Crisis Vision: Race and the Cultural Production of Surveillance

by Torin Monahan (2022) Durham, Duke University Press, 228 pp.

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The pervasiveness of surveillance in contemporary society is attested by not only its technological deployment but perhaps even, more poignantly, its infiltration of the contemporary imagination. The imaginary is, indeed, a constitutive terrain for science and technology, towards which scholars and researchers are increasingly turning their attention – and, by doing so, they can meet those professionals of the imaginary who are the artists.

In *Crisis Vision*, Torin Monahan contributes to this discussion by critically examining the rise of surveillance-themed artworks, or what might be called "artveillance", over the last couple of decades. The many "trappings of visibility" – to speak Foucault-like – are discussed specifically vis-à-vis the concerns – shared by both the author and many of the artists discussed – that surveillance may increase social inequalities and systemic racism.

The book opens with two artworks taken as prototypical of two extreme positions: Banksy's *One Nation Under CCTV* (2008), on the one hand, and Ai Weiwei, Herzog and de Meuron's *Hansel & Gretel* (2017), on the other. Whereas Banksy's piece embodies an Orwellian denunciation of the totalitarian danger inherent in surveillance society as a whole, Ai's installation offers a playful approach that caters to contemporary narcissism while at the same time evoking a "new-prudentialist" stance that emphasizes personal responsibility in protecting one's own personal data.

Both approaches, the universalist and the personalist, argues Monahan, are insufficient to grasp the whole scope of critical surveillance art. Although it's perhaps not entirely fair towards Banksy to charge him for failing to address issues of social inequality, racialization and violence – as these indeed represent major topical interests of the British artist – the author has a point in highlighting the existence of many different artistic takes on surveillance.

Critical surveillance art can be defined as a thread in contemporary art revolving around the exploration and the criticism of the politics of visibility sustained by surveillance, exposing the visibility regimes in place, and agitating the public debate around them. This form of art inherently entails politicization. Monahan argues that critical artwork produces assessments of what he calls "crisis vision", defined as "a destructive way of seeing that amplifies differences among individuals and inspires the scapegoating of those marked as Other" (p. 12).

Against crisis vision, critical surveillance artworks seem to gesture towards resistance through the creation of spaces of opacity, although the author also warns that many artworks themselves possess their own blind spots, often oblivious as they are of the larger historical and societal dimensions of racial domination and oppression that predate current technologies, and yet crucially prolong into them. A similarly restricted framework is at play in the type of artveillance that can be placed under the rubric of "avoidance". Given that surveillance technologies are most often oriented towards identifying subjects, various artistic operations seek to disrupt the process of identification, including hiding (becoming transparent of invisible to the system) and masking (passing for someone else by camouflaging). These solutions Monahan judges to be hyper-individualized and consumer-oriented adaptations to surveillance, rather than an actual challenge to it.

A second approach addresses transparency and its pitfalls. Surveillance, the author reminds us, is technically grounded in data collection and archiving, which digital technologies have exponentially multiplied. The systemic requirement of "transparency" effectively rhymes with such such enhanced scrutiny over people through data archiving and retrieval. In this respect, artists such as Trevor Paglen, Josh Begley, Paolo Cirio, Kai Wiedenhöfer, Andrew Hammerand and Hasan Elahi, have all variously worked towards creating counter-archives that trouble archival certainty, rejecting the narrative of rationality projected by surveilling agencies, and eroding – or, at the very least, instilling the seed of doubt in – the everyman's faith in them.

The third framework the author labels "complicity": it gathers artworks that focus on the "ways of being seen" (to paraphrase John Berger) enabled by surveillance. Artists such as the *#NotABugSplat* collective, Jakub Geltner and Dries Depoorter, question the nature and the outcomes of drone vision, satellite imagery and CCTV footage through either sarcastic or surreal commentary. Often, they deploy, re-deploy or recycle surveillance systems and their data to provoke the audience as regards the lay person's systemic complicity with the logic of surveillance.

Throughout the book, Monahan advances the argument that the surveillance society is intertwined with structural violence; and violence is actually a fourth interpretive framework, picked up by artists such as Marco Poloni, Hanne Nielsen and Birgit Johnsen, Santiago Sierra, Phil Collins, James Coupe, Paolo Cirio and Charlotte Haslund-Christensen. However, the author appears somewhat more critical of this framework, highlighting several gaps and inconsistencies in artworks deploying such a lens, which – he writes – "leans upon the promise of liberal systems of governance to live up to their mythology of equality, fairness, and justice" (p. 113).

"Rupture" represents a final framework, where crisis vision is finally targeted more directly: artists working in this direction deliberately bring to the foreground the enduring legacy of racial terror and trauma. In the works and performances by Hank Willis Thomas, Dread Scott, The Mirror Casket Project collective, JR, and the choreographer Will Rawls, the author sees a way to address more directly the racist underpinnings of the surveillance apparatus, effectively disrupting the dominant narrative. The most promising direction that emerges in this respect seems to be the one that goes towards creating new spaces of "opacity", a category the author draws from the Martinican poet Édouard Glissant.

Overall, *Crisis Vision* offers an informed and sustained discussion of contemporary artworks dealing with topics of surveillance, inequality, racism and violence. Although there is certainly a degree of idiosyncrasy in the way Monahan groups the artists and the artworks reviewed in his text, and although sometimes his criticisms might not be entirely fair towards the artists themselves, *Crisis Vision* is a brilliant book that powerfully demonstrates how surveillance can be satisfactorily analyzed only through a culturalist lens capable of re-embedding the technologies within the ideological hotbed out of which they have sprung. In conclusion, this book might prove relevant to STS, albeit in the very indirect manner of indicating the cultural coordinates within which a range of new technologies are deployed and can accordingly be questioned.