

In the air

The Eyes of Sibiu

Ariel Wagner-Parker

A camera fixed to a building on the „Piata Mare“ films everything that happens in that part of the vast square and beams it out via internet into cyberspace. Sibiu live online. This is the only observation camera I noticed in the city, except for the ones outside the German Consulate next door to our guest house and one surveying a cash machine we used. Yet everywhere you go in Sibiu, you are followed around and observed by the „Eyes of the City“.

In Sibiu the older houses have steeply sloping tiled roofs with oval dormer-windows set into them. The number varies depending on the size of the building, but there is often a pair of them, side by side. These narrow elongated holes - they are not glazed - have dark rectangular „pupils“ in the middle and the effect is of half-closed, heavy-lidded eyes. Light and shade and the shape of the snow still lodged on the roofs can heighten the effect, creating a fleeting physiognomy.

The prosaic explanation for the “eyes” is that they originally served to channel fresh air into the lofts where people stored their food. But we are in the land of Dracula, the un-man who flies out by night in the body of a bat to suck virgin blood - and the eyes are also known as „bat-lights.“

And they watch you, these eyes, seem to follow you everywhere, like the portraits by the Old Masters in museums. You think you're alone, then look up and see one looking back at you. You turn a corner and a row of eyes observe you entering their street, follow your progress along it. None is friendly, though some appear benign, just mildly curious; others seem to be narrowed in suspicion, frankly hostile, malevolent even: „the evil eye.“

The watcher watched: I take out my camera and boldly aim it upwards onto a particularly eerie pair of eyes, with glowering snow-eyebrows, the guttering-mouth just visible through a bushy snow-beard. The eyes stare back blackly, looming larger as I zoom in.

I am walking the streets of Sibiu with a dark secret and I'm afraid the eyes will root it out of me. The sheer force of their obser-

ving omnipresence will finally force it out in one long cry of anguish and relief. I knot my scarf so it covers my mouth tightly: pathetic protection! Feeble defence! Truth will out. The eyes will have it.

This is a country where for over two decades, nearly two decades ago, a paranoid dictator spied obsessively on his people. His *Securitate* listened and watched, shadowed and read; pried into privacy, put a censor in every head, wrought total unfreedom; *not one of them but in his house he kept a servant fee'd.*

And the eyes spied too on the citizens of Sibiu: the „Eyes of Ceausescu.“

Observed by the eyes, I observe in turn; this is my mission today.

...That coatless middle-aged man in the

square, nose lifting left and right to the different scents, yes, animals too.

I walk on through the arch by the church into the *Piata Mica*, where icicles hang from the eaves of the houses the sun doesn't reach and continents of snow slide suddenly down the steep roofs onto the cobbles, taking the icicles with them, shaving beards, leaving eyes without brows, staring baldly down. Across the square to the *Liar's Bridge*, where the eyes are asking a different question. That group of kids filming each other, shouting, laughing, prancing and posing...

The camera never lies, my mother used to say.

As I child, I worried that the people I saw on television could see me too and were

watching. And „God sees“, they told me as well, nodding gravely. Always some invisible eye, observing, judging - is this how our toxic stock of guilt begins? - a perversely comforting uneasiness though, an answer of sorts to Beckett's „*Suis-je seulement vue?*“: someone is, after all, watching (over) you. The Eyes of Sibiu revive atavistic fears. Or perhaps not so atavistic: these days we really are observed, visibly and invisibly, all the time and everywhere. Surveillance has become a fact of life and we scarcely even notice the ubiquitous cameras spying and prying.

„If you have nothing to hide, you have nothing to fear“, they tell us. Yet who decides what is to hide? Recently, an English newspaper revealed that the

police were systematically filming demonstrations and storing the names and photos of thousands of activists, with no criminal record at all, in a central database.

Dear old London, with its nice red buses and half a million observation cameras. And dear old Luxembourg, with its fairytale turrets and „security zones“ subjected to wall-to-wall, 24/7 surveillance.

The Eyes of London.

The Eyes of Luxembourg.

In Sibiu, the cameras are not there - or if they are, you don't see them. But Sibiu has its eyes, oh yes, and the watchers leave to them the mission of surveillance: they know that the self-imposed censor, the one in the head, is the most potent kind of all...

And my secret? I was fortunate this time: the eyes didn't get it out of me.



Photo: Ariel Wagner-Parker

They watch you, these eyes, seem to follow you everywhere...

blue beret, his lined face in profile, newspaper held out in front of him, as if he was reading the whole double page at once. That elderly man in the tall beaver-lamb hat, jeans and anorak, scattering crumbs from a paper-bag for the pigeons that bob and boil around him, until a sudden noise sends them frenziedly flapping up to the town hall roof. Those two young women in scarves and long traditional dress, carrying supermarket plastic bags, peering and pointing into a shop window.

The noisy group of students, swarming arms outstretched and laughing in among the old man's pigeons, sending them up to the roof again. Even the three brightly bundled children, bending down together over some private game on the ice-rink. The shabby little piebald dog trotting across the