers to the literature are likely to find Gilliom and Monahan's description of the surveillance society, and the extent to which many people willingly engage with it, provocative. Scholars who strike a particularly strong position on the importance of human agency in defining social behaviour may reject the authors' underlying suggestion that surveillance is a structural determinant of reality that is difficult to escape. Though Gilliom and Monahan might be criticized for providing an unbalanced evaluation in this regard, they demonstrate their commitment to an unbiased evaluation by avoiding labelling surveillance as wholly negative. Keen to give credit where credit is due, the authors emphasize the positive qualities and potentials of surveillance. Furthermore, while *SuperVision* is a rudimentary introduction to Surveillance Studies, engaging the reader in a practical understanding and critique of the pervasiveness of surveillance in their daily lives, Gilliom and Monahan incorporate a variety of key academic terms and concepts that prepare the reader to develop a more nuanced understanding of surveillance.

In summary, *SuperVision* is a welcome addition to the Surveillance Studies literature, particularly as a much needed entry level text. Perhaps most significant, throughout *SuperVision* Gilliom and Monahan suggest that the experience of surveillance is becoming increasingly normalized, and that this reality constrains human agency by creating routine and accepted pathways for behaviour. The authors maintain that incremental growth in surveillance is accepted because of the illusion that surveillance is a necessary prerequisite to safety. However, evidence suggests that this assumption is fundamentally flawed. Gilliom and Monahan prompt readers to critically engage with the *realities* of surveillance by recognizing its many forms and functions as well as acknowledging the differences between purported and achieved outcomes.