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— Rhetoric of the Temporal Index: Surveillant Narration and the Cinema of “Real Time”

Not least since Orwell’s 1949 vision of an aggressively invasive authoritarian *1984*, our sense of the future – and increasingly of the present – has been marked by the fear of being watched, controlled, and robbed of our privacy. Indeed, one could argue that one of the hallmark characteristics of the early twenty-first century is precisely the realization of Orwell’s worst nightmare (and this even where, as in the United States post 11 September, it is being increasingly welcomed with enthusiasm rather than alarm). In forms ranging from the more obvious closed-circuit television (CCTV) observation to the more insidious (because largely unrecognized) digital information tracking known as “dataveillance” (which covers everything from supermarket purchases to cell-phone usage and internet-surfing patterns) – surveillance has become an issue that is not only increasingly a part of

everyone's daily life, but is even embraced as such. Advertising – always a very sensitive social barometer – has not failed to note this fact, as evidenced by a Manhattan billboard touting clothing that reads: "On an average day you will be captured on CCTV cameras at least a dozen times; are you dressed for it?"¹

1 _ Yet another print ad points out that "Only 1 out of every 10 New Yorkers who owns a telescope is interested in Astronomy."

These dynamics of omnipresent voyeurism, observation, and data tracking are by no means limited to the United States, as was detailed in the fascinating report *An Appraisal of Technologies for Political Control* presented to the European Parliament in 1998.² Reading this sober and systematic catalogue of a wide range of devices and practices used to maintain power – the extended treatment of surveillance is just one chapter of this lengthy document – one realizes that what might previously have been dismissed as wild conspiracy theory is often not only true, but in many cases more extensive than one could ever have imagined. In the wake of the end of the cold war, so it is explained here, former military suppliers have begun increasingly to furnish the so-called private sector, just as new technologies combined with intrastate arrangements have made it possible to automatically scan telexes, telegrams, faxes, e-mail and even telephone conversations for key words and then store them selectively. A task that previously – as in the German Democratic Republic – required 500,000 secret informants of which up to 10,000 were needed just to listen and transcribe telephone conversations, can now be done fully automatically. Indeed, this is precisely the mission of the infamous ECHELON Project, a cooperative global surveillance venture of the USA, Great Britain, Canada, New Zealand, and Australia (discussed in detail elsewhere in this volume), that "sniffs" all the data traffic – i.e., virtually all satellite-telephone, internet, fax, and e-mail – traveling between the Intelsat satellites. Initially developed for military purposes, it is today routinely

2 _ *An Appraisal of Technologies for Political Control*, European Parliament: Directorate General for Research, Luxembourg; Scientific and Technological Options Assessment, February 1998.

used to examine "civilian targets" as well. As the report explains, all five participating countries provide "dictionaries" of keywords, phrases, and names, and are then automatically provided with full-text transcriptions of all "tagged intercepts" – useful not only in combating "terrorists" but also, for example, when negotiating trade agreements.

Even seemingly harmless technology such as traffic control systems can be easily refunctioned for surveillant purposes, as was evidenced by the aftermath of the clashes on Tiananmen Square. The Siemens-Plessey video-traffic monitoring system that served operation on the square was used to identify virtually all of the student leaders, in that the images from the video cameras were broadcast on state television until all the individuals had been denounced. A similar traffic control system was recently exported to the Tibetan city of Lhasa, although it has no traffic congestion problems whatsoever. The key conclusion, as articulated in the report, is simply that "*democratic accountability* is the only criterion which distinguishes a modern traffic control system from an advanced dissident capture technology." Such traffic control systems are innocuous, however, when compared with the newest generation of gadgets, such as the Danish stroboscopic camera Jai, which can shoot hundreds of photographs in seconds and thus can easily produce individual records of all participants in a demonstration; new parabolic microphones can clearly capture conversations taking place up to a kilometer away, and the German firm PK Elektronik has recently introduced a laser version that can pick up any conversation in the line of sight even through closed windows. As a recent article in the New York Times put it: "if you can see the Empire State Building, we can see, hear, and above all record you."

Less secret-agent in character – but equally disturbing – is the fact that tele-

phone systems based on the ISDN protocol are not only optimized to deliver data to ECHELON-like sniffer systems, but also allow one to take any phone “off the hook” without it ringing in order to listen in to any domestic or office space. Credit cards and new machine-readable passports have long allowed for the possibility of keeping tabs on – however intermittently – the geographic movements of individuals – revealing as utterly warranted the paranoid instinct that fueled a German grass-roots movement years ago protesting the introduction of bar-codes on their ID-cards. More recently, the ability to track individuals has undergone a significant increase in terms both of accuracy and of what one could call the “refresh” rate of the data, thanks largely to the proliferation of mobile telephones and their proletarian “beeper” cousins. This fact was confirmed in an oddly unstrategic manner by the advertisement campaign for the then-new (and now-bankrupt) Iridium global satellite cellular telephone system which read: “Tracking a package shouldn’t be easier than tracking a person.” While many people in the US were aware of, or even familiar with, a very useful service offered, for example, by Federal Express, that allows one to follow on-line the progress of a package from pick-up to delivery, few recognized the potentially sinister consequences of the constant location mapping involved in cell-phone use prior to the news of the assassination of Chechnya’s rebel leader Dudayev: a reclusive nomad whose only contact with the outside world was by means of mobile telephone, he was pinpointed and killed by using the triangulating location signals of his cell phone as a very effective homing signal for a rocket (a conceit subsequently taken up as a key narrative device in the film “Charlie’s Angels” [McG, 2000]).

If this seems disturbing, consider the implications of the much-publicized launching in the summer of 1999 of the

IKONOS satellite imaging service: while this new generation of devices does indeed increase the resolution of satellite images available on demand to the civilian population from the previous ten-meter standard of the SPOT satellites to a long-awaited one meter resolution, it should be kept in mind that the military reserves for itself levels of resolution that are orders of magnitude more precise than what is available to the public (some experts speculate that it could now be as low as 3cm). One should also try to imagine the consequences of the next generation of terrestrial surveillance technologies which will capitalize on the rapidly developing field of biometrics, allowing for the automated recognition of individuals by means of facial or ocular analysis – the famous “retinal scan” already in trial use at some bank-teller machines. Combined with the video surveillance systems already in place, such technology will allow for the automatic, continuous remote identification and tracking of individuals in nearly all spaces, both public and private, a dystopian scenario whose consequences were already explored in detail in “Gattaca” (Andrew Niccol, 1997). While this twenty-first-century panoptic scenario is not yet quite a reality, it may become that much sooner than one might have imagined only months ago: in the wake of the 11 September attacks, the justified controversy that accompanied the trial introductions of automated facial-recognition technology at the Super Bowl and in Tampa in early 2001 has given way to a more uncritical embrace of such systems.³

³ – The Super Bowl story was first reported by Robert Trigaux (Cameras scanned faces for criminals, in *St. Petersburg Times*, 31 January 2001) and then picked up by the *Los Angeles Times* on 2 February 2001 (“Criminal Faces in the Crowd still elude Hidden ID Cameras Security”). For a useful introduction to the subject, see the special section on “Biometrics: The Future of Identification” in the February 2000 issue of *Computer*, esp. 46.

such surveillance differs dramatically from country to country: while the use of CCTV systems in public space is severely constrained in some (such as Denmark and Germany), in others (such as Great Britain) it remains virtually unchecked.



Similarly, the ability of third-party cyber-entrepreneurs to track one's on-line activities and sell such data to potential advertisers and other vendors is currently the basis for a major regulatory dispute on the politics of data privacy between Europe, where such activity is much more highly circumscribed, and the United States, where the "government" of cyberspace is left largely to the dynamics of an unrestrained market logic.

There is also, however, another arena in which the politics of surveillance are currently being negotiated and that is, not surprisingly, the domain of cultural production. While at least one widely used class of surveillance devices – the EMHC (electronically monitored home confinement) ankle or wrist bracelets used to track the movement of people under house arrest – was invented by a judge in New Mexico who freely admits that the idea came from a 1979 Spiderman comic book, few analysts of surveillance have recognized the degree to which, parallel with these crucial regulatory disputes, popular opinion – i.e., general attitudes toward surveillance and its dangers – is also being articulated through, and in important ways also being shaped by, various forms of so-called "high" and "low" culture. Indeed, a socio-political understanding of surveillance at the dawn of the new millennium must also include an analysis of the striking proliferation of the *rhetorics* of surveillance – at both the thematic and the formal level – in virtually all contemporary media ranging from cinema and television to cyberspace. As this is obviously beyond the scope of this particular essay, the following analysis, which concentrates on

certain rhetorical functions of surveillance in recent *cinema*, is proffered as an exemplary case study of a dynamic that can and should be explored across numerous other media as well.

The relationship between cinema and surveillance is both long and complicated. Indeed one could argue that employee surveillance plays a key role in the very birth of the medium since, no matter what else it is, Louis Lumiere's 1895 *La Sortie des usines Lumière* is also the gaze of the boss/owner observing his workers as they leave the factory. Early cinema is replete with micro-dramas of surveillance in which people are followed and recorded using both visual (photographic/cinematic) and acoustic (gramophonic) means. In light of the Panopticon's articulation of power in fundamentally ocular terms, it is also hardly surprising that some of the best documentation of carceral spaces can be found in Hollywood scenes shot on location in famous prisons, foremost among them the legendary sequence in *Call Northside 777* of Jimmy Stewart walking along the ramparts of the Illinois State Penitentiary in Stateville. Besides a merely *thematic* concern, however, as narrative means gain in structural sophistication surveillance becomes one of the topoi of a certain kind of intermedially-displaced cinematic reflexivity, as is evident for example in Fritz Lang's 1954 *Rear Window* or in Alfred Hitchcock's 1960 *Peeping Tom*. If in Powell's long-unrecognized masterpiece one can already see the beginnings of a slippage between the diegetic surveillant gaze (the view through the photographer's super-8 viewfinder) and the lurid scopophilia of the

Call Northside 777
USA: Henry Hathaway
1948, black-and-white,
111 min
videostills from LaserDisc
Twentieth Century Fox

frame narration itself, the two are nevertheless always clearly distinguishable thanks to various consistent cues such as the grain and patina of the image, the visible frame of the viewfinder, the whirring sound of the camera, etc. This decidability, the ability to differentiate diegetic surveillance from (for lack of a better term) an “extra-diegetic” but also surveillant narration, becomes increasingly undermined over the next few decades until, by the late 1990s, for reasons that will become clearer below, cinematic narration could be said, in many cases, to have effectively become synonymous with surveillant enunciation as such.

A most striking and proleptic instance of the move away from a *thematic* to a *structural* engagement of surveillance occurs in the final sequence of what is perhaps the classic surveillance film per se: Francis Ford Coppola’s magisterial *The Conversation*, made in 1974. In this exploration of panoptical hermeneutics, surveillance is no longer simply an occasional formal strategy used to differentiate certain images from others, but has become the movie’s primary narrative concern. In the film’s very last scene we encounter the master snoop Harry Caul (played by Gene Hackman), playing his sax at home. Having spent the entire film

engaging in (mostly audio) surveillance, this deeply paranoid man suddenly is made aware that his own space has also been bugged. Desperate to find the technological implant that has made it possible to do to him what he normally does to others, he literally deconstructs his place object by object, floorboard by floorboard, until finally, having failed to locate the device, we find him sitting, exhausted, amidst the trashed ruins of his violated privacy. Although he has dismantled every single artifact, tested every appliance, and ripped down every piece of wallpaper, the “bug” he so desperately seeks has eluded him. But it is right “there” in the film’s final sequence, an extended high-angle shot, that slowly surveys the extent of the futile damage. Beginning in an empty corner, it pans slowly and methodically to the left until it captures the broken, saxophone-playing man, and then continues on past him until, having hit another corner, it suddenly and somewhat jerkily reverses itself and pans back, and then back again. Just as the sound is a semiotically confusing blend of the diegetic (Harry’s sax) and the extra-diegetic (the piano which is “accompanying” him), the structure of this shot itself stages a similar blurring in that its formal signature – the

The Conversation
 USA: Francis Ford
 Coppola
 1974, color, 113 min
 videostills from DVD
 Paramount Pictures



mechanical back-and-forth pan – reveals it to be the surveillant device that Harry is so desperately trying to uncover. But where “is” this thing located? It can’t be “in” his apartment since the veteran expert would have long since discovered it: indeed Harry will never find the surveillant device because it resides in a space that is epistemologically unavailable to him within the diegesis: surveillance has become *the condition of the narration itself*. In other words, the locus of surveillance has thus shifted, imperceptibly but decidedly, away from the space of the story, to the very condition of possibility of that story. Surveillance here has become the formal signature of the film’s narration. And indeed, it is this ambiguity – between surveillance as narrative subject, i.e., as *thematic* concern, and surveillance as the very condition or *structure of narration itself* – that will become increasingly characteristic of the cinema of the 1990s.

Besides obvious socio-political developments such as the Cold War or Watergate that have sparked renewed interest in issues of tracking and control at various historical junctures, there are also a number of media-historical overdeterminations that govern the shift to surveillance as a form of cinematic narration. One of the

more significant of these is a major change in the rhetorical claims of the photograph. Over the last two decades the status of the photograph – which was, at least until the very recent introduction of all-digital projection, the material basis of cinema’s semiosis – has undergone a radical transformation. Just as the photograph was (and in some sense still is) a powerful signifying artifact because it is an image of which one can usually say that it is an image of something, so too the epistemology of the “realism,” of the “effect of the real” produced by classical continuity editing in film is fundamentally based on the referential surplus value of photochemical indexicality. But in the age of digital imaging, the basis of that compelling but admittedly not unproblematic referentiality has come under severe pressure: to put it succinctly, if in previous eras, photographs could be introduced as unproblematic evidence in a courtroom, in today’s post-Photoshop era, no photograph would dare to claim such unabashed evidentiary status. Of course Photoshop only made more easily and widely available the manipulation of photographic signification that was always already possible (and which is amply evident in the history of politically motivated photo-image re-



visionism such as that practiced by airbrush masters on both ends of the political spectrum). Still, the *rhetorical* consequences of the now increasingly widespread recognition of the photographic surface as a text, as a construct that is (if at all) only occasionally – and by no means necessarily – involved in strict indexical reference, are not to be ignored. Indeed, they are nothing short of an obsession in that locus of the social construction of vision which is contemporary commercial cinema. For if one of the many things at stake in so-called Hollywood film is what one could call a continuous and constantly re-negotiated generalized pedagogy of verisimilitude – films both teach us how to see the world and register a general sense of how our culture is doing exactly that – then one can look at the development of recent cinema as the latest chapter in a long history of the changing technological rhetorics of simulation.

As an example of the increasing anxiety about the declining rhetorical status of photographic referentiality, consider the much-touted “Dogma 95” project whose only occasionally ironic and often quite humorlessly neo-*vérité* discourse must be understood against the background of the rise of special effects, itself another name for the aesthetico-semiotic specificity of the post-indexical image. Nor should one forget that Dogma 95 is almost exactly contemporary with the thorough-going appropriation and undermining of the formal vocabulary and characteristics (the signature jerky-camera look) of cinema *vérité* by the *Blair Witch Project* (Daniel Myrick & Eduardo Sánchez, 1999). The lure of this fascinating recasting of *vérité* as thriller idiom was precisely the *undecidability*, the *unreadability* of the genre: is it *vérité* or isn’t it? But this question is effectively the question about the referential status of the cinematic image, of how to read an image, a style, a formal signature. Not surprisingly, similar issues also begin

to crop up in numerous more commercial films of the same period. Revisiting the long standing question of the documentary and the referential status of the photograph that was so delicately examined in Antonioni’s *Blow Up* (1966), a 1999 Joel Schumacher film entitled *8mm* again takes up the key question of referentiality, but now displaced not onto the still photograph but onto the small-format celluloid strip. The issue is raised when a wealthy old man dies and his widow finds in the home safe, alongside various other documents, a mysterious canister of – as the title indicates – 8mm film which, to her horror, seems to be an instance of the apocryphal genre of the “snuff film,” that ultimate instance of photo-chemical referentiality in which acts of torture and murder are supposedly “caught” on film. The challenge for the film’s hero, a private investigator played by Nicholas Cage, is to establish whether this particular film is fact or fiction, whether the images have an actual basis in the so-called “real” world, whether the girl shown being mistreated and ultimately killed in these frames, and her masked brutalizers, were all actors or, in fact, as the film repeatedly explains, “real.” The film’s central narrative concern, in other words, is with the issue of celluloid referentiality. Not surprisingly, Nicholas Cage’s extensive forays into the sado-masochistic pornographic underworld only confirm that what the film-within-the-film *seems* to depict is in fact “real,” i.e., that film is not only a vehicle for storytelling but also a medium that documents, that chronicles what actually happens in the world, however horrific. And of course this discovery, in turn, cannot but have rhetorical surplus value for the “reality effect” of the frame narrative.

If, as seems to be the case, contemporary cinema has clearly registered the rhetorical consequences of the semiotic deflation of its photogrammatic indexicality, one of the most striking (and oddly



Menace II Society
USA: Allen & Albert
Hughes
1993, color, 104 min
videostills
New Line Productions

overlooked) responses is the increasing turn to another regime of visual representation which does not seem to suffer from the same referential undermining: surveillance. When one sees what one takes to be a surveillance image, one does not usually ask if it is “real” (this is simply assumed) but instead attempts to establish whether “the real” that is being captured by the camera is being recorded or is simply a closed-circuit “real time” feed. This is precisely what gives these sorts of images their semiotic appeal. If the unproblematic referentiality of cinematic photograms is under siege, it makes great sense to start appropriating a type of imaging characterized by definition (at least according to a certain popular understanding) in terms of its seemingly unproblematic, reliable referentiality. Surveillance images are always images of something (even if that something is very boring) and thus the turn to surveillance in recent cinema can be understood as a form of *semiotic compensation*. It is important, however, to understand the specificity of this rhetorical response, since the history of the invocation of surveillance in narrative cinema is itself marked by a theoretically significant shift from surveillance as *recorded observation* to surveillance as *real-time transmission*.

Just as in *Blow Up* the truth of the photograph is in some sense a function of its non- or extra-intentional status (the photographer does not “witness” the murder that his camera “happens” to capture on film), there is a type of surveillance invoked by cinema whose narrative function depends on its status as a recording produced by an automated device, i.e., one not governed by any sort of intentional agency. A most striking example is provided by the opening scene, even prior to the credit sequence, of the 1993 film by Allen & Albert Hughes called *Menace II Society*: two young men of color enter a Korean grocery in South Central L.A. to get a drink and are immediately kept under vigilant scrutiny by the mistrustful store owners. Annoyed by what they perceive to be a racist practice of interpersonal surveillance, they get their beers and are on their way out when the man behind the cash register mutters an insult that enrages one of them, provoking an altercation that culminates with the kid shooting him to death. However, before then going on to also kill the wife, the youth forces her to go with him to the back room of the store where he commands her to give him the videotape from the surveillance camera. It is worth noting that, with the exception of a para-



Thelma and Louise
Ridley Scott
1991, color, 129 min
videostills
MGM

bolic mirror in one corner of the establishment and a tightly tracking camera that figures a general atmosphere of suspicion, there has been no indication whatsoever that the space is under surveillance: at no point do we see a camera or a monitor. In an elegant exemplification of the internalization of a culture of surveillance, late-twentieth-century urban street literacy simply requires that one take for granted that such places always have a panoptical apparatus and – this is key – that this device is not simply a closed-circuit TV but is actually sending its images to a VCR. And indeed, as the young man robs the dead shopkeeper on the floor, we see the video tape that he has extracted from the machine jammed into the back of his pants. Quite a bit later in the film, this video then becomes a spectacle of bravado, re-played at the young man’s home with great success for a select audience of friends, one of whom is very eager to “get a dub” of what is effectively a silent black

and white snuff film. Leaving aside the fact that the obvious success of this fixed high-angle single-take film provokes the “lead” to insist that he is going to start selling it for \$59.95 – surveillance effectively providing *Jedermann* with their moment of media fame a la Warhol, albeit reduced from fifteen minutes to fifteen seconds – what is crucial is that the footage functions as a form of diegetic flashback that buttresses the film’s own narrative operations. The “reality” of the opening scene is “established” later by the fact that we see it again, but this time through the eyes of the unseen but implied “diegetic” surveillance camera which now shows us *different* aspects of the same events. But this surveillant perspectivalism, this revisiting or “playback” of an earlier moment, is only possible because of the specific materiality of the surveillance as a repeatable, commodifiable videotape.

The function of surveillance in a scene from Ridley Scott’s 1991 film *Thelma and Louise* is at once different yet strikingly similar in its narrative operation to this sequence from *Menace II Society*. The scene begins when the two women named in the film’s title, already on the run but in need of some basic supplies, stop at a grocery market out in the middle of nowhere. While Thelma takes care of the shopping, Louise waits in the car and

suddenly notices that she is the object of the quietly surveillant gaze of two older women staring at her through the window. This only slightly discomfiting social panopticism (a mild “country” version of the more aggressively suspicious gaze of the Korean grocer in the ghetto) is suddenly interrupted by Thelma who comes racing out screaming that Louise should drive off as quickly as possible as she has just robbed the store. When, as they are driving away, an incredulous Louise asks just how she went about doing this, Thelma responds that she just walked right in and said ... at which point the film cuts to a black-and-white sequence shot by the surveillance camera located behind the grocery counter. This footage, which shows us what transpired inside as Louise waited in the car outside, suddenly changes its narrative voice midstream – which it can do *only because of its status as a videotape*. After only a few seconds, and without a break in the sound, we cut away from the surveillance footage (which began as a visualization of Thelma’s recounting of the immediate past) to a group of astonished law enforcement officers and her Thelma’s husband who are watching the (now long past) event as it unfolds on the tape. Their

obviously much “later” surveillant spectatorship is then intercut with the rest of the recorded scene until, to emphasize its materiality as a recorded video *tape*, it ends in the visual equivalent of white noise often referred to as snow before then cutting back to the two women driving down the road (the temporal space in which the scene began). The surveillant image is here functioning as a memory that is both *personal* (it is introduced as Thelma’s narrated flashback) and, qua tape, as *public* (since as a tape it can also be seen by others – here the police – and at different times and places). In other words, the material specificity of the surveillance tape (with the crucial addition of synchronized sound) here condenses in a narrationally highly efficient manner what David Bordwell would call an enacted recounting (a visualization of what we imagine Thelma is telling Louise) and an enacted flashback which “takes place” at a later time (the moment when, after the robbery, the tape has been given to the authorities who are shown watching the “evidence” of this past transgression).

If both *Menace II Society* and *Thelma and Louise* exploit to great advantage the new narrational capacities offered by re-

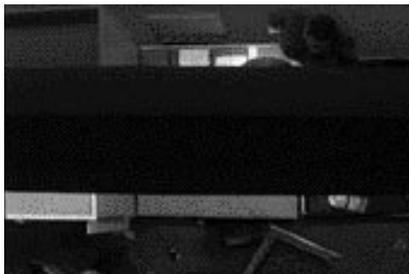
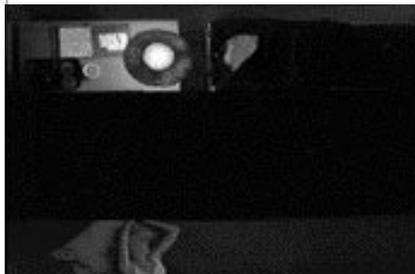
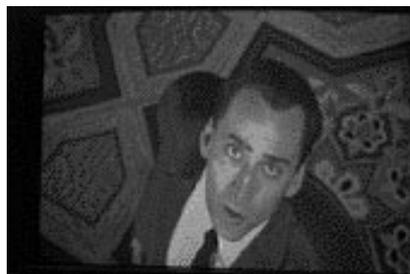
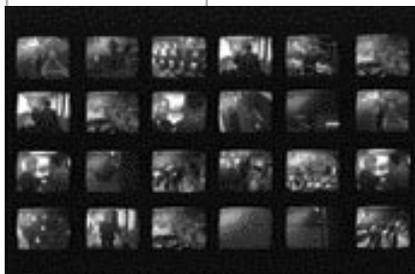


Sliver
USA: Phillip Noyce
1993, color, 108 min
videostills
Paramount Pictures

corded surveillance, more recent cinematic appropriations of surveillance tend increasingly to harness the narrative dynamics of a very different sort of monitoring: that of real time observation. The transition between what one could call two different regimes of surveillant narration is evident in a film such as the Mabuse-remake *Sliver* (Phillip Noyce, 1993) where, unbeknownst to the dwellers of a high-class Manhattan high-rise, the entire building has been wired for continuous, remote PTZ (pan-tilt and zoom) surveillance. While the evil yuppie programmer who installed and exploits this system maintains a collection of clandestinely recorded surveillance tapes of his various amorous conquests – indeed it is just these video recordings which, as material traces of his surveillant transgression, ultimately bring about his demise – the bulk of the film’s narrative titillation lies in its brazenly scopophilic invasion *in real time* of the

banal quotidianity of the sliver-building’s occupants. Recorded surveillance has been displaced here by the cinematic exploitation of the fascination of real-time tracking from the secret diegetic panoptical control booth. The sort of fantasmatic hyperpanoptic system employed there is, of course, increasingly prevalent in shopping malls, high-end apartment buildings, and virtually all gambling establishments. It is thus hardly surprising to find that Brian De Palma (whose appropriately entitled film *Blow Out* had explored for sound recording in 1981 the surveillant issues raised earlier by *Blow Up*), sets his 1998 thriller *Snake Eyes* in a New Jersey casino outfitted with massively redundant, remote-controllable PTZ surveillance. This state-of-the-art system gets employed in the film as the means by which, following what seems like a terrorist attack, the slightly corrupt impresario played by Nicholas Cage tracks an elusive female

Snake Eyes
USA: Brian De Palma
1998, color, 98 min
videostills
Paramount Pictures

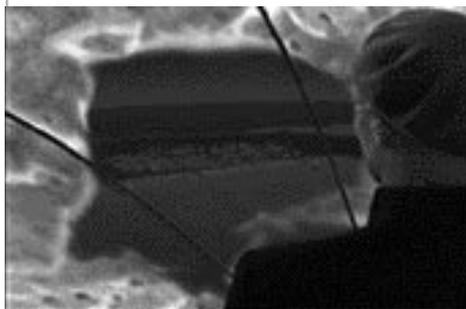


suspect, using the full resources of the casino's surveillance control booth. Here the surveillant narration that was almost invisible in the subtle finale of *The Conversation* becomes *foregrounded* but in an importantly ambiguous manner: the film constantly shifts from more classically omniscient narration to what one could call a *diegeticized surveillant omniscience* – that is, a spectacle of real-time CCTV tracking.

While it could be argued that, because it places the spectator in the very pleasurable (because very empowering) position of the CCTV operator, *Snake Eyes* serves to *legitimate* surveillance through subtle, formal means, one could also insist, conversely, that because here the spectator's narrative desire is satisfied by a camera logic that is explicitly surveillant, this exposes a certain regime of narrative cinema as fundamentally complicit with certain aspects of the visual economy of surveillance. Of course, surveillance here is also

recast *in terms of* classical Hollywood narrative, as is most immediately obvious in the surveillant variation on the familiar shot-reverse shot in which Nicholas Cage, who is down in the casino, is seen from a high angle looking up (into the surveillance camera), while his walkie-talkie interlocutor in the surveillance booth overlooking the gambling floor is shown in the “reverse shot” from a low angle looking down into his surveillance monitor. Even more striking is the surveillant rendering of one of the most self-consciously artificial devices in the arsenal of classical narration: the highly stylized “impossible” omniscience shot whose paradigmatic instance is the one that captures lovers gazing into the flames from a perspective located *inside the fireplace*. In *Snake Eyes*, at a point where both the hero and the bad guy are closing in on “the girl” but have lost her in a delirious maze of endlessly identical hotel hallways (actually shot in





The Truman Show
USA: Peter Weir
1998, color, 103 min
videostills
Paramount Pictures

The Venetian hotel in Las Vegas), the camera suddenly embarks on what could only be called a wet dream of surveillant omniscience, craning up and over the walls of the hallway in an “impossible” shot that tracks across one room after another as if the ceiling had been lifted off, peering down into each until finally it locates the object of narrative desire. What is striking here, of course, is that what renders the shot “impossible” is *not* the crass violation of privacy, but only the sequence’s diegetically implausible structure as a *track*, an impossibility that foregrounds the all-too diegetically plausible character of most of the film’s other uses of clearly surveillant narration. In other words, what we see here is the degree to which the stylistics of surveillance has enabled contemporary cinema to displace the highly “artificial” (i.e. foregrounded) classical structures of omniscient narration *into the diegesis itself* in the form of a now increasingly diegetically plausible surveillant omniscience.

While surveillance plays a significant narrational role in *Snake Eyes* it seems negligible when compared with *The Truman Show*, the 1998 Peter Weir film chronicling a life subjected to continuous real time observation. This recasting of the

genre of “reality TV” as auteurist mega-production, this drama of the encounter of contingency and intention, is a most striking example of the degree to which contemporary cinema is registering and being transformed by questions of surveillance, both thematically and structurally. In yet another variation of the surveillant recasting of traditional narrative omniscience, here that diegeticized surveillant omniscience is itself a thoroughly foregrounded component of the diegesis – the “real” presented as a spectacle managed in “real time.” Like many others of late, this film effectively creates (and to some degree endorses) a spectatorial position that is in large part identical to that of the surveillance operator. Indeed, I would suggest that this harnessing of surveillance as compelling narrational rhetoric is an important and sociologically symptomatic part of its appeal. As an only minimally scripted televisual production governed by the conditions of the “live-broadcast,” the diegetic *Truman Show* can be read as a prophetic variation on the reality-soap idiom whose status as a global phenomenon was quickly confirmed by the contagious success of the *Big Brother* format pioneered by Endemol Productions in Holland less than a year later. Truman’s “show” is clearly

different in scale: his “container” admittedly considerably larger (a vast and domed gated community bounded by water rather than simply a carceral apartment bounded by fences) and the number of participants decidedly greater (a “cast of thousands,” as it were, rather than simply a dozen cross-sectional, consenting competitors). More importantly, however, it differs in kind: the key difference, of course, being that unlike the *Big Brother* participants, Truman is unaware – and only slowly comes to suspect – that his is a life under constant surveillance. As the story of his coming to grips with a fundamentally paranoid world view (the insight that everyone is in fact watching me), *The Truman Show* functions as an allegory of surveillant literacy. But surely it is not that which makes the staging of a life under surveillance such a compelling spectacle to the enthusiastic and worldwide televisual audience that is repeatedly depicted in the film? Besides the classic voyeurist pleasure of being able to watch someone who does not realize they are being observed, what marks the specificity of the attraction of the *Truman Show* qua spectacle, I would argue, is in fact its simultaneous *flaunting* and *containment* of surveillance. By means of various foregrounding devices – iris masks on the image that signal hidden cameras, voice-over narration that tells “us” precisely which device (“button-cam,” “sidewalk-cam,” “crane-cam”) is being used, etc. – surveillance here is revealed to the eager diegetic spectators (and thus always already also to us) as *readable*, as recognizable – and thus assuages the anxiety of an invisible, unreadable surveillance over

which one has no control. Furthermore, by limiting the panoptical environment to that of the mega-studio where the show “takes place,” the film simultaneously invokes a world of total panopticism but also insists that it is *not* our world, but only that of the (hubristic) televisual simulacrum.

What is most media-historically important, however, about this particular mobilization of the rhetorics of surveillance is the claim that *The Truman Show* is broadcast “live.” The film’s repeated emphasis on its “real time” character is of course a response to a particular condition of television: indeed, what marks this type of surveillance is the foregrounded diegetic recasting of cinematic narration as a “live” and thoroughly televisual multi-camera production. Moving far beyond the comparatively “primitive” surveillance van used in *The Conversation* (and even its more high-tech variant in *Enemy of the State* [Tony Scott, 1998], the recent GPS-era remake of the Coppola film), the surveillance mothership in *The Truman Show* is a literally panoptical television production studio. It is here that “Christo” directs the vast team effort which is responsible for the continuous, real time drama that is Truman’s life and its “live” global broadcast. One can begin to understand why the film goes to such lengths to point out that its production takes place in real time when one recalls that there is a televisual equivalent of the digital undermining of photo-chemical indexicality: one could call it the anxiety of post-production. In the domain of commercial cinema this was articulated most ironically in Barry Levinson’s corrosive 1997 film *Wag the Dog*,



Wag the Dog
USA: Barry Levinson
1997, 97 min
videostills
New Line Cinema

which effectively undermined an uncritical belief in the referential veracity of TV by exposing how the televisual image itself can be “constructed” piece by piece in the age of digital effects. This further explains the rhetorical urgency behind the shift in the cinematic exploitation of surveillance from videotape to “real” time: by means of its appropriation of the rhetorics of “live” televisual broadcast, cinema has recast its surveillant images from their earlier status as recordings – which could, of course, be subjected to all sorts of manipulation and would, as such, not provide the rhetorical surplus needed in the wake of the decline of celluloid’s photogrammatic referentiality. One should recall that, as Mary Ann Doane has pointed out so compellingly, while cinema’s primary category is that of *space* (pro-filmic space, photographic space, narrative space), the semiotic signature of television is, of course, that of *time*.⁴ By adopting the rhetorics of real-time broadcast so characteristic of television and a certain economy of CCTV – not to mention that of webcam culture – cinema has displaced an impoverished spatial rhetoric of photo-chemical indexicality with a thoroughly contemporary, and equally semiotically “motivated” rhetoric of *temporal indexicality*. Just as previously one component of the photograph’s claim to truth was the belief that, thanks to its mechanical conditions of production and its photo-chemical basis it was (unlike other media) not subject in the same manner to the dictates of agency or intention, and that this lack of intervention within the photographic space at some level guaranteed the veracity of the representation, so too, now, a similar claim of non-intervention could be said to govern the surveillant image broadcast in real-time. What has happened here is that the *spatial* indexicality that governed the earlier photographic condition has here been replaced by a *temporal indexicality*, an image whose truth is supposedly “guaranteed” by the fact that it is

happening in so-called “real time” and thus – by virtue of its technical conditions of production – is supposedly not susceptible to post-production manipulation. The fundamentally *indexical rhetoric* of cinema’s pre-digital photo-chemical past thus survives in the digital age, albeit now re-cast in the form of the *temporal indexicality* of the real-time surveillant image.

The fact that the temporal indexicality of real time surveillance has become an important new idiom of cinema’s “reality effect” in the early twenty-first century is evident not only in the transformation that this has effected in the narrative structures of films such as *Enemy of the State* and *The Truman Show*. It has also spawned an entirely new cinematic, or perhaps post-cinematic, paradigm of surveillant narration of the sort exemplified by Mike Figgis’ remarkable film *Time Code* (2000). Pushing the real-time question already explored decades earlier in Hitchcock’s *Rope* to an astonishing new limit, the feature-length film divides the movie screen permanently into four real-time quadrants – a formal invocation of the by-now familiar multiple-monitor surveillance set-up – each of which contains a more-or-less autonomous narrative conveyed by means of a continuous ninety-minute take. Eliminating any trace of a cut, *Time Code* effectively recasts the cinema as a surveillance station where we watch the activities of four temporally synchronized “real time” feeds. The film was constructed using, as the publicity materials announce, “4 cameras. No edits. Real time.” At 3pm on 19 November 1999, so the final credits explain, four cameramen started their synchronized digital video cameras and each followed (put under surveillance?) one of the four central characters (or character groups) who, over the course of the next uninterrupted ninety-minutes, encounter each other both acoustically (cell-phone/audio surveillance) and visually in ways that often link – and sometimes

4 _ Mary-Ann Doane, Information, Crisis, Catastrophe, in *Logics of Television*, Patricia Mellencamp (ed.), Indiana UP, Bloomington 1990, pp. 222-239.

