THE POWER OF VISION

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Introduction

Power is in inflicting pain and humiliation. Power is in tearing human minds to pieces and putting them together again in new shapes of your own choosing.
(Orwell [1949] 1992, p279)

Whether we are being watched or not is no longer the question: we are. In our contemporary – mainly but not solely capitalist – societies that are driven by corporate management, law enforcement and state bureaucracy, Big Brother has taken on many forms. Forms in the form of forms, for a huge part. Inevitable computerized registration and administration extend the level of surveillance day by day. Fields of vision are expanded by turning bits of life into bytes of data, feeding them into queryable databases, with or without our knowledge or conscious consent. The question is however if surveillance policies should just be perceived as mere snapshot systems of reality. Are they just a means of passively watching and monitoring the world? The aim of this paper is to look at surveillance systems as expressions of power that actively shape our behaviour and understanding of reality rather then neutrally observing them. I will argue that the rise and ubiquity of information technology and the evolution towards a society in which the representation of individuals is more and more reduced to so-called 'data' plays a crucial role in the evolution of power through 'vision'.

In order to demonstrate this I will first make a short analysis of the surveillance aspect in George Orwell's canonical fiction novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, and try to explain why a projection of this totalitarian model on contemporary surveillance policies is not completely viable. From this examination I will proceed to Michel Foucault's and Herbert Marcuse's philosophical theories that provide a more articulate view on the complexity and interrelations of surveillance mechanisms, technology, power structures and control. These fictional and philosophical notions will then serve as a foundation to focus on more contemporary and practical manifestations of surveillance systems as representations of social and political conditions of our time. This part will be largely constructed on John Gilliom's precise analysis of the welfare bureaucracy in the United States.

I   The Totlitarian Vision

It doesn't take too many steps to arrive at George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) when talking about 'watching' in a context of surveillance. The vision of a totalitarian society depicted in this dystopic novel still has a major impact on how people perceive twentieth and twenty-first century social trends. Although regarded as prophetic for many and perhaps compatible with today's society to a certain extent, the view on how state domination and surveillance are constituted in Oceania proves to be limited if you apply it to contemporary culture. Like any other politically tinged text, the book and its body of thought should be read with the historical conditions of that time kept in mind. Juggling with contexts and copy-pasting political reflections from one epoch to another is problematic, to say the least. *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was written in a time when fascism and state communism manifested themselves as prominent, totalitarian and oppressive political regimes. The world and atmosphere that Orwell is presenting us seems largely constructed on the Soviet Union in the 1930's, with its political trials, torture-extracted confessions, secret police, labor camps, Lysenkoism, rewriting of history and cult of Stalin (Kellner, 1984). It would be blunt to consider this apocalyptic worldview as a condemnation of socialism in general, as if all socialist regimes would be thoroughly evil. Orwell himself confirmed this in a letter to Francis A. Henson, a journalist for the United Automobile Workers shortly after the publication of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* in 1949:

> *My recent novel is NOT intended as an attack on Socialism or on the British Labour Party (of which I am a supporter) but as a show-up of the perversions to which a centralized economy is liable and which have already been partly realized in communism and Fascism. I do not believe that the kind of society I describe necessarily will arrive, but I believe (allowing of course for the fact that the book is a satire) that something resembling it could arrive.*
>
> (Orwell, 1949 cited in Kellner, 1984)

Thus, Orwell's critique could be read as a warning, as an expression of fear of what *might* happen if the type of totalitarianism of his time would continue, aggravate, expand and become the global norm. Through his apocalyptic vision of the future, he particularly formulates a strong indictment of the early and mid-twentieth century's era's politics. The sort of extreme socialism Orwell is depicting is based on power centralization, terror, war, repression, administrative bureaucracy and surveillance that leads to unfreedom, discomfort, constant state of alert, deprival of human rights and loss of individualism (Kellner, 1984). One might say that this is a fairly accurate description of the world we live in today, and, as stated before, I think this is the case to a certain extent. State regulation and centralization have widely been intensified, administrative bureaucracy could be considered the backbone of modern society,... The problem with looking at *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as a prophecy for the present however, is that Orwell's vision of state power, domination and surveillance is fairly unstratified compared to the complex, sophisticated and diversified ways power manifests itself today.

Perhaps the biggest blind spot in Orwell's image of the future is the limited anticipation of technological innovation and its social implications. Although television plays a prominent role as a medium for power enforcement through propaganda and surveillance, its function consists primarily of terrorizing individuals by constant public command and observation. Also, monitoring through these screens is particularly directed towards members of the Inner and Outer Party. The proles (proletariat) generally don't have telescreens because their importance to the Party is minimal. Firstly, this contrasts with today's ubiquity of television in all layers of civilization and secondly, I would argue that surveillance systems are embedded in all layers of society, be it through closed-circuit television in public spaces or administration forms, questionnaires, Internet applications... Overall, broadcast media today is far more ingenious in indoctri-

nating viewers with values, beliefs and role models in subliminal ways. Such techniques of behavioral control seem to provide a more valuable view on how oppressive systems (not only state mechanisms) work in contemporary societies than the *boot-in-the-face* model of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. What Orwell does call attention to on the other hand – and this is a very crucial point – is the increased degeneration of language and truth in political discourse (Kellner, 1984). The authority of mass communications in politics and the ways in which political speech has deteriorated into a play of images that shape and twist truth still offers a valuable scheme for a critique of language and politics in contemporary society. In *Nineteen Eighty-Four* this is illustrated by the establishment of a new, totalitarian language called 'Newspeak'. Its aim is to narrow the range of thought so that individuals lose the capacity to think critical and preclude the possibility to formulate or even come up with subversive reasoning (Kellner, 1984). Techniques to constitute this kind of language (and thereby control of thoughts) are the conversion of potentially critical terms into their opposites or simply their elimination from the language's word repository as an ultimate form of censorship. The term 'doublethink', the Newspeak version of 'reality control', emphasizes on this manipulation of thoughts and truth:

> *To know and not to know, to be conscious of complete truthfulness while telling carefully constructed lies, to hold simultaneously two opinions which cancelled out, knowing them to be contradictory and believing in both of them* [...] *Even to understand the word 'doublethink' involved the use of doublethink.* [...] *Doublethink means the power of holding two contradictory beliefs in one's mind simultaneously, and accepting both of them.*
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> (Orwell, [1949] 1992, p37, 38, 223)

It would lead me to far to go deep into the area of political linguistics here, but this analysis certainly provides interesting perspectives when looking at contemporary societies in which data-driven surveillance has become the dominant administrative mode of times. The use of computerized systems to collect data through a set of strictly defined limitations also changes how and by whom 'truth' is defined and to which extent individuals have the capacity to respond or react to it, whether they comply with this 'truth' or not. I will come back to this later in the text.

II   The Panoptic Vision

As a supplement to the Orwellian vision, Foucault offers more elaborate and relevant perspectives on how control is constituted in contemporary societies. Particularly his theory of panoptic power as described in his book *Discipline and Punish* sheds an interesting light on this matter. The panopticon is an innovative prison building designed in 1971 by Jeremy Bentham, an English philosopher and social theorist. The concept consists of a cylindrical construction with the individual prison cells enclosed in the outer wall of the cylinder. At the center there is a tower that allows the guards to observe (-opticon) all prisoners (pan-) without the latter being able to tell whether they are being watched or not. All parts of the cells are open to the view of the guards at all times, making any abnormal behaviours subject to immediate detection. Although the prison has never been fully realised in its original form, it gained a lot of attention through Foucault's adoption of the concept as a metaphor for modern 'disciplinary' societies and their pervasive inclination to observe and normalise. At the core of this concept is the idea that the prisoners, under the perpetual eye, are subjected to a normalizing disciplinary power through which they lose the opportunity, capacity and will to deviate (Gilliom, 2001, p130). The ultimate effect would be that they eventually 'internalize the gaze', as Foucault put it, so the means of surveillance technology itself are sufficient to achieve the goal of total control and power. Over time, as power grows more familiar to the

ones subjected to it, the increase of discipline results in a decrease of individual autonomy and the need for examination to see if the observed complies with the rules would become unnecessary. Media and its ability to 'shape' people is part of what Foucault calls this 'normalizing' disciplinary power. Education, welfare, media, and other programs, institutions and techniques are part of a sophisticated system that socializes individuals to 'keep them in line' with the norms and values one should live up to. And although ultimately centralized, the exercise of power is diffused through different institutions, disciplines and discourses (Kellner, 1984). This is in stark contrast with Orwell's fairly one-sided illustration of power display and domination.

Modern technology seems to be a fundamental basis for the construction of this kind of power. Herbert Marcuse, a political thinker and philosopher associated with the Frankfurter Schule, writes about the synthesis of capitalism and technology and its impact on the development of new forms of social control, particularly in his book '*One-Dimensional Man*'. The introduction states:

> *The capabilities (intellectual and material) of contemporary society are immeasurably greater than ever before – which means the scope of society's domination over the individual is immeasurably greater than ever before. Our society distinguishes itself by conquering the centrifugal social forces with Technology rather than Terror, on the dual basis of an overwhelming technology and an increasing standard of living. [...] Technology serves to institute new, more effective and more pleasant forms of social control and social cohesion.*
>
> (Marcuse, 1964)

This was written before the computer revolution and all its extensions. The state of technological ingenuity today is not even comparable to the level of sophistication and implementation of technology in the early 60's. As mentioned earlier, political texts should be understood as contextual writings, however I am convinced that Marcuse's analysis still offers a meaningful framework to look at today's intertwinement of capitalist society and technology. An important thesis of *One-Dimensional Man* is that technology cannot be regarded as being neutral. Marcuse motivates that *'it cannot be isolated from the use to which it is put; the technological society is a system of domination which operates already in the concept and construction of techniques'* (Marcuse, 1964). In his view, technology is structured and constituted by the interests that produce it, so that in a capitalist society certain capitalist interests are embedded in technology, but once constituted, it becomes relatively autonomous and can have its own dynamism and power (Kellner, 1984). In the case of surveillance technology this would mean that it doesn't just serve as a peephole, but that, once in place, the technology itself holds the power to assert certain norms and values to the ones 'being watched'. In other words: it becomes an end.

III   The Bureaucratic Vision

In *Overseers of the Poor*, John Gilliom looks at a very specific case of surveillance politics: that of the welfare bureaucracy in the United States. More specifically, he takes a look at the effect and workings of welfare mechanisms through testimonials of low-income mothers in Appalachian Ohio. He too underlines the fact that surveillance programs should not be viewed as mere techniques or tools for neutral observations, but that they are expressions of particular historical, cultural and political arrays of power. Program goals, criteria and data sources all express social, political and technical conditions of the times (p128). Today, popular media could be considered as a portal through which all of these conditions shine through, both in what gets broadcasted and, perhaps even more, in their structural and functional en-

tanglement with politics, economics, technology,... Although surveillance is definitely an item regularly brought under attention in the media, most of its warnings and debates concern the issue of 'privacy invasion'. As our daily lives are gradually being crystallized into accessible and processable formats, this focus is not surprising, but perhaps one of the most important issues of all is hardly ever touched: the ongoing shifts of power and domination inherent in the tooling and retooling of surveillance programs (Gilliom, 2001, p128). These programs and the data they collect are used to make representations of people in the form of numbers, images and text – so-called 'data doubles' – and categorize them based on this information. This raises questions not only related to privacy, it also determines the level of individual access we have to certain services, places or goods. Ultimately, these digital carbon copies are evaluated in order to grant or deny, reward or punish, admit or refuse, benefit or harm... The biggest problem here is that data doubles are all but neutral, objective or complete. This is exemplified by Gilliom's statement that numbers and biological material can never account for the complexity and specificity of personal lives and situations:

> *Bureaucratic surveillance manifests a way of seeing and knowing the world that excludes much of our true complexity while moving a small cluster of characteristics to the forefront. Simplified criteria that are important to the State – such as documentation regarding income, family makeup, or evidence of unreported resources – push aside the other facets, dimensions and complexities of the lives of the poor.*
> (Gilliom, 2001, p9)

We do not have the power over what data is being mined and how 'we' are categorized by the databases it's inserted into. This occurs at a level that is simply too opaque. The consequence of this is that categorized classification of people through databases is not a democratic, public process but rather a procedure that is prescribed and predetermined by the specifications of (largely computerized) administrative tools used by state institutions or private corporations. Since a lot of necessary services – privatised and governmental – we need to invoke in our everyday lives are running on such data harvesting and classification systems, there is simply no possibility to escape or opt out of this kind of surveillance: we are depending on them. More so, the rise of number matching programs, credit reporting, banking data swaps and other innovative ways of data usage and exchange manifest a massive transformation in the relationship between individuals and the institutions in their lives (Gilliom, 2001, p129). The turn to computerized, bureaucratic surveillance has lead to a revolutionary shift in the administrative power of state and corporations through the diminution of autonomy and control of the individual. The discussion on these transformations of power through surveillance remarkably resides, as mentioned before, somewhat in the shadow of the debate on privacy. Ultimately this is a discussion on the power of vision, something that is embedded in every aspect of our lives, although we might not be very conscious about it at all times. From the belief in an all-seeing and all-knowing god to attempts to hide personal e-mail traffic from a boss, daily life is permeated with politics of vision.

Seeking for, avoiding, caring about or ignoring attention is part of the human nature to manage, be concerned with and, more specifically, fear how others see us. By making people aware that they are in range of a particular field of vision and bound to certain rules, surveillance can work as part of a system that produces compliance through fear. But this traditional idea of power as a tool with which those who possess it can control those who do not, does not offer a complete image of the capacities of surveillance as a creative force that communicates norms, channels behaviour and ultimately shapes people (Gilliom, 2001, p130). This is where Foucault's theory on disciplinary power shines through, it is the productive ability of surveillance to '*tear human minds to pieces and put them together again in new shapes of its own choosing*'. Through actions of observation, depiction and intervention, the ultimate goal of corporate and state bu-

reaucracy and their use of information technology is to make people over in their vision of what is right, wrong, good, bad, important, trivial and so on. In this perspective, Gilliom's conclusion could not have been more clear and on the mark:

> *The dramatic increase and concentration in the power and capacity of centralized authorities to assert norms, monitor behavior, and enforce compliance may well mark one of the most important transformations of power as we enter the twenty-first century.*
> (Gilliom, 2001, p134)

The more we are forced – consciously or not – to disclose very particular information about ourselves in the form of data, the narrower the space for a personal, diversified view on reality and the policies and politics of the world. As the data double is one of the key elements to establish a construction that makes us progressively accept an imposed truth because of its neutral technological guise and our enforced inability to dissect and influence its constitution, it seems that we have entered an era in which some kind of Orwellian 'Doubledata' is starting to prevail.

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