

Book Review

Zimmer, C. 2015. *Surveillance Cinema. Postmillennial Pop.* New York: NYU Press. 288pp. Paperback. US\$27.00. ISBN: 978-1479836673.

Jonathan Naveh

Ohio University, US.
jonathan.naveh@gmail.com

Catherine Zimmer's *Surveillance Cinema* explores the increasing presence of surveillance narratives in tandem with the socio-political ideologies underpinning the proliferation and normalization of monitoring technologies. A most welcome addition to Surveillance Studies, *Surveillance Cinema* functions, in Zimmer's words, as "a theoretical and historical reexamination of the relationship between cinema and surveillance that takes into consideration the formal elements of film narrative, the technological bases of both cinema and surveillance, and recent critical discussions of surveillance..." (2015: 4). The book builds upon work done in Sebastien Lefait's *Surveillance on Screen: Monitoring Contemporary Films and Television Programs* (2013), another recent monograph on the subject of surveillance culture—however Zimmer takes the still-relatively nascent intersection of Film Studies and Surveillance Studies and steers it into newer and more politicized terrain. In the following paragraphs I will introduce the scope of this new direction through a summary of Catherine Zimmer's main ideas, her conversation with other scholars, and what I find interesting about her corpus of films.

Zimmer's primary argument centers on the notion that "technology and ideology manifest in cinema to play a crucial role in the politics of surveillance." Moreover, these pervasive ideologies inform the ways in which screen narratives produce racial, gendered, political, and affective formations around and through surveillance. While such claims seem ostensibly straightforward, the saliency of subject formations (as they pertain to experiences of identity or struggle) are seldom undertaken in the film/surveillance intersection, hence Zimmer's approach is both valuable and long overdue.¹

To support her assertions and outline a history of the field, Zimmer draws on scholarship from multiple disciplines. In an exceptionally well-organized introductory chapter, she acknowledges the importance of pivotal cinema scholars such as John S. Turner, Dietmar Kammerer, Thomas Levin, and Sebastien Lefait. These scholars, among others, helped lay the groundwork for Zimmer's intervention by observing the relationship between surveillance, narration, and cinematic form—though Zimmer's arguments are significantly more politically-minded. Other scholarship, by figures such as Norman K. Denzin and Christian Parenti, are rightfully qualified and somewhat problematized by Zimmer—Denzin for overly conflating surveillance and voyeurism and Parenti for emphasizing voyeuristic desire as surveillance

¹ I must also acknowledge and praise Simone Browne, Christian Parenti, Hille Koskela, and John Gilliom (amongst few others) for their work on surveillance from the marginalized standpoints of race, class, gender. Browne has recently published a monograph on surveillance and race (2015) while Rachel Dubrofsky and Shoshana Magnet have released an edited collection entitled "Feminist Surveillance Studies" (2015).

culture's driving force. Zimmer engages with the two scholars not to discount their work, but to reconsider it.

As a major text, *Surveillance Cinema* will undoubtedly be compared to Sebastian Lefait's *Surveillance on Screen*, though Zimmer seeks to redress some of Lefait's limitations. In his review of *Surveillance on Screen*, David Murakami Wood voiced a criticism that I largely agree with, that Lefait's book was overly concerned with figures like Foucault and Orwell and as a result was "rather ahistorical and lacking in engagement with real world politics in its treatment of surveillance" (2014). Zimmer's aim, in part, is to rectify the discourse by utilizing a framework which moves the discussion beyond predominant ways of thinking about surveillance—specifically, the way in which psychoanalytic voyeurism and Foucauldian panopticism have dominated as analytic models for surveillance-themed narratives. Instead, Zimmer takes a historic approach, noting the influence of how political events—like 9/11, the introduction of the Patriot Act and the NSA's secret dataveillance, and the American government's use of torture to gather intel—have shaped society's understanding of technology and power. This methodology motivates what I consider Zimmer's two most notable contributions to the field: her application of philosopher Giorgio Agamben's "zones of indistinction" concept to violence in surveillance culture and her expansion on Frederic Jameson's notion of the "geopolitical aesthetic."

As previously mentioned, Zimmer's critical reexamination extends to her corpus. Not only does she investigate a diverse group of films that solidify the existence of a "surveillance cinema" but she also expands upon and justly questions its canonical entries. For example, while the book discusses perennial favorite *The Conversation* (1974) at length, Zimmer gives less space to Orwellian surveillance narratives such as *THX 1138* (1971), *1984* (1984), and *Minority Report* (2002) due to their antiquated figuration of disciplinary surveillance societies. This strategy is markedly motivated, and here Zimmer distances herself from the type of rhetoric that has lent itself to dystopic speculation (both discursive and cinematic). Instead, Zimmer insinuates that surveillance produces not oppressive or authoritarian conditions, but rather, ambiguous, contradictory, and often indeterminate relations. *Surveillance Cinema* thus downplays the prominence of Orwellian canon in lieu of films which more aptly navigate and negotiate between the "zones of indistinction."

The films Zimmer works through more thoroughly are those whose images confront the present political landscape.² Most of these movies, in Zimmer's words, document the fears, anxieties, and suspicions of a post-9/11 society, although films which anticipate the heightened role technology plays in contemporary social life, like *Strange Days* (1995) and *Enemy of the State* (1998), are given considerable attention as well.³ *Rising Sun* (1993), now somewhat of a forgotten film, is resurrected and convincingly discussed in relation to globalization, terrorism, and racism. The majority of Zimmer's corpus is divided amongst her chapters. *Saw* (2004), the American torture-porn movie, is studied alongside select works by auteur Michael Haneke to detail the figuration (or disavowal) of bio-political power through video surveillance. *The Blair Witch Project* (1999), *Paranormal Activity* (2007), *Cloverfield* (2008) document through the form of "found-footage" our predilection for compulsive documentation, self surveillance, and image consumption in the age of interactive digital cultures, while *The Bourne Ultimatum* (2007), *Body of Lies* (2008), and *Mission Impossible: Ghost Protocol* (2011) serve as examples of surveillant narration through post-9/11 "geopolitical imagery."

² Ample room is also allotted to a discussion of early cinema (1895-1905), particularly as it anticipates surveillance techniques and formations through the narrative, thematic, and technological production of visible bodies.

³ Cinema has represented surveillance as far back as Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927) and *M* (1931), though it can be deduced that we are witnessing a modern cultural tendency (from the 1990s onwards, and especially post-2001) given the prevalence of films structuring the technologies into their narrational and formal fabric.

A brief dialogue on surveillance and video art can also be found in Zimmer's book, an area rarely covered save for 2002's amazing compilation *CTRL [SPACE]*. I would have liked to have seen Zimmer expand more on the challenging work being done in the realm of experimental cinema, for example, with Dariusz Kowalski's *Optical Vacuum* (2008) and Deborah Stratman's *In Order Not to Be Here* (2002). Also, I think lesser-known (and largely independent) features which complicate the narrative agency of surveillance such as *Alone with Her* (2006), *Look* (2007), *388 Arletta Avenue* (2011), and *Devil's Due* (2014) could have benefitted from analysis, especially given their bizarre relationship to (and the book's investment in) the "found-footage" subgenre. Additionally, *The Purge* and *Fruitvale Station*, two pivotal films chronicling technological cultures at the intersection of racial struggle were ignored—however, these are minor critiques for a book which is already overflowing with information and critical insight.

Before I conclude I would like to reiterate that Surveillance Studies has historically paid only a small portion of its attention to representations of surveillance technologies and practices in popular culture—and even when such depictions are studied, they are often through the film's pessimistic and dystopic leanings or through voyeuristic conceptions of desire. However, as Catherine Zimmer explains, surveillance cinema will continue to evolve in order to account for the widespread production, implementation, and ubiquity of such technologies and their adoption by various sectors (governmental, commercial, and personal). As a result, we will not only see an assortment of films that more intricately treat the topic of surveillance (whether on a formal, structural, or thematic level), we will also be introduced to modes of thought which qualify, and even critique, the transformations of power occurring on a daily basis. As one such example, Catherine Zimmer's *Surveillance Cinema* solidifies the need to understand representations of and formations around technology as they play a part in the politics of surveillance. I heartily recommend it to film and media scholars, the Surveillance Studies community, and even those outside of academia who may be interested in surveillance culture.

References

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