

## Ch. 10 A Mood Apart: What's Wrong with Tom?

*For any eye is an evil eye  
That looks in onto a mood apart.*

-Robert Frost, "A Mood Apart"

In one sense Voire's story speaks for itself. If the reader experiences indignation and intellectual provocation regarding Tom and the society that creates him, the case has done its job. The story is accessible and resonates (whether positively or negatively) with most readers because, like Tom, we all are agents and subjects of appropriate and inappropriate surveillance.

The story shows rather than tells, although it is rich in what poker players refer to as "tells." If the reader better understands and feels the power and omnipresence (or at least potential availability) of so many forms of surveillance in public contexts and the cultural and regulatory haze around these, the case has made its point. While the experiential meaning of fiction rests with the reader, the scholar can take this a step further in looking for transcendent patterns and meaning.

In his many experiences as a subject of surveillance, Tom is broadly representative of what an average person might encounter. As such, no special analysis is required beyond what would apply to other subjects as children, workers, consumers and citizens.

The analysis in this chapter is restricted to what is unique about the case. His activities as a male agent with female subjects involve distinctive questions of sex, gender and surveillance. Moreover, his behavior nestles within the separate context of open field surveillance—meaning surveillance that occurs beyond that appropriately associated with a role, an organization, or group. It introduces fascinating unsettled questions regarding what should be private even in "public" (whether defined as place or easy availability of information). By indirection, it also encourages thought on what should be public (or at least revealed to appropriate others such as employers, merchants, government officials, parents and friends) within the private zone of the individual.

This chapter contains the following material deleted from the book: some links between sex, gender and surveillance, the male gaze, the mixing up of gender and sexual preference, and some organizational responses to surveillance and gender.

### **Sex and Surveillance: Unveiling Secrets**

In beginning this research I did not intend to say anything about sex, let alone devote attention to it with a fictional case study. Yet it soon became apparent that sexual themes often hover over the topic or lurk in the background, particularly when

surveillance is covert. Sexual images and metaphors (whether conscious or latent) surround the subject.

General features of sex relate it to surveillance apart from gender. Covert surveillance in particular offers a “safe” passage to excluded but presumably attractive or desirable territory and to things that are not “public” in the sense of being available to anyone. A market principle in which information scarcity serves to increase value may apply.

To hide or mask an identifiable object, or to withhold information known to exist, can pique curiosity and intensify interest. The informationally excluded wonder about what they cannot see and how the object appears when unwrapped or decoded. Seeing a person of sexual interest fully clothed may provoke the observer to fantasize about the unclothed person (although it is interesting that being partially unclothed is generally more alluring than the Full Monty).

Surveillance and sex share the increased excitement that can accompany activities that are forbidden, illicit, or risky. Secret surveillance represents a form of power over the other and can stimulate the imagination. Voyeurism feeds consciousness, and sex is as much in the head as anywhere else.

Sex and surveillance have some literal and metaphorical links. To begin, both involve crossing exclusionary borders. The allure of sexual secrets (whether the existence of a relationship or its details) is well known.<sup>1</sup> Consensual sexual encounters consist of seeking barriers against the surveillance of others (e.g., the privacy offered by darkness, empty houses, closed doors, basements, barns, the woods, cars, covers, and secret getaways). Yet they also do the opposite in overcoming barriers to mutual surveillance and direct contact.

Involved here are a series of parallel and progressive unveilings, revelations, and entrances—from the outer walls of a structure, to the doors of a bedroom, to the shedding of clothes, to the contact of separated bodies, to the revelation of inner thoughts and feelings that are masked in public presentations of the self. Here we see the cooperative elimination of anti-surveillance measures in order to facilitate surveillance of, and by, the partner. The hidden observer of such activity vicariously participates in this unveiling, transcending the privacy the couple presumably intended to create.

Beyond these parallels, surveillance and sex may be explicitly joined as new technologies offer opportunities for the consensual videotaping of sexual encounters. Whether covert or overt, watching and filming in some form are frequent themes of conventional and pornographic films. This may serve as a stimulant to the hidden watcher, to those being watched if they know or imagine they are being watched, and to the doubly voyeuristic viewing audience (Denzon 1995).

Factors such as the above transcend gender. Yet in spite of broad scientific generalizations or laws intended to be universal in their application, some pronounced gender differences in attitudes and behavior (at least on the average) can be noted.

### **Gender Differences: The Male Gaze**

*Standing on the corner  
watching all the girls go by,  
Buddy if you've got a rich imagination,  
matter of fact, so do I.*

-The Four Lads (1956)

Research on the social correlates of privacy-related attitudes and behaviors does not suggest many striking findings. This contrasts with other well-trod survey research topics such as attitudes toward politics or religion. But one area where differences do surface is with respect to gender. Men tend to be more fascinated by technology than women and less concerned with its misuses. Women are more concerned over privacy issues, more apprehensive about technology and more likely to use surveillance technology in a defensive way as protection, while men are more likely to use it to discover information.

On the average, men and women differ in their response to the Tom story. Women are more likely to find it creepy and even upsetting, while men tend to find it humorous and unrealistic. For some it may even speak directly to their experience, or at least imagination.

Tom's tendency to blame women for his behavior is indefensible. He would be on stronger ground if he critiqued the culture rather than the individual. It is true that our culture eroticizes women's appearance much more than men's. There is feminine connivance thanks to the male gaze's saturation in the culture. In their presentation of self, many women "do to themselves what men do to them. They survey, like men, their own femininity." Here the mirror and of course the mass media function "to make the woman connive in treating herself as, first and foremost a sight." (Berger, 1972, p. 63, p. 51)

Given our culture, it is not surprising that the female form draws greater sexual attention than does the male. Advertisements for surveillance devices often show young women as the subjects. The purchasers and users of surveillance technology are disproportionately men, as are the consumers of pornography. Contrast the circulation of *Playboy* and its imitators with that of *Playgirl*.<sup>2</sup> In the traditional striptease, women reveal and men observe, rather than the reverse, which is why the film *The Full Monty* was funny. We do not find many songs written by girls about "standing on the corner watching all the boys go by" (although there are more now than previously).<sup>3</sup>

Men do not usually complain about being yelled at or observed by female construction workers (and only partly because there are so few). Nor do they complain about female landlords hiding cameras in the bath and bedrooms of their tenants. Nor do women frequent shopping malls with hidden video cameras.

Sexual material has an ironic or paradoxical quality so that those who consumer it find it difficult to avoid suspicions of prurience, whatever their intentions or physiology. As the feminist and religious critics of pornography who must engage the materials they find distasteful have discovered, an ironic contamination effect is present—similar to trying to clean up a paint spot with a rag that has paint on it. In dealing with sexual materials, the critics are subject to complaints about their prurient interests, just as Tom is. Freud said that in the beginning there is the body; no amount of detached analysis or moral high ground can quite overcome that.

### Mixing It Up

What happens to the story if we shift genders and sexual orientations? Tom's story fails miserably if *he* becomes Tomasina, a *she* who engages in the same behavior. It is just too far-fetched, even in our more sexually liberated age, to have women behave toward men the way Tom behaves toward women.<sup>4</sup>

It is also interesting to speculate on how the reader's response might change if it turned out that the story ended not with Erving Goffman's powerful insights, but with Tom giving it all up when his probing surveillance reveals that Eve was really Evan, a man who presented himself as a woman a la Madame Butterfly. With the genders or biology switched, we are unlikely to feel the same degree of indignation and shock over the voyeur's behavior, or sympathy and concern for the object of her surveillance, as we do over Tom's.

What accounts for this variation? Differences in power, risk (women's greater vulnerability to assault), and the nature of sexual desire, roles and expression as shaped by culture (and maybe more) are possible explanations.

In considering power and desire imagine four types of situations. In the first, men and women are exactly equal in power and in the intensity of their desire or willingness to express sexuality (*equality*). In the second, women have more power and less intense desire or willingness (*amazonia*). In the third, women have less power and a greater desire (*the male fantasy*). In the fourth, women have both less power and less willingness to express their sexuality (*American reality*).

In the first situation of equality, gender would be irrelevant. The story of Tom would not have the same impact, no matter whom it involved. One analog would be the more frequent couplings said to be characteristic (on the average) of male homosexuals -- where drive and power may be assumed to be more equivalent.

In the second type (*Amazonia*) Tom's story would not be compelling because his actions would not be bolstered by the power our culture gives to males. It would be much riskier for him to behave that way, and the greater power of women would not engender the sympathy we now feel for the object of Tom's attention.

The third type--in which women have less power and greater sexual interest--would work better, but still not as well, because the greater sexual desire and availability of females would lessen our understanding of Tom's behavior.

The story of Tom, however, does work in a society such as ours where a pronounced power imbalance exists and where the culturally conditioned need to express one's sexuality is generally greater, or at least more immediate, for men than for women.

Yet the gender differences in desire and its expressions can be overemphasized. The differences between Tom and Tomasina may be one of form and content more than greater or lesser interest or desire to know.<sup>5</sup> With respect to content, men appear to find entangled bodies and the female form of sufficient interest, while women are more likely to want a fuller context and story. Are women really less interested in observing the opposite sex or just more affected by social customs?

Relative to men, when women use surveillance, they are more likely to do so for protective rather than prurient reasons. Women may be better at watching than men--watching for different things and more subtly. For example, they are better at interpreting nonverbal meanings. Moreover, their greater likelihood to engage in "relationship" talk, to discuss the personal and share confidences, and perhaps to gossip more than men, indicates a high level of curiosity. Further, as mothers watching their infants and children, they may, on the average, be more attentive than men. Finally, particularly when alone, they are more attentive to threats posed by their environment.

That surveillance technology lends itself to disembodied, acontextual information may mean that men find it more attractive. On the other hand, its very distancing quality makes it safe in a way that direct observation is not. Anonymous surveillance mediated by distance does not run the immediate risk of retaliation, invitation, or a display of bad manners from staring or other direct interaction. Thus, one might expect that over time, as women become more familiar with the various technologies, they would make greater use of them. Caller-ID, for example, has been marketed more for women than for men. In a related example, women may be as or more likely than men to silently record phone conversations with the potential now offered by answering machines.

### **Some Organizational Responses Surveillance and Gender**

Although Tom does much of his doubtful surveillance work outside the organization context, I want to address the organizational context here because of the ways in which it often treats gender and surveillance. Where monitoring involves sensitive gender questions, organizations often seek to avoid cheap-thrill-inappropriate-look/touch issues through policies of sex segregation and gender equivalence in agent and subject roles. To

the extent that surveillance involves nudity, direct searching via touching, or asking questions of a sexual nature, agents of the same sex are preferred--for example, monitoring of video cameras in changing rooms, bathrooms, and airport x-ray machines that reveal bodily contours hidden by clothes; observation of urine collection for drug testing; pat downs; and body cavity searches.<sup>6</sup>

Such policies assume that gender and sexual preference are the same. In denying males the chance to observe females, the women are protected from unwanted feelings of being seen as sex objects, and the men are denied the chance for inappropriate behavior (as well as protected from false accusations). The case of prohibiting females as monitors of males is related, but not quite the same. Here the goal may be more to protect the female watcher from embarrassment than to guard against any inappropriate gratification.

However, when we separate gender from sexual preference, assumptions about gratification and embarrassment break down. Considering both the watched and the watcher and assuming either/or categories for gender and sexual preference (omitting bisexuals and hermaphrodites),<sup>7</sup> there are at least 16 possible combinations varying in their desirability as public policy. Thus, to more accurately conform to the contours of the empirical world and to accommodate individual rights requires going beyond same-sex observation. Measurement tools to determine the gender and sexual preferences for both those watching and the watched could be required and thereby to identify cross dressers or dishonesty in sexual preferences for those in search of cheap exhibitionist or voyeuristic thrills.

Airport screens and observation of drug tests or department store changing rooms would require places for the many categories such as “heterosexual: male monitors and surveilled,” “homosexual female monitors and male homosexual surveilled.” While the case can logically be made for such policies, they would be impractical and not only because of assumptions about the rigid binary nature of the categories. But as a thought experiment it suggests the limits of many of our assumptions about watching. Alternatives include having machines replace people as watchers or ceasing to be concerned over gender and sexuality issues in legitimate surveillance.

### **Outlaw or Pioneer, Victimizer or Victim?**

How should Tom be viewed and by what standards....



*Lady Godiva* by John Collier (circa 1898)<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For example, Wenger, Lane and Dimitri (1994) find that shared secret romantic relationships have greater resonance than do open relationships. What is true for the social secret may also be true for the individual with a secret obsession such as Tom. The risks and uncertainty over potential discovery may heighten the thrill, not unlike the rush from high risk sports and other related activities –what Lyng (1990) refers to as “crowding the edge.”

<sup>2</sup> See Magazine Publishers of America Average Circulation for the Top 100 ABC Magazines. (May 10, 2006), available at [http://www.magazine.org/circulation/circulation\\_trends\\_and\\_magazine\\_handbook/16117.cfm](http://www.magazine.org/circulation/circulation_trends_and_magazine_handbook/16117.cfm). Playboy had a circulation of 3,060,376 in 2005 and was ranked 17<sup>th</sup> overall in terms of total circulation. Playgirl was not even ranked on the top 100 list which ended with Forbes, which had a 2005 circulation of 926,581.

<sup>3</sup> This song was done by the Four Lads. Among songs with female watchers noted in cut chapter on popular culture are “Whatta Man” by Salt N Pepa, Natalie Imbruglia’s “I’ve Been Watching” and Melissa Etheridge’s “Watching You.”

<sup>4</sup> There are occasional cases of the jealous and perhaps revenge-seeking female stalking the male as taken to an extreme in the film *Fatal Attraction* (1987). Several studies suggest that the gender differences, at least for the milder forms of stalking, may not be as great as one might expect. A large study by Tjaden and Thoenes (1998) concluded that in the preceding year over one million U.S. women and almost 400,000 men had experienced behavior that can be seen as stalking –most commonly following, standing outside the home, making unwanted phone calls and sending unwanted letters and gifts. About 9 out of 10 of the stalkers identified by females were male, as were 6 out of 10 of those identified by males. Johnson’s (2002) research suggests that in everyday life, the milder forms--such as “drive bys” and telephone “hang-ups”--are “widespread and pervasive and stem from the discontinuities and conflicts in ordinary relationships.” They are inherent in processes of coupling and uncoupling (Vaughn 1986).

<sup>5</sup> Ease with using technology and opportunity may also be factors. Note the enthusiasm with which Sharon Stone in the film *Sliver* (1993) becomes intrigued and a regular in watching her wired high-rise building, after an initial culturally expected obeisance to the shock and insult of video invasion. The film *Kika* (1993) chronicles a female voyeur. While more muted, Grace Kelley in *Rear Window* (1954) also becomes an interested observer. Of course we must be careful not to too unreflectively leap from movies to generalizations about other kinds of human behavior.

<sup>6</sup> A related issue not seen in Europe to the same degree as in the U.S. is the expectation that a nurse will be present in situations that call for revelation and touching involving a male doctor and a female patient.

<sup>7</sup> There are actually 5 physiological types, at least by birth. One of my students, employed as a collector of urine samples, reports the case of a hermaphrodite who when asked, said it didn’t matter if a male or a female observed the sample collection.

<sup>8</sup> *Lady Godiva* by John Collier (circa 1898), available at <http://itsa.ucsf.edu/~snlrc/britannia/flowers/godgifu.html> (last visited May 10, 2006).