
Book Review

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Surveillance and Terror in Post-9/11 British and American Television
by Darcie Rives-East

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Social scientists widely agree that television –sociologically speaking– is oriented to provide viewers with the necessary guidelines to understand reality, but in so doing, sometimes, the spectatorship internalises the dominant ideology, which means those beliefs, stories and stereotypes which legitimise the status quo. The book *Surveillance and Terror in Post 9/11 British and American Television*, which is authored by Darcie Rives-East starts from the premise that 9/11 –as founding event– not only introduced a new climate of *panopticism*, where the cultural values of terror and surveillance prevailed, but also altered the conditions of geopolitics worldwide. Having said this, the introductory chapter explores the nature and evolution of television as well as debates what the act of watching television means. In the days post 9/11, the War on Terror and the doctrine of preemption, which punctuated on the needs of conducting a preventive world in those ‘rogue states’ considered a threat for Washington, changed the content of the cultural industries (i.e., TV documentaries, cinema, videogames and television). The US gradually ushered into an atmosphere of mistrust where the figures of police, intelligence agencies, imprisonment and counter-terrorism captivated the attentions of American citizens. At a closer look, as Rives-East puts it, though television serves as an ideological instrument, its influence is not unilaterally imposed to all agents because viewers often attest, internalise or reject those narratives revolving around terrorism and 9/11. Rives-East selects the American and British television in view of the fact that the Anglo-alliance played a crucial role in the invasions in Iraq and Afghanistan. In the same way, both cultures (British and American) have developed similar discourses respecting to the possibilities of democracy as a cure against terrorism. The second chapter reviews the idealised archetype of prison –in TV documentaries as *Locked up abroad and Wentworth*. These documentaries reproduce the long-dormant discourses which were foundational in the *American character*. Basically, Puritanism evolved historically according to two axioms: the natural exemption which poses Anglo-race above the international law, and captivity narratives. Beyond the fascination for imprisonment lies the idea –which is alimented by terrorism- we are living with the enemy within. The non-Western ‘other’ seems to be not only an undesired guest but an object of suspicion. The third chapter, complementarily, focuses on the figures of police

and forensic disciplines as two key factors that help state to control criminality. Doubtless, Sherlock Holmes was a pioneering detective who laid the foundations of this new science, at the least in the social imaginary. His task consisted in reproducing the conditions that led to the crime not only for discovering the reason but the responsible. Just after 9/11, Police is advocated to prevent the crime –alluding to the precautionary doctrine– while the individual rights are very well vulnerated. To put the same in bluntly, one of the limitations of the precautionary doctrine lies that events are judged before they take place. This pseudo academic position contradicts the Roman jurisprudence and places the democratic institutions in jeopardy.

Chapter four, rather, emphasises the darkness of the espionage and sometimes the impunity of intelligence agencies often acting beyond the scrutiny of lay-citizens. Rives-East reminds –like in many of her chapters forming this book– that 9/11 triggered a point of convergence between fear and surveillance. While the former signals to the government the capacity –if not authority– to do the best for protecting its citizens, the latter accelerated the rise of many intelligence agencies trained to spy even to the citizens they should protect. This great contradiction which posits the lay-person as a potential terrorist not only allowed the intromission of state to the private sphere, but compromises the constitutional rights in the US and the UK as never before. This seems to be the reasons that lead Rives-East to interrogate furthermore on the limitations of the surveillance culture, precisely in the last chapter. And of course, this contradiction seems to be conflictive but necessary in a new radicalised society where the *panopticon* set the pace to *synopticon*. Her main thesis is that watching television should be understood in the limits of a more solipsist society where the non-Western other is not desired. As 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 urgency of articulating critical viewpoints to confront the status quo as well as the needs of dismantling the ideological discourses around the logic of surveillance. It is important not to lose the sight of the fact that we are framing our own lives as a real drama. This begs the question, why are we fascinated to consume terrorism-related news?

As discussed, 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.