

THE ENDS OF SURVEILLANCE TECHNOLOGY

A very premature first draft!

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.

(O'Brien in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Orwell 1949)

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 information about our everyday lives into bytes and feeding them into queryable databases, with or without our knowledge or conscious consent. This is today's reality. The question is, however, if the crystallization of our daily lives into an accessible and processable format is the most problematic aspect of surveillance. It is undoubtedly the basis from which certain – regulative, manipulative, oppressive,... – opportunities arise, but is the act of 'watching' or 'gathering', through whatever means, in itself as passive or merely receptive as it pretends to be? This writing is an attempt to look at surveillance as an autonomous system and how that defines the way it holds power over individuals. In other words, how its ends are hard to be separated from its means of technicity.

I Power

It doesn't take too many steps to get to George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* when talking about being watched in a context of surveillance. The vision of a totalitarian society depicted in this dystopic novel had and 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. *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was written in a time where fascism and state communism manifested themselves as prominent, totalitarian and oppressive political systems. 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 (ref). It would be blunt to consider this apoca-

lyptic 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)

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, deprivation of human rights and loss of individualism (ref). One might say that this is a fairly accurate description of the world we live in today, and, as stated before, I think that 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 though, 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 monitoring in contemporary society is perhaps very much focused on marginalized parts of the population. Overall, broadcast media today is far more ingenious in indoctrinating 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*.

II Control

As a supplement to the Orwellian vision, Foucault offers more elaborate and relevant perspectives on how oppression is constituted in contemporary – mainly capitalist – societies. Media and its ability to 'shape' people is part of what Foucault calls 'normalizing' disciplinary power (ref.). Education, welfare, media, prisons 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 (ref). This is in stark contrast with Orwell's one-sided illustration of power display and domination.

Consumer capitalism and its use of 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, particularly in his book *'One-Dimensional Man'*, about the synthesis of capitalism and technology and its impact on the development of new forms of social control. In the introduction of his book, Marcuse writes:

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 read within their own context. However I am convinced that Marcuse's analysis of the intertwinement of capitalist society and technology still offers, for a large part, a valuable model to look at present modes of coercion.

An important thesis of *One-Dimensional Man* is that technology cannot be regarded as neutral. Marcuse motivates that "it can not 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"(ref). In other words: once constituted, technology in itself becomes autonomous and can have its own dynamism and power (ref). In the case of surveillance technology this would mean that it doesn't serve as a mere peephole for neutral observation, but it acts as an active agent that asserts its norms and values to the ones 'being watched'. This brings us back to Foucault, and more particularly to his theory of the panoptic power, based on Jeremy Bentham's blueprint for an innovative prison in 1791. At the core of it is the idea that the prisoners are subjected to the aforementioned normalizing disciplinary power through which they lose the opportunity, capacity and will to deviate (ref). 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. The need for examination to look if the observed complies with the rules would become unnecessary. Over time, as power grows more familiar to the ones subjected to it, discipline increases and individual autonomy decreases (ref). Although the panopticon (as Bentham designed it) has never been realized, the concept of panoptic power is one that offers a fertile ground for looking at the workings of surveillance systems today.

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 (ref). And although the coverage of surveillance in popular media is definitely an item regularly brought under attention, most of its warnings and debates concern loss of privacy. Gilliom points out that maybe 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 (ref). Technological innovation plays a ma-

job role in this constant shift. Especially the increased computerization changes the relationship between individuals and the institutions they have to make an appeal to (being the state in this case). The more technical ways of control are constituted, the less options it leaves for the individual to be autonomous. Not only the low-income mothers suffer from this computerized bureaucracy, also the caseworkers are in a constant power struggle with their restricted digital input forms and resent their loss of autonomy (ref). These forms are constructed and defined in such a way that they demand truth. The problem however is that the institutions define the outline of this truth, which gives them the power to mould and then dictate it through a limited set of options. (Computer) Technology provides for such techniques to work efficiently, since it minimizes possible manipulation and maximizes institutional control.

III Resistance

For now this part is just a sum up of the things I'd want to touch here (as is most of the text still...). It will deal with how everyday practices of resistance can be used to partially reclaim control and power over dominating institutions, but that these can also lead to a feeling of guilt and humiliation. This is where, according to me, the real 'normalizing power', the 'internalization of the gaze' of surveillance systems is at work. It constitutes a struggle between what is right and wrong according to one's own values or the ones imposed on them, and blurs the lines between those. From this perspective, surveillance systems are mechanisms that, as in O'Briens quote at the start of the essay, cause humiliation and pain and tear minds apart to put them together in new shapes of the observer's own choosing. Centralized surveillance and administration require norms and guidelines that must be identified and enforced. This identification and enforcement leave practically no space for debate or conversation. This is why I think that practices of encryption, hiding and anonymizing (Seda) in order to accomplish forms of deception, camouflage and secrecy are necessary to maintain individual autonomy, values and norms in today's increasingly surveilled and technologized societies.