

## **Marta de Sousa Simões**

Instituto Politécnico de Coimbra, Escola Superior de Tecnologia e Gestão de Oliveira do Hospital

**Catarina Frois, *Peripheral Vision: Politics, Technology and Surveillance*.  
London and New York: Berghahn Books, 2013. 176 pp.  
ISBN: 978-1-78238-023-8**

Nothing is more necessary than reviewing, renewing, suspecting with no truces the images and the myths that incarnate in themselves inseparable from the relation to the nation we once were, are and will be [...].

Eduardo Lourenço, *O Labirinto da Saudade*

Reading Catarina Frois's *Peripheral Vision: Politics, Technology and Surveillance*, published in 2013, allows readers to analyze the cultural frame that contextualizes the process of the video surveillance implementation in public open areas in Portugal, from 2005 to 2010, within the *National Video Surveillance Programme*. Although this is mainly an anthropological study, her conclusions are comparable to the ones presented by Eduardo Lourenço in *O Labirinto da Saudade*<sup>1</sup>, summed up in the quotation above. As a surveillance study, its contribution to the anthropological debate on matters of modernization, surveillance, (in)security and policy-making is

---

<sup>1</sup> In this book, first published in 1978, Eduardo Lourenço urges the Portuguese to rethink their national identity, not only in terms of the images and counter-images formulated by the Portuguese cultural/literary heritage, but also in terms of the different discourses produced by past ideologies related to the maritime expansion, religion and family. The author also reflects upon the urgency of creating a critical discourse about those images, seen that the development of nations only happens when there is a compulsive questioning of identities, in a rational and contemporary way. Eduardo Lourenço also focuses on the nation's need to exercise a realistic "thinking" by itself, instead of mimicking the "Other", in order to find the right way out of the cultural maze in which Portugal was in. In this specific matter, I consider that both authors' conclusions upon their reflections are analogous.

remarkable, in the sense that readers experience a “psychoanalysis” of the motivations, behaviors, reactions, preconceptions, stereotypes, complexes and mentalities of all the interveners in the process. As the author clearly states in the introduction, her study derives from an intensive fieldwork, which benefited from the fact that it witnessed the process from its inception, going far beyond the sphere of Law No. 1/2005<sup>2</sup> and metamorphosing gradually into a deep and accurate study of “the importance of technology and its social and cultural impact in a particular society.”<sup>3</sup> Catarina Frois analyzed the Portuguese case, in terms of its practical results or data – giving an account of the number of projects approved and rejected under this Law – but, more importantly, she presented a full understanding of the processes surrounding policy-making, institutional interaction and citizens’ perceptions that contextualize those five years of application of the *NVSP*. For all these reasons, *Peripheral Vision* is a demanding and methodological work on surveillance and *CCTV* as a framework for a comprehensive study of a political project that was marked by contradictions, omissions and inconsistencies.

*Peripheral Vision* is, in itself, a metaphor for the main purposes of the book by combining two concepts: “periphery” and “vision”. The first refers to Portugal’s several backward conditions, in relation to Europe – bearing geographical, economical and political specificities. It also relates to its own past, whose history of four decades of dictatorship still lingers in Portuguese mentalities, preconceptions and expectations, despite the efforts of Prime Minister Sócrates’s government to achieve modernization through the use of technology - which fundamentals the conception of the revolutionary “Technological Plan.”<sup>4</sup> In addition, it refers to the peripheral condition of anthropology among the disciplines that traditionally operate in surveillance studies.

---

<sup>2</sup> Law No. 1/2005 (No. 6, January 10<sup>th</sup> - *Diário da República* - I série – A): regulates the use of video surveillance cameras by security services and forces in public places of common use.

<sup>3</sup> Catarina Frois, *Peripheral Vision: Politics, Technology and Surveillance* (London and New York: Berghahn Books, 2013), 6.

<sup>4</sup> The aim of the “Technological Plan” was to revolutionize the political, social and economic domains of Portuguese life.

“Vision” relates to surveillance cameras, which can add potentialities to the human eyesight, suggesting also different plans and perspectives and, ultimately, the idea of safety and security in public places. In my opinion, the visual amplification that the “peripheral vision” allows, which implies an ability to see more than by looking directly into our line of sight, is present in the structure of the book itself, that gradually expands and deepens the issues it raises, by looking at its causes and results. In the first three chapters there is a more direct or “central” approach to politics/policies, technology and surveillance; whereas in the last two chapters that vision is amplified (becoming “peripheral”) by the discussion of crucial concepts such as (in)security and fear; and dichotomies such as private and public, security and freedom – which are the genesis of policies and discourses regarding surveillance.<sup>5</sup> One of the questions this book answers is precisely the one related to the correct vision to adopt (which should be much more “peripheral” than “central”) concerning the nationwide implementation/imitation of a hegemonic European model in a country such as Portugal, taking into consideration its national and local specificities. The “anxiety over modernization,”<sup>6</sup> using Catarina Frois’s words, alluding to the national fixation to prove the country’s modern condition, meeting the European patterns of modernization and in this way pushing Portugal out of its supposed “backwardness”, led to the creation of a project which disregarded its applicability to the context.

The Portuguese cultural context, that is, the “peripheral” conditions that contextualize the application of the project had no preliminary evaluation, rendering the process inoperative at the end. The process should not have been, as it was: (i) an ambitious copy of other countries’ models, intending only to achieve an apparent modernization to overcome a backwardness condition caused by an authoritarian legacy of dictatorship (whose effects are still felt today); (ii) implemented without a previous assessment of the existing human and economical

---

<sup>5</sup> After 9/11, these concepts and dichotomies became inseparable from the paradigm of the ‘War on Terror’ that the United States announced against terrorists – a trend that expanded to other countries and led to the creation of a discourse that legitimizes many surveillance policies and projects.

<sup>6</sup> Frois, *Peripheral Vision*, 4.

resources; (iii) an initiative that showed no efficient interaction or communication between the interveners, since it did not solve the mental inability to deal or adapt to it. In fact, Catarina Frois proved in this study that the use of video surveillance in public areas in Portugal did not gather a consensus or shared interests between the involved forces, leading to a power struggle between institutions, instead of creating a cooperative process whose aim should have been an increased security and citizens' protection through crime prevention. Politically, "these systems are intended to somehow appease citizens, business owners and political opposition, demonstrating government concern and its proactive attitude."<sup>7</sup>

The author considers the period under analysis, from 2005 to 2010, the initial phase of the process, and from 2011 onwards the second stage of it, as termed in the article "Video-surveillance and the Political Use of Discretionary Power in the Name of Security and Defence."<sup>8</sup> During this first stage, there were ten submissions requesting authorization to implement video-surveillance; only five got approval; and from these five, only two effectively operated during this period. Catarina Frois analyzed the ten cases – although focusing more in the Oporto Historic District and Baixa Pombalina, comparing them and drawing conclusions. She argues that most projects failed to establish a coherent relationship between the suitability of the surveillance system and the reasons that sustained the proposal, mainly because of the low crime rates and the type of crimes committed in those areas. In fact, Catarina Frois points out that during the first years of implementation of these systems, there was almost no effect on crime reduction, which came to confirm the Public Security Police's point of view, considering that the most effective strategy was 'proximity policing', i.e. having interventions on the street and not relocating officers behind a screen. The most antagonistic force came from the Data Protection Authority, whose function was to confirm a balanced correlation between the

---

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 151.

<sup>8</sup> Catarina Frois, "Video-surveillance and the Political Use of Discretionary Power in the Name of Security and Defence." In *The Anthropology of Security: Perspectives from the Frontline of Policing, Counter-Terrorism and Border Control*, eds. Mark Maguire, Catarina Frois and Nils Zurawski (London: PlutoPress, 2014), 45-61.

specificities of each proposal and the protection of different civic rights such as privacy, freedom of circulation and right to image. The Data Protection Authority had binding power, and it represented the end of the following process: the police forces or the Municipality made a formal submission mentioning the target areas; then, the submissions would be delivered to the Ministry of Internal Affairs for approval and, finally, they would be sent to the Data Protection Authority for a final authorization. There were many negative rulings due to the lack of objective reasons to approve the proposals, and other interests became frequently evident, such as the ones of shop owners and municipalities that wished to bring new residents to pivotal Portuguese urban areas that could be rehabilitated under the ‘image’ of security and protection given by surveillance cameras. Catarina Frois’s accurate analysis of media and political discourse, as well as of citizens’ perceptions and spontaneous opinions on matters of security in Portugal, revealed an evident discrepancy between both. The alleged feelings of insecurity and fear alluded to by politicians and sensationalistic media found no echo in citizens’ objective concerns, which were more directly connected to the political and economic instability of the country. While reading Catarina Frois’s conclusions, I also feel like there are more questions to be answered, as, for instance, the real impact of the international context of insecurity, terrorist threats and foreign policies in a small European country such as Portugal. There are issues raised in the last chapter of the book that are directly connected to concepts of danger and fear that need to be amplified through a deeper analysis of the country’s permeability to external feelings and discourses of insecurity. *Peripheral Vision* is, nevertheless, a mandatory reading, not only for scholars, but for the public in general, as a necessary exercise of citizenship, of questioning identities and ‘rebuilding’ political strategies.