The Portable Keyhole: Peepers, Paranoia and Hidden Cameras in Urban Japan

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In Japan, since the crime rate began increasing in the late 90s and early 2000s, surveillance cameras have increasingly been employed as a crime prevention tactic by local municipalities. By the time of my field research in Tokyo (2015-2016), their presence had become normalized, surveys suggesting the public’s widespread acceptance of surveillance cameras as effective crime deterrents. Their very visibility, however, called public attention to less perceptible forms of watching. As surveillance cameras spread, so too did the market proliferation of cheap, high quality cameras that did not deter, but rather enabled a new form of criminality: technologically mediated peeping. It is uncertain just how many tōsatsuki (hidden cameras) now circulate Tokyo, but security experts agree, “[w]ith the spread of the digital camera [Japan] has become a society where tōsatsu [peeping photography] can occur anywhere” (Secom Research Institute’s Security Consulting Group). This paper explores the paranoia produced (and encouraged) by the perpetual uncertainty of being watched. I argue that fear works to reinscribe the private boundaries of the home, where fearful women act as agents delimiting acceptable zones of watching.

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