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Sensing Surveillance

Surveillance is most commonly conceived of as something electronic or machinic. Something that is primarily a ruling body or state's power, but also increasingly a part of the everyday life we are accustomed to in the West: CCTV cameras, passports, and security, yes, now also credit cards, phones, social media, online shopping. The idea of surveillance creeping into everyday life is not new (Marx, 1988). In these everyday imaginings, "surveillance" signifies events happening all around us, something that we step into, hold, tap, log onto; something done *onto* our bodies that we experience, might benefit or get pleasure from, that might trap us, help to kill us, or something that we resist.

It is a similar story in most academic literature: "surveillance" is defined as an act done by a state or powerful institution onto a subject and/or population involving machine technology (Monahan, 2006). It's fair to say that surveillance studies is dominated by a desire to analyse and interrogate this rapid advent of new technologies that expand and proliferate surveillance systems both in-line with and away from state power (Finn, 2011: 415).

Undoubtedly, examining technology-mediated surveillance is important. But this focus on new developments conceals how surveillance has long been a tool of colonial practices that continues to disproportionately impact the lifeworlds of colonised subjects, whilst sustaining the global violence of lingering empire (Browne, 2015; Ogasawara, 2019). Moreover, as Dubrofsky and Magnet (2015: 3) note in their influential text [Feminist Surveillance Studies](#), focusing on machines distracts from the fact that in 'its most basic structure, the act of surveillance has always existed in some form as the action of observing or the condition of being observed'. A particularly sensory – and human – observation.

The broader conception of surveillance as human has produced some fascinating explorations into visual surveillance. In *Surveillance & Society's* special edition entitled '[People Watching People](#)', Andrejevic (2004: 481) describes 'lateral surveillance': 'not the top-down monitoring of employees by employers, citizens by the state, but rather the peer-to-peer surveillance of spouses, friends, and relatives'. In the same edition, Zurawski (2004: 499) examines the Northern Irish "culture of watching" between people that is contextually specific to a landscape of conflict. Social media is, of course, a powerful tool of human visual surveillance *par excellence*, as humans connect, watch, and evaluate each other across the globe (Trottier, 2016). Steve Mann's (2002) concept of "[sousveillance](#)" reveals a space within surveillance whereby humans can utilise their own personal technologies to look *back at* those in power, indicating possibilities of agency and resistance. Away from machines entirely, in [Dark Matters](#) Browne (2015) examines surveillance's colonial roots and coins

“dark sousveillance”: a human countermodel to oppressive surveillance that emerges from sites of oppressed Blackness, offering hope for other ways of being. Similarly, Finn (2011) examines how “staring” and “being stared at” does a racialised visual surveillance to assign “belonging” and “unbelonging” along gendered lines within social spaces.

Being watched, watching others, watching ourselves. Familiar enough ideas – but what about the rest of the senses?

Within criminology there have been stimulating explorations into the importance of taking into account the total sensory mode: seeing *and* hearing, smelling, touching, tasting. The emergent field of “sensory criminology” highlighted in this blog shows how interrogating the affective phenomenological experience of *being human* enlivens studies of deviance, otherness, and criminality. In my own PhD thesis, I argue that essential to understanding the topic of surveillance is an examination of the full range of the senses and their individual and combined roles in practices of surveillance. With this expansive, affective view of sensation-as-surveillance, I study how surveillance is done by humans in everyday spaces and in everyday ways: put simply, I seek to sense surveillance.

One such everyday space is the gender-segregated public bathroom, a site of contested identity that, more so than any other social place, sustains rules about gender in ‘a quite literal way ... mark[ing] people out as “normal” or deviant, law-abiding or criminal, safe or threatening’ (Barcan, 2005: 10-11). To enter, we must agree to the vulnerability of mixing with strangers at the same as revealing and opening our bodies. The public bathroom is also a site of significant sensory intensity saturated with sensory information: labels and signs, flickering lights, warm seats and door handles, banging doors, running liquids, flatulence, the stench of shit, piss, and bleach, coughing, mechanised gusts of hot air, shuffling feet. This sensory and affective intensity makes it an ideal site from which to explore how humans undertake a sensory surveillance of themselves and others around them in everyday spaces. And, in particular, in a space that increasingly features in the UK as a central arena for hostile attacks on trans people’s bathroom access (Jones and Slater, 2020). In the absence of formal gatekeepers comparing identity documents to bodies, such as the type you would find at an airport, the public bathroom is a site of concentrated *informal* governance. Individuals are empowered to informally police the space themselves in the pursuit of “safety” and “privacy”, in turn upholding particularly binary ‘gender laws’ (Barcan, 2005: 10-11). This pursuit manifests, in part, as sensory engagements with a latticework of spatial and bodily clues and cues that are used to “tell” who “belongs” where.

These clues and cues work simultaneously at the levels of architecture and the body, following deeply problematic binaries that make assumptions about bodily configuration. When we approach the public bathroom door – an architectural block cloaked as a common-sense object – and *if* we are able to enter, we undertake a series of complex, relational, and situational decisions that are part of our own self-regulation: What are we wearing? How are our bodies arranged? Do we match the space? What sensory signals are we giving off? Are we chatting in the ladies? Are we not-speaking in the men's? Are we making sure to cover the sounds of piss, or openly farting? Are we in and out, or stuck in a queue complaining? All of this happens at a sensory level: we look at, we listen out for, we sniff, we touch. *We feel our way in.*

At the same time, we undertake a sensory assessment of those around us. For example, in my PhD I examine how assuming someone's gender based on the length or their hair and their clothing style is visual surveillance; the assessment of someone's vocal pitch as to whether they are a man or woman is aural; the smell of a place (so often used to describe the men's) is olfactory. These sensory processes are not neutral: sensory attributes have long been assigned to some population groups in stereotypical and violent ways as part of the maintenance of homogenous power and normative borders. The ongoing patrolling of trans, queer, and non-normative bodies that in part occurs at the sensory level is connected to this history and demonstrates how the use of sensory evaluations is part of the ongoing construction of social power flows, as well as the surveillance and policing of gender. It is also leading to the [increased verbal and physical harassment](#) of different types of bodies in public bathrooms – because this assessment is not just about who “belongs” in what bathroom, but also about casting doubt onto some bodies who do not “seem right”, who are organised along a spectrum of “safe” to “dangerous” when being made “dangerous” can trigger a [violent formal police response](#) in worlds already hyperviolent for racialised queer and trans bodies.

In my thesis, I seek to explore the ways in which surveillance exists outside of and away from machines, and how it is so much more than watching others and being watched. Taking the public bathroom as an intense social site saturated with sensory surveillance I hope to add to, to complement, to provide *another* surveillant framework that attends to the complexity of human governance alive in everyday spaces. Sensing surveillance helps us to study the sensorium of everyday lifeworlds that construct and direct our experiences of ourselves and others, as well as account for the various sensory economies that are always at play, policing, informing, regulating. It helps us to see that surveillance does not just happen “over there” and is not something new – it is perpetual, endless.

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