

ROUTLEDGE ADVANCES IN SOCIOLOGY

# Opening the Black Box

The work of watching

Gavin J.D. Smith

# **Opening the Black Box**

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**Gavin J.D. Smith**

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# Opening the Black Box

Closed circuit television (CCTV) cameras are a prominent, if increasingly familiar, feature of urbanism. They symbolise the faith that spatial authorities place in technical interventions for the treatment of social problems. CCTV was principally introduced to sterilise municipalities, to govern conducts and to protect properties. Vast expenditure has been committed to these technologies without a clear sense of how they influence things. CCTV cameras might appear inanimate, but *Opening the Black Box* shows them to be vital mediums within relational circulations of supervision.

The book excavates the social relations entwining the everyday usage of CCTV. It takes the reader on a journey from living beneath the camera, to working behind the lens. Attention focuses on the labour exerted by camera operators as they source and profile distanced spectacles. These workers are paid to scan monitor screens in the search for disorderly vistas, visualising stimuli according to its perceived riskiness and/or allurements. However, the projection of this gaze can draw an unsettling reflection. It can mean enduring behavioural extremities as an impotent witness. It can also entail making spontaneous decisions that determine the course of justice.

*Opening the Black Box*, therefore, contemplates the seductive and traumatic dimensions of monitoring telemediated 'riskscapes' through the prism of camera circuitry. It probes the positioning of camera operators as 'vicarious' custodians of a precarious social order and engages their subjective experiences. It reveals the work of watching to be an ambiguous practice – as much about managing external disturbances on the street as managing internal disruptions in the self.

**Gavin J.D. Smith** is a Senior Lecturer in Sociology at the Australian National University. He is the author of many reviews, book chapters, journal articles and media reports on the social impacts and implications of surveillance diffusion. His current research explicates the dynamic interplay between systems and subjects of surveillance, particularly the interpretive meanings people attribute to their visibility and the labour they invest in managing their ascribed 'data-body'.

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The work of watching  
*Gavin J.D. Smith*

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# Acknowledgements

Writing and journeying share comparable properties. Each involves motion and indeterminacy of one form or another, commencing at a start place and terminating at an end point: a process of movement from one destination to the next, a transition of being into a state of becoming. Each activity evokes vistas of terrestrial topographies and encourages speculative projections on observed dimensions. The hope, for most writers and travellers, is that the undertaking will be rewarding and the carriage safe. Of course this is not an aspiration that can ever be guaranteed. There are too many influence-wielding intermediaries and interdependencies. Velocity, for instance, has a habit of interfering, as do the forces of nature. There are always hidden turbulences, fuel blockages and unexpected delays: a multitude of obstacles that were not anticipated, or a section in the plan that just does not make intuitive sense. For those trying to escape persecution or flee from environmental extremities, journeying seems a non-negotiable pursuit. It is a means of *survival*. For those privileged critters determining their own migratory itineraries, journeying can provide introspective openings and invite kudos. It is, in contrast, a means of *enriching*. Exactly how an arrival is made and in what mode of conveyance, influences the nature of the transit endured and the reception experienced, especially in human contexts. Ponder, for example, the contrasting ways in which undocumented refugees and documented industrialists get treated at international borders, notwithstanding their equivalent genetic constitutions and fleshy boundaries. Yet the wonder of journeying for all creatures of the world is essentially the same. It provides an experiential medium for storytelling and an opportunity to pit life and limb against the elements. The enchantment of voyaging, as writer or as wanderer, resides less in reasons for peregrination than in gradual realisation that a story you embark on is not necessarily the one you finish with.

Reaching the terminus of this journey would not have been possible without the obliging support of many carriers. Innumerable people have tendered encouragement, insight and succour, all in an effort to propel me along the path. There are, however, a number of conveyors to whom I owe special gratitude. I wish to thank the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) for awarding me a graduate studentship to research CCTV. I also wish to thank colleagues, staff and students at the University of Aberdeen, City University London, the University of Sydney

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Gavin John Douglas Smith  
February 2014

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