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Video Surveillance in Hollywood Movies*

Dietmar Kammerer¹

Abstract

This paper examines the representations of CCTV in contemporary popular culture, namely Hollywood film from the perspective of culture and film studies. It starts from the observation that a growing number of Hollywood films are not only using (fake) CCTV images within their narrative, but are actually developing 'rhetorics of surveillance'. Following the argument of Thomas Y. Levin, contemporary Hollywood film is increasingly fascinated with (the images of) video surveillance. This fascination can be explained with the use of 'real time' and a shift from spatial to temporal indexicality in these movies. The paper then takes a closer look at three recent films: Tony Scott's *Enemy of the State*, Steven Spielberg's *Minority Report* and David Fincher's *Panic Room*. The role and uses of CCTV imagery in these films are analyzed; the role of the heroine under surveillance is examined; modes of (im-)possible resistance against CCTV are discussed.

Introduction

This paper comes out of the following constellation of questions: Why is CCTV so highly valued, even though we still do not know for certain if it really works? How can we explain the discrepancy between what can be called the 'myth' of CCTV and its reality? Why is it that people want CCTV?

Thomas Mathiesen has offered a hint to answer these questions. Under the heading of the 'viewer society' he postulates a complementary relation between the mass media and surveillance technologies like CCTV (Mathiesen 1997). Historically, Mathiesen argues, mass media and surveillance technologies both have their origins in the early nineteenth century. It was in 1787 that Jeremy Bentham published his writings on the prison architecture, or the 'Panopticon'. It guarantees the automatic functioning of surveillance at minimal cost: only few guards – if any – are needed to watch a whole prison population. Mathiesen finds this structure symmetrically mirrored in the structure of the TV media, where the many watch the few: the TV audience watching the high society. He calls this system of observers and observed the 'Synopticon'. He grants it equal importance in establishing and upholding a society of

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surveillance and control, “[...] the greatly expanding mass media system provides the necessary belief context, the obedient, disciplined, subservient set of beliefs necessary for the surveillance systems to be functional.” (Mathiesen, 1987: 75)

In this view, it could be said that cinema has always been an apparatus of control. As we learn from etymology, the term ‘cinema’ derives from ‘kinema’, the Greek word for movement. Cinema is the wish to capture that movement, to conserve it in time, make it available for repetitions in different times and places over and over again. As a medium for the recording and storing of (visual and acoustic) information, the technical apparatus of cinema fulfils at least two of the functions essential to any surveillance system: the analysis of a movement or situation (*what is going on?*) for the purpose of controlling it (*what do we want, what should be going on?*)

Cinema is capable of analysis, because it is capable of ‘filtering out’ time, the duration that a certain course of events needs to take place. The cinematic apparatus is capable of decomposing or dividing up any given movement and of putting the pieces together again. The arrow of time is of no importance here, any movement can be played backwards. (‘Backwards’ of course is only an impression relative to the observer. The apparatus itself is completely indifferent towards the direction of the course of events it has recorded.) In the ‘reel world’ of cinema, the physical laws of the real world and its entropy are suspended, or turned upside down: water flows upwards, men walk backwards, heaps of rubble rearrange into a building. A movement can be slowed down or accelerated, so that you can actually watch grass and flowers grow at an unnatural speed, and horses run slowly as if they were stuck in jelly.

None of these optical tricks is solely for fun: even in the prehistory of cinema, in its earliest developments, the purpose of such tricks was to gain knowledge, to reveal and make seen what hitherto had been hidden from the human eye. The apparatus recorded on photographic plates what no painter had seen before: When running, a horse will take all four legs off the ground. This is where cinema started – as science, not as entertainment. It was the will to scientific knowledge, the documentary impulse, what film scholar Joel Black calls its ‘graphic imperative’ or “cinema’s vital affiliations with the non-artistic domains of science and technology” (Black, 2002: 6).

Prehistory of cinema

Let us take a look at the beginnings and the prehistory of cinema. The pioneers of the moving images, or the images of movement, have started their studies and experiments in the 1880s with an explicit scientific purpose in mind: to make analyzable the motions of animals and humans beings, to reveal the ‘optical unconscious’ (to use Walter Benjamin’s term) and to thereby overcome the inertia of the human eye. Proto-cinema, as in the serial photographs of Edward Muybridge or Etienne Jules-Marey from more than 120 years ago, explicitly was an experimental setup for the study of *Animal Locomotion*, as the title of Muybridge’s book calls it. Muybridge conducted extensive experiments, in which people performed ‘everyday’ activities, like walking, running, dancing, boxing or knitting. With the aid of several photographic cameras

connected in series, these actions were recorded on photographic plates. The human participants in these experiments were either naked or dressed in black costumes with special white stripes on them, and photographed in front of a black background, so that their motions and gestures could be accurately measured. Thus, the self-control of human motions through image technology can be traced back to the beginnings of the cinematic age.

The control of a movement is as natural to cinema as is its analysis. Analysis is achieved by the technique of montage, the putting together of singular sequences into a larger, meaningful entity. I call montage 'natural' to cinema, insofar as almost every movie not only uses montage for practical reasons, but fundamentally depends on it. It is at the heart of cinema to create completeness out of fragments, to put together disparate perspectives, pieces into a whole and (hopefully) meaningful narrative. A movie is a sum that is more than its parts.

I said that *almost every movie* uses montage. This statement should be qualified. There are exceptions. For in movie history, there have always been ambitious attempts to overcome the considerable technical obstacles and produce a film without a single cut, i.e. with no temporal montage at all. Alfred Hitchcock's *Rope* (1948), a murder mystery thriller of all films, comes to my mind as one of the earliest examples of a film composed of a single continuous camera movement. Still, Hitchcock had to use tricks and cut whenever the camera was passing something black, a wall or the back of a person, and started filming on the same black background again. Today with the advent of digital recording technology Hitchcock's dream has come true. In contrast to celluloid film, digital technology allows a scene to be recorded for a much longer, almost indefinite time. With the development of computer generated images on the one hand, and digital cameras with high definition on the other, an 'aesthetics of continuity', of 'anti-montage' has in recent years gradually gained ground in mainstream film production.

Time Code

Without recourse to a big budget, but with unremitting diligence and a great care for the details, British filmmaker Mike Figgis has made a film that probably tells us more about video surveillance than most other films. I am referring of course to *Time Code* (2000). In this film, the aesthetics of the continuous camera shot is taken to the extreme. The film is actually shot without a single filmic cut in time. And yet – and this is exactly why *Time Code* is so interesting under the perspective of CCTV – it is not without montage. Just like a monitor wall in the control room, it substitutes temporal for spatial montage.

On 19th November, 1999, four cameras have been synchronized and started simultaneously at 3 p.m. Each camera then followed for the course of exactly 97 minutes the actions, meanderings, encounters, conversations of several different persons, without stopping once. The film is presented as split-screen, i.e. all four films run parallel with each other and synchronous side by side. The cross formed where the four frames intersect reminds the viewer that the characters are constantly under the crosshairs of surveillance.

Alternatively, they form a kind of wall of monitors. The sound track of all four cameras can be

heard simultaneously. The viewer's attention is guided by 'foregrounding', respectively 'backgrounding' each frame's sound level. So what you see is guided by what you hear, in an inversion of the usual hierarchy between visual and acoustic information. Still, the viewer is free to let his gaze wander between all four frames.

Time Code by Mike Figgis not only keeps to the aesthetics of *cinéma vérité*, recently made popular again by the *Dogme* films (hand held camera, original sound, shooting on location only, etc.). It also explicitly inscribes itself into the surveillance discourse and understands itself as an artistic reflection not only of what it means to be under constant surveillance, but also of what it means to watch these images. (Why is it, that images that pretend to follow a certain 'raw realism', have in recent cinematic production become so popular?) In the lobby of the TV production studio, which all of the *Time Code* characters have to cross at least once in the course of the film, a security guard is sitting in front of several video monitors connected to the CCTV system of the building. It consists of nine monitors in rows of three, and at one point all nine monitors fill one of the frames. So instead of only four frames, the viewer has to choose between twelve different frames running simultaneously.

Thomas Y. Levin (2003), theorist of culture and media and professor in the German department at Princeton University, who also curated the exhibition *CTRL Space* on video surveillance and the arts at the 'Center for Arts and Media' in Karlsruhe, calls *Time Code* an outstanding example of the 'cinema of real time', a genre that for Levin consists of films like *Brain de Palmas Snake Eyes*, *Menace II Society* by Albert and Allan Hughes or *Sliver* by Phillip Noyce. 'Real time' of course is one of the essential features of the surveillance systems: what you see is what is happening at the very moment. Levin writes: "'Time Code' effectively recasts the cinema as surveillance station" (Levin, 2003: 592). He goes on to describe the movie as a compelling mixture of pseudo-documentarism, reality-TV, *cinéma vérité*, trimmed with the fascination of surveillance images.

The 'indexicality of real time' that these images convey for Levin is first of all the sign for a fear of loss, and its compensation. In earlier times, photographic images, qua photochemical process, were created as it were by the pen of nature itself. They could be taken as certain proof of the existence of whatever they represented, and this representation was considered to be as truthful as possible. A photograph was an unassailable demonstration of authenticity. Today, in the age of *Photoshop* and digital image manipulation, this evidential character of the image seems to be all but lost. Of course, there have always been methods and ways of manipulating and faking photographs. The art of retouching and other tricks were perfected long before the first computer was built. Today the possibilities are unlimited. Even the most stumbling amateur with a PC, a graphic card and the right software can manipulate an image by clicking a button. How can images still be trusted today?

In 1980, French philosopher and critic Roland Barthes in his book on the »Camera Lucida« could still emphatically describe photography as having its destination in an 'unprecedented embrace of reality (*It has been like that.*) and truth (*That's it!*)' (Barthes, 1989: 124).²

² My translation

Photography for Barthes was 'exclamation and declaration' at the same time. Barthes was well aware of how provocative or even outdated his comments on the 'Camera Lucida' had to appear. But still his analysis of the future of representation is very lucid. Even though Barthes seemingly doesn't care about technical developments, he is anticipating in a striking way the nostalgia and the feeling of loss that people suffer in the age of the digital image, when the indexical character, its referentiality (something has been in front of the camera and has left an optical trace) cannot be saved.

As Levin argues, that is exactly the reason why the 'cinema of real time' is shifting the referentiality from the dimension of *space* to that of *time*: 'This is happening right now.' Levin even goes so far as to diagnose a fundamental change in the cinematic image itself: "If the rhetorical power of [*Time Code* is] any indication, what we are witnessing here in the shift from spatial to temporal indexicality is nothing less than a fundamental recasting of the cinematic medium in terms of what could be called a rhetorics of surveillance" (Levin, 2002: 593).

CCTV and Hollywood

In recent years, mainstream commercial cinema has seen an obvious trend in to integrate the imagery and the aesthetics of video surveillance into the film itself, and/or to make the consequences, blessings or terrors (as the case may be) of a dooming 'surveillance society' the subject matter of an entire movie. I will name just some of the more well-known examples: Peter Weir's *Truman Show*, Tony Scott's *Enemy of the State*, *The End of Violence* by Wim Wenders, *Lost Highway* by David Lynch, Brian de Palma's *Snake Eyes*, or David Fincher's *Panic Room*. The list could easily be continued, and it is not confined only to new films. *Peeping Tom* by Michael Powell or *The Osterman Weekend* by Sam Peckinpah are earlier examples. These days, video surveillance and its images are very much *en vogue*, mostly in the contemporary action thriller, where there has to be at least one scene in which a surveillance camera or monitor can be seen.

So in the concluding half of my paper I would like to go into a more detailed discussion of three films in particular, all mainstream Hollywood movies, and their relation to CCTV images: *Minority Report* by Steven Spielberg, *Enemy of the State* by Tony Scott and *Panic Room* by David Fincher. In these three films, surveillance is the main subject, and there is not only video surveillance, but the total range of surveillance technology: cameras, sensors, acoustic devices and computers for electronic 'dataveillance'. In all of the films, the hero or heroine is confronted with that technology and has to learn to find new ways of using it.

Spielberg's *Minority Report* portrays the most advanced scenario. It tells the futuristic and dystopian tale of total surveillance in a society, in which it can no longer be decided, if the state institutions or private organizations, capitalist enterprises have the greater powers of control. In Scott's *Enemy of the State* it is a government institution, the American National Security Agency (NSA), where the bad guys have an impressive arsenal of surveillance technology at their disposal. The film's action does not take place in a distant future, but in the here and now, and it

is suggested that all of the technological gadgets actually are already in use. In Fincher's *Panic Room* the surveillance technology is less spectacular. It is the privately owned CCTV system in an apartment, and the new owner does not even know how to handle it and actually even does not like it.

Minority Report

Minority Report is a film directed by Steven Spielberg and scripted after a short story by science-fiction author Phillip K. Dick. It tells the well-known tale of one who believes in the perfection and legitimacy of the system, until inevitably he himself becomes its victim. Tom Cruise plays John Anderton, chief of a special police unit, that in the Washington of a near future is conducting a field experiment, in the center of which are the so called 'Pre-Cogs' – humans, who are capable of telling future crimes, which, as the film rightly suggests, for them is rather a curse than a gift. But with their help, crime rate has dropped to zero, because Tom Cruise and his high-tech special 'Pre-Crime' unit can prevent crimes before they are de facto committed. On its surface the film reflects the philosophical question about whether a person can be punished for a crime he or she has not yet committed. But philosophical speculations on moral antinomies are quickly put aside, when Anderton himself suddenly turns up on the list of future criminals. The film then follows the conventional topoi of pursued innocence, of the hunters and the hunted, who is willing to risk all in order to proof not only that he is innocent, but also to reveal who is behind all this, who has set him up. Anderton is convinced he is not guilty, because he does not even know the person he is supposed to kill within the next 48 hours. The audience is led to believe that he was framed. While the Ex-Cop on the run is hunted ruthlessly by his former colleagues, the film sketches out the portrait of a society under total surveillance.

The police deploy a huge array of surveillance technology, including cameras, heat sensors, extensive electronic databases, biometrical access control and even little robot spiders that can spy into the most remote corners of a building. However, the movie *Minority Report* doesn't stop at this Orwellian picture of the all-seeing, all-knowing state. It goes further than this. Private corporate enterprises seem to have even more power of controlling every citizen's movements or consumer habits. When Anderton, still on the run, walks past a 'smart' billboard, the irises in his eyes are automatically scanned and so his identity is biometrically verified. "John Anderton, you look like you could use a Guinness!" the talking billboard calls out to him.

The hunted one has no choice but to take the path of Oedipus, the blind visionary of Greek mythology. He has his eyeballs surgically removed and replaced by the pair of a different person. Since he knows the surveillance system and its technologies and has worked for the police, Anderton for a while manages to stay one step ahead of his pursuers. But he doesn't manage to escape from fate: He really kills the person, and in exactly the same way as the 'pre-cogs' have predicted. He knows technology, but he doesn't know himself. The message of the movie: Technology doesn't fail. It is humans that fail. That is precisely Anderton's dilemma. He trusts a system, which threatens his life and has put him into an inescapable situation.

In the end, he finally escapes and uncovers the plot that had been laid against him, because he stills believes the predictions the pre-cogs make. He succeeds, as soon as he starts using the surveillance system against his enemies. He never attacks it directly – rather, he implodes the

system by uncovering the inherent antinomies and contradictions, that have always been at once the conditions of the working of the system and, finally, it's undoing. The 'System' itself does not make any mistakes, only the human interpreters, who have not learned to read the images properly. In the interpretation of the images, they used a narrative logic, where a 'logic of the image' should have been applied.

Enemy of the State

In a similar way, Will Smith in *Enemy of the State* is also being tracked by the all-seeing, all-knowing 'System'. But unlike Tom Cruise, who as usual in films, is the well-trained specialist who succeeds in managing even the most 'impossible mission', Will Smith – also as usual – plays a character, who has abilities and some kind of special training (he is a lawyer), but for the task at hand, all his training or education is of absolutely no use for him. The typical Smith-character instead relies on his natural talents: cunning, quick reflexes, a big mouth and a great deal of luck. Whereas in *Minority Report* everything in the hero's surroundings signals danger, of which he is well aware of (he even knows his own future), the lawyer in *Enemy of the State* is completely ignorant about what is going on – until his seemingly familiar surrounding all of a sudden, and most dramatically, turns out to be most hostile.

Consequently, the only person he can really trust is a complete stranger to him, played by Gene Hackman, a former government operative and surveillance expert. (Hackman is taking up a modernized 90's high-tech version of the cynically disillusioned character he played in Brian de Palma's *The Conversation* twenty years earlier). Everything else already belongs to the enemy. His watch, his shoes, his clothes: bugged. His assets: frozen. His bank account: erased. *Enemy of the State* tells the tale of the violent intrusion of a state institution into the private sphere of an innocent citizen, into his privacy. The hero becomes the victim of the perfect conspiracy. He can trust nothing and no one any longer, not even his own mobile phone.

Here is a brief summary of the plot. The first video surveillance camera of the movie is seemingly 'innocent', because it is used for scientific purposes. (Note that the movie tells us from the very start that here is no such thing as an 'innocent' surveillance camera). It is the camera, that a zoologist has installed near a lake in order to observe the habits of ducks and other birds that live on that lake (reminiscent of Muybridge's plans to analyze 'Animal Locomotion'). Unfortunately, it inadvertently also records the brutal murder of a senator, executed at this lake by some ruthless NSA-villains. Later, when the police arrive at the scene of the crime, one NSA-agent watches the unsuspecting scientist removing the camera and taking it home. When the scientist discovers what is on the tape, the evil guys are already after him. Shortly before his dies in a fatal accident, he can hide the tape (which is rather a floppy disk) in Will Smith's shopping bag. Smith is totally ignorant he even has the tape, but the boys from the NSA know, because they have the recordings of the surveillance system of the store, in which the scientist and Will Smith have shortly met. (This store is, most appropriately, a designer's boutique, in which the sales girls wear nothing but expensive lingerie. First, there has been the observation for scientific purposes. Now, there is the sheer voyeuristic pleasure of looking. Both are not *per se* 'immoral', the film says, but both can be used for immoral or illegal purposes.)

After the exchange of the tape, Smith's world turns upside down. Nothing is the same any

longer. He doesn't even know why someone is attacking him, making him the target of dataveillance and data manipulation, of total audio and video surveillance. And the NSA not only observes 'every breath he takes, every move he makes' from a distance. They choose to destroy his reputation as a lawyer and a citizen, as a husband and father. The once respected lawyer is within days completely expelled from his former life, job and family. But with the help of the surveillance expert gone underground – Gene Hackman – he turns the tide by using his enemies' high-tech weapons, the bugs, computers and video surveillance against them. The tape on which the murder is recorded and that everybody is looking for, works like the perfect Hitchcockian 'McGuffin': no one knows where it is, and at one point is even destroyed, but it keeps the action going. In the movie's final showdown, Smith wins two victories at the same time by playing the NSA off against the mafia, who are also looking for a specific video tape.

In *Enemy of the State*, the hero is also defeating the 'System', not by frontal attack, but so to speak by attacking it 'laterally', by acquiring the necessary media skills and turning the inconsistencies of the system against it. In this film, as in *Minority Report*, the images nevertheless are fascinated by the technologies of control that seem to be working always flawlessly.

Panic Room

The only frontal attack on surveillance cameras occurs in David Fincher's *Panic Room*. Fincher, director of *Se7en*, *The Game* and *Fight Club*, has always been the master of paranoid cinema. He is a filmmaker whose films bring their audiences to reflect more their own assumptions or beliefs with regard to what is happening on the screen, than the screen action itself. In a Fincher movie, you put yourself under observation.

Panic Room is about monadology and motherhood. The new apartment, in which Meg Altman (played by Jodie Foster) and her daughter are spending the first night, was meant as a shelter for the two women after Meg's divorce, a place of protection and a place to rest. The building is spacious, has several floors and is almost empty, because they have just moved in. In the center of this emptiness there is the 'Panic Room', constructed by the former owner of the place. Concrete walls, a steel door that closes automatically, with enough food and water supplies stored inside to survive whatever threats (terrorism, burglars, civil riots). A CCTV system of several video cameras monitors the whole building and transports the images into the 'Panic Room'. But the room of protection turns into a trap, for inside the box there is another box: the safe. Only the three burglars, who break into the house while Meg and her daughter are asleep, know about the hidden money. They want to get inside the room, but they can't, because Meg and her daughter are in it and they certainly are not willing to come out. Liberty and safety are contradictory and irreconcilable promises: the women in the 'Panic Room' are safe, but trapped. The three invaders barricade the doors and windows of the house, so no one gets in. The system is closed and put under pressure.

The room that was meant as protection from panic becomes the 'Panic Room' – not a shelter, but a trap. In Fincher's chamber piece the dreams of security and control implode. There is no closed system (there is always communication, every action provokes a reaction), apart from the film itself and its handful of elements: three burglars, two women, one room. The lines are drawn,

any transgression is punished immediately. Only one protagonist here is free to move around at will: it is the movies' camera eye itself, and it moves through gas pipelines, electrical wires, or key holes. It is an absolute camera, not any of the protagonists' view. There is no 'narrative' camera perspective that would take images from the surveillance cameras and use them in order to keep the action going.

Unlike in *Minority Report* or *Enemy of the State*, in *Panic Room*, there is not a single shot from the point of view of a surveillance camera, in the typical blurred, grainy 'video look'. Whenever the camera gets closer to the video surveillance monitors installed in the 'Panic Room', you can always still see that it is an *image on a monitor* you are watching, and not the image itself. Fincher's camera doesn't use the CCTV-images, it *mentions* (it quotes) them. And this is precisely, because it itself is the all-seeing, all-knowing divine eye. This camera is (according to German film critic Georg Seeßlen), "the inner eye of the architecture. The instance, that observes the action, is neither objective nor subjective; we are permitted neither cold distance nor hot identification. The room sees itself. It is an eye that can be virtually anywhere in the house, extremely mobile, and at the same time extremely instable." (Seesslen, 2002: 197).³ Extremely mobile, but unstable: the surveillance technology in *Panic Room* is useful and harmful, good and evil at once. Only after Meg destroys the cameras with a sledge hammer, is she able to defeat her enemies.

In my view, *Panic Room* is a better example than the other two mentioned films, to express the ambivalence of surveillance technology that David Lyon famously put into the phrase of the "two faces": "The same process – watching over – both enables and constraints, involves care and control." (Lyon, 2001: 3). German film critic Georg Seesslen puts the movies' essence into almost the same words: "A film about the contradictions of protection." (Seesslen, 2002: 195). This becomes evident most of all in the relation between mother and daughter. The daughter suffers from diabetes, and only because her mother allows her one glass of coke too much – for celebrating their new apartment – the daughter later gets seriously ill. There are two opposing promises at work in *Panic Room*: freedom and security, openness and closedness. But you can't have both, says the movie.

Conclusion

In this paper, I set out to follow Nic Groombridge's thesis advanced in an earlier issue of this journal that "whether CCTV works or not, it has become part of the cultural repertoire." (Groombridge 2002: 30) That is, given that CCTV is a technology of the image and the gaze, it has to be understood not only in criminological, juridical or sociological terms, but also in terms of media and cultural studies. In a world saturated with images, CCTV images can be combined with (compared with, opposed to, mixed with etc.) myriads of other images from different sources. We have only begun to explore into this field of study.

Popular media like TV and cinema are related with CCTV not only on the level of technology,

³ My translation

but also on a structural, historical and epistemic level. The history of cinema started with the same eagerness to know, with the scientific look and the observation of people in motion that characterizes many uses of CCTV today. The ‘synoptic’ TV can be seen as a complementary to the ‘panoptical’ technology of surveillance, as Thomas Mathiesen has demonstrated. The techniques of editing and of montage in cinema rely on the same principles that can be found in any surveillance system. Therefore, even if cinema and TV have in the last years increasingly started to incorporate CCTV into their formats, plots, storylines, the relation between these ‘texts’ of popular cultures and this technology of surveillance is not a simple one. There is no simple cause-and-effect relation between these two. We can not simply ask: ‘Does TV promote surveillance, because it exploits it in formats like *Big Brother*?’ or ‘Is *Enemy of the State* a critique of surveillance society?’ Maybe, maybe not – but what is important is to recognize that CCTV and media have much more in common than simple subject matters. It is not a question of ‘conspiracy’ or ‘complicity’ but rather of ‘complication’ and ‘complexity’.

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