

Book Review

Surveillance and Terror in Post-9/11: British and American Television

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From its inception, television widely mediated between the spectatorship and the social reality, so to speak, providing to viewers not only from the narratives so that they to understand the world but also on the stereotypes and beliefs revolving around the dominant ideology. From this premise starts the book *Surveillance and Terror in Post 9/11 British and American Television* which is authored by Darcie Rives-East. As a founding event, 9/11 strongly marked the international geopolitics while drawing the contours towards a new climate where the values of surveillance and terror prevailed. As Rives-East puts it, a radical culture of panopticism gives further priority to homeland security as the mainstream value over other sensibilities.

As the previous argument is given, the introductory chapter explores the nature and imprint of television as well as the meanings beyond “watching television”. Gradually, the archetype of terrorism, adjoined to the “War on Terror” alters the cultural entertainment industry including films and novels. Although this process seems not to be new, simply because it was enrooted in the American and British history, it is noteworthy that terrorism woke up a long-dormant panopticism, which molded the predominance of police, intelligence agencies, leading the US towards a culture of imprisonment. The main shared argument overtly says that television as well as texts offer an ideological instrument to legitimate surveillance and control but not always, authors add, this happens unilaterally. Viewers often attest, digest and reject some of the created narratives revolving around 9/11 and terrorism while in some other cases they internalize them. What is clear seems to be that 9/11 or the War on Terror are narratives we tell ourselves. This raises the pungent question why does author selecting the American and British television as a unit of analysis?

As Rives-East replied to this point, the Anglo-alliance played a crucial role not only in the two US-led invasions but also Great Britain finally endorsed total support after

the attacks that whipped London. To some extent, the US and the UK shared similar analogies and sensibilities regarding terrorism and the challenges of democracy –as an idealized figure- to defeat it.

The second chapter reviews the figure of the prison under the lens of some TV documentaries as *Locked up Abroad* and *Wentworth* (only to name a few). For some reason, the social imaginary seems to be captivated by stories about criminality, captivity and the resulted imprisonment. Per the authors, these documentaries replicate the long-dormant narratives which were incipient in the formation of the American character. The narratives of captivity as well as the ideals of exception, which was proper of Puritanism, played a leading role to portray “the non-Western Other”. Far from disappearing, these discourses are present in the counter-terrorism culture. Complementarily, the third chapter turns the focus to the police as well as the investigations in the forensic discipline post 9/11. The question of whether Sherlock Holmes laid the foundations towards a new science where the crime should be re-discovered and probed now citizens are afraid the police apparatus becomes too powerful harming the autonomy of democratic institutions. Holmes’s task consisted in the reproduction of the crime, while in the post 9/11 days the police are advocated to prevent the crime before it takes place opening the doors to the risks of “the precautionary doctrine”. All the series analyzed in this chapter poses the problem of police brutality and its risk for the democratic life. Chapter four, rather, emphasizes the darkness of the espionage and sometimes the impunity of intelligence agencies which remain beyond the scrutiny of lay-people. Like in the other chapters, there is a turning point just after 9/11. Whether espionage served in the past for ensuring the individual liberties when they were placed in jeopardy, the drama re-appears today when the privacy of citizens as well as individual liberties are being threatened by the intromission of almighty intelligence agencies. The culture of surveillance and homeland security accelerated a rapid growth of these agencies in the name of a safer society, but at the same time, it compromises the founding cultural values of the US and the UK, as the author alerts. Last but not least, the fifth chapter interrogates furtherly on the contradictions revolving around the surveillance culture. To put the same in bluntly, while the logic of surveillance appears to be conflictive but necessary, no less true is that it acts within the constellations of panopticon-synopticon. Watching television, far from undermining its influence on the individual aggravates it. As the author goes on to write

In other words, we as viewers enjoy the power of the panopticon/synopticon, and we often seek out its gaze by offering up our lives on social media and reality television for viewing, judgment and examination. In this way, Foucault is correct that we internalize the panopticon so to arrange things that the surveillance is permanent in its effects... However, we do more than internalize it; we relish operating it and being the focus of it (p. 32)

At least for this reviewer, the importance of this book mainly rests on the fact that authors embrace a critical viewpoint to reveal the difficult dichotomy between the fear of terrorism and the culture of surveillance. We have widely created the psychological needs to gaze –so to speak to control the external world- but in doing so, we fall prey of a much panoptic logic which interprets the past according to a new imposed and fabricated discourse. It is important not to lose the sight of the fact that -as the author suggests- we are framing our own lives as a real drama. In a nutshell, this editorial project remains with the needs of discussing critically the emergence of a new uncanny “voyeurism” by the Other’s suffering which very well situates as a form of cultural entertainment for global spectatorship.

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