

# The Rock Observed: Art and Surveillance in Michael Winter's *This All Happened*

Christopher J. Armstrong

---

Volume 25, Number 1, Spring 2010

URI: [https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/nflds25\\_1art02](https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/nflds25_1art02)

[See table of contents](#)

---

Publisher(s)

Faculty of Arts, Memorial University

ISSN

0823-1737 (print)

1715-1430 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

---

Cite this article

Armstrong, C. J. (2010). The Rock Observed: Art and Surveillance in Michael Winter's *This All Happened*. *Newfoundland Studies*, 25(1), 37–54.

# The Rock Observed: Art and Surveillance in Michael Winter's *This All Happened*<sup>1</sup>

CHRISTOPHER J. ARMSTRONG

LIKE MUCH CONTEMPORARY postmodern art, *This All Happened*, Michael Winter's first novel, playfully redraws the borders of fiction and reality. That much is immediately clear in a text that calls itself a "fictional memoir," yet offers a truth claim as its title. Indeed, if the journal form of this novel, with its 365 entries extending over a calendar year, heightens our truth-telling expectations, then the preface, with its twist on libel disclaimers, insists on our looking past the fiction: "Any resemblance to people living or dead is intentional and encouraged." A glance at the cover, with its spikey-haired, Winterish head peeping at us through binoculars, does little to quell suspicions that, in fact, some fairly blatant snooping has been going on to put this work of fiction together. In the novel itself, we find Winter's alter ego, Gabriel English, training those binoculars on the city of St. John's and its people — for his art, of course — but also to the point of some fairly chilling invasions of privacy:

From my bedroom window I can watch Maisie walk down Parade Street with groceries....

I wait until Maisie is in her porch. I can see her run for the phone.

You should close your front door, missus.

Who is this.

I've frightened her. It's Gabe, I say.

Jeez, boy. (34-5)

"Fiction" like this didn't sit well with real people in St John's, especially those acquainted with the author; one member of Winter's circle threatened him with a

punch in the nose for prying and publishing. That incident, reported in an *Evening Telegram* interview occasioned by the appearance of 2004's *The Big Why*, gave Winter a chance to deny all charges or to cease and desist. Instead, reiterating the sinister logic of modern surveillance, in which one never knows if another is looking or listening, Winter confided, "Truthfully, I take it as a compliment when people think my writing is autobiographical .... I want to fool people into thinking that I'm writing about my life" (Vaccaro).<sup>2</sup> Autobiographical writing, fictional or otherwise, inevitably entwines others; and thus Lydia Murphy, ex-lover of the fictional writer hero, gives voice to the very paranoia that Winter's remark might inspire when she observes angrily, "I suppose youre writing that down."

These provocative gestures toward the (auto)biographical real can, of course, be defended on the grounds that all vital art is based on lived experience. Yet the potential violence of an act of writing that exposes the intimate lives of others or which "captures" some human emotion, even when fictionalized, has not gone unquestioned. In *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction*, Wayne C. Booth asks, "Are there limits to the author's freedom to expose, in the service of art or self, the most delicate secrets of those whose lives provide material?" A definitive answer is not forthcoming: Booth merely observes that such intrusions and transgressions seem unjustifiable, even in the name of art (130). For Gabriel English, himself keeping a personal journal while writing a historical novel, the intimate moments of self and others in his own present serve his fiction of the past. But like many who aspire to write, Gabriel is for the most part untroubled by an "ethics of fiction." Indeed, in *This All Happened* and in my account of it, the ethical issues at stake assume less importance than the novel's exploration of the late-twentieth century landscape of privacy, surveillance and art's boundary relation to them. Insofar as an "ethics of fiction" concerns mainly the realm of the private, I insist that *This All Happened* exhibits what can be called a post-privacy consciousness. That is to say, it is an exploration of the stakes for social justice under contemporary surveillance, a view of surveillance that moves beyond today's pervasive discourse about the loss of privacy, monopolized as it is by the more privileged and mobile middle-class. Traversing surveillance regimes of the traditional, modern, and postmodern, the novel examines how in their contemporary, coercive form, technologies of surveillance effect "social sorting," the marking and maintaining of class divisions.

Winter's novel also explores the various ways in which art is complicit in surveillance, raising questions as to what, if any, resistance art might offer in this, the age of the reductive, decentering, and ubiquitous data-image. Consequential on that, however, the novel also recognizes that surveillance is wrapped up with a deep human need for belonging — the desire for a benevolent gaze and for community. It suggests that art satisfies a pleasure of seeing and being seen, of knowing and being known. The novel argues that today art with an autobiographical thrust struggles, in unavoidably problematical ways, without alibi, to foster human response

amid contemporary media spectacle and increasingly intrusive and insidious forms of social coercion in the 21st century.

i

It's a fact that not much could happen in our world without surveillance. British sociologist Anthony Giddens makes it one of the four institutional dimensions of modernity, defining it as "the supervisory control of subject populations, whether this control takes the form of 'visible' supervision in [Michel] Foucault's sense, or the use of information to coordinate social activities" (15). Over the last twenty years or so, spurred by the arrival of advanced telecommunications and networked computer databases, our society has passed from a modern era of state monitoring, with its paperland of census records, voting lists, vital statistics, and bureaucratic redtape, to a postmodern condition of proliferating video cameras, decentralized databases, and computer-enhanced prying, prompting sociologist David Lyon to insist on a new and disturbingly persuasive label for our contemporary liberal democracy: "surveillance society." Yet surveillance, Lyon hastens to add, is not new at all, it antedates the modern era; in small communities there was always someone watching, listening, gossiping—and not always to our ill. The Newfoundland of Winter's novel includes this full spectrum of surveillance societies — traditional, modern, and postmodern — from the embodied interactions of small outport communities and urban spaces to the virtual ones of filmic representation, networked databases, and surveillance cameras.

Inspired in part by the work of Michel Foucault, especially his *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1977), the cross-disciplinary, sociological subfield of Surveillance Studies (Lyon 2007) has begun to take account of this new order. Starting in the 1980s with technological advances in computing as well as the extension of surveillance into the sphere of consumer activity, academic interest in surveillance increasingly focussed on three themes: the capitalist economic logic of surveillance, the influence of Weberian bureaucratic rationality, and questions of power and resistance (Lyon and Zureik, 1996, 4-6). Scholars in the field have devoted their energies to addressing privacy rights, complementing and critiquing the outpouring of public concern expressed in editorial pages, libertarian jeremiads, and the activism of such watchdog organizations as the London-based Privacy International, the international Computer Professionals for Social Responsibility, the Electronic Frontier Foundation, and Canada's own Office of the Privacy Commissioner.<sup>3</sup> Yet while such civil institutions have fostered a discourse of privacy and raised and rallied public attention, theorists of surveillance society insist that the discourse of privacy is inadequate to task of contesting, let alone conceptualizing, the emerging regime. Certainly, libertarian jeremiads such as Charles J. Sykes' *The End of Privacy* (1999) exhibit a kind of blind fury, flailing away at state and corporate intrusion whilst expressing equal scorn at the everyday surrender of privacy for the sake of consumer convenience — not to mention Sykes' intemperate vilification of our "perverse" culture of exhibitionism. Such perspectives, as Lyon

and others insist, place emphasis on the individual sphere, ignoring the fact that “surveillance practices and technologies are becoming a key means of marking and reinforcing social divisions” (“Surveillance Technology,” 2003, 166). Surveillance society poses more than an end to privacy; it raises questions of social justice.

Outside academia, a wide range of responses have greeted the arrival of surveillance society. Avant-garde art has provided some of the most provocative interventions, yet it is nonetheless implicated in media spectacle, as Hal Foster pointed out over twenty years ago in *Recodings*. More recently, an extensive multimedia exhibit held in Karlsruhe, Germany, in 2001 and 2002 called *Ctrl [Space]: Rhetorics of Surveillance from Bentham to Big Brother* (2002) documents the variety of artistic engagements with surveillance society over the last few decades. Beginning in the 1960s, avant-garde artists took up the new communication technologies, installing video cameras in galleries and museums as well as public spaces, turning their own video installations on the monitoring security cameras; subverting viewers’ spatial and temporal sense or confounding the positions of subject and object of surveillance. Among some of the landmarks featured in the catalogue: Andy Warhol’s pioneering of the reality soap in the sixties; Michael’s Klier’s “The Giant” (1982/83), a “city symphony” of images culled from video surveillance cameras (Weibel et al, 82); the relentlessly harassing male gaze of Yoko Ono’s “Film No. 6 Rape (Clip)” (1969); or “TerraVision” (1994-2001), a 1:1 scale virtual map of the earth. Other artists have worked in more pedestrian but equally troubling modes. French conceptual artist Sophie Calle has stalked strangers, gathered information from found address books, and hired private investigators to follow her (Wilson), while Australian performance artist Denis Beaubois and the New York City Surveillance Camera players have directly confronted the electronic eye of Big Brother in the public space of street and square.

Surveillance, privacy invasion, and a host of dystopian possibilities are, it seems, indelibly inscribed in the public imagination, as the currency of Orwell’s Big Brother attests. Its reconfiguration as a reality soap opera on European and North American TV screens is not, however, a fact merely to be cited but explained. For the moment, it will suffice to point out that surveillance has long been a staple of commercial pop culture: in song lyrics, movies, comics, jokes, and advertisements. These manifestations reflect social attitudes, technological advances, and deep human longings. Alfred Hitchcock’s *Rear Window*, for example, married Cold war era paranoia to the recently available zoom lens in order to reflect a commonly held view that, in the words of one character in the film, America had become “a nation of Peeping Toms” (Marx 198). As David Lyon (2007) points out, popular culture and modern media not only portray for us what surveillance is like, typically in alarmist fashion; they also help legitimize, even accommodate us to surveillance itself (139-40).

Indeed, while many of these academic, artistic and pop trends point up anxieties of totalitarian control through intrusion and coercion, Peter Weibel, writing in

the *Ctrl [Space]* catalogue, contends that surveillance, or what he calls the panoptic principle, has been transformed from its totalitarian character as threat or punishment to a form of “amusement, liberation and pleasure” (215): “surveillance is enjoyment; observation is entertaining” (218). What with talk show confessionals and the reality TV of today, complementary modes of voyeurism and exhibitionism have been installed, as it were, via these proliferating popular culture forms (218). Such viewing pleasures, Weibel insists, prepare the way for our “conforming to future social relations”; in particular, they work toward inoculating against civil revolt as surveillance increasingly invades our lives (219). In this reading of contemporary surveillance as entertainment, pleasurable means lead us to the same tyrannical end, as we — to rephrase Neil Postman — amuse ourselves into democratic suicide. As Slavoj Žižek sees it, “today anxiety seems to arise from the prospect of NOT being exposed to the Other’s gaze all the time, so that the subject needs the camera’s gaze as a kind of ontological guarantee of his/her being” (225). More precisely, Žižek insists, invoking the reality soap-opera “Big Brother” for illustration:

What if Big Brother was already here, as the (imagined) Gaze for whom I was doing things, whom I tried to impress, to seduce, even when I was alone? What if the *Big Brother* show only renders palpable this universal structure? In other words, what if, in our ‘real lives,’ we already play a certain role — we are not what we are, we play ourselves? The welcome achievement of “Big Brother” is to remind us of this uncanny fact. (226)

Winter’s *This All Happened* underscores this human need for a certain kind of surveillance, a recognition that the Gaze is internalized in our very being; that the self is constructed under the gaze of another, bringing about not only a desire for communal belonging as knowing and being known but also exposing the fundamental theatricality to all presentations of the self.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, Winter’s “literary tableau” of contemporary Newfoundland (prefatory note, n.p.) describes a social experience inscribed in the wider Western culture of surveillance, in which Big Brother is no longer Orwellian prophecy but reality television, and in which, as Erik Larson has pointed out, the “surreptitious collection of personal information constitutes nothing less than an assault on human dignity and the sanctity of the self” (206), and in which new and subtle kinds of discrimination are mobilized in an “electronic caste system” (15). Gabriel English is for the most part a portrait of ambivalence amid this order of things. He is, as Paul Chafe argues, a literary flâneur, one who “records and re-creates the city and sells it back to its citizens in the form of a novel, poem, painting, or song” (Chafe 116). But with his binoculars signifying a desire to look and to survey, as well as a desire for distance, he is part cultural geographer, part postmodern voyeur. Gabriel relishes tabloid trash and is inclined to play intrusive jokes on his friends but feels uncomfortable when the tables are turned

(Winter, 2000, 201). Elsewhere, he begins to understand how his intimate journal writings trouble Lydia and evinces some concern over his milieu and its social order.

Indeed, for the most part, the narrative centre of gravity in Winter's fiction resides with characters whose class and cultural affiliations make them more likely to be the subjects rather than the objects of surveillance — at least in the sense of surveillance as coercion. Educated middle-class professionals, they travel, live comfortable, creative lives, and experience few unchosen deprivations, and only occasionally register an awareness of their social privilege. Class location, education, and social and geographical mobility, moreover, have implications for their art. Winter's fictions immediately preceding and following *This All Happened*, namely the short story collection 1999's *One Last Good Look* and the historical novel *The Big Why* (2004), have deliberate and intriguing reverberations in this context. In the former, Winter's alter ego Gabriel English passes from adolescent to university student to aspirant of the creative class, facing up to many of its compromises in *This All Happened* (2000). That passage is noted in the novel when Gabriel enters a single sentence in his journal for July 25th: "Life is a battle between attaining comfort and rebelling against it" (169). In *Look*, for example, Gabriel ponders the use that his intimate writings to Lydia could serve for his fiction but concludes that publication would only embarrass her (120). Those who trade in the intimacies of others often cultivate anonymity: Harry Caul of Coppola's *The Conversation* (1974) comes immediately to mind. So it is for the Gabriel of *Look*, who won't list his phone number in the directory, doesn't own a credit card, and uses false names to sign up for magazine subscriptions in order to discover the channels by which his name has been sold to marketers (122). Class surveillance is also added to the mix, as Gabriel confesses a curiosity for his one-time university friend Eric Peach, whose life is falling apart: "Eric was slipping off the grade and I wanted to watch him; he was my sole contact with, for lack of a better word, the oppressed" (114). Thus it appears unsurprising that Gabriel's love interest in the story "Something Practical," Doris Parsons, calls him "a spy, ... A quiet spy" (5).

An alleged spy is, of course, the central figure of Winter's second novel, *The Big Why* (2004). That work extends Winter's take on "self-begetting fiction": American artist Rockwell Kent and Newfoundland explorer Bob Bartlett of *The Big Why* are the very historical figures that Gabriel is at work fictionalizing in *This All Happened*. In the former novel, Kent, a modern, urban intellectual in search of primitive authenticity, ends his fifteen-month stay in Brigus on allegations of being a "German spy," earned by his Germanophilia, vegetarianism, socialism, pacifism, and all round belligerence. Class privilege is highlighted in Kent's confessional discourse: "I came from a family used to the world. Because of my background I was used to expecting, and expecting puts you in a position to receive" (357). We witness his militant assertion of privacy in the face of community and state intrusion, attempting to turn the tables on civil authorities prying into his private life: "I'd like you to feel as caged with your talk as I feel walking about this town. If



anyone is spying, Mr Bishop, it is this community. On me. The reason I chose this house was for privacy. And privacy is the last thing I am receiving” (319).

But Kent is, paradoxically, hypocritically, a spy of another sort. Like Gabriel, a betrayer of intimacies in the name of art, Kent confesses: “You begin to paint a life that you have not openly admitted to, and those who love you suddenly see your secret life exposed. They realize what your undisclosed life is, and that you’ve been a spy all along” (283). Kent’s friend Gerald Thayer admonishes his “betrayals ... committed in the name of art” (298), betrayals that include not only family intimacy but also a community and its culture. As Kent confesses, “I thought I could disappear in Brigus and lead a pure, natural life, free of suspicion. But I was misguided. My motives were not true ... I was using the culture. I was exploiting it. And what I was creating is not what happened here” (271). Needless to say, the dimension of cultural politics is added to the question of art, privacy, and surveillance — a theme that cannot be explored here. But it may suffice to point out Eric J. Sundquist’s attention, in the context of American regionalism, to how the “anthropological dimension in which new ‘regions’ [were] opened to fictional or journalistic exploration and analysis” at the turn of the last century, as part of “the rising spectator culture promoted by newspapers, magazines, advertising, photography, and later motion pictures” (503) — and to point out the importance of resisting the outside gaze as central to the literary and cultural regionalism of Atlantic Canada.

ii

The Newfoundland landscape of Winter’s *This All Happened* (2000) includes both traditional and modern surveillance environments. The novel highlights surveillance as a fact of human sociability, the built-environment, and the geodemographics of the rural and the urban. Yet the novel takes us beyond these into the realm of contemporary postmodern public and private sector prying: the video surveillance camera, the tourist’s camcorder, the art installation; not to mention ubiquitous digital technologies such as relational databases, biometric devices, clipper chips, ID cards, passports as well as the everyday (and equally surveillant) conveniences of the cell phone, email, the networked computer. These are all implicated in social sorting; that is, all working at the (re)inscription of class by surveillance.

In what follows, I want to sketch this landscape of the novel and some of its surveillance themes, before considering the possibilities for literary art as resistance in the age of the data-image.

Early and late portions of *This All Happened* find artist Gabriel in surroundings that theorists such as Lyon would call traditional surveillance: a small outport community with the tantalizing name of Heart’s Desire. Seeking solitude in which to write, Gabriel finds a gently intrusive curiosity among the people there. He later recalls that his writer friend Maisie, owner of the house, experienced the same friendly prying, perhaps more so because “[s]he was a woman with child” and in the eyes of the community had “no occupation.” “You could drop in on her,” he tells us. “When she said she needed time to write, they couldn’t comprehend it. They



invited themselves over. She gave into it" (16). At the same time there is an extensive and colourful knowledge of the local people, Gabe remarking that Josh and Toby, the two school-age boys he befriends, are "like old men in their depictions and knowledge," capable as they are of rhyming off the intimate details of the lives of "fifty- four families that live along the road" (17). In the community, then, knowing and watching one's neighbours is a routine activity, and Gabriel's composure is brought up short when Josh chides him for sleeping in late. Asking how they'd known, Gabriel learns that his neighbours gathered as much because they'd watched his chimney (20). Yet if the community is watching him, he also observes it, realizing that local lore and gossip can serve his fiction. Indeed, what begins merely as Gabriel's attempt to write in solitude turns into something of an ethnographic field trip as he decides to use Josh and Toby as informants for his novel. Unfolding his laptop he creates a file for "Heart's Desire" and enthuses, "Let's do a project together": "You tell me who lives in Heart's Desire, and I'll write it all down" (16). Gabriel describes his art as "captur[ing] people by their actions. By quick glimpses of how they do or say things. Moments," his pretensions innocently deflated when Josh admits to practicing that himself: "gossip," he calls it. Late in the novel, Gabriel is back in Heart's Desire, heartbroken at the loss of Lydia Murphy, and welcomes a crowd of Christmas mummers from the village. Invited to do the rounds, he bails out because, as he says, "No one knows me" (282). Gabriel, clearly, yearns for a form of community in which surveillance figures as concern and care. As he remarks of Josh and Toby, "They are far more knowledgeable of the people they love than I am of my own" (16-17). As I will suggest later, this kind of yearning for community, its intimacy and reciprocity, informs the novel's aesthetic stance, and can be read against the sinister and depersonalizing effects of (post)modern surveillance.

By contrast, St. John's is a "claustrophobic city" (91), a characterization of its social as well as physical setting. Gabriel inhabits a social scene in which everybody knows everyone (152) and, consequently, intense curiosity envelops newcomers (151). It is an incestuous social circle, where friends have dated and moved on (6), where not only gossip and rumour — Lydia and Gabe's marriage (28), Craig Regular's terminal illness (152) — but even more intimate, quotidian facts are known about others: "I've never said more than five words to Craig, but I know all about him. He drinks Guinness. He doesn't smoke" (151). In addition, the built spaces and topographic features of St. John's make, at times, for easy observing, listening, overhearing or unwitting disclosure. Gabriel's hilltop room furnishes a bird's eye view of city and its people (4), its windows "the eyes that study the downtown and the harbour" (5). Lydia dislikes the lack of privacy in these living arrangements (7), a fact that points up his diminished economic prospects. There are, as well, parts of town where one needs to be careful of what one says in the street: "We manage the stairs to Duckworth Street and speak quietly under the ear that hears all of downtown St John's. Quiet with the stories you tell, or

the wrong person will hear you” (95). Characters take rambling walks that bring them unwittingly below the window of the one about whom they are gossiping (6) or find themselves unwitting observers (193). In the fall, Gabriel remarks, there are “Hedges you can see through. You can stare into a house. There are no secrets” (249). This sense of urban claustrophobia and all-too-easy intrusiveness prompts Gabriel to crave the intimacy of his relationship with Lydia. Yet when the relationship ends, it also serves him in his stalking of her and Craig (271 and 273).

As Lyon and others point out, the age of the computer, relational databases, and the video camera is the age of unprecedented (postmodern) surveillance. Winter builds references to a range of otherwise mundane technologies into his novel, dispersing them across its 365 journal entries: ordinary convenience (personal computers, cell phones, email, and the World Wide Web); official information stored in medical, government databases, stamped on or embedded in passports, government cheques and ID cards; and finally, in depth-sounding radar or the simulations of Global Positioning Systems (GPS). Among Gabriel’s circle of friends, there is talk of clipper chips installed in computers, biometric devices attached to bodies, coercive surveillance of the poor and criminal, and media complicity with transnational corporations. The romantic plotline frames this quotidian assemblage of post-modern technology: Gabriel loses his lover, Lydia Murphy, to a yuppie computer professional named Craig Regular, a type of the new information age. A number of incidents, moreover, call attention to the intrusion of surveillance technologies in contemporary everyday lives. At the Motor Vehicle office, Gabe imagines his electronically captured signature dispersed to databanks across the continent (112-3). Elsewhere, Gabe, we learn, has not voted often enough to have a recent address in the government database (51). Alex Fleming sports her well-travelled passport in a flirtatious scene in which Gabe plays the border guard, pointing up how mobile middle class professionals are monitored (9-10), while video surveillance cameras installed in Lydia’s home capture images of neighbour Boyd Coady’s “break ins” (234). Gabriel carries his laptop into the countryside, collecting stories, gossip and linguistic detail from the “folk” in the outports. Meanwhile, Alex Flemming, a new media artist “with lots of software,” (121) works on some kind of camera apparatus set on converging streets (270). Her photographs, like Gabriel’s literary impressionism, seek to “capture” emotional intensity in faces and looks that are then abstracted from their contexts (97).

It is Craig Regular, in fact, recently returned from IT contract work in Seattle, who speaks the most compelling lines about the imminence of the quintessentially postmodern surveillance society, holding forth on the infamous clipper chip. This electronic passkey to voice transmissions was developed by the National Security Agency, announced by the Clinton Administration in 1993, and opposed by broad coalition of privacy advocates, citizens, and encryption specialists, including the Seattle-based Computer Professionals for Social Responsibility. Craig insists that the totalitarian impulse of surveillance begins by colonizing the criminal underclass.

Surveillance scholar Lyon and other theorists make the same point: social control is the aim of surveillance, sorting people into social risk categories which impact different classes and cultures in different ways. The criminal and the disadvantaged experience it directly as coercion and humiliation. As Christian Parenti points out in his history of surveillance in America, “political technologies of surveillance have always been most readily applied on socially weak populations, such as the impoverished” (Parenti 152). Everyone else, Craig insists, gets a telephone number for life (149), pointing up Lyon’s and others’ observation that the more affluent in society are surveilled through modern conveniences and the exercise of consumer “freedom.”

In addition to the frequency of surveillance technologies in the novel and character discourses on contemporary surveillance, intimations of its control and coercion are reflected in formal aspects of the novel, in stylistic modulations and in a measure of self-consciousness about questions of representation. Gabriel’s binoculars evoke a recording eye/I of descriptive narration in much the same way as the passive recording of the video camera:<sup>5</sup>

I study the city with binoculars.... Fresh hinges. Uncollected garbage. A mattress sags against a boarding house. Broken vinyl siding exposes styrofoam and the faded paint on rotting clapboard. Inside a window two men sunk in a floral couch roll cigarettes while an astonished parakeet swings in its cage. (85)

Gabriel’s interest in this actuality as well as his capturing moments in gesture and phrase parallels his fascination with gossipy tabloids and their pictures of celebrities in their less polished moments: “Read the *National Enquirer*. The tabloids are good because often the actors don’t look their best; they’re caught in unflattering poses coming out of limos or washrooms where they’ve sneezed or done a line. They look tired, startled, worn” (93). This preference aligns him with the privacy-invading paparazzi, not to mention its paraphrase of Andy Warhol’s insistence that the finest media photos are those of famous people doing un-famous things.

Yet when that gaze turns to the urban poor, Gabriel betrays a narrative self-consciousness that illustrates the intrusive, potentially coercive effects of observation. Gabriel’s description highlights the direct and stigmatizing ways in which the city’s poor are surveilled, as they surrender personal data in order to receive social support, in the form of the easily identifiable blue government cheques.

17 At Coleman’s grocery store. The distorted women, freak-show faces, warped eyebrows, blotchy complexions — about four of them, their tiny husbands pushing carts. A pregnant woman with groceries. She comes out with the bags and there’s a man in the passenger seat, waiting, staring at the glovebox, defeated, with a nine-year-old in the back, and / the pregnant woman, struggling into the door, forces her belly behind the wheel, pained, drives.

Thin legs on the big women, big torsos, and their pushed-in, beaten faces, receding chins, thin hair crimped artificially. Then calling taxis, paying with Government of

Newfoundland blue cheques that require MCP and SIN and theyre worth \$301.50 and theyre buying cases of Pepsi, Spaghettios, tins of vienna sausages, cold pre-fried barbecue wings, I can barely write this as it's all so cliché. (116-17)

“Cliché,” it would seem, because those depicted in the passage conform to the stereotype of the urban poor, an all-too-familiar poverty that brings writing to a virtual standstill, registering the resistance of aesthetic sensibility, if not also an ethical conscience. But Gabriel does nonetheless record them — in blunt and unforgiving language — betraying an ambivalent attitude, a desire to know and perhaps therefore to discount them. Paul Chafe reads this passage as part of Gabriel’s growing sense of exhaustion with the city as well as evidence of a flâneur’s contempt for the masses, a literary urban idler who nevertheless relies on them for his stories (134). Indeed, literary description, even what Gabriel elsewhere calls “mere description,” is far from innocent. Franco Moretti notes how urban description in literature has been drawn to social diversity at the same time as it has stigmatized others, fixing individuals and groups in physical and social space, “building and conveying a meaning, and establishing a *classification* of high and low, beautiful and ugly, old and new.” Noting that description reaches maximum force with literary depictions of the poor in naturalism, Moretti sees its essential meaning in the fact that their “future can only duplicate their past: their essence is what they are, not what they might become. They will never be objects of a narration” (111-2). Similarly, as Christian Parenti points out, “‘helping’ the poor has always been bound up with policing and punishing them. This in turn has always hinged on a compulsion to ‘know the poor’ by defining, categorizing, and ultimately blaming them for their own plight” (152). Gabriel does not seek to help nor does he engage in blame. Rather, he can glimpse no story, no literary possibilities, indeed, no social future for them at all.

But this absence of possibilities, literary or otherwise, is signaled in other ways. What makes the writing of the urban poor cliché is not merely their physical appearance or the fact that government support stigmatizes as it surveils, but also the way they choose to spend their money. Clearly, including what they consume in this description helps further define their social economic status and its cliché character. In this, too, the literary eye/I of description shares something with surveillance. In its contemporary postmodern instance, the categorizing force of surveillance, David Lyon tells us, works through modes of consumption:

Surveillance practices seem more and more to reinforce the social order of consumption ... while simultaneously maintaining existing social divisions, especially those between consumers and non-consumers or those with the occupational structure and those cut off from it. ... [Surveillance] classifies together those whose market position disqualifies them from participation in the consumerist cornucopia. This same group is much more likely to experience surveillance of a more carceral kind, not only from corporations but also from welfare and policing departments. (*Electronic Eye*, 1994, 215, 221)

Journalist Erik Larson, in his exposé of consumer surveillance in contemporary marketing, *The Naked Consumer* (1992), contends that we occupy “a digital caste system through which we systematically are included in or excluded from the daily flow of consumer culture” (55).

A similar instance of surveillance as Larson’s “digital caste system” or Lyon’s “social sorting” arises in connection with the capture and conviction of Boyd Coady. After a number of items go missing at Lydia’s house and when a TV mysteriously appears in her living room, the police install video surveillance cameras. Coady is revealed to have made a number of break-ins in the neighbourhood. The “crime” is in fact somewhat banal, somehow un-criminal: Coady “used” houses in the neighborhood: “He’d break in, find a spare key, make a copy, and then study the patterns of the people who lived there. When they were gone, he’d go in” (241). The evidence of the crime is presented to Gabriel and Lydia in the form of surveillance tapes of Coady watching the TV he brought with him while doing his laundry (234). Permitted a courtroom confession, Boyd is summed up as follows: “it wasn’t personal. He just needed things now and again and he was tired of waiting in line to pay for things. He says he’s sorry” (267). Boyd is nowhere identified as poor, his roots rural and working class, his family connections oddly cosmopolitan. He displays, for Gabriel at least, nostalgia for the outport of his youth (246). But whether or not a case can be made that Coady has a different, reciprocal conception of community — Coady did after all donate a TV and fix Lydia’s faucet (140) — born of his outport background is not the crucial point. Similarly, whatever can be made of reports that Coady merely “used” his neighbours’ homes, in terms of surveillance society, he belongs in a social risk category. Moreover, his confession is evocative of the link between surveillance and consumption. Thus, as privacy is linked in the novel to middle-class privilege and security, so surveillance is shown to serve the privileged, sorting individuals according to social risks that also map onto on class and cultural identities. The legal system, it would appear, plays its part accordingly: Boyd Coady gets a sentence of three years for his break-ins (267); Craig Regular gets off on charges of drug possession, enabling him to resume work in the U.S. (194).<sup>6</sup>

Winter’s novel, then, gestures beyond the discourse of individual privacy toward issues of social justice. With its juxtaposition of the writer’s somewhat malevolent autobiographical project — the journal that eventually sours Gabriel and Lydia’s relationship — and given the active yet perhaps complicit role of art within surveillance society, as noted earlier, I want to consider whether the novel envisions any forms of resistance to the power inscribed in the surveillant gaze. Does a poetics of “capturing moments” embody the same logic as capture on tape, storage in a digital database, or other such forms of surveillance? Does art hold out any possible form of resistance to the contemporary reduction of the human image to the data-image? In particular, I want to view Gabriel’s aesthetic stance alongside the threats to identity and personhood posed by electronic surveillance, specifically, the electronic (video and digital) data-image, while also suggesting that the pros-

pects of resistance staged in the precincts of art, at least for Gabriel and perhaps his fellow cultural producers, seem severely limited, and dubious at best.

According to recent theorists, electronic surveillance, aided by the computer, the relational database, and the video camera, poses serious threats to identity and personhood. For David Lyon, “our humanness itself ... is increasingly defined in terms of the data-image. Who we are to the ubiquitous machine, the ubiquitous connection, is more significant than who we are to ourselves or each other” (Lyon 1994, 215). Drawing on poststructuralist theories of language, Althusser’s notion of interpellation, and Foucault’s work on discourse as practice, Mark Poster sees equally disturbing possibilities, characterizing the database “a discourse of pure writing” that hails, or constitutes, the subject in entirely novel ways. The data file, he observes, is a text without author or ownership, endlessly transferrable and reproducible (182-83), consisting of “pure grids whose vertical fields and horizontal records divide and classify objects with a precision that more traditional forms of discourse, such as psychology, must surely envy” (185). Psychology, along with other social discourses, as Foucault’s theory sees it, at least has the benefit of creating an interiorized subject, a being with a depth of subjectivity, a being “conscious of his or her own self-determination.” The subject constituted by the database is, according to Poster, an object, a product of objectification. The database produces “individuals with dispersed identities, identities of which the individuals might not even be aware” (190). For our times, Poster insists, “through the database alone, the subject has been multiplied and decentered, capable of being acted upon by computers at many social locations without the least awareness by the individual concerned yet as surely as if the individual were present somehow inside the computer” (185). According to Lyon, this radically fragmented, dispersed, even unknown identity, this data-image as end product of postmodern objectification, “crucially affects life-chances and also renders fragile one’s very reputation. Both a ‘good life’ and a ‘good name’ may be put in jeopardy by it. The data-image objectifies, is based almost entirely on a one-way transmission of information ... while its categories are clustered around observable behaviour alone” (Lyon 1994, 215).

An apt image, conjoining writing, identity, and surveillance technology, is Gabriel’s truncated, deformed signature, captured by an electronic signature pad at the Motor Vehicle office. Reduced to something “tiny and mean” by the confining writing space and dispersed, as he observes with some insouciance, to “every province, territory, state, and free-trade zone in North America” (112-3), the signature evokes the essential human identity threatened by “the ubiquitous machine” as imagined by both Lyon and Poster. This microcosmic image of the (writing) subject reduced to the data-image contrasts Gabriel’s literary impressionism, his valorization of subjective moments of experience, in particular, his ecstatic journal entry for March 3rd:

I’m writing honest moments and people who are themselves and people who make fun of themselves and are silly and childish and unsophisticated and warm and gener-

ous and loving and full of toughness too and original and sexy and rough and animalish and playful and have guts and a red red tender heart bursting crying at small wonderful irrational things at moments at hot moments that steam and penetrate our brains and sizzle like a / branding iron into the marrow and make us horny and I like trying to put words to these moments give particulars and hand them delicately to people like Lydia and I want them from her too that is my only demand on anyone because that is life is all life is moments doesn't she think and I think she does and she does among other things when the moment's right. (58-9)

This zealous plea is prompted by a discussion with Lydia about the novel he is writing, but other, otherwise banal personal pressures figure in precipitating it: a student loan coming due, Lydia puzzling over his gift of a love poem (52), rumours and parental advice around an impending marriage proposal. All put Gabriel on notice as to his impending entry into the precariously situated creative arm of the middle class.

Yet there are other connections, and indeed broader social implications. The passage is significant for Gabriel and his art, for an ideal of community he desires, and as a role for the artist within the larger society. Indeed, it is hard not to read this humanistic vision of art against the reduction of the self — perennially associated since Rousseau with the immersion of the self in society — not least in our century a *surveillance* society structured by the data-image. With its single, flowing sentence, anarchic in form and tone, the passage stands in marked formal contrast to the “pure grid” of the data-image articulated by Poster. Moreover, Gabriel’s “honest moments” stand against the data-image through their human depth and emotional intensity. In Gabriel’s implicitly social vision, the artist collects and transforms moments of experience in his art, redistributing them in the primitive social currency of the gift. Exchanged by mutually authoring subjects, the literary impression, moreover, contrasts the data-image and the electronic network, with the latter’s one-way transmission of information, its categories confined to observed (not lived or shared) action, and its potentially wide dispersion and destructive effects. In modest form, then, it is an ideal of beneficent community, a surveillant gaze through art, analogous, perhaps, to that beneficent gaze that Gabriel finds in the outport.

But there are hints that this passage, with its attempted justification of Gabriel’s art and its personal and social importance, is not to be read at face value: the sheer ecstasy of tone coupled with the comic deflation at work in the onomastics of “honest moments” and “when the moment’s right” capping it off. More important, perhaps, is the image of the artist as child or madman, perversely naive and innocent, clamoring to persuade others of his sincerity. This typically romantic icon of the artist, Hal Foster observes, has been a common feature of a postmodern art that reiterates and plays with the repertoire of styles and themes in Western tradition. In fact, it *reduces* contemporary Western art to a mere repertoire of styles, to a set of readily consumable media clichés. For Foster this signals regression: “an



alienation from history and not a return to it — an acceptance of the cultural division of labor (of the marginal role of the artist as romantic, entertainer, purveyor of prestige goods) and a legitimation of social subjection” (37). Whereas in their day, the madman, child or social misfit “often ‘troubled’ the propriety of the given discursive circuits of art,” today, according to Foster, their evocation of alienation or subversion is “intended to please rather more than upset” (40). Is Gabriel trading in some kind of romantic cliché of the artist, a token of his acceptance of the artist’s social subjugation? Indeed, if this lyrical effusion is one side of his art, the other is the historical novel he is writing, that respectable art form that confirms the middle-class in an invented lineage. In the context of Gabriel and his circle, Winter offers little in the way of art’s possible resistance, except the figure of a clownish misfit, a portrait of the artist as media cliché or commodity, at best perhaps an ironized romanticism.

With its Newfoundland landscapes of traditional, modern and postmodern surveillance regimes, Michael Winter’s *This All Happened* poses questions not only about the relativity of what the urban middle-class would call privacy, but also about the larger consequences of contemporary surveillance society. It explores some of the contradictory and complicit moves of the artist within this order. Gabriel English is a figure of ambivalence, a stance that is linked to his somewhat compromised social standing as well as his location within a postmodern culture of surveillance and voyeurism. Himself at times an intrusive voyeur, Gabriel also finds himself troubled by the social regimes of surveillance he sees around himself and others. In this sense, the novel as a whole displays a “post-privacy” consciousness, one that moves beyond the (albeit troubled) class lens of its artist hero. To be precise, the novel implicitly rejects the pervasive discourse of privacy, calling attention to the inscription of class, indeed sensing the very threats to personhood posed by contemporary surveillance. At the same time, the novel recognizes a deep human need for belonging, the desire for a benevolent gaze, and thus a welcome of surveilling others. To be sure, Winter senses the limitations of art and of a humanistic response to surveillance, yet despite its deficiencies art satisfies the socially instituted pleasures of seeing and being seen, of knowing and being known. With biases and pitfalls exposed in the course of the novel’s calendar year of journal writing, Winter’s artist is implicated in social surveillance in unavoidably problematical ways, struggling to foster human response in the face of increasing intrusive and debilitating forms of social coercion.

cjarms@lets.chukyo-u.ac.jp

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>An earlier version of this essay was presented at Surf’s Up: The Rising Tide of Atlantic-Canadian Literature, Wolfville, Nova Scotia, October 2004. A special research grant (*tokutei kenkyuu*) from my home institution, Chukyo University, made possible

my attendance and the revision of the essay. I wish to express my thanks to Herb Wylie for reading and commenting on a draft of this essay and to the two anonymous reviewers for a number of useful suggestions.

<sup>2</sup>See also “A Galapagos Wave Strikes Newfoundland” in *Writing Life: Celebrated Canadian and International Authors on Writing and Life*. Ed. Constance Rooke. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 2006.

<sup>3</sup>Privacy International (<http://www.privacyinternational.org>) is a non-governmental organization formed in 1990 by privacy experts and human rights organizations from more than 40 countries. Its annual Big Brother Awards identify the most egregious governmental, private sector and individual violations of privacy <<http://www.bigbrotherawards.org/>>. Established in 1983 with 5 US chapters, in Palo Alto, Boston, Madison, Seattle, and Los Angeles, Computer Professionals for Social Responsibility is “a public-interest alliance of people concerned about the impact of information and communications technology on society” (INK“<http://www.cpsr.org>” <http://www.cpsr.org>). Along with the Fund for Constitutional Government CPSR formed the Electronic Privacy Information Center (<http://epic.org/>) in 1994. Founded in 1990, the Electronic Frontier Association is “free speech, privacy, innovation, and consumer rights” (<http://www.eff.org/about>). Canada’s Office of the Privacy Commissioner is an independent authority that reports to Parliament and the Senate, educates the public about privacy issues, and responds to complaints by individuals regarding the public and private sectors (<http://www.privcom.gc.ca>).

<sup>4</sup>Terry Goldie has suggested that some of the stylistic features of the text — Winter’s frequent use of the playscript format (“Lydia: No, we’re not married.”) as opposed to the tag phrase (“Josh says”) — figure the design-less design of the novel, in which “things are just happening” (183), but one might also read Winter’s occasional use of the former technique to point up the fundamental theatricality of the self in society. For a brief account of theatricality, see Jervis, 1998, 37-8 and 1999, 221.

<sup>5</sup>Both Terry Goldie (183) and Paul Chafe (134) note the static nature of description and the passive stance of Gabriel throughout the novel.

<sup>6</sup>One might also mention that Gabriel’s forcing the door of Maisie’s outport home (12) and the break in to a cabin by Gabriel and his friends during their disastrous July river expedition also occur without consequence for them (159).

## Works Cited

- Booth, Wayne C. *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988.
- Chafe, Paul. “Beautiful Losers: The Flâneur in St John’s Literature.” *Newfoundland and Labrador Studies*, 23, 2 (2008): 115-138.
- Foster, Hall. *Recodings: Art, Spectacle, Cultural Politics*. Seattle Washington: Bay Press, 1985.
- Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Trans. Alan Sheridan. New York: Vintage Books, 1995.
- Giddens, Anthony. *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*. Cambridge: Polity, 1991.

- Goldie, Terry. "The Angel Gabriel." *Essays on Canadian Writing* 82 (2004): 173-86.
- Gotlieb, Calvin C. "Privacy: A Concept Whose Time Has Come and Gone" in Lyon and Zureik, 156-71.
- Jervis, John. *Exploring the Modern: Patterns of Western Civilization and Culture*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1998.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Transgressing the Modern: Explorations in the Western Experience of Otherness*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1999.
- Larson, Erik. *The Naked Consumer: How Our Private Lives Become Public Commodities*. New York: Penguin Books, 1992.
- Levin, Thomas Y., Ursula Frohne, and Peter Wiebel, eds. *[Ctrl] Space: Rhetorics of Surveillance from Benthan to Big Brother*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2002.
- Lyon, David. *The Electronic Eye: The Rise of Surveillance Society*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Surveillance Society: Monitoring Everyday Life*. Buckingham: Open University Press, 2001.
- \_\_\_\_\_, ed. *Surveillance as Social Sorting: Privacy, Risk, and Digital Discrimination*. London: Routledge, 2003.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Surveillance Studies: An Overview*. Cambridge: Polity, 2007.
- Lyon, David and Elia Zureik, eds. *Computers, Surveillance and Privacy*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996.
- Marx, Gary T. "Electric Eye in the Sky: Some reflections on the New Surveillance and Popular Culture" in Lyon and Zureik, 193-233.
- Moretti, Franco. "Homo Palpitans: Balzac's Novels and Urban Personality." *Signs Taken for Wonders: Essays in the Sociology of Literary Forms*. 2nd Ed. Trans. Susan Fischer, David Forgacs, and David Miller. London: Verso, 1988, 109-29.
- Parenti, Christian. *The Soft Cage: Surveillance in America from Slavery to the War on Terror*. New York: Basic Books, 2003.
- Poster, Mark. "Databases as Discourse; or, Electronic Interpellations" in Lyon and Zureik, 175-92.
- Sundquist, Eric J. "Realism and Regionalism." *The Columbia Literary History of the United States*. Ed. Emory Elliott. New York: Columbia University Press, 1988, 501-24.
- Sykes, Charles J. *The End of Privacy*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999.
- Vaccaro, Anthony. "Winter's Tale." *St. John's Evening Telegram*. Friday, September 10, 2004, B1.
- Weibel, Peter. "Pleasure and the Panoptic Principle" in Levin et al., 207-23.
- Wilson, Megan. "Sophie Calle: Public Spaces - Private Places" *Stretcher*. Org Summer 2001 <[http://www.stretcher.org/archives/r9\\_a/calle\\_mw.php](http://www.stretcher.org/archives/r9_a/calle_mw.php)> Viewed on October 3rd, 2004.
- Winter, Michael. *The Big Why*. Toronto: Anansi, 2004.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *One Last Good Look*. Toronto: Anansi, 1999.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *This All Happened*. Toronto: Anansi, 2000.
- Zizek, Slavoj. "Big Brother, or, The Triumph of the Gaze Over the Eye" in Levin et al., 224-27.



CAPTIVATING.



CAPTIVATING.\*

\* CANADIAN MAGAZINES MAKE YOUR INTERESTS MORE INTERESTING. From Literature to Business, all written from a refreshingly Canadian viewpoint you won't find anywhere else. Just look for the Genuine Canadian Magazine icon at your favourite newsstand, or visit [magazinescanada.ca](http://magazinescanada.ca) to find what interests you.

