Big Brother is Watching You (Again): Britain under Surveillance
Annual Conference of the Association for the Study of British Cultures
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"Datavaillance," Facebook and CCTV – it sometimes seems that we live in a world of total observation. Whether walking the streets of London (or many other major cities) or navigating the virtual environment of the internet, most of our movements and actions are potentially open to inspection and evaluation by unknown others. Perhaps the epithets "Orwellian" and "panoptical" – habitually applied to describe our experience of the present – are not entirely unwarranted.

A closer consideration of reality, however, suggests that such labels might be used a little too casually. For although surveillance seems ubiquitous today, it is a far more complex phenomenon than the by now reflexive reference to the totalitarian fantasies of George Orwell and Michel Foucault suggests. Surveillance is neither unilateral nor all-encompassing. Many forms of surveillance not only rely on the participation of those who are its targets (whether this participation manifests itself in the traces left involuntarily during internet shopping sprees or in the conscious and sometimes vociferous demand for more and better surveillance technology), surveillance is also spectacularly fallible, especially when it comes to what is considered one of its main purposes, the prevention of crime. The images taken by surveillance cameras often only become meaningful after the events they are meant to prevent have taken place and although these data might still serve as evidence in criminal investigations and court proceedings, they are regularly disregarded or misinterpreted (not least because the sheer amount of data collected daily in this way makes their evaluation difficult). In fact, one might argue that gathering data with the aid of surveillance technologies has become an aim unto itself. At the same time, surveillance can be – and is – successfully avoided and undermined, as people appropriate the images taken by surveillance cameras, explore their blind spots or indeed interfere with their hardware.

Rather than providing yet another occasion for a collective complaint about the all-seeing surveillance state, this conference intends to probe the complexities, faultlines and failures of the phenomenon of surveillance – in order to refine our understanding of and responses to it. How does "surveillance" actually work (and when does it fail)? Which methods of analysing it do justice to its ambivalences?

Which conditions allow it to be introduced, maintained and expanded? Above all, are there forms of counter-surveillance through which resistance is possible?

We invite proposals for 20-min papers in English addressing the following areas (or aspects thereof):

- Surveillance and urban space
- Historical perspectives on surveillance
- Legal, political and public debates around surveillance (whether offering support or voicing resistance to it)
- Surveilling humans and technologies
- Representations of surveillance in the arts, literature and film

Please send 300-word abstracts accompanied by a short biographical blurb by 1 April 2011 to Prof. Dr. Anja Müller-Wood, Department of English and Linguistics, Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz (wood@uni-mainz.de).