

## BOOK REVIEW

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***Windows into the Soul: Surveillance and Society in an Age of High Technology***, by Gary T. Marx (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2016), 400 pp., \$35 (paperback), ISBN 9780226285917

Surveillance studies is increasingly consolidated as a discipline, with journals, professional organizations, and readers for undergraduate courses. Now, Gary Marx, whose *Undercover: Police Surveillance in America* (1989) was an important early contribution,<sup>1</sup> has offered the field an epistemic and methodological baseline. In summarizing a career's insights, *Windows into the Soul* engages with a "modest but persistent analyticity" (by its own description, citing Goffman) in the tasks of defining, historicizing, and theorizing the study of surveillance. Marx offers these frameworks and concepts with the aim of establishing his key claim about surveillance, which is that "surveillance is neither good nor bad but context and comportment make it so" (284). This insight, Marx notes, is based not only on his field knowledge but also on his experiences in hundreds of interviews and interactions with stakeholders in government and industry.

Among the book's more difficult tasks is to situate that emerging disciplinary neutrality vis-à-vis Marx's most important recent contribution to the field, which has been the configuration of a certain "new surveillance" as the central object of the field's scrutiny. The "new surveillance," Marx has been arguing, represents a historical break with previous regimes of monitoring in that it is primarily systemic and technological rather than occasional and interpersonal. Marx repeatedly sums up the shift by using the word "soft" to describe this new surveillance: in general, it feels like ordinary social interaction rather than domination. Widespread CCTV is already aging in its role as the central example; now Marx is interested in "human spoor" (2), the constant stream of digital and biological traces that people leave everywhere they go. It is primarily technological change that has made it possible to gather and analyze these effusions of identifying information, and those changes have led to a new dispensation in which surveillance can be at once ubiquitous and inoffensive.

A looming question, one which Marx, in his enthusiasm for neutrality, has put out of his own reach, is whether there is some relationship between this newly softened surveillance and the capacity of this new field to assume a neutral attitude toward the object of its study. But it is a rare question that Marx leaves unframed.

*Windows into the Soul* is full of questions and offers what amounts to “a soft-driving argument” (8). Marx proposes that surveillance studies remains disjointed in its conceptual middle: where the “surveillance essay” (*Discipline and Punish* and its ilk) is much too schematic and theoretical, most sociologists working in surveillance studies remain too focused on producing empirical data about particular techniques, contexts, or consequences. *Windows into the Soul* looks to mediate. The result, depending perhaps on what kind of work one has been doing previously, is either a boutique toolbox of really remarkable comprehensiveness or a dismaying profusion of overlapping distinctions and conceptualizations. To illustrate, one can note that Marx has a flair for lists. Chapter One] culminates in 40 “basic terms” and “surveillance structures.” Chapter 2 features a chart of 40 “surveillance dimensions” distinguished by how they appear in traditional surveillance versus the new surveillance. Chapter 3 has 12 possible goals for the collection of information; chapter 4 has 19 dimensions along which that information can be classified. Chapter 12 lists 44 “Information Age Techno-fallacies”; chapter 13 offers nine categories of “questions for the ethics of surveillance,” under which are schematized dozens of particular questions. Chapter 14 has seventeen] reasons why the “panopticon” remains relevant; 13 why it is not.

Marx’s approach to his subject is exhaustive and can feel exhausting. However, one use for these materials is immediately apparent: as aids to teaching. For a class on surveillance studies, it is hard to imagine any more generously gathered – and easily excerpted – précis of the kinds of questions that can, do, or might arise about surveillance. Similarly, for courses in related fields, such as ethics or privacy, the book is a ready supplemental source of thinking about how surveillance impacts those areas. Finally, it is worth noting that Marx, in giving his overview, provides a comprehensive bibliography of the field.

For scholars invested in interdisciplinary engagements that reach from the humanities to the social sciences, or vice versa, Marx’s central chapters hold a special interest. In four chapters in *Windows into the Soul*, Marx operationalizes his bevy of frameworks by providing hypothetical scenarios, which he fleshes out through creative writing. He has written the employee handbook of a corporation devoted to productivity via surveillance; the mission statement of Parents Insist on Surveillance Help, Inc. (PISHI); a psychologist’s report on an obsessive, yet scrupulously law-abiding, voyeur; and the transcript of a blowhard keynote address at a surveillance industry conference. Methodologically, this is an interesting gesture and one Marx justifies by noting his commitment to the specific configuration of details in each “surveillance occasion” which appears before the analyst. Marx implies that his tools cannot be tried in the abstract, and provides these texts to show how variously elements of the surveillance process can interpenetrate. He remarks, “the complexity of the situation made me do it” (176).

From a more theoretical standpoint, one might wonder how this appeal to what might be described as “narratives,” or “cases,” or “examples” fits into *Windows into*

*the Soul*. Here a contradiction in the text is telling: at one point, Marx asserts that while in his first chapters “the emphasis was on neutral analysis,” by contrast the stories are “unabashedly normative” (265). A few pages later he tells us that “the first three sections of the book [which sections include the “stories”] sought social science objectivity” (276). This repositioning reflects a truth about Marx’s “stories.” Like all satire – for that is what they are – these stories construct a critique by inhabiting to excess the point of view which they wish to oppose. They thereby allow the premises on which that critique is based to go unstated. And that is also how *Windows into the Soul* generally operates: Marx constructs a neutrality toward surveillance which is nonetheless everywhere motivated by the idea that much surveillance traduces “the Kantian idea of respect for the dignity of the individual and respect for the social and procedural conditions that foster a civil society” (289). In fact one need not squint to perceive the critical character of Marx’s work and of surveillance studies more generally. Whether that criticism can underlie, without undermining, Marx’s objective, neutral toolkit is a nice but an academic question. After all, he would surely remark one uses tools when things need fixing.

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1. Gary Marx, *Undercover: Police Surveillance in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989).

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