Surveillance and Ethics in Film: *Rear Window* and *The Conversation*

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Although popular culture is an important metaphorical framework for the discussion of surveillance, it has rarely been the subject of study among surveillance scholars. Especially ethical concerns and dilemmas have been neglected. The purpose of this article is to shred light on how the practice of surveillance can be justified and what kind of responsibility that follows it. By studying two classic films about murders, *Rear Window* and *The Conversation*, different perspectives on ethics and power relations are revealed. However, rather than giving us answers, the protagonists of both films embody the persistent ethical dilemma of surveillance.

INTRODUCTION

For three decades, the academic study of surveillance has been occupied with identifying, describing and analyzing issues relating to different kinds of monitoring practices. Alongside this scholarly perspective, surveillance has been a recurring theme in popular culture and, interestingly, the portrayal of monitoring practices in popular culture has been both a metaphorical framework and a major inspiration for surveillance studies as well as the public debate. In his seminal work, *Private Lives, Public Surveillance* (1973), James Rule contributed significantly to making surveillance, privacy and social control a topic on the agenda in social science and thus initiating the tradition of surveillance studies (Lyon, 1994, p. 6). To explain the importance of this topic, Rule used an example from popular culture:

> Why do we find the world of *1984* so harrowing? Certainly one reason is its vision of life totally robbed of personal privacy, but there is more to it than that. For the ugliest and most frightening thing about that world was its vision of total *control* of men's lives by a monolithic, authoritarian state. Indeed, the destruction of privacy was a means to this end, a tool for enforcing instant obedience to the dictates of the authorities (Rule, 1973, p. 16).

Rule, a founding figure in surveillance studies, takes his cue from George Orwell's famous novel, and so do numerous other scholars, which has led to a discourse of 'Orwellian' concerns and fears of 'Big Brother tactics'. Besides the Panopticon, this popular culture discourse is so dominating that David Lyon, another important figure in surveillance studies, has devoted a full chapter of his book *The Electronic Eye – The Rise of Surveillance Society* (1994,

pp. 57-80) to discuss Big Brother and the Panopticon as metaphor in the context of computerized surveillance and, not least, to explain that surveillance studies is actually more than Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949).

However, looking at the surveillance literature, popular culture seems to be an inescapable framework and inspiration for the academic and public debate. As Clive Norris and Gary Armstrong put it in *The Maximum Surveillance Society – the rise of CCTV* (1999):

> Throughout the twentieth century the idea of surveillance has become inscribed in mass consciousness, not primarily through the learned tomes of academics, but through its artistic treatment in popular culture. In the English-speaking world, at least, the most enduring, and often haunting images are to be found in films such as Hitchcock's *Rear Window* (1954), Francis Ford Coppola's *The Conversation* (1974) or Michael Powell's *Peeping Tom* (1960) (Norris & Armstrong, 1999, p. 3).

Many recent films can be added to this list: Tony Scott's *Enemy of the State* (1998), which has several references to *The Conversation*, is the story of the state's violent intrusion of an individual's privacy. David Fincher's *Panic Room* (2002) is a more subtle film which illustrates the ambiguity of surveillance practices, as measures of security are transformed into technologies that expose vulnerability. Whereas *Enemy of the State* and *Panic Room* focuses on technologically mediated power relations, Peter Jackson's blockbuster adaptation (2001-2003) of Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* (1954-1955) offers a vision of the terrifying gaze. Watching and being watched is a central theme to the story with the infamous antagonist, the lidless eye of Sauron (cf. Harl, 2007).

Today, surveillance studies is a growing field of research in which many academic disciplines meet, and this has led to a number of study subgenres. However, areas relating to the sociology of surveillance, such as policing, civil liberties and social sorting, have dominated the field. The strong ties between surveillance and popular culture have, surprisingly, so far been less explored.[1] Popular culture mirrors and illustrates social, cultural and societal issues with surveillance and is therefore a highly relevant field of study. In this article, I will contribute to this subfield by focusing on the gaze and ethical dilemmas of surveillance as portrayed in the films *Rear Window* (Hitchcock, 1954) and *The Conversation* (Coppola, 1974), which thematize surveillance in the forms of watching and eavesdropping, respectively.

The article is structured in the following way: First, the concept of the gaze and popular culture will be discussed in the context of psychology, cultural studies and existentialism. Second, two classic surveillance films, *Rear Window* and *The Conversation*, are analyzed. Third, I focus on how the practice of surveillance can be justified and what kind of responsibility that follows it.

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[1] Notable exceptions are (Albrechtslund & Dubbeld, 2005; Kammerer, 2004; Marx, 1996; Taylor, 2006).

THE GAZE AND POPULAR CULTURE

Surveillance is most often thought of as undesirable and even something to be feared and when new surveillance technologies and practices are introduced, creepy scenarios from popular culture are often brought into the debate. Orwellian concerns of a future authoritarian surveillance society is habitually raised in the public debate, and an example is automatic traffic cameras, which many governments have introduced since the late 1980s in order to enforce road-rules. The purpose of such traffic surveillance is to prevent violations such as speeding and driving through red lights. This seemingly harmless way of improving safety on the roads has met severe resistance politically, in the press and in public opinion; governments have been accused of 'Big Brother tactics' and in several countries the harsh opposition has either delayed or led to the abandonment of proposed legislation.

Certainly, it could be argued that the public debate is out of proportions when what seems to be a minor invasion of privacy is defended at the expense of road safety, which might prevent many people from being killed and injured every year.[2] The example illustrates the deep-rooted opposition to surveillance, which is reminiscent of an almost innate or existential conflict.[3] And, indeed, the existential and psychological roots come to mind as a possible way to understand this curious relation to surveillance. It is an interesting paradox that many people, on the one hand, feel very intimidated by emergent surveillance technologies and practices, and, on the other hand, are fascinated by the same apparatus in the context of popular culture.

The fascination relating to the gaze is taken to another level with the concept scopophilia (the pleasure of looking) from psychology literature. Scopophilia can be divided into voyeurism (the desire to look at other people) and exhibitionism (the desire to expose oneself to others), and this conceptual pair has been the object of study across a number of academic disciplines, including philosophy, psychology and cultural studies. Voyeurism and exhibitionism are most often directly associated with sexual pleasures, or even perversions, and Sigmund Freud identified the pair as one of two component drives in the human psyche (the other is sadism/masochism) in *Triebe und Triebschicksale* (1999b), which was first published in 1915. In this work, Freud expands on the concept of scopophilia, which he developed in *Drei Abhandlungen zu Sexualtheorie* (1999a). The essence of Freud's theory is that the gaze is a way to objectify other people both in order to gain control, as well as out of curiosity. Scopophilia plays an important part in the formation of children, as the curious gazing at other people's behavior contributes to the constitution of the ego (similar to the 'mirror stage' in Lacanian theory). This voyeuristic inclination is gradually replaced, but the pleasure in objectifying others often remains an ingredient in adult sexuality. According to this line of thinking, the failure to develop a mature

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[2] Studies show a positive effect of road safety cameras, as the number of fatalities and injuries are reduced (e.g. Christie, Lyons, Dunstan, & Jones, 2003; Pilkington & Kinra, 2005).

[3] I am, of course, not saying that people opposing automatic traffic cameras have psychological issues, or are in some sort of existential crisis. The purpose of this example is solely to illustrate an often seen deep-rooted opposition to surveillance technologies and practices, which can, at least in some cases, seem irrational compared to the benefits.

sexuality could lead to an obsessive scopophilia (voyeurism and exhibitionism) or its opposite, scopophobia (the fear of being seen). However, scopophilia and scopophobia can also be associated with non-sexual contexts as seen in especially popular culture. I will return to this near the end of this section.

Another approach to the gaze is the philosophical tradition of existentialism. The existentialist movement in the twentieth century is most famously associated with Jean-Paul Sartre, and although existentialism (and Sartre) today seems to be less influential compared to other intellectual movements, it has nonetheless been an inspiration for a number of related theories and practices, including psychotherapy, and as a theme in popular culture. In his major work, *L'Être et le néant* (1943), Sartre famously discusses the constitution of subjectivity, and one of the examples he uses is a voyeur peeping through a keyhole. Watching other people while hiding behind a door, Sartre argues, I am absorbed by the situation before my eyes, and this preoccupation, not being aware of myself, is a pre-reflective state of mind. However, when I hear steps behind me in the corridor and realize that someone else is near, I become aware of myself as an object for the other person's gaze and I enter into a reflective mode of subjectivity. Through the other's subjectivity I become aware of my own bodily existence in the world, and the gaze is thus an integral part of the existential constitution.

Most of all, however, surveillance have been a theme within popular culture and art. Writers, film directors, computer game designers and artists have worked with the concept of surveillance for many years. The most prominent example of surveillance in popular culture is the infamous Big Brother of Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), which has been adapted into films, theatre plays etc., just as the central theme of totalitarian control carried out by extreme mass surveillance has been reproduced in numerous variations. The fear of and fascination with Big Brother is an example of the apparent surveillance paradox:

> Overnight civil libertarians are fond of flogging the old Orwell warhorse, "Big Brother is Watching You," while fuming on late-night talk radio –failing to note that they have been watching Big Brother watching us for decades on the funhouse mirror of the Hollywood cinema. Since its birth, but most explicitly since the 1950s, the cinema has played with surveillance, voyeurism, and the power of the gaze, often in cautionary tales that conjure up the specter of totalitarianism, and also through meta-references to the movie camera's own complicity with institutional voyeurism. (Hultkrans, 2006)

The cinematic gaze illustrates the paradox of surveillance, in that it allows us to be fascinated with our shame of watching and fear of being watched. Conversely, the cinema facilitates a space where we, the audience, can explore and to a certain extent live out our issues with and feelings about surveillance. Moreover, surveillance is not only a theme in films, but can also be said to structure the films' imagery and narration. Dietmar Kammerer (2004) has pointed to a trend in mainstream Hollywood cinema over the last decades to integrate the aesthetics of video surveillance as well as the imagery itself into films. Surveillance footage, often grainy images from a raised point of view, can be part of the imagery of the film and in that way

influence the way films are structured. As Thomas Levin (2002) put it: "[S]urveillance has become *the condition of the narration itself*" (p. 583). The post-9/11 TV series *24*, which is broadcast by Fox Network in the USA, illustrates both the thematic and structural role of surveillance. The fast-paced story and visual style of the series often depend on surveillance technologies, such as GPS tracking, knowledge obtained by computer hacking and imagery from satellites and CCTV are integrated in all episodes. A characteristic mode of storytelling in *24* has Chloe O'Brien (Mary Lynn Rajscub), the computer expert, at her desktop and Jack Bauer (Kiefer Sutherland), the series protagonist and *über*-agent, somewhere in the field working on a mission. In this set-up, Chloe facilitates Jack's actions by providing him with information obtained by surveillance.

In the context of film, Laura Mulvey has famously introduced psychology into feminist film theory when she published "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (Mulvey, 1988b). This very influential article, originally published 1975, introduces the concept of the 'male gaze' to describe the asymmetric power relation in e.g. classic Hollywood films in which the men almost always gaze upon woman thus exerting control. In this interpretation the male is the active voyeur while the female is the passive exhibitionist; men are 'bearer of the look' while the women are presented as 'image' or 'spectacle' (Mulvey, 1988b, p. 62). Mulvey's article gave rise to many reflections within feminist film theory, just as it has been the subject of much debate and criticism. Tania Modleski (1988) among others has criticized Mulvey's focus as disregarding a female gaze and narrative. Mulvey revisited the debate in her "Afterthoughts on 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1988a) where she elaborated her position. She argued that although classic Hollywood cinema does not offer a female gaze as such, the woman spectator can actively pursue the role of the 'male gaze' rather than identifying with a passive role as objectified female.

REAR WINDOW

Alfred Hitchcock (1899-1980) has been particularly occupied with surveillance in his work. In several of his films, watching, gazing and looking plays an important part in the plot and theme. For Hitchcock, the act of watching others for voyeuristic pleasure is simply a basic human trait. When asked by Truffaut if the main character in *Rear Window*, L.B. Jeffries (James Stewart), is a snoop, he replies:

> Sure, he's a snooper, but aren't we all? I'll bet you that nine out of ten people, if they see a woman across the courtyard undressing for bed, or even a man pottering around in his room, will stay and look. (Truffaut, Hitchcock, & Scott, 1984, p. 216)

In their discussion, Hitchcock and Truffaut expand the scopophilic perspective to include the audience, since the cinematic experience, sitting in the dark comfortably hidden and distanced to the events on the screen, can be interpreted as a form of voyeurism.

A major theme in *Rear Window* is scopophilia; Jeffries watches the neighbors while Lisa (Grace Kelly) tries to get the attention from Jeff (as she calls him), and we, the audience, watch

all this. The scopophilic theme is hinted as early as the opening credits, where Jeffries' window shades are raised in a way that suggests a theatre curtain, and furthermore, behind the curtains appear the neighbors' windows that resemble a number of separate films for Jeffries to watch. "What you see across the way is a group of little stories that […] mirror a small universe", as Hitchcock puts it (Truffaut et al., 1984, p. 216). As the film(s) unfold(s), Jeffries suspects his opposite neighbor, Lars Thorwald, of murder; Thorwald's wife, who, like Jeffries, is immobilized, since she is seriously ill and thus confined to her bed, has gone missing while her husband displays increasingly suspicious behavior.

Jeffries, who is a professional photographer, is disabled, because he broke his leg while daringly photographing a motor race too close for comfort. His immobility[4] leads to snooping, and when he stumbles on Thorwald's strange behavior – leaving and returning to the apartment several times during the night with his suitcase, and cleaning a large knife and a saw – he picks up his paparazzi camera lens and uses it as a telescope. Interestingly, Jeffries first picks up his binoculars, but hesitates when he contemplates the obvious voyeuristic intent, and *then* finds his camera lens, as if the professional tool can serve as an alibi for the watching, replacing the private (and inappropriate) curiosity with the cool distance of work interest. In a way, his immobility is an alibi for watching, since his physical disability deprives him the ability to act. Instead he gives instructions to Lisa and Stella (Thelma Ritter), his nurse, to act for him – they are his surrogate 'legs' (Mulvey, 1988b) – almost as a director of a film.

The relation and distance between the surveillant and the surveilled, as seen in *Rear Window*, has been interpreted as being to some extent panoptic (Pallasmaa, 1997), and Hitchcock's special architecture of the setting certainly comes to mind considering Foucault's description of Bentham's Panopticon:

> They are like so many cages, so many small theatres, in which each actor is alone, perfectly individualized and constantly visible. […] Each individual, in his place, is securely confined to a cell from where he can be seen from the front by the supervisor, but the side walls prevent him from coming into contact with his companions. He is seen, but be does not see; he is the object of information, never a subject in communication (Foucault, 1975, p. 234).[5]

Jeffries is watching his neighbors without being seen, and the courtyard thus resembles a panoptic space. However, the neighbors are not aware of his surveillance and therefore the courtyard is not a true Panopticon, since Jeffries' apartment, obviously, is not an inspection tower no more than the neighbors' apartments are cells. Yet, in the terrifying moment near the end when Thorwald becomes aware of Jeffries watching, their eyes meet in a crucial gaze that turns the panoptic structure of power; Jeffries changes from surveillant to surveilled, from being in

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[4] Mulvey interprets Jeffries' immobility as castration and impotence, and she points out the voyeuristic incentive derived from this is underlined by the phallic character of his camera lens (Mulvey, 1988b)
[5] I am quoting the English translation (Foucault, 1977, p. 217).

control to being vulnerable, from hunter to prey. Interestingly, Foucault's claim that: "[o]ur society is not one of spectacle but of surveillance […] We are neither in the amphitheatre, nor on the stage, but in the panoptic machine" (Foucault, 1975) is challenged by Hitchcock's staging, since both spectacle and surveillance seem to take place in *Rear Window*. Jeffries' apartment is the stage, while the opposite apartments are cinema that Jeffries watches thus encompassing the ambiguity of the voyeuristic gaze: "The film set lifts peeping to the third potential; 1) the movie camera watches 2) the photographer watching through his telephoto camera, and 3) the audience in turn watches the events through the illusion projected on the screen" (Pallasmaa, 1997).

The climax of the film comes when Thorwald has realized that Jeffries is on to him and Thorwald attempts to ward off the exposing of the crime. Thorwald enters the apartment, but Jeffries defends himself using his technology of voyeurism (the camera) as a technology of blinding by repeatedly letting the flashbulb go off. However, the defense merely delays the physical confrontation, which results in Jeffries falling from the window. He survives and Thorwald is caught by the police, but the final scene of the film reveals Jeffries in the same position as in the beginning of the film, only this time facing inward with his back toward the rear window and with two broken legs. As Jeffries is immobilized even further, he has presumably left his voyeurism behind.

THE CONVERSATION

Another film director who has been concerned with the theme of surveillance is Francis Ford Coppola. In *The Conversation*, Coppola also takes up the theme of a man coincidently becoming aware of a murder scheme, which then makes him spy on the people he suspects in an attempt to understand what is going on.

Like Jeffries, Harry Caul (Gene Hackman) is simply a voyeur (in this case using sound for surveillance) and therefore unable to intervene when the crime is carried out, but unlike *Rear Window*, Coppola's film is a dystopian study of an almost paranoid voyeur. Jeffries is immobilized by his physical handicap and he only becomes aware of the crime as it has been committed, but Harry does not have a similar alibi for his inability to act. He simply listens as a passive witness from the hotel room next door as the murder seems to be carried out, and his feeling of guilt relates to this lack of intervention. The feeling of guilt also relates to a previous assignment, where his surveillance work resulted in the death of an entire family. Harry claims to be indifferent to his clients and the people he tapes: "I don't care what they're talking about; all I want is a nice, fat recording" (Coppola, 1974), but in the course of the film his guilt transforms him from cynical surveillance machine[6] to a human being with feelings that he does not know how to act on. This increasingly alienated man guards his own privacy with a borderline obsessive enthusiasm and the irony is, of course, that his lonely life does not seem to have anything worth protecting: "I don't have anything personal. Nothing of value, except my keys" (Coppola, 1974).

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[6] Megan Ratner (2001) even finds Harry Caul reminiscent of the infamous intelligent computer, HAL 9000 of the spaceship Discovery in Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968).

The conversation in the opening scene, which is the pivotal point of Coppola's film, takes place in a crowded place (Union Square, San Francisco). However, despite the noisy outdoor space, Harry's surveillance team is able to record a considerable part of the words spoken. Nevertheless, the words are disconnected and lack an overall meaning. Harry's transformation is linked to his attempt to make sense of the conversation, and throughout the film he puts the words together and adds new bits of cleaned recording as if doing a jigsaw puzzle. The twist is that the meaning of the conversation is dependent on human interpretation, and after his carefully piecing together, Harry simply *mis*interprets. Several times during the film we see a young couple talk and then hear the sentence "he'd kill us if he got the chance," which Harry (and the audience) interprets as if someone wants to kill them, possibly people from the corporation where they both work and which assigned Harry the bugging job. When Harry realizes that this is not the case – on the contrary – we hear the sentence with the crucial inflection: "he'd kill *us* if he got the chance." Thus, the presumed victims are in fact the killers, and this suggests Harry's inability to act.

The scene in the hotel further demonstrates Harry's passivity as he, weak and confused, sits in the bathroom floor while using his homemade surveillance equipment to spy on the people in the room next door. It has been suggested that this scene also compares the act of eavesdropping and spying with the behavior of a child, trying to figure out how to be an adult (cf. Lacanian mirror stage): "Harry's final bugging of the couple's hotel room resembles a primal scene; he tries to shrink himself – huddling fetus-like under the bathroom sink, directly next to the toilet – just as a child would" (Ratner, 2001). This interpretation of Harry acting as a child seems to be consistent with the psychological interpretation introduced above, and it can be supported by the television scene. When Harry realizes his inability to act on his suspicion that a murder will take place in the room next door, he turns on the television very loud, as if these childish defense techniques will make everything go away. Suddenly, the professional sound bugger has become a human child trying to escape all traces of sound.

The concluding scene of *The Conversation* is a study of a man tormented by paranoid suspicions. Harry interprets his excessive self-consciousness as an invasion of privacy from some unknown enemy. He tears his room apart, obsessively searching for some hidden microphone or clue as to what ingenious surveillance method his 'enemy' is using. Finally, the last stronghold of Harry's personality, his Catholic faith, is torn down as he smashes the statue of the Holy Virgin, suspecting the figurine to hide the unknown bugging device. We, the audience, cannot know to what extent Harry is right about his suspicions, since all we know is his perception of things, however, it is indicated that Harry is dreaming or hallucinating from time to time, e.g. the hotel scene where the toilet overflows with blood. Yet, it can be concluded that Harry's looming madness relates to the implicit paradox of his, on the one hand, strong voyeuristic interests, at first professionally and gradually privately, and, on the other hand, his extreme scopophobia.

THE ETHICS OF THE GAZE

Rear Window and *The Conversation* are concerned with the ethics of watching and eavesdropping. Harry's surveillance is professional and is facilitated by advanced technology, whereas Jeffries' snooping is accidental and, at first, not technologically mediated. Nevertheless, the two films share a number of ethical issues and I will discuss two themes here. The first concerns the justification of surveillance. The ethical problem facing the watcher – in this case Jeffries – has to do with the ethical justification of the potential privacy invasion of the watching. Is suspicion of a crime sufficient reason for carrying out potentially violating surveillance? The second theme deals with the responsibility inherent in the practice of surveillance. When Harry eavesdrops for his clients, he learns about a threat to the lives of the people who are the target of his surveillance – at least he think he does. Does this information give him an ethical obligation to act?

The Ethical Justification of Watching

For Harry, the act of watching others is simply a job, at least at first, and he does not put much thought into the ethical implications. He deliberately distances himself from the ethical question by using his work as a pretext for focusing on the technicalities of surveillance. This is not the case with Jeffries. His watching stems from curiosity or boredom rather than work, which lead him to thoughts on the possible justification of surveillance, as can be seen from this key dialogue:

> Jeffries [thoughtfully]: […] I wonder if it is ethical to watch a man with binoculars and a long-focus lens. Do you, do you suppose it's ethical even if you prove that he didn't commit a crime?
> Lisa: I'm not much on rear-window ethics.
> Jeffries: Of course, they can do the same thing to me. Watch me like a bug under a glass if they want to (Hitchcock, 1954).

Jeffries' speculations about the ethical grounds of his actions reveal an ambiguity, since he seems to find spying justified if it results in the solving of a crime; his concerns are aimed at the case where a crime has not been committed and the watching only proves the subject of the spying to be innocent. This argument seems to be a case of ends justifying means and, further, a dilemma arises, because it is only possible to know if a crime has been committed or not, *after* the watching. It is a peculiar situation if the ethical soundness of a given action (in this case spying) cannot be determined before it is done, since it reduces the key ethical concept of responsibility to a matter of chance based on more or less well-founded suspicions. Furthermore, Jeffries suggests that ethical justification can be based on the symmetry of the gaze, since his neighbors can also watch him "like a bug under a glass." However, this transparency of mutual watching is not the case in the setting of *Rear Window*; Jeffries goes out of his way to hide himself from his neighbors.

Jeffries' vague speculations indicate a certain perplexity relating to the ethics of watching,

and this can be substantiated by situations hinting the embarrassment of spying. Stella's opening dialogue in *Rear Window* is a warning to Jeffries about spying on other people as she philosophizes on voyeurism:

> The New York State sentence for a Peeping Tom is six months in the work house…They got no windows in the work house. You know, in the old days, they used to put your eyes out with a red-hot poker. Any of those bikini bombshells you're always watchin' worth a red-hot poker? Oh dear, we've become a race of Peeping Toms. What people ought to do is get outside their own house and look in for a change. Yes, sir. How's that for a bit of home-spun philosophy? (Hitchcock, 1954)

Stella's strong condemnation of Jeffries' voyeurism is later echoed by Lisa, and when Stella also warns about voyeurism eventually leading to trouble, Jeffries says he welcomes a bit of trouble after six weeks of boring immobility. Thus, in the beginning of the film there are two opposing views on the ethics of watching, but these views transform during the evolving of the plot, and they finally meet in the speculation on 'rear-window ethics.' Stella's concern that "we've become a race of Peeping Toms" is reproduced several times during the film, and her suggestion to get outside and take a look into one's own house is partly realized by herself and Lisa, as they both go to the courtyard and Lisa even enters Thorwald's apartment; all the while they look to Jeffries for instructions. Jeffries himself only follows Stella's advice involuntarily as Thorwald literally throws him out of the window.

Compared to more recent surveillance films and TV series, *Rear Window* and *The Conversation* do not present us with context-dependent arguments for the justification of surveillance. From the 1990's and onwards, the idea of an overwhelming, allegedly all-trumping reason for surveillance has been an ingredient in especially thrillers. Films involving imminent disasters, e.g. terrorist attacks, often bypass the question of justification, as protagonists simply *must* act on such threats and 'save the world' (and perhaps ask questions later). A prime example of such plots is *24* where Jack Bauer often is confronted with situations that call for action rather than contemplation according to the logic of the series. The ethics of these actions is in the hands of the protagonist who is faced with a utilitarian calculus of saving the many at the cost of a few wrongs along the way.

Interestingly, the ethical considerations in *Rear Window* mirror an understanding of surveillance as a power relation controlled by the person watching. Surveillance is called "spying" and it is done by "peeping Toms" while the objects of surveillance are looked on as "bugs under a glass." This negative conception of surveillance stages the persons under surveillance as passive receivers of the controlling gaze. This is in line with the conventional understanding of surveillance as a hierarchical system of power. This common understanding is represented in familiar metaphors such as Big Brother and Panopticon, both of which illustrate a vertical, hierarchical power relation between the gaze of the watcher that controls the watched. This is especially clear in the scene when Jeffries and Thorwald's eyes meet and the power

relation changes in favor of Thorwald. As soon as the role of the watcher changes, Thorwald takes control of the situation, leaving Jeffries as a passive, immobilized receiver of the murderer's actions. We find a similar structure in *Enemy of the State* where the protagonist, Robert Clayton Dean (Will Smith), is on the receiving end of the state's powerful gaze. Rogue government agents frame the innocent Dean in a murder conspiracy, controlling him by using surveillance technologies to destroy his reputation. It is only when Dean masters these surveillance technologies – personified by his contact with Edward 'Brill' Lyle (Gene Hackman), retired government agent and surveillance expert – that he is able to take control of the situation. Thus, the hierarchical power structure is reproduced, as the key to control and power are situated in surveillance technologies.

Power relations is also implicit in the discussion about Mulvey's idea of the male gaze (1988a, 1988b). In her interpretation, the male gaze is active and controlling, whereas the female spectacle is passive and submissive. Modleski's (1988) critique involves an alternative power relation in which the female exhibitionism is interpreted as empowering. Thus, a female point of view is also at play in the cinematic narrative and we see this when Lisa also stares out the window, interpreting events in a way that challenges Jeffries view on things, e.g. the conversation about "Miss Torso" (Modleski, 1988, pp. 80-81). This dualist point of view is sometimes dominated by the female spectator, since Jeffries on some occasions must identify with Lisa's point of view, e.g. when she is in Thorwald's apartment (Modleski, 1988, pp. 82-83). This interpretation of power relations in *Rear Window* challenges the hierarchical understanding and offers an opportunity to rethink the concept of surveillance, as I have also discussed elsewhere (Albrechtslund, 2008).

The Responsibility of Knowledge
Besides the foundational questions of the possible justification of watching, the two films in question are concerned with the responsibility of knowledge. This ethical aspect of surveillance has to do with the responsibility of the surveillant when knowledge has been obtained through surveillance: Does the surveillant have an ethical duty to act on the information (secretly) gathered through watching and eavesdropping?

For Jeffries, this question is answered by his actions. From the beginning of the film, he is determined to intervene, in part, to prevent the crime and, in part, to obtain more information about the situation. Jeffries' difficulty is only his physical inability to act, which he tries to compensate for during the film. The situation is different in *The Conversation*, where Harry Caul throughout the film is tormented by the ethical implications of his surveillance. The problem concerning responsibility is already introduced with the catchphrase on the poster: "Harry Caul is an invader of privacy. The best in the business. He can record any conversation between two people anywhere. So far, three people are dead because of him" (Coppola, 1974). And the dilemma is, of course, that Harry does not initially take on the ethical responsibility of his work, or as he puts it when he explains to his colleagues about the fatal bugging job that resulted in the killing of three people: "It had nothin' to do with me, I mean, I just turned in the tapes…What they do with the tapes is their own business" (Coppola, 1974). In this scene, Harry and his

colleagues discuss their profession, and we are convinced that Harry is somewhat of a legend in his field. His colleagues encourage him to tell anecdotes of his work and share some of his professional secrets. Although flattered, Harry is reluctant to talk about his merits in surveillance; he claims not to be responsible for the content of his tapes, but it is evident to the audience that he is racked with feelings of guilt.

Another scene that underlines Harry's feeling of guilt is when he goes to confession. He confesses to the priest that his surveillance work will be used to harm a young couple:

> Bless me Father for I have sinned. Three months since my last confession. I – these are my sins. […] I've been involved in some work that I think, I think will be used to hurt these two young people. It's happened to me before. People were hurt because of my work and I'm afraid it could happen again and I'm – I was in no way responsible. I'm not responsible. For these and all my sins of my past life, I am heartily sorry (Coppola, 1974).

Still, Harry does not take on personal responsibility for his professional work, which seems to be a paradox: how is it possible to feel guilt and at the same time disclaim responsibility? The basis of ethical action is, of course, that the person in question is responsible, that is, he or she has the power to influence a situation. Conversely, if the person in question does *not* have the power to influence a situation, then that person cannot be ascribed the burden of ethical responsibility. The same apply to the feeling of guilt, so Harry's ambiguity can be interpreted as an irrational conflict within himself, which eventually leads him to madness.

We learn something interesting about Harry in the dream scene. This key part of *The Conversation* contributes essentially to the understanding of his character; in that he seems to do all of his never realized desires and wishes. In the dream, he follows the woman of the young couple in order to warn her. All the while he tries to warn her, he also spills his heart out, telling her about his childhood, his fears and inner feelings that have been bottled up inside him and it all comes out in one confused monologue. It appears that Harry's troubled mind can be traced back to a difficult childhood, but of special interest in this context is Harry's tying together of responsibility and privacy. While letting go of his preciously guarded privacy in this second 'confession', this time being much more private and revealing compared to his confession to the priest in waking state, he finds it in himself to tell the woman that she is in danger and he thus takes on the ethical responsibility of his knowledge.

Rear Window mirrored a power relation where the watcher controlled the watched, but another understanding of surveillance is at play in *The Conversation*. Here, the practice of surveillance – in this case listening – does not entail control of the situation. Harry carries out the surveillance, but he is certainly not in control, as his bugging only leads to confusion and passivity on his side. However, the persons under surveillance are not in control either. Their actions are unrelated to the surveillance and though the plot involving murderers and victims probably are affected by the material produced by the bugging, it is not Harry who is directing the action. Here, the conventional understanding of surveillance as hierarchies of power is

challenged. In the Orwellian sense, surveillance is part of the destruction of the subjectivity under surveillance and the effort to render the lifeworld meaningless. We see the opposite in Coppola's film, as Harry's bugging display the surveillant's own shamefulness and inability to take control of the situation. Harry's world does not become more meaningful through surveillance, instead it eventually destroys him. For Harry there is no resurrection like we see in *Enemy of the State* where Dean turns the tide by taking control of the surveillance technologies.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Although L.B. Jeffries and Harry Caul are fictitious characters, their troubles with the gaze and ethical responsibility touch us in several ways. Popular culture obviously influences our understanding of the world in the sense that ideas and conceptions originate in and are formed through cultural artifacts such as books and films, and this is certainly also true when it comes to the discourse surrounding surveillance, where especially the fictitious character Big Brother has dominated both public and academic debate. Both *Rear Window* and *The Conversation* offers the opportunity to broaden our perspectives in today's discussion of surveillance. Popular culture is also a rich source for the cultural 'sediments' of our more or less tacit understandings of surveillance, and we need further studies to bring these to light. Moreover, as metaphors and illustrations from popular culture contribute to the way we think, further studies are likely to disclose new 'Big Brothers' or other powerful ways to describe and better understand our everyday surveillance practices and technologies.

The films I have studied illustrate two central dilemmas concerning the ethics of surveillance, namely the questions of justification and responsibility. Neither of the protagonists, Jeffries and Harry, seems to demonstrate an ethically sound approach to 'rear-window ethics' or the responsibility burden of (secretly) obtained knowledge. Even though Jeffries does 'the right thing' according to his own voyeur morality whereas Harry succumbs to feelings of guilt, both films thematize the ambiguities inherited in ethical scenarios relating to surveillance. Hitchcock's lesson for us is sophisticated, because Thorwald actually *is* guilty and, thus, Jeffries' voyeurism is rewarded. However, Jeffries' issues with voyeurism are intact, and the concluding scene displays *status quo* with him even more immobilized (both legs broken) and Lisa by his side. The crime has been solved, but for Jeffries it does not conclude in a classic happy end. Coppola focuses less on the ethical grounds for surveillance and instead lets us follow the destruction of the guilt-ridden Harry. In this way, Jeffries' and Harry's futures both look problematic, as both men continue to embody the ethical dilemma of surveillance at the films' conclusion.

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