

REVIEW

Dietmar Kammerer, *Bilder der Überwachung* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2008), ISBN: 978-3518125502

In “Bilder der Überwachung” (images of surveillance), Dietmar Kammerer moves beyond the common limits of surveillance studies, which primarily focus on the repressive function of video surveillance. Instead of denouncing the entire system of surveillance as nothing but an extension of eighteenth-century panoptic power, he simply asks why CCTV is still so widespread and widely accepted?

According to Kammerer, this acceptance is neither a question of technological determinism nor a simple discursive effect of politics or police authorities. Rather, it also results from the (pop)cultural image of surveillance technology and observation practices. The “representation of systematic observation, based on technology,”¹ as it is conveyed by the mass media, shapes the collective conception of surveillance. In this way the particular imaginary of the surveillance society is established. Kammerer takes his distance from purely theoretical approaches as they are found in Cultural Studies. Instead of perpetuating a Foucauldian-type exegesis ad infinitum, he strives for an empirical analysis. He directs his attention to pedestrians whose steps are traced by cameras, to the practice in control rooms, to the algorithms of face recognition software, and to the status of video footage as evidence. Consequently, a great deal of the book is devoted to a diligent analysis of the *dispositif* of surveillance: micro practices, technologies, and representations.

The book has two parts. While the first deals with “surveillance images,” i.e., the development and implementation of CCTV and monitoring devices, the second part takes issue with “images of surveillance,” i.e. how surveillance is represented within the mass media. Unfortunately, the theoretical and methodological toolbox of this analysis remains implicit for too long. Only in the fourth chapter, does Kammerer begin to discuss the general aspects of ocular power and the fundamental ambivalences that haunt visibility. Here, he criticizes Foucault’s reading of the panopticon in two regards. First, he challenges the absolute dissociation of “the see/being seen dyad,”² and argues instead that the prisoners have to see at least something in order to keep the panoptic mechanism going. Secondly, he casts into doubt the alleged absolute rationality of the disciplinary machine by underscoring its theatrical, illusionary and fictional aspects.³ Kammerer also criticizes the discourse of electronic panopticism⁴ for applying the historical categories of Foucauldian analysis all too easily to the

¹ Dietmar Kammerer, *Bilder der Überwachung* (Frankfurt: am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2008), 9. (my translation)

² Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977), 202.

³ Kammerer, *Bilder der Überwachung*, 120.

⁴ See, e.g., Oscar Gandy, *The Panoptic Sort: A Political Economy of Personal Information* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1993) and Mark Poster, *The Second Media Age* (Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers,

postmodern network society. In his view, CCTV goes beyond a mere disciplinary mechanism that locates and observes its subject. Referring back to Deleuze's *Postscript on the Societies of Control*,⁵ he points out that CCTV does not correspond to the logic of the "environments of enclosure" (Foucault) that is governed by normative rules. Rather, it is directed at the changing public localities of a subject whose movements are not restricted.⁶

How this neoliberal surveillance actually works is the topic of the first and larger part of the book. In this part, Kammerer gives a detailed description of the *dispositif* of surveillance by covering areas as disparate as criminological and public discourse, technological set-ups (the network of CCTV cameras, control monitors, and automatic recognition software), spatial arrangements (urban space, private and public institutions, control rooms, court yards), different subject positions (the observer, the deviant, the pedestrian, etc.), and the order projected by visibility and invisibility. Necessarily, this whole ensemble of heterogeneous elements contains paradoxes and blind spots that are opposed to the official discourse.

Unlike the conventional Foucauldian approach, Kammerer's history does not start with Bentham's panopticon as the birthplace of contemporary practices of observation. The ancestors of the electronic eye of power are to be found elsewhere: in public street lighting, as it was introduced in seventeenth-century Paris, whereby the individual human being becomes radically exposed, hypervisible,⁷ and in the beginnings of criminological photography and archival documentation, as they were pioneered by Alphonse Bertillon in the late nineteenth-century.⁸ The second chapter is primarily dedicated to the most important steps in the actual implementation of CCTV in Great Britain and Germany.⁹ After being used to monitor and channel traffic flows in the 1950s, CCTV began to invade wider society mainly via private institutions like shopping malls, banks, and office buildings. Based on this normalization process, both the German and British government sought to expand the public "surveillance webs" in the 1990s, both in quality and numbers in order to improve crime prevention measures and to render cities more attractive for consumers. Interestingly, that CCTV never yielded the expected results was never considered as a problem of the system as such. It was rather seen as a question of advancement of technology, a view that inevitably generates a never-ending spiral of technological rearmament and refinement.¹⁰ Kammerer, by contrast, underlines the fact that video surveillance is not just a matter of technology. It is also a social practice that leads to a range of individual decisions that depend in turn on a complex arrangement of subjects, institutions, space, and technology.¹¹ In other words, surveillance images have to be looked at in order for them to have an impact on reality. In the fifth chapter, Kammerer explains how the scopic regimes of control rooms, institutionalized production and reception of images, and the constructive character of visual evidence are intertwined. A control room is usually equipped with both a wall of monitors (fed automatically with images) and single spot monitors (showing images which are chosen by the individual observer). It is

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⁵ Gilles Deleuze, "Postscript on the Societies of Control." *OCTOBER* 59, (1992) 3-7.

⁶ Kammerer. *Bilder der Überwachung*, 136.

⁷ Ibid., 20.

⁸ Ibid., 33.

⁹ See also: Dietmar Kammerer, "Police Use of Public Video Surveillance in Germany from 1956: Management of Traffic, Repression of Flows, Persuasion of Offenders." *Surveillance & Society* 6 (1), (2009), 43-47.

¹⁰ Kammerer. *Bilder der Überwachung*, 67.

¹¹ Ibid., 143.

evident that such an arrangement is creating its own blind spots, first, because the observer can only focus on either the overview or the detail and might therefore miss something important, and, second, because the technology is not transparent. The surveillance images do not convey a coherent picture of the controlled space.

Kammerer underscores the ambivalences and difficulties of the controlling gaze¹² by pointing out that what is actually seen is not simply determined by the image on the monitor. It depends also on the cognitive synthesis performed by the attentive observer. In order to assess correctly what is happening beyond the scope of the camera's gaze, he or she has to know the real physical space and the blind spots of the camera; he or she also has to recognize the incidental within the permanent stream of boring images; at last, he or she has to identify suspicious activities and eventually call for a police operation (which only rarely happens). These acts of seeing are highly precarious and necessarily biased by subjectivity and prejudices. Kammerer voices his doubts whether this fundamental problem can be solved by face recognition and automatic recognition systems, as their respective software is far from working reliably. It always contains a "technological bias."¹³ Another set of problems stems from the dubious legal status of surveillance images. Since digital images are always exposed to the danger of being manipulated and never showing the entire scene, their value as pieces of evidence seems at least ambiguous. Consequently, the archiving and processing of surveillance images has always been subject to procedures of authentication. Moreover, Kammerer emphasizes that the scopic regime of surveillance does not work unilaterally. The observers and the police officers are also observed by the camera system. Ironically, this observation of the observer quite directly affects the way in which police officers work, as they think that their actions have to "look right" on the video.¹⁴

All these detailed descriptions indicate that CCTV is neither an efficient technology nor a reliable tool for crime prevention and detection. Moreover, official and non-governmental evaluations have shown that CCTV does not fulfill the two fundamental promises that are propagated by politics and media. First, the positive impact of CCTV on the crime rate is relatively low and varies according to the kind of offense and, second, the inhabitant's subjective feeling of safety is not increased.¹⁵ Generally, the biggest effect of video surveillance results from its initial symbolic power. Newly installed, the cameras are perceived as operating properly, i.e., immediately repressive, although their effectiveness declines as soon as people get used to it. The power of CCTV is thus partly based on the lack of knowledge about its actual effects.¹⁶ Considering the failure of CCTV, Kammerer poses the reasonable question why this technology is still regarded by both experts and the wider public as a reliable instrument of crime prevention and public safety. In surveillance studies, this phenomenon is mostly attributed to a broader transformation of society, like the advent of an "information society" or "risk society," or to a paradigmatic shift in crime and city policy. Beyond these classical sociological approaches, Kammerer claims that the wide acceptance of CCTV is also the result of a cultural image machine that puts visual observation in a certain light and helps to create a "myth" (Barthes) of surveillance.

This "image of surveillance" in popular culture is the subject of the second, shorter part

¹² Ibid., 56 ff.

¹³ Ibid., 200.

¹⁴ Ibid., 152.

¹⁵ Ibid., 74, 79.

¹⁶ Ibid., 83.

of the book. According to Kammerer, the modern iconology of surveillance is still primarily shaped by the classical symbol of the divine eye that is simultaneously protective and repressive.¹⁷ As video surveillance appears to be more effective when the citizens are reminded that they are being watched, state authorities try to multiply the visibility of cameras by signs and pictograms that use the icon of the eye to indicate the presence of CCTV. These short messages perform the paradoxical task of communicating simultaneously a feeling of safety and of posing a threat to potential criminals. Apart from these representations of CCTV in public space, surveillance is also a subject of pop cultural imagery. Fashion advertisements make use of the aesthetics of surveillance images by using bluish and coarse-grained photographs that reveal models seemingly "caught in the act." Other advertisement strategies capitalize on the myth of the omnipresent surveillance camera by using such slogans as "You are on a video camera an average of 10 times a day. Are you dressed for it?"¹⁸ This new "paranoid chic"¹⁹ is equally communicated by pop music, architecture, TV, and cinema. Kammerer claims that the "spectacle of surveillance" has a great impact on how surveillance is actually experienced in public space: the "image of surveillance" conditions "surveillance images."²⁰ However, Kammerer keeps a distance from the simple thesis that Cinema, Reality-TV, and Real-Crime formats encourage a new voyeurism and narcissism, thereby provoking an expansion of video surveillance.²¹ He argues for a close analysis of the ways in which the media are making surveillance popular and of their actual effects on the collective imaginary and power relations. Consequently, he reads four Hollywood films which deal with the impact surveillance has on the process of subjectivation. Whereas in *Truman Show* and *Enemy of State* the protagonist himself comes to realize that he lives in a self-referential universe of total surveillance without an outside, *Minority Report* and *Panic Room* are about the ambivalence between the wish for protection and the actual threat that results from total observation. Other short case studies focus on how certain surveillance images acquire a life of their own in mass media's depiction of certain spectacular crimes. Ironically, these icons of surveillance imagery did not really help to solve the case or prevent the crime. Nevertheless, they served as potent justifications for the expansion of CCTV. Finally, in the last chapter, Kammerer discusses some critical strategies which may subvert the *dispositif* of surveillance. Usually, these maneuvers try to destruct the machinery of observation from the inside by confronting it with acts of counter-surveillance or by sabotaging the cameras, misusing surveillance images, and hacking the digital networks of the monitoring system. Predictably, Kammerer arrives at the Foucauldian formula that there is no outside to power. As these kinds of critical practice are operating on an immanent level, they simultaneously react to and perpetuate the always changing modulations of the *dispositif* of surveillance.²² Thus, the *dispositif* will not be eliminated but reproduced ad infinitum.

One of the main virtues of the book lies in its high level of information. In contrast to the more theoretical emphasis one can find in Cultural Studies, Kammerer provides detailed

¹⁷ Ibid., 227.

¹⁸ Ibid., 259.

¹⁹ See Eric Howeler, "Anxious Architectures - the Aesthetics of Surveillance." *Archis* 3, (2002): 11-20.

²⁰ Ibid., 268.

²¹ See, eg., Thomas Mathiesen, "The viewer society: Michel Foucault's Panopticon Revisited," *Theoretical Criminology* 1 (2), (1997), 215-234 and David Lyon, "9/11, Synopticon, and Scopophilia: Watching and Being Watched," in: Kevin Haggerty and Richard Ericson (eds.), *The New Politics of Surveillance and Visibility* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), 35-54.

²² Ibid., 342.

accounts of the actual historical, technological and cultural development of surveillance. Of particular strength is his sensitivity for the paradoxical effects of technology and the way he analyzes image production and control room practice. The close analysis reveals that vision and observation, far from being just a question of optical processes, are based on practices that are culturally contingent. They are also dependent on heterogeneous elements, including architectural settings, artifacts, subject positions and the interplay of visibility and intransparency. Another strong point is Kammerer's central argument that surveillance is more than just a rationally organized scopic regime or a technology that advances step by step. Central to its functioning is the nature of the visual spectacle as well as the imaginary of the mass media. Putting so much emphasis on the irrational and phantasmagoric aspects of the society of control causes some important theoretical and empirical shifts in the discourse on surveillance. However, the reader feels sometimes at a loss in following up the main line of argument or in identifying the general analytical structure of the book. Nowhere in the entire study are its heuristic and methodological tools or the historical and empirical sources explicitly stated. While each chapter is devoted to a certain aspect of surveillance, the connection between them remains quite loose. For example, it never becomes clear how the Deleuzian paradigm of control has to be expanded in order to grasp the imaginary and spectacular dimensions of surveillance. Nor do we ever learn how the (pop) cultural imaginary and the technological or material set-ups affect each other precisely. Still, *Bilder der Überwachung* is well worth reading because of the extensive overview it gives of all the heterogeneous aspects which, taken together, constitute the paranoid living conditions of the surveillance society. How this power/knowledge can be transcended is, as it were, another story.

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