

HOW THE NEW ORDER OF SURVEILLANCE REALLY WORKS

V I C T O R P E P P A R D

*Chameleo. A Strange But True Story of Invisible Spies,
Heroin Addiction, and Homeland Security*

By Robert Guffey

OR Books

New York, 2015

264 pp. Paper \$18.00

E-book \$10.00. Print + E-book \$24.00

CHAMELEO IS INDEED A STRANGE STORY, one we might wish were not true, but after reading Robert Guffey's book I am convinced that it is. The book's cover features the title superimposed on a facsimile of a page from the Department of the Navy's Field Manual. This is because the Naval Criminal Investigative Service (NCIS) plays a crucial role in the events Guffey describes. In addition, the upper left-hand corner has the reverse side of the Great Seal of the United States with the words *Annuet coeptis* above and *Novus ordo seclorum* below. Judging from the subject matter of CHAMELEO, it seems likely that Guffey means to suggest a new meaning for the "Eye of Providence" above the pyramid. As though to whet our appetite, on the pages before the start of the story, we see photographs of the principal characters, including the author, his friend Dion Fuller, and Richard Schowengerdt, the head of Project Chameleo, as well as a picture of a "UFO-like drone." These photographs include one of Dion Fuller giving the finger as a "farewell message to the NCIS and their invisible devil spawn." CHAMELEO consists of two basic parts: the first is the story of how Dion Fuller, a friend of the author, winds up being tracked, interrogated, and subjected to all manner of high-tech sur-

veillance by the NCIS, and the second is a narrative that features Robert Guffey's meetings with Richard Schowengerdt, head of Project Chameleo.

Dion lives in an apartment in Pacific Beach, CA, where he sells drugs and allows his dwelling to be used for twenty-four parties and by anyone who wants to crash there. One such young man named Lee stops there briefly in the process of going AWOL from Camp Pendleton. To the amazement of the author, Lee has managed to steal twenty-five pairs of night vision goggles, a nine-millimeter pistol, a laptop, and a truck in the course of his getaway. Lee's brief stay in Fuller's apartment is the ostensible reason for the multifaceted NCIS persecution of Dion, because they believe he knows the whereabouts of the night vision goggles, which we presume have some special high-tech properties the Navy does not want to become known to the public.

Early in the recounting of Dion's tribulations, we are not sure how much to believe of what he tells Robert Guffey, because Dion is a meth and heroin addict who may be paranoid. He is also proficient at taking advantage of others and may even be a con-man. Nevertheless, Guffey remains loyal to him and goes to great lengths to help him out. At a certain point, his involvement results in Dion's troubles becoming his own (78).

When Dion tells Guffey about being visited by invisible spies or agents, we are naturally skeptical. Dion also notices that when he looks outside of his apartment he sometimes does not recognize what he is seeing. His efforts to persuade the NCIS that he does not know the whereabouts of the stolen night vision goggles are all in vain. He even meets with Lita Thompson, the head of the investigating team, but is unable to convince her to stop all of the high-tech shenanigans she and her crew are subjecting him to. Eventually, Dion realizes he needs to leave Pacific Beach, which is near Navy headquarters in San Diego, and so he moves to Minnesota. But there too he is hounded by what he believes are hundreds of people who he is convinced are deliberately getting in his way and running into him in all kinds of places, including restrooms. They all tend to say the same kinds of things to him, often telling him to give up the goggles. It also appears that a predator drone is following him everywhere he goes. At a certain point, he begins to see crows that hover around and follow him.

When a pair of "Jesus freaks," Jeb and Bo, get hold of Dion and try to convert him to their version of the light by threatening him with branding irons, Guffey is forced to intercede yet again, this time over the phone. As far-

fetched as Dion's trials might have seemed to some, Jeb and Bo are receptive and hold off on the branding irons. This allows Dion to move to Winona, Kansas to a house well away from town, a place where he finds a brief respite from the incessant harassment he is receiving, but boredom sets in and he goes first to New Orleans and then to Seattle. Author-Narrator Robert Guffey goes on vacation to Seattle but winds up getting into a "mundane variety of intrigue . . . driving me up the wall more than the fucking invisible midgets ever had" (138) due largely to Dion's arrival there in his well-travelled van that serves as his mobile abode cum office. The causes of the "psychological dissonance" (154) Dion has been experiencing, as well as the meaning of the title begin to become clearer when Guffey meets with Richard Schowengerdt, the head of the project that gives the book its title.

Robert Guffey quotes Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes in order to enhance the credibility of his own story when he writes: "Once you eliminate the impossible, whatever remains, no matter how improbable, must be the truth" (182). When Guffey meets Schowengerdt, who works for the Defense Contract Management Agency, we learn how Project Chameleo got its name. Here is what Schowengerdt tells the author:

Project Chameleo was conceived with the idea that we could take the background and present it on a surface surrounding an object or in front of an object, and portray the background on this image, effectively giving you the same effect as if you were looking through the object, see the background behind it. And the chameleon does this. That's why I chose Chameleo, which is the Latin word for the genus chameleon, or chameleon. (183)

In this way, all kinds of structures and people could be camouflaged at a distance of 700 feet or more, and it also would be possible to change the colors of aircraft. As Schowengerdt says, special sensors could be set up so that they conceal a person even as s/he turns (188). He also says that such a system is already of great interest to the Army in its program for developing the Soldier of the Future, and the Navy has also shown "intense interest" (189). What is more, the intelligence services could take advantage of this concealment technique as well, (193), and humans could be made to look like animals for purposes of psychological warfare (195).

Robert Guffey is so intrigued by all of these possibilities and develop-

ments he asks Schowengerdt whether it is possible to find out about them using the Freedom of Information Act. However, as Schowengerdt has already found out in his attempts to get an extension on the techniques he has patented, the Department of Defense (DOD) fends you off with all sorts of technicalities and requests for more and more details about exactly what information you want (197).

Guffey, who combines the techniques of a good investigative reporter with that of a (well published) fine storyteller, is interested in whether the government can keep a secret. Schowengerdt has a theory about that based on how the government dealt with the Roswell “UFO” incident of 1947:

He says that “I firmly believe that the UFO phenomenon has been leaked out in a very controlled manner since about the 1950s and ’60s . . . there’s just too many coincidences and too many connections, and a lot of executives from the CIA, for example, have moved back and forth into the movie industry. It’s like a revolving door between the CIA and the movie industry, and the media, the national media. And the whole idea behind it is that it’s a form of conditioning and control, that if you condition the people that this is the way it’s gonna be, then when it finally comes, they’re not going to be shocked out of their mind, you know. (207)

Schowengerdt believes in the final analysis that “the military can keep a deep, dark secret, and I think they have done that to a degree with Roswell. But they’ve also leaked it out, which is kind of a paradox” (207). Schowengerdt is, undoubtedly, extremely talented and accomplished in the field of camouflage and concealment, and he is a tremendously valuable source for understanding what the military is doing in this field, as well as for exposing the military’s tactics in keeping its programs hidden from those who would like to know what they are up to. Nevertheless, as a non-believer in UFOs I am not ready to get on board with his theory that for 68 years a succession of US administrations has been able to manage a series of coordinated efforts to alternately hide and leak information about UFOs and the Roswell incident, all with the purpose of not shocking the public out of our wits. That the government can keep certain information away from the public view for long periods of time seems self evident. Dion, who has a propri-

etary interest in that issue, cites the case of the Tuskegee syphilis experiment (217). This took place from 1932 to 1972, during which time black men with syphilis were experimented on rather than treated, even though penicillin was already the treatment of choice by 1940. We have to wonder how long the experiment would have lasted had not a whistle blower exposed it in 1972. However, is that government capable of mixing suppression of information with releasing bits of it at the same time?

When Richard Schowengerdt hears about the different optical distortions that Dion Fuller experienced, he posits that “they” might have been testing their techniques out on him (229). Fuller becomes so distraught over the surveillance he was subject to that he tries to commit suicide, but as he says, “it didn’t work, because I’m indestructible for some ungodly reason” (231). When he moves to a part of California near some marijuana plantations, drone surveillance begins only after he gets there, and that convinces Guffey that Dion is being tracked again (262).

Toward the end of *CHAMELEO*, Guffey raises the temperature of his invective against the system that is developing ever more sophisticated surveillance techniques. His dealings with Linda Ciarimboli of Paramount Pictures, who tells him about the invisible soldiers that Paramount want to depict, convinces him that this is part of the military’s conditioning kids to want to be invisible soldiers and “get their opaque asses blown off in some godforsaken desert at the backend of the world.” He adds, “but, hey, at least I got to be invisible for a couple seconds. Go, G. I. Team, go!” (251). Guffey makes a plea that we “stop this surveillance” dystopia from ruining our own lives and lives of people we know . . . the lives of others (a reference to the German film *The Lives of Others* [*Das Leben den Anderen*]). He also worries that we have lost the ability to stop working for “The Machine” (257) and, quoting Theodore Sturgeon, urges us to “ask the next question” (260).

At the very end, Guffey turns up his invective yet another notch when he writes, “we’re dealing with a rule-crazy, Puritanical, hypocritical, Old Testament-style perception that desperately needs to wipe out anything or anyone that is Other. Different. Contrary” (263). Moreover, he writes: “Fear God, demands our *novus ordo seclorum*. Fear the devils He created in his own image. Fear yourself. Fear the invisible. That’s the new National Anthem of the Disassociated States of Amurrica” (264).

While writing this review I have encountered two articles in the press that substantiate and complement Robert Guffey’s depiction of how the military

and the intelligence services abuse our freedoms with their technology, both exotic and ordinary. The first of these appeared on June 3, 2015, 4A in an Associated Press report in the *Tampa Bay Times*: “The FBI is operating a small air force with scores of low-flying planes across the country carrying video and, at times, cellphone surveillance technology—all hidden behind fictitious companies that are fronts for the government, the Associated Press has learned.” These planes can carry “technology that can identify thousands of people below through cellphones they carry, even if they’re not making a call or in public.” Naturally, the FBI claims that its surveillance planes, of which there are more than one hundred, operate within the agency’s rules. Here I cannot resist saying, should we be glad of that or concerned about it? The news about these flights comes at a time when, as the AP puts it, “the Justice Department seeks to navigate privacy concerns arising from aerial surveillance by . . . drones.” Robert Guffey and Dion Fuller will no doubt be more than interested to see how Justice resolves the issue. And when will we read in the mainstream press about the ways in which the government has conducted experiments to try out its new “intelligence gathering” equipment on people like Dion Fuller?

The second reference is an article, “Loitering with Intent” by William M. Arkin in *Harper’s*, June 2015: 11–16, about the military’s use of drones and its inability to control the massive amounts of data it collects. Arkin understands well the deleterious impact of these practices when he writes: “When I look at the digital legions splayed out in the battlefield that is truly global, I see drones and the Data Machine they serve as the greatest threats to our national security, our safety, and our very way of life” (16). As we see here, Arkin’s analysis dovetails with Guffey’s depiction of surveillance drones in that each of them shows how much they erode the liberty and privacy we claim to hold so dear. (Arkin’s article is from *Unmanned: Drones, Data, and the Illusion of Perfect Warfare*, scheduled to appear in August 2015 by Little Brown.) I would add that it appears from the PBS “News of the Week in Review,” June 19, 2015, that those who launch drones do not always know who they are targeting and only find out after a strike has been made. This separation of the warrior at a desk from the enemy is one of the major faults Arkin finds with the new warfare the United States is waging.

It needs to be stressed that Robert Guffey is not indulging in an exercise in science fiction, about which is he very well informed, and he has done extensive research on the military’s surveillance techniques. Among his sources are

a number of websites and articles from the press, including *Time* and *Popular Science*. In the latter magazine, June 2011 (34–5), Guffey reports in a footnote on science writer Joshua Saul’s description of the Defense Department’s Raven with a 4.5 foot wingspan and the Nano Humingbird with a 6.5 inch wingspan. This is in the context of the “crows” Dion believes are following him (116).

Guffey contends that the military deliberately uses people like Dion Fuller who are in one way or another vulnerable and thus unlikely to fight against being used as unwilling or unknowing subjects for testing invisible midgets and miniature drones. He also shows, with the assistance of Richard Schowengerdt, that the military has many ways of shielding its projects from investigative reporters and other interested citizens. We are of course told that all of these inventions are designed to enhance our nation’s security by enhancing the capabilities of our armed forces. And let us not forget the many intelligence agencies, which are also eager to try out all of these innovative surveillance devices and techniques—to keep us safe, of course. Many of these activities eventually reach the public’s view, but I worry that they now come so fast and so often that they become accepted and established before we can judge the extent to which they erode our privacy and our liberty.

CHAMELEO consists of a number of narrative forms that include extensive interviews, especially with Dion Fuller and Richard Schowengerdt, letters written by and to the author, in addition to detailed footnotes as just noted, and an epilogue at the end. Guffey also employs a couple of subplots to add spice to the story, one about his work as a part-time English composition instructor and another about his romantic life, the latter of which culminates in his marriage to Melissa, who is a professional photographer. This provides a kind of happy ending to the romantic subplots, which begin on the first page of the book with Dion throwing Jessica out of his house for her blatant lack of fidelity, to put it periphrastically.

In the context of this journal, it is appropriate to note that Guffey (who published a story “The Walk” in the Fall 2013 issue of *The Mailer Review*: 347–56) makes what I am calling an Advertisement for Himself, when he mentions that his next book will be called *The Opposite of Foolproof*.

Most of all, I believe we should pay serious attention to Guffey’s exposing of the surveillance techniques and tactics employed by what he calls “The Machine.” And we should also heed his exhortations to fight against them—if only we had the initiative and the gumption to do so.