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Surveillance as Culture, Not Device: A Contemporary Reading of Dystopian Fiction

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Abstract

Surveillance is often described through the technologies that enable it - cameras, networks, databases, screens. Yet these devices explain only part of the phenomenon. Much of the force of surveillance lies in the habits, fears, and quiet performances that shape people's daily behaviour. This paper argues that modern dystopian fiction does not simply imagine societies ruled by machines of observation. It portrays cultures that teach individuals how to watch themselves. By examining George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, Naomi Alderman's *The Power*, and Paul Lynch's *Prophet Song*, the study proposes that surveillance becomes truly effective when it settles into social rituals and emotional reflexes. Drawing on theorists like Foucault, David Lyon, Shoshana Zuboff, the paper explores how these novels reveal a shift from surveillance as an instrument to surveillance as a cultural condition - one that alters privacy, reshapes identity, and influences human conduct even in the absence of visible authority.

Keywords: surveillance culture, privacy, control, dystopian fiction, internalisation, authority

Introduction

Surveillance today rarely announces itself loudly. It appears in the way people measure their words, in the pause before a message is sent, in the instinctive lowering of the voice when discussing sensitive matters. It moves quietly through behaviour, as though it belonged there all along. This shift - from visible systems of watching to subtle cultural habits - is a defining feature of the modern world.

Dystopian fiction has been alert to this transformation, sensing that control becomes most enduring when it blends into ordinary life.

Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is remembered for its machinery - the telescreen, the microphones, the looming image of Big Brother - yet its deeper force lies elsewhere. People correct themselves before speaking and worry about their own facial gestures. Their bodies betray them long before their actions do. Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* extends this idea through ritual and ideology, where obedience is performed almost before it is commanded. Alderman's *The Power* shows how surveillance shifts as power shifts, while Lynch's *Prophet Song* portrays a society sliding toward authoritarianism through the slow thickening of fear.

Although surveillance in dystopian fiction has been widely studied, much criticism still focuses on technological or political structures. Less attention has been given to how surveillance becomes cultural - how it embeds itself in habits, emotions, and everyday performances even without visible authority. Existing studies often treat Orwell, Atwood, Alderman, and Lynch separately. What remains underexplored is a comparative reading that shows how these texts reveal a shift from surveillance as device to surveillance as cultural condition. This paper addresses that gap by examining the subtle, ordinary, and deeply human processes through which surveillance becomes part of social behaviour itself.

This study therefore argues that surveillance functions most powerfully when it becomes cultural rather than mechanical. The emphasis is not on devices but on the gradual internalisation of the gaze. Each novel portrays a society in which people monitor themselves - sometimes more harshly than any authority could. Such worlds feel close to our own, where digital platforms, political polarisation, and social expectations often shape behaviour more effectively than overt policing.

Review of Literature

Critical discussions of surveillance almost inevitably begin with Michel Foucault. His analysis of the panopticon remains foundational because it captures a psychological truth: people behave differently when they believe they are being observed. The brilliance of Foucault's argument lies in the idea that watching need not be continuous. The *possibility* of being watched is often enough. This insight resonates strongly with *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, where the Thought Police require little physical intervention because citizens have already absorbed the rules into their inner lives.

Yet surveillance theory has evolved. Gilles Deleuze proposed the idea of the "control society," where power is no longer tied to fixed institutions but moves fluidly

through screens, codes, and shifting gateways. People are not confined; they are steered. This fluidity mirrors the cultural uncertainty in *The Power* and the steady tightening of conditions in *Prophet Song*.

David Lyon's concept of surveillance culture pushes the conversation even further. Lyon argues that surveillance becomes effective not when imposed, but when normalised. It appears in everyday exchanges, consumer transactions, digital habits, and casual social judgments. Surveillance becomes a mode of social participation. Although Lyon writes about contemporary life, his observations illuminate the worlds of Gilead, Oceania, and Lynch's collapsing Ireland with remarkable clarity.

Shoshana Zuboff's work helps explain why surveillance culture spreads so easily. In *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, she describes how personal behaviour becomes valuable data. People surrender privacy not because they are forced to, but because modern life encourages it. Her argument resonates with Alderman's exploration of shifting power and with Lynch's portrayal of fear-driven compliance.
Literary criticism on Orwell and Atwood is extensive, yet newer dystopian works are still gaining critical attention. Scholars note that *The Power* revisits questions of authority and fear from a different angle, while *Prophet Song* situates surveillance in the intimate world of parenting and home life. What remains largely unexplored is how these four novels, taken together, depict the transition from surveillance as a structure to surveillance as a culture - an idea this paper seeks to foreground.

Discourse

(i) When Surveillance Thickens into Atmosphere

Surveillance becomes truly dominant when people no longer recognise it as something separate from their daily lives. In many societies - fictional or otherwise - control does not arrive with a sudden burst of machinery. It settles slowly, like dust, until it feels ordinary. Dystopian fiction captures this movement with unusual sensitivity. It shows how the pressure to watch and to be watched shapes posture, speech, emotion, and even imagination. In such environments, surveillance becomes less a system and more a mood.

This atmospheric quality appears across the four novels under study. The monitoring is not far away or abstract. It rests on the surfaces of objects, hides in conversations, and slips into people's assumptions about safety. The characters' responses are not always dramatic. They are often small gestures - pauses, hesitations, careful smiles. These modest adjustments indicate the deeper truth: surveillance works best when it reshapes instinct.

Foucault's idea of the internalised gaze explains part of this logic. Lyon expands it by emphasising how everyday life absorbs these pressures. Dystopian fiction adds something more emotional: the weight of being continuously visible even when no one is actually looking. That imagined visibility is often the point. People behave as though their inner thoughts were public property. Once that mindset takes hold, surveillance becomes self-sustaining.

(ii) *Nineteen Eighty-Four*: The Habit of Obedience

Orwell's novel is often read for its political warnings, but its psychological intelligence is just as striking. The telescreen may be the most memorable device in the story, yet it is merely the entry point. The more significant mechanism is the learned behaviour it produces. Winston does not straighten his face because a guard is nearby. He does it because he has internalised the consequences of carelessness.

Orwell shows how discipline becomes a reflex. Citizens learn to fear their own impulses. A wrong expression can betray them. A moment of enthusiasm can expose doubt. The body becomes a site of potential danger. Even solitude offers little relief because the mind itself feels monitored. Winston's diary entries - hesitant, fragmented, guilty - reveal a man who wants privacy but hardly knows what it feels like anymore.

What makes Orwell's world frightening is not the efficiency of the state, but the willingness of its citizens to participate in their own regulation. Children report parents. Neighbours watch one another. People police their own emotions. Surveillance becomes cultural because it becomes desirable to appear loyal. Obedience is performed before it is demanded.

The shift from machine enforcement to cultural performance is what gives *Nineteen Eighty-Four* its lasting power. Orwell understood that the strongest forms of control are those that people apply to themselves, often without recognising it.

(iii) *The Handmaid's Tale*: Rituals That Shape the Body

Atwood approaches surveillance from another direction. Gilead is not a world crowded with cameras; its strength lies instead in how ideology governs the body. Clothing is symbolic. Speech is regulated. Rituals are designed to reinforce hierarchy, and these rituals repeat until they feel natural. A handmaid walks, speaks, and even breathes within the confines of a role she has not chosen.

Offred monitors herself constantly. She watches the movement of her eyes. She considers the weight of each word. She is alert to the shift of a Commander's voice or the stiffness of a Wife's expression. Much of this vigilance is automatic.

Gilead has trained her to measure every gesture. Surveillance here is woven into behaviour long before it is enforced through punishment.

Language is central to this cultural control. Greetings are scripted. Silence carries ideological meaning. Even ordinary statements acquire ritual significance. Atwood's insight lies in how these linguistic forms embed surveillance within communication itself. People learn what cannot be said, and eventually they stop wanting to say it. Ritual replaces spontaneity.

Gilead demonstrates that surveillance can thrive without extensive machinery. A society can control people through stories, symbols, and shared expectations. When belief merges with discipline, individuals become custodians of the very rules that restrict them. Atwood's novel therefore expands the field of surveillance beyond devices, showing how culture can do the work of technology with equal precision.

(iv) *The Power*: Watching That Moves with Power

Naomi Alderman's *The Power* presents a more volatile landscape. When women suddenly gain the ability to release electrical energy, the world shifts quickly. Social hierarchies flip. Fear changes direction. What is striking is how fast new forms of surveillance arise. Women begin to watch men for signs of resistance. Men adapt their behaviour to avoid provoking danger. People learn new cultural rules almost overnight.

Alderman reveals something important: surveillance is not tied to specific institutions. It is tied to whoever holds authority in a given moment. Watching becomes a way of confirming identity within an unstable world. Women assert dominance through observation. Men protect themselves through caution. Surveillance becomes relational, not structural.

This fluid model challenges more traditional depictions of dystopian control. Instead of a singular oppressive regime, Alderman depicts a society negotiating new expectations. The cultural habits that form around power - the way people adjust their tone, the way they read the atmosphere of a room - become as influential as any formal system.

The Power therefore expands surveillance theory by showing how quickly cultural watching adapts to new configurations of force. The gaze follows authority wherever it goes. It is not bound to machines or ideologies. It travels through people.

(v) *Prophet Song*: Surveillance in a Slow Emergency

Paul Lynch's *Prophet Song* approaches surveillance in a quieter register. Its world resembles a society sliding into authoritarianism without fully acknowledging

it. The result is a landscape where people watch not because they believe in the state but because they fear what they cannot predict. Surveillance becomes a survival tactic. Eilish, the protagonist, experiences this shift intimately. She pays attention to the tone of official announcements. She studies the expressions of neighbours. She watches her children for signs that the world's tension is affecting them. These are not heroic acts. They are the measured steps of someone navigating an environment where everything feels fragile.

Lynch's novel shows how surveillance becomes cultural during prolonged crises. Institutions may weaken or behave unpredictably, but communities fill the gaps. Rumour and suspicion circulate. People rely on instinct. They perform calmness at checkpoints. They hide their fear at home. The state does not need to enforce constant watching because uncertainty performs that function naturally.

Among the four novels, *Prophet Song* offers perhaps the closest reflection of how real societies experience authoritarian drift. Cultural surveillance grows at the edges before it reaches the centre. People adjust quietly. Their behaviour becomes careful. Privacy feels like a luxury that cannot be afforded.

(vi) Privacy in Retreat: How Cultural Surveillance Shrinks Inner Space

One of the quiet tragedies across all four novels is the slow retreat of privacy. It rarely disappears with a single policy or machine. Instead, it erodes in increments. People surrender one small moment after another - first a gesture, then a thought, then a piece of memory - until they are no longer sure what remains wholly their own. Dystopian fiction portrays this erosion with remarkable clarity.

In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Winston's dream of privacy is fragile from the start. His diary offers him a momentary refuge, yet even this act feels dangerous. He hesitates over each sentence. He flinches at the sound of footsteps. He senses the Party's shadow even in the movement of his pen. What Orwell captures here is not simply fear but the emotional consequence of living under a cultural form of surveillance. Winston cannot trust his own solitude. His inner life feels exposed long before anyone reads his words.

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, privacy is denied more openly. Offred's body is a public site, controlled through ritual, scripture, and state logic. She tries to protect her memories of Luke and her daughter, but these memories sit uneasily within the confines of Gilead's discipline. They start to feel like stolen property. Atwood shows that privacy becomes dangerous not only because it is punished, but because it resists the cultural vocabulary of the regime. To want privacy is, in some sense, to want a self outside the state's definitions.

Alderman's The Power offers a different angle. Privacy becomes unstable because the social rules that once protected it collapse. The shift in power forces both men and women to reassess what aspects of themselves can safely remain hidden. Alderman presents privacy not as a fixed right but as a social agreement - one that can dissolve when fear and uncertainty rise. Cultural surveillance thrives in this instability, feeding on anxiety.

In *Prophet Song*, the erosion of privacy feels painfully intimate. The family home becomes permeated with tension. Conversations are guarded. Even children pick up the atmosphere. Eilish tries to hold onto her inner world, but the crisis outside seeps into her thoughts. Lynch shows how cultural surveillance infiltrates domestic life; it dulls easy laughter, interrupts sleep, and alters the texture of silence.

Taken together, these novels suggest that privacy shrinks from the inside outward. Devices may accelerate the process, but cultural pressures do the deeper work. People begin to doubt their right to a private thought. That doubt becomes the foundation upon which surveillance culture rests.

(vii) The Performance of Compliance

A striking feature across dystopian narratives is how often characters perform obedience. Their compliance is not always sincere. It is strategic. It is survival. Yet performance has consequences. The more it is repeated, the more it becomes habitual. Performance gradually blurs into belief.

In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the Two Minutes Hate turns performance into spectacle. Citizens scream and gesture not because they are compelled by force but because they know the cost of hesitation. Their bodies participate before their minds do. This performative energy creates an illusion of unity. It also reveals how easily culture can mobilise emotion for political ends.

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the ceremonies demand precision. Every gesture, every utterance, carries significance. Offred performs these rituals with the understanding that deviation could break the thin line separating life from punishment. Yet something deeper is at work: the rituals shape her sense of self. Performance becomes a way of remembering the boundaries she cannot cross. Atwood shows that when a society builds its ideology into repeated gestures, individuals eventually feel the weight of those gestures even when unobserved.

In *The Power*, performance becomes a sign of shifting dominance. Women perform confidence. Men perform caution. These performances reveal deeper cultural changes. They confirm the emergence of new expectations. Alderman suggests that surveillance culture responds quickly to power. It watches whoever is vulnerable. It

reinforces whichever group has authority. Performance becomes both shield and signal.

In *Prophet Song*, the performances are subdued but emotionally charged. People behave calmly at checkpoints. They keep their voices steady. They choose their words carefully with strangers. This quiet performance reflects a society where fear circulates in ordinary spaces. Lynch shows that compliance does not need dramatic rituals; it can emerge through the smallest behavioural adjustments.

Performance sustains surveillance culture because it keeps individuals alert to how they appear. Once people begin to monitor themselves, the need for external watching decreases. A culture of self-surveillance becomes its own enforcement mechanism.

(viii) Anticipation and the Logic of Self-Policing

Surveillance culture thrives on anticipation - on the belief that something could happen, that someone might be watching, that danger is possibly near. This expectation shapes behaviour more effectively than any continuous monitoring system.

In Orwell's world, people fear the Thought Police even when alone. That imagined threat shapes their posture and speech. They become careful with their dreams. They think cautiously. Anticipation creates a climate where self-policing becomes automatic.

In Gilead, Offred anticipates punishment for even minor deviations. She anticipates the consequences of a gaze lingering too long or a smile that crosses boundaries. This anticipation produces emotional fatigue. It becomes part of how she understands her place in the world.

In *The Power*, anticipation flows through the new social order. Men anticipate harm; women anticipate challenge. Alderman shows that the shifting of power produces new forms of alertness. People develop instincts shaped by the recent history of violence and fear.

In *Prophet Song*, anticipation is tied to uncertainty. Citizens sense that things are getting worse, even if they cannot articulate how. This anticipation generates caution. It keeps people from asking questions. It makes them more careful in public and more anxious at home.

Anticipation matters because it reveals how surveillance culture embeds itself in thought. Actual watching becomes less important than the belief that watching is possible. This belief alters behaviour long before any device or official act does.

(ix) The Emotional Weight of Being Observed

Surveillance is not only a political force. It is an emotional experience. It shapes how people feel about themselves and others. Fear becomes normal. Shame becomes easy to manipulate. Suspicion becomes a social instinct.

Winston carries despair like a physical burden because he cannot trust even the privacy of his mind. Offred navigates guilt, longing, and numbness as she tries to adapt to her restricted existence. Men in *The Power* carry a deep unease that colours every interaction. Eilish, in *Prophet Song*, experiences a slow-building dread that changes the meaning of home, community, and hope.

These emotional responses matter because they reveal how culture sustains surveillance. Emotional habits become part of the mechanism. People feel watched even in moments of solitude. They internalise the emotional consequences of exposure. Dystopian fiction uses these feelings to show that the true cost of surveillance is not simply the loss of freedom, but the quiet reshaping of human interiority.

(x) When Culture Becomes the Device

Across these four novels, a shared pattern emerges: surveillance becomes most effective when culture performs the work that machines were once imagined to do. Devices may trigger fear, but cultural habits maintain it. Institutions may design rules, but ordinary people enforce them - sometimes gently, sometimes with startling intensity. As practices repeat, they become familiar; as familiarity deepens, they appear natural. Once a society reaches this stage, surveillance no longer needs constant reinforcement. It becomes part of the social fabric.

In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the telescreen is symbolic, but the real device is the culture of suspicion that grows around it. People learn to correct themselves before any outsider can. The telescreen shapes behaviour in its presence, but culture shapes behaviour everywhere else.

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, technology barely appears. Rituals do the work instead. They discipline the body, structure speech, and carve a certain kind of obedience into daily life. Gilead does not require elaborate machinery because culture becomes a system of enforcement, one that teaches individuals to conform even when the state is not looking.

In *The Power*, cultural surveillance evolves with social energy. The shift in authority changes who watches whom, yet the underlying mechanism remains the same. People use observation to stabilise their place within the new order. Surveillance becomes a social instinct that adapts to new realities.

In *Prophet Song*, cultural surveillance arises from fear and uncertainty. Neighbours watch one another not because they are commanded to, but because they sense danger in the air. The state relies on this atmosphere. It allows ordinary fear to fill the spaces left by failing institutions.

These novels reveal a simple but unsettling truth: surveillance becomes most powerful when it no longer needs to announce itself. When people internalise its logic, culture itself becomes the device.

Conclusion

Surveillance is often imagined as a technological force - an array of cameras, screens, and digital systems. Yet dystopian fiction consistently points toward something deeper. In these novels, surveillance becomes a cultural practice long before it becomes a technical one. It survives through habit, performance, anticipation, and emotional conditioning. People learn to regulate themselves. They adjust their words and gestures. They carry fear inside their imagination.

By reading *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, *The Handmaid's Tale*, *The Power*, and *Prophet Song* together, it becomes clear that surveillance spreads most effectively when it blends with ordinary life. Orwell shows how discipline becomes reflex. Atwood highlights how ritual shapes identity. Alderman reveals how watching shifts with power. Lynch traces the slow tightening of fear in a society falling apart. Each text demonstrates that privacy shrinks not through technology alone but through cultural acceptance.

Understanding surveillance as culture changes how we interpret contemporary life as well. It suggests that resisting surveillance requires more than questioning devices or policies. It demands a deeper awareness of the habits and emotional patterns that make watchfulness feel normal. Literature becomes a crucial space for recognising these patterns, not because it predicts the future exactly, but because it exposes how cultural forces take shape within the human mind.

Seen in this light, dystopian fiction is not merely a warning about authoritarian systems. It is a study of how ordinary people inhabit worlds where scrutiny becomes routine. It reveals the fragility of privacy, the vulnerability of identity, and the subtle ways culture can turn into a mechanism of control. By shifting the focus from machines to human behaviour, these novels offer an urgent reminder: the most enduring forms of surveillance begin within us.

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