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Exploring Modes of Surveillance in Films

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Abstract

This article frames a theoretical discussion of cinematic gestures in their opposing forms, illusionism and reflexivity, exploring different modes connecting surveillance and film. One observes cinema as an illusionistic surveilling machine that records reality. In this respect, surveillance can be an "element of movie plots." Then, given the simultaneously entrapped and swaying nature of cinematic gestures, the investigation of film reflexivity associated with surveillance reveals a dual character. The dominant one (auto-mediacy), although guided by a subversive thrust, ultimately reinforces the dynamics of the internal panopticon, the regulation, and the marketization of the self. Conversely, another form of emancipative self-reflexivity (autoscopia) operates a set of enunciations exalting the filmmaking process' materiality. The film *Grizzly Man* is an example of autoscopia generating a form of technology-mediated subversive self-examination.

Keywords: surveillance cinema; gesture; metacinema; biopolitics; auto-mediacy; autoscopia; Grizzly Man

Surveillance, Media Platforms and the Presentation of Self

The historical development of technological infrastructures has steadily pervaded our public and private life to the point of crucially influencing our decisions, political orientations, and social behavior. The very perception of reality is mediated by a complex network of screens and devices that filter the observers' gaze. This aspect relates to the process of subsumption operated by the biopolitical power (Foucault, 1990), which extends political control over crucial life moments through the technologies and techniques that govern human, social and biological processes (Foucault, 2008). The biopolitical power inscribes itself in a historicized path of maturation, crucially taking advantage of the recent media technology evolution. Since the diffusion of cinema and television onwards, gathering different mediatic specificities (written texts, photography, films, videogames), smartphones and portable laptops have determined, as integrated technologies, a series of crucial transformations.

New media technology has set a precise trajectory that departs from a merely passive mediatic usage to a more pervasive form of real or imagined surveillance that actively demands individual and collective existences to be more proactive in reviewing their online status and self-presentation practices (Duffy and Chan, 2019). Here, the central assumption is that language encounters the

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audience through different media in an exploitative way. But also that social networks promote a specific narcissistic culture where self-aestheticization processes lie at the core of subjective identities that often fall prey to societal pressures (Beresheim, 2020).

In a time preceding the emergence of such a refined network of media technology, Goffman (1956) commented how "a certain bureaucratization of the spirit is expected so that we can be relied upon to give a perfectly homogeneous performance at every appointed time" (36). These two aspects are intimately connected as narcissistic self-aestheticization is entwined with a bureaucratization of the spirit, which conforms and bridles work performances within specific boundaries.

In that, the scenario opened up by Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and other digital platforms, highlights how specific the surveilling properties of media, as gathered within integrated technological devices, have radically transformed the disciplinary power of contemporary societies (Foucault, 1991) into a self-surveilling domain or a realm of self-referential conformism. In this respect, Dünne & Moser (2008) have coined the term *auto-mediacy* as a concept used to describe the processes of subjectification produced by the increasing technologization of media. Subjects are "automediated" upon YouTube and social networks, delivering repetitive schemes which translate into similar pictures, poses, videos, etc. This scenario would depict a societal constellation replete with consumerist self-referentiality.

Along with the widespread diffusion of technological devices, these developments have also sealed a paradigmatic change in the processes through which the capitalist mode of production reaps its benefits by exploiting the labor force. In the particular context of the digital age, these methods of value-extraction have been recognized under the predominance of immaterial labor (Lazzarato, 1996) to exploit more effectively the ever-changing subjective-political composition of the working class and the prevalent informational content of new types of commodities. Professional roles increasingly involve cybernetics and computer control. Simultaneously, the management and regulation of the workforce are operated through technological control to shape cultural and consumer norms, along with new political subjectivities (Ibid.: 133). Twenty-first-century advanced capitalism has harnessed these control mechanisms by extracting and using data, an increasingly central source of information apt to ignite predictive policing, targeted surveillance, and tactical and strategic governance (Linder, 2019). When the ownership of knowledge becomes a privileged source of profit, the efforts are directed towards the flexibilization and optimization of productive cycles, the transformation of low-margin goods into highly remunerative services, and the exaltation of the peculiar property of data to generate other data. Shoshana Zuboff (2019) analyzed in-depth how the commerce of behavioral futures is intimately connected with predicting and modifying our actions at any given moment, nudging,

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tuning and herding us into computer-mediated activity for mining purposes to generate profit in the context of what she names surveillance capitalism: a new pervasive economic logic. Elsewhere, similar mechanisms have been framed within the term platform capitalism. Again, the substance revolves around exploiting digital infrastructures provided by giant transnational corporations such as Facebook, Google, and Amazon, connecting users, consumers, advertisers, producers, and suppliers (Srnicek, 2017). Financial capital exploits the technological platforms in a highly deregulated neoliberal economic regime. It thrives on the privileged path underlaid by such a refined and tentacular power-knowledge dispositif.

Like the watchtower, offering an all-encompassing view of every individual cell, digital platforms reproduce a surveilling landscape in which nobody can honestly tell when one is watched or not (Trottier 2015). In *Postscript on Control Societies*, even Deleuze (1990) stated that these "societies function with a third generation of machines, with information technology and computers" (180). The minimum common denominator here is to promote a methodological individualism reproduced through the discursive and material specificities of the technological infrastructures that feed into platform capitalism's consumerist and productive requirements (Srnicek, 2017).

In a nutshell, the spirit of late capitalism and the specific features of social media combine an efficient call for a voluntary leak of everyday personal information and the promotion or

marketization of the self. This mechanism recalls the disciplinary, panoptical collection and storage of data that provides the means to supervise individuals or groups and intercept, mold, and reorient consumers' desires (Jackson et al., 2006).

To articulate such a new contemporary paradigm of surveillance, theorists have coined neologisms such as the "Catopticon" (Ganascia, 2009) and "Sousveillance" (Mann et al., 2003). These notions describe the new technology architecture that compels subjects to embody and potentially multiply the surveilling dispositifs while communicating digitally with others. Thus, the very constitution of the many subjective panopticons and artificial intelligence techniques (*inforgs*) removes the necessary presence of surveyors from the watchtower (Ganascia, 2010). Technologies shape an intricate network whose degrees of automation and interconnectedness make them utterly emancipated from human control. Nevertheless, this new technological architecture, whose potential for counter-surveillance is high, as witnessed by the influence of "dark sousveillance" (Browne, 2015) in triggering the upheavals *of Black Lives Matter* or by practices of resistance in recording police brutality (Borradaile and Reeves, 2020), still engender reflections upon the constitution of an even more claustrophobic self-surveilling society (Newell, 2020). These aspects are the flipside of methodological individualism. They produce delusions of grandeur in the masses. It suffices to think about the hubris of negationist/no-vax prevalent

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arguments. Demonstrators aggress medical experts, politicians, and journalists, denouncing how they have betrayed their trust. According to the accusers, these hoaxers should tell the truth about the hidden governmental second ends curtailing our freedom, inoculating poisonous vaccines, and controlling our everyday life with the excuse of mere flu circulation. But in a way, their apparent contesting, counter-cultural behaviors feed entirely into the drive to self-marketize individual skills, in this case, the supposed ability to spotlight obscure power dynamics by accessing classified information commonly and deliberately hidden from us. However, their radical protests foment the systemic injunction to produce and disclose private information on social networks and, more decisively, distract them from addressing more pressing problems: the lack of economic security, social marginalization, environmental concerns etc. Thus, if it can be agreed that the surveilling specificity of new media technology is not the sole responsible for the undermining of privacy, the repression of political dissent, and the atomizing direction programmed by the biopolitical power, it is also true that this represents one of the last steps of the historical evolution of the disciplinary society (Foucault, 1991). The realm of cinema has not escaped this process.

Cinema as a *Locus* for the Biopolitical Expropriation of Gestures

First, I argue that media like photography and especially cinema can be deemed "information collectors," selective recorders, or reality surveillants. Besides being merely a thematic *topos*,

cinema's relationship with surveillance is more significant than it appears at first glance. Lumière's *La Sortie des usines Lumière* (1895), the first product of film history, can be interpreted as the materialization of the boss's glance observing his workers leaving the factory (Levin, 2002). Or, for instance, pre-cinema visual experimentations of Marey and Muybridge account for the passage through which photography married motion and oriented the cinematic medium's techniques towards scrutinizing life and the human body's minutest components.

Following these techniques, Agamben (2000) constructs a history of the cinematic gesture as a particular modality of action entangled with the filmic image. He punctually argued that "the element of cinema is gesture and not image," where "the gesture is the exhibition of mediality or the process of making a means visible as such" (57). In terms of action, a gesture is neither correlated to *praxis* nor *poiēsis*, but to *gerere* meaning "to bear," "to carry," but also, "to show," "to reveal," "to perform the function" (Glare 2012, 762). Elsewhere, I discussed how gestures fundamentally manifest self-reflexive and metacinematic elements (Ciccognani, 2020). Agamben departs his investigation of gestures from the medical imaging techniques of Marey, passing through the photographs of Muybridge, evident examples of reflexive and experimental proto-cinema, and the studies of neuropsychiatric disorders conducted by Gilles de la Tourette. The critical point is that these photographic and proto-cinematic practices so intimately binding images

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and human bodies, concomitantly with the proliferation of Tourette's neurological cases, can be read as signs of ongoing gestural entrapment within the surveilling and controlling forces of the biopolitical dispositif. These expressive outbreaks would seal a biopolitical catastrophe of gestures expropriated by the anthropological machine of which cinema is only one of the manifestations (Agamben, 2000).

About this notion, Harbord (2016) commented that "if gesture is the site of a potential within cinema to operate historically, it is also the locus of a biopolitical investiture in the human body that takes place towards the end of the nineteenth century" (14). Thus, although the notion of cinematic gesture appears irremediably enclosed within the straightjacket of biopolitical power and the attendant economic, linguistic and discursive forms typical of its capitalist, industrial character, this property also contains an emancipative potentiality. As Levitt (2008) punctually argues, the gesture is expropriated by biopower, but it also becomes the focus of an aesthetic attempt to reclaim itself. So, cinematic gestures can perform a somewhat disorganized, counter-cultural dynamism standing against their incorporation into the surveilling processes operated by the biopolitical power.

But, eventually, it is a struggle wherein cinematic gestures mostly vanish within the incorporating functions established by the dominant profit-led forces of the film industry. In this regard, it is not too inventive to assert that the expropriating aspect of the biopolitical power utilizes

the cinematic apparatus's surveilling character as a corrective instrument apt to neutralize the intrinsic antagonisms and contradictions of contemporary reality. It proposes the image of an edulcorated, consumerist society that surveils and reproduces its representational regimes in a socially acceptable form. Filmic products of classical Hollywood cinema such as *Gone with the Wind* (Fleming, 1939), *Casablanca* (Curtiz, 1942), or *It's a Wonderful Life* (Capra, 1946) confer a tangible form to the last theoretical speculation. These movies' overall tendency is to hide social contradictions, reassure the audience with easily digestible stories, and deter the emergence of radically contentious subjectivities.

I argue that cinema becomes an "information collector" when attempting to obliterate social conflicts and material and political struggles. In doing so, it inevitably occults gestures. Namely, the mentioned films dissolve their emancipative potentiality within an edulcorated, optimistic scenario attuned to a comforting world-making symbolic construction (Yacavone, 2014).

Hence, society's surveillance and the control of its bodies establish a developing path that exploits the invention of photography, cinema, television, and information technology. In this process, these refined information technology devices linguistically and technically "remediate" (Bolter and Grusin, 2000) their progenitors' surveilling characters.

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Intersecting Surveillance and the Cinematic Medium

At this point, it is urgent to clarify an essential distinction - namely, the existence of two main possible configurations that connect surveillance to cinematic gestures. One posits the surveilling gaze as a constitutive feature of the cinematic apparatus. As said, it recalls cinema as an "information collector," a surveilling machine that records a reality. The other is represented by the theme of surveillance as an "element of movie plots" that expounds a certain degree of cinematic reflexivity. The two forms produce tension between the necessity for the medium to register reality and the drive to reflect upon the functioning of surveilling devices, as presented within the story narrated in a movie. The constitutive surveilling property expresses the urgency to map and reproduce reality according to specific symbolic, moral, and sociopolitical values.

In contrast, the reflexive mode opens up an emancipative trajectory for the cinematic gesture to evade the illusionistic norms dictated by the film industry. Films belonging to this type would be *Man with a Movie Camera* (Vertov, 1929), *The Conversation* (Coppola, 1974), or *Red Road* (Arnold, 2006), where the inherent surveilling character of the cinematic apparatus is explicitly shown and generates a profound reflection upon the omnipresence of surveilling devices in our society.

Here the dichotomy stands precisely between "illusionistic" and "self-reflexive" in the sense that we would either have a suturing or reflexive gesture. The concept of "suture" describes one

of the discursive properties that construct a natural or imaginary unity (Neumeyer, 2013: 397). In a nutshell, the "suturing apparatus" is the set of devices that unites all the statements, utterances, images, and sounds in an intricate and uniform linguistic collage that confers the impression of reality and a credible imaginary reading of the fictional content. On the contrary, the "reflexive apparatus" refers to all the sets of different devices operating and transmitting a symbolic meta-reading of the cinematic medium (Takeda, 1987: 89-90).

There is a peculiar linkage between the emergence of the theme of surveillance and cinematic reflexivity. "By implementing this new form of film reflexivity, surveillance films present a world turned profilmic, which human beings need to analyze as a film in order to find new bearings" (Lefait, 2012: 225). In that, the reflexive status coincides with the impersonal enunciation described by Christian Metz (2016). This notion designs a mode of reading that focuses on a cinematic text eluding subjective identifications. So, cinematic reflexivity instead suggests an identification with the surveilling material objectivity of the medium and, therefore, tends to eschew any precise subjectivity.

Consequently, I argue that when the reflexive gesture appears in a cinematic form, in the guise of such an erratic or swaying nature that flees exact interpretation, it also works against the apparatus which generates specific identities. Or in other words, when films expose their self-

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surveilling, metacinematic character or diegetic elements that explicitly evoke the surveilling machinery of production, they also induce a particular viewing mode. In this sense, within the boundaries established by a self-reflexive realm, gestures re-emerge, wax and wane.

Indeed, this wake-up call does not necessarily signal an incontrovertible potential of self-reflexive films to subvert this homologizing apparatus. On the contrary, their contemporary proliferation restates (1) that the prevailing theme of surveillance is the new essence of cinema. (2) It reflects that reality is increasingly observed and experienced in a cinematic manner, as the audiovisual domain overwhelms our cognitive and relational approaches (Lefait, 2012). (3) It can also be asserted that cinema's self-surveilling property recalls how self-reflexive procedures have been gradually remediated into the narcissistic use of social networks – Facebook, Instagram, etc. - as translated in the self-aestheticization or self-marketization at the core of the construction of contemporary consumerist subjectivities. This element even prompts a depreciation of the subversive and critical potentiality of self-reflexive patterns in media and other forms of artistic expression.

To summarise, one can underpin two possible standpoints connecting surveillance and cinema. The first posits the surveilling gaze as a feature of the illusionistic cinematic apparatus, an "information collector." Conversely, the other is represented by the realm of self-reflexive cinema. The most evident facet is surveillance as a theme or an "element of movie plots." Then,

distinctively, the self-surveilling character of certain films emerges when the metacinematic gestures are so prevalent to transmute the whole work into an auto-explorative process. These movies bend back to themselves, exhibit their production process, and substantially open up a discourse over their technical, linguistic, and organizational patterns. They are entirely metacinematic.

Regarding the latter, it is even possible two underline the existence of a dual or Janus-faced character for self-reflexivity gestures related to surveillance. The dominant one, connected to *auto-mediacy*, reinforces the operativity of the dynamics associated with the internal panopticon, the regulation of the self, and the self-marketization so typical of the spirit of late (platform) capitalism.

With its radically exceeding force, the other, nearly unexplored, potentially emancipative self-reflexivity exposes the materiality of filmmaking in all its internal components. It plays against the illusionistic and surveilling functions of the cinematic apparatus and indicates a potential disruption of the expropriating features of biopolitical power. I argue that *Grizzly Man* (Herzog, 2005) is an example of a metacinematic gesture that plays against the illusionistic and surveilling functions of the cinematic apparatus through *autoscopia*, a particular form of thoughtful and personal introspection mediated by cinematic images (Elsaesser, 1989).

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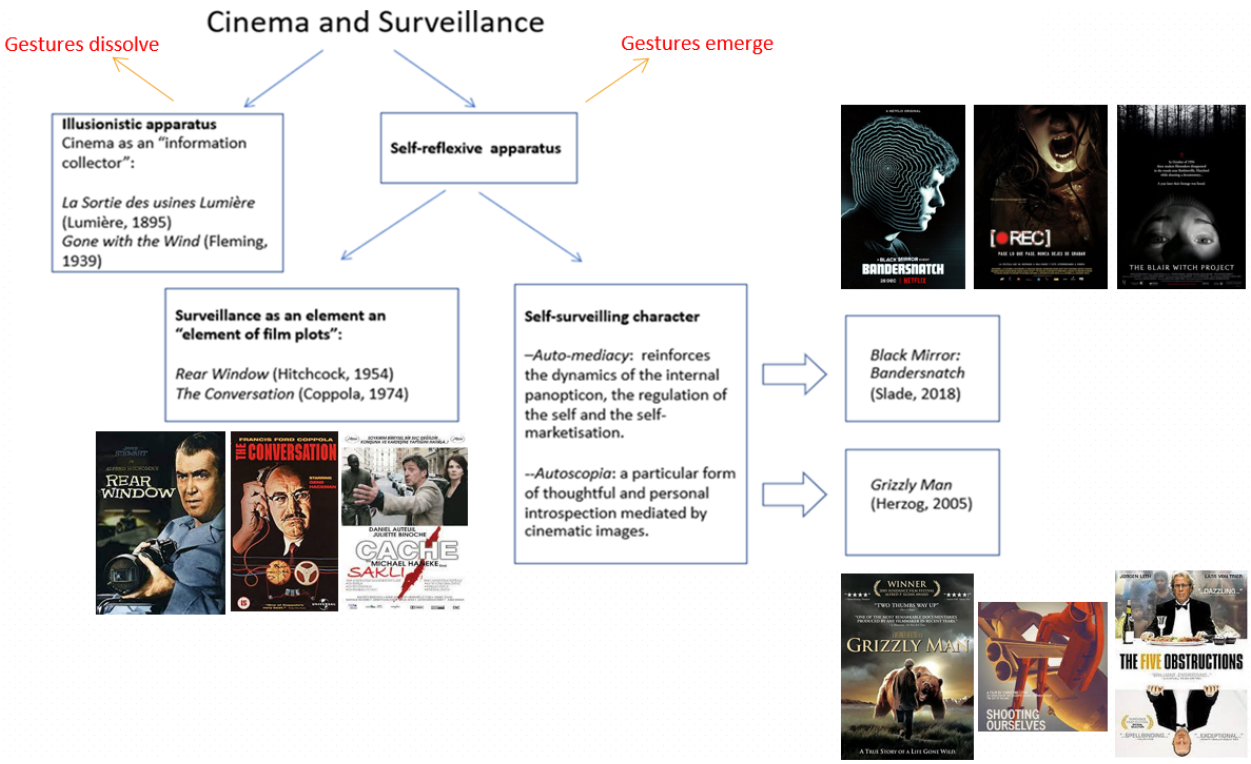

Surveillance within Film Plots: Framing New Scopic Regimes

From the very onset, cinema has oriented its obsessive attention towards the theme of surveillance with many examples ranging from Lang's films with Dr. Mabuse to the prominent examples of *Rear Window* (Hitchcock 1954), *Peeping Tom* (Powell, 1960) leaping towards *Blow Up* (Antonioni, 1967), *The Conversation* (Coppola, 1974), and refining its thematic features involving strong spectatorial participation with the POV formulas of *The Blair Witch Project* (Myrick and Sànchez, 1999) and *Rec* (Balaguerò, 2007).

However, *Black Mirror* trespasses its limits with the paranoid interactive film *Bandersnatch* (Slade, 2018). It compels the spectator to embody a puppeteer's role endowed with the capacity to redirect the story plot following the available diegetic paths designed in a choose-your-own-adventure structure. Elsewhere, it has been discussed how the movie critically prods audiences to reflect upon the performative element of their digitized interpassivity, a form of everyday delegated activity caused by interactive mental fatigue in a technologically overwhelming world (Conley and Burroughs, 2020). But it can also be argued that *Bandersnatch* epitomizes a cross-encounter between the constitutive surveilling gaze of the cinematic apparatus in the way Netflix remediates it as a streaming entertainment platform. Through this angle, the film allows the theme of surveillance to flow beyond the screen, encouraging spectatorial identification with a surveilling onlooker capable of amending the unfolding story. Even the advertising campaign for the *Black Mirror* 6th season hints at the Covid-19 pandemic's surreal consequences similar to those depicted in some of its episodes (*Figure 1*). The ad consists of a virtual mirror that bystanders can use to glimpse their new everyday experience, equipped with masks and protective kits to control the spread of the virus. Therefore, through this powerful expedient, the art directors illustrate how Covid-19 has transformed the global society into a highly self-reflexive, surveilling realm to control and mitigate the pandemic's effects (French and Monahan, 2020).

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Figure 1. Brother Ad School Spain created the outdoor advertisement inspired by the Covid-19 pandemic for Netflix.

The list of films related to surveillance is potentially infinite. Many audiovisual products recall, often only marginally, such an omnipresent topic within cinema's history. Movies like *The 1000 Eyes of Dr. Mabuse* (Lang, 1960), *The Trial* (Welles, 1962), *Fahrenheit 451* (Truffaut, 1966), *Blow Out* (De Palma, 1981), *1984* (Radford, 1984), *Brazil* (Gilliam, 1995), *Gattaca* (Niccol, 1997), *Lost Highways* (Lynch, 1997), *Following* (Nolan, 1998), *Panic Room* (Fincher, 2002), *Minority Report* (Spielberg, 2002), *Caché* (Haneke, 2006), *The Lives of the Others* (von Donnersmarck, 2006), *Citizenfour* (Poitras, 2014), *Await Further Instructions* (Kevorkian, 2018) allow cinema to dive into the cryptical world of surveillance in different ways. Each transposes the adaptation of renowned Orwell and Dick's science fiction novels or the cryptic lens of Kafkian bureaucratic

mazes. The main themes of surveillance as an element of fiction stories are paranoia, invasion of privacy, exploitation, and sense of guilt.

Furthermore, Catherine Zimmer (2011) investigated the look and the gaze as the privileged means through which surveillance narratives have been organized around the concepts of scopophilia, voyeurism, identification, and other ideas borrowed from psychoanalysis. Elsewhere, she (2015) has also pointed out that "video imagery occupies cinematic space so prevalently that the ambiguous middle ground of a hypermediated, 'reflexive' film begins to appear more as a rule than an exception" (2). Here, I would like to highlight the complexity of reflexive-voyeuristic tendencies (Denzin, 1995). Indeed, surveillance metacinema presents a few peculiar characteristics that signal the late evolution of the cinematic medium and how it contributes to reorienting contemporary reality perception.

This metacinematic form emerges when the watcher behind the screen remains unidentified or the identification process is directed towards the camera as a surveilling device. This principle can be exemplified by Pisters's analysis (2012) of Alfred Hitchcock's movie *Rear Window* (1954). Pister highlights how certain cinematic products exhibit the camera's material presence: "we now live in a metacinematic universe that calls for an immanent conception of audiovisuality, and in which a new camera consciousness has entered our perception" (170). This exhibition occurs

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within a fictionalized context. Namely, the camera becomes part of the objects displayed in the framing - like the character of James Stewart, who uses it to peek at people living in the building opposite his flat. Yet, it has been noted that "by modifying the natural reflexive system of cinema, therefore, surveillance films investigate to what extent the essence of film can be said to have been altered by the growing weight of the mediated scopic regime in daily life" (Lefait, 2012: 223). Along these lines, *Sex Lies and Videotapes* (Soderbergh, 1989) explores the inherent reflexivity of video forms after the diffusion of VHS camcorders. In this film, the disturbed protagonist obsessively videotapes women disclosing sexually related confessions.

The Russian director Dziga Vertov inaugurated these cameras' over-expositions with his silent documentary film *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929). Unlike the mainstream cinema products of that time, where the camera was mainly hidden and stale, the cinematic device's technical magic was displayed via its cumbersome and captivating presence. In many sequences, Kaufman's giant camera's superimposed image on the top of a building seems to scrutinize the whole Russian town from above or the hectic crowd from within (*Figure 2*). The imaginary Vertov's fusion with the camera lens also stresses its technical mystery. That is what the concept of *Kino-glaz* (Cine-eye) aimed to embody, along with the attendant allusions to a further stage for human cognitive evolution. This signals the passage from a flawed creature destined to transform into a more

precise, technologically empowered species that can finally produce Kino-Pravda or Cine-Truth (Musser, 1995).

In Vertov's scenario, the mechanical eye thus reflects the prosthetic dimension of cinema as a surveilling technology. In this sense, *Man with a Movie Camera* does not dissimulate but instead uncovers the cinematic apparatus and its specific forms of language as suggested by the Russian Constructivist sociologists: thinkers heralding a pedagogical reformation of society with the crucial support of literary, artistic, and audiovisual experimentation.

The tradition of reflexive cinema contains many examples that restate or criticize the mediatic apparatus's surveilling character and its various scopic regimes. They function as wake-up calls for the spectator by revealing the production mechanisms, the linguistic and technical devices which underlay cinema's surveilling nature.

Figure 2. These superimpositions display Mikhail Kaufman's eagle eye over the town and people's lives.

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The Self-Surveilling Character of Cinematic Reflexivity

Self-reflexive cinema can produce films substantially critical of the hegemonic forms of expression by contesting the most diffused solutions offered by the film industry. These films historically belong to counter-cultural, avant-garde movements like Nouvelle Vague, Neuer Deutscher Film, British Free Cinema, or specific streams such as the 1960s and 1970s Italian political cinema. With these movements, self-reflexivity has been overtly adopted as a particular style of filmmaking directed towards the provocative and, sometimes, parodistic exposure of its production mechanisms. *Day for Night* (Truffaut, 1973), *Contempt* (Godard, 1963), and more recently, *The Five Obstructions* (Leth, Trier, 2005) and *Shooting Ourselves* (Cynn, 2016) are only a few conveyors of the desecrating effect exercised by these counter-cultural and anti-Hollywoodian tendencies.

I argue that the exposure of the machinery of production of these metacinematic works elevates their specific character to a certain degree of self-surveillance. A movie like *Day for Night* pays unprecedented attention to the material conditions of production, the actors/director relationship, the budget, the film crew, the environmental constraints, or the screenplay's limits. It relaunches the features of those interrupting gestures that Walter Benjamin (2003) correlated to the estrangement effect triggered by the politically imbued experimentations of Brechtian theatre. These interrupting reflexive gestures test intersubjective relations. They highlight how "the

production difficulties which the producer meets while rehearsing the play cannot be separated any longer from concrete insights into the life of society" (24, 25). In this connection, we understand how self-surveilling cinema exposes its production mechanisms and extends its reflexive glance to the socio-political domain.

Mann (1998) proposed the term Reflectionism, a concept borrowed from Situationist art, as a mode of expression in which "artists often appropriate the tools of the oppressor and resituate these tools in a disturbing and disorienting fashion" (95). Along similar lines, it can be said that these self-reflexive films contain an explicit, ethical, and political rethinking of filmmaking's role and highlight the cinematic apparatus's multi-faceted self-surveilling character. They operationalize this process by communicating and amplifying the pluralism of voices and practices that compose their production modes and broadly reflect the intricate antagonisms of contemporary reality.

However, as previously discussed, reflexivity does not often manage to subvert the apparatus that abides by biopolitical power's conforming and disciplining character. It produces tension against the illusionistic and suturing functions of the cinematic device. It indeed relaunches the potential to challenge the expropriating features of contemporary late capitalist culture. But as an expression of a dominant character, cinematic reflexivity mainly conveys that cinematic processes,

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and their scopic regimes, have bypassed the Studio System's business models and pervaded our individual and collective lives.

As consumers, we are constantly involved in an updated and marketized presentation of the self within social networks. Thus, quiet differently, the enhanced identification triggered by films like *Bandersnatch*, *The Blair Witch Project,* and *Rec* stresses how reality is singly observed and experienced in an interactive, platformed, self-referential manner. But it also highlights that the prevailing theme of surveillance is the new essence of cinema (Lefait, 2012) as the visual domain overwhelms our cognitive and relational approaches to reality. The evolution of such self-reflexive forms of cinema has been integrated into more conforming modes of audiovisual reception and reproduction performed within the medial constraints of smartphones, tablets, laptops, and social networks. The internal panopticon or self-surveillance is therefore intensified and reproduced by the self-reflexive configuration of our technological devices.

In this sense, these three films' self-surveilling character does not frankly subvert but eventually contribute to reproducing a scenario in which *auto-mediacy* thrives (Dünne and Moser, 2008). I recall how auto-mediacy is a helpful concept to describe the processes of subjectification produced by the increasing mediation of technological devices and social networks, which crucially feed the construction of self-referential conformism.

Thus, self-reflexivity is not anymore, if it had ever been, a guarantee of critical detachment or distance from the omnipresence of mediatic surveillance, but rather an incentive to internalize self-surveillance as a mode of subjectification. This attests to how contemporary late-capitalist cultures, lifestyles, and marketing niches produce fragmented and self-referential selves.

Notwithstanding, self-surveilling, metacinematic gestures can be said to possess an inherent contradiction, a Janus-faced or dual character: that of being both a site of exploitation and potential emancipation. There is an exceeding aspect that calls for further exploration.

Exceeding the Internal Panopticon: towards Autoscopic Explorations

Intending to stimulate further investigation regarding the surveilling character of metacinematic forms, it is urgent to dissect whether some self-surveilling products contain the blossoms for experimentations that manage to escape the discussed systemic straightjacket. In particular, I have dwelled on Agamben's (2000) idea of gesture as the exhibition of mediality or a process of making a means visible. This feature was later reinforced by the allusion to Benjamin's (2003) conceptualization of gestures as interrupting actions that break the illusionistic flow of classical representational grammar. Inspiringly, Janet Harbord (2016) has outlined how gesture's subversive nature can give birth to an ex-centric cinema. She has also problematized how gestures

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retain the potentiality of a (filmic) body liberated from the biopolitical expropriation operated by the anthropological machine. However, I have discussed how media technology has gradually absorbed self-reflexive procedures because their attractiveness strictly matches the narcissistic use of social networks, self-aestheticization, and self-marketization at the core of the construction of contemporary subjectivities.

The pervasiveness of these practices involves every aspect of the private sphere. Rather than standing for an exceptional, experimental contingency, it is instead a sign of the spirit of the late capitalist biopolitical project. These considerations entail further questioning: is there any space for the emergence of critical, exceeding self-reflexive gestures in films, and if so, in which specific forms? Is it so unequivocal that social networks and digital platforms can remediate every form of metacinematic gesture while manufacturing such a realm of self-referential conformism?

I argue that a few exceeding trajectories can be retraced within the experimental and subversive domain of self-scrutiny enabled by movies like *The Five Obstructions* and *Shooting Ourselves*, yet even paradigmatically, *Grizzly Man*. This film reports the last months of life and work of the naturalist and documentary filmmaker Timothy Treadwell amongst a group of wild bears in Alaska. So, Herzog casts himself as a spectator and the editor of Treadwell's work in a second moment. His high opinion of spectatorship is essential to understand his own positioning in the course of *Grizzly Man's* elaboration. As he argued (2010): "I elevate the spectator. […] And I, the

author of the film, do not let him descend from this height until it is over. Only in this state of sublimity [Erhabenheit] does something deeper become possible, a kind of truth that is the enemy of the merely factual. Ecstatic truth, I call it" (1). In this sense, it can be asserted that Herzog rather sublimates the role of an active onlooker or surveillant-spectator so that we can abandon ourselves in the contemplative observation of Treadwell's self-exploration.

This process is crucially engendered by Treadwell's intimate symbiosis with the camera as a prosthetic tool. The American environmentalist lived in such harmony with the camera that it became a powerful instrument of mediation to interact with bears. In an interesting article, it has been argued that the camera in Treadwell's footage represents a "technology of self-recognition" (Pettman, 2008) through which the American environmentalist explores himself and ventures into the remote sides of his own identity. Such an intriguing mechanism would occur non-intentionally through a process that Thomas Elsaesser (1989) named *autoscopia.* That is "a modern form of introspection, highly mediated by cinematic images, whether the subject is actively engaged in producing these images or not" (Pettman 2008: 154). As Herzog underlines, there is a scene in Treadwell's footage that functions as a metonymy of the entire film, where we can see him jumping in and out of the frame and posing like John Rambo. He abruptly emerges from the bushes and disappears behind them while frantically wielding another camera in the thrill of experimenting

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with a revolutionary form of filmmaking. And he truly achieves it, but unwittingly, through a magic scheme of autoscopic epiphany, which illustrates the essence of nature captured in the frame. Following the evocative voice-over of Werner Herzog:

"In his action-movie mode, Treadwell probably didn't realize that seemingly empty moments had a strange secret beauty. Sometimes images themselves develop their own life, their own mysterious stardom. Beyond his posings, the camera was his only present companion. It was his instrument to explore the wilderness around him, but increasingly it became something more. He started to scrutinize his innermost being, his demons, his exhilarations. Facing the lens of a camera took on the quality of the confessional" (*Figure 3*).

In the desperate attempt of self-surveilling his bear-welfare activism, Treadwell forgets about the camera and allows the spectator to fuse with its unpredictable material presence and what it registers, the natural environment, a few bushes swept by a calm breeze, the imperturbable staleness of the plot. This instant of abandonment compels the onlooker to escape the process through which self-reflexive gestures provoke abrupt depersonalization followed by the sudden drive to reconstitute an identification with the story, the diegetic constraints, the protagonists, the subjects, or by extension, the digital platform or the social network (as in *Bandersnatch*). The camera is fixed.

*Figure 3***.** The ecstatic beauty of Treadwell's frames alternating his wandering figure and the surrounding wilderness.

There is no possibility to identify with an observer in POV (like in *Blair Witch Project* or *Rec*). We are instead subjected to these scopic interactions between Treadwell, his cameras, and us. Our imagination is captured in an enigmatic network of gazes, medial interactions, and vanishing points in a similar way as in Velazquez's *Las Meninas*.

In light of this, I argue that Herzog's editing exalts Treadwell's gesture of "being there with a camera," but also his disappearance, involving a combination of intentional and non-intentional elements. The instants where he suddenly vanishes precisely coincide with those where we can admire, by subtraction, an image of nature bearing unprecedented cogency**.** Captured in his own

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removal, the author Treadwell (but also Herzog and us) is thereby dethroned from his privileged enunciative position. A sign of the constant auto-mediatic recapture is Treadwell's reluctance to leave the frame, which implies anxiety about relinquishing the sense of identity the camera confers (Peucker 2012: 49).

Indeed, it can be argued that Treadwell enacts a narcissistic self-aestheticization but simultaneously allows the material objectivity of the filmmaking process to emerge. This mechanism triggers genuine reflections upon alternative, exceeding functions and scopes of the cinematic medium, which neutralize the injunction of sudden re-subjectivation. It instead exalts the filmic impersonal enunciation described by Christian Metz (2016). Precisely by eluding subjectivity, this reflexive, autoscopic device temporarily annihilates the internal panopticon's operativity. The peculiar metacinematic gestures of *Grizzly Man* can thus generate recursive, interpretive loops that trigger a sensation of emptiness in the critical observer, an embracement of the *horror vacui* induced by the image's material objectivity and cold medial, technological machinery. Hence, they operate in the direction of total depersonalization that exalts the filmmaking process's materiality by tending to disclose the internal components of production. Such an operation starkly contrasts with the hyper-subjectivized forms of consumption and interaction generated by social media within platform capitalism. The idea of autoscopic self-examination, propelling the emergence of free-floating materiality of the medium (or the

filmmaking process), can be situated in a radically different context. It enables a mechanism generating a form of technology-mediated subversive self-examination. It works against the constraining iterations of auto-mediacy as a property driving the self-presentation strategies produced by surveillance media technology. If only for a moment, its magnetic suspension drags the spectator outside the pre-packaged, conformist self-referentiality inhabiting the dispositifs of biopolitical power.

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Filmography

1984 (Dir. Michael Radford, 1984)

Await Further Instructions (Dir. Johnny Kevorkian, 2018)

Black Mirror: Bandersnatch (Dir. David Slate, 2018)

Blow Out (Dir. Brian De Palma, 1981)

Blow Up (Dir. Michelangelo Antonioni, 1967)

Brazil (Dir. Terry Gilliam, 1995)

Caché (Dir. Michael Haneke, 2006)

Casablanca (Dir. Michael Curtiz, 1942)

Citizenfour (Dir. Laura Poitras, 2014)

Contempt (Dir. Jean-Luc Godard, 1963)

Day for Night (Dir. François Truffaut, 1973)

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Fahrenheit 451 (Dir.François Truffaut, 1966)

Following (Dir. Christopher Nolan, 1998)

Gattaca (Dir. Andrew Niccol, 1997)

Gone with the Wind (Dir. Victor Fleming, 1939)

Grizzly Man (Dir. Werner Herzog, 2005)

It's a Wonderful Life (Dir. Frank Capra, 1946)

La Sortie des usines Lumière (Dir. Louis Lumière, 1895)

Lost Highways (Dir. David Lynch, 1997)

Man with a Movie Camera (Dir. Dziga Vertov, 1929)

Minority Report (Dir. Steven Spielberg, 2002)

Panic Room (Dir. David Fincher, 2002)

Peeping Tom (Dir. Michael Powell, 1960)

Rear Window (Dir. Alfred Hitchcock, 1954)

Rec (Dir. Balaguerò, 2007)

Red Road (Dir. Andrea Arnold, 2006)

Sex Lies and Videotapes (Dir. Steven Soderbergh, 1989)

Shadows (Dor. John Cassavetes, 1959)

Shooting Ourselves (Dir. Christine Cynn 2016)

The 1000 Eyes of Dr. Mabuse (Dir. Fritz Lang, 1960)

The Blair Witch Project (Dir. Eduardo Sánchez and Daniel Myrick, 1999)

The Conversation (Dir. Francis Ford Coppola, 1974)

The Five Obstructions (Dir. Jørgen Leth and Lars von Trier 2005)

The Lives of the Others (Dir. Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck, 2006)

The Trial (Dir. Orson Welles, 1962)