Semiotic approaches to surveillance?

Introduction

In 2006 Kevin Haggerty & Richard Ericson published their widely cited volume *The Politics of Surveillance and Visibility*.¹ In this book, visibility is discussed by several of the most outstanding researchers in the surveillance studies such as William Bogard, Gart T. Marx, David Lyon and Kevin Haggerty himself. However, social scientists as we are, we tend to focus much on those aspects that appeal to us more than others. In Haggerty & Ericsons' book the concept of visibility is understood as 'social visibility', highlighting the fact that more and more people are under constant observation – visible to some other agency or person. What does this do to a person, and what does it do to society? This is the natural follow-up question to which David Lyon proposes, drawing on Jacques Lacan and Thomas Mathiesen, that we are becoming a pathological viewer society.² On average, the focus of the book lies in the politics-aspect of this thematic, in line with the book's title. How is visibility and surveillance changing in different societal arenas? What rights and/or possibilities do we have not to be visible? Who is in control? These are questions that the authors address. There is no doubt that this book has been influential and continues to be a stable reference in surveillance studies literature. But what happened to visibility?

A common danger for edited books is that the contributions only superficially adapt to the general thematic of the book, and that the authors really write about the same things they always write about. I think that this is true to an extent about *The Politics of Surveillance and Visibility*. Because if 'social visibility' is in focus, then an analysis of the different kinds of visibility seems natural. Focusing on “The Politics of...” is a way to escape questions of the kind that David Lyon are pointing at, but does not have room to engage empirically; namely that 'visibility' is much more than that which is achieved by surveillance, and especially CCTV. Another understanding of the issue is

¹ In this text I (very unfairly) use this book as a starting point to see where we arrive if we take the concept of visibility more seriously.

² Lyon, “9/11, Synopticon, and Scopophilia: Watchin and Being Watched.”
that visibility is both a cultural and a psychological process where what is seen, what is displayed, and what meaning it has, are questions that require an approach which move easily between the levels of analysis and that is sensitive to inter-subjective meaning-making, or *semiosis*.

In this short paper I will argue for an interpretive approach to studying surveillance. Interpretive in this context signifies that such approaches are meaning-centered, mainly qualitative, and not attributable to the positivist tradition in the social sciences. Interpretive approaches in social science reflects a choice to draw influence from the humanist scholarly tradition as opposed to the natural sciences. Actually, there is reason to be more specific as to the approach that I discuss here. I focus my argument on the issue of *semiotics*, since the interpretive approach is very common in the surveillance studies anyway. In order not to kick in an open door and argue for a discursive approach to surveillance (that would be too easy!), I instead seek to enter the problematic through the wider concept of semiotics. Semiosis is the function of meaning-making through *signs*, in and between people, and semiotics is the study thereof. I will draw on a few examples and earlier work that studies semiosis and in the end argue why I think that this type of analysis could constitute a rich addition to the field of surveillance studies.

**Semiotics**

Semiotics is essentially the study of communication. Basic communication theory focuses on the sender, receives, and interpreter of *signs*. They are typically divided in three groups: icon (resembles an object), index (points to an object), and symbols (is arbitrarily associated with an object). Signs are all the means we use to communicate, such as language, gestures, signage, colour marks, etc. Basic semiotic theory states that a sign has a *expression* and a *content*, and when we study signs we study the nature of these two. Language is a system of signs that is of particular interest, since language is one the one hand so formalised and on the other so open and susceptible to change.

Many social scientists have studied signs understood as *signals*. Stein Ringen, for example, discusses the relative powerlessness of modern governments and claims that what they today have been reduced to are senders of signals to the population, market, and administration. By signals the governments produce incentives and legitimates its behaviour. This perspective essentially reduced politics to the communication function, and thus we approach other research fields such as political

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3 See the Introductory chapter of Yanow and Schwartz-Shea, *Interpretation and method : empirical research methods and the interpretive turn* for further explication on what interpretation means.

4 Scollon and Wong Scollon, *Discourses in place : language in the material world*, 26f.


6 Ringen, “THE POWERLESSNESS OF POWERFUL GOVERNMENT.”
rhetoric and discourse analysis. Martin Innes studies the ways that certain crimes or disorders become important to a group of people and can easily lead them to draw faulty conclusions on the general level of crimes in an area. Innes 'Signal Crime Perspective' has become quite influential in British criminology, even though there are certain moral and theoretical problems with it, according to my own view. Clifford Geertz also argued for an intense study of signs in his seminal paper on 'thick description' from 1973. Finally, discourse analysis draw much of its theoretical foundations from the same sources as semiotics, but extend the analysis with more or less rigorous theoretical frameworks focusing on power and social or political change. Commonalities lie in the constructivist epistemology and the focus on the signifier rather than the signified (or rather on their internal relation). In discourse analysis, an intermediate aim is to reconstruct the discourse, which is seen as a temporary fixation of meaning, whereas in semiotics a much wider array of aims are thinkable, such as interpreting the signage of CCTV in different locations and focus on the different meanings that are conveyed. While sharing the idea that signs are part of a larger networks of other signs, the aim in semiotics does not necessarily include reconstructing these network but to focus one's attention to a particular part of them. This is because semiotics as such does not include notions of power or hegemony, even though it certainly can. In sum, the study of semiosis is very wide and every research projects that focus on inter-subjective meaning-making can in one way or another be formulated in the terms mentioned above.

Visibility

How would a semiotic study of surveillance and visibility be constructed? Well, it depends of course on the topic. I will use Coaffee et al.’s recent article about visibility and terrorism to show how a semiotic approach can be understood.

Coaffee, O'Hare and Hawkesworth (2009) emphasise aesthetics as key to the understanding of counter-terrorist measures (under the somewhat bold heading of an 'aesthetic turn' in IR scholarship), and they ascribe particular importance to architecture as a communicative factor in society. Intentionally or not, architecture and constructed objects function as one-way transmitters of signals, or 'messages', to the recepient by means of their visibility. Such signals are received by the public mainly as an emotional response: "In many instances, such features are quite obvious (possibly being obtrusive) or even 'advertised' in order to convey the message that a place..."
of building is fortified.” Thus, the visibility of fortification sends a message of danger, or at least that danger is possible. The authors make the connection with Newman's theory of defensible space, and claim that one aspect of the aesthetics they discuss can be understood as 'target hardening' (the obstruction of crime by design). Such contributions are most welcome and do not only display the readiness of the discipline to incorporate new ideas, but also fits well into my own idea with this paper. The communicative aspect of security measures is here understood as one of the main ways to legitimise intrusive processes for the 'audience'. Authorities and corporations working with security are very aware of the communicative aspect of all visible measures, and beside campaigns and signage, objects such as cameras monitors are common means of communication to citizens. Coaffee et al. introduce a three-part typology of security measures: overt (clearly military in character), stealthy (visible but not obvious to the untrained eye), and invisible (completely hidden) security features. The picture of the ancient camera below is an example: It is clearly not operational, located in the nexus of Stockholm's public transport system just outside the brand new and tall glass entrance barriers.; next to the new smart card ticket machines, next to about ten small dome cameras inside the perimeter (see picture below). *Why is this camera still there, as is has no obvious function? It is an iconic display, a kind nostalgic remembrance of old surveillance technology?* Is it just there for no reason, because no one thought of bringing it down? Or is it an intended display of 'target hardening'? Coaffee et al.'s focus on aesthetics clearly implies this kind of 'semiotics of security', though the analyst must be wary not to over-interpret instances that may go unnoticed for most people.

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11 Coaffee, O'Hare, and Hawkesworth, “The Visibility of (In)security: The Aesthetics of Planning Urban Defences Against Terrorism,” 496.
12 Newman, Defensible space. Crime prevention through environmental design.
13 However, in one-way, indirect communication such as the example with the camera, there is always the risk that the intended message is distorted or interpreted quite differently. A sign notifying passengers about surveillance can easily display a state of insecurity if the sign has been manipulated, smeared, half-way torn off, or the like. See Zedner, “Too much security?.”
This typology obviously only concern itself with the expression of security, not with its content. A more proper semiotic analysis would also focus on this aspect of the 'control signals'.

Instead of being secondary to the analysis of politics, the work described above takes visibility as such seriously and on equal level with the political aspects. By addressing surveillance in terms of its visibility we get the means to address the everyday experiences of security and surveillance. In other contexts, semiotic approaches can shift our focus in ways that we did not think about before and so function as a heuristic. Finally, semiotic analysis is extremely suitable for internationally comparative analyses because it highlights the cultural understanding of signs, which is of course different in different contexts. This is actually a quite important point because in many ways the surveillance studies literature assumes that everybody think of surveillance in similar ways, or at least the different ways in which people think about surveillance in different cultural settings are rarely made the immediate object of study. Even though we should not essentialise 'national culture', is it possible that American, Polish and Chinese people understands not only the politics of surveillance differently, but also surveillance and its visibility itself? Whereas this question may seem self-evident, it is actually quite controversial as it questions the applicability of any results in different cultural contexts. Can we still read David Lyon's and the other authors' responses to the visibility problem with the same glasses, or do we have to change perspective and consider them as specific, culturally contingent responses to an equally contingent question of surveillance and visibility? I do not propose an answer here, only that this mode of problematisation is not common in the surveillance studies. Since this is a major gap in the research, semiotic approaches can bring the surveillance studies further in this area.

15 Cf. Innes, “Signal crimes and signal disorders: notes on deviance as communicative action.”
16 Save the comparative privacy literature to some extent. See Bennett and Raab, The governance of privacy: policy instruments in global perspective.
Semantic approaches to surveillance

At first, I had conceived this text in terms of *semantic approaches*, but it soon became clear that semantic analysis, which focuses on language, is insufficient as a general heading. As a sub-heading, however, it's great (it is also typically subsumed under semiotics as one form of semiosis). Semantic approaches to surveillance can draw on the same qualities as semiotic ones, but in the case of language there are well-developed theoretical backgrounds that we can use as points of departure. Viewing language as a problematic platform where meaning is communicated gives us the opportunity to ask questions about semantic structures of 'surveillance’ such as language-specific usage of subject forms, semantic transitivity, what other concepts are connected to surveillance, differences across types of surveillance practices, and the general grammatical possibilities to use the word.17 Lexical definitions, public reports, scientific texts, and 'talk' suddenly become more than just carriers of information and begin to appear as contingent representations of discourses of surveillance.18 My own dissertation work applies a 'mixed' approach to surveillance, where I use the concept of 'logic' as forwarded by Jason Glynos & David Howarth to analyse both semiotic and semantic aspects of security discourse in the public transport systems in Berlin, Stockholm and Warsaw.19 This 'logics approach' focuses on practices, which are abstracted into 'logics' used do describe the discourse. As is evident from the examples brought up in this paper, we will find no 'final' approach or toolkit in this area, rather, each study must define the terms of its own engagement with the empirical world.

Discussion

Many analyses of surveillance distinguishes themselves in the normativity of their research problem, the *a priori* notion of surveillance systems as illegitimate disciplinary machineries. This is a basic feature in the field of surveillance studies, and also part of what distinguishes it from applied social science. The field has arguably its roots in two sets of normative distinctions. On the one hand an essentially Marxist perspective on social control as tool of an oppressive state; on the other the liberal notion of privacy as "informational self-determination".20 These are mutually reinforcing rather than exclusive standpoints, and their combination is as well a particularity that

18 See for example Thomas Kunz's dissertation, where he studies entries on 'Innere Sicherheit' in German criminological handbooks. Kunz, *Der Sicherheitsdiskurs: die innere Sicherheitspolitik und ihre Kritik*.

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comes out of studying surveillance, which can legitimately be defined as “social control through the gathering of personal data.” These are two forms of normativity with which researchers have approached the study of surveillance, security, and social control reflect two types of scientific critique: first, the Marxist critique based on the notion of justice and equality. This is a normative critique based on a specific value. Second, the liberal Rechstaat critique based on the evaluation of information collection and processing, especially of in terms of legality. The Foucauldian and Deleuzian perspectives of disciplinary and governmental power, and control societies respectively, shift these distinctions somewhat, but the basic tenets remains the same. Surveillance studies explores the mechanisms and consequences of, and engage in a progressive critique against disciplinary power, neoliberal governmentality, structural oppression against ethnicities and classes, and unfair information practices. This is a very general statement of course, and I am aware the limits of the argument. I do not see that it as particularly controversial, and I will not validate this with a row of references. Instead, what I am pointing at is the function that semiotic approaches can have in this context.

Semiotic approaches to surveillance, have the potential to help us pose new questions to existing problems of surveillance, and to generate new ones through a different mode of problematisation. Consider for example the issue of visibility. Haggerty & Ericson's book, while drawing up a crucial problem in the surveillance studies, fails to engage it inductively. Instead, it seems to me, the issue of visibility is engaged deductively, letting theory inform the problem instead of the other way around. The mode of problematisation that I suggest instead says “Ok, so here we have new aspects of visibility, we have new 'control signals' and we have new genres of communication of security. How can they inform our understanding of surveillance?” Let us pose some exemplary questions:

- What do these different modes of visibility tell us about the political programs and strategies which they represent?
- Do people identify with the security strategies, and what cognitive aspects of surveillance produce the emotional response necessary to achieve this 'grip'?
- How do '(control) signals' affect persons from different cultural backgrounds, or in different contexts?
- Do do modes of visibility and communication reinforce existing modes of exclusion, and if so, how do 'the excluded' subject interpret this communication?
- How is security communicated in contexts that have recently experienced authoritarian rule, as opposed to stable democratic contexts?
- How does visibility of surveillance affect, or is intended to produce, anxiety?

23 I am aware of that these questions are coloured by my own disciplinary background in political science and that
The point is that with semiotic approaches to surveillance we are able to pose questions that address pressing issues without over-theorising them from the start. This is of course true for all interpretive approaches, but the problem is that surveillance studies have been quite prone to over-theorising (because our topics are so damn interesting!). Nevertheless, we could do with more empirical work, and most certainly with more comparative work.

In comparative semiotics I see a great area of interesting research topics that wait for social scientists to address them. Think for example about the new resilience policies made by municipalities during the last years. How does the concept of resilience and sustainability relate to issues of visibility here (fortification, control signals, safety programmes etc.)? Or the issue of language: In Swedish and English, there are two words for what is typically meant with the word “security”: security/safety in English and säkerhet/trygghet in Swedish. In German and Polish, there is only one word (Sicherheit/Bezpieczeństwo). However, in Germany, Poland, Sweden, the Netherlands and Spain, practitioners use the English words in addition to their own. Why? My theory is that the English words provide the illusion of objectivity, that it locates the impression of a surveillance measure in a legitimate symbolic space. It is a way of objectivating meaning, as Berger and Luckman might say. But the semiotic question would be How do words become securitising signs? How do different registers of communication interact and develop once they are introduced? Can we see differences in the way that signs of surveillance are incorporated in political strategies in different semantic contexts? Comparative semiotics provide us with the possibilities to question the conditions of surveillance as well certain aspects of its effects.

To the extent that semiotics help us posing new questions in this direction we can also expect that new ways of formulating scientific critique open up that highlight the contingency of surveillance deployment and questions its universal applicability. Therefore I think that we in LiSS have a great opportunity through this COST action to engage in teams for this type of analysis, because of the various cultural backgrounds represented in the four work groups. The semiotic analysis requires deep cultural knowledge and therefore the LiSS researchers have a brilliant platform to initiate comparative projects.

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Bibliography


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