Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

MICHAEL MCCAHILL, *The Surveillance Web: The Rise of Visual Surveillance in an English City*. **Cullompton: Willan Publishing. 2002, 224 p. £ 30.00 hardcover.**

The study of surveillance in its many forms has expanded to the extent that we are currently witnessing the emergence of "surveillance studies" as an analytic field of scholarly distinction. Comprised of a broad range of activities spanning routine patterns of one person or set of persons "watching" others to advances in communications interception technologies, smart cards, and biometric measurements, academic interest in information and data gathering techniques is mounting. And yet, despite the fact that important empirical studies on surveillance infrastructures across a diversity of social spaces are now available, much of the literature remains decidedly theoretical, failing to yield a seasoned, empirically-based body of knowledge devoted to the human mediation of surveillance technologies.

The Surveillance Web stands as a crucial addition to the burgeoning study of surveillance. An ethnography in the tradition of thick description, it is oriented towards fusing grand theory with a micro-sociological account of the ascendence and operation of visual surveillance systems in a city located in northern England. Extending earlier studies on visual surveillance, McCahill offers a rich analysis deriving from interview materials, observational data, and newspaper reporting to demonstrate how the surveillance web brings human beings together with information and communication technologies in the context of pre-existing social, political, cultural and institutional matrixes. Careful to avoid a technologically deterministic account, McCahill exposes the uncertain human contingencies embedded in a fragile web of relations which lie beneath the surface of visual surveillance programmes.

In the context of the sociological literature about the rise of closed-circuit television (CCTV) monitoring, *The Surveillance Web* is of particular import. Whilst much of the theoretically-based commentary has remained committed to explicating variations on the panoptical power of the state, recent discussion has sought to contextualize CCTV in terms of social-ordering practices' emerging from powerful elite partnerships. McCahill's analysis provides a much needed examination of the functionality of elite networks, detailing how considerable dissent exists within configurations of individuals who are otherwise conceptualized as an homogenous set of actors– business persons, city councilors, police, and community leaders.

Far from an undifferentiated set of processes operating in the interests of capital and profitability, McCahill casts visual surveillance in terms of a more delicate web of relations.

Although CCTV surveillance is one of the most politically contentious forms of social monitoring to have increasingly appeared in several western cities over the past decade, much of the scholarly attention has been directed towards open-street monitoring systems. McCahill's analysis breaks from this pre-occupation to examine visual surveillance in the workplace, the mall and in a high-rise housing scheme. Seeking to comprehend more fully the processes involved in the construction and mediation of CCTV networks, *The Surveillance Web* provides an all too rare assessment of the workings of CCTV control rooms, reinforcing previous argumentation that the selectivity of the surveillant gaze is interceded by social factors such as race, gender, personal presentation and, particularly, age. Deriving from his fieldwork interactions, McCahill explores in meticulous detail the daily routines of control room monitoring, not only demonstrating the uses and, as some would be inclined to argue, abuses of visual surveillance systems, but taking care to explore the "context specificity" of surveillance systems in Northern City.

If fault is to be found with *The Surveillance Web*, it may be identified as its lack of theoretical progression. There is no question that McCahill effectively problematizes many of the dominant theoretical assumptions contained in the literature on CCTV, summoning vital empirical data to probe the human mediation of information technologies, but he does not provide any substantive theoretical contribution beyond what the literature currently offers. In all fairness, theoretical innovation is not a primary purpose of the book. Yet, close reading of the text reveals the potentiality for theoretical advancement.

These critical reflections notwithstanding, anyone interested in matters pertaining to surveillance, social monitoring, and the cultural construction of suspicion will not be disappointed by *The Surveillance Web*. A timely and welcomed addition to the rapidly developing study of surveillance, McCahill's analysis is without doubt a key contribution to contemporary surveillance studies.

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