Book Review

Smith, G.J.D. 2015. *Opening the Black Box: The Work of Watching*. London: Routledge.

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This book provides a fascinating insight into the world of one group of surveillance agents—CCTV surveillance camera operators. The author draws upon extensive interviews and observational research to provide a phenomenological account of how surveillance camera operators experience and respond to their working environment. This involves a micro-sociological analysis of how they manage both the external disturbances that take place in public space and the internal disturbances that result from telemediated interactions. In short, while camera operators are ‘watchers’ in the business of making things visible, they are also ‘workers’ subject to the same systems of regulation as other neoliberal labourers. Thus, while previous research has focused on how CCTV operators influence what is seen on the TV screens, this book makes a major contribution by focusing on how surveillance agents are affected by this telemediated contact.

Chapter one begins by attempting to clarify the terms to be used, the author preferring to use the term ‘supervision’ rather than ‘surveillance’. This is deemed necessary because ‘watching rituals ... comprise activities (i.e. meanings and repercussions) in excess of those specified in standard surveillance definitions’ (p. 6). Watching repertoires, the author explains, are ‘unbounded’ (not necessarily fixed to a purpose) and can be motivated by curiosity or desire rather than power wielding or governance. Supervision also broadens the analytical lens by providing a ‘relational’ approach which helps illuminate ‘the mutual entanglements of watchers and watched’ (p. 12). These points are very well made and thought-provoking, but a number of questions remain concerning this call for conceptual clarity. Firstly, many of the key features of ‘supervision’ (e.g. a technical capacity for enhanced vision; the action of supervising; order-making; socialisation etc.) could easily be assimilated within the ‘surveillance’ paradigm. Secondly, the relational aspect between watcher and watched is already a central theme in the literature (see Lyon 2007: 7). Thirdly, surveillance theorists have also been keen to avoid hierarchal or ‘top-down’ definitions by focusing attention on ‘bottom-up’, ‘lateral’ and ‘self-surveillance’. Finally, the use of ‘supervision’ to denote how monitoring is not always purposeful or systematic echoes recent discussions on ‘Big Data’ which it is argued is not routine and focused but aims to capture everything and hold on to it forever (Andrejevic and Gates 2014: 185). Nevertheless, simply by raising the question the author encourages scholars to be crystal clear on terminology so that conceptual clarity and empirical precision are ensured.

In chapter two, the author tells the now familiar story of the rise of CCTV surveillance cameras in the UK, before going on (in chapter three) to examine the construction of a public-space CCTV surveillance system in the fictional town of 'Newborough'. This chapter complements other case studies on the rise of CCTV in the UK by showing how the implementation of the Newborough system was driven by 'elite' interests. There were, for example, no women or ethnic minorities represented on the CCTV Working Group which ensured that 'it was a homogenous and gendered enterprise exclusively populated by white, masculine, bourgeois and authoritarian values' (p. 68). However, the author goes on to show how the whole process of system implementation was characterised by conflict between the journalistic and crime control fields, as well as between local authority figures and CCTV campaigners. Moreover, organisational conflict and oversights at the stage of formulation and implementation all affected the practice of CCTV and placed limits on the disciplinary potential of the supervisory circuitry. This chapter also asks the crucial question of whether the neoliberal concern with economic rationalism might witness a shift from the politics of surveillance 'expansion' to a politics of 'diminution' as large-scale CCTV networks become a financial burden.

In chapter four, the author aims to analyse two things: firstly, how existing social positions of camera operators shape what is seen on the TV monitors, and secondly, the 'set of *contact points* and *text-mediated interactions* where supervisors and supervisees ... interface in a program of remote encounters' (p. 105). This chapter required more detailed background and demographic information on CCTV operators to illustrate how existing social positions influenced what was seen on the TV monitors. However, the author does provide some examples of these processes when he describes how female CCTV operators (mainly mothers) utilised the surveillance cameras to safeguard those that they considered to be in danger. The chapter goes on to provide a fascinating account of the targeting of the 'stars of CCTV' (e.g. homeless, drug users, known suspects etc.). The use of media theory here is particularly good and might have been extended further, perhaps drawing upon Joshua Meyrowitz's (1985) synthesis of media theory and symbolic interactionism to make sense of the shift from face-to-face to electronically-mediated interactions. The author might also have explored whether these 'fictional narratives' have 'real' consequences as the 'stars of CCTV' become 'typecast' and strongly identified with deviant identities based on 'mythical stories' that are exchanged between surveillance agents.

In chapter five, the author takes us to the heart of the book by examining the social and psychological consequences that monitoring may have on CCTV operators and the 'coping strategies' devised. Here the author notes a central irony in CCTV monitoring in the sense that 'supposed technologies of security can spawn subjectivities of insecurity' (p. 150). This chapter echoes and adds to the literature on 'police culture' showing how 'being vicariously involved in witnessing apparitions of brutality, disorder and suffering affects their territories of self' (p. 24) and leads operators to see 'the external world through a lens of distrust, cynicism, fearfulness and despair' (p. 132). These 'internal disturbances' are managed through various strategies, including an attempt to disconnect from what is viewed on screen, the use of humour, or flicking channels from a perceived chaotic urban scene to harmonic visions of the 'natural order' (e.g. the countryside or spectacular coastal views).

One issue that could have been addressed in a little more detail in the concluding chapter is a discussion of the implications that the research findings raise for existing theoretical debates on 'discipline', 'control', 'synopticism' etc. The book clearly demonstrates, for example, how

current CCTV surveillance practice consists not only of 'watching' suspects, but also how this 'watching' is accompanied by detailed systems of classification (e.g. CCTV operator access to databases, the PNC and other forms data exchange) which allows for the attribution of observed deviant behaviour to identified and classified subjects. The discussion on the 'stars of CCTV' meanwhile could be interpreted as a form of 'synoptic' surveillance whereby 'the many' (a large network of plural policing actors) utilise 'panoptic' surveillance technologies to monitor and scrutinise the behaviour of 'the few' (homeless, drug users, known suspects etc.). Far from reversing hierarchies of surveillance this 'panoptic-synoptic' fusion may simply lead to further monitoring of the 'usual suspects' who have been ascribed 'negative celebrity' statuses. Also, while the author draws upon the work of de Certeau to show how 'involuntary exposure' can be accompanied by 'voluntary revealing', these resistant strategies (e.g. gesticulating to CCTV operators) can also lead to further surveillance and potential exclusion from new spaces of consumption.

One of the most significant contributions of the book is the examination of the potential social and psychological impacts that monitoring may have on surveillance agents. This opens up a potentially fruitful line of enquiry involving further research on the phenomenological experiences of a range of surveillance agents, such as drug testers, data profilers, software designers, informants, intelligence analysts, etc. As the role of watching and collection of personal data is increasingly devolved to wide-range of actors, it is important to understand how this monitoring may be shaped by existing social positions. Why, for example, do some surveillance agents become 'crime fighters' or 'sympathisers' or 'whistleblowers'? *Opening the Black Box* has raised these questions and in doing so the author has made a significant and enduring contribution to the field. The book will become essential reading for those interested in surveillance studies, criminology, urban studies, and organization studies.

References

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