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Paranoid, moi? Surveillance and the Popular Cultural Documentary

The current theme of public surveillance has quite the direct link to documentary film. In short, you could say that video surveillance represents a conventional view within this movie genre; a view of the camera as the viewer's direct registration of reality.

In an art-related context, such a concept of authenticity has long since been challenged and criticized and now seems more like a multifaceted and often complex reference within this type of film. Yet, since 9/11, the relationship between surveillance, society, and the individual has often been the subject of both experimental and more mainstream-orientated documentary. Conditions in the UK especially have come under critical scrutiny in movies like Neil Ferguson's *Suspect Nation* (UK 2006) and Nino Leitner's *Every Step You Take* (Austria 2007). A more recent contribution to this sub-genre of documentary is David Bond's *Erasing David* (UK 2009), a movie that takes its conceptual footing in a personally experienced paranoia triggered by living in a contemporary "database society".

Early 2008, British documentary film director David Bond receives a letter from the British data protection authority ICO (Information Commissioner's office) informing him that two CD-ROMs containing personal information on him and his daughter have gone missing in the mail. This incident, the so-called "HMRC Data Loss Scandal", not only affects Bond and his family as information on 25 million British citizens is also lost in the mail. This incident prompts Bond to try out in practice how fine-meshed a net British surveillance society is.¹ The purpose of this investigation – and the documentary – is, as Bond puts it in his prelude to the film: "To make the invisible visible". To achieve this, he uses three different strategies: As his primary strategy, Bond seeks access to the type of information different public authorities and private enterprises possess about him and his family. The culmination of this investigation appears in a scene in the film, where he sits on the floor together with his 2-year-old daughter, surrounded by

veritable piles of documents and various prints which clearly illustrate the massive scale of (primarily electronically registered) data that exists on him; not including all the data which he for various reasons cannot get hold of, but still assumes exist.

The second strategy of detection involves a surveillance experiment, which Bond himself stages and which comprises the narrative plot of the film. Thus, Bond goes incognito – “to find out, I’m going to leave my life behind and disappear”), as the dramatic voice-over tells us – and gets a private investigation agency to try and locate him. Initially, Bond flees to the Continent, where he seeks advice from a number of experts to give a historical perspective to the present “surveillance condition”.



Figure 1. “Watching the Detectives” As an experiment concerning the scope of our current surveillance society, documentary filmmaker Bond hires two private investigators from Cerberus to track him down through his involuntary trail of personal data. © Green Lions Ltd. 2009

Back in England, the flight culminates, when Bond in an increasingly paranoid state of mind – unfolded in a scene filmed with handheld night vision camera and with strong references to the horror-mockumentary *The Blair Witch Project* (USA 1999) – seeks refuge in a remote cottage in Wales. He leaves the cottage again, when he realises, that the actual point of the whole experiment should be to try and lead a relatively normal life, but – as he puts it – “without leaving a trail of data wherever he goes”. Parallel to this part of the film, which has been primarily filmed with a handheld camera by Bond himself, the viewer follows the hired detectives who try to track him down in various ways. In a highly dramatized final scene accentuated by Michael Nyman’s cacophonous soundtrack, the detectives end up catching him outside a hospital, where Bond goes to meet his pregnant wife at a prenatal check-up.



Figure 2. During the last part of his self-imposed escape from any type of digital tracking, Bond seeks nightly refuge in a remote cottage on the Wales countryside. The paranoia ensues.
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Edited into the staged flight and the accompanying detective-story narrative are also expert commentaries from a series of lawyers, politicians, NGOs and opinion leaders such as the historian Timothy Garton Ash, former British Minister of Interior David Plunkett, and the author of the book *How to Disappear*, Frank M. Ahearn. The latter also gives Bond practical advice on how to leave a minimum of electronic trails. This includes amongst other things, not travelling by airplane and avoiding the use of credit cards, mobile phones or the Internet – especially Facebook, which according to Ahearn is possibly created or controlled by the CIA (which in retrospect seems like surprisingly sound advice).

On top of all this, the film is divided into chapters reminiscent of the American TV-series *24 Hours* (USA 2001-2010) that tells us how long Bond has been “on the run”. In the sound track, these chapters are accompanied by a ticking clock with an added echo that makes the beats accelerate into a stampede; an effect, which together with Michael Nyman’s score, intentionally leads to a dramatic build up.

The Popular Cultural Documentary

David Bond’s film is in many ways paradigmatic of a specific development in the documentary genre; a development which could be said to have been instituted by Michael Moore’s successful – yet severely criticized – *Roger & Me* from 1989. This type of film tries, through a conceptual approach to its subject, to unite personal history with the mass-appeal of social satire thus creating a partly critical, partly activist documentarism. In this sub-genre, dramatic and genre-oriented effects are imported from fiction, and various subjective positions are ne-

gotiated. In spite of this, the truth of the film is constantly performatively verified through an overall set of conventions related to the more classical characteristics of the genre. A voice-over narration is used to structure the story and subject-matter, and the arguments are supported by revealing footage or the disclosure of facts. The display of revealing fact is staged as especially essential, because it is with this very content, that this type of documentarism establishes a connection between its photographic registrations of reality and our perception of an objective and well-founded truth.²

Through a very self-conscious play on genre, the reception of the particular film can therefore not only be anchored in the use of specific imagery or the intent of the director. The expectation towards these productions must have its basis in a fluid exchange of information, where the character and the validity of the specific facts as well as the selected imagery are constantly up for renegotiation.³ The form and content of the popular cultural documentary in Moore's tradition does not let itself be categorized solely as *revealing, analytic* or *expressive* works.⁴ Instead, we are dealing with hybrids, which fluctuate and interrelate between several types of (film) genres. The reference to reality/real life is present, but is activated through the conceptual framing that is created for the recorded material.

Bond's strategy for conceptually staging his film is comparable to Moore's. *Erasing David* is a person-driven documentary all the way to the title; a documentary which places its director in the absolute centre of the film. Bond's personal story and private life constantly function as the setting and illustrative example for the critical questions, he sets out to ask. However, letting his "real" lived life function as the central plot-driving parts of the film leads to a series of principle strengths and weaknesses in the cinematic material, which have also been pointed out in relation to Moore's oeuvre. And it creates a series of problems more specifically related to the declared subject of the film: Surveillance.

In his analysis of Moore's *Roger & Me*, film theorist Matthew Bernstein draws attention to a line of characteristics in the popular cultural documentary. Several of these motifs and genre-related strategies can also be observed in Bond's material. Pivotal is *the mission* as an explicit framing of the story. Like most of Moore's productions are conceptually bound to a specific and, in reality, often impossible task which the director tries to solve, David Bond, as already mentioned, uses his personal act of disappearing as that story which has to tie the film's research material and interviews together as a meaningful whole. Bernstein's point is that this "*impossible project*" works in a dynamic interplay with the director's self-conscious and deliberate play on the conventions of the documentary film. The impossibility of ever completing that mission, which was the original starting point of the film, is in fact a paradoxical way of verifying a form of authenticity – or put in another way; a strategy to recover a certain effect of authenticity. By supplementing the registration of real incidents with footage of what is conceptually planned, the filmmaker acquires a rather important control over how the finished work is perceived.

This point is taken from Paul Arthur's analysis of the changing relationship between film language and the status of authenticity throughout the history of American documentary. Analysing a series of directors and their works, Arthur argues that the filmmaker's presence as a diegetic character in the film establishes a certain type of authenticity. A distanced, self-exposing and often ironic position which creates a loosely defined room to manoeuvre, where the many types of authority within the documentary can interact, either as analytical comment, critical reportage or even *cinema vérité*. The installation of the director as the pivotal focus of the film is achieved exactly through the impossible project, which simultaneously legitimizes genre freedom/experiments. According to Arthur, this is a kind of anti-documentary, which plays, and in its own way even capitalizes on, certain conventions, but in contrast to more experimental films in the genre, does not try to subvert them or undermine their naturalization. *Erasing David*, for instance, begins in a cinematic style that mimics the suspense-filled atmosphere of thriller fiction, rapid cross-cuttings show the protagonist David's escape from his private home (hidden under a blanket in the backseat of a car) thereby also assigning the private detectives the role of cruel, snooping antagonists. At the same time, the scene is also held in black and white tones, which references the well-known look of historical documentaries. Parallel with this, Michael Nyman's minimalistic background music acts in the way of a conventional fiction dramatization and with that combination invariably leads the thoughts towards Phillip Glass's now canonized music for Errol Morris' likewise canonized documentary *The Thin Blue Line* (USA 1988). These genre-oriented references work on two levels, as the seminal innovation in Morris's film was, in fact, the fusion of the revealing documentary with the genre-consciousness of the fiction film.⁵

The Dramatized Diary of a Documentarian

The sequences made like a day-by-day on-the-run video bind Bond's documentary investigation together. However, it soon becomes clear that this overall narrative is in many ways inconsistent with the subject the director wishes to illuminate. As Bernstein and Arthur point out in relation to Moore, the practice of "the impossible project"-strategy is an opportunity to stage documentary scenes, which displaces their eligibility from the revealing to the exposing.⁶ Bond's declared starting point for the film is, as mentioned, the "HMRC Data Loss" scandal and with this case a focus on the notion of so-called "data rape", which according to several of the film's characters, you can become victim of, when information you consider private and even intimate, suddenly circulates (relatively) readily available or has fallen into the wrong hands.⁷ However, the kind of surveillance staged by the film is often of an entirely different character, and part of it can, in fact, hardly be described as surveillance *per se*, because the detectives go about their job in a rather prosaic way. They turn Bond's trash inside out and seek out his relatives (whose trash is also rummaged through). Arguably they find certain standard information via the electronic media, but most of the data leaks that happen via the internet



Figure 3-5. Examples of the many different stylistic effects and genre-references employed in Erasing David. Bond hiding under a blanket while trying to escape his pursuers, filmed in the grainy, handheld style of the observational documentary. Bond on the train, filmed in close-up POV-shots mimicking the subjective camera of the action film. Intercutting of a classical interview-sequence used to strengthen the films factual basis. Here it is British historian and Professor of European Studies Timothy Garton Ash. © Green Lions Ltd. 2009

or by use of mobile technology are clearly the director's (self) conscious attempt to demonstrate the overall coherence in his project.

A longer sequence early on is both in a media and (film) historical perspective exemplary of this type of documentary staging. During his "flight" to the continent, David Bond seeks out the Belgian internet and communications expert Toon Vanagt in Brussels for a discussion about the perspectives of ongoing self-surveillance through the Internet. Vanagt records the interview with the purpose of publishing it later on his blog on the video portal, Vimeo. This "scene" is then followed by a series of fragmental shoots of Bond's journey through Europe, combined with outtakes from his research at home prior to the project. Among other places, the journey takes him to Berlin, more particularly Stasi's former headquarter in Normannenstraße, which now houses a "surveillance museum". Bond interviews two former Stasi agents, who are supposed to give him advice on how to most effectively avoid the unwanted spotlight of our media-saturated society. Characteristically for the general mode in the film's argumentative build-up; this rather absurd joke is put in contrast by a critical expert comment, in this case by Phil Booth who is the coordinator of NO2ID, an activist organisation that runs campaigns against the British Government's introduction of ID cards. Booth compares this initiative to Stasi's systematic registration of personal data only in order to point out, that we are now witnessing the emergence of a far more "self-sufficient" system.

Finally, this critical intermezzo ends in a scene where the private detectives who are hired to track down Bond stumble across Vanagt's webpage which at this point already contains the footage from Brussels. Thus Bond creates a condensed cinematic comment that most of all seems to serve the purpose of conjuring up ideological parallels to the most expanded surveillance society of the Cold War. Mind you, a basis of comparison through the supplied criticism indicates, that we are now confronted with private profit driven media-databases – in this incident a video portal – which, surveillance-wise, are superior to this historical example.

The problem arises, when this footage does not strengthen Bond's critique of the inescapable database society by facilitating an experience of its repressive character or by confronting us with yet unseen aspects of the same. Instead, they seem more likely to reflect a filmmaker's attempt to break the code for creating an efficient pop culture documentary, an approach that ends up uncomfortably placing the film somewhere between being ironic or serious. When Bond lives out his paranoia in front of the camera, it's always carried out in an ironic tone. He literally films his own attempt to escape from this feeling, but since the film's formalistic structure never deviates from documentary virtues such as explanatory voice-over and strategic placement of research-footage, it prevents the viewer from being deeply affected by this state of mind. One of the moments were this appears noticeably overplayed is in a scene halfway through the film, where we crosscut between the detectives' office, and Bond on his way to Wales by car. Inadvertently, he opens an email from the detectives (!) on his Blackberry and immediately gets traced through the GPS built into his mobile device. It is these



Figure 6-8. Examples of Bond's staging of our net culture and its consequences from a surveillance perspective. Bond and his daughter surrounded by hardcopies of all the different database registrations produced by his net-based activities. Toon Vanagi's documentation of Bond discovered by the detectives on the video-sharing website Vimeo. The detectives flip through family photos on his wife's Facebook page.
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types of setups that gradually make it harder to decode what purpose the investigators serve, besides moving the conceptual narrative forward.

Arthur emphasizes, that it is exactly this conscious interaction between positions and modes of expression, which characterizes the person-driven documentary. According to Arthur's description of this development in the documentary genre, the shift between the different modes of expression precisely indicates a strategy to legitimize one's own practice.⁸ Bond blatantly capitalises on this freedom, right down to his self-conscious attitude and the way he constantly calls attention to the presence of the film media.

It seems there is a certain discrepancy between *Erasing David's* area of examination and the way the film illustrates this cinematically. As mentioned by way of introduction, an implicit reference to the mediated/technological registration of the world is associated with the theme of surveillance - and following this, an internalized validation of the documentary genre and its historical relation to reality, that is, the idea or ideal of media transparency. Bond points out this connection through a metaphorical use of the camera in the film crew's footage of the detectives, whose efforts at tracking him are illustrated several times with the gaze of the surveillance or hidden camera. Furthermore, the film includes a sequence where Bond consults the psychologist Daniel Freeman regarding his growing paranoia. The scene obviously works as a kind of expert verification of the characteristic signs of this mental state. At the same time it crosscuts with recordings from enormous CCTV control rooms, which in an allegorical way is supposed to join together Bond's personal paranoia with what happens to be a point in the critique of modern capitalism: The explosive growth of technologies such as CCTV and biometric registration according to a number of the film's experts is caused by the fact that for decades the surveillance lobby has led a deliberate (mis)information campaign about the relevance and necessity of these technologies.⁹ This point is interesting in its own right, but also obscures a media related discrepancy in Bond's project, namely that digital surveillance is never "translated" effectively and reflectively through the film's narrative. It is thus quite striking, that it remains unclear whether the conclusive information regarding the visit to the hospital where Bond is finally caught is gathered through data surveillance or simply based on a standard phone call to a medical secretary.

Equally symptomatic for the film is the fact that the sequence which examines the economic aspects of the proliferating business of surveillance ends with a shot of David Bond wandering about testing equipment at a fair for the very same industry. This setting is reminiscent of a scene in Francis Ford Coppola's now classical fiction film *The Conversation* (1974), which also combines a growing paranoia with an interest in the contemporary tendencies of surveillance. Here the monitoring expert played by Gene Hackman gradually becomes a victim of his own practice, the observer becomes the observed. Coppola elegantly used the spectrum of fictional storytelling, and through an unconventional narrative, symbolic visuals and the film's fragmented and syncopated score, masterly illustrates

the information technologies dissolution of the boundary between the private and the public.¹⁰ In spite of his strategic use of the devices of fiction, Bond never gets the actual issues portrayed in a convincingly or captivating cinematic form. It is tempting to conclude that the result in *Erasing David* is that the *documentarian* becomes the victim of his own practice. And he does so, chiefly because he operates with an unclear notion of what he actually understands by surveillance and as a consequence what he points his criticism towards, how this criticism actually should be formulated and what it is capable of.

Analytical (and Normative) Understandings of Surveillance

Against the backdrop of the conceptual vagueness in Bond's project and its realization, we suggest the following three-way taxonomy of different analytical and normative understandings of the surveillance phenomenon and its sociological, political and cultural implications: (1) the critical subversive, or if you like: the countercultural, (2) the para-cultural and (3) the affirmative-cultural.¹¹ These are best thought of as theoretical conceptions, but "theoretical" in the sense that they also can be located – or suspect to have functioned – as what we might refer to as "intellectual starting points" of for instance artists or documentarians. The perspectives or views on surveillance within this taxonomy in other words range from highly abstract academic discourses to, for instance, aesthetic and/or material realizations of such ideas.

(1) *The critical subversive discourse* aims to reveal – and by doing so eventually undermine – the continuous expansion of surveillance society and the socio-cultural consequences of this tendency. Thus a critical consciousness-raising towards surveillance is sought. The more classical documentary, for instance, belongs to this category – also including, at least at a first glance, *Erasing David* (cf. Bond's ambition to "make the invisible visible") – along with different forms of narratives (films, novels, etc.) which is staged and/or works more or less as truthfully critical or dystopian representations of the modalities of surveillance, cultural logics and potential effects (cf. for example a number of science fiction works, amongst these George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* obviously, which is the seminal work within this tradition). Finally, most of the academic discourses belong to this category, which in a scientific, but also often rather value-laden register is occupied with the surveillance phenomenon, while they typically establish a form of panoptic view on their field of study themselves.¹²

A particular variety of the critically uncovering approach has also surfaced, more precisely the type of critique which aims at the precision and validity of the surveillance critique up to now instead. That is, a critique, which is primarily sceptical towards other interpretations of the actual scope of surveillance, that is, interpretations which typically all take their point of departure in either Orwell's "Big Brother" character or a rather reductive understanding of Michel Foucault's interpretation of Jeremy Bentham's draft for a panoptic prison architecture in *Dis-*



Figure 9-10. Gene Hackman as the surveillance expert Harry Caul that develops a well-founded paranoia in Francis Ford Coppola's *The Conversation* and the mirror-sequence in *Erasing David*, where Bond visits the surveillance fair.
© Green Lions Ltd. 2009 & A Coppola Company Productions, Paramount Pictures 1974

cipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison. As an example of this epistemic “critique of the critique” one could point to Bruno Latour’s introduction of the concept *oligopticon*. The most important function of this term seems to be to act as a corrective counter-concept to the exaggerated practical range of the panoptic surveillance, which according to Latour is never that total, or perhaps even *omniscient*, as the Foucault- and Orwell-inspired interpretations of panopticism typically claim. On the contrary, it is always situated, that is, extremely exact and detailed, yet only partial and thus of limited scope.¹³

(2) With this, we are close to the other type of (critical) intervention, which exhibits what could be called *para-cultural* characteristics, and which by exten-

sion of the French philosopher Michel de Certeau operates with a term that can be described as ‘*tactical reappropriation*’. Examples of this could be different kinds of so-called *tactical media*, *hacktivism*, *jamming* etc. (Taylor), which precisely act tactically vis-à-vis the power structures of surveillance society. Following this, the para-cultural attitude and its tactics are part of a “network of anti-discipline”, which does not necessarily shatter surveillance *in toto*, cf. the ambition of the already mentioned “counter-cultural” (analysis) strategy. What the para-cultural tactics do, however, is to provide small temporary spaces (de Certeau 1988: xiv-xv; 29-42). Obvious examples of this, can be found in a series of surveillance-related activist art projects by Hasan Elahi, Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, Surveillance Camera Players, and Mare Tralla, to mention just a few, which all play in various ways experimentally with the functional structures, strategies implications of surveillance, which are turned against themselves in pursuit of other agendas.¹⁴

Like the more directly critical counter-cultural category, most of these para-cultural tactics display obvious antagonistic tendencies vis-à-vis the surveillance society and its political and cultural implications. But it is a significant point that this happens in another register (i.e. with other rhetorical or aesthetic means) and with a starting point in another epistemological frame of understanding (beyond the idea of medial or discursive transparency). While the critical-subversive discourse is primarily epistemically oriented, the para-cultural approach is to a much greater extent oriented towards the practices of everyday life. Here, for example, we find the academic/theoretical and tactical/practical tradition, which has been categorized *sousveillance* or *inverse surveillance*¹⁵ by the surveillance theoretician Steve Mann. A view which is conceived in opposition to the Orwellian dystopia of the surveillance society, “Big Brother Britain”, in which a powerful elite monitor and control the many through a centralized gathering of information. Instead, advocates of this position suggest that it *is* – or *should be* – the many lesser (i.e. seen in a hierarchical power structure), which demonstratively and subversively stare back at the panoptical ocular-centric surveillance society with an “in-your-face” attitude (Mann, Nolan & Wellman).¹⁶

Yet, it is also in the para-cultural approach to surveillance that we find interpretations of the consequences of surveillance society, which strike far lighter tones. Sometimes even displaying an attitude, which appears almost joyfully exhibitionistic in its staged exposure of and playful dealing with the logics of surveillance society. This is, for example, the case in John E. McGrath’s analysis with the very eloquent title *Loving Big Brother*, where surveillance society is rethought and -perceived through theatre theory, and thus opens up for possible, new heterotopic (Foucault 1986) spaces and practices, which in a positive way elude the repressive gaze of Big Brother/panopticism: rather than ignoring the reproduced selves that populate the data banks and recordings of surveillance culture, we should embrace them as aspects of a new consciousness: selves producing selves, prostheticized and discontinuous, communicating in a proliferation of codes and secret languages, replacing the containment of privacy with the productivity of surveillance space. (McGrath 17-16)

An understanding and a tactical practice, which in an artistic register can be seen in the equally voyeuristic and exhibitionistic, performative practice of the self-surveillance of British artist Jill Magid (cf. *Evidence Locker* from 2004¹⁷ and *Surveillance Shoe* from 2000) on which she herself has noted that with this kind of tactical re-appropriation of the media and gaze direction of surveillance, it becomes “a way of seeing myself, via technology, in a way I could not otherwise. In self-surveillance I use a system or a technology as my mirror.” (Lovink & Magid) Or as the interviewer Geert Lovink comments about Magid’s artistic practice: “Instead of portraying citizens as victims of Big Brother, Magid’s works opens up a new field of art and activism in which predictable forms of protest against the almighty eyes of power are turned into a dandy-like performance.” (Ibid.)

First of all, this reflects a historical shift in how we understand surveillance: from a social anomaly that should be rectified (for instance by applying the traditional modes of intervention of critically exposing documentary), to a fundamental fact of life with which you can at best “make do” (cf. Certeau’s concept “*faire avec*” concerning everyday forms of emancipatory tactics (Certeau 1988: 29–42)). Secondly, in the more normative register, this implies a re-interpretation of emerging surveillance culture almost as a fortunate situation. Admittedly, this on one hand potentially contains elements of new ocularcentric abuse (cf. the implicit accept of panopticism’s/The Big Brother figure’s postulate of the “almighty eye”). But on the other hand, it also means the opening of new fields struggle and resistance, which in this discourse can appear almost like newly gained fields of “auto-aesthetic” pleasures. This, in other words, means the emergence of a “surveillance space” (cf. McGrath), which offers new ways to see and be seen, but in particular new ways to *watch yourself yourself being watched*.¹⁸ Concerning Jill Magid it is thus tempting to claim –paraphrasing Nietzsche’s aphorism on how “the perfect woman commits literature as she commits a little sin” – that Magid commits self-surveillance “as an experiment, in passing, looking around to see if someone is noticing; and to see to it *that* someone notices ...”¹⁹

The (unconscious) surveillance advocacy

(3) Finally, there is the third category, which could be termed the *affirmative* approach to surveillance, which, especially when you look at the artistic/pop-cultural versions, uses the idea of omnipresent, all-seeing surveillance technologies as narrative nodes.²⁰ The consequence of this is – often unwillingly it seems – that this representation appears as a relatively uncritical appraisal of the technological possibilities and potentials of surveillance and thereby also its legitimacy. In the world of fiction and especially the broader context of popular culture, which we have argued that *Erasing David* belongs to through certain film stylistic characteristics and genre conventions, the Fox TV series *24 Hours* about the anti-terror agent Jack Bauer is an interesting example. In the American public, it has been discussed, what importance the series has had to the public’s, the politicians’ and even



Figure 11. Installation view of the CCTV recordings of herself used by Jill Magid in Evidence Locker. <http://www.evidencelocker.net/story.php>
© Jill Magid/ The Whitney Museum of American Art 2006

the army's and intelligence agencies' understanding of the efficiency and –closely related to this: the legitimacy – of the use of torture in the battle against terror. A practice which not only is forbidden according to the Geneva Convention but paradoxically also factually unfounded, given that all univocal research show that torture does not work as intended (provided, of course, that the intention is the provision of reliable information).²¹ The point in this context is, that the situation is much the same regarding the phenomenon of surveillance, which just does not work with the same surgical precision as the series leaves you with the impression of (cf. also Latour's oligopticon). Although facts in the real world point to the opposite conclusion, the functional performance of surveillance (or torture), which the plots of TV series and movies so often revolve around, has been crucial torture to the attribution of legitimacy to these practices in real life.

The German art historian O.K. Werkmeister has put forward an equally harsh criticism of the pop-cultural presentation of the technological possibilities associated with surveillance, which according to Werkmeister is construed in a highly distorted form. Thus, Werkmeister remarks of the “fantastic scenarios within the mass-produced art of film and comic books”, which have been so profoundly influenced by the image regime of surveillance technologies, that this “demonizes the video-electronic control of the reality we live as a utopian extremity of the universal availability.” (Werkmeister 62) However, this utopian – or if you like: dystopian, since this understanding is not only put forward by the affirmative but also the critical surveillance discourse (including Bond's) – delusion portrays the pop culture not in order to deceive its audience, but on the contrary to fulfill a series of conventions of truthfulness. To appear authentic, Werkmeister thus

remarks: “mass art find itself obliged to adapt its modes of representation to the conventions of visibility of electronic imaging production and transmission. Thus, the video electronic visual forms on one hand become aesthetically degenerated, and on the other, functionally exaggerated to the effect that their influence seems limitless. In that way, the aesthetic image culture presents its mass audience with fictive scenarios of contemporary experience, whose visual parameters appear to be on par with the electronic imaging technology and to communicate insight into the electronic regulation of the reality in which we live. Instead of the mysterious surface of events, they offer a seemingly functional understanding of its technical progress in a satirical mode of utopian exaggeration.”²²

Thus, the technologies of surveillance and their operators are attributed almost omniscient potentials. To the extent that these presentations are taken for granted, it partly releases a hypothetical elimination of the far from insignificant margins of error of the surveillance technologies, and partly a false feeling of security – and you could further argue, for the critics a false sense of insecurity.²³ But perhaps most significantly it also potentially releases a significant factually unfounded – and thus also a really unnecessary – internalization of the modalities of surveillance culture and implicitly prescribed behavioural patterns; both within the excited, the indifferent or unresolved and with the critically inclined.²⁴ An internalization effect, as contemporary electronically based surveillance technologies (*data mining* and the like) unlike the classic panoptic surveillance strategy paradoxically does not themselves make a scant effort to cultivate (cf. the present scandal concerning PRISM),²⁵ but as both its affirmative chanters and its critics end up contributing to anyhow.

Re-erasing David

So, how is Bond's Erasing David placed into this taxonomy? Obviously, the film would be difficult to place under the affirmative category – at least not, if we follow what appears to be the film's own intention. But should we then speak of it in terms of an *under-surveillance* or *sousveillance* project (ie. the more critical para-cultural approach mentioned in section 2)? Here the response must also be negative, since Bond and his camera are being way too polite. For example, the film consists almost exclusively of staged situations that serve to illustrate what surveillance can do more, rather than any form of counter-surveillance *per se* (i.e. as a form of display of the surveillance and its agents). Thus, it would be difficult to argue that these scenes have the characteristics of a demonstratively subversive attitude, which Mann *et al.* pointed out as a special feature of the strategies of counter-surveillance. On the levels of formal aesthetics, the film certainly mimics the visual hallmarks of CCTV and the hidden camera, but it mostly remains a form of playful courting of genre-specific narrative and image-oriented conventions. Tactical re-appropriation of the technology is simply absent. In this sense, the film can hardly be described as critical-subversive from a para-cultural perspec-

tive; it is much closer to being didactically enlightening in the classical sense (cf. the intention of “making the invisible visible”). In other words, Bond’s film unfolds a rather traditional counter-cultural strategy.

Thus, paradoxically – qua the use of the transparent detection logic that Bond resorts to a long way down the road – Erasing *David*, which unquestionably sets out to be an unambiguous surveillance critical film, ends up displaying a number of similarities to the affirmative surveillance discourse. Through its choice of cinematic strategies it quite unwittingly contributes to the utopian/dystopian exaggeration of the surveillance technological functionality, that Werkmeister, among others, pointed to. In this particular case, the film goes so far as to let a series of phenomena and actions partake, which can hardly be described as surveillance *per se*, only with the purpose of solving the equation and the narrative of the omnipresent and all-seeing gaze of surveillance. Thus, Bond has a tendency to want the surveillance society to appear as an Orwellian and totalitarian observation form, but on closer inspection it really only appears so through the film’s insistence of the impossible project (cf. Bernstein). This is quite a paradox, as Bond even experiences a paranoid internalization of the panoptic gaze (the night scene in the Welsh forests), but ends up unwittingly confirming Latour’s oligopticon: yes, you can register and achieve rather comprehensive knowledge of the different details in an individual’s life and aspects of the world for that matter, but that is not equal to the total overview, which at the same time can manage complex details and contexts. This would also need a thoroughly constructed, insistent narrative; which in this case is the exact function of Bond’s plot. In addition to the film’s fictive Olympian optics, which, as argued above, is constantly playfully dismantled with the help of a re-installment of a second order (i.e. through the presentation of the staging of the “impossible project”, as Bernstein described it), another convergence point is also present, namely the wall in the private detectives’ office, where all the information is arranged around a large photo of the main character of the film, David Bond. Compared to the before mentioned *staging*, this setup also only exists as a forced illusion, which clearly is arranged in honour of the camera.

Interestingly, this reminds one of the rhetorical strategies that are unfolded in the text, which historically might have been most central to the panoptic presentation of the architectural and social structuring of surveillance, namely Foucault’s chapter on the topic in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. In a short essay titled “Micro-techniques and Panoptic Discourse: A Quid pro Quo”, Michel de Certeau thus interprets Foucault’s genealogical method as a particular scientific discourse that self-consciously and tactically builds a panoptic illusion, or as it is called: a “theoretical narrative, which obeys rules analogous to those of panoptical procedures.”²⁶ This especially alludes to Foucault’s archival work, where all sorts of different documents are being excavated (“poached”) and brought to life as historical evidence to the thesis that a certain type of gaze is in the hidden power-structured logic of Modernity. According to Certeau, what we are in reality witnessing is a so-called “micro-technical” academic discourse, which should

be understood as being tactical-political; that is, a kind of Trojan discourse like the para-cultural intervention in surveillance society and its culture, that by any given opportunity really tries to subvert the discursive information strategy, whose “rhetoric of clarity” (*écriture de la clarté*) Foucault imitates by trapping “strange things, which he discovers in a past literature”, which then can be held out as historical, yet until recently hidden logics and used “for disturbing our fragile present securities”.²⁷ A rhetorical tactic – or reading according to whom you attribute it, of course, Foucault or de Certeau – that has proven itself so subtle, it has largely gone unnoticed within surveillance studies and surveillance theories, which for a long time almost unambiguously have equated Foucault’s text and the panopticism in its most reductive forms.

While Foucault possibly has appeared too subtly subversive to all his readers (except de Certeau, apparently), the same cannot be said about *Erasing David*, where the collapse of “transparent illusionism” associated with both documen-



Figure 12. David Bond is omnipresent in his own documentary, both as subject, performer and filmmaker. Here he finally meets up with his pursuers in front of the information wall at the detectives' office.
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tarism as well as panopticism, is blantly put on display. However, you could suggest two possible readings of Bond’s film. Either an affirmative or perhaps even “apologetic” reading, which understands *Erasing David* as a para-cultural film that is extremely conscious about its own panoptical fiction and as in the deconstructive tradition of *tactical media* demonstratively undermines the transparency metaphor, which forms the basis for the ocular information and detection logic that the surveillance, the scientific academic tradition and the traditional documentary film all have in common. Or a reading – which is the one we mostly subscribe to – of *Erasing David* as a film, that in its eagerness to convince and argue for the hegemony of the panoptic regime, does not only overlook its own discursive break

with the conventions of the genre, and what this *could have had* of theoretical implications, but also overlooks the extent to which it itself contributes to a certain way of analyzing, speaking of and living with the technological possibilities and cultural consequences of the surveillance phenomenon; that is, within a perception of surveillance as an almost omniscient, intrusive force.

This paradox points to a central issue relating to the nexus of surveillance technology, surveillance culture and the critical analysis hereof: namely the fact that this critically revealing analysis (whether this is carried out in a theoretical or artistic register, in text or on film) often tends to strengthen the effect of internalization, normalization and behavioural regulation, which Foucault singled out as some of the primary effects of surveillance. (Foucault 1977: 180-182) So the point is this: the feeling of potentially being watched (filmed, monitored, data recorded, etc.) everywhere and at any given time is to a great extent also something that is evoked by the discourse of surveillance society, which to a large extent is made up by surveillance criticism like the one permeating *Erasing David*. This also raises some unexpected questions and dilemmas that reach beyond this specific film: *who does (critical) surveillance theory really serve?* And if the answer to this is disturbing: *which analytical points are in that case politically and/or tactically opportune to propose, and which are not?* Questions that this article, of course, is not able to answer, but nonetheless most relevant to ask.

Endnotes

- ¹ According to one of the film's many references, "Big Brother Britain" now ranges as the third-most monitored country in the world after China and Russia.
- ² A relation linked to the camera's historical status as scientific instrument. In a methodical reading of the political functions of the documentary genre, film theorist Michael Renov (cf. Renov 1993) links this to Foucault's critical analysis of the scientific approach. Both talk of a legitimization process, which on the basis of a specific, historical and ideological rationale tries to objectify its own practice (cf. Foucault 1980).
- ³ This is a very brief summary of the central characteristics of the so-called "post modern documentary film" as presented by Linda Williams in her influential text, "Mirrors Without Memories: Truth, History and the New Documentary" (L. Williams, *Mirrors Without Memories: Truth, History and the New Documentary* [w:] *New Challenges for Documentary*, ed. Rosenthal, Alan & Corner, John. Manchester & New York: Manchester University Press 2005 (1988), pp. 59-75).
- ⁴ Cf. Nichols' chronologically motivated definition of the simultaneously present modes of expression in documentary film; *The poetic, the expository, the observational, the participatory, the reflexive and the performative*. Each of which becomes harder and harder to situate and differentiate as the genre develops through history (Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press 1980, pp. 99-139).
- ⁵ Morris's film in a dramatic way combines the *Noir* film with the documentary unravelling of a murder case, another argument for stylistically placing Bond's film along the new American documentary.
- ⁶ Obviously in Moore's film *Roger and Me*, it concerns the coveted interview with General Motor's CEO Roger Smith, a desired goal that gives Moore among other things the opportunity to show up at the corporations HQ unannounced and demand an audience. A request any documentarist is set to fail, but here it is instead used to illustrate the distance between the economical upper class and "the working class" in late-eighties USA.

- ⁷ It is Bond's wife Kathryn, who at the end of film uses the expression to describe the type of (potential) surveillance abuse, which she and her husband David thinks, the film has uncovered.
- ⁸ (P. Arthur, *Jargons of Authenticity*. [w:] *Theorizing Documentary*, ed. M. Renov, New York & London: Routledge 1993, pp. 128).
- ⁹ Cf. that the introduction of these technologies can hardly be documented as really being of any use; they only exist to make us even more unsafe. The reason for the contra-factually founded popularity of the surveillance solution can apparently be found in that they instead offer a technological "fix" to a series of far more complicated social problems.
- ¹⁰ For an unfolded (Foucault inspired) analysis of the relation between surveillance, technology and the cinematic expression in Coppola's *The Conversation*, see (Norman K. Denzin, *The Conversation in Symbolic Interaction*, 15:2 (1992), pp. 135-149).
- ¹¹ As all other (good) taxonomies, this one is also ideal-typical and non-comprehensive at the same time; i.e. full of gray areas when faced with concrete examples.
- ¹² Cf. the more unfolded, de Certeau-inspired discussion in relation to Foucault's oeuvre below.
- ¹³ Latour & Hermant 28-32, 79; Gad & Lauritsen 51-52. The *oligopticon* concept to a large extend presents itself as an ideology-critical anti-concept, which serve to show the often imprecise metaphors of the panopticon concept than any actual scientifically-descriptive concept in it's own right. Compared to certain notions on the radical scale-logic of surveillance, Latour's concept shows primarily, what surveillance *cannot do*, not what it instead really can do.
- ¹⁴ If *Erasing David* - although somewhat misleading - is attributed medially meta-reflexive, deconstructive dimensions, this film could also be included in this category. However, this is not the ambition of this present article, which will become apparent below.
- ¹⁵ A theoretical approach to the subject that often appears almost artistic with its various practical experiments (cf. the illustrations in Mann et al. 2003) and furthermore has had great influence on a long line of artists who specifically employ critical interventions towards surveillance.
- ¹⁶ Concerning the concept 'ocularcentricism' in relation to Foucault's perspectives on power, knowledge and surveillance, see Jay 381-416.
- ¹⁷ <http://www.evidencelocker.net/>.
- ¹⁸ A tendency reflected in the displacement of the titles given to surveillance based reality shows: from Big Brother to Paradise Hotel (Lauritsen).
- ¹⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols, Or, How to Philosophize with the Hammer*, Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997, pp. 8.
- ²⁰ Although less frequent than within the other approaches, academic theories also exist, which insist on the technological abilities of surveillance as well as its beneficiary consequences, (e.g Bloomfield 2001).
- ²¹ Cf. professor in international law, Philippe Sands, who concludes, "that *24 Hours* contributed significantly to produce a climate, where both ordinary citizens and the decision were brought to believe, that torture can produce useful information, and that it is thus justifiable in cases of emergency. In my mind, both assumptions are wrong, but we must admit, that popular culture can support illegal actions, which eventually become international war crimes," (quoted from Geist 4).
- ²² O.K. Werckmeister, "Den samtidshistoriske billedproblematik" in Bolt, Jakobsen & Visby (ed.), *Billedpolitik - At se er at dræbe*, Copenhagen: Nebula, 2010, pp. 62-63.
- ²³ An issue Bond actually also approaches in a passage halfway into the film, where he, by interviewing a couple of people to whom misregistration has had serious consequences, suggests, that the surveillance society has a significant margin of error. However, Bond does not really succeed in connecting this point to the fact, that it in these cases it is actually the combination of the authorities' excessive confidence of the surveillance technologies *and* a registration system which has not proven itself precise at all, which causes a condition of absence of legal rights. It that sense it could even be argued, that the problems that arise *in these cases* can be claimed to have occurred *in the gaps between* the trails of surveillance/registration (i.e. in the oligopticon); not through the finely meshed structure of an omniscient surveillance net (panopticism).

- ²⁴ Hereby, entertainment TV-fiction like *24 Hours* is placed along the same tradition as the co-productions between Hollywood and the American Army, which seem to serve several purposes; to optimize the army's base for recruitment, to promote ideological, political, normative and psychological identification and empathy for the American Army as well as finally – and perhaps most significantly – to portray an image of this war machine's superior strength.
- ²⁵ McGrath, pp. 8.
- ²⁶ Michel de Certeau; "Micro-techniques and Panoptic Discourse: A Quid pro Quo" in *Heterologies: Discourse of the Other*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000, pp. 191.
- ²⁷ (ibid.).

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Paranoid, moi?

Temat inwigilacji w filmach dokumentalnych głównego nurtu

Autorzy badają w jaki sposób dyskurs nad inwigilacją i szeroko pojęte studia nad tym zagadnieniem (surveillance studies) manifestują się w filmach dokumentalnych mających charakter popularyzatorski, skierowanych do masowego widza. Przedmiotem krytycznej analizy jest tu *Erasing David* (2010), hybrydyczny dokument utrzymany w tradycji osobistych, populistycznych filmów Michaela Moore'a, zrealizowany przez brytyjskiego reżysera Davida Bonda. Pedersen i Stephenson poddają krytycznej ocenie formę filmu, jak również problematyczny sposób ukazania i tematyzowania przez reżysera inwigilacji. W tym celu przedstawiają autorską typologię dyskursów i perspektyw opisujących to zjawisko.

Autorzy stawiają też pytania o charakter relacji między kinem dokumentalnym (praktyką artystyczną), inwigilacją (praktyką społeczną) i poświęconym jej dyskursem (teorią), a także o skuteczność teorii i praktyki, u podstaw której leży otwarta krytyka lub subwersja inwigilacji.

Paranoid, moi?

Surveillance and the Popular Cultural Documentary

Authors research the ways in which surveillance discourse and studies on surveillance phenomena manifest itself in mainstream documentary filmmaking. The subject of this critical case study is David Bond's *Erasing David* (2010), hybrid documentary which aesthetics and conceptual roots are clearly embedded in the tradition of Michael Moore's subjective, populist filmmaking. Pedersen and Stephenson's critical analysis of Bond's documentary follows issues of both the form and the problematic way in which surveillance was represented and conceptualized by the filmmaker. In order to articulate their reservations they introduce a typology of discoursed and critical perspectives dominating the ways in which surveillance phenomena is usually introduced. Authors ask about the character of interrelations between documentary cinema (artistic practice), surveillance (social practice), and academic discourses on surveillance (theory), eventually sharing a comment on the efficiency of this theoretical and practical works that were intended as openly critical or subversive.