

Models of Surveillance Rhetoric in Movie Title Sequences

Feldman, Tim
FMS 112
13 December 2007
P. Krapp

Introduction

Images of surveillance have been used to both arrest and infuriate spectators in cinema. Using these images in the title sequences of films introduces the themes related to surveillance and the arena in which characters will struggle; specifically the use of surveillance and the habits of voyeurism in society, whether used by private or state-run agencies. The title sequences from Francis Ford Coppola's *The Conversation* (1974), Tony Scott's *Enemy of the State* (1998), and Steven Spielberg's *Minority Report* (2002) all introduce themes of surveillance, punishment, and the idea of an all-knowing patriarchal power structure within each respective society. All three title sequences draw upon the popular beliefs about surveillance, as well as the history of where those beliefs have come from. What follows is a discussion of how each of the title sequences incorporates the three themes in order to prepare the spectator for the film ahead. I will also draw conclusions about a more general "Surveillance Rhetoric" used in films, and especially film title sequences, today.

The Panopticon and early surveillance apparatuses

Modern concepts of surveillance and structures of power and discipline in society today come (at least in part) from the analysis given by Michel Foucault of the Panopticon. The Panopticon is an architectural design for a prison created by Jeremy Bentham in the late eighteenth century. Its structure is such that all of the prison cells are arranged in a circle around a central guard tower. While the guards have a view of every prisoner from this tower, it is designed so that prisoners cannot tell if anyone is in the guard tower or not. Thus, prisoners may assume that at any given moment they may be

watched by guards. This internalizes structures of power within the prison, providing the effects of constant surveillance without having to provide the effort or manpower necessary for such a venture. “... the major effect of the Panopticon’ is ‘to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power...the perfection of power should tend to render its actual exercise unnecessary’” (*The New Media Reader*, 737).

Other models of surveillance that support this patriarchal model of self-policing can be found in literature such as F. Scott Fitzgerald’s novel, *The Great Gatsby*, George Orwell’s novel, *1984*, and numerous other examples. Here, the concepts of the Panopticon are extended to entire societies in order to preserve the societal structure that focuses all of the power in the hands of an elite group or a single figure. In *The Great Gatsby*, the billboard for the eye doctor is a well known metaphor for the all-seeing eye, the unseen spectator, the judging and watchful eye of society. The concept of Big Brother in *1984* is a more direct extension of the Panopticon; every house in the novel serves two purposes. “In *1984*...video screens are instruments of both surveillance and propaganda” (*Imagining Surveillance*, 3). With this model of surveillance, when extended to an entire society, the issue of privacy is more pronounced.

Stereotypes about surveillance and its effects on society

These concepts have helped to shape our understanding of the ways in which methods of surveillance are used to monitor and police the actions of individuals in a modern, urban society. Structures of “Surveillance Rhetoric” develop around current modes of technology, and as technology advances, so too does the rhetoric. What

changes through time is not the theory behind self-policing and how it works on the populace, but rather the ways in which information is gathered and the ways in which various societal models of the Panopticon are constructed. As time progresses, the invasion of privacy becomes more manifest, as is evident in the three title sequences I will be discussing. Surveillance in *The Conversation* is limited to the devices one can install in and around the subject of interest, while in *Enemy of the State* surveillance devices have been installed all over the urban site (including satellites in space), and thus wherever one goes, Big Brother goes too. Finally, in *Minority Report*, the surveying figure has seemingly complete and unfettered access to space and time itself, an omnipotent force. It allows the powers-that-be to know one's actions before he even commits them, or knows he is going to commit them.

The Conversation

Simple and elegant, the title sequence for *The Conversation*, created by Wayne Fitzgerald, unfolds in a single long take shot with a telephoto lens from the top of a building adjacent to a central park square filled with people. Unsure of what to look at, the spectator's gaze shifts from person to person, searching for meaning among the chaos. The extreme low angle and use of the telephoto lens suggest the voyeuristic nature of the film. This is somewhat self-reflexive as the act of watching a film is an act of voyeurism itself. As the camera begins to zoom in, the film's titles are overlaid with glass plates and a mime stands out from the crowd as he performs his caricatures of other bystanders in the park. That the mime stands out from the rest of the crowd brings up one particular theme as it relates to surveillance; as the subjects of interest in a

surveillance society increase, the amount of manpower delegated to watching each subject decreases. To make the most of the available resources, it is necessary to employ specific strategies to aid in the identification of unseemly activities. Among these strategies is pattern recognition. Most people in a given crowd will act a certain way and begin to blend together. Anyone who does not do as everyone else does, thus breaking the pattern, will stick out and lend himself to further study by the surveyor. This is perfectly illustrated in this title sequence with the mime. The spectator naturally picks out the mime as the subject of interest because he acts counter to everyone else in the park. Continued viewing of the mime eventually leads the camera to focus on Gene Hackman's character, Harry Caul, as he sips coffee and walks through the crowd. When the mime loses interest in Harry, the camera stays with Harry and the mime drifts out of frame.

The font of this title sequence does not stand out as extraordinary in any particular way; it is thin, white, and simply overlaid on top of the action in the scene. It is situated in the bottom right-hand corner of the screen so as not to intrude on the action, as it does in some other films. Perhaps this adds another layer of depth to the sequence, as the titles are visible, but almost invisible at the same time. They do not call attention to themselves in any way; they do not move and they do not obstruct. They are simply there. So it is with video cameras, miniature microphones, and other surveillance technology. It never calls attention to itself, but it is always present.

Also important to the title sequence is the use of sound editing by Walter Murch. Diegetic noises from the crowd and music from the square fill the scene, with the occasional scrambled noise of a conversation, or of *The Conversation*, if you will. As the

events unfold in real time, without cuts to edit either space or time, the use of diegetic sound helps complete the sense of reality, almost as if the film were an example of *cinéma vérité*. The addition of scrambled noises, like the mime, completely disrupts the normalcy of what is going on in the square. Underneath the veil of the ordinary lies a mystery. This is what the entire narrative is about. Like Harry Caul, the spectator's goal becomes the decoding of these noises, even before the spectator meets Harry officially through the narrative. The spectator is placed in the role of the voyeur, of the surveyor, rather than the surveyed. By the end of the movie this gets turned on its ear, as the protagonist becomes the victim of surveillance rather than the victimizer. The extreme shift in position of both the spectator and the protagonist from viewer to viewed represents the most unsettling aspect of the film.

Enemy of the State

Unlike the radical shift in *The Conversation* from viewer to viewed, the protagonist in *Enemy of the State* shifts in the opposite direction. Beginning as an unassuming victim in a surveillance society, the character learns to use the technology against his pursuers. In order to set the stage for this transformation, the title sequence for *Enemy of the State*, made by yU+Co, follows a strategy that opposes that of *The Conversation*. The quick montage that combines both stock footage taken from closed-circuit televisions and footage shot for the film creates an image of contemporary society infected with cameras in which it is impossible to escape the ever-watchful eye of the law. The effect on the viewer is a feeling of inescapability, of claustrophobia. Following the logic of the title sequence, there is nowhere one can go to escape the camera. In

addition to this, there are panoptic images intertwined in the montage of security guards watching multiple screens and digital satellites that track subjects with green crosshairs.

Complementing the frantic nature of the quick cuts and low-quality surveillance images, the music constantly attacks the spectator with a strong use of percussion instruments and quick pacing. Beeps and other digital computer sounds reinforce the idea of mechanized surveillance, signaling that the industry has moved into the digital age. Diegetic sounds can also be heard, from gunshots to sirens, helicopters to speeding cars. The unrelenting pace of the sound work complements the quick succession of images of surveillance and capture that quickly subjugate the spectator, letting him know that everyone is under surveillance and will be punished for any misbehavior.

The titles in this sequence mimic the font found in *The Conversation*, but with certain letters replaced by stylized versions that also function as symbols. For example, all of the 'E' letters are replaced by the Greek letter, sigma. This kind of symbology embedded in the lettering that otherwise conforms to its own rules restates themes found in *The Conversation* relative to the mime sticking out from the crowd. Noticeably different from the titles found in the former film are the obtrusive placing of the letters over all of the action, and the way in which they show up onscreen. Almost like fugitives, they flit onscreen, stopping for a moment before vanishing much the same way in which they entered. All of these elements combine to make a sequence that is at once easily understandable as a film about surveillance while at the same time making the viewer feel confused and almost assaulted by the constant presence of surveillance in the urban setting today.

Minority Report

Taking the concept of surveillance as a penetration of privacy and a loss of free will one step further, *Minority Report* imagines a world so dominated by surveillance that even one's future is subject to analysis and retribution. In this imagined society, especially talented humans, collectively called the "Pre-Cogs," foresee future crimes before they happen, and thus prevent harmful social deviance. The way that this dystopian narrative translates into the title sequence by Imaginary Forces does not become immediately clear. The sequence contains a set of images blurred and out of chronological order. Some images repeat or reverse, some are clearer than others, some contain clear sound and some contain muffled sound. Together, the sequence plays out like an experimental film that explores a nightmare about a murder. Indeed, at the end of the sequence there is a cut to a wide open blue eye: the eye of one of the Pre-Cogs, the watchers. They live in a constant nightmare of images, adding to the dystopic nature of the story. This is explicitly referenced in the title sequence. Though the viewer might not recognize it right away, this sequence is the way in which the film communicates the experience of the Pre-Cogs, the way in which future detective agents can preemptively stop crime. The film aligns the act of surveillance with the effects of a nightmare. While it is part of the literal world of the film, it is abstract in its representation of the concepts and themes that will pervade the film. It is so non-descriptive of the setting, characters, and exposition, that it cannot be considered the true beginning of the narrative, but rather part of the introductory title sequence.

The film does not contain much in the way of actual titles. After the stylized branding of the studios that funded and produced the movie, just two title cards are

displayed; one contains the same information as the studio branding that passes just before the first title card, and the other contains the title of the film. Shining through the letters are images of water, clues to the constant submergence of both the Pre-Cogs in their amniotic bath, and the submergence of the society in constant surveillance.

Sound in the sequence is appropriately intense and mysterious. The orchestral soundtrack peaks when the murder weapon flashes onscreen, and muffled diegetic sounds can be heard through the din of the music and the aural manifestations of the screen wipes and fades. The one line of intelligible dialogue through the entire sequence is that of the murderer: “you know how blind I am without my glasses.” This line of dialogue is key to the film. It exposes a central theme: that of perception, viewership, and lenses through which we see truth. The crime that he is committing is one of passion, and as such, he cannot see clearly the consequences of his action. Not only that, but the Pre-Cogs cannot see the entire situation surrounding a given murder clearly, nor can the protagonist, John Anderton, see the effects of the Pre-Cogs and crime preemption/surveillance on society at the beginning of the film.

Surveillance Rhetoric in contemporary film title sequences

In a world dominated by visual stimuli, entrenched in the pleasures of looking, images of surveillance are used to illustrate the negative effects of such a society. But while narratives that employ the use of surveillance images create anxiety in the spectator and warn against their use, at the same time they reinforce the dominant patriarchal power structures of society. As Kammerer explains in his article, rather than attacking the system itself, the hero of *Minority Report*, John Anderton, inevitably learns to use the

same technology against his pursuers in order to outsmart them. The implicit logic behind this is that “technology doesn’t fail. It is humans that fail” (Kammerer, 469). The shift in the narrative is in who bears the gaze, for the bearer retains the power. Laura Mulvey goes into depth about the concepts of the cinematic gaze, but fundamentally the male figure is the bearer of the gaze, and thus, the male retains the power. Ultimately, surveillance narratives are parables that reinforce the dominant patriarchal power structures within society by situating the ownership of the gaze within the male figure, and by giving that figure all of the power within his respective society.

In the title sequences discussed above, these ideas are communicated through the emulation of the formal qualities associated with surveillance footage. While each adapts these qualities to the genre of the film, these elements can be extracted to show a general “Surveillance Rhetoric” that is used to communicate themes and concepts about surveillance and privacy and the modern world as illustrated below:

1. **The camera is removed from the action.** It can be located either as close as on an adjacent rooftop as with *The Conversation*, or as far as in the mind of the spectator as with *Minority Report*. The concept of watching without being watched is paramount to the idea of surveillance for the preservation of the surveyor’s privacy and power.
2. **The use of technology, real or imagined, implicit or explicit, helps the spectator to achieve this level of voyeurism.** In *Enemy of the State* all types of surveillance methods are used in the title sequence to illustrate this, and in *Minority Report* an imagined telepathic ability synchronized with futuristic computer interfaces makes this possible.

3. **The situating of power with the bearer of the gaze reinforces power structures present in society.** The viewer navigates technology and possesses more knowledge than his subject, and his subject's failure to recognize or escape this condition weakens him.

These three tenets of surveillance are all introduced in the title sequences of each of the movies described above. Together they create the setting for the narrative that follows, calling on the spectator's previous knowledge of surveillance rhetoric in society and applying it to the setting of the film.

Conclusion

From the Panopticon and the use of surveillance behind the design, to *Minority Report*, concepts of surveillance in society have advanced through the use of technology. Since before Jeremy Bentham's thought experiment, power structures in society have favored the bearers of the gaze. Films often explore these ideas, but while they search for answers, they never find alternatives to the model; as Kammerer notes, it is not the technology that is flawed, but the humans. Thus, surveillance narratives focus on the hero's learning how to use the technology to gain the upper hand rather than disrupt the structure. The title sequences for Francis Ford Coppola's *The Conversation*, Tony Scott's *Enemy of the State*, and Steven Spielberg's *Minority Report* all introduce these ideas and set the viewer up for the narrative that is to come. From these sequences I have identified three basic tenets of a general "Surveillance Rhetoric" that all three films follow: the camera is removed from the action onscreen, the use of technology helps achieve this goal, and the situating of power with the bearer of the gaze that retains

structures of power within a patriarchal society. Together these create the look and communicate the ideas behind surveillance that the spectator is familiar with. They prepare the spectator to challenge the use of surveillance technology in society, but ultimately ordain its use and support power and surveillance structures that exist in the urban setting.

References

- The Conversation. Dir. Francis Ford Coppola. Starring Gene Hackman. DVD. Paramount Pictures, 1966.
- Enemy of the State. Dir. Tony Scott. Starring Will Smith, Gene Hackman. DVD. Touchstone Pictures, 1998.
- Minority Report. Dir. Steven Spielberg. Starring Tom Cruise, Max von Sydow, Colin Farrel, DVD. Twentieth Century Fox, 2002.
- Agre, Philip E. Imagining Surveillance: Notes on 1984 and Enemy of the State. 13 Dec. 2007. <<http://www.pco.org.hk/textonly/english/infocentre/files/agre-paper.doc>>
- Agre, Philip E. "Surveillance and Capture: Two Models of Privacy." The New Media Reader. Ed. Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Nick Montfort. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2003. 737-757.
- Kammerer, Dietmar. "Video Surveillance in Hollywood Movies." Surveillance & Society. 2(2/3) (2004). 464-473. <<http://www.surveillance-and-society.org/cctv.htm>>
- Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" ANTPAC UCI library, 1988.