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"Beautiful, Unethical, Dangerous": Screening Surveillance and Maintaining Insecurities / Adam Brown and Tony Chalkley

Keywords: Culture Studies, Media, Television and Film

> "*Beautiful, unethical, dangerous. You've turned every cell phone in Gotham into a microphone... This is wrong... Spying on thirty million people isn't part of my job description.*"
>
> Lucius Fox to Bruce Wayne in *The Dark Knight*

<1> In Christopher Nolan's blockbuster hit, *The Dark Knight* (2008), the roguish caped crusader builds a massive computer system to locate his arch-nemesis, the Joker, using sonar technology. After being called on by Batman to use the system and assist with the pursuit, the deeply moral CEO of Wayne Enterprises, Lucius Fox, reluctantly agrees to help just one time, but threatens to quit immediately afterwards. The film's subsequent climactic scenes are thus played out in a cityscape under surveillance, both thematically and aesthetically, with Batman's (anti)heroic exploits only possible through his (temporary) establishment of a virtual "surveillancescape." Yet there lies a fundamental tension in this film—among many other recent productions—between the undesirability and the inevitability of surveillance; between its "unethical" and "dangerous" nature; and between the deep insecurities over being watched that permeate society and the "beautiful," voyeuristic nature of the process of watching. Such films reveal that surveillance pervades the very means by which narratives about the subject are formed, and have significant implications for how surveillance is understood in the contemporary world.

<2> From the Hollywood action thriller *Enemy of the State* (1998) to the recent science-fiction

remake of *Total Recall* (2012), films have been at the forefront of negotiating cultural meanings of, and perspectives on, the formation of the "Surveillance Society." Alongside this phenomenon, the intersections of new media and the cinema have seen the emergence of innovative forms of representation, with new media screens often becoming intertwined with the camera's gaze. A seemingly endless stream of post-9/11 mainstream productions, such as *In Time* (2011), *Tron: Legacy* (2010), *I Spit on Your Grave* (2010), *Surrogates* (2009) and *Look* (2007), purports to critique the problems involved in increased surveillance; however, these films invariably reinforce that which they question, contradicting their surface claims with implicit arguments for the acceptance, desirability—even *necessity*—of surveillance in everyday life. Surveying this landscape, we highlight the recent Hollywood blockbuster *The Hunger Games* (2012) as exemplifying the widespread trend in films to naturalise the concept and aesthetics of surveillance for the viewing public(s).

<3> On the other hand, Ben C. Lucas' unconventional Australian feature film *Wasted on the Young* (2010) confronts the viewer with complex issues relating to (in)security and surveillance, whilst providing significant representations of (post)modern adolescence/young adulthood in a digital world. We argue that this film reveals the potential of the medium to engage with the complexities and ambiguities arising from surveillant behaviour in a sophisticated and nuanced manner. Contrasting *The Hunger Games* with Lucas' work, we explore the rich ideological fabric of filmic discourses around surveillance, arguing that significant contradictions lie at the heart of much mainstream cinema, epitomising the crucial role of film in the development of hegemonic societal power structures.

Representing Surveillance in Film: Reinforcing the Dominant Discourse

<4> A considerable literature has examined the representations and self-representations engendered by popular forms of social media, reality television, and so on, while (usually other) scholars continue to explore the existence and implications of surveillance on social, political and institutional levels. However, limited attention has been given to cultural representations of these phenomena themselves. As Thomas Levin points out, "a socio-political understanding of surveillance at the dawn of the new millennium must also include an analysis of the striking proliferation of the *rhetorics* of surveillance—at both the thematic and the formal level—in virtually all contemporary media ranging from cinema and television to cyberspace" (581). These rhetorics themselves constitute a fledgling

industry, particularly in the domain of Hollywood film production, where hundreds of millions of dollars are churned out and swiftly returned through companies' efforts to captivate contemporary audiences.

<5> The perpetually growing trend by filmmakers to either focus explicitly on surveillance or provide brief, naturalised portrayals of ("new") media use for surveillance purposes has a long history. On 22 March 1895, the first ever commercial films were screened for a paying audience. One of these films was Louis Lumiere's *Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory*, which is composed of a single, 46-second long shot depicting a group of mostly female workers leaving a photography equipment factory under the gaze of both employer and camera. Surveillance in one form or another has been an intrinsic part of cinematic history ever since. While the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Centre and Pentagon arguably energised filmmakers' interests in surveillance even further, its place as a theme in contemporary narratives has had a complex evolution (Zimmer, "Surveillance and Social Memory" 302). As the issue of surveillance has become more and more prominent in a media saturated society, an ever-increasing number of recent films engage with the issue in a considerably more direct and reflexive manner. This phenomenon of films focused thematically, and often aesthetically, on surveillance, has given rise to what Catherine Zimmer has termed "Surveillance Cinema." Reflecting a perspective on film that informs the proceeding analysis, Zimmer writes that "cinematic (and televisual) narratives of surveillance serve as such specific structural models of the dynamics within a culture of surveillance that they should be viewed not just as 'reflections' of an increasingly surveillance-centred media, but themselves as *practices* of surveillance" ("Surveillance Cinema" 439).

<6> In his reflection on the mass media as a system of control, Thomas Mathieson emphasises the power of television to evoke in viewers the "obedient, disciplined, subservient set of beliefs necessary for the surveillance systems to be functional" (75). Similarly, Mark Winokur likens the cinematic experience to Michel Foucault's paradigmatic conceptualisation of what has become the "staple metaphor" (Caluya 622) within Surveillance Studies: the Panopticon. Drawing on surveillance in a metaphorical sense (one that does not necessarily reflect the distinct practices and process involved in surveillance proper), Winokur argues that film and television are "panoptic institutions" of a particularly powerful kind—certainly more panoptic, in his view, than the Internet. Winokur writes:

> Because film takes place in the dark it is most often a monadic experience: each

spectator is an island unto herself. Like the central prison tower, the central object of attention (the screen itself) is well lit, and, as with the prison tower, we are to keep our attention riveted to this central structure; stillness is enforced. Finally, although we believe we have chosen to go to the movies in a way prisoners do not choose prison, we are metaphorically imprisoned both in the sense that our culture still gives us precious few authentically practical options, and in the sense that, like prison, movies are instructive. (179)

This passage may seem hyperbolic at points and perhaps gives insufficient weight to viewers' capacity for resistant readings and the multiplicity of viewing formats and environments provided by DVDs, home entertainment systems and online movie piracy. Nonetheless, Winokur's essay does serve as a reminder that film can readily be fitted into the "disciplinary technologies" explicated by Foucault. Rendering individual agency subordinate, this (cultural) "surveillance" is both "absolutely indiscreet" in its omnipresence and alertness, and "absolutely discreet, for it functions permanently and largely in silence" (Foucault 177). Reflecting Winokur's views, cinema is, as John Turner points out, "hypersurveillant" (94). While it needs to be emphasised that this metaphorical conceptualisation of "surveillance" differs markedly from the manner in which it is conventionally understood, the synergies between film, ideology and power that Winokur points to is essential to a reflection on how meanings about surveillance are negotiated on the screen. The "instructive" nature of film highlights the crucial importance of the passive, often unintended ideological messages these cultural texts generate—ones that frequently contradict the surface ideologies they put forward. Such messages need to be exposed and understood with a critical eye.

<7> A number of scholars argue that the very nature of the filmic medium itself therefore threatens to legitimate, if not glamorise, forms and processes of surveillance. Commonly established via sequences of what seem to comprise CCTV footage (Kammerrer), but also through a variety of other means, the aesthetics of surveillance in many films often becomes merged with the ideological discourse(s) constructed within the narrative. To return to the example of *The Dark Knight* with which we began, the ambiguity over whether or not Batman should have instigated an immensely powerful weapon of surveillance is arguably undermined by the frequent reliance

throughout the ensuing action sequence on the subjectivity of the caped crusader, whose technology-enhanced vision becomes directly enmeshed with the point of view shots provided by the camera. The majority of Batman's disarming of criminals and rescue of innocent civilians is screened directly through a surveillance aesthetics: the sonar vision that his morally tenuous actions have made possible. Furthermore, as soon as the Joker is caught and his reign of terror comes to an end, it is revealed that Batman has installed a self-destruct mechanism that dismantles the system and (apparently) erases the collected data. Thus the initial ethical concerns expressed by Lucius Fox are shown to be resolved, and instead of resigning as he had intended to, the character (played by the morally stern Morgan Freeman) walks out of the frame and into the next sequel. In these ways, through both the film's plot and camerawork, the audience is positioned to view surveillance as useful and necessary. The film's resolution perhaps even relinquishes Batman's initial portrayal of surveillance as a "necessary evil."

<8>As the example of *The Dark Knight* highlights, the meanings constructed in relation to surveillance often rely on the complicated intersection of the place of surveillance as thematic concern and its role(s) in the structure or style of a film. Levin notes that cinema in the 1990s became increasingly characterised by an "ambiguity—between surveillance as narrative subject, i.e., as *thematic* concern, and surveillance as the very condition or *structure of narration itself*" (583, author's emphasis). Many recent films are shot to varying degrees, if not solely, through the lens of an "in-film" handheld camera, such as *Chronicle* (2012), *Project X* (2012), *Cloverfield* (2008), *Quarantine* (2008) and the *Paranormal Activity* films (2007-12). Surveillance technologies are, furthermore, frequently positioned as the only means by which a story can proceed. In one scene of the alien invasion film *Skyline* (2010), for example, a terrified group of survivors hidden behind closed curtains in an apartment building can only watch the battle being waged outside between the genocidal spaceships and the United States military through their use of a large flat screen television and a conveniently placed digital camera. Here, product placement and dramatic narrative conventions combine to position the viewer to accept surveillance as not only the norm, but a valuable means by which to experience and understand the world. This development has important consequences for narratives that allegedly critique surveillance.

<9> Several scholars have explored the aesthetics of surveillance in feature films. Tellingly, an

essay by Anders Albrechtslund returns to Hitchcock's *Rear Window* (1954) and Coppola's *The Conversation* (1974) for examples of films that he finds to be effective in exploring the ethics of surveillance. Particular attention has been given to Peter Weir's well-known 1998 production, *The Truman Show*, in which protagonist Truman Burbank (played by comic actor Jim Carrey) discovers his entire life has been filmed for a "Reality"-style television program and thereafter relentlessly attempts to flee his fabricated environment. In front of his "world" of admirers, Truman eventually defeats his television producer nemesis and exits the massive set in triumph. Dusty Lavoie praises the film as "a biting dystopian social commentary" that effectively critiques surveillance, in part through its "polysemic ending" that begs the question(s) of whether or not Truman's escape signifies his freedom, or whether anyone at all has the capacity to enjoy genuine human agency (53, 65). On the other hand, Levin persuasively contends that the film is characterised by a "simultaneous *flaunting* and *containment* of surveillance" (591). Not only does Weir make the surveillance devices "visible" to viewers and hence diminish any anxiety felt over the power structures governing Truman's every move throughout the film, he also creates a sharp disjuncture between the world of the film and the world outside it. As Levin notes, *The Truman Show* "simultaneously invokes a world of total panopticism but also insists that it is *not* our world, but only that of the (hubristic) televisual simulacrum" (591, author's emphasis). In this reading, Truman's famous sign-off to the in-film audience, "Good afternoon, good evening, and goodnight," might be seen to signal to the broader viewership that "the show is over, you may all go home now"—an interpretation that arguably fits with the pathos of the film's "happy ending."

<10> Levin's critique of *The Truman Show* has perhaps gained even more credibility through the growing intertextual connections with similarly themed films that have appeared in the years since its release. The apparent condemnation of the dystopian potential of "Reality TV" programs has become a common trope in films about surveillance, although their subversive pretensions invariably mask significant contradictions. In Paul Anderson's action thriller *Death Race* (2008), an unethical prison warden profits from her position of power by overseeing televised competitions involving armoured cars, eroticised female bodies and "compulsory" violence. Unsurprisingly, however, the heroic protagonist's inevitable escape from the prison's power structures relies on the same kind of action sequences for the film's entertainment value as those that are demanded by the demonised system of surveillance at the core of the film's plot.

<11> A somewhat more complex exploration of the pitfalls of surveillance and its relationship to new media culture can be found in the recent Hollywood action films, *Gamer* (2009) and *The Condemned* (2007). In the former film, both "Reality" show and computer game merge into the massively popular "Slayers" program, which turns criminals into the physical puppets of online gamers, who control their avatars through a series of gruesome, non-virtual battles. *The Condemned* takes this a step even further, with a tyrannical profiteer kidnapping death row inmates from around the world and forcing them to compete for survival on an island for the viewing pleasure of the growing online audience. These two films engage with the ethics of surveillance to a greater extent than *Death Race*, exhibiting self-reflexive moments that suggest audience members (both within the film and outside of it) are implicated in something deeply problematic: an unjustified and voyeuristic mode of behaviour. Through their continued viewing of the *real* violence as it is mediated in the film, the audience *within* the film is judged to be *complicit* in the life-and-death consequences of this violence. Nonetheless, there are significant limits to such films' subversive intent. A number of scenes that arguably, though to varying degrees of effectiveness, position audiences *of* the film to question their complicity in the rhetorics of surveillance hastily give way to further violent endeavours screened for the viewers' entertainment. The ultimate victory of the "innocent" protagonists, who are solely the victims of surveillance and completely separate from the "evil" perpetrators of it, leads to the explicit or implicit construction of a future characterised by "freedom"—a freedom that is available immediately and only after the demonised despots have met a timely end and the surveillant behaviour is (apparently) no longer possible. The conquering of the antagonists in films like *Death Race*, *Gamer* and *The Condemned* (always through killing them) results in a "containment" of surveillance similar to that in *The Truman Show*. Implicitly, the world reverts back to a (usually unspecified) "better place," in which the broader power structures that reinforced the system based on surveillance seem to have disappeared.

<12> From these examples, it is evident that while dystopian films of the not-too-distant future purport to undermine monitoring practices and processes on their (often thin) narrative surfaces, the voyeuristic tendencies they portray and promote (both in terms of the camera's fetishised gaze on gratuitous violence and sexualised women's bodies) maintain the dominant discourse of surveillance as normal, valuable and essential. Driven by narrative conventions perceived to be intrinsic to the goal of obtaining box office returns and merchandising success, any

well-intended attempt to offer an authentic critique of surveillance through film faces vast obstacles, but this does not mean that mainstream cinema is incapable of genuinely subverting dominant ideologies. The texts mentioned thus far constitute only a small sample of those that reveal how the ever-expanding surveillance in/of the contemporary world is negotiated, as issues of observation, security and privacy have become, and will no doubt continue to be, an increasingly central thematic concern of cinematic culture for audiences of all ages. Indeed, the latest addition to the array of films that seek to challenge surveillance by appropriating the "Reality TV" theme is Gary Ross' blockbuster film aimed (primarily) at adolescent and young adult viewers, *The Hunger Games*.

An Insatiable Appetite for Violence: Surveillance and Dystopia in *The Hunger Games* (2012)

<13> Adapting the first novel of Suzanne Collins' trilogy for the big screen, Ross' film was released amidst massive media hype and fan interest in March 2012. Set in a post-apocalyptic world in which most of Earth's population has perished, *The Hunger Games* depicts the surviving remnants of humanity organised into twelve "Districts," which are characterised as starkly segregated from each other and the extravagant "Capitol" city along social, economic, cultural and political lines. As punishment for a past "uprising" and in order to instil fear and compliance in these communities, the dictatorial President Snow convenes annual competitions called "Hunger Games," events that have taken place for the last seventy-four years. These events consist of one female and one male "tribute" between twelve and eighteen years old being randomly selected from each District to participate in a gladiatorial "Fight to the Death." Provided with rations, weapons and a genetically engineered environment full of lethal hazards, the aim for each "competitor" is to be the one remaining survivor. Not unlike the surveillant aesthetics of *The Condemned* and *The Tournament* (2009), the Hunger Games are televised to the subjugated Districts and the eager Capitol via a "Reality TV" show, consisting of a *Big Brother*-esque set, an eccentric, blue-haired host, Caesar Flickerman, and perversely staged interviews with the contestants just prior to their departure for (almost) certain death.

<14> The story follows the experiences of Katniss Everdeen, a sixteen-year-old from the mining community District 12, who volunteers to be a "tribute" to protect her sister when she is chosen at a public "Reaping" for the Games. The viewer follows Katniss on her journey through her formal one-week training and evaluation, followed by her desperate struggle for survival in a completely

artificial (though natural looking) forest environment. Watching the contestants every move, the engineers of this battleground can manipulate everything from the collapsing of trees to the introduction of deadly genetically engineered beasts. The microchip implants used to track the contestants and the innumerable cameras hidden throughout the forest battleground highlight surveillance as a deeply problematic feature of this dystopian society—one that is intentionally used by the authorities to "control" the populace, but also one that is seemingly accepted by many viewers who voyeuristically watch the proceedings. Referencing both Ancient Rome's penchant for spectacle and the fascination of contemporary audiences with celebrity, the film implies that the Capitol's citizenry have a considerable appetite for violence, both mediated and actual. When viewing a "highlights" reel of the previous year's "final kill," which combines violent visual imagery with the host's voiceover description of how excited seeing it made him feel, Katniss turns the television off in disgust.

<15> In many ways, *The Hunger Games* positions itself as providing a broad critique of gender(ed) norms, socio-economic injustice, totalitarianism, excessive consumerism, and problematic surveillance. Even prior to its cinematic release, the narrative was praised as a subversive text that rejects the stereotypically demure and passive protagonist of the *Twilight* series, who is ever-reliant on her male hero(s), in favour of portraying an independent, capable young woman. While this agenda is laudable, and generally successful despite the (less thematically significant) inclusion of two love interests for Katniss, the film's apparent challenging of the dominant ideology of surveillance does entails significant limitations. The theme of surveillance is explicitly introduced in the film's opening minutes, when Gale Hawthorne, a close friend of Katniss, raises the question of what would happen if everyone stopped watching the televised battle, declaring that: "You root for your favourites, cry when they get killed—it's sick!" Significantly, this is the most direct verbal challenge to the synoptic power structures in the entire film, yet the fact it occurs so early in the narrative, prior to the full context of the Games as TV show being provided, somewhat blunts the force of the character's vehemence. The contradictions undermining the film's overt criticism of surveillance become clear in a number of ways.

<16> Below the surface of the film's narrative lies a strong disassociation between those complicit in creating and maintaining the system of surveillance and the film's audience. Several scenes reveal the Hunger Games program—both televisual and engineered physical setting—to be

manipulated via a sophisticated "Game Centre" containing multi-layered, interactive digital platforms not unlike those seen in Steven Spielberg's *Minority Report* (2002). The "Reality" show's producer paces the sterile, hospital-like environment, giving orders to the technicians around him. For example, after manoeuvring Katniss into a trap that will likely result in her death, he calmly asks one computer operator to "get the camera ready." Yet those who work in the Game Centre reveal none of the apprehension or guilt seen in the surveillance workers of *The Condemned*, but are instead thoroughly dehumanised. Indeed, the computer operators in *The Hunger Games* are as anomalous as they are anonymous, with their uniformly clipped hair, protruding ears and bright white clothing making them seem to fit more comfortably within the cast of *Star Trek*. Likewise, the jarring aesthetics of the brightly coloured populace of the Capitol—those who seem almost universally implicated in the voyeurism being demonised throughout the narrative—also distances them from the film's audience. The population of the Capitol seems to universally support the persecution of outlying Districts while they revel in absurd costumes and consume an abundance of food at the expense of starving communities, serving to discourage any form of audience identification with them.

<17> Whereas a case might be made for Collins' novel effectively deconstructing the aesthetics of surveillance (Horning), the audience of Ross' film is, for the most part, not similarly positioned. Rather than be implicated in the act of surveying, the viewer's insecurities about invasive monitoring practices are resolved by foregrounding the suffering and heroism of Katniss through the eyes of those sympathetic to her cause, therefore downplaying the previously established theme of voyeurism. Presumably, the vast majority of the Hunger Games' audience within the film are ecstatic fans of the violence that ensues. However, the depiction of those watching the program concentrates overwhelmingly on several "good" characters who the viewer is positioned to identify with: Katniss' "mentor," Haymitch Abernathy, who watches with concern as the odds stack up against her and ensures that life-saving assistance is sent to her by "sponsors"; her friend Gale who watches enviously as Katniss develops a closer relationship with her male companion, Peeta Mellark; Katniss' sister and mother who wait for her at home; and the oppressed masses of District 11 who her bravery inspires to revolt against their authoritarian enemies. The problematic nature of the program's reliance on voyeurism and spectacle is elided in favour of aligning the viewer's empathy with Katniss' struggles through the reflected gaze of her allies, who are (almost) the only ones shown

watching her.

<18> The characterisation of the morally pure Katniss also ensures that the film's audience is not implicated as voyeurs, because the killings required by the inventors of the Games are justified, at least in terms of Katniss' behaviour, in simplistic terms. Katniss is established as a skilled hunter as she stalks a deer with bow and arrow amidst a peaceful musical score at the start of the film, and the parallel use of a forest setting for the Hunger Games later in the film maintains the association of her as "hunter" rather than "killer." Indeed, when Gale visits the protagonist just prior to her deportation to the Capitol, he tells Katniss that she must survive using her skills: "You know how to hunt." When Katniss points out that she hunts animals, Gale blatantly contradicts his aforementioned strong criticism of the voyeurism and violence of the Hunger Games by telling her, "There's no difference, Katniss." Lastly, the film repeatedly returns to Katniss' overriding motivation to return to her sister, serving to justify all of her actions from the moment she tells her distraught sibling that she will "try to win." This sentiment is likewise reinforced in the film's most emotionally stirring scene, in which Katniss' young friend Rue tells her with her dying breath, "You have to win." The moral certainty with which Katniss progresses through the Games is clear even before they begin, as the sympathetic stylist Cinna wishes her good luck with the comment, "I'm not allowed to bet, but if I could I'd bet on you." The notion that gambling on the wholesale slaughter of children and teenagers might be problematic in itself does not seem to come into consideration. Therefore, as much as Katniss is depicted as suffering at the hands of those who have power over her, the construction of the narrative actually succeeds in protecting her (and the film's viewers) from facing the more devastating implications of her actions (for herself and others)—actions that are a "logical" and "inevitable" outcome of the surveillance system created for the Games.

<19> The film further contradicts its surface message regarding the problems of surveillance by legitimising Katniss' killing of others who are also oppressed. At the end of *The Hunger Games*, Katniss and Peeta survive the tournament, leaving in their wake the corpses of twenty-two young contestants—several of whom Katniss has killed herself. Nonetheless, the narrative omits the moral ambiguity that might usually be perceived in Katniss' situation, clearly distinguishing each one of her uses of violence as both a last resort and motivated by one of three "justifiable" reasons: self-defence, protection of others, and mercy. While Katniss seems to initially attempt to

avoid all conflict, she is eventually forced to react when she is physically threatened in a direct manner, when she endeavours to save those she cares about, and, in the last instance, when she takes pity on her chief nemesis, who writhes in pain as he is mauled by over-sized dogs invented for the Games. As Katniss' focalised internal dialogue states in Collins' novel: "Pity, not vengeance, sends my arrow flying into his skull" (414). Crucially, those characters she does kill—members of an "alliance" of sadistic tributes from more privileged Districts—are demonised to the audience from their first appearance in the film, rendering their deaths not only justifiable, but *necessary*. [1] On the other hand, Katniss is conveniently not faced with the otherwise very plausible prospect of having to kill those tributes who befriend her in some way—namely, two African American characters who help her and one red-haired girl who appears to be just as terrified as Katniss—all of whom die at the hands of her "enemies" or by other means. That Katniss essentially walks away from the carnage without facing a single ethical dilemma of any kind is one more factor that renders the film's critique of surveillance more simplistic than subversive. On the other hand, the audience of another recent film depicting problematic adolescent behaviour and technological surveillance, Ben C. Lucas' *Wasted on the Young*, is exposed to complex ethical issues around consent and responsibility, adolescence and adult supervision, and cyberbullying and manipulation.

"You Can Stop This": Is Youth Really "Wasted on the Young"?

<20> The dystopian production of *Wasted on the Young* (hereafter, *Wasted*) certainly points to some form of disconnect over genuine social concerns relating to surveillance; however, this dark tale of privilege, power and violence can be seen to make visible a "larger" disconnect facing contemporary youth. The film depicts a world with "fuzzy" boundaries, hormone-charged decision-making, and rapidly changing, socially constructed realities. In her 2011 thesis, Shanly Dixon describes a world in which social norms seem to change with "breakneck" speed, the boundaries between "public" and "private" self seem to be almost fluid, and most importantly, defining "privacy" is complex and problematic, especially for young people on which "youth" is "wasted." These issues are the "insecurities" central to the plot of the film.

<21> The narrative of *Wasted* focuses on the lives of a group of private school students, particularly the conflict between two step-brothers, both members of the swimming team. Along with his friends, Zack, the more popular brother of the film's protagonist Darren, rapes

the unconscious Xandrie (Darren's love interest), whose drink has been spiked at a house party. (Post-)modern technology plays multiple roles in the film, with a number of school students using camera phones to record a school beating and the rape. Social media is used to debate with and flame other students, ranging from accusations levelled at the rapists to the undermining and blaming of the victim. In the film's climactic scene, following the suicide of Xandrie in front of her voyeuristic peers who were previously enjoying (and filming) a violent school beating, Darren conspires with several others to punish the perpetrators of her rape. At a house party, he sends an MMS with the recording of the rape he stole from the guilty party to everyone present. The meaning of the words accompanying the video—"You can stop this"—become clear when Darren sets up a trap in the basement, placing himself and his (drugged) brother Zack on couches in front of a remote-controlled handgun. Given the choice of which brother will be shot via live video feed, which is screened in the house on a large television, everyone "votes" by text message and Darren's brother is killed. This morally problematic scenario reinforces the theme of complicity at the core of the film, summed up by Xandrie before her suicide: "If you see something and do nothing, you're not a witness. You're an accomplice." The intersections between complicity, resistance, voyeurism and surveillance are played out in manifold ways.

<22> Interestingly, *Wasted* features no on-screen presence of adult characters, yet their presence is implied in the narrative: the young girl who is drugged and sexually assaulted does not want her parents to know about the crime; likewise, the young men responsible for the rape actively work to keep the incident "private" from the principal and the police. Despite the absence of the physical presence and direct gaze of adults, the film creates the impression that young people are definitively under surveillance. The viewer is constantly aware of a benign and yet potent presence, a little akin to a hidden camera: sometimes this is a photograph, a text message, or an update via a social media site. On one level, the "all seeing, all hearing" and yet absent adults implies a sense of artificial freedom and autonomy for the characters. Released from the direct intervention of parents, they appear to be free to do as they wish without consequence. However, as the film reveals, there are consequences for every action—whether physical, verbal or virtual.

<23> Reading Dixon's research into digital youth, privacy and identity points to another contradiction in *Wasted*: that young people's engagement with technology changes how individuals

determine what constitutes "privacy" (101). The characters in *Wasted* frequently articulate a desire for privacy, demanding to be free from the constant determination of their peers. As Xandrie shouts, sometimes they "just want to be left alone." Nonetheless, in what seems a contradictory move, even though the characters (and many adolescents in everyday life) articulate this desire for privacy and freedom from surveillance, their actions demonstrate a constant pressure (and desire) to be watched and idolised. Jean Baudrillard called this type of seemingly contradictory process "*regressus ad infinitum*": a practice by which meaning is constantly changing, producing structure and constructing reality by progressively layering their concerns and issues, and sedimenting a different set of understandings over and around preceding ones. Indeed, the desire to be viewed by one's peers (but only at times of their choosing), is supplemented and strengthened by the desire *to view* others in an array of voyeuristic behaviour that is critiqued in the film. In *Wasted*, this *regressus ad infinitum* results in a fractured, ever-changing and volatile definition of what exactly "privacy" means to the young characters in the film (and, in turn, for the viewer). Many of the moments in which one or more characters place another character under surveillance makes for difficult and at times uncomfortable viewing.

<24> Typical of Levin's characterisation of the "ambiguity" of surveillance as both narrative subject and structural condition of contemporary surveillance cinema, *Wasted* positions the viewer in a space that makes unclear the role and status of surveillance: "positive" or "negative," "useful" or "flawed," "moral" or "immoral." The story moves between positioning surveillance as "protector" or "guardian" of the innocent, and as "negligent carer" or "passive voyeur," of the participants. The perpetrators of the rape erase security camera footage, while Darren, who gradually learns the truth about the event, hacks into the school computer database to look for Xandrie when she is missing from school, and then hacks a phone and computer to discover the activities of his brother. In turn, Zack uses GPS technology to keep tabs on Darren. Once again, the absence of adults contributes to this surveillance ambiguity: as the plot unfolds, the audience is positioned to understand that the students' activities are being observed, recorded and even broadcast. What viewers never know is, who are the characters watched by, and for what purpose? As a result, it is arguably impossible for the viewer to determine definitively whether or not this film presents surveillance in an overwhelmingly positive or negative light. If one thing is certain, the film challenges the customary practice of adults imposing social norms,

moderating behaviour and using sanctions to ensure compliance with community rules and the law in general. These practices are made "visible" in the film by their very invisibility.

<25> The dominant, generally accepted utopian construction of "safety through surveillance" is confronted in a number of ways in *Wasted*. In their research, Gary Marx and Valerie Steeves find that companies selling security tools and devices position their products as "essential" tools of "responsible and loving parenting" (193). There is no absence of security tools in *Wasted*, but there is a complete absence of parental care. Marx and Steeves argue that there are two key expectations by those who undertake surveillance of the young. Firstly, they point to the perceived need to watch children to ensure their safety. *Wasted* problematises this by placing the characters under constant and varied surveillance for what appears to be their protection, before setting out to deconstruct the sense of safety implied in this ever-present observation—indeed, it is often when being "watched" that some characters are in the most danger. Rather than protect and guard, the devices are used to record, promote, publish, and ultimately, *judge* the behaviour of the young.

<26> Marx and Steeves' second expectation is that people anticipate particular forms of action-response surveillance by "government agencies," which place "the emphasis on surveillance to identify and 'manage' genetic or behavioural deviations from the norm" (193). In *Wasted*, the young create their own "government": the popular have power over their peers and make the rules; the "insecure" and vulnerable are "invisible." It is a rule-bound and yet strangely lawless world. As the film's intricate narrative asks, is this autonomous and lawless world a consequence of the "digital childhood"? The only options for subversion in this world for the sympathetic characters are death, as in Xandrie's case, or to engage in their own morally problematic appropriation of technological surveillance and peer pressure for justice, as revealed in Darren's actions.

<27> Dixon's research findings indicate that when young people are placed under ever-closer scrutiny, they tend to resist by forming "closer, tighter, more intense interaction with each other... [creating] a separate subculture, often revolving around new media and digital culture, which is distinct from both general adult culture and digital culture of adults" (118). In *Wasted*, the characters are constantly operating digital devices, sending or receiving messages on mobile technology, filming each other and themselves, uploading video files, playing games and, in short, constantly carrying an item of electrical equipment. The young in this film use new media to

create and maintain a "mean world" subculture where cruelty and destruction are part of the social practice of everyday life. They communicate to each other (and the audience) through these digital devices and, at times, the voices of the characters are replaced by the typed messages of the characters. This creates a sense that the audience is both "insider" and "outsider."

<28> Unlike the disassociation of the audience from the issue of voyeurism in *The Hunger Games*, the viewer of *Wasted* is not only exposed to the ethical complexities of surveillance, but is made complicit in the act of surveying. Granted access to the inner worlds of the characters and their often unkind and sometimes brutal thoughts, they are nonetheless powerless to act on the injustices unfolding throughout the narrative. The "insecurities" played out in the characters' lives on the screen thus become an integral facet of the "insecurities" evoked in the viewing experience. On the other hand, the commercially unsuccessful status of *Wasted on the Young*—which is relatively unknown on the Australian stage, much less in the global film environment—points to another significant disconnect over genuine social concerns relating to surveillance. Perhaps Darren's message that "You can stop this" to the implicated participants in his vigilante behaviour becomes a question for filmmakers and audiences who accept, whether they are aware of doing so or not, the dominant discourse of increased and increasing surveillance as important, justified, and necessary.

Conclusion: 1984 Is Long Gone, But Still Here...

<29> Since George Orwell's dystopian novel of the (then) future *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) and its 1984 film adaptation by Michael Radford, films can increasingly be found at the forefront of negotiating cultural meanings of, and perspectives on, the formation of the "Surveillance Society." Films construct often dystopian societies in a number of ways—from the physical, to the psychological, to the virtual—and hold considerable importance in mediating understandings of technology, humanity, and the intersection(s) between these. Indeed, the sheer diversity of the types of films under consideration here cannot be reflected in one paper. We have argued that feature films serve an important socialising function in making surveillance seem a natural facet of socio-political relations. Similar to the normalising effect that Martin Hirst and John Harrison locate in the "forensic voyeurism" of television crime dramas and claims of "moral acceptability" by Reality TV programs (302), the prolific depictions of technological innovation in mainstream feature films that appear to critique surveillance serve only to naturalise and legitimise this phenomenon.

<30> An understanding of how various modes of cultural representation raise or undermine genuine concerns over surveillance is a fundamental aspect of what has been termed a much needed "surveillant literacy," which Albrechtslund defines as "a critical, differentiated analysis of the pros and cons of surveillance" (11). The insecurities that people justifiably feel regarding processes and practices of surveillance continue to have a strong hold over the collective imagination, evidenced by the sheer number of productions contributing to the "surveillance film" genre. Lemi Baruh and Levent Soysal write of a "chilling effect of surveillance" to emphasise the "uncertainty" over whether or not one is being monitored or not (397). This insecurity is transposed onto the screen in countless films—films that "act out" genuine fears alongside exaggerated paranoias, and blur the boundary between both.

<31> Albrechtslund points out that "the cinema facilitates a space where we, the audience, can explore and to a certain extent live out our issues with and feelings about surveillance" (132). Difficulties ensue, however, when so many narratives passively reinforce the dominant discourse of surveillance rather than expose it for nuanced appraisal. Influential films such as *The Hunger Games* continue to offer audiences a "way out" by disassociating their viewers from the ethical dilemmas that are purportedly being criticised. We have argued that films do have the potential to negotiate these complex issues, as seen in the sophisticated representation of surveillance and moral ambiguity offered by *Wasted on the Young*, which implicates its audience in troubling questions about online monitoring, privacy and identity. Nonetheless, in significant ways these troubling questions may prove "unsellable," particularly to a mainstream film audience. To draw once more on Winokur's metaphorical conceptualisation of surveillance, it is clear that the power of media deserves continued reflection: "Films give us images with which we identify: models for culturally acceptable or desirable modes of thought and behaviour... [w]hile we believe ourselves to be watching television and film, these media are watching us" (179). [2]

Notes

[1] Interestingly, although Katniss technically forms advantageous "alliances" of her own throughout the film, they are never described as such.

[2] Many thanks to Trent Griffiths for his assistance in researching this paper.

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