

# A Reconsideration of Surveillance in Michael Winter's *This All Happened*

## What Actually Happened?

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## A Reconsideration of Surveillance in Michael Winter's *This All Happened*:

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Thomas Halford

When Michael Winter's *This All Happened* was first published roughly 15 years ago, it caused somewhat of a stir in St. John's, Newfoundland. According to Chris Armstrong in "The Rock Observed: Art and Surveillance in Michael Winter's *This All Happened*," Winter's friends and family felt that they had been unfairly written about, and they were offended: "'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" (37–38). As time has passed, more diverse responses to Winter's journal à clef have emerged. Some people were upset; others were indifferent, and some were flattered.<sup>1</sup> Prying and publishing was not such a great offence after all. For example, in *This Is My Country, What's Yours?* Noah Richler reports a conversation he had with two people who were the inspiration for one of Winter's characters:

"What Michael did brilliantly . . . is that he put so many of the St. John's characters and experiences into the book and yet never has anyone ever felt kind of like — well, *the next time I see him . . .*"

"The next time I see him, what?"

"The next time I see him — *you know*."

"Nobody feels that," said the one. (330)

With this more varied response to Winter's text in mind, in this essay I reconsider *This All Happened* and the ethics of writing about others. Critics of this novel tend to describe the observations of Winter and of his narrator, Gabriel English, as a sort of surveillance. This essay offers an alternative reading through the metaphor of "sousveillance" or "parodic surveillance." It questions how Winter's novel might signal a way of working with and against contemporary types of surveillance to lessen their harmful qualities. The literary impression parodies surveillance as an experience that is constantly subject to new interpretations; it is amorphous in ways that can never be fully captured and sorted.

Surveillance is a recurring theme in Winter's writing, and critics have read his work through this lens. Chris Armstrong, Paul Chafe (in "Beautiful Losers: The Flâneur in St. John's Literature"), and Peter Thompson (in "Surveillance and the City in Michael Winter's *This All Happened*") have examined the observational practices of English in *This All Happened*. In *The Big Why*, Rockwell Kent is under the watch of the government for professing his love of German culture during World War I. David Twombly gets a "no-fly caution" in *The Architects Are Here* when he says "something sarcastic about blowing up the plane" (132), and in *The Death of Donna Whalen* the actions of the Royal Newfoundland Constabulary are scrutinized. Surveillance takes many forms in Winter's novels, and one of its frustrating or intimidating elements tends to be its sorting of citizens and reducing them to types. Surveillance technologies, such as closed circuit television (CCTV), create the illusion of a concrete perception through the video recording of moments that could only otherwise be recalled through memory. Individuals can rewind to an event and witness it repeatedly; thus, it appears as a real experience despite the fact that it lacks the interiority and the confusion of immediate perception. If a by-product of surveillance is ethical or moral certitude, then indeterminacy and irony frustrate the belief that what one sees or records is absolutely true.

Although it might sound as though I am contrasting visual and verbal media, my overarching focus is on the relationship between

artistic modes of observation and governmental modes. This essay focuses on the literary impression because it tends to invite complex representations of character and to disrupt moral certainty. As Martha Nussbaum writes in *Poetic Justice*, “When simplified conceptions of the human being are in widespread use for predictive purposes, it is all the more important to keep reminding ourselves of the richer picture of human life to which such simplified models are ultimately accountable” (47). My definition of “indeterminacy” is a moment or moments in which an observer cannot be certain of what he or she sees. This definition derives from Mikhail Bakhtin’s use of the term in “Epic and Novel” when he discusses how “the novel inserts into . . . other genres an indeterminacy, a certain semantic openendedness, a living contact with unfinished, still evolving contemporary reality (the openended present)” (6–7). In contrast to the depth and thoughtfulness that invests the novel form, surveillance technologies tend to sort and categorize (Armstrong 48), and they “eliminate the variability of territory” (Thompson 73). My definition also is informed by Wolfgang Iser’s “Indeterminacy and the Reader’s Response” since I follow his argument that indeterminacy is cultivated through specific aesthetic choices that encourage reader participation (6). I am using Linda Hutcheon’s definition of irony in “Irony, Nostalgia and the Postmodern” as the moment “when two meanings, one said and the other unsaid, come together, usually with a certain critical edge” (par. 15). The indeterminacy of the present and the irony of the reading experience permeate *This All Happened*. Readers are actively encouraged through the author’s — and occasionally the diarist’s — aesthetic choices to participate in critiques of how one writer observes and describes his world.

Criticism of *This All Happened* characterizes English’s diary as a means of surveillance, and one question that tends to be asked about this text is whether or not English is an ethical observer. Armstrong and Thompson both consider art’s compliance with or resistance to the ways in which societies observe and judge citizens. Armstrong expands on Paul Chafé’s representation of English as a flâneur, one who “is amongst the crowd, but not part of it . . . both participant and

recorder, a roving reporter who maintains critical distance even as he threatens to melt into the masses" (Chafe 119–20). Analyzing the ways in which surveillance stifles class mobility, Armstrong uses *This All Happened* to question whether or not literary artists can compete with the ever-growing technological eye of judgment. Thompson highlights the ways in which English uses art to further his own interests and to gain control over his friends and family in social situations. For him, English represents a transitional figure from the old ways of surveilling people to newer forms such as CCTV. One central point of contention to these critics is that surveillance is not the best metaphor to describe English's and Winter's observations. Although art certainly can be a tool of social coercion as Chafe, Armstrong, and Thompson show, describing a writer as a source of surveillance attaches unwarranted connotations that are mainly negative. Surveillance functions from a position of authority and generally at the behest of a hierarchical structure. On the other hand, in "Sousveillance': Inverse Surveillance in Multimedia Imaging," Steve Mann describes sousveillance as a form of observation that functions through the gaze of individuals: "The word sur-veillance denotes a God's eye view from on high (i.e., French for 'to watch from above'). An inverse . . . [is] called sousveillance (French for 'to watch from below')" (620). Although English receives state funding through an arts grant, his allegiances are to his craft and to his aesthetic sensibilities, not to his government or to a corporation. His obsession with writing makes him occasionally snobbish and even cruel, but not an agent of state or corporate supervision. To tweak this discussion slightly, I will consider whether or not authors can be a source of sousveillance, a far more appealing concept for those interested in resisting abuses of social control or in productively co-operating with the powers that be.

Armstrong questions whether or not artists have the capacity to resist the stifling elements of surveillance through their creative action. He demonstrates the effects of various kinds of observation in *This All Happened*, and he elucidates the systemic problems of surveillance technologies. Acknowledging that contemporary society depends on

surveillance to produce a sense of security, he points out that it becomes problematic when it is used as a tool by those who are in positions of power to reinforce hierarchical social structures (Armstrong 39). He is not confident about the potentialities of art as a means of opposition to ways in which visual technologies define and objectify human beings: "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 prospects 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" (Armstrong 48–9). The obvious response to the technological objectification of human beings through surveillance would be a textured and subjective account of an individual's experience. Even more appropriately, this literary resistance would concern the individual's idiosyncratic contemplations of various forms of surveillance. Armstrong anticipates this argument and rejects it: "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" (50). Armstrong's cynicism about this form of resistance is rooted in English's representation of himself as a specific type of artist. In this sense, Armstrong echoes a similar critique to Chafe's observation of English as a *flâneur*. The fact that the artist can be identified as a type frustrates the attempt to be a unique recorder of experience. For Armstrong, English is not simply a *flâneur* but, expanding on the various types, he is "a clownish misfit, a portrait of the artist as media cliché or commodity, at best perhaps an ironized romanticism" (51). His experience loses its subjectivity and, as a result, its individuality. He becomes a composite of the available artist types rather than a unique and idiosyncratic creator. The texture of his experience is reduced to a minor variation on a

major cliché. Ultimately, however, Armstrong is ambivalent about the potential of art to function as a form of resistance to ubiquitous surveillance technologies. Although he is dubious about English, he offers some hope in Winter's authorial position: "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" (Armstrong 51). To redirect this thread of Armstrong's argument, this essay emphasizes how Winter develops *This All Happened* to encourage irony and indeterminacy.

While Armstrong focuses on the potentialities of art as a form of resistance, Thompson illustrates how English uses writing as a method to gain control over his surroundings. He argues that English represents a transitional phase in theories of surveillance, from the subjective interpersonal note-taking of individuals to the objective data-gathering made possible by new technologies such as CCTV: "[Winter's] . . . protagonist in *This All Happened* finds in surveillance a strategy for preserving traditional forms of community and sealing off Newfoundland to outsiders. The text offers on the one hand a critique of the impersonal nature of contemporary forms of surveillance and an uneasy analysis of Newfoundland's 'ironic' urban culture on the other" (Thompson 72). Where Armstrong is dubious about the use of art as a form of resistance to visual technologies, Thompson sees journal writing as an outmoded tool of social control. Textured subjectivity does not reveal human fallibility or the hypocrisy of one individual's gaze. Instead, the literary impression elucidates the ways in which people use art as an avenue to gain power and influence: "While his obsession with surveillance is closely related to his aesthetic vision — he tells Lydia at one point that his binoculars 'make colour appear' and 'create sound' (70) — Gabe seems less interested in the way in which this activity informs his writing and more concerned with using the information he gleans from observing the city to his advantage in social situations" (77–8). Thompson brings up a valid concern in relation to the importance of art as a form of resistance to surveillance technologies. If art provides writers cultural authority or

interpersonal advantages, then there will be people who will abuse these benefits. However, the construction of *This All Happened* invites readers to observe English in his authorial position. In this sense, Winter encourages a certain vigilance *against* those who seek control through their observational and descriptive practices.

To shift Armstrong's and Thompson's observations of *This All Happened*, I will use *sousveillance* rather than *surveillance* to describe the writing of Winter and of English. Like *surveillance*, *sousveillance* is an ambivalent term. However, it does have more positive connotations in placing greater power in the hands of individuals who feel disenfranchised by surveillance technologies. If citizens become more aware of how they watch and are watched by others, then these citizens will have more choice in how they interact with various manifestations of surveillance and *sousveillance*. Two qualities in Winter's text that encourage a productive sense of watching and being watched are indeterminacy and irony since they invite readers to consider what Nussbaum might call "the richer picture of human life" (47). At no point do I want to suggest that *sousveillance* is absolutely opposite and separate from *surveillance*. A synonym for "*sousveillance*" in this essay is "parodic surveillance." In using "parodic," I am not referencing its comedic connotations as a type of burlesque (Abrams 26); I am referencing Linda Hutcheon's definition in "The Politics of Postmodernism: Parody and History":

What I mean by "parody" here is not the ridiculing imitation of the standard theories and definitions that are rooted in eighteenth-century theories of wit. The collective weight of parodic practice suggests a redefinition of parody as repetition with critical distance that allows ironic signaling of difference at the very heart of similarity . . . this parody paradoxically enacts both change and cultural continuity: the Greek prefix *para* can mean both "counter" or "against" AND "near" or "beside." (185–6)



Thus, when I use the terms “sousveillance” or “parodic surveillance,” I aim to reference how sousveillance is counter to but also co-operative and even complicit with surveillance. In one sense, English represents a clinging to traditional forms of communal observation, but he also makes use of newer surveillance technologies when necessary.

The advent of new digital technologies has changed the way people watch one another. A classic metaphor to describe the ways in which governments and companies surveil citizens is the panopticon, but scholars such as Kevin D. Haggerty in “Tear Down the Walls: On Demolishing the Panopticon” argue that contemporary surveillance studies are undergoing a paradigm shift (24). The concept of the panopticon was developed by English philosopher Jeremy Bentham to create a more efficient and humane prison system.<sup>2</sup> He theorized that if prisoners could not physically see their guards, they would begin to practice self-discipline (Haggerty 25). This prison system is used as a metaphor by Michel Foucault in *Discipline and Punish* to explain the processes of socialization in democratic societies. In Foucault’s list of panoptic institutions, he includes, “schools, hospitals, factories” (207), and he writes of the panoptic model that “It is a type of location of bodies in space, of distribution of individuals in relation to one another, of hierarchical organization, of disposition of centers and channels of power, of definition of the instruments and modes of intervention of power” (205). In this formulation, power operates through this shared sense of being watched; surveillance is thus a method of encouraging citizens to adopt social norms as defined by states and corporations. Haggerty writes, “Foucault . . . proposed that the principles inherent in the panopticon themselves served as a model for understanding the operation of power in contemporary society” (25). The major shift from panoptic surveillance to contemporary surveillance is that the panopticon represents a singular eye of judgment, whereas contemporary surveillance has numerous eyes of observation: “The multiplication of the sites of surveillance ruptures the unidirectional nature of the gaze, transforming surveillance from a dynamic of the microscope to one where knowledge and images of unexpected intensity and assorted

distortions cascade from viewer to viewer and across institutions . . . undermining the neat distinction between watchers and watched” (Haggerty 29). Haggerty’s description of contemporary surveillance promises increased observation of those who observe. However, this multiplication of sites might just mean an increase of more sophisticated panoptic surveillance structures. The impersonal and the placeless eye of government and corporate surveillance should be supplemented by the ground-level observations of private citizens who value indeterminacy and irony. In “The Generalized Sousveillance Society” Jean-Gabriel Ganascia writes:

the notion of a surveillance society, which many of our contemporaries still dread, does not seem to characterize the present state of our postmodern societies. . . . This does not mean that surveillance has disappeared, but instead that the global organization of the surveillance society has been replaced by a new social organization, more flexible and fluid, where surveillance and what we can call “sousveillance” coexist. (Ganascia 491)

If private citizens have an increased potential to observe and to be aware of how they are observed, then this shift could put more agency in the hands of individuals who feel stifled and subjugated by surveillance. However, I do not see sousveillance as truly countering power with power; it is a steady redefinition of power from below; it is, as Hutcheon notes, an “ironic signaling of difference at the very heart of similarity” (185). If citizens cannot balance the power to observe, then at least they might be able to parody the ways in which surveillance operates. Winter does this throughout *This All Happened* in his varied idiosyncratic descriptions of surveillance technologies.

In this period of multilateral observation, the literary impression could inform readers about the effects of watching and being watched. Novels reveal the nuances and the complexities of observation and description. However, the effect and the social influence of the novel are

contested. According to D.A. Miller, the novel creates stifling behavioural expectations, but Bakhtin argues that it encourages a sense of openness in how one sees the world. Even if the technological eye of judgment is multilateral, Miller, in *The Novel and the Police*, argues that the novelistic eye of judgment is typically unilateral. Miller's theory derives from Foucault's concept of panoptic discipline, and he focuses on the Victorian novel, "whose cultural hegemony and diffusion well qualified it to become the primary spiritual exercise of an age" (x). Through a clear demarcation between the normal and the deviant, fiction imposes a set of traits onto the supposedly free, liberal subject. This discipline "provides the novel with its essential 'content'" (Miller 18) and makes fiction "the very genre of the liberal subject, both as cause and effect" (Miller 216). In Miller's characterization of the novel, he represents the author as the individual lurking inside this three-tiered panoptic structure.

On the other hand, one classic theoretical assumption about the novel is that it infuses static worlds with the openness and the uncertainty of the present. Observers who watch others via data collection or CCTV cameras do not experience their subjects' day-to-day lives. Bakhtin theorizes in "Epic and Novel," however, that when the novel intermingles with forms like the epic, it challenges the elevated nature of time-honoured stories, and it makes heroic characters far more human (Bakhtin 14). Essentially, the novel grounds readers in a contemporary and an indeterminate reality as opposed to the epic's basis in a concrete and distanced past: "the entire world and everything sacred in it is offered to us without any distancing at all, in a zone of crude contact, where we can grab at everything with our own hands" (Bakhtin 26). Bakhtin's argument is prescient in its focus on the novel as a zone of contact between different realities. If English has the authority to demarcate the normal and the deviant, he does not have the comfort of a unidirectional gaze. He is under observation not only for what he writes, but for his position as an observer. Rather than an unseen official imposing a strict demarcation between the normal and the deviant, he is something closer to Bakhtin's characterization of the reader in novelistic discourse, an individual in "a zone of crude contact"

subject to a host of competing wills (26). One could argue that in *This All Happened* the diary form is also being novelized alongside surveillance. The discourse of *This All Happened* suggests that diaries and fictional diaries parody surveillance technologies, but they are not parodic because they are more coherent or authentic than other forms of observation; they are parodic because they invite readers to observe the indeterminacies and the ironies of one individual's daily life.

To further demonstrate why sousveillance is a better model to understand *This All Happened*, English's style and the overall construction of Winter's text must be shown to possess elements of irony and indeterminacy. Both Armstrong and Thompson present convincing arguments about the literary artist as a source of surveillance. However, as I hope this argument has shown so far, there are more optimistic ways to characterize the work of creative writers. The ironies of *This All Happened* are not always obvious, and they are generally not ones that English is aware of, but they highlight the fact that certain things are deliberately left unsaid by Winter. *This All Happened* asks readers to consider the overarching irony that even though English observes others, his life comes under the closest and most prolonged scrutiny since they are privy to his journal. When someone observes others in this text, he or she usually ends up being observed, and in this sense the very idea of observation becomes ironic. In contrast to the ironic elements of this novel, English is cognizant of the indeterminacy of certain moments, and the writing of these moments is often infused with metaphors. Description has the power to transform how these moments are remembered; when these described moments are read or interpreted, they are transformed yet again. What results is an endless process of transformation. The metaphor of surveillance cannot accommodate this lively, amorphous, and liberating quality of literary language as readily as sousveillance.

Since English, more than any other character in *This All Happened*, is under the closest scrutiny, his tendency to watch others is underwritten with a sense of irony. The text begins with a preface, written by Winter, in which he signifies English as a writer and as a fictional

character: "Gabriel English was the protagonist in a book of stories I wrote entitled *One Last Good Look*. Let me tell you about Gabriel English. He is a writer" (xii). Readers are thus encouraged from the beginning to observe English as an author figure and as a construction of Winter's imagination. His journal is one flawed individual's intimate and occasionally humiliating account of a year in his life. Imagine that you are looking into a window, and you see someone staring at you. The two of you are complicit in this gaze. The difference is that the person looking out is gazing into a public space, whereas you are gazing into a private world. As readers, we are gawking at an intimate window into English's life. Even if the narrator is not aware of his flaws and shortcomings, readers are invited to perceive them in his journal.

Although English organizes and describes these moments, each reader has the opportunity to be skeptical about the ways in which this writer portrays himself. The gap between English's perceived self and the self he reveals through his actions is not only ironic, it encourages the reader to doubt the claims that English makes through writing. Part of the experience of reading *This All Happened* involves witnessing how one individual abuses his position as a powerful observer. James O'Rourke argues in *Sex, Lies, and Autobiography* that "Literary works are uniquely capable of challenging the narratives that give our lives a sense of ethical coherence when their polysemic qualities — their ironies, ambiguities, and indeterminacies — falsify the central premise of moral philosophy, the presumption of a discernible continuity from ethical principle to practice in everyday life" (O'Rourke 1-2). Winter makes English's failings and occasional creepiness an observable element of the text. In the preface, Winter states that English "confesses his failings, copies overheard drunken conversations . . . [and] reports gossip" (xii). English's unethical practices of observation are a recurring theme of the text. This point becomes clear when he talks about spying on his girlfriend through a pair of binoculars. Sometimes he uses his position as observer to his own advantage, but he also describes these moments in his journal, which readers then observe and judge. Stories such as *This All Happened* reveal that even though a person views

himself as essentially good and decent, his actions suggest otherwise: “This story of the good self is a narrative of interiority that centers on the feelings and intentions of the autobiographer . . . this narrative of the good self is shadowed by an account of acts and consequences in which the autobiographer profits from the misfortunes of others and plays some role in the production of those misfortunes” (O’Rourke 2). The irreconcilability of these two selves invites a sense of uncertainty in how the narrator is understood, and it indicates that something is not being said about the way the narrator watches his community.

As the note-taker and composer of his journal, English would be a panoptic, unidirectional watcher, if not for the fact that he is marked as a writer. As the novel repeatedly demonstrates, those who observe tend to make themselves objects of scrutiny. Since people know English is an observer, they return his gaze and attempt to use him for their own ends. Winter writes, “[Oliver] is telling me this story because he knows I’m a writer. He is telling me this so I’ll write it down. It’s as though he knows Maisie Pye [Oliver’s wife and English’s friend] is writing about him and he wants to have a piece of the action” (42). Oliver wants to influence English’s perception and frame domestic problems between him and Maisie Pye from his point of view. As a writer, English becomes a potential conduit for Oliver to air private grievances in a public forum. Furthermore, English lives in a community where other people are observing and writing about their own experiences. Maisie Pye is a novelist, and Lydia Murphy, English’s girlfriend, has a journal in which she records her own observations (Winter 89). More directly, English discusses how watching others can result in being watched: “I’ve been told that I have a critical eye. Some people mistake my gaze for judgement. When all I’m doing is looking into your eye” (Winter 23). Sometimes *sousveillance* is confrontational and antagonistic, but it is also playful and convivial. For example, Murphy gifts English a doll in his likeness, and he is flattered. “I cry laughing,” he writes (Winter 66). Alex Fleming, a love interest, gives him a Christmas present that encourages him to contemplate what it means to watch people: “The box has a glass front that’s been

sandblasted except for an eye, which you can look through. At the back of the box is another eye. It is a photograph of my eye" (Winter 269). In contrast to Miller's theory, novelistic discourse lacks a panoptic structure if the author figure is a flawed individual who observes, manipulates, plays, and experiments as he is observed, manipulated, played upon, and experimented with — who is in crude contact with other human beings in their various complexities. As English narrates "the story of the good self" (O'Rourke 2), readers are invited to sousveiler his actions, both good and bad. Even though there is no "neat distinction between watchers and watched" in English's St. John's (Haggerty 29), one of the most likely ways to make oneself a subject of observation is to be an observer. In this sense, observation itself takes on an ironic aspect.

Aside from the overarching irony in how the text is constructed and in how observers are almost always observed, there are more subtle ironies. For example, English longingly describes how people in a small community watch each other. This description of Heart's Desire confides a nostalgia for an older Newfoundland, one before the various technological innovations that have made contemporary surveillance possible. Armstrong writes, "Gabriel, clearly, yearns for a form of community in which surveillance figures as concern and care . . . this kind of yearning for community . . . can be read against the sinister and depersonalizing effects of (post)modern surveillance" (44). Likewise, Thompson uses this scene to highlight English's nostalgia for older forms of observation and of recording: "Gabe goes to great lengths to present himself in his diary entries as an 'ethical observer' interested in guarding traditional forms of social monitoring that exist in small communities" (83). Even though English yearns for these older ways of watching, his actions suggest that he also appreciates and values newer forms. For example, he writes about this community on his laptop. Winter has constructed this moment in the text to encourage readers to see that something is not being said by the narrator: English is posturing; he values new technology as a means to observe and record information. Yearning for and guarding the old ways of watching are

outward elements of the diary; the reliance — sometimes begrudging reliance — on new ways of watching is an irony constructed by Winter. Using a laptop to type up one's nostalgia for a time less reliant on electronic devices signifies English as a figure of parodic surveillance. He desires to be counter to the intrusions of contemporary society, but he inevitably is implicated in that which he aims to resist.

To further emphasize English's parodic relationship with surveillance, he relies on technological devices and on government supervision as a form of help. He and Murphy realize that someone is breaking into her house. CCTV cameras prove to be an annoyance, but they ultimately allow the police to catch the intruder. Furthermore, the police officers who install them are portrayed sympathetically: "They are polite, ashamed if they have to do a little damage to the mouldings. The cameras are tiny, with high resolution. Apparently there are three, though as soon as they are installed I cannot see them" (Winter 195). English's description of surveillance devices is reminiscent of Haggerty's analysis of the older, unidirectional gaze of panoptic state supervision. However, English and Murphy both know where these cameras have been placed. While English expresses annoyance about the cameras, he is subdued and his complaints are reasonable: "We eat with our fingers. Lydia says we can shut off the video system while we're in the house. But even so I feel monitored. There is one camera on the front door, one in the living room, and one in the kitchen" (Winter 201). This experience with surveillance does not appear to be a completely negative interaction. English does not wish to simply supplant newer forms of state supervision with traditional, communal observation; he values a human-centred way of observing others, but he co-operates with his government, and he makes use of new technologies. Surveillance and *sousveillance* coexist in *This All Happened*. Both ways of seeing are neither simply good nor bad, but ambivalent forms of watching and being watched.

The style in which English chooses to describe his surroundings highlights the indeterminacy and the subjectivity of perception. Descriptions of events and of place are often fused with a secondary image. For example, when Murphy flies into St. John's she describes the



waves as looking “like a thousand white sandwiches at a funeral” (Winter 36). Similarly, when English watches a city tractor piling snow against his fence, he writes, “The pickets lean and splinter, buttons on a fat man’s gut” (Winter 62). When people watch, they make associative leaps and visuals take on a metaphorical aspect. The view flying into St. John’s has connotations of death and loss, whereas the snow-clearing scene implies a sense of excess. The descriptions of these scenes communicate that there is an emotional and a subjective inner world of the observer. If these same moments were recorded via CCTV, they would lack this metaphorical aspect and this interiority. The literary language that English and certain characters use emphasizes the human-centredness of parodic surveillance. What each person sees is radically subjective and influenced by personal thoughts and feelings; one’s inner world is powerful enough to transform waves into sandwiches or a fence into a fat man’s gut. Winter’s use of metaphor invites readers to think of observation and description not as a simple recording of events but as a transformative act. Thus, one should not be certain that what others write actually happened. Instead, such metaphorical language encourages a sense of indeterminacy.

Not only does English infuse the setting with metaphorical imagery, he states that writing is always a form of remembering. Perception is not only subjective and full of unexpected associative leaps, but the immediate moment of seeing is specifically characterized as indeterminate. English writes, “When you describe an experience what you are recounting is your memory of the act, not the act itself. Experiencing a moment is an inarticulate act. There are no words. It is in the sensory world. To recall it and to put words to it is to illustrate how one remembers the past” (Winter 273). He stresses the fact that everything he writes is a subjective attempt to relate his memory of events, never the official story. The moment in which one experiences an event can never be fully or clearly enunciated. This disparity results in a gap between observation and description. He may have observed events in one way, but he is explicit about the fact that everything he writes is a subjective description of his memories, not a direct or perfect account

of a moment. Immediate perception is beyond language, and writing about these moments does not relate what actually happened. Literary language creates its own happening.

The way in which English discusses his own writing might clarify how authors appear to record events from their lives but upon closer analysis are actually creating new, literary moments. When English watches his friends and writes about them, he is not doing so exclusively to further his writing career or to gain control over them. Nevertheless, real life sneaks into fiction:

I should be writing the novel, but instead I concentrate on Lydia. Remembering how she smelled a pair of gloves and knew who owned them. How can I turn that into a historical moment? Moments never attenuate. Moments are compressed into the dissolve of real time. I will never forget how she looked when she smelled those gloves . . . I will have Rockwell Kent's wife have this ability. But Kathleen Kent is nothing like Lydia. (Winter 34)

English's observations of his friends and his girlfriend are filtered into his writing, but he also watches them in order to cling to specific moments. Assuming that Lydia Murphy equals Kathleen Kent is not only wrong, it reduces English's observational desires down to a cold and utilitarian impulse. On the other hand, although the living person does not directly translate into the fictional person, real-life details cultivate an allure of gossip. It seems as though the author is talking about his friends and family even though he is only using their outlines to animate new people. Using these outlines is no sinister act, but it is not an altogether innocent one, either. Sometimes fiction becomes truth: "[Maisie Pye is] making a novel about what's happening now. It's thinly veiled autobiography. Except she's pushing it. The Oliver character has an affair, and her friends, when they read it, think Oliver's cheating on her. He's not, she says. People believe if you write from a tone of honesty, conviction, and sincerity, if you capture that

correctly, then readers will be convinced it all happened that way” (Winter 29). As the novel progresses Maisie Pye’s fiction becomes reality when it turns out that Oliver is having an affair. This subplot to the text carries a darkly comedic message about making things up: language has the power to transform imagined events into reality. Authors might feel that they concealed details from real life or that they have “captured” a moment, but when a story is published it is no longer under their control. Likewise, Winter’s novel is less about what did or did not happen in real life but about being transposed into a literary world. The answer to the titular question of this essay is that Winter’s novel happened. Lisa Moore concludes her “Introduction” to *This All Happened* on a similar point: “What this means is that if this has *not* really all happened, it will, and will again and again, for every reader” (x). Moore’s introduction indicates a specific reading of *This* in the novel’s title. *This* refers to the fragile relationship between reader and text, and the imaginative power that this interaction holds to create an experience that is its own indeterminate moment.

Before I conclude, I need to address the fact that English is able to focus on writing as a result of a government arts grant. It presents a potential flaw in my argument since it implicates him directly in state supervision. Chafe, Armstrong, and Thompson all tend to view English as a type of cultural official whose position as a writer reinforces stagnant class divisions. The most troubling scene occurs at Coleman’s grocery store, when English observes people “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 it’s all so cliché” (Winter 117). Armstrong explains how Winter uses his writer character to communicate the troubling gaze of the artist levelled at the poor (47). English is uninterested in impoverished people due to their lack of imagination (Armstrong 47), and this point, for Chafe, is compounded by the hypocritical detail that the only reason English can distinguish himself from people on welfare is the fact that he is a writer with an arts grant (135). However, this scene

should also be read within the broader context of the novel's cultural and economic contingencies. English lives and writes in what Herb Wyile describes as a region that is dependent on tourism and that tends to struggle economically (4). Furthermore, Thompson points out that "Gabe's hostility toward the tourists he sees . . . [is] part of a wider cultural and literary backlash toward the unequal relationship between residents and visitors created by the tourism industry in Atlantic Canada" (84). In the Acknowledgements section at the back of the book, Winter ironically refers to tourism: "Much of *This All Happened* was written and edited during time funded by the Cabot 500 Year of the Arts program. May you all visit Newfoundland" (Winter 287). Winter playfully casts his readers as literary tourists taking a break from their everyday lives to watch this struggling artist and his quirky friends. Thus, this scene at Coleman's should also be read as an invitation for tourists to glimpse a version of Newfoundland that will not be mass-produced by the tourism industry. In any case, despite the fact that English is implicated in state supervision, his gaze is communicated through first-person, subjective narration. His observations still can be discussed as a form of *sousveillance* since he writes from eye level and, perhaps more importantly, since his gaze can be scrutinized by others. Readers and critics have the opportunity to critique the way he observes and to consider how they have observed in similar situations. My point in this essay has not been to argue that English is an ideal author figure who never participates in surveillance; my point has been to argue that his actions are most accurately thought of as parodic surveillance, as counter to but also co-operative and even occasionally complicit in reducing people to clichés. Nevertheless, this manifestation of *sousveillance* still needs to find a way of allowing the poor to look back at an artist such as English. Winter's *The Death of Donna Whalen* might be a better text to pursue this issue.

English's descriptive practices and his stylistic choices highlight the subjectivity and the indeterminacy of perception. No matter what data might be available to the observer, something has been left unsaid. Where the gaze of surveillance technologies appears to be ubiquitous,

irony is a constant reminder that there is always something not-said and not-seen. English's indeterminate descriptive practices highlight the fact that observing and describing are never simple or direct. Creative uses of language have the power to transfigure an object or a person into something or someone new. It is true that the title of Winter's book — *This All Happened* — exploits an autobiographical allure (Armstrong 37), but not enough people have asked what *This* is in reference to. If *This* stands for the experience of reading a novel and not for a series of actual events that happened in St. John's, then what it means for English and for Winter to observe needs to be reconsidered. *This All Happened* is not going to save victims of state or corporate observation, but the concepts of irony, of indeterminacy, and of sousveillance could add texture to the detached, placeless strategies employed by surveillance technologies. Even if English's aesthetic philosophy is about capturing honest moments or latently using an artistic gaze to gain control of his surroundings, Winter's is not. Winter creates a metaphoric world that feels as immediate and as conflicted as lived experience. The fact that readers can critique English's behaviour encourages them to become participants in what Bakhtin would describe as "a zone of crude contact" (26). The distance of contemporary surveillance denies this contact, and that is a problem that needs to be addressed in a society that wants to be democratic. St. John's and its community of artists could be a model for how people choose to respond. Stranger things have happened.

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## Notes

- 1 Mathews, Larry. Personal interview. 20 May 2013.
- 2 In "Outline of a Plan for the Management of a Panopticon Penitentiary-House," Bentham writes: "above all, by that peculiarity of construction, which without any unpleasant or hazardous vicinity enables the whole establishment to be inspected almost at a view, it should be my study to render it a spectacle, such as persons of all classes would, in the way of amusement, be curious to partake of . . . providing thereby a system of inspection, universal, free, and gratuitous, the most effectual and permanent of all securities against abuse" (200).

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