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The University of Toronto Under Sur/Sous/Subveillance

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Silke Roesler-Keilholz reflects on her research stay in Toronto. She takes readers on a journey, following the traces of Canadian Media Theory, especially those related to Marshall McLuhan, to develop a virtual topography of the UofT that feeds into her project on Rhizomatic Subveillance and Surveillance Architectures. In this piece, she traces the intersections of everyday life, including fashion and clothing, and human bodies with digital surveillance, while also looking at subveillance, which literally gets under people's skin.

My stay at the Munk School of Global Affairs and Public Policy[1] at the University of Toronto forms the anchor and starting point, a node in the network of encounters, spatial and intellectual explorations[2] in the metropolis on Lake Ontario. The aim of my research stay was to trace 'Toronto thought' through observations, conversations, research and the presentation and questioning of my own research theses.
As a media scholar, a research stay in Toronto, the home of one of the central schools of thought in media theory, offers much promise. The so-called Toronto School, also known as the Canadian School or Canadian Media Theory, summarizes central Canadian thinkers of the twentieth century under the above name.

Fig. 1: Department for Communicative Disorders, © Silke Roesler-Keilholz

Marshall McLuhan's theses on media ecology are just as relevant to my research as the works of Walter Ong, Jack Goody and Harold A. Innis are important sources of inspiration for my teaching. I was curious to find out what still remained perceptible of the traces left by from the "Canadian Mind"[3] (Arthur Kroker) on technology, how it might have evolved and how it would still have an impact on the University of Toronto.

Various dates and events – always with links to my current research project entitled "Rhizomatic Subveillance. Surveillance Architectures" – have created a productive data network of media studies impressions and reflections. So I strolled through the various faculties, institutes and rooms as an academic tourist, parasite or spy, and implemented all the information into my project. Visiting different places and penetrating them mentally gave rise to a virtual topography of the University of Toronto (UofT).

Listening – Center for Culture and Technology

I spent a highly inspiring evening in the historic Coach House of the Center for Culture and Technology.[4] A special aura still emanates from the building, which smells of musty wood, old pipes and carpet.

Fig. 2: Marshall McLuhan in front of the Coach House, 1950s, © Courtesy Robert Lansdale Photography, University of Toronto Archives

Fig. 3: Silke Roesler-Keilholz in front of the Coach House, 2023, © Silke Roesler-Keilholz

The Monday Night Seminars still take place here at McLuhan's old place of work: "The Monday Night Seminars carry on the tradition of the Center for Culture and Technology's public seminars at the University of Toronto, first established by Canadian media theorist Marshall McLuhan. They are designed to challenge prevailing cultural notions about technology and provoke new insight on the possibilities for a more equitable technological future."[5]

One evening the anthology *Queer Data Studies*[6], edited by Patrick Keilty, was presented in a highly attentive, ambitious and yet relaxed atmosphere with lectures by Shaka McGlotten on the queer driving service Homobiles[7] and by Harris Kornstein on AI-generated queerness via images. The input for my research was very valuable in addressing counter-surveillance aspects through the presentation and reflection of alternative, queer

projects.

The further search for the ‘Toronto thought’ and the Canadian media studies spirit finally led me to the archives of the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library[8], where an immense mass of books, scripts, notes, flyers and photos by and about Marshall McLuhan (and his companions) manifest his work.

Fig. 4: Thomas Fisher Library of Rare Books, © Silke Roesler-Keilholz

The review of the archive material made it impressively clear how strongly the figure of Marshall McLuhan, his work and the corresponding place of work are inscribed in the history of the University of Toronto and are still present today. I mainly looked at sources from the 1960s to the 1980s in order to prepare the course “Canadian Media Theory, Toronto School & Co” of the Chair of Media Studies in the summer semester of 2024 at the University of Regensburg.

Researching – Robarts Library

The Robarts Library (1973) and the attached Faculty of Information including the ischool rise mightily. The building, which looks like a huge calculating machine and resembles settings from an early sci-fi film, can be

assigned to the sometimes controversial architectural movement of Brutalism. The building is located in the northwest of the university campus, which also exudes a form of strength, seriousness and ambition through its students, lecturers and other international researchers.

Fig. 5: Robarts Library, © Silke Roesler-Keilholz

Fig. 6: Faculty of Information, © Silke Roesler-Keilholz

The solid concrete library, which specializes in the humanities and social sciences, houses some 5 million books and almost as many microfilms. The books seem to be well guarded in this safe and storehouse of the culture of remembrance built of stone. The works from the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, including Isaac Newton's *Principia Mathematica* and Egyptian papyrus writings, are also kept safe there.[9] As is the archive material from the above-mentioned Coach House and McLuhan's influential work at the Center for Culture and Technology, which allowed me to become immersed for days in the Canadian media discourse of the 1960s.

Wondering – MannLab

> Sousveillance now reverses the balance of power in the surveillance arrangement and means, for example, the surveillance of the state or other authorities by the population.

The MannLab[10] is less monumental and fortress-like than the 'Fort Book', as the Robarts Library is also called, but more like a think-tank, a laboratory in which research is carried out, and, above all, where things are experimented on and tinkered with.[11] The lab is named after Steve Mann, Professor of Electrical and Computer

Engineering at the Faculty of Information at the University of Toronto, guru of wearable computing and creator of the term sousveillance.

Fig. 7: MannLab Toronto, © Silke Roesler-Keilholz

In the MannLab, inventions are researched and developed by Steve Mann and his closest colleagues. With locations in Toronto, Shenzhen and Silicon Valley, the laboratory sees itself as a global ecosystem in which entrepreneurs, thinkers and visionaries come together to shape how people and technology will work together in the future.

Mann advocates the use of wearable computing, i. e. a wearable technology (e. g. special glasses), in order to break up or liberalize the power structure of asymmetrical surveillance 'from above'.[12] Hierarchies are flattened or even reversed. The Canadian computer scientist has strongly criticized surveillance as a classic form of surveillance "from above" ("oversight" or "watching from above"), seeing it as the cause of an "asymmetric distribution of power": "With surveillance, the subject of the gaze is at a disadvantage and is often unaware of when (s)he is being watched, and thus the distribution of power is asymmetric." [13] Sousveillance now reverses the balance of power in the surveillance arrangement and means, for example, the surveillance of the state or

other authorities by the population. “The practice of viewing from below when coupled with political action becomes a balancing force that helps – in democratic societies – move the overall ‘state’ towards a kind of veillance (monitoring) equilibrium, what we refer to as equiveillance.”[14] Sousveillance opens up a democratic perspective on the use of surveillance technologies and manifests the liberal notion of an emancipatory use of media. To realize his idea, Mann suggests the/an active use of wearable computing, such as smart glasses with outward-facing cameras: “[W]e are increasingly gazing back at institutions using technology […].”[15] In other examples, monitoring from above is intended to be neutralized or undermined through blocking, restoring and masking.[16] These technologies are being developed in Toronto’s MannLab, among others.

Presenting – Munk School of Global Affairs and Public Policy

A central point of the research trip was my public lecture entitled “Smart Fashion Under Subveillance”[17], an excerpt from my habilitation project with the working title “Rhizomatic Subveillance. Surveillance Architectures”. Since the Munk School of Global Affairs and Public Policy is dedicated to the area of globalization and has digitalization as its focus, I hoped to gain important insights for my global and politically relevant project. The event was opened and moderated by the historian and filmmaker Lilia Topouzova, who in her role as a professor at the University of Toronto is an important link in the networking of different institutions, such as the Munk School, the Center for European, Russian, and Eurasian Studies, and the Faculty of Information. The audience at the extremely well-attended event was correspondingly.

> I define surveillance (its etymology deriving from ‘sur’ which means ‘over’, ‘above’ or ‘from above’ & ‘veiller’ which means ‘to watch’) as a form of directed observation with a specific intention and the aim of gaining knowledge. This distinguishes surveillance from observation, making it something active and aggressive.

Fig. 8: Munk School of Global Affairs and Public Policy, © Silke Roesler-Keilholz

In my talk, I explored the question of the extent to which surveillance mechanisms take effect in the context of smart fashion and how these could be reflected in examples under the term subveillance. I define surveillance (its etymology deriving from 'sur' which means 'over', 'above' or 'from above' & 'veiller' which means 'to watch') as a form of directed observation with a specific intention and the aim of gaining knowledge. In most cases, surveillance conditions or evokes a subsequent action (a 'punishment', a 'manipulation'). This distinguishes surveillance from observation, making it something active and aggressive. Surveillance processes can be located between the two poles of a visible, topographically delimitable surveillance space (such as the illuminated cone of a prison spotlight on a wall fenced in with barbed wire) and an invisible, covert surveillance based on digital code in the World Wide Web. Remarkably, the surveillance spaces of both poles are calculated: one space is visible and physically 'measurable', the other is invisible and calculated by algorithms. Whereas the surveillance of individuals once functioned by locking up and chastising bodies, i. e. via architectures (think of Foucault's Panopticon, the prison, psychiatry, etc.), the current aim of surveillance is to generate (more and more) knowledge about the spaces *and* the people living there.

> I have coined the term subveillance to outline a special, more in-depth form of

> surveillance. Subveillance operates subcutaneously, which means it is interested in the processes and biodata under the skin, is invisible and produces further digital data. […] Subveillance therefore refers to a new dimension, a next level of modern surveillance using electronic technology; a digital form of surveillance based on algorithms.

I have coined the term subveillance[18] to outline a special, more in-depth form of surveillance. Subveillance operates subcutaneously, which means it is interested in the processes and biodata under the skin, is invisible and produces further digital data. By generating knowledge about the object of surveillance and consequently being able to manipulate (e. g. through advertisements) the person as a subject on the basis of the collected data, this form of surveillance is topologically characterized. Subveillance therefore refers to a new dimension, a next level of modern surveillance using electronic technology; a digital form of surveillance based on algorithms.

Monitoring devices are getting closer and closer to us even though we wear them on our bodies. Technologized fabrics and sensor-equipped garments are changing the way we interact with ourselves and the way our bodies interact with our surroundings. People and their bodies are literally networked with the environment. What all the garments we have looked at during the talk had in common was that they operated via sensors and that internal processes were projected to the outside. Dutch researcher Lianne Touissant states: “Techno-fashion brings surveillance closer than ever before: as a prime instance of wearable technology, it by definition resides in close proximity to the body but also allows us to take surveillance into our own hands.”[19]

The example of fashion can, I argue, be used to study a spatial shift in the effect and access of surveillance mechanisms. In the context of smart fashion, the surveillance forms of surveillance and subveillance merge. Smart garments form a hinge and a membrane in which, for example, bio-processes can be observed, stored and processed through implemented sensors, i. e. processed and mirrored to the outside. In this way, the garments weave people into a network of data, creating a rhizomatic web of information. People are connected to their inner selves via the garments they wear and are also linked to the outside world. “What makes smart fabrics revolutionary,” says Rebeccah Pailes-Friedman, “is that they have the ability to do many things that traditional fabrics cannot, including communicate, transform, conduct energy, and grow”.[20] Techno-fashion can communicate all kinds of information about the wearer to the outside world by converting certain inputs (e. g. physiological data) into visible outputs (e. g. light, color, sound or vibration). Fashion communicates or people communicate through fashion. It is necessary to ask whether, and to what degree, a shift in the role of the subject can be observed. It is not just that biological data is scanned and evaluated, and the subject is potentially the target of advertising such as promotional offers for sports products, heart pills, fat or stress reduction medication; people can also be transformed from their passive role into an active role through technologized fashion. In the concluding discussion, the sensitivity of the Canadian attitude to the surveillance discourse crystallized.

Relaxing – Downtown Toronto

If you look south from the campus, the skyscrapers of downtown Toronto, including the CN Tower, stretch into the sky like the guardians of the city.

Fig. 9: Scotiabank Arena, © Silke Roesler-Keilholz

I was able to spend one of the last evenings at the NBA game between the Toronto Raptors and the Atlanta Hawks, witnessing how the German world champion and current Raptors point guard Dennis Schröder cracked the 10,000 point mark in the NBA.[21] What a spectacle, what an experience – all in front of the eyes of rapper and Raptors fan Drake, currently the best-known Torontonian after McLuhan and a top Canadian export. Finally, there is hope of being able to explore the so-called 'entertainment district' of downtown Manhattan as part of a future visit to the Toronto International Film Festival, another central place of media, pop culture and the networking of the virtual topography of Toronto.[22] Contacts with Canadian filmmakers have already been made.

Notes

[1] I would like to thank the Leibniz ScienceCampus, its board and especially Paul Vickers for the opportunity to go into the world with an outgoing fellowship. At the Munk School, I would like to thank Rob Austin, Olga Ketscharuk and Taanya Mehta for their organizational and logistical support, and Lilia Topouzova for input into Canadian science and my project.

[2] *Explorations. Studies in Culture and Communication* (1953–1955) was also the name of the journal founded by

Marshall McLuhan and edited by Edmund Carpenter.

[3] Arthur Kroker: *Technology and the Canadian Mind.* Montreal and New York 1984.

[4] https://www.cultureandtech.utoronto.ca/, last accessed December 13, 2023.

[5] https://www.cultureandtech.utoronto.ca/mondaynightseminars, last accessed December 13, 2023.

[6] Keilty, Patrick (ed.): *Queer Data Studies*. Washington: Washington University Press 2024.

[7] https://grist.org/cities/homobiles-sfs-queer-ride-service-is-the-anti-uber/, last accessed December 13, 2023.

[8] https://fisher.library.utoronto.ca/, last accessed December 13, 2023.

[9] I would like to thank the archivist Tys Klumpenhouwer, who quickly obtained a wealth of material (letters, notes and other writings from Marshall McLuhan as well as minutes from meetings of the Center for Culture and Technology) for inspection.

[10] https://www.utoronto.ca/news/meet-steve-mann-father-wearable-computing, last accessed December 13, 2023.

[11] https://mannlab.com/, last accessed December 13, 2023.

[12] See Mann, Steve & Ferenbok, Joseph: New Media and the Power Politics of Souveillance in a Surveillance-Dominated World. In: *Surveillance & Society* 11 (1/2), pp. 18–34, here p. 23.

[13] Mann & Ferenbok (2013, p. 23).

[14] Mann & Ferenbok (2013, p. 29).

[15] Mann & Ferenbok (2013, p. 26).

[16] See Mann, Steve, Jason Nolan, and Barry Wellmann (2003). Sousveillance: Inventing and using wearable computing devices for data collection in surveillance environments. In: *Surveillance & Society* . 1 (3), pp. 331-355, here p. 333.

[17] I would like to thank the historian and filmmaker Lilia Topouzova, who introduced me and my talk and who led the subsequent discussion.

[18] I outline the development from a topographically operating form of surveillance to the collection of knowledge about a topological dimension in my habilitation project under the term subveillance, which I created and would like to establish.

[19] Lianne Touissant: *Wearing Technology. When Fashion and Technology Entwine*. Radboud Repository. Radboud University Nijmegen 2018, p. 190.

[20] Rebeccah Pailes-Friedman: *Smart Textiles for Designers: Inventing the Future of Fabrics*, London: Laurence Kind 2016, p. 14.

[21] https://www.faz.net/aktuell/sport/mehr-sport/nba-meilenstein-deutscher-basketballstar-dennis-schroeder-knackt-10000-seiten-19383535.html, last accessed December 15, 2023.

[22] https://www.tiff.net/, last accessed December 13, 2023.

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