

Chapter 19

Urban Surveillance in Mexico

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, the symbolic cultural dimension of technology and surveillance technologies in two cities and two commercial centers in central Mexico will be explored, especially the various Closed Circuit Television Systems (CCTV). This will allow the analysis of the way in which these technologies have made viable specific ways of sorting and governance of public and private spaces in the country. This document then examines the relationship established between the symbolic meanings given to these surveillance technologies in said urban spaces. Included is a series of observations and interviews of those in charge of these systems.

INTRODUCTION

During the last 10 years, an important increase in the installation of closed-circuit television (CCTV) in Mexico has been observed, both in public and private spaces. This is a response from government authorities, as well as from private administration instances, to the growing feeling of insecurity dealing with crime and delinquency experienced by the population. Although this can be seen in some spaces of Mexico (Arteaga Botello, 2007), it does not turn out to be a generalized

rule as yet. In the case of the municipalities analyzed in this document, Tlalnepantla and Toluca (located in the state of Mexico), CCTV has been used, initially, as a tool for urban management, the organization of transit ways, as well as the supervision of public services (such as potable water, drainage and electricity). Subsequently, the usage of surveillance systems has been modified, being directed toward the supposed prevention of offenses and crime. Another transformation in the utilization of CCTV can be observed in the case of commercial centers – which are also examined in this paper. Being installed for the maintaining and securing of these spaces, surveillance systems

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were directed towards the supervision of daily activities of employees, the social classification of their visitors, as well as the harmonization with other systems of public management of the municipalities.

Traditionally, this shift in the routine applied to CCTVs has been attributed by the system's operators as a natural consequence, on one side, to the viewing capacity given by the cameras and on the other, to the information and data offered. In a certain way, the metamorphoses can be explained as driven by the technological capacity that surveillance systems have on their own. In this document a critique of this vision is given, highlighting the fact that such metamorphosis responds to the symbolic weight given to the video cameras instead of their actual capacity to see.

In the same way as what happened with the introduction of computers after the Second World War (Alexander, 2006), CCTVs perform a speech on which they are considered salvation as far as they allow the apparent organization of social life, the rationalization of public and private spaces, apart from guaranteeing the reduction to a minimum of crime and disruptive acts. Its usage, in this way, is framed on the notion of technology as a sacred object. This analysis proposes, following the developments of cultural sociology by Jeffrey C. Alexander (2000), that surveillance put in place through the use of CCTV, in the cases outlined here, respond more to the logic of a symbolic network, than to its "technological capacities". In this sense, videosurveillance cameras are signs of a cultural framework; and the cameras operators, determined by this framework, give a special meaning to this technology. This explanation attempts to distance itself from the idea that social transformation is based on technological development and the utilitarian approach, which considers CCTV as the only logical answer to the problems of public insecurity. The camera operator works from the basis of a symbolic social framework and not from the logic of the rationalization of space in the urban and commercial environment.

A PERSPECTIVE ANALYSIS

Technology is inserted in the cultural narratives as an element that guarantees the organization and the rationality of social relations –transforming ordinary language of complex systems into a numeric meaning–, taking for granted that which responds to a certain objective materiality. In this way, concerns such as risk, security, well-being, social classification, as well as its legitimacy or illegitimacy, can be revised from specific cultural structures, who have inserted the use of technologies (Alexander & Smith, 2000), in particular those oriented to surveillance –such as CCTV, although not exclusively.

CCTV is found immersed –as technological instruments– in the logic of meaning that opposes the world of negative and positive signs. As stated by Alexander (2000), in the case of the use of computers after the Second World War, these were considered both as a salvation (its role would be important to human development), as well as an element of destruction: simultaneously, they were conceived as gods and demons. The computer represented, therefore, a sacred and mysterious object, which contributed to the fact that it was outside the contact of ordinary people, and its use reserved for a group of experts. But also, the computer, as stated by Alexander (2000), produced much fear, and generated the idea of the alienation of people, generating the feeling of slavery, as though its presence will destroy the foundations of society. This eschatological vindication certainly has changed much with the introduction of the personal computer, turning this technological development into a routine object, and each time more divested of the positive and negative characteristics of which were provided in the beginning.

Electronic technologies, in this sense, would not be in and of themselves regarded as empirical, objects and rational references, but the transference from a myth to scientific forms. In this way, CCTV's, as well as computers during the middle

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