Introduction: Critical Perspectives on Surveillance in Contemporary German Literature and Film

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Today, total surveillance stratagems are no longer merely figments of our imagination. Yet, the threat and discomfort emanating from contemporary surveillance regimes may lead us, increasingly so, to turn to literature, film, and art as sources for understanding and possibly resisting it in a productive way. Global surveillance is a reality established by the technology that put it into place and without which we can no longer function: neither in the professional world, nor in our private lives—if one can still draw a strict distinction between public and private. Both the erosion and the defence of privacy, autonomy, and democratic values are the cornerstones of contemporary surveillance critique. By accepting the need for security as the legitimizing argument for surveillance, it seems that democratic societies have fallen into a state of regarding the protection of individual freedom, autonomy, and agency at a time when vigilance is of the essence. A certain impassiveness, targeted by the contributors of this special issue and by surveillance critics at large, is reinforced by the idea that compromise is a small price to pay for security and the freedom to roam, to access information, and to be part of the global community. However, what is lacking here is an awareness of the irony contained in the unreflective acceptance of surveillance measures, namely that, because of our dependence on technology, we are only “free” to the extent to which we conform. It is against this bad bargain that surveillance critique addresses itself, often invoking Benjamin Franklin’s famous dictum that a people ready to sacrifice a little freedom for a little security doesn’t deserve either and ends up losing both.

The revelations of whistleblower Edward Snowden in June 2013 exposed the scope of electronic surveillance and spy programs and has fundamentally altered the ways in which we think about the use value of information and how we conceptualize its flow, analysis, and storage. What the citizens of the world learned was that, first, governments practice secret surveillance on their own citizens, thereby violating democratic principles established precisely as recourse against the excesses of power. Second, companies, governmental agencies, and the media exchange information to mutual benefit. This alliance has facilitated
what critics denounce as one of the major problems of contemporary surveillance: a recentralization of power by a few corporations that monopolize, on a global scale, the World Wide Web on which depend the roughly 3.5 billion users. Third, this “unholy” alliance provides and enriches these organizations with personal data, mined and exploited in the service of profit and control. Surveillance through the internet, dataveillance, is facilitated by user data, the collection of which is neither transparent nor consensual. Digital technology has become the most formidable and ubiquitous tool of surveillance and control ever devised. The internet, as Ignacio Ramonet points out, has become a kind of fifth element along with the classic ones, earth, fire, water, and air (19, 23).

Since the 1970s, interdisciplinary surveillance studies developed at the intersection of sociology, criminology, philosophy, literature, film and the arts, offering a rich platform for the Humanities—and particularly film, cultural, and literary studies—to understand and think about surveillance as it infiltrates and shapes our lives today. The typical areas of the surveillance critic’s scrutiny include the military, the governmental administration, the world of work and finance, crime control, terrorism, immigration, border control, and, more recently, consumer activities. The consensus among experts is that surveillance, as a political and economic weapon, is a product of modernity, a direct consequence out of the precepts of eighteenth-century Enlightenment spirit intent on “putting world affairs under human management and replacing providence (‘blind’ fate, ‘random’ contingency) with Reason, that mortal enemy of accidents, ambiguity, ambivalence, and inconsistency” (Bauman and Lyon, 139). Thus, surveillance studies bases its critique on the assumption—shared by the contributors of this special issue—that democratic states consistently underestimate or deny the threat emanating from the restriction to civil and private liberties. While modern surveillance theory understands surveillance as an outgrowth of production- and efficiency-driven capitalism, bureaucracy, and “machine-like technology,” postmodern surveillance theory focuses on new forms of visibility and vigilance concerning endemic surveillance strategies within a hypertechnological environment wherein the targeting of the body as an object to be watched, assessed, and manipulated simultaneously also transforms “souls” (Staples, 11; Lyon, Surveillance Studies 51). The contributors to this special issue critically engage modern and postmodern notions, strategies, and critiques of surveillance from Michel Foucault’s Discipline and Punish (1975) with the panoptic model derived from Jeremy Bentham’s prison (1791) to liquid surveillance, the model examined in the conversation between Zygmunt Bauman and David Lyon in 2013.

At the base of every discussion of surveillance, we continue to find the principle of the panoptic—surveillance as a means to create a “disciplinary society” controlled and maintained by the omniscient eye of the Orwellian Big Brother. Extrapolating from a very concrete architectural model, one of Foucault’s major contributions to the study of surveillance is to have shown the fundamental power relations operating and developing according to modern ambitions of
efficiency in institutions, such as hospitals, schools, factories, and prisons. Examining rituals of exclusion and projects of discipline, Foucault identifies the transition from what he calls the “society of spectacle” towards a “disciplinary society”; whereas in the former, punishment—like torture—was a public affair, in the latter, punishment and discipline was internalized. The idea of the panoptic resides in the transformation of an external and central surveillance authority towards an automatic and transformative auto-discipline. “Docile bodies” are useful and profitable in their voluntary compliance with and attraction to the ever-increasing demands of total visibility and transparency. Although Foucault’s analysis is all too often reduced to the confines of the preglobal and pre-electronic/digital era, it is important not to overlook the contemporary relevance of his insistence on the dangers of an inescapable and tyrannical visibility: “He who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself, he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection.” This is how visibility becomes the trap of complicity built to assure “the automatic functioning of power” (Foucault 201–03). This angle is thoroughly investigated by the contributors here, who in their readings of literature and film pursue the question of participation in and resistance to surveillance power.

Anticipating the post-Foucaultian shift from the panoptic to liquid surveillance model, Gilles Deleuze’s “Postscript on the Societies of Control” (1990) posits “a generalized crisis” affecting all public and private environments and professional and personal human relations (3–4). As societies of control, corporations, governmental agencies, and public institutions deploy strategies of continuous control, fostering a climate of competition and suspicion. Using technology that exacerbates the frantic chase after efficiency, productivity, and achievement, disciplinary powers transform themselves through processes of endless substitution and “limitless postponement” (7). While the fluidity and decentralization of this new type of organization may initially have seemed to guarantee more flexibility, mobility, and greater freedom, the result is more restriction, constraint, and uncertainty. The promise of safety and security, too, remains unfulfilled as terrorist attacks worldwide continue to elude highly sophisticated surveillance systems. And, yet, most accept—more or less reluctantly—the reinforced security measures and the demands for transparency.

Considering the claim of complete integration within the societies of control, and the dependence on what Armand Mattelart called “centrifugal security society” (Mattelart 9), it is difficult to locate and devise modes of resistance to a situation of permanent crisis. According to Giorgio Agamben, in the state of exception, “every aspect of life coincides with normality and becomes, in this way, just a tool of government” (5). Lyon and Bauman point out the paradox arising from the normalization of exception: the insecurities that arise within a surveillance-saturated world have become a “practical corollary of today’s securitized societies” and are part of a larger social and political configuration, relating to risk and its close
cousin, uncertainty.” (107) The general mood of suspicion, fear, or simply unease resulting from the more or less conscious living in this precarious and ever-expanding global world marked both by compulsive activity and apathetic resignation calls for a renewed vigour of reflection and engagement.

The contributors to this special issue respond to this call as they engage critically with the challenges surveillance represents both as an organized, technology-driven apparatus and as an inherently human activity. Both of these aspects of surveillance involve an ethics of care and control, and the struggle for power underlies the ongoing dynamics between the two. The articles here address the issues presented earlier from different perspectives, locating in classical and contemporary literature and film the manifold ways through which surveillance is engendered, operating, maintained, and possibly resisted.

The first article of our collection by Michael White, entitled “Tyranny and Tragedy: Paradigms of Surveillance in Theodor Storm’s Aquis submersus and Carsten Curator,” locates various dimensions and strategies of surveillance in nineteenth-century literature. Indeed, with its focus on the moral conflict between individual needs, instincts, desires, and compulsions, on the one hand, and social demands, rules, expectations, and traditions, on the other hand, German Realism offers significant insights into questions of surveillance. White’s interpretation and re-evaluation of the two novellas through the lens of today’s surveillance discourse takes into account the difference and distance of the historical and practical contexts between then and now. Then, surveillance as a concept, a reality, and a practice was not widely thematized. White explores in Storm’s novellas surveillance as a basic human problem under the multidimensional aspect of the larger topos of visuality. What is at stake here is to understand oppressive surveillance practices within larger patterns of visual behaviour grounded in human nature, fostered and developed through cultural, political, and social forces. White’s analysis of the two novellas highlights the moral and ethical dimension of surveillance—a dimension often neglected in the throes of urgency fostered by the dependence on digital technology and the continued threat of terrorism today. Indeed, the basic need for security through control—self-control included—constitutes an essential factor in all human relationships, whether this need is grounded in a concern out of love and care or out of power and greed. In brief, all things human, the best intentions or the worst power schemes are bound to failure on some level and this not least because of the limitations of our sense of sight. Storm’s literary exploration of the tragic clash between good intentions, individual—and often compulsive—needs and personal, wilful, and unintentional blindness constitutes one of the cornerstones of White’s analysis. The thematic overlap of the novellas resides in the unavoidable guilt of the father and his failure of control and self-control within an eroding paternalistic structure. Both novellas present, White argues, the tragic insight that failure is the outcome both of a surveillance of care and a surveillance of control because, first, they condition each other and, second, because they come into conflict with inner and outer social rules, standards, expectations, and
values, and they are linked—as often with Storm—to natural disasters. The clash between instincts, emotions, and the human need for individual freedom and self-fulfilment with reality and the demands of the outer world create psychological and existential havoc, posing challenges that humans try but fail to master. As White shows, Storm’s literary exploration of surveillance is timely and productive, addressing the basic conundrum of surveillance, the fatal defeat of the human will to forces beyond its control. As White shows, the interest in Storm’s novellas for the surveillance debate today resides in the author’s ethical humanism, which, on the one hand, critiques surveillance as abuse of power, while legitimating it when done out of love, dutiful altruism, and protective leadership, on the other. In Storm’s novellas, morality is permanently threatened by an abuse of power that is latently present in the texts. The fine line between an ethics of care and an ethics of control stays fine. For Storm, observation is essentially a positive activity, done out of natural curiosity, eagerness to learn and know, yet it is always in danger of transforming into control. White highlights the many forms of visual communication, a “silent visuality,” such as eye contact between characters and characters in communication with paintings. This kind of communication goes beyond words but contains also concealment and secrecy: not everything can be known, nor is full communication and complete revelation possible. Ideally, there should be openness and transparency in all relations. In reality, a remnant of mystery, regretfully or luckily, remains. As such, surveillance as an act of seeing is fundamentally ambiguous and begs the question of perspective and interpretation always anew.

One of the famous conclusions of Foucault’s Discipline and Punish (1977) is that visibility is a trap (200). The consciousness of being caught in the web of surveillance and an active part of the sustaining force that moves and shapes the intricate power mechanisms at work hits home nowhere better than through literature and film. Betiel Wasihun bases her arguments on David Rosen’s proposition that “if surveillance is, on some level, all about reading and authorship, so literature has been deeply engaged with, and transformed by, changing ideas about observation and control” (Rosen 13). By linking surveillance activity to literary writing strategies and surveilling authority to narrative authorial positions, Wasihun takes an original approach to highlighting the critical dimension and dialectic relation between fiction and reality. Wasihun explores the concepts of authority and authorial narration within the context of the enhanced post-9/11 security measures. While it is debatable whether 9/11 constitutes a “caesura” between then and now, the attacks have not only brought to the surface existing surveillance trends that, as Lyon points out, “had been developing quietly and unnoticed” for years but have also enhanced law enforcement surveillance to an alarming degree (Lyon, After September 11 4–5). At the centre of “Surveillance Narratives: Kafka, Orwell, and Ulrich Peltzer’s Post-9/11 Novel Teil der Lösung” is the question of how to resist the ongoing and gradual erosion of democracy, freedom, personal/political autonomy, and privacy within the state of an ever more sophisticated and insidious surveillance regime. Reading Juli
Zeh’s call to action and defence of democratic freedom in conjunction with the modern “Ur-Surveillance Novels” by Kafka (Der Prozess) and Orwell (1984), Wasiuhun seeks to extricate possibilities of resistance to authority and control from Ulrich Pelzer’s postmodern novel Teil der Lösung. She locates resistant potential in Pelzer’s play with complex literary strategies deployed in a concern to deconstruct the centralized-authoritarian position and gaze of the classical panoptic sort. Peltzer’s text resonates with an informed readership not least because of his sophisticated narrative strategies, including the sombre and emotionally detached narration by numerous narrators, the intrusion of an indeterminate author, multiple narrative threads and shifts, and variations in font style. Indebted to Kafka’s and Orwell’s pioneering works, Peltzer, Wasiuhun argues, makes them operative and yet moves beyond them by attacking and dissolving authority as such. In this way, Peltzer’s text mirrors, Wasiuhun argues, the shift from a panoptic and centralized surveillance of modernity to the state of an all-pervasive surveillance as postulated in Deleuze’s “Postscript on the Societies of Control” and in Bauman and Lyon’s Liquid Surveillance, which sees surveillance as “seeping into the bloodstream of contemporary life” (153).

Like Wasiuhun and the other contributors to this special issue, Sarah Koellner, too, probes the fundamental question already posed by surveillance studies, namely that, “if we really could use surveillance to create a perfectly safe world, might it not do so at the cost of undermining the very personal autonomy and integrity that it was supposed to protect?” (Lyon, Surveillance Studies 148). Koellner’s article entitled “Bodies, Love, and Data: The Value of Privacy in Juli Zeh’s Corpus Delicti” seeks to illuminate the consequences of the loss of privacy and critical, autonomous agency. Reading Zeh’s post-Orwellian novel Corpus Delicti in conjunction with nonfictional works, such as Angriff auf die Freiheit by Zeh and Ilya Trojanow and Robert Simanowski’s Data Love, Koellner elucidates further the contemporary literary engagement that dares the reader to reflect on the existential and ethical consequences of an uncritical participation in new and increasingly insidious surveillance mechanisms as they have developed through an ever more sophisticated and methodical technology. In the world of Corpus Delicti, ruled by the state, business, media conglomerate, and a “health-dictatorship” called “Die Methode,” the Foucauldian trap of visibility is less and less recognized by those caught in it. The Deleuzian free flow of control rules its members by means clearly echoing those of Orwell, albeit going one step further: in Zeh’s novel, a microchip is inserted into every citizen’s body to track their level of health, compliance, and efficiency. As Koellner shows, Zeh’s Methode represents a classical, panoptic reward and punishment system, controlling all aspects of life, including hygiene, sleep patterns, and partner choice, keeping its members in check through the promise of a long, healthy, and disturbance-free life. Koellner’s presentation of the Methode’s ideology reflects contemporary approaches to healthcare management to an eerie degree and brings to mind Žižek’s critique of “late capitalist utilitarian despiritualized consumer society,” which—not unlike in Zeh’s bloodless universe of Corpus Delicti—embraces the virtual over the real.
The citizens under the control of the Methode are abandoning the challenge of engagement for the sake of an illusory freedom (Žižek, 10). Koellner’s analysis of Simanowski’s concept of Data Love reveals the intrinsic complexities involved in the dialectics inherent to Big Data, which “is not so much a very large entity as a way of doing things” (Lyon, After Snowden 69). Citizens “love” data because it feeds desires and promises fulfilment and gratifies and postpones gratification in exciting ways. This “love” is returned and camouflaged as “care” by the surveilling agencies—here the Methode, in our world, GAFAM (Google, Apple, Facebook, Amazon, Microsoft) and the state—through reward and punishment. Surveilling agencies “love” data because it allows full and ever-more profitable exploitation of the consumer’s economic, emotional, and libidinal power to optimize their own interests. As Koellner shows, Zeh’s text engages the reader’s reflection because it presents and problematizes the vicious circle of mutual codependence between providers and exploiters of data. Although Zeh’s novel offers a hopeful ending, Koellner’s analysis demonstrates how it may serve as impetus for the reader’s critical reflection and self-examination.

Brook Henkel’s analysis of the visual strategies deployed in Nikolaus Geyrhalter’s documentary film Abendland shows how Geyrhalter deconstructs the totalizing tendencies of contemporary surveillance through technical and formal interventions, such as the use of fragmentation, disruption, destabilization, and montage. “Watching the Night: Surveillance and Cross-Sectional Montage in Nikolaus Geyrhalter’s Abendland (2011)” undertakes insightful close readings of this documentary/essay-film featuring disparate scenes of a night-time Europe that never sleeps, including images of border fences, walls, hospitals, night clubs, geriatric facilities, suicide hotlines, postal services, and parliamentary proceedings. By situating Abendland in the Weimar-era tradition of Querschnittfilme, Henkel is able to compare and contrast the ways in which non-narrative, cross-sectional visual strategies are used to capture different urban realities in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The Querschnittfilm offers a formal, technical, and historical reference point for understanding Geyrhalter’s aesthetics and for analyzing contemporary surveillance practices, showing how contemporary modes of perception have been radically transformed by surveillance technologies. While Walter Ruttmann’s and Dziga Vertov’s montage, mobile cameras, and rhythmic editing resulted in a dynamic, hectic, and pulsing portrayal of urban modernity, Geyrhalter’s static camera, high-angle shots, and long takes reflect the techniques of automated monitoring, tracking, and recording of contemporary surveillance regimes. Informed by current debates on the surveillance by Deleuze, Jonathan Crary, and Wendy Brown, Henkel argues that Geyrhalter “highlights the persistent disciplinary sites and borders that regulate contemporary European life.” Geyrhalter’s film shows societies of control as societies of affluence in which services are rendered and received ostensibly to protect human life—yet, also and perhaps foremost—to protect the privilege of occidental life. Henkel’s analysis of Geyrhalter’s emphasis of on borders and walls and the seeming normality of what goes on inside these borders brings to mind the
post-panoptic apparatus of the Ban-opticon, which functions on a transnational scale “to exclude certain groups in the name of their future potential behaviour (profiling) and by the way it normalizes the nonexcluded through its production of normative imperatives, the most important of which is free movement” (Bigo 35). The Ban-opticon has “the task of ‘keeping out’ instead of ‘keeping in’, as the Panopticon does. It is motivated by concerns about the rise of ‘global (in)security,’ not by the disciplinary urge behind the Panopticon. As such, the Ban-opticon underscores the European unease and concern to guard the entrance to its inner and outer gates in order to maintain and “reproduce” order (Lyon and Bauman 63). Henkel aptly draws on Crary’s critique of Deleuze’s “evocation of open, amorphous spaces without boundaries [that] is belied by the brutal development of walled borders and closed frontiers, both of which strategically target specific populations and regions” (Crary 72). Henkel’s astute analysis makes evident the film’s importance to the growing oeuvre of European films—such as films by Michael Haneke, Christian Petzold, and the Berlin School—that explore the interconnection between the cinematic gaze, visual perception, and surveillance. Citing Abendland as a case in point for the erosion of a clear distinction between the diegetic surveillance depicted in films and the surveillant gaze of film viewers, Henkel argues that the film occasions recognition of engrained patterns of perception. In doing so, Abendland—along with films by the other filmmakers—appears to implicate viewers in the process of surveillance, turning them from spectators into accomplices of surveillance. In this way, viewers are stripped of their passive role as benevolent observers or pleasure-seeking voyeurs and, instead, are projected into the role of protagonist and participant in intrusive acts of voyeurism and surveillance. As Henkel suggests, the defamiliarization of the voyeuristic gaze aims to precipitate awareness of the viewers’ own participation in surveillance activities, thus problematizing not only the relationship between spectatorship and surveillance but also the troubling intersection of the ethics of care and control.

Focusing on postsocialist state surveillance, Cheryl Dueck’s “Secret Police in Style: The Aesthetics of Remembering Socialism” explores surveillance practices as a transnational concern. Examining Das Leben der Anderen (2006), set in the German Democratic Republic (GDR); A Vizsga/The Exam (2011), set in Hungary; Różyczka/Little Rose (2010), set in Poland; and Ve Stinu/In the Shadow (2012), set in Czechoslovakia, in the context of the cinematic conventions of the spy thriller and the film noir, Dueck problematizes the impact of the films’ portrayal of surveillance on contemporary perceptions of the socialist past. These films contribute to the exposure of the impact of authoritarian rule and the repressive mechanisms of power and control on the lives of ordinary citizens. The deployment of the genre of the spy thriller and the style of the film noir facilitates broad international distribution to audiences privileging mainstream over art films, and, as Dueck argues, on a regional level, the expansion from national and niche to international markets might bestow a sense of postsocialist justice for the victims of socialist surveillance regimes. However, within the contemporary
environment of global surveillance, the films’ critical impulses might be, first, thwarted by the entertainment value of the spy and noir genres and, second, might also precipitate an all too facile historical displacement that projects surveillance regimes into the past and onto other places. As much as these films speak to the contemporary concerns about surveillance, their popularity might also reveal the comfort viewers may take in distancing themselves from the repressive surveillance techniques portrayed in these films. Indeed, Lyon’s reflection on the ease with which memories of past repressive governmental regimes, such as the GDR, the Soviet Union, China, and Chile, fade within our culture are a point in case. The illusion of freedom and the freedom of choice that our society seems to take for granted foster the notion that what happens on the screen happened in the past and cannot happen here (Lyon, *After Snowden* 116). While, on the regional level, the films might play a role in the formation of cultural memory, the plot emplacement in the socialist states of the GDR, Hungary, Poland, and Czechoslovakia might offer a convenient political and historical (dis)location for staging surveillance at a safe temporal and geopolitical distance. Surveillance as exercised by repressive, socialist regimes becomes the problem of suspected dissidents, often linked to tragic consequences and heroic acts of self-affirmation. Yet, while the conventions of film noir, melodrama, and spy thriller might be problematic both in regard to the construction of national cultural memory and to the displacement of issues of surveillance from the present to the past, their usage—Dueck argues—nevertheless provides the films with an universal language that allow them to bring their national stories to transnational audiences.

Similarly to White and Koellner, Annie Ring redirects our attention from the all pervasiveness of surveillance to its moments of failure. Exploring the potential for resistance against new and more comprehensive forms of surveillance, assessment, and manipulation in the workplace, Ring’s analysis offers valuable insights into and new perspectives on workplace surveillance. Focusing on the object rather than the subject of surveillance, “System Error: Complicity with Surveillance in Contemporary Workplace Documentaries” analyzes documentary films by Harun Farocki and Carmen Losmann to argue that the latent instability of surveillance regimes opens up the possibility for resistance in precisely that space that is perceived as being the most un-free—the workplace. Drawing on the theoretical writings of Foucault, Deleuze, Bauman and Lyon, and others, Ring illuminates how Farocki’s *Die Schöpfer der Einkaufswelten* and *Ein neues Produkt* and Losmann’s *Work Hard Play Hard* depart from the model of a centralized, absolutist, and sovereign surveillance power. She shows how the films’ engagement with surveillance points towards the insufficiency of theoretical writings to conceptualize the complexity of surveillance regimes today. Ring’s examination successfully links the documentary films to Foucault’s later work, in which the Panopticon gives way to more mobile and fluid structures and networks of surveillance. On the one hand, the increase in surveillance mobility turns newer surveillance regimes into more comprehensive and far-reaching
enterprises; yet, on the other hand, the increased fluidity also poses the risk of blind spots, system failures, and co-option. By conceptualizing the subversive quality of Farocki’s and Losmann’s films in terms of Žižek’s notion of the pervert “who causes disarray by practicing a ‘too literal identification’ with the law,” Ring offers an original framework for formulating a productive critique of fallible surveillance tactics within “working models and workplaces that appear to be flexible and freeing, but which in fact penetrate the life of the individual much more deeply than a CCTV camera ever could” (Ring 31). Resonating with Deleuze’s analysis of the corporate work (s)pace—that today is transformed into vertical campuses in which individual workspaces give way to collaborative “neighbourhoods” and “huddle areas”—, Farocki and Losmann’s films indeed resonate with the unease with surveilled work environments. Exposing the absurdity of compliance on the part of the “pervert,” the over-the-top law-abiding worker, the films raise awareness by causing viewers discomfort. While Ring is not disputing the wide-ranging effectiveness of surveillance techniques or the complicity of the surveilled subject revealed in the films, she explores how the films expose the vulnerability of surveillance regimes, how these regimes may fail to achieve their aims, and how they may be undermined. Often emerging from unconscious psychic and somatic responses, resistance—Ring’s perceptive analysis shows—need not be limited to or even primarily driven by conscious decision-making processes to be effective. Thus, in Ring’s reading, Farocki’s and Losmann’s stark documentation of seemingly all-encompassing systems of surveillance reveal the surprisingly hopeful message that the complicit, surveilled subject remains—but however objectified she may be—a subject whose response to her own surveillance can be monitored but not controlled.

It is surprising that while German history is notoriously fraught with excesses of surveillance and control, offering a rich body of literary and cinematic works, the topic has until recently received only modest attention in German Studies. The pioneering special issue of the German Studies Review on Surveillance and German Studies, edited by S. Jonathan Wiesen and Andrew Zimmerman, offers a broad historical framework, laying the groundwork for and inviting scholarly participation in the emerging field of the surveillance studies within the humanities. Indeed, through the tangible urgency of the post-9/11 situation, the subject has gained in momentum and offers new perspectives, not only on surveillance and control as a threat, but also on the topos of visuality and on the complexities inherent to the sense of sight as it frames, constructs, and deconstructs relations of care and control within and through our visual culture. Although situated within specific historical, political, and social contexts ranging from the nineteenth-century visual surveillance to twenty-first-century digital surveillance, the contributions to this special issue seek to understand the problem of surveillance thematized by German-speaking authors from a global perspective. They transcend the specificity of their foci by making operative the timeless dimension of surveillance grounded in visuality, while linking literary and cinematic works to the discourse proper of classical and contemporary
surveillance studies. Thus, these articles contribute to the field of German Studies by opening it up to an interdisciplinary and transnational debate on surveillance that is just beginning. Finally, one of the common threads in this issue concerns the failure of surveillance, which is also always at work alongside its efforts of expansion. Detecting loopholes in the system and locating forms of resistance in voluntary and involuntary human agency, there is a hopeful note in all of these contributions. By working against the grain of the tendency to discuss exclusively the all-pervasiveness of surveillance practices, our contributors speak to the productive potential of oppositional practices.

Works Cited


