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Normalizing Panoptic Surveillance Among Children: '*The Elf on the Shelf*'

The Elf on the Shelf® is a special scout elf sent from the North Pole to help Santa Claus manage his naughty and nice lists. When a family adopts an elf and gives it a name, the elf receives its Christmas magic and can fly to the North Pole each night to tell Santa Claus about all of the day's adventures. Each morning, the elf returns to its family and perches in a different place to watch the fun. (CCA & B LLC, 2013)

After several years of observing parents and teachers sharing photos of Elf on the Shelf dolls in various (and sometimes compromising) poses on social media including Facebook, Instagram, BuzzFeed, and Pinterest, our curiosity led us critically examine the cultural phenomenon known as *The Elf on the Shelf*. *The Elf on the Shelf* is a wildly popular, Christmas-themed book that comes with a doll to reinforce the story in home and school settings. The purpose of this article is to explore theoretical and conceptual concerns about the popularity and widespread educational use of *The Elf on the Shelf* in light of the contemporary literature on play and panoptic surveillance.

Based on a family Christmas tradition in their home, retired teacher Carol Aebersold and her daughter Chanda Bell self-published an illustrated children's book called *The Elf on the Shelf* in 2005 and

OUR SCHOOLS/OUR SELVES

distributed it in the United States (Healy, 2013). By 2013, they sold over six million copies of their book, packaged with an elf doll (Healy, 2013; Orr, 2013). Evidence of its mark as an icon of North American culture includes a float in the 2013 Macy's Thanksgiving parade, coverage on NBC's *Today* show, and a television special on CBS (Orr, 2013), two Elf-themed *Saturday Night Live* sketches in 2012 and 2013, and being named one of Amazon's top 10 toys of 2012 (McCann, 2013).

The illustrated book enclosed with each doll explains that elves are assigned to homes (or sometimes classrooms) with the explicit charge of observing children's actions all day on behalf of Santa Claus, who is referred to as "the boss" (CCA & B LLC, 2013). These industrious elves perched high on shelves are managers of Santa's "naughty" and "nice" lists with a central aim of ensuring that the children who have adopted them remain on the "nice" list. As the story goes, at night the elves step away from their shelves to return to the North Pole so they can report their observations to Santa Claus. According to the website, there are two basic rules that children must know about having an elf:

First, an elf cannot be touched; Christmas magic is very fragile and if an elf is touched it may lose that magic and be unable to fly back to the North Pole. Second, an elf cannot speak or move while anyone in the house is awake! An elf's job is to watch and listen. (CCA & B LLC, 2013)

Teacher resources are designed with American curriculum standards in mind. The website encourages teachers to register for *The Elf on the Shelf*® "Teacher Resource Center" for free kindergarten to grade 5 lesson plans and classroom resources that support the Common Core State Standards¹ (CCA & B LLC, 2013).

The immense impact of play in children's sense-making of the world around them, their place in society, and their identity, and what is right and wrong has been well-documented (Johnson, Christie, & Wardle, 2004; Morrison, 2008; for examples, see Borchard & Dickens, 2008; Pelias, 2012). We acknowledge that play comes in a variety of forms and involves many different types of activities. During play, children may role-play and interact with other people, or they may interact with things (toys or other objects), or a combination of both. In the course of play, children practice all sorts of social and cognitive activities, such as exercising self-control, testing and developing what

they already know, cooperating and socializing, symbolizing and/or using objects in ways that are meaningful and thrilling to them (Samuelsson & Carlsson, 2008).

When children enter the play world of *the Elf on the Shelf*, they accept a series of practices and rules associated with the larger story. This, of course, is not unique to *the Elf on the Shelf*. Many children's games, including board games and video games, require children to participate while following

a prescribed set of rules. The difference, however, is that in other games, the child role-plays a character, or the child imagines herself within a play-world of the game, but the role play does not enter the child's real world as part of the game. As well, in most games, the time of play is delineated (while the game goes on), and

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the play to which the rules apply typically does not overlap with the child's real world. *Elf on the Shelf* presents a unique (and prescriptive) form of play that blurs the distinction between play time and real life. Children who participate in play with *the Elf on the Shelf* doll (an object, like many other toys) have to contend with rules at all times during the day: they may not touch the doll, and they must accept that the doll watches them at all times with the purpose of reporting to Santa Claus. This is different from more conventional play with dolls, where children create play-worlds born of their imagination, moving dolls and determining interactions with other people and other dolls. Rather, the hands-off “play” demanded by the elf is limited to finding (but not touching) *the Elf on the Shelf* every morning, and acquiescing to surveillance during waking hours under the elf's watchful eye. *The Elf on the Shelf* controls all parameters of play, who can do and touch what, and ultimately attempts to dictate the child's behavior outside of time used for play.

The gaze of the elf on the child's real world (as opposed to play world) resonates with the purpose of the panopticon. Michel Foucault's (1979) metaphor of the panopticon is based on Jeremy Bentham's

eighteenth century design for a model prison, consisting of a central tower in a circular structure, surrounded by cells. Backlighting in the central tower made it impossible for prisoners to discern whether or not they were being watched. For Foucault, the panopticon is a perfect symbol of modern surveillance societies. He adapted the panopticon as a metaphor for discipline operating through a variety of social and institutional apparatuses that leave the individual on guard, never certain if she is actually being watched, but knowing structures are in place to monitor her movements at all times.²

As Foucault (1979) argued, in modern society surveillance does not merely occur in the central tower, but also from the “conscious and permanent visibility” (p. 201) that forces the individual to self-monitor her actions. This claim was illustrated by the example of *Huffington Post* writer Wendy Bradford (2013) who reported that her children insist on ringing the doorbell before entering their home to make sure that their Elf on the Shelf doll, “Chippey,” is prepared for their arrival, thus underscoring their awareness (and acceptance) of the surveillance apparatus. Also in the *Huffington Post*, Lewis (2013) reminisced about the “good old days” in a tongue-in cheek blog about *The Elf on the Shelf* phenomenon while simultaneously reinforcing the surveillance functions of the toy:

I long for the days when Santa’s helpers were mystical, magical, mysterious and unseen little people and not some overpriced brand. But, the times they are a-changing. If I must participate in this new “tradition,” I choose to let the elf serve its purpose — to set on a shelf and encourage my children to be “nice”... Parents need all the help they can get. Let your elf help you.

The children’s modified behaviour described in these two examples is known as panoptic performativity (Perryman, 2006) in which a sense of constantly being watched leads individuals perform compliantly to pass inspection, not for intrinsic reasons. When engaging in play with Elf on the Shelf doll, the children surrendered a certain degree of autonomy to the elf based on a set of rules of conduct attributed to Santa Claus, (referred to as “the Boss” in the book). The production of cultural signification for the child’s identity relies upon and is enforced by a structure of power situated within larger social contexts. Under

normal circumstances, children's behaviour (i.e., what is "naughty" and what is "nice") is situated in social contexts and mediated by human beings (peers, parents, and teachers) where the child conceptualizes actions and emotions in relation to other people and how they feel. The object or subject of a child's attention in play is what the child makes meaning of (or learns about) the other (Samuelsson & Carlsson, 2008).

Through play, children become aware about others' perspectives: they have to be mindful what they have negotiated to be as characters in the play world, what their role means, what the others are acting as, and so on (Samuelsson & Carlsson, 2008). Through interactive play with others, they cultivate understandings about social relationships (Samuelsson & Carlsson, 2008). The Elf on the Shelf brings in a new set of codes and norms into the child's play-world, and essentially teaches the child to accept an external form

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of non-familial surveillance in the home when the elf becomes the source of power and judgment. Children potentially cater to *the* Elf on the Shelf as the "other," rather than engaging in and honing understandings of social relationships with peers, parents, teachers and other "real life" others.

What is troubling in the presence of the Elf on the Shelf is not the in-home Elf on the Shelf doll *per se*, but rather what Elf on the Shelf represents and normalizes. Anecdotal evidence reveals that children perform an identity that is not only for caretakers, but for an external authority (the Elf on the Shelf). The kind of relationship that is set up between child and authority in the home is a mirror of the dynamic between citizen and authority in the context of the surveillance state in which they live. Further to this, the website offers teacher resources designed with K-5 curriculum standards in mind. Integrating the brand into both home and school, The Elf on the Shelf embeds itself into the foundations of formal and informal education tacit acceptance of

being monitored and always being on one's best behaviour without question.

Conceptually, the Elf on the Shelf also bears eerie similarities to artist Jill Magid's work on panoptic surveillance (2003, described in van Brakel, 2013). Magid invented a company (System Azure Security Ornamentation) and presented herself as a "security ornamentation professional" in order to receive permission to decorate Amsterdam police surveillance cameras. This was a juxtaposition of attempts by authorities to leverage positive "public relations" by ornamenting cameras in ways thought to be pleasing, and Magid's agenda of exploring intimacy in the performance of decorating as part of the installation. The Elf on the Shelf embodies a whimsical, non-threatening aesthetic (much like the ornamentation intended to make security cameras more palatable to those being watched) tied to a more serious surveillance apparatus. In Magid's work, police agreed to an aesthetic scheme that included a stripes of green for 'justice', red for 'full of love', blue for 'strictness', and white for 'integrity'. These color choices and striped patterns mirror those used in The Elf on the Shelf merchandise and website homepage. As in Magid's work, the elf conceals a serious and troubling modern form of surveillance with fanciful and non-threatening decoration. Yet, beneath the affable surface lies an apparatus that strips the individual being watched of privacy, and can have unsettling consequences depending upon how the authorities interpret the actions captured.

By inviting the Elf on the Shelf simultaneously into their play-world and real lives, children are taught to accept or even seek out external observation of their actions outside of their caregivers and familial structures. Broadly speaking, The Elf on the Shelf serves functions that are aligned to the official functions of the panopticon. In doing so, it contributes to the shaping of children as governable subjects as described by Smith (2011).

First, the Elf on the Shelf's dual existence in play-world and real life simultaneously attempts to ensure compliance through "obedience to a heteronomous code" so that children experience "fear and guilt" knowing that the other is watching and will reward or punish based on what is observed (Davies, 2003, p. 93). Second, the play world aspect of the Elf on the Shelf attempts to disguise coercion of real-life action in a whimsical form. Although The Elf on the Shelf has received positive

media attention and has been embraced by millions of parents and teachers, it nevertheless represents something disturbing and raises an important question. When parents and teachers bring the Elf on the Shelf into homes and classrooms, are they preparing a generation of children to accept, not question, increasingly intrusive modes of surveillance?

This essay called attention to the problematic nature of The Elf on the Shelf, and poses important questions that parents and teachers ought to consider if bringing the Elf into children's lives. While the elf may be part of a pre-Christmas game and might help manage children's behaviors in the weeks leading up to the holiday, it also sets children up for dangerous, uncritical acceptance of power structures that involve panoptic surveillance. Certainly, teachers and parents can incorporate critical pedagogies alongside the elf's presence in children's play worlds and social lives. The elf provides opportunities for "teachable moments" to cultivate children's ability to identify, question, and resist power.

Finally, the ideas presented here also suggest areas for further study. Additional research would be necessary to accurately describe how children conceptualize being watched and if they perceive themselves to be engaging in performance, or if performativity is a natural response to the elf's presence. Further research might also reveal the degree to which children challenge or resist the surveillance and judgment that are part of the Elf on the Shelf's purpose.

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OUR SCHOOLS/OUR SELVES

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ENDNOTES

1 The Common Core State Standards are national curriculum standards in the United States tied to the *No Child Left Behind Act* which teachers in most of the 50 states are required to follow.

2 While we acknowledge critiques of the relevance of Foucault’s understanding of surveillance (Lianos, 2003; Haggerty and Ericson, 2000; Crossley, 1993), and like some of the authors who apply the concept in spite of their critiques, we too believe it to be relevant to this work.

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