

Article

Manoj Barpujari

Surveillance Themes and Their Treatment in Cinema



(1984)

In a time of deceit telling the truth is a revolutionary act. – George Orwell

Prologue: an eerie buildout

The Pegasus Project is infuriating, but not surprising. The academia, the lawmakers and law enforcers, the media and filmmakers are carrying for long the overburden of researching surveillance by state apparatuses, both repressive and ideological. Hence it didn't give goosebumps when governments differed when it comes to reacting to the outrage. The colours didn't fade or hide as an allegation of using the

military-grade spyware Pegasus was raised. Some took it seriously and ordered multiple investigations on reports of targeting political leaders, journalists and human rights defenders. Read the colour of their national flag: three colours, blue, white and red. But some brushed aside the reports as rubbish, and instead of showing any interest in probing, they denied even discussions in the highest legislature of the nation.

Read the colour: three colours again, saffron, white and green.

As one Prime Minister even telephoned his counterpart in another continent, where the Pegasus originated, to demand answers whether the allegations were true, the latter PM in response set up a high-level committee to probe. The former one also took a swift forensic evaluation of journalists' phones by the national cyber-security agency to confirm whether they were infected with the spyware. Given the fact that the spyware producer only sells its product to governments or government agencies, the responses of various governments say it all. The truth is denied, refused thus to be given access to, thereby installing Orwell's dystopian rhetoric "Freedom is Slavery. Ignorance is Strength." – showing the way in which a government can manipulate truths. In an eerie reality scene, relative freedom is witnessed in denial by the law makers, thereby forcing their own freedom, a freedom from accountability, freedom from truth. It is an unnerving Covid-19 situation when an elected government states that no one has died from lack of oxygen, so much so for the truth while the reality reflects a 180 degree reverse picture of the truth. It is intriguing and pinching to come to terms with the truth if it is revealed by its beholder's own faults. George Orwell's epoch-making *1984* pointed accusing fingers to the Stalinist Russia; but comparisons in a changing scenario spring up in the 21st century democracies across the globe. Post truth! Does post-truth wear colours? Yes, they never fade or hide!

Rapid surge of surveillance

Speaking of a secretive activity, it won't be illogical to apprise of how the media activity rests on surveillance from time immemorial. Recall Sanjay, the ecumenical *Mahabharata* character, whose surveillance of the Kurukshetra war, or the sage Narada whose empirical reports provide a whole lot of minute details: both the characters carry news and wisdom and both of them provide fictional base for the discipline of media communication. Media and journalism by default are practices in surveillance that accounted for coining the term Watchdog. It may prove, and indeed is, interesting to examine

emergence and development of surveillance themes in narrative cinema and their treatment. If Louis Lumiere's *Workers Leaving the Factory* (1895) is interpreted as a form of corporate surveillance, it won't be an exaggeration. The monitoring of the workplace de facto has been one of the predominant forms of surveillance. A great majority of street traffic and business of all hues, not to speak of the industrial activities and daily social interactions, all are immersed in and surrounded by video surveillance, with Google maps adding a classy voyeurism to this practice. Catherine Zimmer rightfully zooms in the fact in her book *Surveillance Cinema* (NYUP, 2015): "Far more than just cultural symptoms of what is increasingly called a "surveillance society," films about surveillance do both ideological and practical labor by joining the form and content of surveillance practice in a narrative structure."



(*The Conversation*)

Digitalized world has seen surveillance easier and widespread than ever before. But as a method of allowing and eavesdropping on someone's privacy, surveillance is as old as communication tools and mediums. Believing what Francis Ford Coppola has said as truly significant, it may be good to take note of the fact that the practice of confessions in the church is one of the earliest forms of the invasion of privacy, earliest forms of surveillance. Coppola's protagonist in mystery thriller *The Conversation* (1974) presents a surveillance expert who has been through a moral dilemma following a past wiretap job which resulted in murders and his Catholicism. The motif of the film is bugging the conversation of a couple in a public space that is accomplished by a number of surveillance operatives positioned in

different points around the couple's meeting place. But visual deployments of surveillance technologies apart, the narrative construction around those technologies suggest highly complex dynamics. Coppola's film focuses absolutely on those dynamics, not on the social or sexual dimensions of the evolving narrative, as the protagonist tries his best to prevent a murder plan getting executed, but in vain. While he discovers the ambiguous plan from the sound recordings, he further finds out through bugging that the couple is not victims but conspirators of a murder, thus the purpose of his first surveillance operation is rendered unfounded but his second one leads to the ultimate realization of the fact. Over his landline phone he gets a threatening call and the caller states, "We'll be listening," making him suspect that he too might be bugged and on this suspicion he searches every nook and corner of his apartment, ripping apart the wooden walls and floorboards, to locate any probable microphone. The camerawork in the final shot actually blurs the distinction between cinematic and surveillant technique; and it raises a question: Are the nature of cinematic and surveillant narration synonymous with each other?



(*The Truman Show*)

The early films of the late 19th and early 20th century actually made the movie camera the new way of establishing social and moral transgressions in private life. That has developed to the present

juncture of video recording of everything under the Sun (not only potential and actual crime) which acquires a form of media entertainment too. By example, *The Truman Show* (1998) explicitly incorporates narrative structure around the surveillant capacities of cinema. It is Peter Weir's comedy drama about a reality television programme filmed through thousands of hidden cameras and broadcast worldwide. It is a weird story of a young, naïve, married man named Truman Burbank who was born, brought up and given a working life in an island township which is a complete set built within an enormous dome harbouring an artificial Sun, rain, a population of cast and crew, and what not. Truman's life right from the beginning inside his mother's womb, including his tragic childhood as his father was made to disappear, all are captured to feel his emotions to give audiences a taste of his total self as everyone except him is part of the acting crew. Characters often lean into the lens (CCTVs), interior scenes are bright, and the setting and images of buildings sometimes look artificial. Although the deceptive game Truman has been drawn into for a long time is itself fictitious – as given the world he lives in with the state-of-the-art technologies used in the dome, it is hard to imagine a living being unaware of such a cocoon. The show capitalizes on deceitful behaviour to an individual with a primary motive of generating revenue, obviously when surveillance at all levels is married to this motive.

With the internet crossing all boundaries, the narrative of surveillance in recent films has acquired formidable proportions with the inclusion of satellites, global positioning systems and closed circuit television. But before these techniques were used in films, the ability to track individuals over space and time was sensationally offered by non-cinematic surveillance technologies. Michael Anderson's surreal drama *1984*, for instance, projected an imaginary dystopian world which was by no means unreal by the standard experiences mankind had already gone through on which the accounts in Orwell's novel of same title were based on. The protagonist of this 1956 black-&-white film secretly brings home an unused old diary, reveals his identity and belongs in front of the eye of Big

Brother— the noticing device on the wall, then manages to sit down and open the diary, strikes through the year and writes the present year as 1984 and starts writing discreetly as writing in private is prohibited. The narrative unfolds the daily life of a low ranked civil servant working in the Ministry of Truth in war-torn London ruled by a totalitarian superstate. The events show how the individual becomes a sloganeering puppet under the regime's all-pervading surveillance of the Thought Police that debars individual thinking on both political and personal level. Following his secret affair with a lady party worker recorded by a hidden telescreen, both of them are arrested and taken away to the Ministry of Love. Horrendous methods of rehabilitation are seen as being followed on the principles of Doublethink and unsparing surveillance at all spaces.

Voyeurism at the core of surveillance

The closeness of narrative and surveillance proves revealing in terms of political and material formations which are nothing but use of voyeurism, whether seen in Anderson's *1984* (also remade in 1984 by Michael Radford with the same title but in colour format), or Michelangelo Antonioni's *Blowup* (1966). Sociologist David Lyon, well-known in surveillance research initiatives all over the world, holds the view that surveillance – which at its social and etymological core is about watching – is easily accepted because encouraged by the culture of television and cinema all sorts of watching have become commonplace. He signals that while intruding upon 'privacy', the intensification of surveillance has prompted broader questions of ethics and social justice including civil liberties and human rights. It was actually within thirty years, camera surveillance grew from an unknown, non-issue to a frequently taken-for-granted 'necessity' as observed by Lyon in his co-edited book *Eyes Everywhere: The Global Growth of Camera Surveillance* (Routledge, 2012) and this 'growth' is explicitly fashioned in films down the ages. The central role in Antonioni's *Blowup* shows a fashion photographer who unwittingly captures a murder in his still camera while he is secretly taking pictures of a lady with her lover in a park. Only the blow-ups of the pictures

disclose that the camera has functioned independently, in the sense that there is more in the photographs than he realized when he took them: here he becomes apparently a passive voyeur. The blow-ups seem to upheaval his existence, an unwanted object lying within the frame of the photographed image in the film makes him unstable, while the lady's life also seems to be hanging in balance.



(*Blowup*)

The technological devices sometimes dictate the owner, and lure the persons who own them, depending on the subject under its surveillance which is what happened to two men in Buddhadeb Dasgupta's *Ami, Yasin Ar Amar Madhubala* (The Voyeurs, 2007). They installed a tiny secret camera in their beautiful neighbour's home to get voyeuristic pleasure, only to get caught eventually and fell in the trap of the state's anti-terrorist drive, even paying a heavy price for mistaken identity. Voyeurism as such doesn't just become a political tool, but emerges as a project with political ramifications. Here the 'allegory of spectatorship' comes into force that has garnered immense interests in the study of films. Rima Das' *Antardrishti* (Man with the Binoculars, 2013) also flickers past, as in a different level it dwells on the material structure of the protagonist's voyeurism in given social and psychic conditions the film emerges from. Surveillance of neighbours through a camera replaced a window owing to technological advancement in cinematic narrative – at least that's what witnessed – from Alfred Hitchcock's 1954 film *Rear Window* to the films produced in the new millennium. A seemingly light social drama slowly builds up to be a mystery thriller, thanks to the protagonist's preoccupation with surveying his neighbours from his window. Fondly

called 'peeping Tom' by his nurse, an invalid Jeff who is a photo-journalist and recuperating from a broken leg is more interested in observing his vicinal people across a courtyard than even in his girlfriend visiting him. Once she crosses the barrier between his room and the apartment block opposite, their chemistry is revitalized. *Rear Window* became a model of voyeuristic watching in Laura Mulvey's seminal essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema'. Mulvey analyzed Jeff's voyeurism as captor of images in his locale, though disabled by his enforced professional inactivity, binding him to his seat as a spectator.



(*Rear Window*)

Francois Truffaut in an essay likened the courtyard in *Rear Window* to the world, the photographer to the filmmaker and his binoculars to the lenses of camera. The film became a kind of social study, exposing and exploring the tension between private and public, interior and exterior, the individual and the community, and so on, as it retained other serious contours of the time of its making. Jeff's voyeuristic practices are clearly signs of an exercise rooted in the establishment of a national security apparatus that legitimized the use of the camera for intruding on the privacy of others. Privacy is thus politicized which demonstrates the historical import of the way surveillance is culturally processed. Jeff's interest and monitoring habit take a serious turn when he smells trouble in at least two apartments. After repeated police footfall, along with Jeff and his girlfriend's adventurous investigation, a neighbour confesses to violence that took his wife's life. This confession is explained as an act of

admitting one's own tainted past; the genesis of this act tracks back to abuse of power and role of the state in it, which is a critique of McCarthyism that tortures the American pride even today, and which is synonymous with the state's devilish surveillance.

Surveillance and risks involved

The line that separates ethical questions from legitimacy of surveillance is scant in those films fulfilling the basic tenets of consumer culture and mainstream doctrine. Steven Spielberg's *Minority Report* (2002) practically justifies surveillance of the state apparatus, as the narrative steps further by dwelling on the future architecture of virtual imaging in which the surveillant system foretells the future by dint of which the police can effectively stop a crime. The film is set in 2054 in which a 'pre-crime department' enters sixth year of its experiment. Equipped with surveillance applications and faster travelling machinery in a utopian vision, the state boasts of providing ultimate security to its citizens, but at the same time it turns out to be dystopian in nature as people are being used as tools or slaves of surveillance culture. With the state preferring to rule that surveillance is essential a service, Spielberg's feel-good ending saves the narrative from total indignation. The Tom Cruise starrer has ingredients of not only a futuristic action drama, it also wears a thick sci-fi look, while heavily enamoured of technoir, but at the same time appears to be a heavy-duty chase film and a whodunit variety. The hybrid of all these genres is made possible by the storyline that is based on one written in 1956 but upon which the script envisions a hundred-year forward view of a world shaped by technological marvels but unchanged in human behaviours laden with primary instincts of grabbing and misusing power at the cost of fellow human beings. As the film utilizes the temporal logic of surveillance, it surpasses human limitations authorizing the mise-en-cine to play a certain role in futuristic precincts.



(*Minority Report*)

The term ‘pre-crime’ was coined by the original storywriter and means a system focusing on previsions of crimes yet to be committed: in the film the specialized cops apprehend individuals who are about to commit crimes. This action is based on foreknowledge or predictions televised in huge screens connected with brain-scanners of three ‘precogs’ (abbreviation of precognition or future vision) who have psychic ability to see events in the future. The protagonist is a commanding officer in the pre-crime department and becomes a fugitive following accusation of a future killing and, while on the run, he kidnaps a precog named Agatha – the strongest of the threesome – to lead him to the person whom he is foretold to have murdered to check if his freewill can prevent the act. In other words, the thickened plot examines whether his will can overpower the future which is known in advance. But there are other sub-plots making the design a multi-layered murder mystery where an ultimate bad guy, the director of the pre-crime department himself, is exposed of killing the mother of Agatha. She was killed because she reclaimed her psychic daughter whom she once sold to pre-crime.

There are interplayed stories behind every deprivation, subjugation and act of violence in the film that raise not only the ethical questions of the methods applied to generate and float the precogs. By prosecuting an officer for a crime that has not yet been committed, it serves as a critique of the whole temporal project of surveillance. Those ethical questions are organic to the very existence and functions of the pre-crime system. However, it is ultimately abandoned as a result of corruption and crimes committed by the big bad guy. As Agatha

occasionally sees a different future vision from the other two, referred to as ‘minority report’ of a possible alternate timeline (an alternate future in which the crime does not happen), it indicates disagreement amongst the precogs: so, they as a unit of the system and their vision-prompted actions of pre-crime are not infallible. Hence it comes out that inherent follies in the presented surveillance model make the system unacceptable in spite of high claims made by its creators. *Minority Report* as a film is out and out intellectually stimulant and cinematically profound. That it warrants discussions is vindicated by Roger Ebert hailing it as a masterpiece, and yet another critic praises it as “a huge leap forward for the director, who moves once and for all into the world of adult movie making”! Of course, the film not just effectuates visual pleasures derived from its mix of artful techniques, it also demands solid mental exercise unlike Spielberg’s most others.



(*The Bourne Ultimatum*)

By contrast in subtlety, *The Bourne Ultimatum* (2007), another film churned out by Hollywood, doesn’t stake a moral claim in the utilities of surveillance services. Rather, this sophisticated action thriller directed by Paul Greengrass takes a critical look at the powerful police and CIA acts. The surveillance technologies in such films are employed with a purpose of visualizing the transnational spaces through economies of violence. Thus, geo-surveillance becomes a way to characterize the establishing shots, chase scenes, and the grand finale. A fast paced cross-cutting and montage add a seductive appeal to the aesthetics of *The Bourne Ultimatum*. The US intelligence units in this film, the third in a Bourne trilogy, are given a bad impression

as surveillance and assassination become synonymous. It's being observed that the third instalment of the series is most spectacularly surveillant as it won three Academy Awards in Editing, Sound Editing and Sound Mixing. The CIA operative Jason Bourne (enacted by Matt Damon) is a creation of novelist Robert Ludlum. He fights for revelation of his past identity as he becomes aware of his suffering from dissociative amnesia. The plot engages him in a fierce hide-and-seek bid with assassins engaged by his seniors to eliminate him as he tries for a redemption following his volunteering for a behaviour modification program that turned him into a mechanical, ruthless assassin of the CIA.

Global surveillance attains a cinematic high in *The Bourne Ultimatum* as the CIA with help from the ECHELON surveillance tracks a London journalist who comes to know about the agency's latest operation codename and Bourne's involvement. (The ECHELON was created in the late 1960s with 'Five Eyes' – the US, the UK, Canada, Australia and New Zealand – initially to monitor erstwhile Soviet Union and its allies and later evolved into a global system of mass surveillance.) The scene where *The Guardian* journalist gets killed by a sniper at the Waterloo train station is structured with smart crosscutting between surveillance operators and actions on the ground with Bourne trying hard to save the journo as the latter is crucial to lead him to discover his identity. Here the rhetoric, technology, and aesthetics are part of cinematic narrative that often shifts from one city to another in different countries. With the help of a sympathetic deputy director in the agency Bourne could retrieve his real name, and then meets the psychologist who oversaw Bourne's behaviour modification. He regains his memory of how he gave himself to a new identity practically to help his bosses hide crucial operation and security data. The irony of the narrative construction is revealed in his words to his tracker who is about to shoot him but unable to, as Bourne says: "Look at us. Look at what they make you give."

In these films secret services and operations are necessitated by Big Data practices. This is seen even more starkly in Oliver Stone's real life docudrama *Snowden* (2016) where 'big data' (which

is a way to analyze and extract information from data sets too large and complex to be dealt with by traditional application software) play a central role in the characterization of Edward Snowden, the whistleblower known for revealing details of classified US government surveillance programs. A filmmaker known for his knack for chronicling recent history with focus on the history-maker has done justice to the fact-based biological thriller on Snowden that picks up an issue that has had global repercussions. Opinions differ on whether Snowden's act of stealing a huge amount of classified data from NSA (National Security Agency) facility in Hawaii and fleeing to another country should be termed heroic or treacherous. But given his moral dilemma in playing his part in what he describes as NSA "really tracking every cell phone in the world... not just terrorists, or countries, or corporations, but you", and given his upfront about releasing data to journalists in a Hong Kong hotel room to whom he says "You just stick to the issue of mass surveillance and let the people decide", it will be imprudent if the film is condemned to 'noncinematic presentation in written journalism' (in Catherine Zimmer's words) 'with numerous articles making the reference explicit'. Zimmer is considering the film as one 'that reduces politics to personal narrative' – but that too doesn't demean the film mainly for two reasons. Firstly, the narrative often oscillates between Snowden's interaction with scribes and flashback scenes of his past that include his relation with his life-partner i.e. his wife who is emotionally much supportive; and secondly, least said the better, the whole gamut of real happening centers Snowden's character.



(Snowden)

Epilogue: surveillance fallout

In the film, Snowden tells documentarian Laura Poitras: “Terrorism is the excuse. This is about economic and social control.” Post his disclosures of global surveillance programs run by the NSA and Five Eyes, the on-film documentary maker and other journalists help Snowden leave the hotel in disguise and take refuge in a safe hut for some days en route to the airport. Snowden’s belief and conviction attain larger significance to where the end part of the film shifts its gear. The film end-shows news headlines of the US Congress passing NSA surveillance reform which vindicate Snowden’s reassured activism transpired through a live online interview in Moscow after he is granted asylum by Russia. News clipping of the then US President Barack Obama signing an act to reform surveillance is inserted. (Fact records as late as in 2020 tell that a US federal court ruled US intelligence’s mass surveillance program illegal, thereby justifying the ethical foundation on which Snowden’s exposure was based upon.) Additionally, it’s noteworthy that when the filmmaker’s role is defined by an anti-establishment outlook it’s still possible to get a film pass the official nod in the US; but that’s most unlikely in many Asian countries like China or Iran where water-tight censorship is at work. An overwhelming fear where colours of the national flag are saffron, white and green is that the recent move for changes to the 1952 Cinematograph Act will only enhance state surveillance of film contents. When democracy is bleeding and civil liberties are under threat, is it imaginable to launch a film project that raises an accusing finger towards overt or covert

surveillance systems of the state in the Third World nations? The Cold War assumes its changing dimension in a post-globalization, post-reform world since the 1990s. Yet numerous Hollywood films portray CIA as an organization whose activities backfire catastrophically, that can be co-opted or inspired by criminal entities, though there are others within it doing their very best to serve their nation intelligently and with humanity, as explained in details in *Hollywood and the CIA: Cinema, defense, and subversion* (Routledge, 2011) written jointly by Oliver Boyd-Barrett, David Herrera and Jim Baumann.

The state power imperatively expands its surveillance in a crisis situation. Slavoj Zizek in his latest book *Pandemic! Covid-19 Shakes the World* (OR Books, 2020) propagates the need of figures like Julian Assange to prevent dangerous abuses of power justified by an emergency, a medical threat if not by terrorist threat. The philosopher says also that new activists following the shoes of Julian Assange, Chelsea Manning and Edward Snowden are needed to expose the misuses of power and surveillance. Snowden’s sensitive leaks, like so many films and reporting in the media, have fuelled debates over mass surveillance, government secrecy, national security, denial of the rights to information and privacy, and sedition laws of course. The Pegasus Report is just an addition to these debates and cinematic rendition is likely to blow them up sooner or later.

▲ **Mr. Manoj Barpujari is a Poet, an Author, a National Award winner Film Critic, Member of FIPRESCI-India, based in Guwahati.**