
REVIEW ARTICLES

Localizing Surveillance: All Eyes on Latin America

Fernanda Bruno (2013): *Máquinas de ver, modos de ser: vigilância, tecnologia e subjetividade*, Porto Alegre: Editora Sulina, 190 p.

Fernanda Bruno, Marta Kanashiro & Rodrigo Firmino (ed.) (2010): *Vigilância e visibilidade: espaço, tecnologia e identificação*, Porto Alegre: Editora Sulina, 296 p.

Bruno Cardoso (2014): *Todos os olhos: Videovigilâncias, voyeurismos e (re)produção imagética*, Rio de Janeiro: Editora UFRJ e FAPERJ, 321 p.

Lucas Melgaço (2010): *Securização urbana: da psicoesfera do medo à tecnoesfera da segurança*, São Paulo: Universidade de São Paulo, 274 p.

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During the past decade or so, surveillance studies have established themselves as an autonomous branch of social research in Latin America. Given the fact that the field originated in Western Europe and North America (for a brief historical outline, cf. Lyon, Haggerty & Ball 2012), this is certainly a highly welcome development – not least since many Latin American societies display certain peculiarities which are likely to affect surveillance practices in one way or another.

In view of factors such as the recent history of authoritarian regimes and notoriously violent police, stark social inequalities and the pervasive fear of street crime, high levels of urbanization, or the often frail public infrastructure(s), carrying out surveillance studies in Latin America promises to yield outcomes which might change the field as a whole

by problematizing some of its tacit underpinnings.

De-centering entrenched accounts of state sovereignty, neoliberal governance, or the public-private divide are integral to its overdue provincialization, as urged by Murakami Wood (2009). For this reason, both pertinent research on Latin America as well as from a Latin American point of view might do a lot to advance this relatively new and fast-growing field of study. While the present article draws almost exclusively upon Brazilian authors, it is supposed to serve as a “directional reference” that might be extrapolated to other national contexts within the “Global South” and beyond.

Out of the four books, Fernanda Bruno’s *Máquinas de ver, modos de ser* is both the most general and the least empirical. The

author traces the intricate relationship between visibility and subjectivity, particularly in our present age of pervasive, automated surveillance and all-encompassing communication networks as the main facilitators of an ever-increasing production and distribution of digital images. The book is based on a collection of essays that have already appeared in various journals; however, it also contains some vignettes taken from her blog¹ so as to elucidate her train of thought.

The book's scope is a truly comprehensive one, but Bruno still manages to deliver a nuanced argument far from commonplace. Her core argument is that we live in an era of "distributed surveillance" (Bruno 2013: 17), drawing mostly on Deleuze's comments about the "societies of control" (Deleuze 1992), as well as on insights about "distributed agency" (Latour 1993) and techno-social actor-networks, which can be derived from science and technology studies. In a nutshell, her main argument holds that late modernity has brought about a new topology of subjectivity – an eversion, as it were, of the bourgeois distinction between interiority and exteriority, the public and the private (as famously elaborated in Habermas 1989), after which the inherited difference of surface and depth has ceased to capture anything substantial.

Correspondingly, contemporary practices of surveillance would draw upon an actuarial paradigm of risk and pre-

emption which has to be understood as performative rather than ideological, productive rather than repressive. CCTV cameras, for instance, enforce a regime of visibilities in which "'appearing normal' is more decisive than 'being normal'" (Bruno 2013: 96) – a techno-spatially enacted reconfiguration of subjectivity, as it were.

The numerical mode of governmentality described in the third chapter would, then, take this configuration a step further insofar as it dissolves its object into a huge pile of aggregated data; correlation and extrapolation would come to irrevocably supplant any notion of causality in governing individuals as well as populations and herald the advent of a thoroughly "post-theoretical" age (Anderson 2008). The author does not fail to mention the crucial role of the private sector in data mining for governmental purposes. Indeed, as if to prove her right, one of Brazil's major cellphone providers recently announced that it will cede its data to the COR, Rio de Janeiro's multi-purpose surveillance center – as part of a public-private effort to make the city more "intelligent".²

While *Maquinas de ver, modos de ser* is theoretically dense and well-written, it still treats surveillance as a somewhat "placeless" phenomenon – as becomes clear when consulting the bibliography, in which Latin American scholars

1 Cf. <http://dispositivodevisibilidade.blogspot.com/> . Last access on 09/13/2016.

2 Cf. "TIM disponibiliza big data a parceiros externos para desenvolvimento de soluções inteligentes"; <http://www.tim.com.br/sp/sobre-a-tim/sala-de-imprensa/press-releases/institucional/tim-disponibiliza-big-data-a-parceiros-externos-para-desenvolvimento-de-solucoes-inteligentes>. Last access on 09/13/2016.

represent an almost negligible minority. *Vigilância e visibilidade: espaço, tecnologia e identificação* is a more locally specific publication insofar as it is explicitly concerned with Latin American “cases” of surveillance and the regional peculiarities it may entail.

Among the contributions most pertinent to our understanding of surveillance in digitalized urban spaces, one might mention Nelson Arteaga Botello’s article on the implementation of CCTV cameras in Huixquilucan, an affluent but socioeconomically divided suburb of Mexico City. Botello observes that surveillance practices always oscillate between a logic of protection and a logic of social control – and that it is crucial to carefully examine the discourses uttered to justify and legitimize it so as to determine how both aspects are balanced against each other. In the case of Huixquilucan, the author argues, administrative dividing lines – largely coinciding with existing patterns of socioeconomic segregation – came to delineate two classes of populations, one of which depicted as transient and deviant and, therefore, as threatening the municipality’s “proper” citizens.

Botello shows how this questionable division was promoted by a coalition of local governmental officials, private security companies and neighborhood associations and, not least, how it was eventually “inscribed” into the surveillance scheme installed. In the given context, the article is especially insightful insofar

as it highlights a crucial, yet often ignored feature of surveillance practices – namely, that they frequently aim at disciplining and/or controlling a particular social group.

In a similar vein, Rafael Barreto de Castro and Rosa Maria Leite Ribeiro Pedro propose a “cartography” of the CCTV network implemented in Guarujá, a wealthy beach resort nearby São Paulo. However, while Botello’s contribution on Huixquilucan depicts the deployment of surveillance technology as a materialization of mostly pre-defined social interests, Castro and Pedro concede a broader margin of agency to the actor-network itself, that is: they go at greater lengths to describe its growth as an emergent and non-linear process that generates its proper truth-effects along the way. It is from this perspective that the authors conceive the system’s “expansive” development not as an intrinsic quality, but as a dynamic that unfolds incrementally – and which, nonetheless, gains sufficient momentum to make future scenarios without this kind of virtually unconceivable infrastructure. In this context, the way the system is couched in terms of “efficiency” and “modernity” by both the police and civil society is particularly insightful.

Meanwhile, in their article on identification and exclusion in Brazil, David Murakami Wood and Rodrigo Firmino draw attention to a frequently overlooked feature of contemporary surveillance practices: their ambiguous character between repression and inclusion. Accordingly, especially for socially marginalized Brazilians,

anonymity would be a threat rather than a promise, that is, the horror of oblivion weighs heavier than potential fears of the surveillance state. The authors exemplify their argument by referring to the case of Bolsa Família, a landmark welfare scheme which links the will to identification to the broadening of social rights. Keeping this ambivalent connotation of (state) surveillance in mind – particularly in such “disjunctive” (Holston & Caldeira 1998) societies as Brazil – might add some nuance to better understand the seemingly uncritical acceptance of surveillance in various countries of the “Global South”.

In *Todos os olhos*, Bruno Cardoso presents his doctoral thesis about CCTV in Rio de Janeiro. The starting point of his inquiry is simple, yet elegant: the author proposes an ethnography of the (surveilling) gaze – of the practices and devices through which it is brought into being, of what it reveals and conceals, and of its embedding in regimes of regulation and moralization. His thesis’ centerpiece consists in a thick description of the working (and watching) routines in two monitoring centers, established in anticipation of the FIFA World Cup and operated by Rio’s military police. Rich in ethnographic detail, the work puts particular emphasis on the many unresolved issues that impede the system’s daily operations. It is often placed on the interface between the human and the non-human actors constituting the surveillance network: a significant share of the policemen did not bring along the technical skills necessary to perform even the simplest computer operations.

Likewise, the “surveillance workers” entrusted with evaluating the camera’s images were mostly overcharged by the sheer amount of information they had to deal with. Besides, the reader learns that the “purely technical” infrastructure also did not work as smoothly as announced: with a major part of the surveillance network drawing upon radio communication, the heavy rainfalls common in Rio weaken the signal up to the point of disruption.

A major thread running through the study is the phenomenological similarity (and, at times, indistinguishability) of surveillance and voyeurism. Cardoso’s second ethnographic site being the monitoring room in Copacabana, the proximity of the famous beach as a locus of lax morals and sexual transgression clearly has a structuring impact upon the policemen’s (they are indeed predominantly male in both settings) watching practices – a fact which becomes manifest in the jokes and anecdotes by means of which the staff seems to negotiate this kind of dilemma. This ambivalence is also taken up in the book’s last part dedicated to the “super-abundant” online circuits along which surveillance imagery is distributed, thus satisfying and sustaining the desire for ever more “real” material – typically in the “genres” of sex and violence. However, the author also underlines how this kind of fetish generates a flourishing economy of simulacra in which the very distinction between “real” and “fake” images becomes increasingly contingent.

As compared to the other publications discussed, Lucas Melgaço's *Securização urbana* differs insofar as, being a geographical piece of work, it is mainly concerned with questions of spatiality or, rather, the production as well as productivity thereof. Consequently, practices of surveillance do not constitute the conceptual starting point; instead, they come in as an explanatory factor for the "securitization of (urban) territory" (Melgaço 2010: 66), which represents the main object of study. Besides the installation of CCTV cameras, Melgaço therefore also deals with the phenomena of "defensive" architecture (ibid.: 120) and the proliferation of gated communities. His case is the city of Campinas, a major town in upstate São Paulo. Despite being one of Brazil's richest cities, Campinas is characterized by stark socio-economic contrasts and high rates of violence as well as organized crime. Consequently, the fear of being victimized is pervasive among the better-off parts of its population.

It is here, in the "psycho-sphere of fear" (ibid.: 105), that Melgaço starts his inquiry which later leads him towards the "techno-sphere of security" (ibid.: 106) – the sphere of commodified protection against the lurking criminal threat. The concepts of "psycho-" and "techno-sphere" are derived from the work of Milton Santos, a Brazilian geographer advocating a dialectical concept of space as in-becoming rather than a static and a-historical "container" of social praxis. Melgaço is thus able to depict "securization" as a spatial dynamics which takes place both materially (by

the deployment of security devices) and immaterially (by the proliferation of crime-related fears). Santos' oeuvre also provides many of Melgaço's other basic terms – which is gratifying insofar as Santos was committed to come up with proper theoretical categories made to specifically fit the formation of territory in Brazil and in the countries of the "Global South", more generally (cf. in particular Santos 2004).

In the context of surveillance and digitalized urbanism, the most insightful chapter is certainly the one on the "informatization of the everyday", according to which territory, crime, and security are all subject to increasing techno-spatial mediations. Drawing upon Santos' notion of a "violence of information" (Melgaço 2010: 184), it indeed appeals to similar phenomena such as the imagetic circuits analyzed by Bruno Cardoso, albeit from a different theoretical starting point and much less in-depth. Generally speaking, the conceptual toolbox provided by Milton Santos entails a stronger emphasis upon processes of globalization and totalization. Besides, men seems to stand firmly in the center of his reasoning, which includes a more categorical differentiation between the social and the non-social "matter" of surveillance technologies. This is clearly different in Bruno Cardoso's thesis, where human and non-human actors interact more symmetrically and the notion of "alienation", recurrent in Melgaço's study, is absent for good reasons.

In short, the four publications discussed provide a broad – albeit far from exhaustive – idea of how surveillance studies could benefit from a more locally as well as culturally situated approach. More specifically, they might draw our attention towards the question of how the loci of surveillance emerge as provisional outcomes of complex techno-social mediations which are virtually impossible to apprehend in advance. Ideally, such an approach would abstain from “contextual” explanations (such as “culture” or “technology”) altogether.

Virtually all of the publications discussed here grapple with this challenge in one way or another, which makes them a valuable reading for scholars of surveillance way beyond Latin America’s geographical borders. Meanwhile, a desideratum for future research might consist in constructing a more emphatically “indigenous” theoretical vocabulary, that is: “provincializing” not only the “typical” cases and underlying grand narratives of Euro-American surveillance studies, but also the conceptual foundations it draws upon – even if they skillfully hide their proper origin within Euro-modernity (Law & Lin 2015). In this sense, a call for a more self-confident “theory from the South” (Comaroff & Comaroff 2011) would particularly entail more emphatically Latin American scholarship on European cases – an uncomfortably scarce phenomenon at present.

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